

1866

The Mysteries of a London Convent [transcript]

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Recommended Citation

Hillyard, William Heard. "The Mysteries of a London Convent [transcript]". *The London Miscellany* New Series no. 18 [13th October, 1866]-New Series no. 26 [8th December, 1866].

THE MYSTERIES OF A LONDON CONVENT

BY WILLIAM H. HILLYARD, AUTHOR OF "THE FAIR SAVAGE."

CHAPTER I. THE INTRODUCTION.

"Don't tell me. If Sir Richard Castleton isn't master of Abbey Park, why, in the name of wonder, who is?" demanded Mr. Fludger, the lodge-keeper of the park in question, of Butts, a fellow-servant, continuing a conversation just begun by the under cook and head gamekeeper.

"Why, the priests, to be sure. They are the real masters, they are, replied Butts decisively.

"What, all on 'em?"

"Yes, all; but one in particular," interposed the under cook quickly.

"Who's that?"

"Why the new confessor, Father Belville."

"But ain't he a young man to be called father and a confessor?" inquired the lodge-keeper's wife.

"Lord bless you! age ain't nothing to do with it, Mrs. Fludger. The younger they are the more wickeder. Our dear young lady, that everybody loves, she, poor soul—"

"Oh! what about dear Miss Blanche Castleton?" inquired the sympathetic Mrs. Fludger. "They ain't gone and done no harm to her?"

"They know that Miss Blanche is in love with Mr. D'Arcy Egerton, but, as he's like us, a Protestant, they call him a heretic, and tell her it will be a mortal sin to marry him; and now they are at her night and day to give him up and marry that nasty surly Philip, Squire Arundell's youngest son."

"And what will they do with her if she won't?"

"Make her take the veil, go into a convent for life, and give her over all her lands and money to the priests, drat 'em."

"Poor dear lady! But don't her uncle, Sir Richard, do nothing? He used to be such a kind old gentleman."

"Ah! they've made him quite different now. He never goes out, and has grown gloomy and sullen. But it's all along o' that hateful ojus father confessor. Oh! I could eat him!" And Jemima showed her teeth as if she desired nothing more ardently.

"I don't see anything so bad in Father Belville," observed the keeper. "He's young, good-looking, and darned civil. But if you wants a cunning, sly, hypocritical priest, there's one I do just hate as I do the devil. He's allays a creeping on yer when you don't expect nobody."

"Who's that, Jim?"

"Oh! one of the house chaps. I'm blest if I don't think they keep him as a spy; a fellow with a long gownd, a rope tied round his middle, with bare feet and sandals, a shaven crown, and a face for all the world like a corpse that has been buried for a month."

"You mean Father Gerald. Oh! he gives me the 'orrors. I wouldn't meet him at night, no, not for the world. He looks like a—"

"Peace be on all here!" was uttered at the moment, in so deep and sepulchral a voice that the four individuals present sprang from their seats as if each had been galvanized, the men grasping their chairs with a short deep breath, and the females giving expression to their alarm

by a sharp cry, so real in its intensity that it was impossible to attribute it to any affectation of feeling.

After the first expression of alarm at this unexpected voice had subsided each individual turned immediately in the direction of the sound, and beheld standing on the sill of the washhouse door the tall dark outline of a monk.

A loose cassock of the darkest serge descended from the wearer's neck to the ankles, and was gathered in and tightened around the loins by a rope, to which hung a rosary and crucifix. His bare feet were encased in sandals, the soles of so soft and soundless a material that no echo, or indication of tread, was ever heard to follow that monk's footfalls.

But for the gleam of the shaven crown, which, in the gloom that surrounded the figure, looked like a faint halo, and the cadaverous hue of his countenance with the half livid colour of his feet and hands, the monk, or friar, as he stood motionless, with his right arm extended as in the act of benediction, might have been taken for a monumental statue raised from the tomb in some dark crypt and suddenly endowed with life.

"Is it a mortal, or one of them sperrits we reads of in the Scripture? Oh! what is it Jemima?" inquired Mrs. Fludger under her breath, as she gazed with a vague feeling of dread on the hollow restless eyes of the motionless monk.

"Why it's father Gerald," ejaculated Jemima, after peering with prolonged scrutiny at the immovable figure. "but how, in goodness gracious name, did he come here?"

"He *is* alive!" ejaculated Mrs. Fludger, with a sigh of relief, as the father slowly dropped his extended arm, and, with a gliding motion, but one perfectly devoid of all sound, moved slowly into the centre of the room.

"Good keeper, will you direct me to my host's mansion!" inquired the monk, in a tone of lowly meekness, and, as Butts led the way to the door, Father Gerald, in the fullness of his zeal, laid a hand on the head of each of the women, and having invoked the Virgin to intercede for their benighted souls, concluded by solemnly blessing both. Then, turning from the women, preceded by Butts and Fludger, he quitted the lodge, and approached the edge of the avenue. Butts was in the act of telling him how to proceed, when a groom, mounted on a powerful black horse, dashed through the lodge gates, and tore up the avenue at the full stretch of his horse's speed.

"Dash my wig, Jim, if that ain't Roger Chucks, Mr. Philips Arundell's groom. What's up now, that he's in such a blazing hurry!"

"Roger, sure enough," replied Butts. "Now, yer reverence," he added, turning to address the tall silent figure at his side, "you've only to keep straight up." Heavy clouds, like a black roof, seemed to descend abruptly, almost touching the tops of the trees of the park, while a low muttering thunder ran round the vaulted, darkness with an ominous distinctness.

"Lord! did you see that?"

"Good gracious! I am blinded!"

These exclamations of Fludger and Butts, the latter on the instant covering his eyes with his hands, were caused by an intensely vivid flash that burst through the darkness around them, struck the tree beneath which the monk had stood but a moment before, and, with a loud crash, split it from top to root.

Every leaf, twig, and bough seemed for one instant to be a flame of electric light. The trunk then stood out, a rent and blasted skeleton, pale and grim in the surrounding darkness, through which the thunder pealed in deafening grandeur.

Unable to hear their voices, and aghast at the clamour and peril of the storm, Fludger grasped the keeper's arm and hurried him away in the direction of the lodge, there to seek shelter from the rain, that began to fall in a drenching volume.

In rushing past the stricken tree Fludger hastily gathered up something over which he had stumbled, and which, on holding it up, the lightning revealed to be the cassock and rosary of the monk.

"The Lord preserve us!" he ejaculated, hurrying his blinded friend forward. "The devil has taken his own, and all that is left of Father Gerald is his gown and his beads."

CHAPTER II.

THE FEMALE JESUIT—MARRIAGE OR THE CLOISTER.

Blanche Castleton, the niece and ward of Sir Richard Castleton, stood alone in her boudoir in the mansion of which she was the reputed mistress, but in reality, by the disposition of her father's will, only the mere problematical tenant. The room was large and lofty, its wainscoating of black oak and its grim portraits giving it a somber and dismal character.

Much of this gloom, however, had been in a measure relieved by light lace curtains and pink drapery to the deep bayed windows, a rich Turkey carpet, some luxurious fauteuils and ottomans, and by the natural taste of the fair mistress, the presence of a harp, guitar, and piano, and by a host of those fairy-like and elegant trifles in which female taste so naturally luxuriates, and whose presence ever bespeaks the refined and educated mind.

Assuredly, if the saying is a true one, that the home of a woman is always a true index of her mind, no one could have surveyed Blanche Castleton's fairy bower and not have formed a flattering opinion of her tastes and disposition. Music, painting, embroidery, and literature were all there, while in a carved recess, half concealed by deep crimson curtains, was a reading desk, with tapers, crucifix, and missals, or what is called a "Prie Dieu," thus adding religion and piety to her worldly gifts and accomplishments.

"Dear Father Dominic, how I do miss his kindly voice!" Blanche observed, with a sigh, as in a dreamy reverie she stood in front of the wide chimney, gazing with a vague intensity into the glowing fire. "How I should like to confess all to him," she added, pressing a folded letter to her heart, "and tell him everything!"

"Lor! Miss Blanche, are you still regretting that old Father Dominic, when you have got such a young and handsome confessor as Father Belville?" exclaimed her waiting-woman, as she entered from an inner chamber, and threw an elegant crape shawl over her lady's fair shoulders.

"Yes, Millicent, I do regret his absence, and ever shall, he was so kind and fatherly."

"Oh! yes, fatherly enough," she said, with a short laugh. "Most young ladies, however, would prefer a confessor who had something less of the *father*, and more of the—"

"Millicent, what do you mean?"

"Oh! nothing, miss. Father Dominic was well enough to confess gouty old men and frowsy widows; but for young women give me a good-looking priest, who can see a pretty patient without putting on his spectacles, such a confessor as Father—"

"Belville, I suppose; but enough of this. I am wearied with always hearing you sounding his praises. Heigho!"

"Well, Miss Blanche, everybody says he is charming, and your uncle I am sure seems almost to worship him."

“How do I look in this dress, Millicent?” Blanche inquired, as if anxious to change the subject. “Does it become me?”

“Divinely, like a seraph. It just matches your beautiful blue eyes. No nun ever looked more lovely. Heaven, I am sure, formed you, Miss Blanche, for the adornment of the cloister. You have just the nun’s devotional eyes, and when you sing your evening hymn I always fancy you have glimpses of heaven.”

“Why do you always harp on my being a nun? I have told you often and you know I won’t be a nun,” she added after a grudge, with less resolution in her tone than the beginning of the sentence promised.

“Lor! Miss. I thought it was understood that if you didn’t, or rather wouldn’t, marry Mr. Philip Arundell, you were to take the veil. And then only think of the joys of the cloister.”

“Indeed, Millicent? And what are then?”

“The pleasure of being acknowledged as the most beautiful and the wealthiest sister in the convent, the chance of at some time being lady prioress, and then going to confession three or four times a day, or having the confessor in your own cell when you don’t feel well enough to go to him. Oh! it’s charming. Father Belville confesses the nuns in your aunt’s convent.”

“What on earth can nuns want to confess so often for? They surely cannot have many very heavy sins to acknowledge.”

“Oh! yes, then can; for a nun may think while she is saying her prayers what a handsome man her priest is, and that is a bad sin, you know; and she must go and confess that at once.”

“Don’t vex me any more about it, Millicent, for I won’t be a nun.

I am sure I cannot tell
What the mischief I have done,
But my mother often tells me
That I must be a nun.
But I won’t be a nun,
I can’t be a nun;
I am so fond of pleasure
That I cannot be a nun.

There now,” as she finished singing, “you have heard my sentiments on the subject. I *won’t* be a nun.” And as she concluded she approached a table strewn with books and papers and writing materials, and, laying down the letter she had hitherto kept so jealously folded in her hand, turned round to her maid, trilling out in a light joyous strain the symphony of her arch little song, and looking as she did so the beau ideal of defiant but innocent gaiety.

At the same instant that Blanche, full of sprightly rebellion, turned to confront her teasing maid, two circumstances occurred which, unconsciously to herself were destined to exercise a powerful influence on her future happiness.

A small panel in the oak skirting was noiselessly pushed back, and a hand, long, skinny, and talon-like, was projected through the opening, and the fingers, having cautiously closed on the folded letter, the hand immediately disappeared, with the same mysterious caution as that with which it had been protruded.

While this piece of unobserved action was taking place by her side Blanche’s eyes encountered and were in a measure fascinated by the tall and commanding figure of Father Belville, who, having entered the apartment by the only other door, had approached to within a few paces of the beautiful girl before she herself was conscious of his presence.

The saucy words of the defiant song were still issuing in warbling notes from her pouting lips when the eyes of the priest and penitent encountered each other.

The effect of that glance, however, was magical, as far as the lively Blanche Castleton was concerned, for it seemed to affect not only her outward behaviour, but to change even her very nature.

Under the magnetism of that look, her eyes lost their vivacity, and her features all the archness and spirit that had made them appear so piquant a moment before; and a cold deadened expression settled in an instant on eyes, brow, and mouth, as if all the blood beneath that downy skin had been driven from its purple channels, turning the bloom of youth and beauty into the unnatural pallor the cloistered recluse.

The passive slave-like obedience that on the instant fell like an icy mantle on the late joyous maiden was not confined to the complexion, or the formal expression of her face, but sank at once to the very core and centre of the metamorphosed Blanche, whose deep humility and abject subjugation were evinced by the lowly reference with which she saluted the bland but impassive priest.

“Bless you, my fair and lovely daughter,” observed the father, after a close study of the maiden’s countenance, a little more eager and impassioned in its scrutiny, and more prolonged in its direction; than was either demanded by the occasion or was strictly becoming in a confessor, or one dedicated to the celibacy and the abnegation of all the carnal appetites and desires.

“Good morrow, holy father,” Blanche muttered, greatly confused under the searching intensity of his look, and making a low obeisance.

“You were surely only jesting, my daughter, when you so emphatically declared you would not be a nun,” he said, with a faint smile. “Only think of the holy peace and seraphic happiness that reign in the bosom of a convent, and the beatitude of the nuns in hourly commune with the blessed saints.”

“Pardon me, father,” she murmured humbly. “I—I was.”

“The dying wish of a beloved parent should have the weight of a solemn dedication to a pious well-regulated mind; and that condition should be embraced with love and open arms, which circumstances may yet compel the adoption of.”

“Oh! father!”

“Daughter, you may retire,” the priest replied turned from Blanche, and addressing Millicent, who on the first appearance of the father had with the deep reverence retired to the extremity of the chamber, and now, when addressed, with downcast looks and a deep genuilocation, passed into her lady’s chamber.

As soon as the Abigail had quitted the apartment Father Belville threw off his cold austere manner and formal gait, and with a frank, good-natured, and smiling ability, more in accordance with the domestic friend than the ghostly confessor, advanced, and as he said with a cheerful smile—

“Dear daughter, dear Blanche, learn henceforth to make a confidant and friend of me. I see plainly you have no election for a nun’s life or the seclusion of a convent. Am I not right? Nay, confide in me,” he said, with a winning plausibility of manner that might have deceived a more experienced listener than a timid and unfriended girl.

“Indeed, holy father, I do not feel my spirit yet incline to the cloister,” she replied, with a meek but open-hearted candour.

“It is as I surmised. Trust absolutely in me, and, though I have a difficult task before me, your uncle being so bent on carrying out your father’s intentions, yet I will assist you as far as

possible. Dispel these fears, my daughter, and let this kiss of peace ratify our future compact.” And, stooping, he pressed his lips on her forehead, while his greedy eyes wandered in unchecked freedom over those features he dared not approach with his licentious touch.

With a shudder that ran like ice through her veins, and a feeling of intense loathing, mixed with an indefinite fear, Blanche instinctively drew back from the pollution of those sensual lips.

While the pious father was gazing with such unholy eyes on the cold and ashy countenance, on which a burning flush was now rapidly mantling, a face of singular vindictiveness and repulsion was calmly and maliciously surveying him through a secret opening in the paneled walls.

A face that, bold and unscrupulous as the confessor was, would have filled him with trouble to contemplate, as, with a malign expression in the eyes and mouth, it watched with devilish malice each change on the priest’s countenance.

“Daughter,” continued the father, as he led the reluctant Blanche to an ottoman, and took a seat by her side, “I have taken this opportunity, before meeting your uncle at dinner to apprise you of something of the utmost importance to yourself.”

“To me, father?”

“To you, my daughter.”

“May I inquire the nature of your information?”

“Have you no desire to know the full purport of your father’s will?”

“I believe—that is, I think,” she replied, much embarrassed, “that I have heard the most important clause.”

“The clause which renders it imperative on you either to marry one of his friend Arundell’s sons or take the veil. This, however, might be—”

“What, father, what?” she demanded with breathless curiosity.

“Rendered nugatory by finding another heir to the estate.”

“I do not understand you. Am I not my father’s only child?”

“True, but there is yet another and more legal heir than yourself.”

“Speak, father. You astonish me.”

“Your grandfather, Sir Maurice Castleton, had three sons—Maurice, Edward, and Richard.”

“I never heard of this before.”

“Maurice, the eldest, a youth of dissolute and turbulent character, left his father’s house when only a lad, and was never afterwards seen.”

“Did he die?”

“It has always been so supposed. He was traced to India, where it was said that, while a clerk in the Company’s service, he was carried off by cholera.”

“How long is that ago?”

“More than fifty years. From that time no tidings of him have ever been heard, though every inquiry was for a long time instituted.”

“My father, then, as the second son, succeeded to the estate on the death of Sir Maurice Castleton?”

“He did so, his brother Richard, in default of male heirs, succeeding to the title. Now to save you from the life of a recluse, I propose *finding some descendent* of your uncle Maurice, which of course, would I succeed would quash your father’s will.”

“Oh! how shall I thank you, Father Belville?”

“By making me your friend, and trust in to me implicitly,” he said, with a singular expression of voice and eye.

“Oh! yes, yes,” she cried eagerly.

“Enough, then, for the present. Remember, not a word before Sir Richard. I must work this matter out in my own way.”

“Oh! you may rely—”

“I had forgotten. Your uncle wishes to see you. He has just received a message from Squire Arundell. *Benedicite*, my daughter.” And, rising, he made the sign of the cross on her forehead, and with his customary deliberate step left the chamber, muttering as he reached the ante-room, “Meshed and caught! She is not completely in my power, poor fool! She is mine—mine for life.”

As soon as the priest had left the apartment Blanche rose, and hastily crossing to the table, possessed herself of the letter she had laid down, and which had been as strangely returned as it had been before removed by the mysterious hand.

“Why is it I cannot wholly trust this Father Belville, and that my soul instinctively revolts from him?” she asked herself, as, taking her stand in the recess of one of the windows, she opened the letter in her hand, and again perused its contents.

“Oh! dear D’Arcy, how gladly would I resign my fortune, and be a penniless country girl, so I might spend my life with you! What could I not sacrifice for your love? Wealth, station, kindred, even religion. Dear, dear D’Arcy, so good, so noble, so—what is this?” she exclaimed suddenly, as after kissing the letter, she was about to fold it up, when her eye caught a few additional lines, or postscript, which in her former perusal had escaped her observation.

“DEAREST BLANCHE,—*I must see you to-morrow night, if only for a moment. Expect me at you casement at twelve o’clock*

“*Your ever faithful*
“D’ARCY.”

Blanche was so absorbed in what seemed the mystery of this postscript, both as regarded the nature of her lover’s communication and her strange omission of it when the letter was first read, that the resounding tread of a heavy step in the adjoining gallery was unheard till almost at the door.

Hastily hiding the letter in her bosom, she had only time to turn, when Sir Richard Castleton entered the chamber, and strode up to within a few paces of his niece’s person.

Sir Richard was a tall dark saturnine-looking man, with a perpetual cloud upon his brow, giving him the aspect of a gloomy ascetic, or a man for ever suffering under the reproaches of a haunting conscience.

“I thought Father Belville had told you, niece, that I had matters of import to communicate,” he began, in a short irritable tone, that admitted of no prevarication in the reply.

“The father did, uncle, and I was coming even now.”

“You are eighteen years of age to-morrow,” he continued, without further parley, “and I have just received a letter from the Squire Arundell reminding me that by the clause in the will you must give a final answer to-morrow.”

“Upon what, uncle?” she asked, growing deadly pale, while a sickening fear caused her heart to sink with a feeling of utter despondency.

“Upon what? Why, upon your acceptance or rejection of his son’s suit—the match years ago contracted for you by your father.”

“Uncle, I never, never can love Philip Arundell.”

“You are only asked to marry him,” he answered curtly. “There is not a word in the will about love.”

“I cannot, uncle, I cannot.”

“Do you know the alternative?”

“Have pity on me, uncle. For my father’s sake, have—”

“I only wish to carry out your father’s commands. Accept Philip, and in three months you will be a happy wife. Refuse him, and to-morrow you begin your noviciate, under the sainted mother, your aunt, the good Prioress Agatha. Decide.”

“Uncle, hear me.”

“A fine manly youth is offered for your husband, with a princely fortune; or the veil and the cloister. You have had ample time to choose. Now determine.”

“Let my fortune freely go to the Church, if wealth is all it craves. I cannot bear the seclusion, and—”

“You are an impious, child, to talk in such terms of your holy faith, and need absolution and penitence. I ask you now, however, for your answer.”

“Uncle, it can never be. I love another. I am betrothed,” she stammered firmly, made desperate by her uncle’s unfeeling conduct.

“It is, then, true, that which I have heard, that a daughter of one of the most Catholic families in the kingdom has held communions with an accused scoffer and heretic, and has dared to think of marriage with a rank enemy to our house and creed. Answer, girl!” And he grasped her arm and drew her violently from the window to one of the ottomans, on which he forced her to be seated. “Is it true that you have exhausted words of friendship—love, as you call it—with D’Arcy Egerton?”

“Yes, uncle, yes. He has my plighted faith, my heart, my life’s devotion,” she cried vehemently, roused by her uncle’s manner to an equal boldness.

“Then, by the blessed Virgin, I swear he never shall be your husband. Rather than you should marry a heretic, I will force you to the altar, and make you take the vows of eternal isolation and celibacy.”

“Uncle, let me speak.”

“Silence! I give you twelve hours to decide upon Philip Arundell or the cloister. Till then you shall not quit these rooms. You hear me, Blanche, and by ever saint I swear I will keep my oath. Off. I’ll hear nothing. Go to your confessor. Go!”

And rudely breaking from her importunate clutch, Sir Richard strode gloomily from the apartment.

CHAPTER III.

THE MIDNIGHT CONFESSION—APPARITION OF THE MURDERED NUN.

The watery beams of an autumnal moon fell on the stained window of the secret chamber or oratory of the Reverend Father Belville, the confessor and spiritual counsellor of Sir Richard Castleton and the family inhabiting the old and rambling mansion of Abbey Grange, the residence of one of the most ancient and opulent families in the county of Norfolk.

As the light of the full moon fell on the stained glass of the tall lance-shaped window, it flung the rich stains of purple, red, and yellow across the polished floor, and dyed with tints of blue and gold patches of the carved paneling that cased, as in a suit of armour, the cold stone walls of the vaulted chamber.

In a recess beneath the gorgeous oriel was erected a small altar, but so obscured by shadow that the two lofty tapers, that burnt one on either side of the tabernacle, only dimly revealed the picture of the Madonna and Infant, and the silver crucifix that rose white and spectral before the painter's masterpiece.

On the left of the altar stood a large easy chair of crimson leather in front of a confessional, the sides and all but the opening for the penitent being hung with velvet drapery.

A quaintly carved and highly burnished table and chair were placed at the opposite extremity of this priestly sanctuary, and at the moment we raise the curtain on our scene partook of the glories of the stained window.

An open missal with illuminated leaves, a breviary, papers, and writing materials were ranged in studied order on the table, while on the chair was thrown the pastor's formal suit, its black texture made seemingly more intense from the dazzling white of the lawn surplice beside it.

Father Belville, or the confessor, as he was generally denominated in the mansion, where in all but name he reigned as master, stood alone in that sanctuary, into which no one, not even Sir Richard himself, dared to intrude without special summons or previous announcement.

The confessor was at the moment we again introduce him to the reader, as we have already said, alone in that mysterious chamber—alone with his unholy thoughts, his plots, his passions.

The father was habited in the rich vestures of his office, in his cassock of silken damask, and his jeweled stole and cope, with the emblematic cross, worked in bright hues and precious stones that completed his costly dress.

With hands folded behind his back, and wrapped in deep contemplation, he strode up and down the chamber, now crossing the ruddy beams of the oriel as they dyed his silken garments in hues of blood, anon striding into the gloom, where his vestments shone through the deepening shadow with an effect bright and sparkling. Twice the confessor pause, and twice he stamped with nervous impatience on the polished floor, and bit his nether lip with his white teeth, as some thwarted passion or the sting of reproaching conscience rose to his mind.

Halting abruptly, he raised his face to the groined roof, and stood for some moments as if appealing to Heaven for inspiration or guidance. As he thus stood his tall and graceful figure was shown to singular advantage, for, drawn up to its full altitude, the form and carriage of the priest appeared eminently handsome and commanding.

In addition to his other advantages of person, Father Belville was gifted with a voice of rare power and sweetness, which he had the skill to modulate to the tenderest pathos or the most resentful passion, and when he brought the deep notes of that melodious organ to back the pleadings of his bold and penetrating eyes the confessor might have challenged a hundred rivals to cope with him in the gam of love and intrigue.

Between the fiery passion of the man, however, and his natural gifts there rose the barrier of his sacred office.

Thus between his nature and his function there existed a ceaseless struggle, and if it is remembered that at this time he was in the full flush of manhood, and at that age when love and

passion hold strongest sway in the human breast, a clearer insight will be obtained of the man and the priest whose career we are about to portray.

“What witchcraft is this?” exclaimed the confessor, suddenly dropping his eyes and striking his forehead. “The image of this girl infects my blood, fascinates my mind, and holds me prisoner, body and soul. ‘Tis very madness—ruin,” he continued, once more striding across the room. “She is my patron’s niece, my penitent, the dedicated of the Church, the promised bride of Heaven, every way sacred and thrice hedged in against pollution and my assaults. But hence, sway, all idle scruples. I’ll have her. She shall be mine. Yes, hear me, ye saints and martyrs, hear me swear it,” he cried fiercely, as he flung up his arms, and, with expanded hands, seemed to invoke Heaven itself to register his unholy resolve.

“By all the souls in peace or torment, this passion shall have fruition. At what peril to soul or, body I care not, it shall be accomplished. Blanche! Blanche! You *shall* be mine.” And for a few moments he remained stationary, seemingly lost in the labyrinth of his passionate reflections.

“yes,” he resumed quickly, but in a calmer mood, as if digesting his scheme—“yes, I must first remove her to the convent, away from this jealous fool her maid, my—no matter—*emissary*. I fear the girl already suspects my passion for her mistress. Ay, there indeed she might do me mischief—nay, fatal, eternal ruin. Cursed fate that ever made me a priest!” And he ground his teeth and clenched his hands at the bitterness of his thoughts. “Pshaw! After all, what cause of fear have I? It only needs a little show of former love, a little tenderness, and then the confessional to blind, ay, and *bind* her to do my bidding. Let me see—let me think,” he resumed, walking slowly about the room. “I must compromise Blanche with her heretic lover, to give a colourable reason for her temporary sojourn at the convent. *Temporary?* Once within those walls, and no power but death can or shall ever remove her thence. Still through all I must appear her friend, bent on restoring her to life and happiness. And so I will, but it shall be to minister to *my* happiness—mine, only mine.” And the confessor laughed a low treacherous laugh, such as might have frozen the blood of any victim within hearing of that hope-killing sound.

“Hark! That’s Millicent. She brings me tidings of Blanche.”

The confessor listened for a moment, smoothed out the folds of his silken vestures, and approached the gloomy-looking confessional. Before he could reach the spot, however, the faint tinkling of a bell sounded through the oratory, when, stretching forth his hand and touching a secret spring, a distant portal was heard to open, and almost immediately a door near the confessor’s table was thrown aside and, with a terrified rush, the tall handsome serving woman entered the oratory, her whole frame bearing evidence of fear and excitement.

Hastily closing the door behind her, the Abigail ran hurriedly up the chamber, and, in her fear or trepidation, would have flung herself into the arms of the confessor had not Father Belville suddenly drawn back, and, extending his hand, as if to repel the threatened familiarity, exclaimed—

“Millicent! daughter! have you lost your sight, there, where you seem to have parted with your wits, not to observe my priestly vestments? Remember, in this dress and seated in that chair,” pointing to the confessional, “I am your ghostly father, only to be approached with awe and reverence. Now speak. What mean those scared looks?”

“Oh! sir—oh! holy father,” cried the girl, sinking on her knees before the confessor, her entire manner instantly changing at the sight of the priestly robes and the three fingers raised so mystically over her head, “I knew not you were in canonicals, or would not have dared to—”

“Enough. Why do you tremble? Rise and tell me the cause of this alarm.”

“Holy Mother protect and hover near me!” she ejaculated, looking round in abject terror. “Oh! sainted father, I have seen her—it—the—mercy! My very blood feels curdling in my veins, and my tongue cleaves to my mouth. Oh! father, I have seen—”

“What? Speak!”

“The ghost of the murdered nun—the evil spirit of the Castleton’s—the apparition that walks the house when any death or ill threatens the family.”

“Go to. I gave you credit for more judgment than to believe the idle rumours of ignorant menials. Go to. You shame my teaching. Arise and shake off this foolish terror.”

“By all my hopes of heaven, father, I met the horrid phantom in the corridor, saw its corpse-like face and stony eyes, and the red gash where Sir Hugh’s knife—”

“Peace, I say. Go and scare the menials in the hall with your idle phantasies, but do not mock me with your vulgar superstitions. Now answer me.”

“I will,” she gasped, staggering to her feet, and endeavouring to still the tremor of her body as she raised her ghastly face to the bold defiant gaze of the haughty priest. “What would your reverence ask?”

Have you sounded your young mistress about the convent, as I advised?”

“I have, but her soul revolts at the idea. Father, she will never take the veil.”

“Then she must be *made* to do so. Not take it? By Heaven she shall!” he exclaimed fiercely. “What of the young lover, that heretic D’Arcy Egerton?”

“I cannot discover by what means they correspond, though I am sure they do almost daily.”

“No matter. We shall solve that riddle in time. Remember the advice I gave you—teach her to look on me rather as a *friend* than as a priest. Do you understand? Keep your eye on Father Gerald, and watch Sir Richard closely. And now good night, my daughter. Tell your lady I wait her midnight confession. Go; leave me.”

“Shall I not accompany my lady to the oratory?” inquired the attendant as a flush of sudden doubt or jealous fear suffused her cheeks, and she stood half irresolute whether to go or stay.

“No. Be content. It is the *priest*, and not the man, awaits her,” he said, with a meaning look and a peculiar tone of voice. “What, fearful still?” he added. “Stay, I will give you a light.” And, opening a panel in the wainscoat, he took out and lighted a taper, placed it in her hand, and, as he opened the door, watched in silence the departure of his spy and emissary.

“Ghost? Pshaw! I fear no spirits dead,” he mused, once more resuming his monotonous pacing of the chamber, now, by the passing of the moon, only faintly lighted by the tapers on the altar. “Shield me from the malice of the living, and I will chance the worst the grave or hell itself can do. Still this ghost story might, if needed, be turned to some account. I’ll think of it. What would Sir Richard give to know the secrets of my oratory! Here I am paramount. From this room I command the entire surveillance of the mansion. This hidden way,” and, as he spoke, he moved a noiseless panel, revealing a dark narrow passage, “conducts me to the library and private chamber of Sir Richard. And this dainty entrance,” sliding back another door, and closing it as he had done the former, “leads straight to the sanctuary of her I love with such consuming passion. These are my paths to interest and to love. And here,” crossing the room and opening a third panel, “likes my way to sure vengeance and a secret grave. Faugh! how damp and earthy is the smell these subterranean vaults give out! It was in these very cells, tradition says, the furious Sir Hugh immured and murdered the nun, whose spectre the fools of the kitchen still believe to walk the house. The air smells of mortality, heavy and foul.” And, closing the panel, he crossed to the

recess whence he had obtained the taper for Millicent, and, taking up a phial, poured a quantity of its contents on a delicate handkerchief he drew from his vestment, and which, hastily folding, he secreted in the palm of his hand.

Scarcely had he closed the opening when the faint notes of the bell were again heard, the father, as before, touching a spring that unfastened the outer entrance, when the door of the oratory opened, and the graceful form of Blanche Castleton, radiant in youth and beauty, crossed the threshold, when making a deep obeisance to her ghostly father, she placed the silver lamp she carried upon the table, and said, in a voice low and melodious—

“I am come, holy father, to make my nightly confession, according to your ghostly commands.”

“ ‘Tis well, my daughter. A blessing must surely follow piety so strict and ordinances so cheerfully obeyed. Approach; I am ready.”

As the confessor concluded he proceeded slowly up the room, bent his knee before the altar, and took his seat in the chair of the confessional.

With arms crossed on her bosom, and downcast eyes, Blanche, with light measured steps, followed the father, and, like him, bent her knee before the silver crucifix; then, dipping her finger in a small font of holy water, she made the sign of the cross, and, meekly approaching the confessional, reverently knelt on the velvet hassock, and, folding her hands on the ledge, bent her head towards the priest, who, as she did so, placed his perfumed handkerchief before her, as if by accident.

At the same moment the abbey clock struck the first stroke of twelve.

Twice Blanche opened her lips, in the vain effort to speak, but her utterance failed her, her head grew dizzy, her eyes closed, and, with a deep sigh, she sank insensibly to the ground.

Instead of succouring the prostrate maiden, so strangely and so suddenly overpowered, the confessor sat rooted to his chair, gazing with a strange unnatural wildness on the carved panels before him, his eyes dilated, his lips parted, and his crisp hair bristled up, like a living thing, while an agony of fear that seemed to master reason settled on his livid features.

What terrible thing—what unearthly mystery is that on which he gazes, that, so cold, so pale, and so corpse-like, stands there, in the paneled wainscoat, motionless, ghastly, and horrible?

“Merciful God, holy Mary, Jesu, protect me!” gasped the confessor, in a scarce audible whisper, his eyes seeming to start from their sockets in the intensity of his fear, while, with a shaking hand, he attempted to make the sign of the cross, and place that mystic symbol between the ghastly thing and himself.

As the last stroke of midnight pealed through the gloomy oratory the spectral form appeared to glide forward, revealing as it approached the dress and semblance of a nun. As, without any perceptible motion, the phantom floated slowly up to the confessional an unearthly light seemed to illumine the awful figure.

With a cry of terror, the confessor rose from his chair as the apparition reached the insensible Blanche, and, rushing to the altar, seized one of the candles, for, with the exception of the light which accompanied the spectre, the oratory seemed in darkness, so low and dimly burned the lamp and tapers.

“Avaunt, those fearful shadows!” cried the father, as, holding the light, and elevating a crucifix, the appalling object glided before him. “By this blessed symbol, I charge you hence, hence. Away, back to your grave, spirit of evil, phantom of dread and mischief! Away, I charge, abjure, command!” he muttered in a voice shaken by terror, as step by step he followed the

spectre, which, with its face turned on the priest, passed slowly to the opposite side of the oratory, till, reaching the secret door that led to the vaults and subterranean cells, it seemed for a moment to pause.

With a look of intense amazement, the confessor noted the panel before which the phantom stood, and, with still increasing wonder, observed one arm of the phantom raised slowly, and the livid hand pointed in the direction of the insensible Blanche, exposing by the motion a deep gash in the side.

For a moment it stood motionless, then the apparition began gradually to disappear through the wainscoat, the cold corpse-like hue of the face and the extended hand being the last objects to face from view, while the unearthly glare of the eyes was fixed on the confessor till the shadowy form was lost in the gloom beyond.

With a choking cry, the confessor flung himself on the secret panel, in a wild attempt to follow the spectral visitor, but, recoiling before the oaken barrier, he fell, stunned, bleeding, and senseless, to the floor.

CHAPTER IV. MEETING OF THE LOVERS.

Left alone in that remote wing of the mansion, with the night closing in, and no companion but her own bitter thoughts, the situation of poor Blanche on the following day was peculiarly heavy and painful.

Laid under the interdict of her uncle's displeasure, debarred from all society except that of her maid, who, ever, loquacious, only waited her lady's summons to pour out her budget of conversation, Blanche felt doubly lonely. Though Millicent appeared devoted to her young mistress, Blanche experienced a rooted repugnance to trust her, and, from the fact that she had been strongly recommended by her confessor, could not avoid looking on her as little else than a spy on her thoughts and actions.

Felling, therefore, in no humour for Millicent's idle prattle and jarring exclamations on the beauty of a conventional life, Blanche passed the hours alone till the expected visit of her lover in sad communing with her heavy thoughts and uncertain fate.

"My nature was never meant for a convent," she said at last, speaking to herself. "I love the world too much, would rather sit at my husband's knees, looking up to my D'Arcy's loving eyes, than kneel for hours before the Madonna, praying for intercession. Oh!, no," she cried, warming under the picture fancy had conjured up, "I should love my home far far more than my cell, take pleasure in my husband's joys, find ceaseless happiness in children, and in the virtuous exercise of my duties as a wife and mother, living each day a new life of usefulness and bliss."

Lighting a taper at the fire, she lit up the wax candles that in silver sconces projected from the mantel and threw a strong reflection on the table from which she had just risen, and, crossing to the small oratory, applied her taper to the candles in front of the crucifix, and then proceeded to the window, and, slackening the bullion ropes and tassels, the curtains fell in graceful folds, effectually excluding all sight of the cheerless evening.

"In this hour of trouble and uncertainty I will pray for that support and guidance my unhappy fate demands; but, instead of imploring the blessed Virgin to intercede for me, I will address my supplications here." And she looked along the line of portraits painted in the panels above her head, and after a moment's indecision, selected the last of the family series—that of her dead father.

The portrait represented an extremely handsome young man, an officer in the royal body guard, dressed in the full and costly uniform of his regiment.

Sinking on her knees opposite the picture, Blanche, in earnest supplication, invoked the spirit of her father to intercede in her behalf, and save her from a fate she loathed and dreaded.

