THE BERKSHIRE LADY.

A Romance

BY

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AUTHOR OF "PATTY," ETC.

"Bachelors of every station,
Mark this strange but true relation,
Which to you in brief I bring:
Never was a stranger thing."

Old Ballad.

London:
MACMILLAN AND CO.
1879.

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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

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Dedicated

TO

"BACHELORS OF EVERY STATION,"

SPECIALLY TO THOSE

"BELONGING TO THE LAW."

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PART I.

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Old Ballad.

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THE BERKSHIRE LADY.

CHAPTER I.

IN KING'S BENCH WALK.

FLEET STREET was as crowded as it seems to have been ever since it was made into a thoroughfare for vehicles, and on this keen-clear winter's day the slippery state of the frozen ground, and the consequent confusion among the horses and their drivers, made the crossing just by Temple Bar no easy matter.

A gentleman, young, handsome, and of

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decided fashion, both in dress and bearing, threw back his head impatiently as, at last, he reached the new stone gateway of the Middle Temple, and, passing under the meek emblem carved with the date on the centre arch stone, he strode down the narrow lane of sombre houses, leaving Brick Court—not then immortalised—on his right, and turning to the left, through Pump Court, soon reached the Cloisters, not long before rebuilt, and, passing through them, without casting so much as a glance at the gray old church of the Templars on his left, he passed Lamb's Buildings, and emerged into the peaceful precincts called King's Bench Walk.

It looked so full of peace—a refreshing contrast to the busy scene through which he had struggled—here was perfect silence, disturbed only by the congenial caw of the rooks or the footsteps of some denizen of

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the Temple, as he walked across the broad open space, taking the air, with eyes bent studiously on the ground.

Mr. Harcourt crossed this quiet Walk without looking towards the river that bounded its farther end, the rippling water, golden just now, as the wintry sunshine gleamed thereon,

and passing under the row of leafless trees, and over the irregularly-paved open space between their trunks and the houses, he stopped before one of these at the upper end of the Walk—a wide red-brick house with a high red-tiled roof, finished with a wooden cornice and brackets. The doorway was quaint, circular-headed, with brick pilasters, and over it a brick pediment.

The frieze beneath this was divided into four panels, on which inscriptions set forth how these houses, having been burned in 1677, had been rebuilt in 1678, some

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thirty years or so before. But Mr. Harcourt had been too often in King's Bench Walk, and was in too impatient a mood, to take note of anything which did not hinder, his progress.

After passing into the small entrance where the names of the inhabitants were duly registered on both sides of the doorway, he began to climb the narrow stairs two or three at a time; but the square

turns of the staircase so checked this method, that he could not make speed enough, and when he reached the third flight he grew tired, and stopping to breathe, looked about him.

"'Fore George," he said, "I remember now. Child said his new rooms were on the fourth storey; egad, that don't seem as if fortune were smiling on the poor fellow. Well, here goes," and he hastened up the

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next flight, which was narrower and mustier even than the others had been.

He had to knock twice before he got an answer; but after the second knock a deep voice said, "Come in," and next minute the door was opened and Mr. Benjamin Child came forward with a smile on his lips to welcome his visitor.

His smile was yet more genial when he saw who it was—"I was just thinking of you, Harcourt, and your marriage. I was wondering when you meant to get the knot tied. I

shan't see much of you after

that I fancy."

As he spoke the smile faded, and showed that the expression of his face was somewhat sad without it.

It was a handsome face as far as mere beauty of feature went, but its expression was delightful—so frank and simple. It

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seemed wonderful to find a man looking so fresh and unsophisticated in the middle of crowded busy London—a man too who was a member of the learned Society of the Inner Temple; for spite of the cloud on his face it looked as if peace inhabited its possessor.

There was that leisurely sweetness shining out of the clear dark eyes, which one would rather have expected to find in a country gentleman passing his days in the sunshine and freshness of outdoor life, than on the face of a struggling barrister who had a mere pittance to exist on.

The room into which he showed his friend told a story both of poverty and of refinement. There were few comforts; but there was no squalor; and one or two pictures, evidently family portraits, and a goodly store of books, ranged closely in narrow shelves along the walls, showed that

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the occupant had at least some taste and learning.

Harcourt flung himself into one of the old horsehair chairs with a force that made its back creak.

"Pah!" he cried, looking round, "this is no improvement on your old quarters, man. You are higher up, have lower ceilings, and less light, for the windows are plaguy small."

Child laughed, and, walking to the window, he threw both lattices open.

"Well," he said, "tastes differ. I get more air and of a better quality. If you look out here you will see the river, and beyond it the Surrey hills, and I get plenty of air from the

garden there on the left; so that I can at least fancy myself near green fields and shady lanes, and the trees in front give a pleasant shade in summer

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time." He looked over his shoulder, but Harcourt sat still, yawning.

"I care nothing for your fields and lanes and trees," he said, "unless they be the fields and lanes of London. I shall have the pastoral sort in plenty when I am a Benedict and pay visits at Arderne Park. Give me joy, Child, all's settled, I'm to be married next month, and I want you to be best man at the wedding. We are to be married at Arderne."

"I!" Mr. Child flushed with some embarrassment. "I'm not much used to gay doings, old friend; you had better choose someone who'll do you more credit."

"Do me more credit, Ben! you know well enough you'll be the prettiest fellow in the assembly, and as to dancing—'gad, I've seen you dance a minuet—a man with legs like yours should be glad of a chance of displaying

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'em." Here he poked his cane into Child's ribs, and burst into a hearty laugh.