Dropping her clasped hands, she slowly raised her eyes now dimmed with tears, to her father's picture.

Is she in her senses? Is she awake or dreaming? What mockery is this? What unnatural semblance is it on which she gazes?

Why do her eyes dilate with fear? Why does an icy shudder run through her veins, and her flesh creep in snaky folds, while in her dread and mortal terror she staggers from the mysterious and appalling sight?

A sight she cannot hide from her starting eyeballs, though she holds her expanded hands before her averted head. But all in vain. Some potent influence forces her to gaze and take in every lineament and attribute of the ghastly picture.

She would have shrieked to relieve in her horror, but the magnitude of her terror and amazement held her speechless and spellbound, as though a mighty grasp was upon her throat, and kept her voiceless.

While Blanche, shuddering and cowering, stood a few paces from the cause of all her alarm, alike unable to speak or to fly from the dreaded sight, we will endeavor to explain the cause of the terror that seemed, from the fascination with which she gazed upon her fear, almost to have destroyed her reason.

When, full of pious hope in the interceding power of her parent, Blanche flung herself before his portrait, her eyes, though taken off the picture, were, from frequent contemplation of the handsome features, able to retain the likeness vividly in her mind.

What, then, was her horror, when, preparing to rise, she discovered, not the portrait on which she had so fondly and trustfully gazed, not the limned likeness of her father, not a painted canvas, but a spectral form, that looked reproachfully and denouncingly upon her, so life-like and so real that had it spoken her fear and amazement could hardly have been greater.

The countenance, pale and ghastly as with long fasts and unwholesome vigils, was that of a man in the autumn of life. So much of the form as the frame permitted to be seen was clothed in the garb of some foreign lay-brother. In one hand he held a crucifix and black veil, both advanced as if for her acceptance, while the other pointed with a firm gesture to those symbols of faith and conventual celibacy.

The portrait of her father had been painted in scarlet and bright colours—the picture, phantasmagoria, or whatever the mysterious semblance was on which she gazed, was all in somber hues, the ivory crucifix and livid tints of the flesh being the only relief to the gloomy colouring.

Though individually the features were dissimilar to those of her father, still there was something in the expression of the firm-set mouth and the cold but authoritative look of the unrelenting eyes that struck her then, but even more afterwards, as a family likeness.

Was the thing on which she looked an illusion of the mind, conjured up by her own overwrought fancy?

Was it a supernatural visitation, sent to symbolize the fate that awaited her?

Or was this the final answer to her prayer?

Was she to interpret this as an emphatic response to her solemn appeal for direction, and accept the veil as her fate?

As she gazed on the supernatural picture before her, and endeavored to solve the one question, was this an answer to her prayer? her eyes became suddenly misty and obscured, confused noises sounded in her ears—the mingled strains of hymns of nuns, and convent bells ringing for compline and matins—till, her senses reeling under the combined effects of terror and ghastly sights, she sank, with a deep sigh, insensible on the floor, close by the spot where she had knelt to pray.

The old and ponderous clock of Abbey Grange, Sir Richard's mansion, was still vibrating with the last stroke of midnight, when the tall and graceful form of a young man, partially enveloped in a large Spanish cloak, and followed at a short distance by a faithful servant, was seen to glide suddenly from under the shadow of a clump of evergreens, and, darting across a patch of moonlit lawn, instantly disappear in the gloom of some adjacent foliage, whence, sheltered by a hedge of jasmine and myrtle, he gazed long and wistfully up the ivy-cased wall forming the extreme wing of the rambling edifice.

"Francis," said the gentleman, in a low but audible whisper.

"I am here, sir," was the prompt and respectful reply, delivered in the same cautious tone.

"Are you certain this is the wing?"

"Quite certain, sir, and those two windows on the second row, where you see light glimmering through the curtains, belong to the chamber."

"If so, here goes. You keep close under the hedge till my return."

"A moment, sir. Have you got your pistols?"

"Yes, of course. But why?"

"These priests are such treacherous dogs to deal with; and if you don't want your pistols to defend your life with, pray use them if necessary as a signal."

"What do you mean?"

"That should be set upon by numbers, fire out of the window, if you are squeamish about shooting one of the rascals."

"What, and rouse the neighbourhood?"

"No matter for that. I shall hear it, and shall not be long in following you."

"Why, you don't suppose, even if I came upon the whole fraternity, with Sir Richard at their head, they would attempt my life?"

"If they did not murder you at once they might throw you into one of the vaults, of which I hear this place is full, and starve you to death."

"Fear nothing, good Francis. Here goes to make the trial."

"Hist, sir, a moment," his servant whispered, in the same cautious manner in which they had hitherto conversed. "Do not forget to fasten the end of this rope to one of the ivy stems by the window, so as to secure a retreat if necessary." And as he spoke he attached a small rope to his master's arm, the coil remaining on the ground.

"Good. I will observe your advice." And seizing the ivy tendrils with a firm grasp, the young man, making a ladder of the plant that covered like a green mantle nearly half the building, rapidly but noiselessly mounted the dangerous and perpendicular ascent, watched with the most intense anxiety by the faithful servant below.

When the daring climber had reached the second series of windows he made fast the end of his rope to a gnarled ivy stem, and, conscious that his dark form was now a conspicuous object in the moonlight, raised himself at once to the sill, and finding the tall casement unfastened, immediately pushed it open and entered the recess, still screened from the room by the curtains.

After cautiously surveying the apartment from between the curtains, and finding it empty, though lighted, the stranger at once passed on tiptoe through the hanging drapery.

Laying aside his cloak and hat, and surveying the half modern, half antique boudoir with both curiosity and surprise, his eye suddenly encountered some white cloud-like object on the ground, below the portrait of an officer in the royal guards.

After a brief inspection of the vague outline he slowly advanced, then suddenly darted forward, and, raising the cold and insensible form of Blanche to his knee, placed her arm round his neck, while, with fervent kisses and passionate entreaties, he endeavoured to call her back to life and feeling.

“Oh! thank the blessed Virgin you are here, dear D’Arcy,” murmured Blanche devoutly, as she opened her eyes, and in the fullness of her love and thankfulness flung her arm over her lover’s neck.

“What has alarmed you, my beloved, and why do I find you here, and alone, fainting on the floor? Tell me what has terrified you,” inquired her lover, for it was indeed D’Arcy Egerton who addressed her.

“Oh! it was so horrible,” she replied, closing her eyes and clinging closer to the manly breast that sheltered her.

“What was horrible, love?” he said soothingly.

“That—that—oh! the picture.”

“I do not understand: What picture, Blanche?”

“That—my father’s. Oh! it was so stern, so terrible,” and shuddering, she pointed to the portrait and hid her face on his breast.

“I see nothing, love, but a young and handsome officer in the Lifeguards’ uniform,” he rejoined, after surveying the picture indicated. “Let me assist you to rise.”

“Oh! D’Arcy, I dare not look again,” she replied, as, by her lover’s aid she rose from the ground, and stood like a trembling fawn in his embrace.

“Why not, sweet Blanche?”

“When I prayed to my father to direct me how to act the picture changed, and a cruel stern man like my father held the veil and crucifix, as it seemed, almost to my hand, and, with oh! such a freezing unearthly look, commanded me to take them.”

“You have been terrified, my love, by your own excited imagination.”

“Oh! no, no. It

was real; I saw it. But thank the Virgin you are come. I was waiting for you when—”

“What?”

“The apparition appeared,” she replied, still trembling violently “But tell me now what it was you wanted to impart to me.”

“Is it true that after sending my letter I heard of your uncle’s intention of forcing you to enter a nunnery, but how should you know of my intention of visiting you to-night I confess astonishes me.”

“Why you told me so in a postscript to your letter.”

“Impossible. I did not know the fact till after Francis had deposited my letter in the old tree.”

“Still it was written in my letter. Nay, I can show it to you.”

“Had I conversed with any one in the shape of a priest to-day I might believe in some trick or juggling, but—what is it, Blanche?” he suddenly inquired as he noted the look of distress in her face.

“I cannot find your letter, yet I know I placed it safely in my bosom.”

At this moment Millicent entered the room from the inner chamber, and, seeing her lady in the arms of a stranger, gave a loud shriek, and, rushing from the apartment, filled the house with her shrill alarms.

Before the lovers could recover from their consternation a dozen men, both priests and laymen, burst into the room and completely surrounded the lovers, who stood in a mutual embrace in the centre of the threatening group.

“Seize that sacrilegious violator of innocence and piety, the midnight spoiler of the Church’s bride! Secure him!” cried Sir Richard, livid with hate and passion.

Instantly three powerful men threw themselves from behind on D’Arcy Egerton, and tore him from Blanche, who, after a vain struggle and imploring appeal to her uncle, fell with a shriek into the arms of Father Belville.

By a desperate effort D’Arcy flung off his captors and bounded to the side of Blanche, when a blow from behind stretched him bleeding at the feet of the smiling priest.

“Stand back!” cried Father Gerald, forcing his way to the front, his whole appearance and voice undergoing a remarkable change from its usual calm sedate manner. “Stand back!” This is my quarry,” drawing a long knife from the folds of his dress, and at the same time hinging back the loose sleeve of his gown. “My right, I tell you, and I alone will dispatch the scoffing heretic.”

The hoarse malignant croak of the monk’s voice was yet ringing in the ears of all present, when a sound of rushing feet was heard.

The lights were dashed from their sconces and instantly extinguished.

Sir Richard Castleton and his priestly party were attacked on all sides, while the flash of the monk’s knife, as it descended with fearful impetus, was followed by a shriek, a groan, and a gurgling in the throat that instantly subdued every noise. The hissing sound of spouting blood, and the low gasping sobs of some expiring mortal, rose through the sudden rush and darkness with fearful distinctness, telling that the monk’s knife had found a victim.

CHAPTER V. BLANCHE ON HER TRIAL.

“I have sent for you, niece,” said Sir Richard sternly, “that you may hear, in presence of these holy men, Father Gerald and your ghostly confessor, the steps your conduct has made it imperative on us to adopt.”

“My conduct?” demanded Blanche, as she took the seat pointed out for her between the two priests.

“Your conduct.”

“I do not understand you, uncle.”

“Indeed? That’s strange, considering how recent are your offences,” he replied sarcastically.

“My offences, Sir Richard?” she retorted, with a heightened colour and an indignant gesture of her hand. “Offences?” she added, with more than usual spirit and hauteur.

“Ay, madam, offences gross and shameless.”

“This to me, Sir Richard? I will no longer submit to such insults. I will leave you, sir, till you know how to address your brother’s daughter at least with respect.”

“Sit down,” he thundered, striking the table, as Blanche, with insulted modesty, rose to quit the library. “The doors are locked, and all egress stopped till I think fit. Resume your seat.”

You taunt me girl, with insulting my brother's child, forgetting how you yourself have outraged the honour of the name you bear."

"I, sir?" she cried haughtily. "Tell me in what, or how you dare so accuse me."

"I will, though my cheek burns to have to remind you what, had there been any grace left, would have needed no reminder from me."

"Go on, sir; I am listening. You said I had outraged the honour of my name."

"Ay, and stained it with most abandoned levity."

"When?" she exclaimed, with flashing eyes and an indignant emphasis.

"Here, in this house, beneath this time-honoured roof, where you have carried on a clandestine correspondence with an enemy of your faith and family—a malignant heretic. Is it not a fact?"

"I have answered this before."

"True; but not the infamy of inviting a lover to your bedroom at the hour of midnight. That disgrace and exposure you have not—"

"Cease, sir. This charge is as audacious as it is false, and you know it to be both."

"Can you deny this letter, with your lover's assignation for midnight?" showing as he spoke to the astonished Blanche D'Arcy's letter, the one so mysteriously lost. "Can you deny that he was seen to climb to your chamber window, and that you were discovered in his arms, there, where no maiden who prides her honour would have let a man approach. Or can you deny that the whole household surprised you together. Are these falsehoods, or are they truths?"

"True in fact, but false in construction," she replied, with undaunted firmness. "I was no party to Mr. Egerton's visit, and I should degrade myself were I to answer the imputation you have dared to put on it. As for your own infamous thoughts, I despise them, and from this hour loathe and detest you. You have outraged me with base suspicion, and covered yourself with infamy by so doing."

"It was truly unfortunate," observed the confessor, in his blandest accents, "that her maid should have so lost her discretion as by her alarm to bring all the menials to witness this most inopportune meeting of Miss Blanche and her lover. This mischief is done, however, and it now behoves us to check the spread of this unhappy scandal by the best means in our power."

"Speak on, holy father. I know my niece's good name and honour are as dear to you as to me," replied Sir Richard Castleton, bending in deferential courtesy to the artful priest, while Blanche, as if only in part comprehending the subject, looked alternately from one to the other for an explanation.

"Have I your permission, daughter?" said the confessor, bowing graciously to Blanche.

"Nay, you cannot doubt her readiness. Proceed," interposed Sir Richard.

"Violent diseases demand immediate remedies. The danger to our daughter's honour from the tongue of scandal is so imminent that it must be met at once by a remedy that shall give the lie to slander, however probable. The remedy is an immediate marriage."

"Marriage?" ejaculated Sir Richard, aghast and confused at a proposition so ruinous to his own advocacy of her cause by the man she so feared and doubted, could hardly suppress a cry of joy as the confessor concluded.

Had either of the three, however, turned their eyes on the silent and observant monk, and noted the keen intelligence of the look he bent on the speaker, they might have questioned the sincerity and the motives of the confessor's apparent friendly counsel, and suspected, not without truth, that Blanche's marriage was the farthest wish from his heart.

“Her affianced husband is ready at any hour to ratify the contract. Let us send for him at once, and she will be a wife before he can hear a breath of censure on his bride, Mr. Arundell being yet ignorant of this night’s scandal.”

“Are you my friend, and would you have me commence my married life with a fraud?” cried Blanche, struggling to keep down the expression of her disgust at such open duplicity. “And though in your wicked thoughts believing me guilty, would you have me practice a lie and deceit upon the man you would make my husband. Oh! fie, sir priest, fie, if this is your moral teaching.”

“Fair daughter, your passion makes you unjust to me and blind to your own position. I counselled a matter of mere expediency, nothing more.”

“Expediency? Shame! shame! I thought you were my friend—at least, you bade me think so.”

“And so devotedly I am, would you but believe it.”

“I see many objections to an immediate union with Phillip Arundell,” observed Sir Richard. “But surely you have some alternative, father, to propose in lieu of—”

“Once for all, cease that hateful subject, for I here solemnly declare I never will become the wife of Philip Arundell,” exclaimed Blanche, rising with impassioned energy. “Here in the face of Heaven and of you, holy men, I make a vow to the blessed Virgin that no time, no threats, no terrors shall ever change my sworn and irrevocable oath.”

“Speak, Father Belville,” continued the baronet, in haughty disregard of Blanche’s interruption.

“There *is* another plan by which scandal may be averted, and that is, that Miss Castleton takes up her residence, merely for a short time, with her aunt at Cromer, say for a few weeks.”

“Go to a convent?” she cried, with a presentiment of some impending misfortune. “Why a convent, sir?”

“Because through those holy walls no calumny can assail you. I myself will accompany you, and after a brief sojourn will bring you back.”

“I like this suggestion well; it meets my fullest approval,” observed Sir Richard.

“But to be effective it must be put in instant practice. Before noon she must be in Lady Agatha’s safe custody.”

“Send me to my aunt at Bath, Sir Richard, or to any place, but not to a convent. Oh! uncle, do not send me to those gloomy cloisters, I beseech, I pray you,” she cried imploringly.

“Away, foolish girl. Is this a time to cavil, when your very honour is in peril? Besides, have you not heard your stay is only for a time? Go to your room, and equip yourself in all haste, while I order horses for this journey. I give you half an hour, and see you tarry not. The door is open.”

And as he spoke Sir Richard unfastened the door and saw his niece with a sorrowing heart depart to dress for her early morning journey.

Returning to the table, where the two priests still remained seated, he said, with a voice that spoke his inward pleasure—

“A bold move, father, cleverly executed. She goes, my reverend friends, she goes; but *when* returns?”

“We all live in hope. *She* hopes to return in a few days. Well, it may be longer, much longer; still she has hope to shorten the bitterest captivity. What a blessing, especially to the young!” said Father Gerald, in those cynical accents that at times gave such edge to his remarks

and made him occasionally resemble more the devil than the priest, the crafty fox than the lowly shepherd.

That Father Gerald was, like Sir Richard, equally pleased with the arrangement in respect to Blanche; and her easy submission to the plan proposed, might have been read by those who knew his nature in the restless sparkle of his deep-set and ferrety eyes.

The motives which induced that gratification, however, were buried where no play of feature or emotion of voice could give them hint or expression, in the recesses of his crafty and selfish heart, and were alike unknown or undreamed of by either the baronet or the more wily and suspicious confessor.

Why this strange and mysterious being, who affected all the privations and asceticisms of the Jesuit and the monk, and who was an enigma even to those who professed to know him best, should have wished the niece of his patron dead, or immured for life in a loathsome cloister, is a secret which even the reader will kill to discover till he has unravelled all the phases of Father Gerald's character.

"I felt sure the marriage scheme was so distasteful that she would readily accept the alternative of the convent," observed the confessor, in reply to Sir Richard's remark.

"I much feared she would have agreed to the marriage, for the pleasure with which she first received the proposal, and, as that would have deprived the Church of its benefits, I for a time dreaded the result," was the specious reply.

"Would it not also have annulled the private contract between the father confessor and yourself?" inquired the monk, with an insidious expression of eye and voice.

"Doubtless, doubtless, and also the sum promised to you or your poor fraternity," replied Sir Richard, somewhat testily, wincing under the cunning imputation.

"That seeming pleasure arose from a misconception. Blanche thought I meant a marriage with her heretic lover. Hence her after indignation," said the confessor with a bland and forgiving smile. "All is now well. She goes to the safe custody of the Lady Agatha, where, when her noviciate of a year is over, she will—"

"Take the veil?"

"Assuredly. She will be made to do so"

"Can that be effected?"

"Nothing easier."

"But how?"

"Leave the means to my management and the cooperation of your estimable sister, the worthy superior."

"You have been selected, I believe, as spiritual director and confessor to the sisterhood?"

"I have."

"Then you will possess many opportunities of seeing your penitent?"

"Very many."

"There is a branch of your order living at Cromer, not far distant from the nunnery, is there not?"

"True, in the same village."

"So near, if I remember rightly," interposed the monk, rubbing his yellow and talon-like hands, "that a mere strip of the Brothers' garden separates the monastery from the convent."

"That will be convenient for your weekly visit, father," said Sir Richard.

"It will, especially as I shall reside with my order for the two days I shall devote each week to my spiritual functions."

“Besides, our ghostly brother will have many opportunities of visiting his pervert without the knowledge of the nuns, and pouring his holy counsel into her ears unknown even by the superior,” added the monk in a tone so meek and conscientious that the confessor, though detecting in his heart the socius with whom the rules of his order had saddled him, and dreading his innuendoes and sarcasms, answered with mild simplicity—

“How, good brother, how can I so perform my sacred calling?”

“By visiting her by the subterranean passage that leads from the fathers’ to the nuns’ cells, under the garden.”

“I am amazed, Father Gerald,” cried the confessor, his cheeks crimson with shame and his eyes flashing with suppressed rage, “that a man of your age and wisdom should give credit to such ignorant and malicious scandal. Believe me, Sir Richard, it is a gross calumny.”

“No doubt. You followers of Ignatius Loyola are ever the victims of falsehood and malice,” replied the baronet.

“Well, brother, those who showed me the door and offered to lend me a key must have played a most scurvy trick and practised an unworthy deception on a poor servant of the order. I ask your forgiveness. Heaven knows my thoughts were pure and my motives spotless.”

“I doubt it not,” replied the confessor, with apparent cordiality, while in his heart, and under the mask of a tranquil face, he registered an oath to take a signal vengeance on the mocking and hated spy.

“We are fully agreed, then, as to the distribution of my ward’s estate when she is once cut off from the world by the black veil?” observed Sir Richard.

“Fully,” replied the confessor. “Three-fifths to the Church, one-fifth to yourself, and one to me.”

“And the trifle for my poor brethren?” suggested the monk meekly.

“Will be paid out of Sir Richard’s portion,” rejoined the confessor; but before Sir Richard could make any exception to this proposition the door opened, and the Abigail, with a low curtsy, announced that her young lady was ready for the proposed journey.

Through the amount understood by a fifth of the estate reached to an annuity of several thousand pounds, it was with feelings of considerable annoyance that Sir Richard listened to the cool proposition of his share of the spoil being met with the bonus of hush money to one of the accomplices. Suppressing, however, all evidence of the vexation he felt at the confessor’s off-hand disposal of his ward’s estate, he answered Millicent’s information blandly, saying—

“It is well. His reverence has only to cloak himself for the journey, and will join her instantly in the hall. Tell my niece we are coming.”

“Will my worthy brother not take his poor socius with him, as an extra help and safeguard on one of his supplicating tones and gestures, as the confessor hastily attired himself for his early ride.

“No,” replied the father, turning sharply round, and answering in no factious tones the other’s petition; but instantly modifying his manner, he added apologetically, “My present duty, I thank you needs no aid. Besides as my worthy brother will doubtless remember, there is a missive to be finished for Rome, while a special duty connected with the interest of holy Church will demand his able management in London on Friday.”

“Ah! me, *mea culpa*,” exclaimed Father Gerald, affecting to be perfectly satisfied and beating his breast with his clenched hand. “That I should even for an hour, have forgotten the orders of my superior! *Mea maxima culpa!*” repeating the thumping on his chest with holy zeal.

With a look of ill-suppressed scorn on his proud but handsome features, the confessor, without deigning another word of reply, turned from the voluntary martyr, and, followed by Sir Richard, quitted the library, while the monk, muttering his *mea culpa* and smiting his breast under the mask of profound piety, sent a glance of hate and cunning after the confessor and his patron, as he muttered—

“A little longer I let you lord it, sir priest; a little while longer I am your cringing humble slave; then I denounce you, then you fall, and I, the humble and despised socious, triumph, trample on your neck, and become the master’s master. Ha! ha!” And the crafty monk indulged in a low chuckling laugh, and crept across the library, rubbing his hands at the prospect of his triumph.

“A little while longer,” he continued, “and this gambling baronet will have found the tether of the rope that hangs him—hangs him like a dog,” and again he laughed with a fiendish pleasure. “Blood is thicker than water, is it? I know better. Ha! ha! Let me see,” he said, pausing in his gliding motion across the floor, and scanning with profound reflection some subtle plan only half developed in his busy brain. “All goes smoothly and promise fair for the success of my scheme, and then all this accumulated wealth will be mine—all mine, and with my own hoard will raise me to the very pinnacle of wealth and distinction. Glorious triumph! A foe to Rome will purchase me absolution and a free tolerance for broken rules and violated canons, and then I’ll live like a Sybarite, found a dynasty of my own, and pass a life of luxury and happiness. ‘Tis strange I cannot find the boy. For twenty years have I striven to track the deserted mother and my boy, the destined heir to all my wealth and honours, but in vain I seek; no loving son responds to my yearning solicitude. But away; these thoughts have no business to intrude here,” he said impatiently, as, with a hasty gesture of his hand, he waved away his sorrow reflecting, and moved across the room with his former absorbed and contemplative motion.

“Let me see,” he resumed. “I must first track this sensual and love-infatuated priest, gain an insight into all his cards, now how he leads the game, and then use my knowledge to punish first, and then to crush him—crush, crush, ay crush!” And, with vindictive malice, he drew his foot across the carpet as if he trod out some noxious reptile. “How I hate him!” he hissed and ground, rather than uttered, between his close-set teeth.

Then, throwing a hooded mantle over his gabardine, so as completely to envelope his form and features, he approached the spacious chimney, and, after casting a rapid glance toward the doors which at either end gave ingress to the apartment, he passed under the richly-carved mantel, and, though a large fire was burning between the brazen dogs or andirons, he vanished from sight with a rapidity so sudden that had a watcher been present his disappearance would have been attributed to magic, or the agency of the arch-enemy himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MONEY-LENDER’S OFFICE—THE CONFESSOR OUTWITTED.

To keep the thread of our narrative consecutive we must go back for a few minutes, anticipate the events of the last chapter by two hours, and request the reader to accompany us to another apartment in the mansion of Abbey Grange.

While poor Blanche, under the terror of the mysterious picture, was lying insensible on the floor of her boudoir, three persons were collected in an inner chamber, sacred to the privacy of the confessor—the oratory.

These three were Father Belville, the monk (or Father Gerald), and Millicent (Blanche's maid).

"There is some mystery in which I cannot fathom. Some one is playing me false. But I will master the secret yet," observed the confessor, speaking with, for him, unusual acrimony. "How can she obtain this letter if not delivered by you?" he said, pointing to the letter taken from Blanche, and turning sharply on Millicent, who stood pale and trembling before him.

"Oh! your reverence, if I was sworn on the sacrament I could only declare solemnly I know nothing of it. To my knowledge, I never brought her a letter, and never saw that till I saw her fainting on the floor, when I took it from her dress."

"Then, again, how came she to faint? There must be some cause for a result that has terminated in so sound a sleep. Father Gerald, can you find no explanation for this mystery?"

"None, brother, none. Like you, I am lost in conjecture," replied the monk meekly and deferentially.

"At all events, we shall be prepared for this heretic lover when he comes. The affair has so far answered our plans, as, under the disgrace of being found with a lover so near her bedchamber—"

"And at midnight," put in the monk.

"At midnight," the confessor resumed, "she will the more readily consent to a short sojourn, if only for decency's sake, in the convent of Lady Agatha."

"And, when once there, what can be easier than to persuade her that by that act she has voluntarily made her election?" observed the monk, with a hypocritical assumption of piety.

"You can leave us, daughter, but remember your cue at twelve o'clock. Be vigilant, Here is an offertory for you, from the altar, for services rendered to the Church. Farewell." And, putting a couple of sovereigns into her hand, and dismissing his accomplice with the customary benediction, the confessor turned to his obsequious and retiring socious, or spiritual companion.

"Brother," he began, "I much fear that the princely fortune of this sentimental girl, which we have so long toiled to obtain for the good of our order, stands in some peril of curtailment."

"You alarm me, respected and honoured brother," replied the other quickly. Then, recovering himself, he immediately added—

"Why so?"

"I fear our host, Sir Richard, is not quite the devotee we believe him to be."

"In what respect? For I have watched him closely, and have seen no—"

"I think he has either already expended some portion of the fortune, or hopes to obtain a larger proportion by forcing his niece's marriage with Philip Arundell."

"What, when *we* have dedicated her to the Church?" replied the socious contemptuously.

"I have a scheme by which we may assure ourselves of all his plans. He goes to-morrow to town, on some business matters, to consult one to whom he has been lately recommended."

"Do you know the man?"

"As yet only by report. He is a low-bred unprincipled money-lending miser, living near Clement's Inn, and is known by the name of Silas Morphew."

"Good. I'll make a note of the address. Moneylending miser," he muttered aloud, as he wrote down the name in his pocket-book. "Well, brother?"

"I wish you to go there to-morrow, with a letter from me. You will then endeavor to find out the purport of Sir Richard's visit, and, having obtained it, hasten back to me. Use all your art and skill to glean his object fully."

"Who will accompany the girl to the convent tonight?"

“That is already provided for. Hasten back, however, for I shall miss my right hand and half my conscience while you are away.” And, with a peculiar expression of the eyes, which the bland and harmless old monk seemed merely to interpret as an overflow of friendship and esteem, though more experienced minds might have doubted the sincerity of the plotting priest, he and his humble tool took leave of each other.

We must now, for a brief time, ask the reader to accompany us to a narrow thoroughfare between Portugal Street and the Strand, and to a tall extremely shabby tenement let out into floors or sets of chambers for those questionable men of business who usually designate themselves agents, managers of coal or provident societies, and other doubtful speculations.

The chambers of Mr. Silas Morphew, accountant, scrivener, and money-lender, as a zinc plate on either side of the entrance indicated, were on the first floor, and ostensibly consisted of three, but in reality of only two rooms, *en suite*—the outer or clerk’s office, the inner or consulting room, and the third, which we have hinted as only a myth, being dully inscribed in white and black letters “Private.”

Exactly at nine o’clock, two mornings subsequent to the last chapter, a white-faced, thin, elongated lad, too tall for a boy and too short for a man, and who seemed to have grown out of his clothes, whose clothes had shrunk away from him, and whom Mr. Silas Morphew called his clerk, opened the outer office, and, after a few preliminary operations, which were supposed to include dusting and sweeping the official residence, contrived by a demikk-vault, to install himself on a high stool in front of a grubby old desk.

Then, taking from his pocket some slices of bread and butter, with a cold bloater, and from his hat an illustrated penny periodical, he commenced the moral and material recreation of refreshing his mind and body at the same time, or, in other words, indulging in the luxury of an intellectual breakfast.

He was so deeply engaged in a harrowing incident in the tale before him and the delicate task of extracting a fish-bone from between his teeth as to be for a time unconscious of the modest knock which had been frequently repeated on the door.

Taking up the rigid roe of the herring (it was a hard one), and daintily nibbling it, he called out in an imperious squeak—

“Come in, can’t yer?”

So admonished, the individual slowly opened the door, and Father Gerald, without his sandals and rosary, but otherwise habited as usual, revealed himself, and glided noiselessly, and with downcast eyes, towards the desk of the autocrat of the outer office, saying deferentially—

“Can I see Mr. Silas Morphew?”

“Is it pertickler, or ain’t it?”

“I believe so.”

“Don’t know, then,” crunching another modicum of his cherished dainty.

“Has the gentleman no particular hour of coming to the office?”

“Yes, in course he has.”

“And when is that, if you please?”

“Just when it pleases him,” licking his thumb and finger.

After having performed this piece of epicurean cleanliness, the youthful clerk carefully swept the crumbs from the desk into the palm of his hand, and, jerking them artistically into his mouth, threw what remained of the bloater’s head into the fire, and then condescended to

complete his sentence by observing, "Sometimes at ten, sometimes at eleven or twelve, but most generally at ten."

"Give this letter to your master, if you please, and tell him, Mr. Josh Whistler, that I will call again."

"How did you know my name?" cried the astonished clerk, taking the letter and staring hard at the visitor."

"I presumed it to be so, from seeing that name so frequently cut on the lid of your desk," he quietly replied, pointing to the fact so glaringly branded into the wood, as, with a slight evidence of disgust at the smell of the frizzling herring-bone, he slowly withdrew from the money-lender's office.

"A queer old bloke that," muttered the embryo clerk, as taking a seat before the fire, and placing a foot on either hob, he resumed the perusal of his pennyworth of fiction. "Some begging old priest, I'll be bound," he added, as he seated himself more comfortably on his chair, and between the occupation of sucking his teeth and poking the fire, addressed himself to the tale in earnest.

About half an hour subsequent to the departure of Father Gerald a short quick step and a dry petulant cough, heard on the stairs, caused Mr. Josh Whistler to leap from his chair, thrust the pennyworth of sensation hastily into his pocket, and bound upon his stool with surprising alacrity.

The owner of that characteristic cough and quick nervous step almost immediately entered the office, and, without turning his eyes either to the right or the left, proceeded straight to the inner office or consulting-room.

The individual who thus entered, Mr. Silas Morphew, was too remarkable a personage to be passed over without the formality of an introduction.

Whether naturally or accidentally deformed no one was sufficiently deep in Mr. Silas's friendship to know, but he was nevertheless most strangely—we might say elaborately—displaced and twisted.

Nature had evidently intended Mr. Silas Morphew for a tall man, but fate, caprice, or accident had bent him nearly double in the first instance, and then twisted him diagonally from right to left, at the same time so displacing his dexter shoulder that when he walked it was almost impossible to see his head, the crown of his hat seeming to grow out of his left arm.

His face was like that of all hunchbacks, long and thin, his mouth hard and rigid, as if the jaw and lips had been cut out of steel, so inflexible and unrelenting was the contour.

His cold grey eyes were restless and full of cunning, and at the same time the most expressive feature in his face, as they fully indicated the character and nature of the man. As he walked along the street, with one arm thrown over his back, as if habitually troubled with lumbago, the other grasping a thick cane, which he struck nervously on the pavement, he might have been taken for a sphinx or a human enigma, while a more philanthropic section of society might have regarded him as an object of commiseration and sympathy.

Both parties, however, would have been wrong, and had they seen him seated in his high-backed easy chair, before an office table, his deformity almost concealed by a partially upright attitude, and his quick eye running over the letter Master Josh Whistler had just handed him, they would have thought him to be a man perfectly independent of and indifferent to the world's sympathy.

"Who left this, do you say?" demanded Mr. Silas, in a quick sharp tone.

"A poor sneaking-looking beggar—some Methody brother or something of that sort."

“Indeed? Ugh! I wish you wouldn’t bring your filth herrings here, polluting the whole office.”

“Herrings, sir?” he ejaculated in blank amazement. “Why I ain’t set eyes on a herring, let alone eating one, not this month, I’d stake my oath”

“Very likely. Go, and when I give the usual signal strike the bell *three* times. Leave me.”

So admonished, Master Josh retired, with a countenance no way disturbed by the falsehood he had just been so ready to swear to.

“What’s up now, I wonder. The old toad” (a playful sarcasm applied to his master) “is so gallows good-tempered. Wait a bit. We shall see.” And with this solacing reflection, Josh leaped up on his office stool, and, under the cover of an inventory, surreptitiously perused the sequel of his serial literature.

While the clerk is thus employed we will return to the consulting-room and listen to the comments of the master, as he reads aloud part of the letter from the confessor, which had been left by Father Gerald.

“The bearer of this is getting troublesome—knows too much to be agreeable. Can you manage to dispose of him, or at least keep him out of the way for some time? If so, the £2000 which would be his share when the novice’s property is secure I would much rather pay to you at once for this accommodation. Any expenses for his board—if it should be necessary—or for his obsequies, should any accident occur to him, you may liberally draw upon me for. I will see you in the course of the day with the money, but not to touch in conversation on this matter. “F.B.”

“Humph! Unprincipled miser! Ah! Good! Good!” And Mr. Silas seemed so delighted at what his considered good that his iron visage relaxed into a grim smile as he rubbed his thin hands with uncommon glee.

“But stop. Am I quite ready for my quest? *Two thousand pounds!* Not a bad bonus for so trifling an accommodation, or for so profitable an acquaintance. Let me first provide all things in readiness for so agreeable a correspondent. Nothing must be omitted that can in any way show respect to my worthy visitor.”

Carefully looking over a bunch of keys he had just taken from his pocket, the money-lender at length selected one of a peculiar shape, and, rising with the aid of his stick, crossed the floor, till he came in front of the door leading into the supposed private apartment, or the “sanctum sanctorum” of the master’s social enjoyment.

Inserting the key into the lock, and opening the door, which appeared of unusual thickness, the inner side being lined with iron, he revealed a short passage, conducting to a green baize door, in the upper part of which an oval pane of glass threw a small amount of borrowed light on the passage from the supposed room beyond, just enough to enable any one, when the entrance was closed, to find his way without much difficulty to the door.

“How natural and snug it all looks! the temporary obscurity of the passage heightening the pleasure of the imagined light and luxury to be found within. Oh! it’s a sweet place,” Mr. Silas continued, in the same tone of jocularly and inward satisfaction.

“Yes, yes, the place does my ingenuity great credit. This oilcloth was a great improvement. The join, too, so neatly fits into the pattern that a lynx with a lantern could not detect the—ha! ha! It was capital.” And carried away with delight at his own ingenuity, Mr. Silas laughed with a low, unpleasant, guttural mirth, like a stifled chuckle, all the time narrowly inspecting the sides and floor of the passage, now fully revealed by the light admitted from the

consulting room.

“Yes, it will do. All is in working order.”

And he entered a short way into the passage, and passing his stick before him on the oilcloth, the whole floor, from where he stood to the green baize door, suddenly sank, revealing a dark yawning abyss, the depth of which could only be surmised by the rush of cold damp air that in an instant seemed to steam up from the depths below, chilling even the inventor of this devilish mechanism to the bone.

“Ha! ha!” he chuckled in absolute glee. “A neater mousetrap was never invented. It does me infinite credit. It will do admirable to catch that priestly imposter.” And, removing his stick, the trap flew back, without sound, into its place, making the flooring appear perfectly even and secured.

“All is now in order, all but the *bait*, and that will duly follow,” he concluded, as, closing the door, he resumed his seat behind the table.

Mr. Silas had hardly taken his place when the door of the consulting-room opened, and Master Josh announced the presence of a visitor.

Immediately after the confessor, habited much in the style Father Gerald appeared in some hours before, entered, and mechanically took the seat indicated by the pen of the money-lender.

“Though this is our first interview, Mr. Silas Morphew, yet, as a staunch brother of our order, you have been largely trusted by the brotherhood in matters of vital importance to the cause,” observed Father Belville, commencing the business of his visit.

“Exactly so,” was the laconic reply, as both men on the instant exchanged a secret sign of recognition.

“You are aware of the accumulated fortune of the novice, late of Abbey Grange, is about a hundred thousand pounds, and the yearly rental will average seven thousand?”

“More or less.”

“You are also aware we cannot legally touch either the funded property or the current rents till the novice takes the veil?”

“Precisely, just twelve months after admission as a novice.”

“And in the meantime we want to raise £16,000 for *necessary* expenses, upon these contingent securities.”

“In the meantime we have neither a novice nor a professed nun, and the securities are invalid,” replied Silas, with slight sarcasm.

“By your pardon, the maiden entered on her noviciate last night, and—”

“But how will you induce her to take the vows, having got her to the convent?”

“By a little innocent artifice, which would have worked admirably had not the girl spoilt it for a time by her folly.”

“How so?”

“I had persuaded her that there might be another heir to the estate, which, of course, by depriving her of her property, would annul her father’s will, and leave her free. Under this impression, I should have induced her to take up her abode for a time in the convent, from which I would have taken good care she never came forth.”

“How was this admirable little plan thwarted?”

“By the foolish thing bring her heretical lover to her bedroom, where he was discovered. To shield her from the public scorn and obloquy of such a wanton act, the retirement and shelter of a convent became absolutely necessary, and of course was willingly submitted to.”

“Is the girl pretty?” suddenly asked Mr. Silas, fixing a look of peculiar meaning on the other’s face.

The priest started, his eyes fell before the other’s glance, and he hesitated somewhat before he replied.

“I believe—that is, I think she would be thought so by the carnally-minded,” he added, with an assumption of strict piety.

“Ah!” replied Mr. Silas, and then added, “Touching this heir, you greatly interest me. What heir do you suppose *can* exist but the issue of the last owner?”

“No one in reality, only I told her that, as her father’s elder brother Maurice had never been heard of it was not impossible that some descendant of his might be found to make good his claim.”

“Indeed? And did you really think it possible?” inquired Mr. Silas, as he fixed a keen searching gaze on the confessor, as though he would read his inmost thoughts.

“By no means. I fully believe the young reprobate died, as he deserve, fifty years ago,” was the prompt reply.

“Doubtless, doubtless,” assented the other, surreptitiously touching a secret wire of communication that led from his table to the desk of Master Josh, in the outer office.

“I suppose, reverend sir, the sainted order, of which I am an unworthy lay brother, allows you a companion, a socius?” he asked, in a tone of devoted humility.

“A spy? Oh! yes, it does,” rejoined the confessor, with a frown, as, drawing a pocket-book from his vest, he continued, as he laid it on the table, “The contents of this book have reference to that—that—”

But before the sentence could be completed a bell on the table before him struck *three* sharp distinct strokes.

“One—two—*three*,” exclaimed Silas, counting the strokes. “Indeed? That is a signal from my clerk, apprising me that some clerical visitor waits to see me—probably one of the order.”

“I do not wish to meet any of the brethren today. I—”

“I calculated as much, and, as you cannot pass out without observation, you can, if you please, step into my private room, a little snugger where you will find some of the daily papers and periodicals, to occupy you for the brief time I may be engaged.”

“Thank you, thank you. This pocket-book, I was about to say,” he replied, rising, “has reference to that little matter understood between us in regard to that same socius.”

“Very good. Allow me to open the door.”

And rising from his chair, Mr. Silas preceded the confessor to the private door.

“You will find a good fire, and prey make yourself comfortable,” opening the door. “you have only to push that—but you perceive the door before you.”

“Many thanks. I can see perfectly.”

The confessor, with a confident step, entered the passage, the money-lender closing the door, and resuming his seat with a bright flush upon his usually sallow face.

Short as was the distance from the door to his chair, a muffled exclamation and the sharp recoil of the trap became distinctly audible.

“Ha! ha! ha! How sweetly any mousetrap acts, to be sure!” he exclaimed, laughing and rubbing his hands in unrestrained glee. “The fire and the papers made as capital a bait as toasted cheese. Ha! ha! The socius knows too much, does he? Well, perhaps—ah!”

This ejaculation was caused by a faint echo of a human voice, evidently raised to its highest pitch; but sounding far off, as from the bottom of some deep well.

“Ah! I see I haven’t quite shut the door,” and, rising, Mr. Silas crossed the room, and, opening the iron-cased door, looked into the vacant passage, the cries of pain or supplication seeming to rise clearer and more intelligible with the open door. Closing it carefully, however, Silas turned the lock, and, removing the key, returned to his chair, neglecting, both in going and coming, his customary deformity, and walking as if no affection of the spine existed at all.

“Let us see what the pocket-book says,” he continued, opening its folds. “Ah! here it is. Four £500 notes, for that little matter about the socius. He! he! he! Cheaply earned, especially when rightly considered, and we remember *who’s* the dupe. Ha! that’s good.”

The next minute Silas Morpew, assuming all his signs of decrepitude and deformity, stumped his way into the outer office, and, approaching Master John Whistler’s desk, counted down eighteen shillings, the youth’s week’s wages, much to the amazement and consternation of that young worthy, who, remembering that the day was only Friday, had some dread presentiment of an instant *mittimus*, or, as he mentally termed it, getting the sack.

I am going again out of town for a few days, and shall not require your attendance at the office” (Josh fairly gasped at this) “till Wednesday morning. Therefore, take your wages now. You can go directly. I will lock up, and shall be here first on Wednesday.”

Having thus delivered himself, Mr. Silas reentered his consulting room.

The first thing Master Whistler did, on the departure of his master, was to sweep the money into his pocket, give a *sotto voce* hurrah! and make an extravagant attempt at a pirouette on the floor, that brought his head in contact with the edge of the mantelpiece, causing a grimace the opposite of mirthful. Then, savagely seizing his hat, he rushed from the office, descending the stairs at the rate of three steps at a bound.

“I hold all their cards in my own hand, and can win the odd trick, and make the rubber whenever I choose. And the dolts believe in me. Patience a little longer, and I will astonish the whole pack. Wolves, every one of them. Sainly wolves, too. Do they think to terrify me with the secret vengeance of their order? Fools! fools! That was an awkward blow in the dark. My curses on the hand that caused it,” he went on, musing aloud. “No matter. I must make the cassock and badge or the order cover the consequences. Why, the poor confessor, I declare, is still bemoaning his mishap. Ah! it won’t last long,” he added, in a facetious tone, as, during the business of filling his pockets with keys, papers, and other articles, he paused to listen to the faint exclamations from beneath the treacherous trap. “He’ll be too hoarse by the morning to whisper. By the bye, he’ll be frightfully hungry before I discover my mistake on Wednesday. However, there’s one thing certain, that good digestion will wait on *his* appetite. Besides, what an excellent opportunity I give him, in solitude and darkness, to cool his unholy love, to tell over all his sins, and confess himself! But I’ll be bound he won’t have the gratitude to see it. Now for Sir Richard Castleton. Good afternoon, Father Gerald—I beg pardon, Father Belville. Adieu,” he cried, with malicious irony, as he tapped on the private door and turned out of his office, carefully fastening all the locks, and then, methodically descending the stairs, and with his arm across his loins, and his body nearly doubled, he reached the Strand and called for a cab.

CHAPTER VII.

JOSH WHISTLER HAS DOUBTS ABOUT HIS MASTER.

As Mr. Silas Morpew issued from the passage of his dwelling into the street, his clerk, Master Josh, protruded his head from the private entrance of a public-house a few doors above, and, after giving expression to an ejaculatory “My eye! what’s up now?” cautiously left his concealment, and, following his master at a respectful distance, saw him hail a cab and disappear in a westward direction.

With a face expressive of the most profound astonishment, he retraced his steps and rushed up the office stairs to satisfy himself that no one was secreted there, and that the door was properly secured.

“That reg’lar queers me,” observed Josh, slowly descending the stairs. “he didn’t come out while I was there, and he ain’t come out since I left, I’ll take my davy. Queer that, uncommon queer. He ain’t gone and eat him, or he ain’t” (here the speaker emitted a low significant whistle) – “he ain’t *murdered* him? Well, it’s suspicious, anyhow, and puts me in mind of that old priest last year as I never see come out of the room, though old Silas swore they went out together while I had my head in the desk; but that be blowed. And—oh! crikey, so it was,” he exclaimed, bringing his hand down with emphasis on his thigh, and looking as if he had suddenly seen a ghost.

“I had to strike the bell *three* times that very day while the old priest was with him. What was that for, and what was it for to-day?” Here Master Josh scratched his head, as if that operation would elucidate the knotty point on which he was puzzling his brains.

“And my! wasn’t there a shindy about the old man and the money he was said to have received from Silas, who had the old ‘uns receipt for the £10,000! Howsumever, neither the priest nor the tin was ever heard of after he left here—left Silas. Did he ever leave? By jingo! I had a holiday that time too,” he continued, becoming more energetic in his manner, and more alarmed in his looks and the tone of his voice, as these new facts rose to his memory.

“I’ve made up my mind to see what’s in that private room of the old fox: I’ve got a cast of the key. But what if it should be like Bluebeard’s room, filled with heads and trunks of murdered victims?” he continued, with a slight shudder. “There must be something there, or he wouldn’t keep it so awful close. I’ll go on Monday night, get a lot of keys, a coil of rope, to get out of that further window, and with a bull’s-eye and matches, I’ll have the whole night to myself to search that cut-throat looking place; for the more I think of it, the more certain I am there’s some mystery connected with old Silas’s private crib, and I’m blowed if I don’t ferret it out, too.”

With this resolve, Master Josh quitted the scene of his daily drudgery, and did not again revisit it till near midnight on the following Monday when, satisfied that the deaf housekeeper was fast asleep in her attic, and his master far away in the country, he would have plenty of time to prosecute his investigations unchallenged.

Armed with a bunch of keys, Josh found little difficulty in entering the outer and inner office, and, having carefully locked the door to prevent intrusion, lighted the gas in the consulting-room and sat down for a moment, to reflect on his subsequent movements.

As he thus sat facing the mysterious door the bold letters comprising the word “Private” assumed in the lad’s mind a strange and ominous significance. To open that strictly guarded portal seemed like prying into the ghastly secrets of the tomb. What horrors might not assail him? Might he not stumble on the skeleton of the old priest or see the corpse of the young one? Busy fancy was running so fast from horror to horror that he felt his scalp wrinkling up, and his rough hair was bristling like quills up on his head.

Giving himself a vigorous shake, to dispel such phantasies, Josh drew a flask from his pocket, and, imbibing a deep drink, seemed fully fortified for the task before him.

There's no knowing but some beggar may be lying in wait, and I ain't going to be floored without giving a blow in return."

Undoing a coil of small rope, he firmly affixed his bunch of heavy keys to one end, saying, as he allowed the rattling mass to fall on the floor—

"A swing with that on the head will be a dose for one, anyhow. Now for the new key to open Bluebeard's private drawing-room."

Rising, and dragging his bunch of keys after him, Josh approached the door that shut him out from all those mysteries he burned so ardently to discover.

With some trepidation he inserted the key he had made from his cast into the lock, and, after a little anxious finessing with it, to his infinite delight, felt the bolt fly back, and the next instant saw the iron-cased door open before him.

With a feeling of infinite satisfaction, Josh surveyed the narrow passage and the baised door beyond, with its oval pane of yellow glass, looking like the eye of some watchful Cyclops, leering with malign cunning on the attempted burglary.

"There's something queer in that ill-looking door and its doffing winder. I wonder if it's locked. I'll take this, however, in case."

Removing the key from the lock, and keeping the door open with a chair, Josh, trailing his keys, advanced with measured steps along the treacherous passage.

Seeing a keyhole in the door before him, he had just put out his right hand when the floor opened beneath him, and, before he was conscious of what was taking place, he felt himself making involuntary summersaults through a space that appeared interminable in its depth and darkness. At length, with a heavy thud, that seemed to expel every atom of breath from his body, and with a jerk that nearly wrenched out his left shoulder, he fell on his back on some fast and yielding substance.

So completely was Josh stunned by the concussion of his fall, though, not seriously injured, that it was some time before he had strength to move, and still longer before he could in any degree realize his situation or understand what had taken place.

His first sensations were those of disgust at the damp fetid odour that assailed his nostrils, making his breathing an act of loathing and oppression. At length, with the consciousness of the darkness that surrounded him, returned the sudden conviction of what had actually taken place.

He remembered at once the object he had in view, how nearly he had reached the secret door, when, by some extraordinary means, the floor had given way and he had been precipitated to that apparently fearful depth.

Fully believing that some accidental rottenness in the flooring had caused his mishap, Josh looked up, expecting to see the light from the office through the rent in the passage, but when nothing but darkness encountered him on every side a dreadful fear took possession of his mind, and he howled aloud in the wildness of his despair.

As the dreadful truth of his situation flashed on his mind, and he saw in his misfortune some devilish contrivance of his master, his terror became abject and paralysing; he beat his breast and tore his hair, and rocked his body to and fro in the agony that was choking him.

In one of these passionate bursts of grief his hand struck on some hard substance that caused him acute pain. His joy, however, at the injury was so great that he immediately threw himself on his knees, and, probably for the first time in his life, he put up a sincere prayer of thankfulness.

“O Lord, O Lord, I thank and bless you. O God, have pity, and help me out of this rightful purgatory. Oh! dear. Oh! how lucky I put my lamp in my pocket!”

Pulling his lantern from under his waistcoat, where he had thrust it, and feeling in his pocket for his box of lucifers, Master Josh, though his eyes were full of tears and his hands trembled violently, was not many seconds in lighting his wick. Closing the front, and rising to his feet, and turning his lamp slowly round, he surveyed the gloomy place of his imprisonment.

The darkness was, however, so profound that, strong as was his reflector, the light could only so far pierce the gloom as to reveal the green and slimy wall, that, reaching high up, terminated in what appeared an arched roof, from which hung long ragged festoons of fenny fungi, dripping a foul and greasy mixture, that here and there fell on the bricked floor with a slow dull splash.

Looking beneath him, Josh discovered that several old mattresses of straw and wool had been spread for a short distance around, with the evident object of breaking the force of the victim's fall. These, however, were so rotted with damp, and torn and burrowed in by rats, as to be scarcely distinguishable, while a pestiferous odour rose with every tread or disturbance of the filthy bed on which he had fallen.

Disgusted with the smell, and terrified by the number and audacity of the vermin, he approached the margin of the mattresses, and, stepping on the slimy bricks, slowly advanced along the vault, exploring with his light every foot of the spacious dungeon, which it was evident, from his careful survey, extended the whole length of the tenement above.

Josh had proceeded down one side, the walls everywhere presenting the same unbroken appearance, and the same surface of mouldy fen, when he perceived a flight of steps let into the thickness of the brickwork, and leading to a low iron door, one glance at which, however, was sufficient to annihilate all hope of escape, so massive, strong, and secure were all its fastenings.

Turning in despair from his inspection, Josh examined the extremity of the vault, and had just begun to investigate the other side, when, under what appeared to be the crown of an arch or recess, he beheld a sight that at once filled him with terror and insufferable loathing.

Extended on its back under the low arch lay the outline of a human body, but in so revolting a state of decay, behind half skeleton, half corpse, that but for some powerful fascination, compelling him against his will to gaze upon the hideous sight, he would have turned and fled in absolute horror.

The long-skirted surtout, so indicative of the priesthood, in which the body when living had been habited, was still plainly evident; the fleshless hands protruded white and ghastly from the sleeves, up and down which the rate coursed in revolting numbers.

The shoes had been completely consumed exposing the bare bones and long skeleton toes as far as the trousers, which, like the coat, were alive with the loathsome vermin.

It was the head, however that presented the most appalling sight in this frightful picture. Every trace of flesh had been devoured from the scalp and countenance, with the exception of the exposed and shrivelled eyes, that with a hideous leer gleamed from the depths of the white skull, with an expression that might have chilled the blood of the most dauntless student of mortality.

But that which added tenfold repugnance to the sight was the moving jaw, that, opening and closing, seemed to give and grin at the shuddering youth who gazed with half frantic terror on the revolting spectacle.

How long with starting eyes and sickening fear, Josh might have stood spell-bound, gazing on the ghastly sight, it is impossible to say; but, fortunately for the preservation of his

reason, a rat that had worked its way into the cavity of the mouth, and whose efforts to escape had caused the mocking motion of the jaw, rushed out from under the chin, and made so sudden and fierce a spring at the glaring bull's-eye in his hand as nearly dashed the lantern from his grasp.

With every limb trembling, and a cold sweat bedewing his body, the clerk turned from the repulsive sight, and muttered in a kind of idiotic babble—

“I know him. I know him. I know him. It's the old priest. I'll swear to his coat.

Chanting these unconnected words, he slowly sauntered to the upper end of the pitchy vault, till he unconsciously stood within a few feet of the spot where he had fallen, when he suddenly paused, stared intently at what appeared like two balls of fire in the surmounting darkness, gave a loud and piercing shriek, and would have fled, but as he turned his foot slipped on the slimy bricks, and he fell heavily to the ground, losing and extinguishing his light.

Though bruised by his fall, Josh, terrified as he was, immediately felt for his lamp, and, having fortunately found and re-lighted it, once more tremblingly turned to the thing that had so alarmed him.

Gathered together on a heap of rotten mattresses lay, coiled up, some indistinct and shapeless object, which even the light of the lamp failed fully to reveal, and from the centre of which there gleamed those red fiery orbs whose fierce and senseless motion had so aroused his fear.

Half persuaded they were the eyes of some wild beast waiting to spring upon him, yet urged on by a curiosity that almost conquered his terror, he slowly rose and cautiously approached the mysterious cause of his alarm.

Josh had crept to within a few paces of the dreaded object, when, with a leap and a bound, it sprang to its feet, and the next instant the clerk's throat was grasped as in a vice, and a voice, cracked and hollow, hissed in his ear—

“The fiends of hell have heard my prayer, and given you to my vengeance. Die, dog, die!”

Half strangled by the convulsive clutch, Josh instinctively raised his arms, casting the full focus of the light on the thin haggard face and flaming eyes of the late handsome confessor.

As those eyes rested on the youth's terrified countenance the priest staggered back, relaxed his hold, and, throwing up his arms with a hoarse guttural voice, exclaimed—

“Away! I did *not* kill you. Back, back, Louise, back! O Jesu, have mercy!” Then fell prone on the foul heap from which a moment before he had sprung like a tiger on his prey.

“What a fool I was!” gasped Josh, feeling his throat. “why it's the priest that called on Friday, and old scarecrow got rid of it, like the other poor devil yonder. Oh! I see it all now,” he said, with sudden intelligence. “There's some trap in the passage, through which the poor wretch who walks over it falls. Oh! the rascally old scoundrel! If I had him here wouldn't I,” and Master Josh ground his teeth, and looked vindictively ferocious. “He means to starve him to death, as he did the old priest. Oh! Lord, and I shall be starved to death too,” and Josh fairly howled again in the agony of this thought.

“How shall I get out? There's no chance by the door. How did I get in? I only know I fell from a frightful height. Let me se.”

Holding up his bull's-eye, Josh scanned the long arched roof of the vault, and to his surprise observed that just over the mouldy beds the roof ascended in the form—as far as the darkness permitted him to judge—of a funnel-shaped shaft, with the apex upwards.

After a minute examination of the spot his eyes detected, hanging among the mouldy strings, what appeared like a rope waiving with the tenny shreds and streamers. The next moment he gave expression to a cry of mingled joy and defiance, as he grasped the end of the coil to which he had fastened the bunch of keys.

“Hurrah! This accounts for the jerk I felt in my arm. Now, old Beelzebub, you and I will be quits yet. Hurrah!”

And, as if his own good fortune had brought into existence all his humanity, he hastened up to the exhausted confessor, and, taking pity on the gaunt insensible wreck before him, gently raised his head, and, placing the flask he had brought for his own use to the mouth of the priest, began, as he noted the eyelids quiver, and the chest to heave with a deep sigh, to impart consolation to his fellow captive.

“Now, sir, be of good heart. Take another pull. We’ll get out yet. Have you had nothing to eat since you dropped down here? The old beggar meant to starve you I am sure of it. But never mind, we’ll pay him out yet, never fear. It’s our turn next. Here, pull away.”

“Jesu—Maria—pardon,” muttered the wretched man, without unclosing his eyes. “Holy Mother! She fled from me—her death is not on my soul. Louise, still loved, plead for me. Oh! say not that it was my crime that drove you to the cold river. Oh! speak to me again, cheer the gloom of this purgatory once more with the sight of those soft eyes,” and tears burst from under his closed lids, and ran down his wasted cheeks.

“Oh! here’s the wickedness, and in a priest, too. Well I’m blest,” cried Josh aside. “Come, come, governor, it’s no use being spooney,” he added aloud. “You must rouse yourself, I tell you. I’ve found a way of getting out. Come, take another pull.”

“Who are you?” inquired the confessor, opening his eyes. “You are not Louise. Where did you get that voice, those eyes? Where do you come from?”

“I am old Silas’s clerk,” he replied, helping the confessor to sit erect.

“Ah! that miscreant! Did he send you?”

“He send me? I should think not. Ah! hist! ye beasts,” he exclaimed, stamping and shouting, as a troop of rats started from a burrow in the rotten mattress near the confessor and rushed madly past.

“O God! what I have endured these weary ages in darkness and solitude from these horrid monsters! Go on. Speak again.”

“I didn’t see you come out on Friday, and, having my suspicions of old Silas—”

“Silas Morphew?”

“Yes. And as he said he wouldn’t be back till Wednesday—”

“Then his purpose was to starve me to death, or give me over alive to the horror of being devoured.”

“Like enough. So I came to-night to try and find out what had become of you, and somebody else I had missed.”

“Another victim? Who?”

“I don’t know his name. Will, I got as far as the passage that leads to the private room, when—”

“The floor gave way and you fell.”

“Just so; but I couldn’t make out for a long time where I was, or what had come over me, it was such a stunning. Fall.”

“But how are we to get out of this loathsome dungeon? Is there no door?”

“Yes. I’ve found a door, but it would take sledge hammers to break it down. It’s made of iron.”

“Then we are lost. And you have only sacrificed your own life in your hope to save mine.”

“No, not so bad as that. Can you climb?”

Alas! my son, no. I am too weak for such labour; besides my limbs are covered with wounds.”

“Wounds?”

“Ay, from the teeth of these wretches, which, when sleep has fallen on my exhausted frame, have assailed me in scores.”

“Oh! horrid. I do pity you.”

“Why did you ask if I could climb?”

“I chanced to have a rope in my hand when I fell, with a bunch of keys tied to one end, and it has got caught in the hinge of the trap.”

“How will that aid you?”

“I have just discovered the other end hanging overhead.”

“Well?”

“I can run like a cat up a rope, and if you can’t follow me I must lower a chair for you and draw you up. Now take another pull at the flask, to put more life into you, as I haven’t got any grub, and you shall see.”

“May the holy Virgin bless you, my son,” replied the confessor meekly, returning the flask after imbibing a portion of its contents.

“Now, here goes,” cried Josh, placing his lantern on the ground and grasping the rope. With difficulty the priest rose, and, taking up the bull’s-eye, laid his wasted hand on the clerk’s shoulder, as he said solemnly—

“Swear to me, my son, swear by your mother’s soul, by all your hopes of heaven, and all you value here on earth, you will not desert me, for I shall go mad if left again in solitude. Swear this.”

“I have no mother to swear by. Poor thing, she went and drowned herself when I was a baby, but as sure as I live, I’ll not leave the office without you.”

With a beating heart Josh tried the rope with his weight, and then like a squirrel, hand over hand, rapidly ascended the rail unseasoned line. The height, however, was even greater than he had calculated upon, and his hand suffered fearfully before his head came in contact with the trap.

It was not till then, however, that the true danger and difficulty of his task began to show itself to the climber.

He was ignorant in reality as to what the keys had caught, and dreaded lest before he could catch the ledge with his hands the trap would fly open, and precipitate him again hopelessly to the bottom.

After great exertion, however, and by twining his feet in the rope, he was at length enabled to pass one hand between the trap and the narrow edge of flooring. The fall, however, worked with so strong a spring that the sweat poured from his body like rain before he could succeed in inserting his elbow above the flap, and lower it sufficiently to allow his head and arms to pass.

The sight of the lighted office and the fresh air revived and encouraged him, when, working his way sideways, and forcing down the trap as he advanced, he at length gained the

extremity, and had hardly time to disengage his hands, when, with a sudden recoil, the trap sprang back, and he was rolled fainting and exhausted into the office.

The priest, who had watched from below the gradual opening of the floor and the admission of light, gave an involuntary cry of despair as he heard the rebound and beheld the sudden darkness above.

For more than ten minutes poor Josh lay panting and breathless where he had rolled, aching and trembling in every limb. When at last he rose to his feet he returned to the passage, and, finding that the keys had lodged, as he first surmised, at the hinge, he was enabled in safety to approach so near as to fix an office chair like a wedge between the green door and the hinge of the trap, and thus keep it open.

The rest of his work, though hard and laborious for a youth of his age, was comparatively trifling, though had not care and starvation reduced the full-bodied priest to half his natural weight, Josh Whistler would have found it impossible to draw him up so great a height, a labour made doubly painful by the tender and lacerated state of his hands.

By patient perseverance, however, the difficult task was at length effected, and the confessor safely deposited in the usurer's armchair, while his preserver, with joyful activity, set about restoring the office to its proper state of order and security.

If the first sight of Father Belville's ghastly feature as seen in his frightful dungeon had startled the clerk, the picture he presented as, in the full blaze of the gas, he reclined, too exhausted to speak, but following with a painful scrutiny every motion of his lively and nimble friend, might well have appalled any one who now beheld him.

Those few days of mental and physical suffering had reduced him to a mere shadow. His well-fitting and once spotless habit, now stained and creased, hung in folds round his gaunt and hollow form, presenting the very wreck of the late trim and imposing confessor.

"Now, sir," said Josh, as he locked the private door and approached the chair where the father was still seated, "I'll help you downstairs and put you in a cab. Where would you like to go? Oh! I won't leave you till you're safe home," he added hastily, as he noted a beseeching expression in the eyes of the confessor.

"Take me to your own home," Father Belville said in a faint whisper.

"Oh! crikey, that would be a lark. Which I ain't got no home. My crab's a third pair back, splendaciously furnished with a bed, a table, and half a chair, with a ginger-beer bottle for a candlestick. Oh! what a lark to take a gentleman to my *fashionable* apartments! Yes, *walker*. Oh! crikey. No, thank you."

Without removing his eyes for a moment from the youth's face, the priest drew a will-filled portemonnaie from the breast of his coat, and, placing it in Josh's hand, said in the same faint whisper—

"I beg you will take me to your own lodgings, and procure me some food. I owe you my life, and you shall not be forgotten."

"I ain't stumped out yet. See, I've got five bob left out of my week's wages; so I shan't touch your money; and if you will go to my place, why you shall." And displaying with some pride the residue of his eighteen shillings, he pushed the purse back on the father.

"Take it, as I desire you," he replied in a tone that admitted of no hesitation, as he pointed to the purse, "and let us go. I cannot breathe in this hateful den. Come."

With a shrug of indifference Josh put the purse in his pocket, and, turning off the gas, raised the confessor from the chair, and, holding his lantern in one hand, with the other arm

supported him through the office, and, having fastened all the doors, descended the stairs, entered a cab, and disappeared in the direction of Clare Market.

An hour later Josh, having lighted a good fire in the rusty grate, and prepared the ingredients of to him a luxurious breakfast, was attending with all the assiduity of a woman on the confessor, who was endeavouring by timely sustenance to restore his exhausted body to its natural standard of strength and endurance.

CHAPTER VIII. THE NUNNERY—THE LOST ONE FOUND.

The night was dark and stormy, the wind howled dismally through the leafless woods, and, mingling with the surge and hiss of the distant ocean, filled the air with drear and mournful sounds.

A fitful glimmer of light on the horizon showed where the moon, in her last quarter, vainly struggled to penetrate the hearse-like clouds that surrounded her setting.

To add still further to the gloom and discomfort of the night, a low scud was ever and anon driven across the face of the heavens, obscuring the partial light of the moon, and at times involving the scene in total darkness.

“We have sealed the outer wall, and reached the house in safety,” observed D’Arcy Egerton in a cautious whisper to his faithful servant, as he glanced up to the many gables and lofty chimneys of the dim old pile that loomed like a misshapen giant out of the surrounding darkness.

“And if the wind continues, and there are no dogs in the grounds to give the alarm, the rest of our task is easy.”

“Are you sure, sir, in what part of the nunnery Miss Blanche is confined?” inquired Francis, as he handed his master an instrument from a bag he carried round his neck.

“Quite certain. I drew a plan of the convent, from the description of the lay sister, and made her point out the very cell in which they have immured my beautiful Blanche. Now, the lever.”

Taking a small crowbar from his servant’s hand, he approached one of the low casements, and, waiting till the wind rose to such a height as to drown the noise, applied his implement, and the next moment had an open access before him to the interior of the building.

Whispering a few hurried directions to Francis, D’Arcy cautiously passed through the opening, and, closing the window behind him, stood for a moment in the darkness to reflect on his course.

A dead silence reigned throughout the vast building, while the gloom was so profound that it was only by the contact of his hand he could discover the nature of the surrounding objects.

Slowly and carefully creeping along the basement corridor, he followed its sinuosities and windings to a length that seemed almost to have traversed the entire building.

Fearful that he had mistaken the directions of his informant, he was about to return, when a door on his left was suddenly opened, and a figure rapidly glided past him.

So close, indeed, did it pass that the thin robe or veil of the person swept across his face in the hurried transit.

In vein he bent his ear to catch any sound of the flying feet, but the tread left no echo, and died away as suddenly as it had arisen.

Drawing up the shade of the lantern he carried in his belt, and throwing a momentary gleam around, he discovered himself in a long arched corridor, running right and left, the floor and sides being partially covered with matting.

But that which afforded him the greatest satisfaction was the finding of a low pointed door immediately in front of him.

Satisfied that this was the portal through which the figure had issued, and the one which would lead to the cells of the refractory nuns, D'Arcy closed his slide and noiselessly advanced, silently closing the door behind him.

A sudden change in the atmosphere and a damp chilly sensation at once convinced him that he was in some large and lofty chamber. Keeping close to the wall, he advanced for a considerable distance, till his hand came in contact with something soft and thick.

D'Arcy had just come to the conclusion that he was in front of an immense curtain, when the strains of an organ pealed out with so abrupt and loud a cadence, sounding directly over his head, that, but for the swell of the music, the involuntary exclamation that burst from his lips must have betrayed his whereabouts.

Recovering, however, from his surprise, he felt for the edge of the curtain, and, deliberately putting it aside for a few inches, beheld a scene which was calculated to fill him with wonder and astonishment.

He was in the chapel of the convent.

And at the moment when the nuns were holding a midnight orison or solemn prayer before him was the grand altar, hung—it being some special fast—in black.

Seated on the dais without the rail was the lady prioress, supported by four or five of the oldest of the sisters, and such as held subordinate offices in the convent under the superior.

Standing in front of their seats, and ranged in a double row on each side of the chapel, were collected about a hundred and fifty nuns, their black veils thrown back, and, at the moment when his eye encountered the group, lifting up their voices in a hymn, to the swelling strains of the organ, that rose and fell in majestic cadence from the rood above his head.

Kneeling in devout prayer, their heads resting on the altar-rail, was a row of young novices, their white veils and dresses contrasting strangely with the black-draped altar and the solemn vestments of the professed nuns.

Intently did D'Arcy watch this line of motionless white figures, hoping to discover by the grace of her outline the form of his beloved Blanche.

Suddenly all sounds of hymn and music ceased, when the prioress, rising and extending her arms over the heads of the kneeling penitents, pronounced the customary benediction.

At this moment the immense curtains that hung from roof to pavement were drawn apart, and the nuns, slowly advancing from either side of the chancel, proceeded, two and two, down the centre of the chapel and through the narrow door by which D'Arcy had just entered, the folds of the curtain having fortunately sheltered him from the exposure that must otherwise have followed from the flood of light so suddenly admitted.

The prioress followed the nuns, and the novices stood their places behind their superior, while the sub-prioress and other official sisters, after extinguishing the altar lights, and each carrying a taper in either hand, brought up the rear, when the curtain again closed in the same mysterious manner, leaving D'Arcy in complete darkness. He had seen enough, however, to enable him to calculate his future proceedings with some accuracy.

Satisfied that Blanche had not been among the novices in the chapel, and now certain he should find her in the subterranean cells, he carefully crept round the curtain, and, groping his way to the steps, ascended the dais and reached the altar rail.

Using this as a guide, he advanced noiselessly round to what he knew was an open space between the huge crucifix that adorned the back of the altar and the great eastern oriel.

Groping about for an iron balustrade that surrounded the flight of steps leading to the underground labyrinths, D'Arcy laid his hand upon what appeared from a hasty survey to be a bier or unfinished altar, and instantly after came in contact with what he at first deemed to be a recumbent effigy.

A more minute examination, however, quickly undeceived him, the outline being that of a human being, though cold and rigid.

The arms were crossed over the chest, and the uncovered face had all the characters of youth, and doubtless beauty, though fixed as if traced in alabaster.

While engaged in this investigation a sudden fear flashed like lightning through his mind and filled him with a sickening apprehension.

Should it be Blanche?

Gracious Heaven! there was agony in the thought.

If they should have murdered his beloved, and, like the heartless fiends, they were, exposed her angel form unwatched and unhonoured in the open chapel!

Distracted with this thought, and resolved, at all hazards, to satisfy his doubts, he threw the light of his lamp full on the face of what was in truth a youthful corpse.

One glance, however, satisfied him, to his intense relief, that, though young and beautiful, the fair novice before him was not his beloved Blanche. At the same moment there rose a shriek so loud and piercing, and yet so near, that for a moment D'Arcy believed the cry that sounded so unnaturally shrill and fearful had issued from the lips of the pale form before him.

Before he could regain his composure, so rudely shacked by that weird scream, the form of a black-draped nun rose from a kneeling posture at the head of the dead novice, and, with a succession of piercing shrieks, fled past him into the gloom of the chapel, filling the corridor and passages of the nunnery with the ringing echoes of her terrified cries.

Turning his light for a moment, to show him the entrance to the vaults, Egerton rushed to the balustrade, and then, closing his lamp, was again enveloped in total darkness.

Admonished by the sounds of unusual commotion, which his quick ear detected in the distant part of the building, that the cries of the terrified nun were arousing the whole sisterhood, and that if seen the detection and ruin of his hopes must follow, he sprang to the top of the secret stairs, and had only time to reach the bottom when voices and flashing lights indicated the approach of searchers.

Low iron gates, crowned with barbed spikes, were placed at the bottom of the stone steps and cut off all access to the passages beyond.

This, to his dismay, he found secured, and, while nervously attempting to force them open, was driven almost furious by the sound of feet ascending the dais, and by seeing the broad reflection of the flashing torches overhead.

At this moment of intense anxiety his hand touched a spring, and, one gate flying open, D'Arcy passed through, but had barely time to reclose the lock and hurry into the gloom, when a group of terrified nuns, with the superior, gathered at the entrance to the vaults and peered down the dark stairs.

“It must have been as sister Theresa says, an apparition of a dead sister,” observed the sub-prioress, devoutly crossing herself, “and no male violator of the sanctuary, for the body of poor Ursula is just as we left it at vespers.”

“Apparition? You amaze me, mother Anna,” replied the Lady Agatha, somewhat tauntingly. “It was either a midnight robber, or else the wicked Theresa, to escape her punishment of watching the dead body through the night, invented the story to cloak her cowardice and disobedience.”

“My dear Mother Agatha, Sister Theresa’s terror was far too real for that supposition,” pleaded some soft and gentle voice.

“We shall soon see. Some of you descend to the vaults and search the passages.”

With a look of blank despair, the nuns gazed into each other’s faces as they heard the imperative order given.

But, as no one had the courage to undertake the task alone, and they dared not disobey the commands of their superior, a group of five or six reluctantly descended to the iron gates, and, holding their shaking tapers over their heads, made a pretence of looking through the darkness.

At this moment the hysterical cries of the terrified Theresa were again heard from some remote part of the cloisters, when the prioress, with a promise to return with Mother Mary and search more effectually, called away the nuns, and D’Arcy had the inexpressible pleasure of hearing their retiring steps, and witnessing the fast receding light.

Availing himself of the present opportunity, he raised his slide, and, consulting a memorandum in his pocket-book, immediately turned to his right, and pursued the low, damp, vault-like passages, lined on either side by a series of pointed doors, each bearing on the keystone above the number of the cell.

D’Arcy had paused half-way down the right-hand corridors, once more to consult his memoranda, when he was startled by a faint imploring voice from within the cell before which he had halted saying—

“Oh! bless you, Ursula. I thought you never would come. I am so faint, so cold. Oh! you don’t know how cold I am. Why don’t you speak, Ursula? Is that you, sister?”

Every word of this simple speech went to D’Arcy’s heart, and was an agonising revelation to him.

Even so forlorn, cold, and wretched might be his own beloved Blanche, whom he had no doubt was the wicked novice alluded to, and whose identity the priests and mothers were already destroying under the adopted name of Agnes.

Impatient as he was to fly to her rescue, he could not leave this imploring nun without answer her beseeching question or giving her a word of comfort.

“Ursula, is it you? Oh! for the Virgin’s sake, let me hear a human voice. Oh! I am so very cold.” And he could hear the lonely captive sob and shiver.

“I am not Ursula. Ursula, I think, is dead,” he said, disguising his voice as much as possible.

“Holy father! dead? Who are you? I do not know your voice; but oh! in mercy, if you have a heart to pity, do not tell the superior what you have heard me say.”

“Calm yourself. Be assured I will not, and if you will promise me not to make any noise, and will listen to me—”

“Yes, yes, bless you. You speak kindly, but your voice is not like the sisters’.”

“Listen.”

“I will, and will not say a word.”

“I cannot give you warm milk, poor thing, but I have some cakes and some drink, that will do you more good. Will you take them?”

“Oh! yes, and bless you for them.”

“In a moment.”

Taking out the chain and hasp, that fastened each door to the staple, he passed into the cell, but without showing himself, a pocket flask of negus and some cakes which he had procured for Blanche, should she require any restorative before reaching a place of safety.

“This is wine. Oh! it is so nice, but I dare not drink much of it. May the holy Virgin bless you for your goodness. Please take it back.” And she stretched forth her thin shaking hand with the flask through the open door.

“I think I can see your form. You are a man. Oh! don’t—but I’m sure you are a gentleman, and will not—stay longer by me. Please go away, and I will pray for you.”

“Would you like to leave the convent?”

“Oh! no, no, no. I dare not. I have nearly completed my noviciate.”

“I will speak to you again presently. Farewell.”

Somewhat reproaching himself with his delay, D’Arcy hastened to the extremity of the vaulted passage, and, stopping at the last portal, tapped gently at the door.

After waiting a few moments in breathless suspense he unfastened the chain, and gently called out, “Blanche! Blanche!”

Full of inexpressible anguish, he pushed the door farther open, and, unveiling his lamp, saw at once the whole interior of the low vaulted cell.

A chair, an iron bedstead, and a hard pallet constituted the entire furniture of the tomb-like prison, the resemblance being still farther borne out by the alabaster form that, like a sculptured effigy, lay upon the wretched bed.

Conscious of the importance of each moment, yet dreading the consequences of abruptly waking her, D’Arcy entered the cell, and, struck with indignation at the ravages grief and solitude had made on her lovely countenance, and by the tears still hanging to her long lashes, he knelt devoutly by her bed, and, trying to reach the slumbering sense through her ear, said in a low whisper—

“Blanche, darling, are you asleep? Blanche, my own dear persecuted love, will you wake and fly from this horrid prison to freedom and happiness? Blanche!”

“I hear you, dear D’Arcy. Oh! speak again. It is so delightful to hear your voice,” she replied in a low murmur.

“Open your eyes, beloved one, and look on me,”

“Oh! no, dearest. To open my eyes would be to destroy the charm and happiness of my dream.”

“Why so, love?”

“The darkness of my cell would destroy my dream, and these nightly communings with you are my sole joy in life.”

“Will you promise me not to start or exclaim if I tell you something?” he continued, whispering in the same subdued manner.

“What a strange question! Of course I will.”

“Remember then.”

“Oh! yes, dear.”

“You are not asleep, you are not dreaming. All is real. It was weeks before I discovered where they had taken you to, but I *did* find it out. Now remember what you have promised,” he added quickly, as he heard her heart beating quick and fast. “I contrived to enter the nunnery to-night, found out your cell, but, being unable to wake you, was obliged to enter and whisper in your ear. Be silent, love. I have a light. Now open your eyes, and come to the arms of him who will bear you to liberty and happiness.”

With an hysterical sob, and a flood of joyful tears, Blanche turned on her pallet, and, throwing her arm round her lover’s neck, wept long and silently in unrestrained happiness.

Allowing her a few moments to recover, he urged upon her the necessity of immediate preparation, as their sole chance of escape depended upon their reaching the entrance window, before the nuns returned to the chapel for early matins.

Finding how completely prostrated she was, and unable to go through the slight fatigue necessary, D’Arcy induced her to take a draught from the flask he had provided for the purpose, and, throwing a shawl he found on the bed round her person, led her into the vaulted passage, taking the precaution of fastening the door as he had found it.

Scarcely had he performed this necessary duty, when the sound of voices and the gleam of lights admonished him to darken his lamp, when, spreading his ample cloak before himself and Blanche, he stood at the extremity of the passage, in momentary apprehension of discovery; for the prioress, sub-prioress, and two sisters, with tapers, came immediately down to within a foot of where the lovers stood concealed.

Apparently satisfied with their inspection, they turned, and, passing into the next passage, were soon lost to sight and sound, the loud jarring noise of the gates at the mouth of the vaults soon after indicating the fact of their having ascended to the chapel.

Enveloping her white dress in his cloak, D’Arcy now boldly led Blanche forward, though compelled to support her with his arm.

Pausing for a moment at the cell of the nun, he inquired if he should remove the chain, or if he could do aught else for her, when, receiving her thanks, and a reply to both questions in the negative, he hurried Blanche along the dismal passages, and, after some slight delay in finding the spring of the gate, ascended to the back of the altar, where he paused, and drew a deep breath.

Had the terrified nun been brought back? Or was another poor offender doing penance at the head of the dead novice?

This was a question it was imperatively necessary to know before attempting to pass the bier.

Cautiously opening his lamp, he allowed the beam to play over the marble face of the dead, and every part of the slab on which the body was laid.

Assured that there were no watchers, D’Arcy caught up his trembling charge in his arms, and, guided as before by the altar rail, passed rapidly across the dais, down the steps, and hurried on till arrested by the curtains that enclosed the chancel.

Emboldened by the success that had attended their flight hitherto, Egerton, believing all risk was now at an end, rudely threw aside the deep crimson folds, and entered the lower half of the chapel.

What, however, was his dismay to discover a large body of light in the place he had lately left in total darkness, and still more to perceive the prioress kneeling before a saint’s altar, and intent on her devotions!

Her quick ears, however, sharpened by vigilance and apprehension, had heard the motion of the curtains, and she was at the instant in the act of rising and turning in the direction of the sound.

Blanche had also caught sight of that stern and dreaded form even before her lover, and, with a faint cry of despair, clung closer to D'Arcy's neck.

Setting his burden gently on her feet, he pulled off the shawl he had at first thrown round her shoulders, and, leaving her enveloped in his cloak, sprang forward, and, as the superior opened her eyes to summon aid, threw the shawl so adroitly over her head that the shriek was stifled in its first burst.

Hastily securing it round the mother's body, to prevent her giving an alarm, he seized up his precious prize, and now, heedless of all secrecy, passed the door and fled along the long basement passages, each instant in mortal terror lest he had taken the wrong turning.

The honest face of Francis, as the faithful valet peered through the open casement, was a source of ineffable delight to his master, as, panting from haste and anxiety, he hurried up to the place of entrance.

Passing Blanche through the open window, the fugitives had just gained the exterior of the building when the deafening clamour of the alarm bell pealed out in startling notes above their heads, while through the house was heard the screams of women, the tramp of hasty feet, and the flitting past of lights in all directions.

Darting across the lawn, they soon mounted the wall, and, reaching the opposite side in safety, a groom led forward three swift horses and held the stirrup while Egerton, grasping Blanche in his arms, mounted a well-trained steed, when, adjusting his burden and folding her from the night air in his cloak, he gathered up the reins, and, seizing the groom's heavy whip, ordered both men to ride forward and have the carriage in readiness.

Allowing his servants a momentary start, he struck his horse's sides, when the noble beast with a bound, broke into a gallop, drowning the clamour of the alarm bell under the wild ring of his impatient hoofs.

Tearing up the dark road, D'Arcy's steed had just cleared the convent wall when the gates were flung open and a horseman dashed out in hot pursuit.

For more than a mile, the fierce chase continued, the leading horse, though doubly burdened, increasing the distance from his pursuer with every bound.

"Draw rein, thou accursed heretic! or, by all the saints in heaven, I'll send a bullet through your skull!" cried the pursuer through the howling storm, as, despairing of overtaking the fugitives, he levelled a holster pistol.

Before the words were well spoken a bullet whizzed through D'Arcy's hat, and made the horse plunge wildly.

Dreading the risk to the dear girl in his arms from such random shots, D'Arcy suddenly wheeled his horse round, and, halting, faced his adversary.

As he did so a second shot grazed his bridle arm.

Unable, however, to check his steed, the pursuer was the next moment dashing past the fugitives, when, D'Arcy rose in his stirrups and dealt him so heavy a blow with the butt end of his whip that the horseman dropped forward, rolled from his saddle, and lay an insensible clod in the road.

Lashing his horse's flanks, Egerton made him spring over the prostrate rider, and, with whip and voice urging him on, was soon far beyond the reach of all pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.
SILAS AND ONE OF HIS TOOLS—AN UNEXPECTED LISTENER.

“Who is your informant?” demanded Silas, as he entered a coffee-house in Oxford Street, walking erect and firmly, and speaking in an authoritative tone to the shabby genteel personage who followed him, and took up a respectful position in the box to which the money-lender had led the way, and at the extreme end of which he had already ensconced himself.

“I heard it from one of the acolytes attached to Sir Richard’s private chapel,” replied the individual, wiping the inside of his hat with a cotton handkerchief, and then carefully depositing it under the seat.

“Heard what? Let me hear it again,” demanded Silas, after giving an order to a waiter.

“My eye! here’s a go,” exclaimed a youth who, seated in a remote box in the same room, had suddenly pricked up his ears on hearing the sound of the new customer’s voice, and, almost scalding himself with the first draught of his half-pint of tea while glancing furtively under the red curtain in front of his seat to catch a glimpse of the newcomer. “Crikey, if it ain’t the governor! What’s old brimstone and treacle about now? Here’s luck. Ain’t I in for it!”

Surreptitiously removing his tray to the table of the adjoining box to that of the newcomers, that exemplary youth contrived to insert one of his ears under Mr. Silas’s box curtain, and could thus hear all that passed between the pair, without discovering the owner, or interfering with the pleasures of his evening repast.

“We are now alone, proceed,” replied Silas, when the waiter had brought the articles ordered.

“Heard what?”

“That the nun has eloped,” replied the shabby individual addressed.

“What nun? Who? Speak, man!”

“The great heiress. Sir Richard’s niece.”

“You’re a fool. Was she not sent safely down to her aunt’s in Lincolnshire?” he exclaimed, with degree of interest and passion that seemed strangely at variance with the man and his calling.

“True, sir,” replied his informant deferentially.

“She *was* sent to the nunnery, but the lover (for it seems she had one) found out her retreat, broke into the convent, and carried her off.”

“Whew! Curses on them! But are you sure this is true?”

“Yes, indeed. I am certain of it.”

“Then they are married. May an anathema light on them.”

“Of their marriage there can be no doubt; but as it is of the utmost consequence to Sir Richard to disavow and repudiate such an union, he is determined to recover possession of the girl, and by forcing her to take the veil, snap the bond that now seemingly unites the heretic with a member of the Church.”

“Good, good—very good. It can and *must* be done. What more?”

“The only thing that deters Sir Richard from instant action is the unaccountable disappearance of—“

“Whom?”

“The confessor, Father Belville.”

“The confessor missing? Demanded the usurer, with well-assumed surprise. “Where can he have gone?”

“That is the mystery.”

“Why a mystery?”

“Because from the time of his leaving for London no clue has been obtained of him.”

“Are none of his haunts, none of his secret sources of piety and charity known? No idea formed of where he was likely to go?”

“None.”

“Indeed?” and Mr. Silas rubbed his hands under the table with more than usual unction and complacency. “Indeed, you surprise me,” he added after a pause of inward gratification. Then, looking up in his subordinate’s face, he said, with an expression and tone of singular meaning, “Do you suppose Sir Richard would be *very* greatly distressed should the confessor not put in an appearance?”

“I do not understand you.” replied the man, gazing with a bewildered look on his superior.

“I mean if any *accident* were to happen to him—if, in fact he should be—that is, if he should chance to die?”

“Mercy on us!” exclaimed the man, this time really astonished. “Such a misfortune would be the ruin of Sir Richard.”

“His ruin?” How so?”

“Why he has got—that is, the confessor—not on his person perhaps, but has put away in some safe place, all the deeds of the estate.”

“All?” ejaculated the money-lender, with a look of blank despair. “All did you say?”

“Well, not all, not exactly *all*. Sir Richard has the mortgage deeds, on which a large part of the nun’s fortune has been invested; but the title deeds of the estate and many valuable vouchers are in his possession.”

“The title deeds of the manor in the confessor’s hands? May a curse—may I ask you,” he added, in an instant changing his passionate tone to one of common courtesy, “where Sir Richard no is?”

“Here, in town. I heard he had an appointment tonight with a Mr. Staunton, a very wealthy friend of his.”

“Yes, yes, true. I forgot. So the confessor holds the deeds, you say?”

“Certainly.”

“Thursday, Friday, Saturday,” muttered Silas half audibly, as if mentally engrossed with some secret calculation. “And this is Tuesday, is it not?” he asked abruptly.

“It is.”

“Confusion! And to-night I am engaged. Can nature last so long—six days?” he said abstractedly.

“How long, sir?”

“Till Wednesday,” he replied vaguely. “Nothing nothing. My thoughts were wandering,” he added quickly. “I must bid you good night. I have an appointment for eight o’clock. Meet me here at this time next week, and with all the information you can gather.” The next minute, with a troubled brow, Silas, followed by his humble friend and secret spy, quitted the obscure coffee-house.

“Well, the old humbug!” exclaimed Master Josh Whistler, protruding his head under the red curtain, and watching the two receding figures. “I wouldn’t have beleft it. The old swindler! Why he’s as straight as a harrer, and I thought him a reg’lar cripple. What’s his little game now, I wonder? No matter, I’m on his scent, and will worm it out yet. The confessor! Oh! yes, don’t you

wish you may get him, old screw-driver? But I'll be beforehand there with you, you te-to-tacious old rascal."

Indulging in a few grotesque but harmless contortions of the face, meant as expressions of feeling against his master, young Mr. Josh Whistler buttoned up his coat, and hurried after his employer and his companion, muttering as he entered the street—

"It won't do, Silas Beelzebub, it won't do. I'm your match, old and crooked as you are."

CHAPTER X. A FASHIONABLE HELL—THE CHEAT DETECTED.

The room was brilliantly illuminated. A massive chandelier of cut crystal hung from the ceiling, diffusing from a hundred jets of gas a flood of soft and mellow light on the rich furniture below; a glowing fire, in jambs of Parian marble, burnt brightly at either end of the spacious saloon; a series of small tables and luxurious chairs were ranged down either side of the apartment; while a *boufet* loaded with massive plate formed a conspicuous object to all who had the privilege of an *entrée* to that jealously guarded chamber.

A number of wax tapers in silver candlesticks burnt on the tables and mantelpieces, which, with the crimson curtains, bullion fringe, and gilded piasters, made up an imposing scene of light, wealth, and magnificence.

Three gentlemen in evening costume were as yet the only occupants of the apartment. Of these, one was leaning against the marble chimney, as he smoothed his dainty moustache in the lofty pier-glass, while the other two were lounging indolently on the elastic *feuteuils*; when one of the gilded doors revolved on its noiseless hinges, and a stream of gentlemen, preceded and followed by a number of liveried footmen, entered and scattered themselves over the saloon.

"What, Dacres, Codrington, and Percy, like three disconsolate maidens, waiting here, I suppose, for your revenge," exclaimed a young and aristocratic looking personage, addressing the previous occupants of the room, as he approached and shook hands with each.

"To tell you the truth, Lord Bidborough, I was just calculating how long, with such a run of ill-luck, my three thousand acres, if converted into cash, would last me," replied Captain the Honourable Lionel Dacres, the gentleman first addressed.

"Pshaw! man. Nothing hazard, nothing win. What is so inconstant as luck? Fortune may change at your next throw of the dice, and give back all you have lost," replied his lordship, encouragingly.

"I hope so, for the jade has dealt me nothing of late but losing cards, and I am almost stumped out."

"Here comes Sir Richard Castleton. He's an authority on these matters; ask him. Good evening, Sir Richard."

"Good evening, my lord and gentlemen, good evening to you all," cried Sir Richard, as with several others he entered the saloon, at the same time nervously casting his eyes around, as if in search of some expected visitor.

"Ha! ha! I know who Castleton is looking for so anxiously," exclaimed Captain Dacres, laughing.

"Indeed? Tell us. Who?" exclaimed half a dozen of the most idle of the party, as they flung themselves in every form of abandoned ease on the luxurious chairs or padded couches.

"Why, he is looking for that individual who won so largely of him at our last meeting. Do you not observe how sanguinary he looks? He is actually thirsting for his revenge. Ha! ha!"

A shout of merriment instantly followed this sally of the captain's.

"Laugh away, gentlemen, laugh away. We all know Dacre's infatuation of believing himself *right*, when the rest of the world well knows he is *wrong*. He has only made another mistake."

"Proof, proof," cried Dacres.

"Well, so admonished," replied Sir Richard, as he handed one of the waiters his hat and overcoat, and threw himself into a lounge, "so far from coming here for my revenge, I am waiting to give it."

"Well, that's satisfactory, at least," replied lord Bidborough. "But I should like to know who your late antagonist was or is at. Where does he bivouac, and under what *nom de plume* does he pass current?"

"Now, my lord, you ask more than I can tell. Except that he calls himself Staunton, and comes out of Shropshire, I really know nothing."

"He seems a good easy sort of being, though eccentric. Were your stakes high? Did you lose much?"

"You labour under a great mistake. I rose a considerable winner, and I am here to-night to give him his revenge—that is, if he comes."

"Oh! he'll come. He's just at the age when play becomes an insatiable passion. Has he money?"

"I hear he is enormously rich, has only lately come into the possession of a fine estate, and is taking his revenge out of fortune for having so long kept him in unappreciated poverty."

"Can he play?"

"But little. Indeed it goes against my conscience to take his money."

"By jove, say you so? Then make over your reversionary interest in him to me." Cried Dacres, laughing. "I have no scruples of that nature I assure you. A pigeon is to me a *rara avis*, to be plucked as an act of moral admonition for his benefit and my gain."

"Mr. Stanton," announced one of the servants, as he held back the lofty portal for the entrance of the individual assumed.

The gentleman who entered was a tall portly-looking personage, with a square face framed in mass of beard and whiskers, and surmounted by a full crop of well-trimmed bushy hair, which at one time had been dark and burly, but now, with his moustache and other hirsute appendages, was in the transitory stage of an iron-grey. The features of Mr. Stanton, as far as they were recognisable out of the forest of hair that surrounded them were decidedly good. The eyes, however, were the least prepossessing item of his face, and had a restless inquisitive notion that was rather irritating than agreeable to those who took the pains to watch their varying motion.

Apart from this peculiarity, which seemed to make him in a few minutes master of every fact in the place, and of even the thoughts of all those who surrounded him, Mr. Stanton was a free, jovial, and remarkably good-tempered man, and one who after the novelty of a first introduction was certain to make himself not only agreeable, but popular, his good temper and extreme liberality in pecuniary matters materially tending to increase that good opinion.

"Gentlemen, your most obedient. Aha! Sir Richard, delighted to see you," observed the newcomer, advancing to the middle of the room, and bowing with good-natured joviality to the assembled company. "What! what! nothing doing? I had hope to have seen you all at play. Why gentlemen, gentlemen, this is a prodigal throwing away of most precious time," he continued,

rubbing his hands and looking, with a good-humoured but reproachful glance from the unoccupied tables to the little groups of gentlemen present.

“A just reproof. Come, let us make up a few sets,” observed Lord Bidborough. “Dacres, I challenge you to a game at hazard.” And in a few minutes some eight or nine of the tables on either side of the saloon were occupied with parties deeply engaged in the different games of chance before them.

“I have been studying the rules of hazard since our last bout, Sir Richard, and I think you will find me a more worthy antagonist than on that occasion,” observed Mr. Staunton, while the waiters placed decanters of wine and glasses on a table in a recess by one of the fireplaces, where, removed from all inspection of the company, the two might play in perfect freedom.

“Delighted to hear it,” replied Sir Richard Castleton, as he placed a number of bank notes and a well-filled purse on the table, and drew up his chair.

“Are you ready, Staunton?”

“Quite, Sir Richard, quite.” And throwing down a pocket-book with a massive gold clasp, he took his seat at the table, and, bowing to his *vis-à-vis*, said, “A bumper, Sir Richard, before beginning.”

“Certainly,” and each filled a large glass, and, with a smile and a bow, drank off the sparkling wine at a draught.

“By Jove! that hook is splendid. I will take another to fortify me.” And Mr. Staunton quaffed off a second libation, with an expression of keen enjoyment; then, leaning back in his chair, waited the distribution of cards.

In a few minutes both players were so deeply involved in the game as to be insensible to all but what immediately appertained to themselves. The waiters, as they glided over the thick piled carpet, moved with such studied quietude and decorum that they might have been taken for mutes waiting on a party of sorrow. Instead, beyond the faint rattle of the dice, as they were shaken from the box upon the well-padded table, hardly a sound was heard for hours through the spacious saloon, where thousands were being won and lost, and untold agony endured in silence.

During these hours the play between Sir Richard Castleton and Mr. Staunton had continued in almost total silence. The simple and sententious “As before,” at the commencement of each new game, rather whispered than spoken, was all that passed. A stranger, however, might have noted that Mr. Staunton did not make good his boast of having rendered himself a better player, for, though he had certainly won one or two games, it was evident, by the great accession to Sir Richard’s bank notes, that in the aggregate *he* had been a large gainer in the contest, and that, either flushed by his success or tempted by the example of the antagonist, he had drunk a considerable quantity of wine.

“No, I’ll not. I—excuse me—I meant to say, I’ll not play anymore,” exclaimed a young man suddenly, in a husky choking voice, as he rose from a distant table and approached, with livid countenance and bloodshot eyes, a *fauteuil* opposite Sir Richard. Throwing himself at full length on his face, he grasped his hair with his hands as if he would tear it out by the roots, the deep breathing of his labouring lungs plainly implicating the intensity of his remorse, while every now and then a nervous tremor ran over his frame like a convulsion.

“A fresh pack and new dice,” observed Mr. Staunton, as at a signal a waiter approached their table, casting a contemptuous glance at the youth, who, under the paroxysm of mental agony, lay quivering on the opposite sofa.

“Bring me some more wine, and ask the proprietor to cash me this cheque. The ink.” And as the waiter presented the silver Standish Staunton filled up and signed a page from a banker’s book at his side.

In a few minutes the water returned with a roll of bank notes, and, having placed fresh wine, new cards and dice on the table, noiselessly withdrew, and the company, after a hasty and imperative exclamation from Dacres of “Double or quite,” settled down into their former almost audible stillness.

So excited had Sir Richard become, either by his previous success, from cupidity at Staunton’s fresh supply of money, or from the influence of the wine he had drunk, that, though his antagonist had won the last two games, he increased the stakes, and played with such reckless impetuosity, losing game after game, that of the late pile of notes beside him only one now remained, and, having no further proceeds to stake, he drew from an inner pocket some parchments, the sight of which made Staunton’s eyes sparkle with more than even their customary glitter. Having selected one of these, and, in a whispered communication, apprised the other of its value, and the conditions on which it was to be held and redeemed, the two, doubling their stakes, resumed their play with, if possible, increased eagerness and excitement.

In less than twenty minutes *three* of the deeds were in the possession of Mr. Staunton, and Sir Richard, imbibing repeated draughts of wine, became more reckless with the loss of fortune, and more infatuated in the sums he hazarded on the game.

“May a curse light on the cards, and he who invented them live in eternal perdition,” suddenly exclaimed Captain Dacres, hurling the pack in a burst of fury at the magnificent mirror over the chimney, and as the cards fell like a snowstorm on the polished hearth the speaker sprang from his chair and rushed like a madman from the room.

The exclamation was so abrupt and loud that it for a time suspended all play, some of the company counting their games, others laughing at their companion’s impassioned vehemence, and the youth on the sofa answering the anathema with a sob and a groan.

Sir Richard leant back on his chair, and with staring eyes gazed on the opposite wall, as he mechanically played with the dice that had for the last hour so unaccountable and persistently failed him. As he thus toyed with the fatal cubes he thoughtlessly placed one of them under his teeth, and, as Staunton, with a triumphant glitter in his eyes, carefully deposited the deeds and his winnings to his pocket, Sir Richard drove his teeth so firmly into the ivory that the die split under the pressure, exposing to the astonished eyes of the gamble the treacherous and *loaded* nature of the dice he had played with.

“A cheat! A fraud! I have been swindled. Scoundrel, disgorge, or I’ll strangle you,” shouted Sir Richard, springing to his feet, and with the grip of a tiger, grappling Staunton by the throat.

Incensed with rage, and actuated by the most vindictive passion, the two men glared into each other’s savage eyes with the fury of wild beasts, their scowling looks and deadly animosity giving for the moment, as they tugged and strained and foamed in their deadly embrace, a strange and extraordinary resemblance to each other both in form and feature.

“Let go your hold, madman, or I’ll strike” hissed Staunton through his clenched teeth.

Both men were so infuriated that they neither heard the signal given of “The police!” nor saw the hurrying waiters rushing to the tables, gathering up cards, dice, and boxes, and throwing them down a secret tube in the wall, leaving no evidence in that spacious chamber of the late busy play.

“Up, up to the roof, if you would save yourselves from custody,” cried one of the waiters, as he opened a concealed door in one of the pilasters, and exposed a light iron staircase.

All traces of gambling had been removed, except on the table before which the two men like bulldogs were still straining at each other’s throats. With one desperate effort, Staunton flung his opponent from him, and, snatching from the table the deeds yet unplayed for, darted to the other end of the saloon, as the waiters hurried Sir Richard, the last of the party, up the stairs, and made fast the entrance.

The next moment the door was thrown open, and a body of police rushed in, when Staunton, who had secreted himself behind some chairs, sprang into the passage, and, hurrying along in blind impetuosity, was caught in the embrace of an advancing constable.

Remaining perfectly passive for a moment, he smiled grimly in the officer’s face, then suddenly twisting his foot round the man’s leg, accompanied by a dexterous blow, stretched the policeman helpless and stunned on his back, when, wrenching the staff from a comrade who had hastened to the rescue, he struck right and left with vindictive energy at a posse of constables who blocked the stairs and opposed his descent, while the party from the room, hearing the commotion, hastened out to take him in the rear.

Seeing the imminence of his danger, Staunton rushed upon the constable nearest the banister, and by a well-aimed blow sent him staggering back among his comrades on the stairs, and as the sergeant from behind rushed up to secure him he flung himself on the balustrade, and, sliding down the polished rail, spun round and down the dizzy flight till he landed on the marble pavement, when, with a laugh of savage triumph, he dashed out of the club, tore down the deserted streets, and was soon far away beyond the sound or the chance of pursuit.

CHAPTER XI. THE MONK IN HIS HOME.

“The deeds in his possession, that fact alters the entire complexion of the case. Cursed mischance! Who would have thought that Richard would have been such an ass?” And the speaker ground his teeth in the bitterness of his reflection. “I cannot go before to-night, be the consequences what they may,” he resumed. “Besides, a few hours could make little difference one way or the other.” So muttered Father Gerald, as he strode across the chamber. Before, however, completing the soliloquy we must give some account of the wily monk’s residence.

Near the bottom of the Old Kent Road, surrounded by a high wall, and entered by a narrow latticed doorway, but removed somewhat back from the line of road, stands a tall, gloomy, and mysterious-looking red-brick building, with an ill-kept lawn and flower beds in front, and a rank overgrown kitchen garden in the rear. It was about midday on the morrow after the *émeute* in the hall or gambling saloon of St. James’s that Father Gerald paced up and down a large and somber-looking chamber in the rear of the above dwelling.

“Men have lived before now for six days without food or water—ay, and have even kept in life for ten whole days,” continued the father, turning from the fire, and, with hands locked behind him, resuming his monotonous walk.

“Two hundred and sixty hours without sustenance! ‘Tis a long time; but then they were kept up by jugglery of faith. Faith? Ha! ha!” and he laughed with a harsh diabolical chuckle. “Our worthy confessor, our poor suffering martyr, now that I bethink me, has no present stock of holy faith or soul-sustaining home to fall back upon. And I remember, too, the place is dark, foul, and as deep as the grave, and I much fear me infested with vermin. Poor Father Belville, I trust

my inability to go to his assistance last night will not have caused him *serious* inconvenience. Yes," he exclaimed suddenly, and with a tone of resentful bitterness, "but for those deeds of which he is keeper he should have died—*rotted* inch by inch in lingering sufferance. *Rotted?* Oh! how I should have gloated in his death!" And he clenched his hands and shook them defiantly above his head. Then, recovering himself quickly, he added, in a subdued and tranquil voice—

"Yes, yes, I will see him tonight, when, if he lives, I can easily make him understand how the mistake occurred, paint the agony I have suffered while posting from the north to save him. Ha! ha! ha!" And he gave free expression to a malicious laugh. "Fool! dolt!" he continued, striking his palms together, while his countenance assumed an aspect perfectly hideous, from the passions which seemed to rise and take possession of his mind.

"Idiot! Did he think to hoodwink and deceive me? Did he hope to amass by treachery and crime the estate and fortune which was mine? Did he think to fool me, consign *me* to a living tomb? Curse, curse him! But—ha! ha!—revenge is sweet, and the dupe triumphs, and the plotter is the victim. Good—excellently good. Yes," he continued, taking quicker strides along the gloomy chamber, while his whole frame shook with nervous pleasure at the memory of his revenge and his cause of hatred, "while I might have been perishing in that loathsome vault, if all had answered to the confessor's wish, he would have luxuriated on the fortune I have for years been scheming to possess, for the aggrandisement of my own name, and the glory of my lost son. Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, and in a tone of natural feeling, "well remembered. Digby must have gained some tidings by this time. Let me hear of that which sits nearest to my heart." And, ringing a bell, Father Gerald, now to all appearances calm and collected, took a seat at an antique bureau, and, touching a spring, opened a succession of small drawers, and drawing from a hidden recess a bundle of discoloured papers, and selecting one filled with memoranda, looked up as a man of middle stature, with a low forehead and gloomy countenance, entered the apartment and took his station at the back of the bureau.

"Have you been to Whitechapel, as proposed?" inquired the monk, without taking his eyes from the table before him.

"I have," replied the man addressed, in a curt decisive tone.

"Have you succeeded this time in discovering the clue?"

"Yes."

"Good, good," he ejaculated, with a pleased and eager expression.

"I have both recovered the clue and lost it."

"Lost it? Another disappointment? Confusion! Is there a fate fighting against me? Shall I never discover him?"

"I fear not."

"Cease your gloomy croaking. I tell you, Digby, I WILL find him, if I expend every stiver in the search."

"I have been five years on the trail, and what does it all amount to? What is the sum total of the information gained?"

"Much. A good idea. Recount the facts you have obtained. The consecutive narration may throw a new light on the subject."

"From the beginning?"

"Yes."

"Thirty-five days ago a young lady eloped from a religious house in Essex with one—"

"Yes, yes, no matter for the name," the father interposed, with some impatience.

“They were privately married at Ilford, and for some three years lived in strict seclusion near London.”

“Well?” he exclaimed, as the narrator paused for a moment.

“Tired of a life of inaction, and wearied of a wife who had ceased to please him, the scoundrel,” and Digby fixed his eyes intently on the monk’s face as he spoke— “the scoundrel,” he repeated, with deliberate iteration, “suddenly deserted his unfortunate wife, leaving her, with an infant son, friendless and destitute.”

“Perhaps he had no money to leave her,” replied the monk, in extenuation.

“Would that justify his desertion?” demanded Digby.

“I am not defending the man I once knew to be a gentleman, and whose son, I am, from *friendship* for the father, and the obligations of an executor, taking all this trouble to discover.”

“It is very generous of you,” replied Digby, with a tone of almost imperceptible sarcasm, as the monk continued—

“The husband suddenly came into possession of a large property, and, on hastening back to his wife, was taken ill, had only time to execute a will and indite a letter to me, when death prematurely cut short his hopes and his career.”

“Indeed? Is *that* the accepted version?”

“It is.”

“And this will and letter lay in his lawyer’s hands till your return to Europe?”

“Of course. But why?”

“Only that my account of the story is different.”

“Possibly, but proceed.”

“The deserted wife, driven from her home by creditors, for a few years gained a bare existence by embroidery and shopwork. This in time failing, and starvation staring her in the face—“

“Well?”

“She sold herself to feed her child, this *scoundrel’s*—I beg your pardon, this friend’s son, and fell, if that were possible, still lower, and the workhouse and a pauper’s grave finally gave her shelter and rest.”

“The boy then—”

“Was reared as a pauper, but, being noticed by a priest who visited the Catholic inmates, and found quick and intelligent, was taken away and educated for the service of the Church.”

“There ends the first act of this eventful drama, and the end, as yet, of all our information?”

“Not quite.”

“How? Has your last search been more fortunate?”

“It has.”

“The death of the mother and the disappearance of the boy are not, then, the final facts of the story?”

“No.”

“I am all impatience.”

“The boy was taken to Ireland, from whence he was sent to Douai, where he took holy orders.”

“What? A priest?” Father Gerald exclaimed, as he grasped his lip between his teeth and knit his brows with ominous displeasure. “A priest? *A priest?*” he muttered, with evident astonishment and disgust.

“That objection, if one, would not prove irreparable.”

“What means you?”

“The sins of the father, it is said, are often repeated in the son, as a punishment to the first offender.”

“Why is this urged?”

“Because the youthful priest followed so closely the example of his sire, and caused such scandal, that—”

“Yes, what?” demanded the monk, with sudden interest.

“That he was expelled from the ministry and disgraced.”

“Thank God for that! I rejoice!” And the father rubbed his hands and gave every token of unbounded satisfaction.

“You glory in the youth’s disgrace?”

“I do, for it clears him of the Church. But proceed.”

“Shall I tell you of his victim?”

“No. Keep to the youth.”

“Expelled from the priesthood, he entered the service of the East India Company, where, under a new name, he rose to a place of trust and honour, and some ten years ago went to Brazil, where—”

“Why do you pause?”

“All trace of him is lost. Whether he fell in the war of the Argentine Republic, or returned to Europe and became a croupier to a gaming house at Baden, are facts I am now endeavouring to solve?”

“Beyond this you have no knowledge?”

“Nothing.”

“When found there may be some difficulty in proving his identity.”

“Would not the father be likely to identify his some by some natural instinct?”

“Father? Did I not say he died, after executing a will?”

“True, but there our accounts differ. You say he died on coming into the possession of a fortune; I maintain that he quitted England, with all the money he could obtain, and rose in China and the Indies to wealth and station.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” exclaimed the monk, with an uneasy laugh, and under a grim smile striving to hid his troubled features. “You have been imposed upon by my *good credulous* Digby, imposed upon by some similar name, thrown off the scent and deceived by some supposed resemblance.”

“I think not; nay—”

“You think so, no doubt,” he said, with a smile of bland toleration.

“I know so.”

“No doubt, no doubt. Why, man, he died more than thirty years ago.”

“You forget it was my duty to investigate every fact. I know his every step, and where, at this very minute, to place my hand upon his person.” And the speaker leant confidentially forward, and, with his eyes fixed on the monk’s face, closed his fingers on his arm with a look of crafty intelligence.

“*Indeed?* Is it possible?” Father Gerald replied, with the slightest shade of increased pallor in his countenance, as he firmly but gently removed the man’s hand from his arm. “you surprise me.”

“Yes, I know his family history, his assumed and real name with the whole record of his life to yesterday.”

With a half-expressed oath, the father sprang to his feet, and threw out his arms as if he meant to grapple the speaker by the throat, but in an instant his body became rigid as from catalepsy, and remained bent but motionless, with the angry eyes dilated, and the parted fingers ready for the mediated grasp.

“You have astonished me. ‘Tis nothing,” he said, with a faith smile, as, sinking back in his chair, he nodded, “I am often seized thus, when much amazed. ‘Tis nothing. This is great news, if true, and must be investigated—and you disposed of,” he murmured through his set teeth.

“But by what means or by what machinery?”

“I have thought of that. There is a very useful but eccentric man living near the Strand, whom I occasionally consult in difficult matters, one Silas Morphew. Do you know him?” And he fixed his keen and vigilant gaze on the other’s face as he made the inquiry.

“No,” was the reply, so promptly and naturally given that the monk, perfectly satisfied with the answer, added, with all his former vivacity—

“I will write a note for you to take to-morrow to the worthy man. Be ready to start at noon. Tell him all you have heard, and depend upon it he will find a means to clear up any discrepancy at present existing. You can leave me now.

“At twelve o’clock to-morrow?”

“Between one and two I believe is the best time to see him.”

“I will be punctual.” And, with a formal inclination of the head, Digby turned and quitted the room, followed to the last moment by the fiery and indignant eyes of his seemingly bland employer.

“You know *too much*, are growing dangerous, and must die—*die!*” he muttered between his teeth, with his eyes still bent on the door, as if he could follow through the panels the receding figure. “Pity. The man is useful; but there is no alternative.” Unlocking a drawer in the bureau, he withdrew a bunch of rusty keys, continuing, as he laid them on the table, “These will give me access to the vault, and enable me to prepare for good Master Digby’s reception.” As he articulated these words a terrible smile flitted for an instant over his thin and cruel-looking mouth.

Pushing away his chair, Father Gerald rose, and, with his eyes fixed on the ground, and his hands locked behind his back, began slowly to pace the darkening chamber, wrapped in deep thought.

“Would it were night! *Can* he be living? Can—merciful God! What—who are—save me!” exclaimed the father, staggering back, and almost falling to the ground in the terror and amazement that suddenly seized him, as, on raising his head from the floor, he beheld, not a yard from his person, the wasted form and ghastly face of the confessor, the man who at that moment he denied to be dead, or perishing in a deep and closely-guarded vault miles from the spot where he so fearfully confronted him.

Was it a supernatural visitant? Was it a mortal, or some spectral illusion of the mind on which he gazed with starting eyeballs and a creening terror of the flesh? For an instant he turned his glance to the table, to assure himself that the keys, the only possible means of escape, were there tangibly before him.

“You seem strangely excited, Father Gerald,” observed the confessor, in a slow and solemn voice, after watching the other’s terror for several seconds.

“Thank God,” ejaculated the other, sinking exhausted into a chair, and signing himself with the cross, “I hear your voice again.” Then, wiping the cold perspiration from his face, he

forced himself to rise, and, approaching the confessor, shook with seeming pleasure the hand of the haughty priest.

“Tell me by what miracle I see you in life again, for we had feared that some fatal misfortune had overtaken you.”

“It has; but I have escaped it.”

“Thanks to the Virgin.”

“And to my preserver.”

“And him also. Your haggard features and sudden appearance, when my mind was full of gloomy images, completely prostrated me. I am very nervous—very unwell.”

“So it would seem.”

“But yourself, good father? What has it been? What has been the nature of your trouble?” he inquired, with the keenest sympathy.

“You went to the money-lender’s, as I instructed you at our last meeting?” the confessor demanded, in a cold suspicious tone, without answering the other’s anxious question.

“Assuredly.”

“And you saw him?”

“No. He was from home on my first visit, and when I returned about two o’clock—”

“Two o’clock? Did the youth strike a bell?”

“I did distinctly hear a bell, but who sounded it I know not.”

“What passed?”

“I was told that a reply to the letter I had left had been already sent, as the writer wished, and I might return.”

“Was it a plot, or was it accident? Oh! I will be terribly revenged,” he said savagely.

“Revenged, revered father?”

“Yes. And let those beware who cross my path or rouse my resentment. Seek not to know where I have been, for till I have sifted this treachery for the heart my lips are sealed.”

“As you will, holy father. Your absence has been a sad blow to Sir Richard.”

“How so?”

“Have you not heard the sad news that the nun has been abducted?”

“Impossible! Blanche gone? Confusion!”

“Stolen by her lover, and with great outrage, from the convent. For myself, I have been ill, or I should have started on the instant.”

“Gone? She must be recovered, at every sacrifice. Oh! that I should have been absent.” And the confessor spoke with an energy and moved with a vigour that dyed his pale cheeks with the flush of strong excitement.

“Ay. Your absence has been a source of deep regret to all, while for myself—” Before he could complete the sentence one of the secret doors of the chamber opened, and Digby, entering announced, “Sir Richard Castleton,” when the baronet with hasty strides entered the room, and hurrying up to the confessor, expressed the joy it gave him to see him again alive, and though not well, but seriously injured.

“If what I hear is true this is no time for explanation, or I would ask what accident has befallen you, Sir Richard.” Replied Father Belville, glancing at the baronet’s disfigured countenance.

“To true, alas! If you allude to Blanche; but with you direct us we shall soon recover the lost girl. Have you been ill, too, Father Gerald,” Turning to the monk “that I have lost even your advice in this emergency?”

“Nothing but sickness could have kept me away so long,” was the hypocritical reply.

“You must both accompany at once to the Grange, there to devise means for Blanche’s capture, for she *must* be recovered,” observed Sir Richard, as he walked up the room, addressing the confessor in a subdued tone of voice.

“I will give directions to Digby, and join you on the instant.” And passing through one of the doors, the monk placed his ear close to one of the panels, his face relaxing into a smile of triumph as he caught the muttered confession of the one, and the stern ejaculation of the other.

“Robbed and assaulted!” exclaimed the confessor, in perfect amaze. “Where, and by whom?”

“A scoundrel of a sharper, whom I, in my credulity, had taken for an unsophisticated country gentleman, and met to give him his revenge. I do not want this prying monk to know of my loss. I like him not; but he is useful, and we must use him while he is so.”

“I hate him too. He is a wolf—a spy; but be satisfied. I have my eyes upon him. Was your loss heavy?”

“In money, well, yes.”

“Nothing else?”

“Some papers merely,” was the evasive answer.

“He ignores the title deeds, those documents that give me absolute control of the estate,” chuckled the monk from his concealment. “The confessor has his eye on me. Ay; but he little thinks of the plot weaving about him, or of the deadly vengeance that will yet be mine. But till the nun is caged and the husband disposed of my day of triumph must be in abeyance. A little linger, sir priest and knight, and then my vengeance is complete.” Holy father, worthy Sir Richard,” he added meekly and deferentially, re-entering the room. “I wait on your convenience. Ah! that my strength of body were equal to my will in your behalf! This way, reverend sir.” And with a cringing sanctimonious obeisance, he preceded the confessor and the baronet out of his chamber.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PRIEST’S PLOT CONSUMMATED.

“Is this not a lovely spot?” said D’Arcy Egerton to his happy wife. “No country in Europe can present such roadside scenery, such romantic hedge-bound lanes, as England. What could be more quiet or better suited for lovers than this sequestered bye-way, with its hedges rich with clematis, wild briar, and the sweet-scented honeysuckle?” he continued, as with all the enthusiasm of youth and the ardour of happy love, he gazed with rapture on the pale but beautiful face of his bride, as she clung with tendril-like affection and confidence to his protecting arm. “It only wants a little more colour in those fair cheeks to make my Blanche harmonise with all the beauties of the surrounding nature.”

“It is very peaceful and very lovely,” replied Blanche, in her soft musical voice. “The whole scene is one of charming beauty, but—”

“What, dearest?” the young husband eagerly demanded.

“Nay, it is probably only my fears, D’Arcy, but perhaps we should have met with greater security in foreign than in domestic scenes,” she added, with a slight hesitation of manner.

“It was from the very fear that, if removed from the protection of our own laws, some means might have been employed to separate us,” replied D’Arcy with a tone of perfect confidence, “that I abandoned the idea of going on the Continent, certain that once married, no

earthly power in this country could tear the wife from the arms of her husband. Banish, then, those idle fears, and look with confidence on me, and joy on the life before you.”

“I will, as far as possible, obey you, love, but you do not know the power these priests exercise,” she replied, anxious to reassure her husband, but at the same moment secretly trembling at the power she had so openly defied.

“But their influence cannot now affect you, dearest.”

“You do not know—you cannot understand all my causes for apprehension.”

“I know, my love, that you are my wife; that we have been a month married, that you are dearer to me than life itself, and that while that life lasts no priest, pope, or cardinal, were he ten times a man, should even tear you from my side, or cause that heart one moment’s fear.” And as he spoke the impassioned husband drew to his form, stiffened his strong muscles, and looked the picture of such manly vigour and defiance that the boldest might have feared to rouse the passion or meet the strength of such an enemy.

“It is for you, dear, far more than for myself, I fear,” she replied, while a smile of pride and pleasure at her husband’s labouring broke up her beautiful countenance into a thousand bewitching dimples.

“Fear nothing for me while there is strength left in this good arm for your defence.”

“Ah, D’Arcy, in such a case it is *not strength* that would avail yours. It is monkish treachery we have both to fear—priestly hypocrisy and craft; these are the Church’s weapons.”

“It is the indefinite fear of this nature that has for the last few days paled your cheeks, my darling, just, then, as freedom and infinite happiness was restoring the roses to this sweet visage.”

“Oh! you flatterer,” she cried with one of those charming smiles, as she glanced half coyly, half timidly at her delighted husband, who, in the ecstasy of his joy stooped down and kissed the still murmuring lips.

“You do not answer, darling?”

“I did not want to cause you any needless alarm on my account,” she replied, affectionately pressing her husband’s arm, “especially when till last night I had no reason to support my fears.”

“Till *last* night? Pray let me hear all, even your apprehensions.”

“Three days ago, when we were at Bath, I was attracted by a person whose features seemed on some degree familiar to me, and who passed us repeatedly while in the Pump Room.”

“What was there to fear in this, my love?” he replied laughing.

“Nothing; nor in my subsequently seeing him as we left the library; but when our carriage drove up to the hotel where we are now staying yesterday morning I observed the same individual descending from a Bath omnibus, and afterwards saw him enter the public room.

“Some invalid, perhaps. A mere coincidence.”

“I hoped so at first, but on this last appearance I remembered on the instant, though his person was disguised and greatly altered, to whom the feature belonged.”

“And they were those of—”

“The *monk*, Father Gerald.”

“Are you sure? However, we will leave this place immediately I wish you had mentioned this yesterday, and we would then have returned at once to town. But no matter. I defy their machinations. Think no more of it, dearest.”

“Oh, that I had the courage to tell you sooner!” she continued, in a tone of self-reproach.”

“Dismiss it from your mind.”

“Pardon me, dearest D’Arcy. I have not yet told you all. Last night on going to my bedroom, I chanced to pull aside the curtain, when, to my terror, I beheld a man’s face pressed against the glass.”

“A man’s face? The monk again?” exclaimed the husband indignantly.

“No, love, it was the face of a perfect stranger. I rang the bell, had the shutters closed, and sent an order to search the yard, but no one was to be found.”

“It was evident we were being watched. Half an hour will take us back to the inn, and then we will start at once for London; but still, love, there can be no *possible* cause for your entertaining any serious fears. They may try to rob you of your fortune, but actual violence is out of the question.”

“You forget, D’Arcy, the heinous crime I have committed in the eye of the Catholic Church.”

“What crime, my darling?”

“That of eloping from a convent, breaking the vows taken by a nun, and deserting the communion in which I had been reared. These, in priestly eyes, are deadly sins, that *no* absolution can cleanse me of.”

“Those sins, Blanche, are mine, all of them,” he replied, laughing, “and I will take the temporal and spiritual responsibility of each.”

“You? D’Arcy?”

“Even I. *You* did not elope. It was *I*, who broke into the convent and carried you off. You were only *supposed* to have taken the vows, which *I* again caused you to break. And, finally, your change of creed is entirely the result of *my* heretical teaching. So, love, make your mind contented. Your sins are forgiven you,” he concluded, with a mischievous smile.

“I hear wheels. There is a carriage coming,” Blanche suddenly exclaimed, pressing Egerton’s arm, to induce him to draw up at the side of the land.

“Not here, dear. The vehicle is passing up the next road. You may see the roof of the carriage moving along level with yonder hedgerow.” And he pointed across some distant fields, where the object indicated was observed as it passed occasional breaks in the fence and foliage.

“The only difficulty, I repeat, we can have with these priests will be in reference to your fortune, and to that, as far as I am concerned, they should, but for the injustice of the thing, to be perfectly welcome.”

“Listen, dear. What is that?” she cried, with an agitated tremor.

“You are nervous, love. It is only a horseman, I suppose. A few minutes more, and we shall be at the inn. See, it is as I thought.” And, drawing Blanche to the side of the lane, they stood stationary, while a strong black horse at full speed came tearing up the embowered lane, the rider wearing a broad-leaved hat, the brim kept over the face by a string, while, as if still further to prevent recognition, he bent almost to his saddle as he urged his steed to the gallop.

With a simultaneous start, on D’Arcy’s part of the surprise, and terror on that of Blanche, husband and wife mutually tightened their hold of each other’s arm, as, gazing after the rider, they resumed their walk up the lane.

“That man purposely averted his face, but I am *certain* he is the same individual who fired on me the night I took you from the convent, and who fell under my riding whip.”

“D’Arcy, love, let us hasten on. There is some evil design on foot. That horseman is our moral enemy—is Philip Arundell.”

“Indeed? Come, then, love, but fear nothing. That man owes me a heavy debt of vengeance, and be assured he shall render me a full account.”

So saying, the pair accelerated their pace, and were soon deeply engaged in an interesting conversation.

So absorbed were both in their subject, and so fascinated at least was Blanche by what she heard, that her late serious misgivings had given way to such light and pleasurable thoughts that as they reached the top of the lane, and turned sharply round to the right, where the road was remarkably wild and lonely, she pleased Blanche, charmed by some merry thought or happy image, laughed aloud, her clear sweet voice ringing through the briary brakes, the hazel coppice, and the knolls of trees like silver music.

Delighted at her cheerful mood, and, with a poet's feelings, enraptured at the harmony of her sweet voice in that sylvan glade, D'Arcy, with all a lover's enthusiasm, had turned to gaze on her beautiful face, when a confused rushing sound, heard behind and before them, caused him to look hastily up, and almost as quick as lightning to disengage himself from Blanche's arm; and, placing her behind him, confront the threatened danger.

Springing from the hedge, from the shelter of the bushes and trees, some five or six desperate looking ruffians, armed with sticks and bludgeons, started forward, and with oaths and threats commanded him to stand from before the lady, for whose capture they held a warrant.

Farther off, and partly concealed between the trees, stood the evident principals of this outrage, and whom Blanche at once recognised as the confessor and his socius, the hated monk, while in the distance a post-chaise and driver blocked up the lane and completed the group.

All these faces, the impressions of the men, and Blanche's terrified recognition of the chief actors were, as it were, instantly impressed on the young husband's imagination, and, understanding from the ruffians and the carriage that the object was to tear his wife from him and bear her back to captivity and punishment, all the manly impulse of his nature, all his hatred and resentment, were up in arms in a moment, and, conscious of his unarmed and defenseless condition, he had, with his first surprise, resolved upon his course of action.

Taking a bound, Egerton confronted the foremost ruffian, and, grasping him by the throat, seized his cudgel before the man could check his speed, wrenched it from his hand, and with a blow sent him staggering on his nearest comrade, both men falling heavily to the ground. At this instant the confessor and the monk started from their partial concealment, compelling D'Arcy who had meant to follow up his advantage on the others, to fall back in front of Blanche and wait the further assault.

Stimulated by the threats and promises of the confessor, the other four, who had for an instant paused by their prostrate fellows, now rushed on the devoted husband, and struck right and left with fearful rapidity at their dauntless antagonist.

D'Arcy, however, was not only an accomplished swordsman, but a perfect master of the quarterstaff, and parried with admirable coolness every blow aimed at his person, and by a dexterous feint and rapid rally soon stretched one of the four senseless on the ground, but in repeating the maneuver on another his treacherous staff broke short in his hand leaving him defenseless.

Hurling the remaining fragment in the face of one of the assailants, he seized the first of his antagonists, who had risen and crept unobserved to his side, by the breast, and, giving him a back fall, flung him stunned and bleeding at the feet of the approaching priest.

With such force had D'Arcy hurled the ruffian from him that before he could regain his position the others rudely thrusting Blanche aside, seized him behind, and held him immovable as in a vice.

Almost at the same moment the confessor rushed upon Blanche, and, despite her cries and struggles, dragged her away from her courageous husband, when, in terror for the safety of D'Arcy, and horror at the polluting touch of the priest, she exerted all her strength, and, freeing her arms from the grasp of the father, held them out with a beseeching cry for aid to her husband.

The sound of that appealing voice seemed to brace his nerves with tenfold vigour, and with a desperate effort he hurled the miscreants from him, and, like an incensed tiger robbed of its mate, followed in rapid bounds the retreating confessor and his victim, pursued in turn by the incensed ruffians. Another leap, and the priest's throat would have been enclosed with the pitiless grasp of the incensed husband, when the man, springing forward, leveled a pistol, fired, and D'Arcy Egerton fell forward on his face.

One loud shrill scream, as she saw her beloved D'Arcy fall, and Blanche fell back in the confessor's arms for the time insensible to all her woes.

With a petulant exclamation at the monk's precipitancy, Father Belville threw the fainting form of the young wife over his shoulder, and hastened with his burthen to the carriage in the distance, while the socius, having seen the wounded men placed in a light wagon that had been secured in the wood, their companions mounted as a guard beside them, and the whole posse of ruffians fairly started in an opposite direction, returned for an instant to the prostrate husband, and, turning the body over on its back with his foot, hastened after his principal, and springing into the carriage, closed the door, lowered the blinds, and, directing the postillion to drive at his utmost speed, took a seat opposite the confessor, who still pressed the fainting Blanche in his arms; and in less than ten minutes from the first surprise the prostrate body of the bleeding D'Arcy was the only evidence remaining of the deadly struggle and the cruel outrage so lately perpetrated in that scene of peace and sylvan beauty.

CHAPTER XII. MEETING OF THE RIVALS.

"Is Sir Richard Castleton within?" demanded D'Arcy Egerton, as for the second time he applied at Abbey Grange to see its morose proprietor three weeks after the assault in the lane where he had been left for dead.

His appearance, however, was greatly altered from that which it had been presented when last before the reader. Instead of the firm tread and elastic step that had then been characteristic of his walk, he moved with a heavy languid progress. His frame had also suffered considerably and lost much of its manly fullness, appearing gaunt and spare, with a black patch on one temple contrasted painfully with the extreme pallor and hollowness of his countenance.

"I wish to see Sir Richard instantly," D'Arcy repeated, in an authoritative tone, as he observed the servant's hesitation.

"Sir Richard is within today, sir," replied the man respectfully, "but I really do not know in what part of the building. If you will have the goodness to step into the library I will find Sir Richard and give him your card." So saying, he ushered the visitor into the apartment where, on a previous occasion, Blanche had been brought before her uncle, the confessor, and the monk, and, closing the door, proceeded in search of his master.

As D'Arcy entered the room in question a slight fluttering noise in the direction of the quaint and lofty mantelpiece caused him to turn his gaze suddenly towards the fireplace, when, with an exclamation of surprise, he beheld the shadowy outline of a man's figure pass through a secret door at the side of the wide chimney and immediately disappear from view.

“Some prying monk or mendicant friar, for I saw his gown and sandals,” he said, as, waiting directly to the hearth, he passed under the carved chimneypiece, and with his hand attempted, but in vain, to detect the secret spring or moving panel.

“Every room in the old house I doubt not has one or more of these monkish contrivances,” he continued, impatiently waiting up and down the chamber. “How I detest these Jesuitical evidences of priestly craft and suspicion! Perhaps my poor suffering Blanche is even now within a few yards of my arm, surrounded by a host of these tyrannous monks and confessors. What new scheme of villainy is the priestly conclave now hatching before I am admitted? In the name of Heaven how long am I to be kept here waiting an audience?” he exclaimed impatiently, as he turned suddenly towards the door.

At that moment, the servant returned, and, observing that Sir Richard would see him in the steward’s office, held open the door for his passage.

“Lead on,” was D’Arcy’s only reply, as, quitting the apartment, he followed the servant across the large marble hall, and, traversing a long stone passage terminated by a flight of stairs, descended into another equally long but underground and vaulted corridor dimly lighted from above by one or two narrow shafts.

As they proceeded along the echoing passages D’Arcy’s ear was frequently startled by the clash of the several gates through which they passed, each portal slamming to with a harsh and ominous clangour that seemed to forbid all return.

Diverging to the right for a considerable distance, they again approached a flight of stairs. Ascending these, they entered another passage at the end of which a ponderous oak portal, studded with huge nails and immense hinges, appeared to oppose all farther progress.

Starting forward, the servant opened the door before D’Arcy, though close behind, could discover by what agency he had effected it, for it had neither perceivable handle nor lock. Allowing the portal to swing back with a sharp portentous clash, D’Arcy found himself in a lofty crypt or vestibule, destitute of every trace of furniture, and with only one means of egress at the opposite extremity.

Taking a key from his pocket, the man approached the door, and, opening it, disclosed another flight of very steep and narrow stone stairs.

“This leads into the steward’s office,” observed the man as he ascended the steps, closely followed by D’Arcy, and, opening a door at the top, added, as he admitted the visitor, “And here is Sir Richard Castleton.”

The words had scarcely been pronounced when D’Arcy turned his head, but, to his astonishment, the man had not only vanished, but every trace of the door by which he had entered had disappeared.

An uneasy suspicion of having been betrayed and trapped into this remote and isolated part of the building flashed like lightning through his brain as he took in, by a hasty inspection, the contents and character of the steward’s office.

A long room, lined half-way to the ceiling with oak paneling, and lighted by two high windows; an office table, a desk, and a few chairs ranged at the farther end, with some deed-boxes on the floor, completed the furniture of the gloomy-looking apartment.

Seated in an armchair at the extremity of the chamber, and behind the table, was Sir Richard Castleton, as with scowling brow and a singular expression of eye he surveyed with evident satisfaction, the doubting aspect of his visitor.

“It is well, wit, that you have thought fit to voluntarily deliver yourself up to justice,” began Sir Richard, in a harsh grating voice, as D’Arcy, having made his mental inventory of the

chamber, boldly approached the table, and with a haughty look confronted the speaker. "You have saved me the necessity of issuing a warrant and having you dragged through the streets as a common housebreaker and felon," he continued, with cutting insolence.

"Do you know to whom you are speaking, Sir Richard Castleton?" Egerton demanded, after giving a hasty glance over his shoulder.

"Doubt not but that the officers and handcuffs will be at hand all in good time," he said contemptuously. "Do I know who you are? Oh! perfectly. Your deeds have made your name somewhat notorious."

"Sir, I deemed you were addressing some one else. That, and no fear of your idle boast, made me look to see if we were alone. My name is D'Arcy Egerton."

"The *Hue and Cry* has apprised me of that fact," he answered, with a sneer.

"You are insolent, sir, but your age, and respect to the feelings of one dear to me, save you from chastisement."

"Chastisement, audacious fellow? I'll have you lashed for this till you howl for mercy."

"Peace, bragging dotard, or—" and he strode with menacing gesture nearer the table, but, checking himself abruptly, he added, in a tone of suppressed emotion, "This is idle waste of time. I came here to demand of you the instant restoration of my wife."

"Your wife? How dare you use that term to a ward in Chancery, a nun, and a sword bride of the Church—one, too, whom you, with sacrilegious violence, have doomed to secular and eternal reprobation."

"Where is my beloved Blanche? Where the wife which priestly ruffians, instigated and paid by you, have torn from my arms? Where is Blanche? Beware, old man, tempt not my patience too far with that contemptuous smile. Again I demand of you, where is my wife?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" was the scornful and derisive answer, as the baronet, who had risen at D'Arcy's sudden movement towards the table, reseated himself in a careless and insolent attitude, laughing in a low sarcastic tone, doubly aggravating from its sense of conscious triumph.

"Tempt me not past my forbearance and reason. Is she here? By heavens I will know!"

"No, she is not here. Think you I would lay my house under the anathema of all the saints in heaven by bringing so soul-stained a criminal beneath its roof?"

"Blasphemer of innocence and beauty. Where, then, is she? What have you done with my darling? Oh! tell me, if you are a man," he cried, with passionate importunity. "The brutal assault on myself I will forget, even pardon the outrage on my wife, so you at once restore her to me. Do you hear me? I will forget all that is past, so you give me back my hope, my wife, my beloved Blanche." And the young husband appealed with looks of beseeching earnestness to the stolid and sarcastic baronet.

"Yes, I will tell you so much, for as there is no chance of your ever seeing her again, it may be some satisfaction in your own solitude to know to what you have reduced you *dear* and *beloved* Blanche," he replied, in tones of bitter sarcasm.

"Good Heaven! what do you mean? Have you forgotten that she is your own niece, the child of your dead brother?"

"No, nor have I forgot what, as a good Catholic and a faithful son of the Church, it was my duty to do to a pervert and a heretic."

"And that was?" D'Arcy demanded anxiously.

"To give her up to the faith she had outraged, to exculpate, by fast, penance, and wholesome punishment, the crimes of apostacy, broken vows, and elopement from her convent."

“Monstrous! And you have dared to violate the laws of God and man, to separate husband from wife, and, like a miscreant, consigned your own relative to the malignant cruelty of bigoted priests and unfeeling nuns?”

“Peace, foul-mouthed heretic.”

“Peace, dotard? I will have no peace; but henceforth a deadly war exists between us, and you shall answer, with your life and property, for the outrages committed on a defenseless woman. And, so help me heaven! before another night sets in, I will bear my wife in triumph from your priestly clutch and convent cells. Ay, though guarded by all the saints in the monkish calendar, or locked in by tenfold bars of iron. I will! I swear it, so help me God!” And with flashing eyes, and extended arms, D’Arcy registered his solemn oath.

During this passionate burst of anger the baronet sat with a grim smile on his rigid features. At its conclusion he merely said, with calm indifference—

“In the meantime you must put up with the accommodation of one of our deepest and most solitary cells. Fool! you have defied me, now I defy and scorn *you*. Ha! ha! you are my *prisoner*.” And again Sir Richard laughed with that low fiendish chuckle, that fell on the ear like the annihilation of hope.

For an instant Egerton felt a tremor of the nerves and a sudden pang at the heart, as if his warm blood had been turned into ice, as he remembered how blindly he had placed himself in the power of the man who had such just cause of hatred against him, and reflected how far he was removed from, all hope of aid, and that probably the priestly myrmidons were already only waiting their signal to spring upon him.

It was not, however, of himself he thought in that moment of sharp anguish, but on the life-long misery to which his Blanche would be condemned should anything at the present moment interfere with his liberty of action; and as this thought dashed through his mind he bitterly cursed the folly that had tempted him to rush into the very arms of his enemy, where, maimed and weak from his late struggle and wound, he could offer but slight opposition to the numbers, who, in all probability, would be brought to assail him.

While these thoughts were rapidly coursing through his mind D’Arcy was suddenly startled by the sound of a voice, heard almost at his ear, observing—

“I regret, Sir Richard, the necessity that consigns this *person* to the claims of justice before I can demand that satisfaction which my own honour and an outraged lady claim at my hands. I must, however, yield to the prior claims of the beadle and the hangman.”

“Liar and coward!” exclaimed D’Arcy, now furious with passion, as he sprang round and confronted his rival, Philip Arundell, as with a haughty smile he moved from behind, and, passing round him, took a place by Sir Richard.

“We can excuse the vituperation of a convicted culprit,” retorted Philip, with a contemptuous smile.

“Base coward! You think yourself safe here,” replied Egerton, drawing himself up to his full height, and looking defiantly at his antagonist, “but I shall take an early opportunity to pay off the debt I owe you for the dastardly shots fired on a persecuted lady, and for your later act of spy and informer, for you were recognised, despite your speed and averted face.”

“I fired, it is true, and would have shot you, like any other midnight burglar or thief. By you remind me well of the blow I received on that occasion when I would have rescued my affianced bride from your profaning grasp, and have vindicated the honour of a number of insulted and terrified ladies.”

“Peace, my worthy friend. Not you, but the community outraged by this man’s deeds, claim a prior right to punish his mercenary hopes and his Tarquin-like atrocity,” interposed Sir Richard. “The faithless nun has been restored to her cell and life-weary penance. It now only remains to punish this guilty paramour.”

“Insolent and profaning braggart!” cried Egerton, unable to restrain his passion. “Dare again to couple your niece’s name without thought of dishonour, and, by the heaven above us, old as you are, I’ll bury my fingers in your throat.”

“This to me?” exclaimed the baronet as he sprang to his feet, and glared with mortal enmity on the young husband.

“Remember, Sir Richard,” interposed Philip, in his coldest and most sarcastic tones, “some indulgence must be allowed for the schemer who has lost an estate and a mistress in one day. Let him rail on. His words, like his will to injure are alike powerless. The girl is in our hands, and her fortune in the grasp of the Church.”

“The flashing eye and threatening gesture of D’Arcy Egerton, as he prepared to bound on his tainting rival, had in it such a look of formidable mischief that Sir Richard, alarmed by the attitude, struck his hand fiercely on the table bell before him, exclaiming savagely—

“This braggart must be silenced. There, secure your prisoner.” At the same moment the door behind the baronet opened, and the troop of ruffians who had assaulted the lovers in the lane rushed into the room, armed, as on that occasion, with heavy bludgeons.

Any momentary timidity D’Arcy might have felt on first discovering how he had been trapped into that remote chamber instantly vanished when he had real cause for apprehension, or any tangible danger to confront, his courage and determination rising with the difficulties that beset him.

On the first appearance of his rival he had braced himself for action, and was in that state of nervous tension that immediately preceded a mortal encounter; but when the ruffians, followed by the monk and confessor, suddenly entered the apartment, he was in an instant all himself again, calm and collected.

The presence of such unequal numbers, so far from daunting, only added fuel to the fire of his passion; and, with the one side of effecting his escape, or in default of that selling his life dearly, he in a moment lost all consciousness of his late debility, and, supported by an indomitable spirit, at once decided on his course of action.

Scarcely had Sir Richard’s command to his myrmidons to secure their prisoner passed his lips when D’Arcy made a rush towards the end of the room, and seizing an office stool, with one blow on the paved floor shattered it into a dozen pieces, leaving him in possession of one entire log as a means of defence.

Opening with his teeth the blade of a formidable stiletto, which he waved in his left hand, he advanced to meet the savage-looking band who approached him, exclaiming, with a haughty and defiant tone—

“Come on, murdering cowards. I am ready.”

For an instant the assailants stood irresolute, somewhat intimidated by the attitude and determination of the young husband, and still strongly impressed by the recollection of the late desperate encounter in the lane.

The confessor, who watched the scene with the eye of a general and noted the momentary hesitation, exclaimed, from his retirement—

“Dolts, you know your duty. Upon him. Disarm and bind the heretic.”

Long as these events may have taken to describe, the whole of them with what follows were in fact but the work of only a few moments.

With a savage shout, three of the ruffians dashed upon Egerton, aiming with their heavy bludgeons blows meant to deprive him of his weapons by disabling his arms. These, however, he was enabled not only to parry with rapidity and ease, but at the same time to deliver a stroke to one of this assailants that sent him staggering against the wainscoat with such force that a secret door flew open, exposing the steep and narrow flight of stairs by which D'Arcy had entered the chamber. Down these, with his head striking each stair, the disabled man was heard rapidly falling.

"On him again, and guard the door," shouted the baronet, as, with Phillip, he spring from behind the coffee table.

While the other three men rushed to cover the open panel, D'Arcy delivered two blows in such rapid succession to those before him that the right arm of one fell by his side, and the other was, from the blood that flowed from his hand, unable to return to the contest.

Taking advantage of this temporary advantage, Egerton darted to the other extremity of the room, upsetting in his speed Sir Richard, and making a stab with his stiletto at Phillip, who attempted to close with him, and only escaped the deadly blade by an adroit spring to the side.

Throwing himself with all his force on the door, from which the monk and confessor had prudently retired, D'Arcy found, to his dismay, that it had neither lock nor handle, and that all his strength was asserted in vain, and that it would not open.

A loud satirical laugh from the monk heard over the rush of feet as the band hurried up to hem him in, apprised D'Arcy of the folly of further exertion in that direction, the danger of his confined situation, and of the almost certainty of his fate.

With a savage determination not to die without wreaking a desperate revenge, he grasped the huge table with both hands, and, as his assailants were within a yard of his person, flung it violently over.

Effectual as this *ruse* was in scattering some of his enemies, one of them instantly sprang over the impediment and attacked him with murderous violence; but man to man D'Arcy was more than a match for any single combatant, and after a rapid exchange of blows the ruffian fell groaning among the *debris* of the table. Before, however, D'Arcy would improve his advantage his left arm was firmly grasped from behind by Arundell, and a desperate struggle ensued for the possession of the dagger on the one side; as with his other weapon he was obliged to keep at bay his other assailants.

An ominous faintness warned Egerton that his strength was fast leaving him, but at this moment his eye caught sight of a rope hanging from the roof outside of the opposite windows. That rope offered one ray of hope, and stimulated him to a last and desperate effort.

Dealing a heavy and sudden blow on the head of the nearest ruffian, the man staggered back among his comrades and scattered the entire group. Instantly throwing away his staff, he turned on Philip with both hands, and, hurling him among the rest, bounded upon a desk, and, reaching the window sill, dashed out the latticed casement, and, grasping the dangling rope, instantly swung himself into space.

A mingled wondrous of oaths, shouts, and exultant laughs came with muffled distinctness to his ears, as for the moment he oscillated to and fro.

With a feeling of despair, he discovered that the rope descended no lower than the window, while the depth below was too fearful to be contemplated. His only hope then was to ascend and trust to the chance of escaping by the roof.

Swift as though D'Arcy mounted with the agility of a squirrel, and, reaching the parapet, rolled himself over, faint and exhausted, on the leads of the flat roof.

Scarcely had he time to wipe his brow and regain his feet, with the raising of a trap-door in the further corner of the roof warned him of renewed danger and the need for instant action. One rapid glance told him that he had now no means of escape.

The tenement on which he was perched was completely detached from every part of the mansion and out-buildings, and stood totally isolated in the grounds, except on one side, where it rose sheer from the margin of a large lake. It was upon this side where some repairs had been making in the parapet the material for which had been drawn up by the rope that had, so far, fortunately aided his escape.

Without arms, for he had dropped his stiletto, and exhausted by his exertions, which chance had D'Arcy of escape? What hope of life? He saw that the hour of his death or captivity was come and at once resigned himself to encounter the first.

One rapid glance down either side of his narrow arena, and like an athlete of old he waited calmly for the coming onslaught.

With a heavy crash, the trap fell on the leads, and Philip Arundell, with a face bleeding from his fall, crushed upon his rival as the rest of the hand emerged upon the roof.

The feeling of rivalry between the two men gave three-fold strength to their deadly animosity as their bodies swayed and bent in their passionate embrace.

So certain were the priest and Sir Richard of now capturing their victim that they restrained the three ruffians who still resumed from closing too soon on their prey, and thereby robbing Phillip of his triumph in throwing his antagonist.

At the moment, however, of their greatest confidence, when the tottering limbs of Egerton showed that his strength was almost exhausted, the body of Philip rose suddenly into the air, and, with a shriek, disappeared over the parapet where his rival had just climbed, when passing the advancing troop with a rush, D'Arcy made a bound, and with his legs twined together, descend like a plummet forty feet in the lake beneath.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CONFESSION AND THE MONK—VENGEANCE FORESHADOWED.

“If I may judge by your looks, father, your errand has been a fruitless one,” observed the socius Gerald to the confessor, as, with morose countenance and a languid step, the latter entered the gloomy room we have already described in the monk's residence in the Kent Road, as the two met a few days subsequent to the events in the last chapter.

“It has,” was the abrupt and laconic reply, as the father threw himself into an easy chair, and gazed in moody abstraction on the deserted garden at the rear of the old manor house.

“May I inquire *why* you have not succeeded?”

“Simply because the scoundrel has left the place.”

“*Scoundrel?*” repeated the monk, with a significant emphasis. “Left the place, has he? Is not that somewhat strange for a man of business?”

“Strange?” the other retorted captiously. “No. Have I not said he was a scoundrel, a cheat imposter? Is there aught strange in the flight of such a miscreant, a thief, a murder—“

“What? Silas Morphew?” inquired the socius, in tones of profound astonishment.

“Have I not said so?” the confessor retorted captiously.

“What your *staunch* friend—*your trusted man of business?*” he demanded, with inquisitive iron. “I thought you had implicit faith in that man’s skill and honour.”

“So I had.”

“Entrusted him with important papers, deeds connected with the novice’s estate and fortune?”

“I did, but why torture me with recollection of my confiding folly?” he replied, with ill-concealed rage and petulance.

“I could not help recalling your eulogium, and my unsuccessful visit to the man. But could no one tell you whither he had gone?”

“No. A fortnight ago the goods were removed, the office locked up, his name erased from the door, and all traces of the man lost. Even the youth who rendered me such a single service, even he, the clerk—”

“Rendered you a service?”

“I said so.”

“Josh! What of him? You—*you* know him?” he demanded with extraordinary eagerness.

“I did make his acquaintance,” replied the father.

“But how did you, who only visited the office once, know the youth’s name?” he asked, with some degree of curiosity.

“That was not a difficult matter to effect,” replied the monk, with a quiet smile, and instantly recovering himself, “seeing that the youth was so proud of his name that he cut it all over the desk, so that all who walked in might read.”

“Probably. I am not so close an observer of trifles.”

“We must find this clerk, for he is certain to know of his manager’s whereabouts. Having found him, he must be made to disgorge those securities. Shall I search out this lad—this Josh Whistler?”

“Useless. He has left his lodgings, and there is no clue to his retreat.”

“You do know where he lodged, then? Let me know the address, and I have some hope that I shall unearth both master and man.”

“As you will. Here is the address of the youth’s lodgings,” and he handed him a piece of paper with the name of the street and the number of the house, which the other accepted with a glitter in his eyes, that plainly indicated the interest with which he received the information.

“When do you purpose visiting the nun in Norfolk?” inquired the monk, as, he glanced at the address and casually put it away in his pocketbook.

“I set out tonight. Why?”

“I wondered whether at the same time you would look in on the husband,” he replied, with a malicious chuckle.

“No.”

“Not to see how he comports himself in his new situation?”

“No. I repeat”

“Not to inquire after his general health, the state of his mind, nor whether his *novel* path had proved prejudicial to his constitution?”

“Pshaw! no.”

“Not even to notice how he bears the Church’s dispensation,” he continued with a low sarcastic laugh, and a malicious leer of his ferret-like eyes, “or how he writes under his severance *e vincula matrimonii?*”

“No, no, twenty times, no.”

“What a pity, *what forbearance*, to resist such luxury!”

“Scoffer! Why do you gibe at me thus?”

“Nay, I meant not to gibe or taunt, only I cannot understand your settled animosity towards the bug-band.”

“Not understand it?” he demanded abruptly.

“No. You have got the novice and her fortune. Your antagonism to the husband, now in safe custody, seems to me a waste of noble passion, a hate without a reason, and an enmity, without a purpose.”

“No reason for my hate, no purpose in my deadly animosity?” exclaimed the confessor savagely, as, with panting breast, clenched hands, and flashing eyes, he leaped to his feet and strode with swelling passion athwart the spacious chamber.

“I cannot see it,” rejoined the monk, as, with a malignant scowl he noted with exquisite pleasure the confessor’s inward war of feeling.

“I tell thee, man. I loved the girl with a devotion that for her sake would have sacrificed every worldly hope, nay, have risked salvation—worshipped her with a passion so consuming that every thought of life, every day temporal and spiritual, was centred in that love, before which my sacred function became a lie, my heart a volcano, my—”

“Well?”

“Well,” he cried fiercely, “this woman, for whom I would have periled soul and body, would have been mine, heart, mind, and person, mind for lifelong bliss, but for the fell chance, that threw this accursed heretic in her way to blast my happiness, rob me of peace, and make a hello of after-life.”

“The fact is she preferred twenty-five to forty, the sprightly youth to the sober priest, and glossy curls to a tangled crown,” sarcastically retorted his companion.

“Let him beware, safe as he now is,” he continued, unheeding the other’s taunt and speaking as if impelled to unburthen the rancour of his heart.

“Beware, for I have a long and deadly account to settle with him yet, the more implacable from the delay I put upon the vengeance smouldering in my heart.”

“What further vengeance would you have, then to watch him rot by inches in his loathsome cell, for ever parted from all he loves, from light and hope?”

“What would I have? Would *you* be satisfied with *one* revenge if you could have the luxury of *two*? Would you be content to let the man who had crossed your path, and always to your prejudice, who had robbed you of a mistress and a fortune, and blasted your dearest interests—would *you* have let such an enemy escape with one life, had the wretch the privilege of two, to satisfy your revenge, your thirst of blood?”

“I am less speculative in my passions than yourself, and can hardly realize the luxury of which you speak, unless indeed I knew how you propose to take this *second* life.”

“Second, did I say? It shall be the last of *many* lives, with which I will rock soul and body. When I have triumphed over her boasted purity, and confined her to eternal penance and her gloomy veil, then—do you hear me?—then, like another Tarquin finished with his triumph, I’ll seek the crushed and groaning husband, and with the recital of my love and dalliance fire his shrunk veins, till through every nerve and artery flows seething lightning, and the burning fancy of his own dishonour brands the picture in his brain past mortal sufferance—till, in his despair and agony, life and soul are sundered. Then—then I shall triumph.

“There is sublimity in your hate that bends my common nature in admiration to a genius that can conceive torture so exquisite.”

“I go to wage that scheme of love and vengeance that shall give me lasting joy. Hence you to the Abbey Grange. Wear your eyes warily, and note well the actions and bearing of Sir Richard, for I much fear the gambler would play us false. I post tonight in Norfolk, and will join you within a week at the Grange. Now farewell.”

“Farewell, *holy father*,” replied the monk, bending low, as the confessor strode out of the room.

For full five minutes Father Gerald preserved the same lowly attitude, till the clangour of the last portal, told him that his late companion had quitted the dwelling, when, in an instant resuming his natural position, he shook his hand defiantly at the door through which the confessor had passed, and, with a muttered curse, exclaimed—

“Fool! dolt! your days of triumph are drawing to a close, and that too before you taste either of love or vengeance. Not that I would save his victims. No, let them perish, they are more in my way than his, and, for my gain and securing, must die. So, so,” he mused, “he knows Master Josh. I must find the knave. Can he have found the secret to the vault, and so have helped the confessor from his grave? Can he?” he exclaimed, with sudden alarm. “If I thought that, by heaven I’d strangle the cur, as I would a ravenous dog,” and he bent his talon fingers with vindictive passion. “I must find the imp, and wring the secret from him, or, by heaven, I’ll bring his hateful neck.” And with this amiable threat he quitted the chamber in search of his missing clerk.

CHAPTER XV.

JOSH MAKES AN OATH AND MEANS TO KEEP IT.

“I never knowed nothing about my father, ‘cept but he was somethin’ in the Church,” observed our old acquaintance Josh Whistler, seated in one of the divisions of a low coffee-house, in a retired street between the Strand and Lincoln’s Inn Fields, about dusk on the following night, in answer to a question addressed to him by a tall well-dressed young man, whom a closer inspection proved to be a personage we have formerly encountered in attendance on his master, D’Arcy Egerton, namely, his man Francis.

“And you never saw your father, Josh?” inquired Francis, as they sat in close and friendly conference, after disposing of their afternoon meal.

“No, and, what’s more, I don’t want to. He used my mother shameful bad, as willinous bad that she went – and drowned herself. Poor mother!” And Josh dashed a tear from his lashes. “I was uncommon fond of her; but, there, what’s the use of sniveling? It’s a precious time ago.”

“Drowned? How was that?” inquired his companion, with evident interest.

“There, there, don’t ask me nothin’ about her. Poor creature! she jumped off one of the bridges, and—and that’s about all,” he added abruptly, with a choking sound in his throat.

“And you have no idea who your father was?” Francis inquired.

“No, nor don’t want to neither, I tell you. Let him keep off o’ me, or, by golly, it would be the worse for him.” And John spoke savagely.

“How come you to be brought up in the Catholic faith, and to serve at the alter?” his companion demanded.

“I’m blest if I know. I s’pose it was through them as took care of me when I was a kid. But I’ve gi’n over going to chapel now. I hates them all.”

“Why so, Josh?”

“Because I’ve seen so much of their wicked ways.”

“Indeed? How?”

“There was that old governor of mine, as crooked as a corkscrew, and just as hurtful in screwing his way into people’s secrets, and as murdering an old willin as was ever unhung.”

How come you to leave that situation?” inquired his companion.

“Me leave? It was contrary, for the old murdering humbug left me, though I did mean to give him warning, as you see I’d found out some of his secrets, and I’m blest if it warn’t dangerous to stop, for if he thought I knew the half of what I do he’d a thought no more of putting me out of the way than of drowning a kitten.”

“Found out what?”

“I darsn’t tell you,” Josh replied, in a mysterious whisper. “And when I sent to the shop the day he was to come back he walks in just as natural and smooth as though he warn’t the tip-top biggest willin as ever was, and says he, ‘Josh, I shan’t want your waluable services any more for this week,’ and then he forks out the brads, and says, ‘Them’s your wages, Mr. Whistler, and you needn’t return till Monday.’”

“Well?”

“When I went on Monday the artful old thief had done me brown, for I’m blest if he hadn’t gone and took away all the sticks out of the office, painted out his name on the door and the passage, pulled down the blinds, locked the door, and reg’lar gone and hooked it. But I knows a secret that would go night to hang him, and straighten out his crooked carkiss.” And Josh looked both maliciously and mysteriously at his companion, as he went through the pantomime of a culprit in the hands of an executioner.

“Keep your secret, Josh; but you can answer me the question I am about to put to you,” replied Francis, as with a smile he watched the youth’s expressive pantomime.

“You’ve been the only one as ever showed any feeling of kindness to me, and have been a reg’lar trump, and it aren’t likely, then, I ‘d refuse you any thing you ask, so out with it like a brick.”

“You have often wondered, Josh, why I took an interest in you, and went to so much trouble in tracing you, from the death of your mother, till I at last discovered you at Silas’s office a year ago. I will now tell you the reason.”

“You will?”

“Yes. I believe—nay, I am certain—that your mother was my only and dearly-loved sister, cruelly seduced, and eventually deserted, by some heartless priest, whose infamous abandonment of her and her child finally drover her to that mad act that, in a moment of anguish and despair, terminated her sad career.”

“You think my mother was your sister?” Josh demanded eagerly.

“I do, firmly and undoubtingly. Strong in that conviction, I want you to aid me in discovering the unnatural wretch, who not only drove his victim to despair, but basely deserted his child. You will do this, Josh?”

“I should think so,” he replied passionately. “I hate him, and only want to see him once, to tell him about my poor mother, and then I can keep from giving him a whacking. I leave him to his own reflections, the scamp.”

“At the school and chapel you have met with many monks and priests, I suppose?”

“Oh! lots of ‘em. Why?”

“Have you ever heard of one called Father Belville, tor the confessor?”

“Hang it! that’s curious. Well I never!”

“What is curious, Josh?”

“Why, that the name of the priest I let out of Silas’s mouse-trap, and who would go home with me for the night, and asked such lots of questions.”

“Indeed? And when was this?”

“Just a few days before Silas came back from the country, paid my wages, and give me the sack so shabby.”

“I do not understand you. What do you mean by Silas’s mouse-trap?”

“I’ll tell you all that some other time. It’s too long for now.”

“Was the confessor long with you?”

“All one night and next day, and he promised to come back in less than a week; but I bolted afore then, and have never seen him since.”

“Why did you avoid him?”

“Well, you see, he wanted me to join him in some plot to unmask old Silas, and go to a convent with him somewhere down away about Norfolk I think.”

“Ha! indeed? Norfolk?” exclaimed Francis with some keen interest. “Did he say anything more?”

“He only let fall bits like, nothing reg’lar right on. He was too cute for that. Not that I should ‘a minded unearthing old Silas, the murdering cheat, but I didn’t much like working for a priest, especially again a woman, and a young swell as was a going to or had married her, and so I hooked it,” replied Josh, with a knowing wink.

“Good heavens! this information is inestimable. Oh! Josh, you know not the value of the clue you have so accidentally afforded me.”

“Why, what on earth have you got to do with that white-choker core of a priest? Josh inquired, with remarkable interest.

“Simply, Josh, that the gentleman you call a young swell is my master, Mr. D’Arcy Egerton, and the young lady is his wife, and who, because she was a very rich heiress, her uncle, Sir Richard Castleton—”

“Castleton? That’s the name of the owner of the house where I was to live as a spy,” interrupted the other.

“No doubt. But listen to the end of my statement. This lady the priests meant to make a nun, and force her to take the veil, that they and her uncle might share her fortune. To save her from this fate, which she abhorred, my young master carried her away from the convent where they had secreted her, and the next day were married at Bath. I, who had been with Mr. D’Arcy in all his adventures, giving her away at the altar.”

“Oh! that was a plucky trick. Took her away from under their noses? I should ‘a liked to have had a share in that spree. It was jolly.” And Josh rubbed his hands with glee at the idea of the adventure. “And you got clean off, and bamboozled the priests? Oh! my! Jolly, wasn’t it?”

“The prize was too valuable to lose without a desperate attempt at rescue, so the priests thought that if they could only get the nun, as they called her, back, they’d terrify her into taking the veil, and break her spirit by telling her her lover was either dead or false.”

“Oh! the willins! But they didn’t hurt her, though? They couldn’t take her when she was married? Eh?”

“Unfortunately, they did. My master had been married about a month, and the two, as happy as the day, were travelling over the west of England, when one afternoon they went out for a stroll in the green lanes. They hadn’t been gone above an hour, when I saw Father Belville, the confessor of Sir Richard’s family, and another priest enter a post-chaise, draw down the blinds, and start off in the direction the young couple had so lately taken.”

“Didn’t you suspect what they was up to?” inquired Josh, with considerable interest.

“I did. I knew there was mischief on foot, so, getting two or three of the grooms and ostlers to accompany me, we started to find the lovers. After near an hour’s wandering up and down the country lanes we came at last suddenly on my master’s body, in a pool of blood.”

“Dead?”

“No. The ball had glanced off his temple, and only stunned him, though the blood he had lost made his case very serious. We took him to the inn, and in about ten days he was declared out of danger.”

“And the lady, his wife?” demanded Josh eagerly.

“Was gone, lost, carried off. The two priests, with five or six ruffians, had rushed upon them, and after a terrible struggle, carried the lady Blanche to a post-chaise, and when her husband was rushing after his wife, fired a pistol at him, and that as all Mr. D’Arcy could tell of the matter.”

“Blanche? Blanche? I’ve heard that name afore,” mused Josh. “Well, and what did your gov’nor do when he come to?” he asked, still deeply interested in the narration.

“As soon as he was able to leave his bed Mr. D’Arcy set out for Abbey Grange—why do you start? Have you ever heard of that name before?”

“I should think so; but spin away.”

“He set out for Abbey Grange,” Francis resumed, “the seat of her uncle, Sir Richard Castleton to tell him they were married, and demand back his wife, and from that time I’ve never seen or heard of my master.”

“They’ve gone and done it, sure as eggs is eggs,” ejaculated his hearer. “They’ve done it.”

“Done what?”

“Done for him, killed him. Oh! they don’t stand at trifles like that, I tell you.”

“No, I don’t think they would go to that extremity; but they might imprison him in some of the vaults, either in the house or monastery.”

“Didn’t you make no inquiries?”

“Everywhere. I called on Sir Richard, by order of my master’s family, but he declared he knew nothing of his niece or her Protestant husband—said, with apparent truth, that Mr. Egerton had called upon him, and when he said he had not heard of his niece since her elopement from the convent Mr. D’Arcy left him, with the determination of setting out for Italy, to see if she had been carried abroad.”

“Gammon!”

“Of course, for Mr. D’Arcy would never have left England without letting me know of his intentions; besides, nearly all his funds were with me. No, Josh, it is a deep-laid scheme. They have first secured the wife, and have now kidnapped and imprisoned the husband, for fear he should expose them; but I will discover and rescue my master, if I spend the next ten years of my life in the search, and you—you must assist me.”

“Right you are. I’m in for that game,” replied Josh, with hearty good will. “I ain’t very bright, but I know a dodge or two, and could play the part of a priest quite nobby. But hold hard a minute. This smooth-spoken priest I helped told me, if Blanche is the name of Mr. D’Arcy’s wife, that she was down in Norfolk, but where I don’t know; but no matter, we’ll find.”

“I know the house,” replied Francis. “It is doubtless the same from which we carried her away to be married.”

“Like enough; but the worst of it is, that sinner of a priest is sweet on her himself, and I was to help him carry her away, or do something. But never you fear. We’ll find both husband and wife, and I’ll engage we’ll jine them agin, in spite of all the confessors in creation Oh! this will be jolly fun. Hush! No it can’t—yes—oh! crikey! Hold hard,” cried Josh, as he suddenly thrust his companion back on the seat, and eagerly protruded his head to listen.

“What do you mean?” cried Francis in a whisper, when he had in some degree recovered from the surprise he felt at being so forcibly pressed back with one hand, as Josh with the other carefully pulled aside a small portion of the curtain that shut in their box, and, in a crouching position, peered with great interest and excitement into the open space between the two rows of boxes.

“What is it?” repeated Francis.

“Hush! and listen,” replied Josh, in the same almost inaudible whisper, pressing his hand on Francis’s body more forcibly, as an admonition for perfect silence. “It’s the old ferret himself.”

“Who?”

“Silas, my governor. My, what a thundering cheat!” he added, removing his head for a moment, to give expression to his amazement.

“Impossible,” muttered Francis, as he noiselessly placed himself in an easier attitude along the seat.

“Is it? Just you listen.”

“Oh! is this the young lady that can answer my question?” inquired a tall stately personage, dressed in top-coat and leggings, whom Josh’s quick eyes, and sharper ears, had at once detected as his quondam employer, Silas Morphey, the crook’d-back money-lender and accountant. “I presume you—” Silas continued, as the young woman he had been referred to on first entering descended the step from the back room and approached. The female, however, with a stronger regard to habits of business than to forms of courtesy, answered the half-expressed question by running over, with extraordinary volubility, the bill of fare.

“Tea, coffee, chops, steaks, *am, errings, heggs, weal-pie*, toast muffins, and sassengers, vichever you likes, sir, *heggs noo-laid*, shrimps, and cowcubmers.” And having, with tender solicitude, aspirated her h’s where they had no business to be, and, with impartial justice, suppressed them when they should have been sounded, left the visitor to digest her batter of viands, and, turning her head towards the emporium in the rear, continued—

“One tea, two bread and butters, one shrimps for No. 4.” Then, coming back to her former starting point, she recognised the stranger, and, thinking he must have made up his mind by this time, remarked, “Did you say tea or coffee, sir, and what would you like to *heat*, sir?”

“You mistake. I merely wish to ask you a question,” replied Silas, with a smile, meant to be gracious, but which fell with a wintry influence on that lady’s mercenary imagination, as she replied—

“Well, sir? Yes, sir. You—”

“It’s coming now,” whispered Josh.

“I have been told that you can inform me of the address of a young man of the name of Josiah Whistler,” observed Silas in the blandest accents.

“What the dickens does he want with me?” muttered Josh. “What’s his little game now I wonder? Here’s a go!”

“Never heard the name, haven’t been here long, and master ain’t in.”

“Not heard the name? Why they told me he had all his meals here.”

“Not as I know of. Miss Tapponden, do you know any person of the name of Josiah Whisperer, as in the *abit* of coming here?” asked the girl, addressing the other waitress.

“Never heard of such a one.”

“I said Whistler,” retorted Silas, rather tartly.

“All the same; we don’t know nothing of such a person,” replied the lady addressed

“Will you ask your master when he returns, for this young man’s address, and say I will call for it in a few days? You can say,” he added with a benevolent smile, “that an intimate friend of his lamented and estimable father has something to communicate of the utmost advantage to him.”

“I’ll put it down on the slate, sir,” and, Suiting the action to the world, the girl turned and wrote Josiah’s name in full on the obverse side of this general day-book.

“Say, too, if you place, that a *dear friend* of his father’s has just arrived from Australia with the father’s *long-lost will*. Good afternoon, young ladies. You will please remember, a *friend* of his father’s, the will, Australia. Good bye.” And, with a courteous elevation of his hat, Mr. Silas Morpew bowed himself gracefully out of the shop.

For more than a minute after his departure Josh supported his body against the partition with one hand while he gazed with a stupefied expression into his companion’s face. At length, giving a prolonged whistle through his teeth, he ejaculated the brief sentence—

“Well I’m blowed!” when, as if literally blown out of all reliance and energy, he dropped listlessly on the bench near the feet of his reclining friend.

“Well, my! if I aint reg’lar cleared out, stumped up, and sold!”

“Sold? What do you mean?” inquired his companion.

“Deceived, mystified, and regular astounded,” replied Josh, in answer to his friend’s question.

“By whom, and what?”

“Why, by old Silas. First of all, I can’t make out the meaning of his pretending to be hunchbacked and twisted when at the office, and then coming here as upright and tall as a grenadier, with no more the matter with him than with me. This is the second time I’ve found him out. It licks me, quite.”

“Depend upon it, he’s playing some deep and villainous game, and, perhaps, has two or three make-ups.”

“That’s it, I’ll be bound, and he’s playing a double game with the confessor and this Sir Richard. Yes, I begin to see a meaning now for his wanting to put the priest out of the way.” And, sitting close to his companion, Josh recounted his previous meeting with Silas in the coffee-house, and his adventure, when, in attempting to satisfy his curiosity as to what was in Silas’s private office, he fell into the vault; his discovery of the confessor, with the history, as far as he knew it himself, of the rat-eaten body of the priest or monk; of his escape through the trap, and of all that passed subsequently till the confessor left Josh’s lodgings to return to his own residence.

“That old hypocritical Silas, I’ll be bound, is playing a foul game, putting on one face and then another. And Josh struck the table with a vicious energy, expressive of the indignation he felt at his late master’s duplicity.

“What do you suppose he could want with you to-day?”

“What a lucky thing that Tom Bates was out, and these new hands didn’t know my name!” remarked Josh, as he nodded in the direction of the young women in the rear of the shop.

“What did he want? Why’s he come across the confessor just when he thought he was snugly done for and making a supper for the rats in his villainous cellar below his office.”

“Well, suppose he did, what then?”

“Why, then he’d know he couldn’t have been let out without hands, and he’d most naterally think it was me as did it, and my, if he did, wouldn’t he swear to draw my teeth for me, and wouldn’t he keep his word if he could only lag me, crikey!”

“Which you don’t mean to let him do, I know.”

“Not jolly well likely,” Josh replied, with a gratified chuckle. In a moment, however, he changed the tone and expression of his voice, as he exclaimed, “ Stop; I think I’ve het the precious nail we wants, and right slap on the head, too.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“The trick how to find out your gov’nor, what’s become of the lady, and the best way of getting both on ‘em out of the fists of them murdering Jesuit priests,” cried his companion, with great glee.

“How so?”

“I’ll leave word where I hang out, pretend not to know Silas, unless he comes the hunchback dodge, see the confessor, too, and find out what they want—for that chaff about a *will* and my father is all reg’lar gammon, a sprat to catch a herring—and if I can’t get ont of him what we wants to know that way I’ll get a place at the convent as a porter or lay brother, and work the oracle that fashion. I can do the priest trick as well as the best, you shall see. Don’t you fear. We’ll jolly soon—”

“Hush!” exclaimed Francis. “Yonder comes the old fox back again,” and he pointed to where Silas could be seen through the window crossing the street.

“Crikey! So he does. Now for it. You keep close till I give the signal up in the corner. Here’s a jolly lark.”

“I forgot to leave my address. Perhaps you will give this card to Mr. Whistler,” observed Silas, as he stopped in front of Josh’s box, and held out a card to the girl.

At the same moment his former clerk looked up, and with a steady gaze of inquiry encountered the money-lender’s piercing but somewhat startled scrutiny.

Satisfied by Josh’s stolid look that his identity was not recognised, Silas took a step forward, when the youth, looking over his box, called to the waitress to bring him the last number of the *Tyburn Journal*.

“This card if you please, for Mr. Josiah Whistler,” Silas repeated, with a distinct emphasis and a courteous bow, but all the time furtively looking through the corner of his eye towards the occupant of the box.

“Is it Josh the gentleman wants—Josh as used to bunk at No. 7, in the alley?” inquired the individual himself, with admirable indifference.

“I’m sure I can’t tell,” replied the girl tartly. “I’ve never heard the name since I came here.”

“Perhaps you know the individual, sir, and could oblige me by his address,” interrupted Silas courteously.

“Well, yes. I do happen to know him,” replied Josh carelessly. “But since his last gov’nor gin him the sack he don’t hang out in no special place. He’s here one day, there another.”

“Perhaps you could find him for me.”

“Well, perhaps I might. Is it perticklar? Does old crooked skinflint want his valuable services again?”

“I really cannot tell, not knowing the person you refer to,” replied Silas, with an unpleasant light in his eye, and a momentary tinge on his cheek.

“Well, if it ain’t anything to do with that old swindle I’ve heard him speak of, I’ll take care that he shall have your card to-morrow.”

“Then I couldn’t see him to-night?”

“It ain’t likely. Is this where he’s to come to?” he inquired, as he took the card from the girl’s hand. “That’s all square. I’ll let him have it. Now then, that *Tyburn Journal*.” And, spreading out the sensational serial, Josh was soon apparently engaged in the thrilling subject before him.

Silas eyed his clerk for a moment with a singular expression of mingled resentment and satisfaction, and muttering—

“Thank you, sir. Good afternoon,” turned and quitted the shop, peering, however, for some time through the window, with his eyes bent on Josh. That worthy, however, squaring his arms on the table in such a manner as to encompass his periodical, appeared so deeply absorbed in its contents that Silas, perfectly satisfied he had been undiscovered, at length gave up his post of spy, and, chuckling to himself, “I have the young imp now in my grasp,” quitted the shop and the neighbourhood.

Josh, having given a few *sotto voce* directions to his companion without lifting his head from his periodical, at length rose, stretched himself, and in the most easy and natural manner possible sauntered alone out of the coffee-shop.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOSH IN A NEW CAPACITY—D’ARCY FOUND.

“This is a great privilege I am allowing you. Mind your feet, for the damp and fen make the worn steps very slippery. There now. Carefully. So we’ve reached the bottom,” mumbled a weak infirm old man, dressed in a long sorge tunic reaching almost to the heels, and showing beneath his nether garments, consisting of breeches, coarse-ribbed stockings, and clouted shoes.

The lay ecclesiastic, for such he evidently appeared, was both bent with age and enfeebled by habitual palsy, for his hand shook with a constant tremor as he held down a stable lantern to light his companion down the steep and tortuous steps they were descending, and which, white with slime, they were slippery and dangerous to the unpracticed visitor.

“That’s all right,” he continued, as his companion, encumbered with a heavy-laded basket, reached the bottom of the stairs, and stood in the gloomy subterranean passage into which they had entered. “Now we’ll rest a moment, and, as my asthma always affects me when I come into these cold foul passages, I’ll take a drop of my medicine. Sit down, my son Josiah, sit down, and I’ll let you into a little secret.”

Setting down his large basket, the lay brother, who had carried it thus far, seated himself on one side of his feet, took the other half of the extemporized seat.

Pulling the woolen bonnet he wore to cover his bald head further over his ears, to protect him from this damp, he drew a good-sized bottle from a secret recess in his bagerdine, and unceremoniously placed the neck in his mouth, and contrived to gurgle down a considerable quantity of its contents before he removed it, when, with a sigh of calm contentment, he rested the bottle on his knee.

“It is necessary, my son, necessary at my time of life. I couldn’t live without my *physic*,” he said, looking apologetically at his bottle. “It’s excellent medicine. Try it, Josiah, you are welcome to a dose, try it.”

There was something so evidently restorative in the effect of the medicine on the old man, and so agreeable in the smell of the compound offered him, that Brother Josiah took the proffered physic without any reluctance, and, regardless of the amount of the dose, imbibed so freely that this invalid, knowing the danger of excess, hastily re-possessed himself of his mixture, and, with a mild reproof on the consequence of too much of a new medicine, carefully replaced it in its secret receptacle.

“Oh! that’s jolly stunning,” ejaculated the lay youth, smack his lips. “And I didn’t know it was your asthmatical cordial, I could have sworn it was the best old Tom,” And he cast a mischievous leer at the lay father by his side.

“Well, my son Josiah, well, it has something of a ginny flavor; but that, my doctor tells me, proceeds from the juniper in it for the lumbago.”

“Right as a trivet. That’s the ticket.”

“Josiah, you have been now three months a member of our holy and pious brotherhood, and I am sorry to say you have not yet entirely left off your worldly and profane mode of expression.”

“I was such a hawful hypocrite and willin afore I come into this blessed and virtuous institution that please, Father Towler, make some allowance for a core what *was* bad, and is a trying, under your edifying allspices, to get over his vicious ways. I won’t do it no more please, father.”

“Well, well, I will pass it over.”

“Didn’t you say something, Father Towler,” continued Josh, in his most insinuating tones—for the reader has no doubt discovered, by his language, that Brother Josiah, though habited like a lay associate of the priesthood, was our old friend Josh Whistler, whom, in our last chapter, but three months previous, we left with his relative Francis at a coffee-house near Clement’s Inn—“something,” he went on blandly, “about a secret you would tell me?”

“A secret, my son?” he exclaimed nervously, looking round him. “I, a secret—poor Father Towler, the sexton and doorkeeper, my son? A secret in a society where I have lived, man and youth, for fifty years? No, no, no, you mistake.”

Josh, whose wits were much sharper than his tongue, and who was resolved to take advantage of the present opportunity, which might never occur again, seized the lantern, and, suddenly holding it before the sexton’s face, exclaimed, with looks of well-assumed anxiety and distress—

“Yes, I was sure of it, this damp vault is affecting your lungs. I see it in the dark mouth round your lips.”

“Do you think so, my son?” inquired the old man, nervously.

“Certain. You had better take another dose of medicine, just as a precaution.”

“Well, I think I will follow your advice, for, to say the truth, I don’t feel quite right.”

“Take a full dose, a *full dose*, Father Towler, when you are about it. A stitch in time, you know, saves nine.”

The effect of this second and larger potation was precisely what the artful Josh expected. It removed all embargo from the sexton’s tongue, strengthened the old man’s nerves, and lifted any cloud of obscurity that might have existed on his mind.

“You told me it was a great privilege to bring me down here,” began Josh, cleverly leading the old sexton to the point he wanted.

“So I did,” replied Towler, in a whisper, as if in those low, dark, unhealthy regions there could be any risk of eavesdroppers.

“So I did; for I am the only person who is ever permitted to visit those underground cells. I am responsible to the prior for their secrecy and safety.”

“Secrecy?” exclaimed Josh, as if amazed at the necessity of such a precaution.

“Yes, yes, yes. But you see I get weaker every day, and when I told the prior that I could not bake the bread, do my duty down here, and my regular work, unless I had some help, he let me hire you to assist me in the bakehouse; so I never allowed you to know anything about the vaults.”

“About the vaults?”

“Yes; don’t speak so loud. But the basket is so heavy, and my palsy and asthma got worse and gets worse every day, and you were such a good, handy, harmless youth, with no curiosity about you, I thought I might trust you, and let you carry the basket for me.”

“Oh! you may trust *me*, Father Towler. I am no prying inquisitive feller, like some coves I knows, always wanting to find out secrets—no such thing. But why do you bring all this wittles and drink and grub down here?”

“I’ll tell you. It’s to feed the refractory brothers.”

“The what?”

“Those monks or brothers who are being punished for disobeying the orders of their superior.”

“Prisoners, you mean. And they are locked up in some of these cells?”

“Exactly, and I go round every two days with their food.”

“Poor devils, all alone and in the dark?”

“Hush! If you wouldn’t like to share their fate keep a close tongue in your head.”

“Oh! never fear. I’m as close as a church. But there’s bread and meat, for some, bread and cheese for others, and only plain bread for one. Why’s that?”

“According to their offenses, my son, so is their food administered to them in captivity.”

“But there’s a difference even in dry bread, father, for three times a week I make two little loves of common meal. Are those all for one man?”

“Quite right, all for one person.”

“Half a pound of black bread and a quart of water a day. My! he must ha’ been an out-and-out wicked priest, that chap, to deserve such short commons. Oh! wouldn’t it bring me to repentance!”

“Hush! hush! He wasn’t a priest at all—nothing to do with the holy brotherhood,” whispered the old man.

“You don’t say that? Who is he then? But there, you see,” he added, with well-assumed indifference and simplicity, “what’s the use telling me? I knows nobody, and have no interest in the matter. But it ain’t a monk or a priest?”

“No, Josiah, no. I may tell *you*, for you are such a steady well-conducted youth. The fact is—listen,” and he placed his mouth to his companion’s ear. “It’s a young heretic.”

“You don’t say so? An abominable heretic? And what’s he been up to?”

“Stealing a nun.”

“Whew! and Josh gave a long low whistle, but whether of surprise or joy of the news it would have been difficult to determine. “Why that’s downright bigamy, ain’t it?”

“No; but it’s death, by the law of the Church,” Towler replied, in a mysterious whisper.

“Is it, though? And who is the howdacious monster who’d corrupt a holy nun?” Josh inquired, with pious indignation.

“His name’s—hush! you’ll be secret?—Egerton; and, what makes the matter worse, he’s gone and married her.”

“You don’t say that?”

“He has, though.”

“Well, I should like to see that nun. He’s a curiosity in willainy, he is. Where is he?”

“I daren’t let you see him. I only see him myself nows and thens, but you’ll see his cell presently.”

“And what’s become of the nun?” demanded Josh, with ill-concealed eagerness.

“How should I know? Taken to some convent, likely.”

“The one joining the monkery.”

“Don’t say *monkery*. It’s disrespectful to the holy fathers. It’s called an oratory, or religious institution. She *might* be next door, but I can’t tell.”

“Do so many of the fathers and brothers die every year that they keep a sexton always on?” added the inquisitive Josh.

“I do duty for both houses, the nuns and priests.”

“Will you let me help you in the next grave you make? I suppose the men go off the hook fastest?”

“Oh! dear no. I’ve far more work in the women’s acre than in the men’s,” replied the old brother, growing communicative as the conversation turned out a favourite and to him remunerative branch of business.

“How is that?” Josh asked, as they both rose from their basket-seat.

“Sin—angels, venial babes, my son. The offspring of nun mothers. But you will know more of this hereafter. Come. Let us distribute food to the refractory and sinful. Ah! Josiah, the world is full of sin and iniquity. How blessed, then, are we, who live in the perpetual odour of sanctity and goodness!”

And, hobbling down the low vaulted passage with the lantern, followed by Josh with the basket, the old man stopped before a low narrow door with a small wicket, and knocked. Then, referring to a paper in his hand, cried out—

“Brother *thirty-seven*, come to the wicket for the refection the prior has graciously sent you, his reverence, in consideration of your inexperience, remitting of your penance seven *orcdos*, nine *l’aters*, and seventeen *aves* a day.”

At this point the inmate of the cell opened the wicket in his door, and took in the allotted food, which the sexton removed from Josh’s basket. Then, bringing a pitcher to the wooden window, the old man carefully willed it with water from a jar in the basket.

In the same manner, without a word of comment from the prisoners, they passed along to some five or six cells.

“But who is this last jar of water and these two loaves of black bread for, Father Towler?” inquired Josh, as the sexton still led the way down the vaulted passage, far past the cells they had visited.

“You will see directly,” he replied. Then, as he suddenly turned down an alley to the left added in a whisper, looking over his shoulder, “For the heretic.”

Cautiously descending a flight of some eight or ten steps, cut out of the hard earth, they came to a short narrow passage, terminated by a door, the cell to which it gave access being hewn out of the hard earth, twenty feet below the basement of the building.

“Hush!” said the old man, coming close to Josh, and whispering in his ear. “I heard the sub-prior say that this passage is directly under the nun’s cells in the convent.”

“The convent on the opposite side of the road?” demanded Josh in surprise.

“Yes, but come.”

“Who’s there?” cried a loud manly voice, so near and abruptly that Josh, under the momentary surprise, staggered back against the wall. Looking up, however, he saw a thin hollow face peering through the wicket in the cell door. The voice, though sharp, was youthful, but the features, although handsome, might have belonged to a man of fifty, such inroads had hunger and suffering worked on their once chaste beauty.

“Two of you! Are you come to murder me? Well, better so then to be thus slowly starved to death.” Exclaimed D’Arcy in defiant accents; but suddenly, seeing something in Josh’s face, or in his mysterious gestures, as Towler was fumbling in his basket, and he was unable to make a perfect sign, he cried, “If you are not a murderer, and would deserve the reward of all good men, go to my uncle, Mr. Egerton, of the Beeches—tell him where—nephew—*five* thousand pounds reward. Eger—ton—Beech—”

The disjointed speech was caused by the sudden and vociferous noise made by the old sexton, who as if bent on drowning the prisoner’s words, or rendering the harangue unintelligible, kept up a loud and shouting accompaniment. D’Arcy, however, interpreting a gesture from Josh, suddenly held his peace, and the sexton as suddenly found himself bellowing for no earthly purpose.

“Hold your tongue, you mad fool,” he cried at length, when able to speak without fear of the prisoner’s interruptions. “A confirmed lunatic, Josiah—a raving madman. He’ll offer you a million next time he sees you, if you will only listen to him—a *million* only to take a message next door. You’ve only to look at his eyes to—But where is his medical allowance of food?” and he began again to grope in the basket for the two small loaves which, with a quart of water, constituted his food for two days.

“Oh! here it is. Here’s the bread and bottle,” he continued, flashing out the articles from the bottom of the basket, and, turning to the wicket, he presented each item to the miserable captive.

But though Egerton took his scanty allowance with evident avidity, he kept his eyes steadily fixed on the features and the by-play of Josh, who, behind the sexton’s back was pretending to rend with his teeth and his fingers the imaginary loaves, Josh indicating by his pantomimic gestures that the prisoner was to look into the centre of each loaf, and then, by a rapid motion of his fingers, signifying the action of sawing and that in two days more he was to do the same.

The lay brother was so intent on his telegraphic and friendly message as to be quite unconscious that the prisoner’s earnest and steady gaze at his performance had attracted the notice of the sexton as he emptied his supply of water into the captive’s jar; and believing there must be something unusual to cause so calm and intelligent a look on that lately excited face, suddenly turned round, and, before Josh was aware that his manipulations were the object of such close scrutiny, the sexton, staring the youth full in the face, asked, with evident surprise—

“Why, why, my son Josiah, what is it you are about? What are you making signals to—to the madman for? I thought I could trust you, but—”

“Ah! ‘tis no use, Father Towler, not a bit. He’s a gone coon. I see you was quite right,” replied Josh, with perfect composure, continuing his signals with undisturbed equanimity. “I’ve bin a trying him all the secret signs of the masons, but it ain’t no go, he don’t answer to one on ‘em; and, what’s more, I thinks now, as you says, he’s a spooney, cracked here,” touching his head, “got a tile off. Now just look here, he can’t even answer this,” and, clenching all but two fingers, he held his hand up in triumph before both the sexton and the captive. The latter, thoroughly understanding that a friend was near him, and resolved to carry out the scheme, whatever it was, and assist his unknown sympathizer, after staring with stolid wonder at Josh’s signals, broke out into an inane laugh, making a grotesque grimace.

So admirably had Master Whistler performed his part, and so natural seemed the conduct of the prisoner, that any suspicion the sexton might at first have felt as to Josh’s good intentions was entirely banished, and, turning to his companion as he prepared to depart, he said—

“You are right, Josh, and cleverer than I took you for. If he had any sense left he’d have tried to answer your signals. Come along, my son, for I feel the damp working into my bones. I’ll tell you a secret,” he mumbled, as, taking up the lantern, he led the way out of the passage, followed by Josh, who, as he raised his basket, contrived to give the forlorn captive one cheering sign of help and friendshi9p.

“That heretic has gone mad at last in earnest,” whispered the old man in his companion’s ear.

“What do you mean, father?”

“That solitude, grief, and short rations have driven him out of his mind. He was all right enough two days ago; now you see, he’s gibbering mad.”

“Then he wasn’t mad afore?”

“No, no, my son. I only said so, but now there’s no doubt of it.”

“Where does this door lead to?” inquired Josh, when the two had nearly reached the centre of the underground passages. “It seems to have got a pass key lock, like a street door,” he continued, as his quick eye, discovered the door artfully concealed in an angle of the vaulted passage.

“Come here, I’ll show you,” replied the old man, with a faint chuckle, as he fumbled in his pocket for a fist key, which inserting in the lock the door opened noiselessly, revealing a narrow passage running far away at a sharp incline, the floor and sides being kept dry and warm by thick matting.

“What place is this?” asked Josh, with his customary inquisitiveness.

“Paradise walk,” replied the old man, with a singular twinkling of the eye and a pleased guggling laugh.

“Does it lead to—”

“Hush! Not a word. Most of the fathers have a key, to enable them to visit their penitents without the scandal of being seen to go too often to the convent. And then, you see, sometimes—you understand, *sometimes*—the nuns want shricing in a hurry at night. He! he! he!”

“Yes, yes, I see,” replied his companion, with a significant wink of the eye. “But *you* are not a confessor, father. Why have you got a key?”

“True, Josiah, but I have sometimes to go to the cloisters, and I always go this way. And *sometimes*—you understand, only *sometimes*—I lend my key to some of the younger fathers, when they are seized with a sudden fit of zeal, and a wish to confess sinners.”

“Doing a bit o’ holy on their own hook. I see it all. Oh! that’s stunning.”

“Don’t be profane, Josiah, They are all good pious fathers, all.”

“Oh! I ain’t disrespectful. But what’s up in the cloisters for you?”

“I goes there on professional duty, to bury the dead. But I’ll tell you another time; we must now return to the refectory.” And, locking the door, the two proceeded on their way, traversing many passages and ascending more than one flight of stairs before an iron door gave them access into the back of the small chapel.

As they crossed the nave a monk rose hastily from before a shrine, where he had been offering up his prayers, and, slipping a small dark lantern into the pocket of his gown, made a sign to the sexton as he passed.

The old man, in his anxiety to reply expeditiously, dropped the key of the secret door on the matting, which the monk, quicker than the sexton, saw and instantly picked up, and as he hastened to the back of the chapel the others quitted it by the transept.

CHAPTER XVII.

JOSH APPEARS IN A NEW CHARACTER—THE CLOISTERS OF THE CONVENT—THE NUNS’ GRAVEYARD—THE CHILD’S QUARTER—BURYING THE NUNS’ BABIES—TOWLER ALARMED IN HIS CONSCIENCE.

Josh, who, by a great assumption of pity, had induced his new patron, the confessor, to obtain for him the office of lay brother, or assistant to Father Towler, the convent sexton and baker, having an ulterior objective in view—namely, the liberation of the half-starved D’Arcy Egerton, and of his young and beautiful wife—had hitherto, worked with all his will and wits to effect that object; but so closely was he watched, and so vigilant was the guard kept on both husband and wife, that he had been unable hitherto to do more than enclose a few tools in the bread that twice a week was made for the prisoners, with an occasional note, and the ground plan of the building, suggesting the best means for poor Egerton to effect his escape.

These, with directions, should he be able to work his way out, where, on certain nights of each week, he would find his sincere well-wisher and friend Josiah Whistler, was all he could at present effect.

More than this it was out of Josh’s power to achieve, and he could only vaguely understand by the captive’s pantomimic motions, when with Towler he made the state rounds, that D’Arcy was secretly availing himself of the implements so surreptitiously supplied to him.

About a fortnight subsequent to Josh’s first meeting with the imprisoned husband old Towler had descended to the vaults alone, according to custom, to take close and ocular cognizance of the captives under his charge, when, to his consternation and terror, he discovered Egerton’s cell empty, a long subterranean hold leading to the outside of the building, and the prisoner gone.

An old nail, which it was presumed he had taken from the door of his cell, was the only implement left to throw a light on what appeared so mysterious a disappearance.

Afraid to apprise the brotherhood of the flight of their victim, the old man resolved to keep his own counsel for the present, and, with the exception of Josiah, make the face of the escape a profound secret.

On the second night after the flight of the prisoner Josh met Egerton and his valet Frank in the neighborhood of the convent and oratory, when, the former rushing forward—

“Worthy lad! I owe you my life,” exclaimed D’Arcy Warmly grasping the hand of the *oi-devant* office-boy; “but it is merely half preserved while my beloved Blanche is pining away in

those loathsome cells. Aid me to rescue her from this living death, and half my fortune shall willingly be yours.”

“I’ll do all I can, Mr. Egerton, and, as I hear every day something more, and am more trusted in the house, I feel certain that I shall soon find out where she—your lady—is confined. Then we can plan how to carry her off.”

“This suspense is agony.”

“It must be endured, sir. I know Josh, and can trust him, and feel certain he wants no bribe to make him vigilant,” observed Frank respectfully.

“Oh! bribe be bothered. Jigger it! I don’t want money, nor no sich thing, and please don’t speak that way no more. But if I’m to be of any use to you I must out now, for they watches me jest like a cat does a mouse.”

“And when, my lad, shall we see you again?” asked D’Arcy despondingly.

“One of you be at the low wall that looks from the lane every other night for about an hour, between nine and ten o’clock, and I’ll put over a letter if there is anything to say or I want to see you; so now please go, and remember, every *second night*.”

“Josh, I have something of importance to tell you,” Frank observed, as they were about to part. “I have found out your father.”

“Oh! bother. Let him keep out o’ my reach,” was the indignant and somewhat undutiful reply.

“And he is in the oratory with you.”

“Whew! Oh! the devil! Well let him look out for a hidin’, that’s all. I ain’t forgot my poor mother, and may I rot—”

“Hush! hush! my lad. Remember he is still your father,” interrupted D’Arcy kindly.

“You don’t know. Your mother as loved you didn’t drownd herself along o’ your father’s willainy. Gid bye.” And, dashing a tear from his eyes, Josh darted off, and by circuitous paths reached the oratory.

“Josiah, my son, you have been a member of the holy brotherhood for more than six months,” observed old Towler, some time after, as he began to trim the wick of his large stable lantern.

“Nine months come Monday, Father Towler,” replied the youth respectfully. “Nine months of blessed peace and pious enjoyment I have passed in your instructive society,” replied the precocious youth, with well-assumed humility.

“Is it so long? Well, well, Josiah, I have been so pleased with your conduct that I am going to-night to impart to you a great secret. You can keep a secret, Josiah?”

“I’ll put it under the best Bramah lock, and keep it as invisibile as if shut in a patent conscience iron safe. You never knowed me peach.”

“No, no, my son, never. I told you once, my son, that we had cases of—of what we call sin-angels—little—”

“I know. Little kids as die young,” interrupted Josh hastily.

“Baby angels, my son—babies of wicked nuns before they took the vows.”

“Oh! I see. And there’s one on ‘em now a croaker—that is, I don’t mean,” corrected Josh, “For to say croaker, but only a croakin’ in the throat—hoppin’ cough like.”

“Perhaps as. Well, we’ve got to bury some tonight. So I’ll carry the lantern, and you can bring the implements. This is the way to the cloisters, my son.”

Taking up the lantern, the old man led the way across several devious passages, to a small square, completely shot in on three sides by the convent, and on the fourth by a stone wall.

Proceeding to a spot underneath the wall, the old man, after examining every inch of this ground for some yards, set down the lantern, and, seating himself on an old basket, said—

“Ay, I think this spot will do. I don’t think it has been opened these ten years. Dig here, my son.”

“But I don’t see no corpses,” replied Josh, as he took up a matlock.

“The sin-offerings will appear all in proper time. About three feet square, Josiah, and six feet deep, for we may want it again soon—soon.”

“But how many is there?” asked Josh, resting in this task when about two feet deep.

“On on a little deeper, and I’ll tell you.”

“What the devil—no, no, I don’t mean that. *O mea culpa! mea maxima culpa!*” Josh suddenly exclaimed, dropping his mattock, and thumping his breast with his fist, and whining out his sinful forgetfulness in a manner that might have moved the heart of an anchorite.

“When shall I ever get out of my sinful and carnal thoughts and works? Oh! dear Father Towler, save me from my wicked youth,” he cried imploringly. “Oh! I’m so wicked.”

“Well, well, my son, we can’t all be saints in a day. It takes time, Josiah, it takes time. What were you going to say?”

“Oh! what—what is the reason of there being so many small stones in this ground? I’m blessed if I ain’t shoveled up five or six spadefuls since I last spoke, and here’s a lot more still. Oh! I’m blowed!”

“That’ll do, my son, that’s deep enough. Stones? He! he! he!” replied the old man, with an asthmatic laugh. “Look at them, Josiah. Take the lantern. Look, examine them. Pretty little pebbles, ain’t they? He! he! he!”

“Well I’m jiggered!” exclaimed the lay brother, taking up a handful of the light rattling articles he had supposed to be stones. Oh! I’m blessed if they ain’t little bones, baby bones, as I’m a sinner! Toes and fingers and sich like! Oh! this is awful.”

“The penalty of sin, my son. This is where we bury the old Adam, Josiah.”

“And the young Eves, I should think” he retorted.

“Perhaps. Now follow me, and we’ll bring out the sin-offerings.”

“Didn’t you tell me that the nun what was made to take the veil yesterday had had one of them sin offerings,” Josh inquired in a whisper, as he followed the sexton into the underground body of the building.

“Hush! Yes, but be quiet. Here we are.”

Towler stopped before a grated window, on which he gave a peculiar signal.

Directly afterward a wooden shutter was drawn aside, and an austere-looking nun pushed out a small narrow deal box.

“What name?” said Towler, as he took the small package and placed it on the ground.

“Sister Clementia,” was the curt reply.

“And this one? receiving another box..”

“Sister Agnes—the heretic Blanche; and this is the third—Sister Ursula.” And as she thrust out the third box she closed the shutter, and excluded the little light that had for a few moments illumined the gloomy passage.

Struck by the names of Agnes and Blanche, Josh had closely observed where Towler set the several boxes, and before the light was quite extinguished secured the article, as the sexton, picking up the other two, led the way back to the cloisters.

Whether there was anything particular in the shape or contents of the box Josh Carried we are unable to say, but daring his walk down the passages he repeatedly placed the box to his

ear, and at last, taking out a pocket knife, he hastily prized up a part of the lid, and with a pencil he wrote on it—

“Mr. E.—Your child. Its mother is Agnes—Blanche.”

By the time Josh had completed his little bit of business they had again reached the margin of the grave. Placing his two boxers on the ground, Towler, turning his back to Josh, got down with some difficulty into the grave, when he called to his companion to hand him in the packages.

Taking advantage of Towler’s bent position, Josh made a hasty step towards the wall, and placed the box he held upon its flat summit. Then, quickly gathering up the other two before the old man had raised himself to an upright position, Josh contrived to slip into the grave, and, falling on the old man’s back, bent him double, scatter at the same time the two small coffins on either side of him.

Profuse in his apologies, and energetic in the denunciation of his own stupidity, Josh helped the old man to his former seat on the basket, and asked permission to perform his duty of burying the dead.

“I am too much shaken, my son, by that unfortunate fall of yours to do the duty myself. You may therefore do it for me, Josiah. But—but I only see *two* cases, and there were *three*,” Towler replied uneasily.

“Don’t stir, father,” he said, as the other was about to rise. “The other fell into the grave, and is here at my feet. That’s all right, snug and comfortable,” Josh added, pretending to place the abstracted coffin in the bottom of the grave and the others on the top; then, shoveling in the heap of baby bones and the sand, finally trampled down the ground and made it appear as if it had been unbroken for years.

Taking his arm, and gently leading him into the house, Josh cast a furtive glance at the wall, from whence the box had been already removed.

“Josiah, my son,” murmured the old man as they reached the sexton’s room, “did you hear anything unusual, any unearthly noise, while you were burying the—the—you know?”

“Well, now you remind me, Father Towler, I could almost have sworn I heard a low mewing cry come out o’ the box I had, just for all the world like the cry of a new-born—”

“No, father, no. Did you? And what were they like?”

“It has shaken my nerves. It was so sudden and so startling that—the saints be good to me!—I thought it was a judgment.”

“A judgment? Oh! that’s awful. Was it a spirit, do you think, father?” Josh asked, with well-assumed dread.

“Hush! and listen. At first there was a low grating noise just overhead, as if something was being drawn along the wall.”

“Save us! Along the wall?”

“Then I thought I heard a voice say, ‘The villains are at their work again. The hoary monster who has done the night’s work shall answer it before God to-morrow.’”

“Done what? And who could be meant by ‘hoary monster’?” inquired Josh, as the old man wiped the perspiration from his pallid features.

“The voice, like an imprisoned spirit, seemed to come through the stone wall, Josiah, it was so deep and ghost-like.”

“Father Gerald wishes to speak with Brother Josiah in the refectory,” said one of the attendant fathers of the order, as he noiselessly entered the room, and by his presence effectually prevented any further conversation between the sexton and his *protégé*.

“Father Gerald?” asked Josh, when again alone with the sexton. “Ain’t that the awful pious monk, Father Towler?”

“Yes, my son, the same. But before you go give me my bottle of asthmatical medicine, like a good youth. Those mysterious sounds have quite upset me. Thank you, my son,” he added, as Josh placed his bottle of cordial comfort in his hand.

“Now go, my son, and don’t keep the good father waiting.”

“What the plague can that old swindle Silas want with me?” muttered Josh as he left the sexton. “He thinks I don’t know him. Oh! no, I don’t. No-hows—not at all. Only—valker. If I don’t find out all about these rascally priests, and where poor Miss Blanche is, afore I cuts my lucky out o’ this murderin’ hole, why then my name’s not what it is. Now, then, to gammon old swindle, alias Silas Morphew, alias Father Gerald, alias the monk, alias the good humbug, and alas old Nick hisself.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATHER GERALD TAKES JOSH INTO HIS CONFIDENCE.

“You traced him home as far as Malta, you say. Well?” impatiently demanded the monk, of Father Gerald, as he walked up and down the large refectory in eager conversation with the agent or spy he retained in his service, and whom we have before introduced to the reader.

“Yes, and there all direct clue of him ends,” replied the other; “but there is certain proof that he subsequently came to England, as a man in every respect answering to his description was living for some years in London with a young woman of respectable family, whom he had seduced.”

“The sins of the father shall be visited on the children to the third and fourth generation,” muttered the monk abstractedly. “Well?”

“Growing weary of the girl, he eventually deserted her in sickness and poverty.”

“Good, good. He saw his mistake, and wanted to shake off the clog of a low connection. Yes, go on. He was very handsome, you say?”

“A remarkably fine young man. The poor deserted girl, in a fit of—”

“Hang the girl!—I mean, never mind the poor thing just now. And my son, you say, after the woman—well?” he demanded nervously.

“Was never heard of more. That’s about thirteen years ago.”

“Never heard of more?” the monk said despondingly. “O God! O God! Shall I never, never, never find my dear boy? Never have the luxury of making him rich and great?”

Then, springing on his visitor and grasping this threadbare coat, he ejaculated hoarsely—

“But he is not a priest? You can assure me of that? Not that? Say sweep, costermonger, no matter how low, so he is not in the—the Church.”

“I cannot say. I have striven hard to find out and trace his career, but what became of him after leaving his vic—”

“Well, well. I know. Go on.”

“I have been unable to find; but this I have learnt, that a cross in *red ink* is tattooed on his breast, with the letters “E.C.” on the top.”

“And that is all. A red cross and E.C. I shall remember,” he said musingly. “Now about Sir Richard. Where is he? What of him?”

“He gives out that, robbed by a sharper of the title deeds of the estate and several thousand pounds of ready money, he cannot meet his liabilities, and has consequently fled the country, has been outlawed, and is now living in hiding in some obscure village in France.”

“There let him rot. Oh! if I could only find my son!” he mused sadly.

“Have you any further orders?”

“Not to-night. Leave me. To-morrow I shall want you.”

“All is now in my hands,” he soliloquized when left alone. “A princely fortune, all the documents here to prove my identity with the lost reprobate of fifty years ago. All are here,” as he drew forth a large pocket-book, and patted it complacently. “All is sunshine and prosperity. The idiot Sir Richard is crushed and will commit suicide, or die of spleen. The girl is safe, and *to-morrow will be still safer*, and I only want two things to complete my felicity—the death of this hated and hateful confessor, and the recovery of my son. Who’s there?” he ejaculated in alarm as his eye fell upon Josh, who at the further end of the room had been for some time listening and observing the excited monk.

“Your reverence said you wished to see me,” replied Josh, bending lowly to the reverend father.

“True, worthy youth. I took a great interest in you when you first entered the oratory, and have constantly stood your friend with the prior. But you have got a powerful enemy here, my son, a foe that works night and day to ruin you.”

“Then I will pray for him, and that his heart may be softened towards a poor orphan,” replied Josh meekly. “What’s the snake up to now?” he muttered *sotto voce*.

“What are you so meek as to pray for the wretch who would cut your throat?”

“We are taught to pray for our enemies.”

“Our spiritual, but not our temporal enemies,” was the specious reply. “Now, though I am a perfect stranger to you, I have, from the good report I have received of you, have been your friend, and, hitherto saved you from the malice of your vindictive foe.”

“It were very good of your reverence, and more nor my uncivil behaviour to a holy man like you deserved, I’m sure.”

“You mistake, my son, for though I’ve had my eyes on you ever since you joined the brotherhood, you have never seen me before to show me any incivility.”

“Oh! yes, yer reverence, we’ve met afore.”

“Never, my son, never. You—you are mistaken, I am sure,” stammered the monk uneasily. “Hang the fellow!” he said aside. “I thought I had escaped his scrutiny.”

“Yes, we have father, once, only once.”

“Oh! only once?” he said, greatly relieved. “And where was that, pray? At the house of some worthy Christian, perhaps?”

“Oh! no, it warn’t. It were at the house of one of the greatest hypocrites and swindlers as ever sopped out o’ the gibbet—a little crooked hunchbacked cheat I once had the misfortune to be with.”

“Indeed? And you saw me in such a reprobate’s society?” inquired the other, delighted to find, by the unreserved confession of his late clerk, that his real identity was undiscovered, though the sketch of his own character was far from complimentary.

“Who was he, pray/”

“Oh! the old thief’s name was Silas Morphew, and you called one day to see him, but lucky for you he warn’t in, and I took sich a likin’ to your innocent face that I said I didn’t think he’d come back for a week.”

“Indeed, how kind of you! I do remember now calling on the man you mention. But it is of yourself I want to speak, my son.”

“Thank yer reverence.”

“There is a man in this brotherhood who for some reason or other has taken a mortal hatred to you.”

“Has he, though?”

“He has, and he will take the first opportunity to get rid of you. Fortunately I have discovered his diabolical plan, and have sent for you to put you on your guard.”

“Have ye now? Well, that’s very kind o’ yer reverence.”

“Come this way, and when I have shown you the awful death that was intended for you I don’t think even your beautiful and forgiving nature will ever again pray for your murderer. I know that old and holy as I am reported to be myself, I could not do it.”

And leading the way into a retired corridor that led from the library to the chapel, and was now completely deserted, he stopped about the centre, immediately beneath the lamp that, hanging from the arched ceiling, lighted the long gallery.

“About fifty feet below this passage,” resumed the monk, “there flows a deep sewer, the drain of both houses. It is alive with ruts, and once a month at spring tide, the sluicies are opened, when the refuse runs away, the returning tide wishing out the sewer. Do you understand?”

Josh, who was thinking of Silas’ mousetrap near Clement’s Inn, shuddered as he answered with a stammer—

“Well—yes. I think I does.”

“Good. You will comprehend, then, that if a person—I only say—if a young man should drop by *accident* into that sewer, why before the filthy liquid could suffocate him his body would be torn into shreds by myriads of rats, who are so ravenous that they devour each other.”

“Oh! oh! oh!” ejaculated Josh, backing close to the wall.

“When the traps are opened to throw down dust and refuse their cries, yells, and snaggings are enough to make your blood cold.”

“But ain’t there no way out? He gasped, now almost livid with fear.

“None, my son, none. The mouth of the sewer is closed with a grating, and if a half-devoured wretch should reach it the incoming tide would drown him.”

“But no one could do sich a thing as drop a cove as never did him no harm into sich a livin’ purgatory as that.”

“There, my poor confiding son, you are mistaken. This man who has vowed your death has already arranged your tomb, and calculated on the torments of your living death; and here is your grave.”

“Oh! my, this awful! And who is the feller?” inquired Josh, now really frightened.

“There are no names given in the house, as you know, among the professed brothers. I can, therefore, only tell you his number.”

“And that is—”

“Well, No. 39. Now tell me, would you not rather a man should stab you to death in the open day than be so inhumanly murdered—torn to pieces by ravenous rats?”

“Oh! ay, fifty times.”

“Now, then, tell me, my son, could you pray for such a monster as the one I tell you means to get rid of you in this manner, and would, unless I put you on your guard?”

“Yes, I’ll pray for him with a halter. Oh! I won’t forget 39.”

“That’s right. Now I’ll tell you a secret. I hate him as much as you do, for I know he means to kill me also. But look here, first, and satisfy yourself of the truth of what I have said.”

And, putting his hand behind one of the pilasters, the monk drew forth a small winch, and, showing it to Josh, placed himself in the centre of the floor under the lamp, and jumped up on the floor to show how firm all was below his feet.

He then took the astonished Josh close up to the pilaster, and showing him a small concealed aperture, fitted in the key, turned it round a few times, and then resumed—

“The supporting girders are now removed. Anyone coming along this passage—as he means to send you—must sink into all the horror I have told you.”

“And would a man’s weight sink it?” asked Josh, as the frightful scene at the office recurred in his mind.

“Sink it?” replied the monk contemptuously. “A mouse’s weight would send it down. See!”

And throwing an apple on the floor, two flaps fell noiselessly, exposing an immense rift in the flooring.

The dark void, the noisome odour, the splash, the squeaking scream of savage vermin far down, all these, soon, heard, and smelt, conveyed so vivid an impression on the excited imagination of the half-terrified *ci-devant* clerk that he shrank close to the wall.

Having carefully watched the impression produced on his companion, the monk, reversing the order of the winding, soon brought back the flaps of the trapdoor, and made the planking appear again level and strong.

“Now, my son, I want you, if you wish to escape this horrid fate of the rats, and turn the tables on your would-be murderer, to come here to-morrow night about twelve o’clock, and do what you saw me do just now. See, here is the key, and this is the hold.”

“But why don’t you do it, father?” asked Josh, all his cunning and suspicion returning now that the trap was closed. “Especially as he wants to turn you off.”

“My vows, my dear son, forbid me. I dare not break my vows, as he is a brother of the order. I may circumvent him, but must not myself perform the act of retribution and justice. So you come to-morrow at twelve o’clock and lower the girders; and now, my son, look for speedy promotion; for you shall be immediately advanced to a lucrative post.”

And thus—on the one hand, the monk chuckling at not only having escaped detection from his late clerk, but in getting a willing tool to prepare the means to rid him of a hated spy and rival, while, on the other side, Josh wrapped in a brown study on the past villainy and future crime of the monk—the two men, so opposed in age, feeling, and integrity, took their several ways and parted for the night. Silas to the library to cogitate over the realisation of his long-plotted scheme of vengeance so nearly consummated, and Josh to his cell, where, before a small looking-glass, and with a parcel of clothes packed up in a dark corner, we must for the present leave him, while we hasten to explain the reason for his spending so much time in the mysteries of the toilette.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRIEST AND THE NUN—THE CONFESSOR’S MID-NIGHT VISIT—THE APPARITION OF THE NUN.

“Blanche! Do you sleep? Awake. ‘Tis I, your friend, your sworn defender,” whispered the confessor, bending over the couch of the deadly pale but still lovely form of the persecuted victim.

“Fear naught. I am your slave, beloved one,” he continued, as, by the aid of his secret light, his sensual eyes devoured the glorious beauties of that half-revealed and heaving bust.

“Blanche, beloved Blanche—for whose possession I stake life and immortal bliss—‘tis I, your lover, who calls you back to joy and hope.”

“Save me, holy Mother! Save me, all ye saints in heaven?” cried Blanche, with a shriek of sudden terror, as she sprang up in bed, and, with instinctive modesty drew closer round her neck the night gear, that, in her disturbed slumber, has broken from its fastenings, and gazed wildly round her dreary cell.

“Who’s there?” she muttered tremulously, trying to pierce the pitchy darkness that surrounded her. “Jesu! Maria!” she gasped. “I thought, in my troubled dream, that I had been given up to misery unutterable, and that the arch-enemy of man, Satan, in the guise and voice of that loathed being, was bending over me to seize my soul and give me over to eternal perdition. O Madonna! Mother of heaven and all holy saints, take pity on a poor broken-hearted suppliant!”

And the poor girl clasped her hands, beat her head, and, between sobs and tears, strove to frame a prayer for mercy and protection.

“Oh! it seemed so true,” she suddenly broke out, as if her fear of danger destroyed all power of praying, “so vivid, and so awfully real! But it was only a dream.”

“Not so, my daughter; it was no dream, but a reality,” cried the confessor, suddenly turning on the full glare of his lamp, and in an instant making the subterranean cell as bright as day.

At the burst of light, the voice, and the abrupt appearance of the priest within a few paces of her bed the distracted Blanche, as if blinded by the vivid glare, gave an involuntary shriek, spread her hands before her face, and cowering backwards, shudderingly strove to avoid the presence and shut out the voice of her hated persecutor.

“Blanche, listen to me. This is absolute folly. You cannot pass through the cold wall to which you press your soft and sentient frame—that matchless handiwork of Heaven, meant but for man’s delight and ecstasy. You cannot escape from this cell or from my power. Lay, then, aside this show of repugnant loathing, and listen, for the last time, to my vows of love, my eternal—”

“Oh! spare me—spare me that!” she sobbed imploringly. “You profane my ears with vows that revolt my soul.”

“I will say nothing further, then, upon my devoted love for you, but leave time and a ceaseless worship to plead my cause, and work its gradual way upon that now obdurate heart.”

“Leave me. Begone. What, can I not allowed the privacy of this miserable cell? May I not claim the sanctuary of my chamber, but in my very sleep I am to be insulted by rude eyes and ruffian visits? Oh! man, man, how must you be fallen, thus, Tarquin-like, to violate the privacy of a helpless woman!”

“Hear me, Blanche, and by my eternal salvation I swear—”

“Oh! sir, to you, a professing minister of Heaven, my griefs, my sorrows, and my bitter bereavements should at leave have made me holy—a wretched being to pity and respect, and not to outrage and insult.”

“By the deep love—”

“Peace! And hence with your profaning vows. If all my earthly ties are severed—if all happiness is debarred to me in life—I will, at least, live pure and holy in the sight of God,” she exclaimed, with more than usual energy, meeting, for the first time, the priest’s gloating glances with a look of scorn and hatred.

“Perish the thought of those charms being sacrificed to the cloister. No, Blanche, in a sunnier clime than this there is a long life of bliss and measureless joy in store for you—a paradise of all the heart can sight for when once beyond these hated walls.”

“Can you give me back my murdered husband? Can you restore to these longing arms my dead baby? Can you undo the misery you have inflicted, or get back from Heaven the extorted vows that only yesterday made me the bride of the Church? No! Leave me, fiend! tempter! Begone!”

“I cannot bring from their mouldering graves the loathsome mortalities you name; but only promise to be mine, and the very night, nay, this hour, you shall quit for ever these hated walls. The Pope shall grant you a solution, and release from every extorted vow; and, with a princely fortune, and this devoted heart to love and shield you, a world of untold happiness shall burst even with the next dawn upon your future life,” he cried passionately.

And if I refuse?” she said, with studied calmness.

“You will not refuse. Think, Blanche. For God’s sake, pause and think.”

“I have thought What is the alternative?”

“Force me not to tell it. Blanche. You little know the danger that hangs above your head, the horrors yet in store for you, if you reject my offer. Now I am power to save you; to-morrow—nay, when this night is past—no human hand can pluck you from the doom already pronounced upon your head.”

“The alternative?” she demanded sternly.

“Death!”

“Blessed tidings! Go. You have my answer. I welcome it as a dear friend that leads me to my true husband.”

“Blanche! Woman! By Heaven I swear I will not part with you. If you are obstinate to perish, I am equally resolute to possess.”

“Remove your hand. Your touch contaminates,” Cried Blanche, struggling to shake off the confessor’s grasp.

“Life, fortune, salvation are all now secondary to this mastering impulse. Silence! Cries or shrieks are all in vain within this womb of earth. Here had you the lungs of Stentor you would not be heard in the upper world.”

“I will be free, villain priest. What would you do?” gasped Blanche, still struggling, and almost powerless from terror.

“The doors are all closed and locked that lead from the convent, and were you buried in your coffin ten feet under earth you would have as much chance of being heard as in this subterranean cell. Silence!”

“Mercy! mercy!”

“you are mine, and, as you have sealed your own doom, neither tears, shrieks, nor importunities shall save you. ‘Tis vain. You are in my power. Peace!”

“Mercy!” she faintly murmured.

“Ask it of Heaven, but not from me. Down! She is mine at last.”

“Forbear!”

“Merciful God!” ejaculated the confessor, as, relinquishing the insensible Blanche, he staggered back, his hair bristling up, and every feature distorted with terror, as he reeled to the door of the cell, against which he supported his trembling body while nun, stood between the bed and the wall, with one hand raised to heaven, and the other pointing reproachfully at the insensible Blanche, that rose suddenly before him.

“Is this an illusion of the mind? Am I awake, or is it madness? What seek you with me now, Louise?” he said, in a low scarce audible whisper, as his dilated eyes riveted themselves on the pale and immovable figure of the nun, which, as if cut out of marble, preserved the same rigid outline.

“Leave me,” at length he gasped. “Your death is not on my soul. I returned to save you, but you had fled, and carried to perdition yourself and child. Leave me, spirit of evil. Though weighted down by guilt, thy murder is not upon my heart. Wherefore art thou here? Holy Mother! do not approach!” he cried in a voice cracked and hoarse, as he threw up his arms and extended his hands as if to repel the mysterious and awful-looking figure that so suddenly and unaccountably started in to sight, and now, slowly dropping the raised arms, seemed noiselessly to be gliding round the bed of the insensible victim.

“Back!” he shrieked in utter terror. “Be your intents blessed or cursed—come you from heaven or hell—I care not, but in mercy come not near me. It will drive me mad. Back! Mad! Jesu! Maria! it comes! Maria! God! It is gliding here, and will clasp me in its mouldering arms. Away! away!” And, turning wildly round, the confessor tore open the door, and fled down the vaulted passages, wakening a hundred echoes from his distracted cries.

“A man at midnight in the cell of a professed nun? Hideous depravity!” exclaimed the lady abbess, as, followed by a body guard of five or six austere nuns bearing flambeaux, she approached the open door of the cell, as the confessor was seen hastening from the spot in an opposite direction.

“Abandoned woman!” she continued, entering the cell and confronting the roused and astonished Blanche, who, seated on the bed, gazed bewildered on the group who filled up all the available limits of her narrow chamber.

“Who was that craven lover whom our presence seems to have scared out of both courage and prudence, for I perceive he has left his burglar’s lantern behind him? Tell me, wanton, who was your paramour? His name?” demanded the abbess, after pointing to the small lantern that had been left on the table. confessor Father Belville,” replied Blanche indignantly.

“Infamous slander! What, the most devout and holy priest in the oratory visit a nun at midnight? Fie, audacious and brazen wanton! vile calumniator! Where is that infamous confidant, the nun I saw here on entering the cell? She shall be made to speak the truth. Place her before me,” imperiously cried the abbess, turning haughtily round.

“Holy Mother!” ejaculated the oldest and most forbidding of the attendant nuns, looking searchingly round the cell, “she was there when we entered. the door has not been opened since, and yet she is nowhere to be seen. She has mysteriously vanished from before your eyes.”

“What, sister, was it? inquired the superior.

“I did not observe her features minutely, but it appeared like a novice, or a—stranger,” she added with hesitation, devoutly crossing herself.

“*It*, you superstitious fool? Think you, then, it was a spectre?” contemptuously demanded the superior.

“The saints shield us! It looked like one,” was the frightened response, as the ascetic old nun made repeated signs of the cross on her forehead, her breast, and in the air around the spot

where the supposed phantom had been seen and lost, a ceremony instantly repeated by every other member of that religious body guard.

Casting a look of withering contempt on her satellites, the lady abbess turned once more to the amazed and trembling Blanche.

“To-morrow a synod of holy men and women will be convened to inquire into these unparalleled enormities and deadly scandals on our blessed Church. Fall on your eyes and invoke the pardon of Heaven for your sins.”

“What sins, mother, have I committed?” importuned Blanche.

“Peace! Bandy not words with me. What sins, wanton? But no matter. Ask for pardon, and pray the holy Virgin to give you strength to bear the cross of punishment, for it will be one to tax your utmost sufferance. Down to your knees, pray, supplicate, implore for heavenly mercy, for all human sympathy is closed against you. To your prayers—to your prayers!”

And sweeping out of the cell, the abbess saw its door duly fastened, and with her guard of virgin.....

CHAPTER XX.

JOSH SOLILOQUISES, AND IS INTERRUPTED IN THE COURSE OF HIS REFLECTIONS.

“I wouldn’t have beleft it of you, Josh; no, that I wouldn’t, after the bringin’ up you’ve had. To think to go and do sich a spoony trick, vhy, I’m reg’lar ashamed of you!” soliloquized Master Josiah Whistler, when, some two hours later in the night, or rather earlier in the morning, he leant against a tall crucifix that, fixed in the ground, stood at the upper end of the refectory as a sort of finger-post to heaven, or remembrance to hungry monks when mortifying their flesh on the steaming joints and unctuous morsels before them.

“Only three hours ago I says to the young man, says I, ‘I’ve diskivered it at last; leastways, I am nigh sure I has, and in half a hour shall be sartin sure o’ hookin’ the ticket; and then to-morrer you come here and we’ll have her out as clean as a whistle, with the blessin’s o’ friends, and the unlimited happiness of the rescued captives, and cetera, and cetera.’ And now, like a precious idiot, I’ve been and gone and put my foot in it, made a mull o’ the whole, and lost my way.” And here, overcome by his grief, or carried beyond due bounds by his self-reproach or impatience, he most irreverently and spitefully kicked, shook, and impiously swore at the blessed symbol against which he was leaning.

“It ain’t no use kicking that post,” he remarked savagely, as he grazed his shin in the attempt at an extra malicious kick. “I could give myself a jolly good hiding for being such a flat. Here have I been,” resumed, falling into his old train of soliloquy, “moonin’ about for six or eight months, first to find out where the husband was cribbed up, and then, after never so long a lookin’ for the poor gal they’ve been and made a nun, and just as I found her, as I thought I should, in comes that iley hypocritical priest as I helped out o’ Silas’s trap, the mealy-mouthed Father Belville. He! he! he! I don’t wonder at their callin’ him father if he’s in the habot o’ walkin’ into nuns’ bedrooms at twelve o’clock o’ night. Oh! No, it ain’t at all difficult to understand. He! he! he!”

And Josh, forgetting his late annoyance, began to chuckle and laugh with inward satisfaction.

“And I begin to see,” he resumed, “how it is that there are so many wicked nuns in the world, and such lots o’ them sin-angels, or sin-offerings, as that cunning old fox Father Towler calls the bastardy hact, and gives sich work in the cloisters o’ dark nights. But that ain’t it,” he

suddenly exclaimed, breaking off from his former strain of levity, and resuming his self-castigation.

“To think that just as I found her out, got snug into her berth, and was about to take her slap out to bliss at once—just as I was a goin’ to do the amable sister dodge, and fold her up to my maternal buzzum, I’m blessed if that thunderin’ priest didn’t night spifficate me with his cussed bull’s-eye, and come crawlin’ up just for all the world like the serpent a circumwending Eve; and then, when I had most choked off the beggar, who took me for one o’ his wictims, in comes old Mother Belzebug and her lifeguards of unnatural and frowsy virginity. Oh! warn’t that a shindy! How I managed to get out o’ the lot, who, like the confessor, took me for a ghost, I’m blessed if I knows. But the cuss of it is that in cutting away to awayd detection I’m blowed if I haven’t gone and lost the way to the cell, and though I’ll find it out, it’ll take me some days afore I can do it, and there’ll be that poor feller her husband awaiting for me to-night to let him in to her, or her out to him; and then, like an everlastin’ stooped ass, I shall be obleeged to say I’ve made a reg’lar mull of it, and ain’t deservin’ o’ my character as one of old Silas’s pupils.”

“Yes, you are worthier of a higher character than that,” a low clear voice said in his ear, as a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“O Lord, Saint Anthony, and Saint Bridget! *Ave Maria! Credo in Deo! Mea culpa! Pater noster, qui es—*” Josh exclaimed in a sudden burst of terror, as he dropped on his knees, and, encircling the upright limb of the crucifix he had so lately visited with such rude evidences of his impiety, began in his alarm to mutter over all the odds and ends of the prayers he had heard repeated in and out of chapel.

“Leave off this mummary, cease this idle beating of your breast, and rise and answer me,” exclaimed the confessor in low but emphatic accents, as Josh, still impressed by the fear of having been overheard by the superior or some of the officers of the establishment, persisted in his scraps of prayers, till; chancing to look up, and noting the features of the speaker, he immediately discontinued his pretended supplications, and, obeying the confessor’s order, slowly rose and respectfully awaited the father’s further orders.

“Listen to me,” resumed the confessor. “Your prying curiosity once led you into an imminent danger, which, however, eventuated in your rendering me a most important service.”

“The cellar in old Silas’s—”

“Peace, and hear me. I am not in the habit of rewarding those who do me a service. Such men I generally regard as mortal enemies, and it is my custom to remove them—do you understand me?—to sweep them out of my path.”

And he made a contemptuous motion with his hand, that in its significance had a most alarming effect on the amazed youth before him, who had a greater dread of the holy father’s pantomimic gestures than of his words, they were so characteristic of the man, remorseless, bold, and secret.

“In your case a tone of voice, a look of the eye, reminded me of one once—no matter. For that I spared you, offered you gold, would have rewarded you.”

“I didn’t want yer money, for I didn’t do nothin’,” Interrupted Josh, in a half dogged, half spiteful tone.

“You refused all recompense,” the confessor resumed, unheeding the other’s remark, “and in my folly or my weakness I let you live—spared you.”

Josh was on the point of returning his thanks for the favour in a manner more forcible than complimentary, but the raised hand of the imperious father checked the retort on his lips.

“When I had forgotten your existence you appeared again, asked me to use my influence to get you a place among the brotherhood. Your reasons for a monastic life you said were qualms of conscience for a past career of sin.”

“That was exactly—”

“A lie, gross and palpable. Peace. No perjury. I saw the falsehood at once and suspected your motive—nay, I knew it from the first.”

At this positive assertion Josh opened his mouth and eyes to their fullest extent, and stared in real alarm on the cold immovable countenance of the priest.

What! He thought, had he been for all these months under the espionage of this crafty unfeeling confessor, and had all his effort to succor virtue in distress and make two suffering and persecuted lovers happy been counteracted and foiled by the cunning of this heartless priest?

Father Belville either pretended not to see or did not notice his hearer’s consternation, for he proceeded to say—

“Yes, I understood your motive. It was natural you should desire to watch the crafty old fox to whose cave of death you had found, like me, the clue.”

Josh breathed again. Even the confessor, then, was at fault; but, knowing the value of keeping up the deception, he appeared still to suffer from the discovery of his secret.

“So, having you here, I thought to make you doubly useful, first by giving you every opportunity of finding out your man, and, when the time arrived, of getting you to watch him *for me*. That time has come at last, and you must within the next twenty hours aid me to circumvent this spy and hypocrite.”

“Who is—”

“The monk, Father Gerald.”

“Oh! yes. And I am to—”

“In the first place, you must procure me a mask, and then as much as possible watch him during the day, telling me what rooms he visits and the numbers of the brotherhood with whom he converses. You know that each brother has a number on his shoulder, like this,” and the father turned his right arm to the light, revealing two small red figures worked into the cloth.

Josh, who had advanced a step, the better to observe the numerals, staggered back amazed and aghast as his eye encountered the well-remembered No. 39.

Here was the man he had been warned against as his mortal enemy (and who was trying hard to murder him, as he was told) plotting, no doubt, to dispose of his friendly adviser the monk.

“Is that all your reverence—to get you a mask and keep watch on old—Father Gerald, I mean?” inquired Josh, a little mystified.

“No,” was the abrupt reply. “You must procure one for yourself, and two cloaks, or dominoes, one for each of us.”

“Us?” stammered Josh. “Am I to go with you?”

“Undoubtedly. You will, furthermore, purchase a small adze, or pick, to use, if necessary, in breaking through a wall. You hear me?”

“Ye-es, yes. Oh! yes,” rousing himself from his amazement to reply in haste.

“Our purpose will also require the use of a dark lantern. I have mislaid my own, curses on my folly!” muttered the priest.

“Is that all, yer reverence?”

“One thing more. Order a post-chaise and four to be in waiting in the lane behind the convent at one o’clock, and give the postillions strict orders not to move or take any direction but

from yourself. You will accompany us. Now leave me. Here is money to pay for the articles needed, and do not neglect to be at my cell at eleven o'clock to-night."

"At eleven o'clock?"

"Yes. Report to me what you have seen or observed of Father Gerald, and then you will know what further I have for you to perform. Now go."

As soon as Josh had quitted the deserted refectory the confessor took up a lighted lamp, his features still pale from his late excitement, and stood for a moment as if irresolute whether to go or stay. Then, suddenly dropping into a chair, he buried his face in his hands and remained for some moments motionless.

"Can I have been made the dupe of my own credulous fancy? No, no, it was too real, too awful in its semblance of the dead for any practice," he muttered, gazing abstractedly on the opposite wall. "The voice, too, sounded from beyond the grave. Why is it that this low-bred ignorant cub, this prying petting clerk, should for ever remind me of that gentle dark-eyed girl whose only sin was her love for me. Away, haunting dreams! There's profanation in the very thought that links her with a thing so base. Away! and let me think."

And, springing up, the confessor took a few rapid strides across the spacious hall.

"To-night will close this scene of passion and importunity, and success crown with triumph my meditated scheme. Yes, at last she shall and must be mine. Every step in my plan is now matured, and ere the dawn of another day, snatched from the jaws of death, I shall fold her in my arms and bear her far away to life and love. Stay, there is one thing more," he mused, as he took up his lamp.

"I must visit the monk's cell and possess myself of that pocket-book, so full of schemes, plunder, and secrets. '*In that book,*' writes my unknown adviser, '*you will find affluence, and the clue to your own history.*' THE DESTINY OF YOUR LIFE DEPENDS UPON THAT BOOK.' Fear not, anonymous friend," the priest added, with a bitter smile, as he folded up a letter he had referred to. "I will have it, though I tear it from his hear."

And, with this vindictive threat, the confessor strode from the apartment, to find, in a few hours' sleep, rest and strength for the fatigues of the coming morrow.

CHAPTER XIX.

BURYING ALIVE—THE MYSTERIES OF THE CRYPT.

The following day proved a busy one for Josh Whistler, so many messages had to be sent, both from the oratory and the convent; and, as he was the chief and most active of the lay brothers, such commissions as required secrecy and dispatch usually fell to his lot to execute.

Besides, Josh had much to do on his own hook, as that young gentleman somewhat vulgarly but tersely called transacting a little private business on his own account.

Much reflection on the various events of the last twenty-four hours convinced the shrewd Master Josh that things were culminating to a crisis, which would be reached that night when the post-chaise and four received its intended occupants. So as soon as he had executed all the confessor's orders, and run on behalf of the two establishments innumerable messages, and all of a most extraordinary kind, he sallied out once more to find his old friend and relative Frank, Mr. D'Arcy Egerton's faithful valet, and impart to him, for the benefit of his master, certain surmises of his own, winding up with strict injunctions to be in waiting at a certain place and time that night.

Josh had scarcely regained the oratory when he was pounced on by old Towler, who, seizing his arm, dragged him in the most mysterious manner into the sexton's sanctum.

"What's up now, father?" demanded Josh, in anything but a respectful tone. "Why I'm blessed if you don't look as if you'd gone and done summat awful. You ain't been out on the loose and forgot yourself?"

"Hush! hush! my dear son. I have an important secret to tell you—a family secret," replied the old man.

"Oh crikey! You ain't goin' for to say—" and here poor Josh's spirits failed him, as he thought of the father he was to find in that house; and the idea flashed through his mind that Towler was the heartless parent whose desertion had caused the death of his mother. "Not that—that—I—you—" he hesitated.

"Say what. Josh, you've been drinking," replied the old man severely.

"Oh! that be blowed. Only you skeer a fellow so, and I ain't the top-sawyer to-day, not the cheese by no account; but fire away."

"I'm sorry to find you relapsing into your vicious style of conversation, Josh, but I'll forgive it to-night. You must know, then, there's been a synod held to-day in the chapel."

"I've heard of a sly vink, but never of a sly nod, afore."

"You mistake, Josh. A synod is a solemn meeting of the old heads of the Church to try a wicked sister—a nun."

"No! is it, though?"

"Yes, and they *have* tried her, and our presence will be wanted at the funeral, Josh; but remember this is all an awful secret."

"Oh! then, she's off the book—dead?"

"Oh! yes, spiritually. She died yesterday."

"But ain't it jolly quick to tuck 'em in so soon?"

"No, my son. It is the custom in all religious houses to dispose of unholy vessels as quickly as possible. You will have to attend as a mute."

"When's the job to come off? I'm ready. I don't mind digging; it gives a feller a happetite for his grub."

"Put on your dress, then, and follow me. Here it is." And the sexton held up a garment that made Josh recoil in absolute terror.

"Oh! the Lord and the saints protect us! What's that?" he stammered, receding still further from the dreaded vestment.

"Don't be a fool, Josh, but put it on. See." And, gathering a similar garment up, he flung it over his head, protruded his arms through two sleeves, and stood before Josh a figure more ghastly than the youth's imagination had yet conceived of anything human.

A long black dress, reaching to the feet, with a headgear like a conical helmet with two holes for the eyes, was the hideous disguise in which the sexton had invested himself.

Gazing for a moment on the revolting figure before him; Josh made a merit of necessity, and, throwing the hateful thing over his head, was soon in a condition to take part in the coming ceremony.

Towler then lighted two flambeaux, and, giving one to his assistant, said—

"Now, whatever you see or hear, be sure you hold your tongue, Josh, for the ceremony of interring a wicked nun is a very imposing one. Come."

So admonished, Josh for a long time silently followed the sexton, taking the precaution, however, as they descended to the gloomy subterranean passages, to draw a line along the wall with a piece of chalk, provided for another purpose.

“This ain’t the way to the cloisters,” observed Josh, as they descended another flight and turned to the right.

“I know it,” was the curt reply.

The next minute they reached the circular extremity of a long vaulted passage, where two men, who had thrown off their dresses, with their torches stuck into the ground, were waiting.

Sounding the wall with a hammer, Towler stopped before a certain part and with a piece of chalk made a cross on the stones, and, turning to the two men, said, “Proceed.”

“What height and width?” demanded one of the men, in a savage tone.

“Six feet high and three wide.”

“But that’ll never hold a coffin, unless you stick it on its end,” observed Josh, astonished at the dimensions.

“Silence, my son, and help the work,” was the severe answer of the sexton.

Inserting their tools between the blocks of stone, the two men and Josh in a few minutes had removed a double row of stones, revealing a recess beyond like a small closet, just large enough to receive a coffin placed endways.

At this moment the sound of approaching footsteps caused them to desist, when, immediately after two mutes, dressed like Josh and the sexton, entered with flambeaux, then followed the monk, Father Gerald the confessor, some more priests, the lady abbess, and her body-guard of gram nuns, half dragging, half supporting—could Josh believe his eyes?—not a coffin or an uncovered corpse, but the pale and trembling form of the lovely Blanche.

“Why am I brought here?” exclaimed the unfortunate nun, looking wildly around her, and shuddering as her eyes encountered the hideous-looking mutes, who, with torches, stood like the ghastly familiars of the inquisition.

“What mean those frightful forms—that fearful—niche—this gloomy vault—and those masons with their tools?” she demanded, her voice each moment booming more tremulous with the alarm she felt invading her blood.

Then, as the group gathered round her, and entirely enclosed, as in a circle, she resumed—

“Oh! tell me, I implore you, why I am brought here! Oh! answer me, wherefore you bring me hither!” she cried, with beseeching earnestness, doubly terrified by the ominous looks that everywhere met her gaze, and by the frigid silence observed by all around.

“To atone for your sins,” replied the abbess, in a voice so cold and solemn that it fell on the ear of the trembling nun like the knell of death.

“Anywhere but here. This place terrifies me,” cried Blanche, with a quick shudder. “The damp strikes to my blood, and an icy trembling courses through my veins. I am weak still. Oh! pity me, and take me back either to the cell or the hospice. Have pity on me!” And she folded her hands in an appealing action to the superior, and then, crossing them on her bosom, stood in humble reverence before the abbess.

“Corrupt and sinful daughter, cease these vain and sinful repinings, and address the whole compass of your mind and heart to God, and think of your suffering soul. To your knees and pray,” replied the lady mother, in tones of freezing piety.

“Repent, daughter. Repent while time is yet offered you,” interposed the confessor sternly.

“Bethink thee, child of sin, how manifold are thy transgressions, and how brief are the moments yet left you for atonement,” observed Father Gerald, in those deep notes he could, at times, assume with such solemn effect.

“All is confusion. I do not understand,” cried Blanche, in utter bewilderment, gazing in blank amazement from speaker to speaker.

“You do not understand?” repeated the superior, with contemptuous sarcasm.

“No, nothing.”

“Not your sins?”

“No.”

“Holy Mother, hear not this sinful reprobate ejaculated the abbess, in pious horror, as she devoutly crossed herself. “Unhappy daughter, avaunt, away!”

“Do you deny those crimes committed against mother Church, and the holy sisterhood whose saintly rules you have so heinously violated?” demanded the monk. “Do you deny your sins? I repeat.”

“Ah! no; for before Heaven I am a poor weak guilty wretch, and, knowing all my unworthiness, night and morning put up my heartfelt prayers to God for pardon. But for the convent I acknowledge no sin, implied or committed, for I am here against my inclination and my will,” replied Blanche firmly.

“Peace, daughter,” interposed the confessor, with stern voice and knitted brows. “Peace, and do not mock your God, and slander us, his unworthy servants, by such prevarication. Fie! Peace!”

“Have you not openly violated the worship of the blessed saints and martyrs by repudiating all the prayers for their holy intercession?” demanded the monk.

“I only followed the dictates of my judgment by offering up my prayers to the throne of grace instead of the shrine of saints,” was the meek reply.

“Flat heresy! abhorrent sin! Away! Back, scoffer, back.”

“You have carried on unholy and carnal love in a house dedicated to chastity and God,” added the confessor.

“And, as a novice first, then as a professed bride of the Church, have broken convent rules, violated your vows of celibacy, and, to the perdition of your soul and the scandal of religion, fled the cloister and polluted it with sin,” added the superior, a hectic flush of horary dyeing her cheeks yellow as she referred to the deadly nature of the sin so slightly touched on.

“Answer the lady abbess,” exclaimed the monk, with haughty vehemence.

“If these are indeed, as you say, sins, then I have committed them,” Blanche replied, her eyes ever wandering, by a strange fascination, to the mutes, the watchful workmen, and that awful-looking rift in the wall.

“*If* they are sins?”

“Yes; if so, they you are all more responsible for them to Heaven than I am. And you, most of all,” she cried, with flashing eyes, as she pointed to the confessor.

“I, unhappy daughter?” replied Father Belville, assuming a look of pious amusement. “I, thou depraved and fallen nun?”

“Even you, for you forced me, against my will, and under a plea of restoring me to the world, to enter the cloister for a time; and when at last I discovered your infamous plots, and spurned your licentious passion, you vowed—”

“This to me, an ordained priest—to me, a man of spotless life,” exclaimed the confessor, with a face livid with rage and shame.

“You swore to keep me here for life, and make me sue to you for pity.”

“This is blasphemy to the Church and a scandal for its ordained ministers. Silence!”

“If I have sinned in breaking from my inhuman jailors Heaven will absolve me from that fault, for what I did was in obedience to one who had the right to direct me.”

“By whose direction, corrupt and wicked sinner?” demanded the abbess.

“By his whom I swore to obey till death—my husband’s.”

“We waste God’s blessed time in vain attempts to touch a heart so callous to good and lost in lustful crime. Proceed to judgment,” broke in the monk, in tones of vindictive passion. “And hark, the signal! The passing bell knolls for a parting soul.”

And he held up his hand with a sudden start as the deep throbbing stroke of the midnight bell fell on the ear, muffled by distance, while, at the same time, the voice of the far-off choir was heard, as it pealed through the chapel, corridors, and open vaults, rising and falling in solemn melody like a floating whisper, broken ever and anon by the dread note of the midnight knell.

At the first sound of that ominous bell the masons dropped their tools, fell on their knees, made the sign of the cross, and, with drooping heads and folded hands, muttered an *ave* or a *Pater* for the soul about to pass from earth.

Nor was the effect of that solemn chant and the monotonous beat on the bell less remarkable on the other parties, though different in its character. Abbess, priests, nuns, and mutes all crossed themselves with devout reverence, bowed the head, and bent the right knee.

On Blanche the sound of the far-off chorus and the trembling reverberance of the death-bell had a strange and paralyzing influence. Chilled as she was with the unwholesome atmosphere of the slimy crypt, those sounds shot an icy coldness to her heart, and imparted a vague horror to her mind. She felt her blood curdling in her veins, and her creeping flesh bedewed with a heavy moisture, as, with dilated eyes and parted lips, she turned her inquiring gaze alternately from one to another of the surrounding group.

With a desperate effort, Blanche at length threw off the crushing influence of the scene and its gloomy associations, and exclaimed—

“What does this mean? Why is that death-bell tolling? Why do the nuns chant the ritual for the dead? Why this gloomy vault? And, merciful God! why are you all here? Oh! speak to me.”

“To punish guilt! Proceed,” replied the monk, as he made a sign to the nuns behind the victim, when four of them immediately advanced, and placed themselves two on either side of her.

Two of these trim guards carried leather belts with buckles, to secure the limbs of the captive nun. A third had a long black veil over her arm, and the fourth held a crucifix.

Blanche cast a wild furtive glance on the tall grim sentinels beside her, and then, with a shriek of terror, darted forward, and, flinging herself at the feet of the impassive prioress, exclaimed—

“Oh! as you are a woman, and the appointed mother of this holy sisterhood, I implore you to tell me, what would you do with me?”

“Look for yourself. Can you not surmise?” replied the abbess, backing, with instinctive horror, from contact with the sinful suppliant.

“No, as I have a soul to save, I do not know.”

“Look around.”

“I only see forms and sights that affright me, but do not guess their meaning,” as, with a shuddering tremor, she moved her head so as to take in all there was to see.

“Know you not the punishment that awaits the nun who violates her vows of chastity and flies her cloister?” she demanded sternly.

“Oh! in pity, do not hurt me,” Blanche said imploringly. “No, by my soul, I know it not.”

“Hear it now, then,” interposed the monk. “‘Tis death!!”

“Death? death? No! no! Oh! no!” she said vaguely, as if hardly comprehending the meaning of the word.

“*A living tomb!* Yonder is your grave,” replied the abbess, pointing to the niche with her crosier.

With a loud and pealing shriek, that ran through the brain like a torture, Blanche sprang to her feet, and, like a timid fawn hedged round by the hunters, turned to fly; but, confronted on all sides by hard unfeeling looks that rendered flight impossible, she cast herself, in her abandonment of terror, at the superior’s feet, and, grasping her gown, implored her, with a choking agony, and a cry of heart-rendering despair, for mercy.

“Mercy! mercy! For the Redeemer’s sake have mercy.”

“So shrill and full of terror was that wild cry, wrung from the poor girl’s heart by the threatened doom, that its fearful echoes spread far and near, checking, as on the instant, the dirge-like chant, the booming knell alone breaking the awful silence that succeeded.

“Close all the gates, and let the service for the dead proceed,” the abbess commanded, with an imperious wave of her hand, and while one of the nuns, taking up a torch, hastened to close the portals of the vaulted passages and carry the message to the sacristan, the superior endeavoured, but in vain, to shake off the polluting torch of the half-insensible victim, who pertinaciously followed on her knees the receding mother over the slimy pavement, ever and anon muttering the one word—

“Mercy! mercy! mercy!”

“Do your duties,” cried the abbess, finding it impossible to shake off the desperate clinger.

“The four nuns instantly seized on the victim, and dragged her from her knees; but, made bold by her despair, Blanche threw them off, and, throwing herself on the ground before the confessor, cried in accents of heart-rending pity—

“You—you will save me from this appalling doom—you the cause of all my suffering. You are a man, and owe professed love. Oh! now show me some pity. Only reverse this horrid, horrid fate, and I will bless you. You have robbed me of all earthly joy—of husband, child—and now you would consign me to a frightful death. You cannot be utterly lost to heaven and pity. You are human still. That woman has no heart, no soul, for or against the ties of nature and of love she shuts the door for ever. But you have mercy. You will—will—”

“Confirm your sentence,” the confessor replied, with an effort.

“No hope! no hope!” she groaned despairingly. Then, as her eyes fell on the monk, she was about to make a last appeal to him, when the four women made a sudden grasp at the imploring form, when, with another piercing shriek, the victim fell back insensible in the arms of her jailors.

To pass the straps round her delicate form, throw the black veil over her death-like features, and place the crucifix in her clenched hand was hardly the work of a moment.

Taking the still insensible body in their arms, the nuns placed it in the niche, and the two men and Josh immediately began to build up the outside wall.

Josh, who had suffered much, heard a great deal, and reflected over much more during this painful scene, began now to work with a remarkable amount of energy.

Seating himself on a large stone that should have gone in the bottom course, he managed to spread the compost before it was noticed; then, by abstracting one or two smaller stones, and leaving apertures in the cement as air-holes, in less than ten minutes the work was effected, and the procession began to move from the spot—

The knell and the requiem for the unfortunate Blanche each moment sounding more clear and solemn as they ascended to the chapel.

“Be in my cell with the dresses and implements in *one* hour,” was whispered in Josh’s ear, as he reached the top of the last flight.

“I won’t forget, your reverence.” And, turning down a deserted Passage, Josh threw off his disguise and ran with all his speed.

CHAPTER XXII.

RETRIBUTION—FATHER AND SON—SILAS CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP— THE NUN UNTOMBED—THE CONCLUSION.

While Josh was hurrying along the secret passages that, in a network of labyrinths, intersected the basement of both houses, and working his way to the outer world, we must take a momentary glance at two other of our characters, personages of no inconsiderable importance in this eventful history.

Seated in a large armchair, his figure presenting innumerable points and angles, as, drawn into a corner, he looked like a huge spider coiled in his web, ready to dart forth on any luckless victim, sat Father Gerald, the monk, as he was commonly called, or Silas Morphey, besides a few other aliases which in the course of this narrative we have seen him represent.

“Where the devil is that knave Josh?” he observed, speaking aloud from his armchair, in the privacy of his own cell, and suspending the operation of biting his nails, to express his petulant thoughts.

“It is past the time he promised to be here, and tell me he had unwound the girders of the trap, and in another hour that hypocritical priest, that sensual dog the confessor, will be paying his nightly visit to the library. O God! How I hate that specious monster!” And the man ground his teeth, and expressed his hatred by a look of most malicious passion.

“He once removed,” he resumed, “I shall begin to enjoy life, and if the news my agent says he has to impart to me in the morning concerning my son is what he hints at, why then I shall rejoice indeed. May all the fiends of Satan light on that accursed Josh!” he suddenly exclaimed, as he looked at his watch, and sprang like a youth from his chair and hurried up and down his cell. “‘Tis past the time he should have been here, and the confessor will escape my vengeance. ESCAPE?” he almost shrieked in his dread of such a possibility. “No, not if I murder him with my own hand, face to face. No. *No escape!* Five minutes past the hour! I must leave nothing to chance. It *must* be done, and I must do the work myself.”

So saying, the monk opened his cell door, and, after a moment devoted to careful listening, he cautiously crept forth, and proceeded down the corridor in which his cell was situated, and reached the great centre passage that led to the library, and where, after closely inspecting all the diverging corridors, he crept up to the pilaster which he had indicated to Josh, and, feeling for the key, unwound the hidden girders; and then, like a midnight thief, stole stealthily back to his own passage.

“Could I have been so cursed a fool as to leave my door open? muttered the monk, as he abruptly stopped at the end of his passage to note a broad stream of light that issued from his open cell. “I must. Fool! fool! to leave my book such an evidence of my prowling. Let me haste and close it.”

While the monk is proceeding up the long passage to shut the door of his apartment, we must turn our attention for a few moments to the inmate of a cell on the opposite side of the building, where the confessor, watch in hand, was impatiently striding up and down his narrow cell.

“Has the boy neglected my orders and turned traitor? Curse him! And yet that cannot be, for from the turret window I just now plainly saw the carriage in waiting. Having executed one part of his commission, it is not likely he would neglect the other. But why then is he not here? A plague seize his tardy carcase! ‘Tis past the time I told him to be ready with the disguise and tools. Every moment too is now of vital importance. She will recover from her trance and be suffocated. Confusion! And there is the pocket-book to be secured before I bear her away; and only ten minutes left to effect all and fly. Curse the creeping idiot! I must go at once. Perhaps he will be here when I return with the pocket-book. Now then for craft, and force *if necessary*.” And, placing a life preserver in his belt, Father Belville glided from his cell, traversed the corridors, and paused outside the monk’s dormitory and listened attentively at the door.

Pushing the portal slowly open, the confessor peered into the cell, and, finding all quiet, entered, and, aided by the bright lamp burning on the table, minutely inspected the small chamber, but for a time in vain, nowhere could he see the object of which he was so eagerly in search.

“Thief! scoundrel! Help! murder!” shouted the monk, as he sprang into the cell and grappled the confessor, who, with the pocket-book in his hand, was turning to quit the place.

“Let go your hold, imposter, or by Heaven I’ll brain you,” exclaimed the confessor, as he raised the life preserver and endeavoured to throw off the monk from the hand and arm he grasped as in a vice.

“Miscreant of a priest!” cried the monk, as he in vain attempted to wrench the coveted prize from the firm grip of the priest—“detested hypocrite! restore that book, or by the Lord I’ll have your life. Loose your hold, or by—Murder! help!” he cried in a shrill sudden tone, as the heavy end of the preserver fell on his head.

“Off, off, or I will repeat the blow with greater force,” replied Father Belville, with a determined look and savage gesture. “Off! This plunder belongs to me.”

“Liar, ‘tis mine, wholly and solely. Give up, or—,” and like a tiger Silas sprang at the confessor’s throat, and after a short but desperate struggle, in which the old man showed extraordinary strength and determination, the life preserver was torn from the other’s hand and flung away, while the father, exhausted and panting, was forced on his knee, and the monk, with a long dagger knife, was in the act of plunging it into the other’s breast, which had become exposed to the skin by the tearing away of his dress in the struggle.

“Give up the book, or by—I’ll plunge this knife in you heart,” gasped Silas, as he forced his antagonist farther back. “For the last time, give it up, or you’re dead—dead!”

“Never!” cried the confessor, as, by a desperate effort, he sprang to his feet and stood face to face with the monk, whose knife at the instant descended on the other’s naked breast.

With a malicious laugh, Father Gerald saw the gush of blood that followed the blow of his weapon.

The next moment, with a cry of the wildest despair, and a look of unutterable agony, he relaxed his hold of the confessor, staggered back, and, pointing to the bleeding breast, cried in accents of reproachful terror—

“The crucifix and the letters in red ink! ‘Tis he—my son! Merciful God, I have murdered my son!” And, covering his eyes with his hands, he turned from the cell, and shouting, “Murder! My son! Murder!” fled like a maniac.

Wounded, but not seriously, the astonished priest gazed on the monk’s agonised countenance and frantic actions, and, still grasping the pocket-book, followed in distant pursuit.

Down one corridor and up another, shrieking and howling, rushed the terrified Silas, closely followed by the confessor, and finally into the centre passage, from the library at the upper end of which streamed forth a number of the brethren, preceded by Josh and his uncle Frank.

Towards this group, forgetful of the danger beneath him, and impressed by one pervading horror, the monk sped, waving the bloody knife and shouting, “Murder! My son! Murder!”

A sudden crash, a shriek of pain as his head struck the edge of the floor, and the body of the monk was seen to fall through the gaping trap, and disappear for ever from human sight.

“Back! back! For God’s sake back!” shouted Josh from the upper margin of the chasm, to which the confessor, unconscious of the danger, was hurrying forward.

“Where is Father Gerald? Answer. Where is the monk?” demanded Father Belville, pausing on the other side of the trap, up which rose that foul stench and snapping noise that some hours earlier had so terrified Josh.

“Where is my—the monk?”

“There, drowned in the sewer, among the rats that are already devouring his living flesh,” replied Josh, as he pointed to the frightful gap. “There, caught in the trap he had set for you.”

“Josh, do you know that man?” demanded Frank, pointing to the confessor as he stood gazing into the pit.

“Yes, it is Father Belville,” he replied promptly.

“It is the villain who seduced my sister Louise, and is your father.”

The confessor, who had looked up on hearing the voice of Frank, and had gazed wistfully in his face, no sooner heard the tenor of his reply than, as if struck by a fit, he threw up his arms, reeled, staggered back, and fell heavily to the floor.

“O God! THIRTY-NINE my father!” ejaculated Josh, with a cry of grief. “Oh! he mayn’t have been so bad as old Silas mad him, and—and I can’t leave him like that nohow; so here goes, Stand back.”

And, taking a run, Josh, with an agile leap, crossed the fatal trap, and had placed the confessor’s head in his lap, and was busily employed chafing his hands and endeavouring to restore him to consciousness before Frank and the priests had left the corridor to reach him by another passage.

We must now return to explain how it was that Josh neglected to keep his appointment with the confessor, and made his appearance so opportunely to warn the father of the danger at his feet.

When Josh hurried away so quickly after the entombment of Blanche it was to meet Frank and Mr. Egerton without the convent, and to satisfy himself that the postchaise was in readiness at its appointed place.

A few words served to apprise the distracted husband of the awful and perilous situation of his beloved Blanche.

Hastily assuming the disguise Josh had procured—the frock and cowl of monks, instead of the dominoes ordered by the confessor—he left Frank at the wall of the oratory to wait for their return, and, leading D’Arcy into the house, conducted them, by a hidden door, to the matted underground passage that led to the convent cells, and which has already been referred to as Paradise Walk.

By this they soon gained the subterranean cells and vaults of the nunnery, and in a few moments stood before the freshly-composited wall that concealed, living or dead, the dearest thing in life to D’Arcy Egerton.

The husband’s impatience could hardly tolerate the inactive part assigned him by Josh, of holding the lamps, while, with the pick and adze, and his nimble fingers, he tore down the plaster and displaced the stones.

“There’s the first,” cried Josh, as he worked out a large stone, and put in his hand. “And, thank God, she is alive. I feel her heart beat.”

“Haste, haste. Let me come. You will drive me mad,” exclaimed D’Arcy wildly.

“Nonsense, sir. You’d either kill her in your anxiety—there’s another,” Josh continued, working and talking— “give the poor thing a whack on the head with a hammer—there’s number three—or crush her purty little trotters with—now stand clear, and I’ll have the whole out in a piece. Here she comes,” and, inserting both hands, Josh, by a steady pull, brought down the greater part of the wall in a solid mass.

A cry of joy burst from the husband as he beheld the upright figure clothed in white, the head and shoulders enveloped in the black veil, standing like a statue in that foul niche.

“No, sir, it ain’t no use going on that way. You can’t taker her out till I takes the darbies off,” interposed Josh, as he placed himself between D’Arcy and the wall, as the latter was about to rush forward.

“Them scamps went and tied her up. Oh! wouldn’t I like to have the weltin’ of that old cat, the abbess! There’s the leg darby. Wouldn’t she have it softly! Oh! no, not if I knows it. And there’s the tother,” unfastening the straps from her body, and most contemptuously pitching the crucifix at the opposite wall. “Now, sir, here you are, and all to yourself.”

D’Arcy rushed forward, and, gently circling her waist with his arm, lifted her from her living tomb.

“Don’t wake her, sir. Don’t wake her till ye gits to the postshay It would only skeer her off agin,” Josh importuned, as he feared the passionate kisses he was pressing on her lips would recall her too suddenly to life and memory.

“Here, sir. Now cover her up in your cloak, and let us cut at once. I’m blest if I don’t collar these jolly nice straps, though, as my share of the swag. Here ye are, sir. Now hook it.” And, leading his way, Josh had just opened the door into Paradise Walk when he was confronted by one of the lay brothers, with a lantern guiding the abbess and some of her nuns to satisfy herself that all was in order about the tomb.

“What does this mean? Stop that—” But what the superior would have said was cut short by a cry of pain from the lay brother and the total darkness in which she found herself involved.

Adroitly kicking out the light, Josh brought the buckles of his straps with no sudden an effort on the bearer’s head that all chance of interruption was at an end in a moment.

Dragging D’Arcy into the passage, Josh locked the door, and hastened on, rapidly followed by the husband and his rescued treasure. At the gate, which they had passed unperceived, they were met by Frank, and in a few moments later D’Arcy had placed Blanche, just waking to consciousness, in the carriage, taking a seat where he could hold her in his arms.

Josh gave the postillions their orders, and the vehicle dashed off at the full speed of four horses to the mansion of Mr. Egerton, D'Arcy's father.

"That's all square, and I'm as pleased as punch. Now we'll just go back to see how the confessor got on without my valuable assistance, and then we'll hook it too. My! won't there be a shindy!"

"Besides, you forget, Josh, I'm going to show you your father," replied his companion Frank.

"Oh! my eye! Crikey! ain't they at it a'ready!" exclaimed Josh, as they entered the oratory, and heard the cries of the monk and the confessor, in their struggle and flight.

Recognizing the voices, and remembering the fate the monk meant to consign his spiritual leader to, Josh, by a short cut, led his companion to the library, where they found a number of the fraternity congregated, when, dashing through the door that led to the corridor, they were just in time to see the disappearance of Silas, and prevent the confessor from following him, as we have already seen, down the yawning trap.

The sequel of our tale is soon told.

For their own interests, both priests and nuns hushed up the scandal of the abduction of the buried Blanche, and took no further steps in the matter.

Father Belville, powerfully impressed with the fact that father and son had been pursuing each other with the most deadly animosity, and that he had been the indirect cause of that father's death—for that he was his father the paper's in his possession left no shadow of a doubt—powerfully impressed with these feelings, the confessor renounced his former vicious career, and, inspired with a deep and holy fervour, resolved at once to make all the reparation in his power for his former villainies and retire for ever from a world where he had enacted a part so unworthy of his honour and profession.

Refunding to D'Arcy, on behalf of his wife, all the deeds appertaining to the estate which his father had so dishonestly appropriate, and allowing his own claim as next of kind to the missing and long-lost elder brother of the family, the confessor next divided the ready money and public securities—realising a splendid fortune, and accumulated by Silas for his son—into two equal parts, bequeathed one moiety to Josh, whom he was well assured was the son of the once loved Louise, and with the other half, as a donation to the institution where he took up his residence, the confessor retired a week after the above events and never appeared to the world.

The death of Sir Richard Castleton soon after removed every obstacle to the peaceable possession of Abbey Grange, and the property appertaining thereto, by the now happy Blanche and her rejoicing husband, a happiness made more permanent and welcome by a Papal dispensation for all her convent sins, obtained through the instrumentality of her former lover and vindictive persecutor, Father Belville, the confessor.

Josh, whose nature was naturally gentle and forgiving, found it hard to part with his new-found father, particularly when he believed he was not so culpable as he had supposed in regard to his mother's untimely fate.

After having a few months' jolly swing, in the character of a gentleman with lots of tin, as he styled it, he one day suddenly shut up shop, put the stopper on his rollicking fun, and, hooking the fine gent and extravagance, invested his fortune in government securities, and went down to Abbey Grange, to ask Mr. Egerton to give him a berth as clerk, paymaster, foreman over the servants, or anything in that way, as he had made up his mind to stick to business, and be in the same house as his uncle Frank.

And, as Blanche, now radiant with health and beauty, entered at the moment, with her baby, restored to life and parents by Josh's means, his suit was not long in being granted.

And there, in that happy household, with plenty laid by for a rainy day, Josh to use his own expressive phraseology, "is goin' on slap up, reg'lar stunnin', and no mistake."

THE END.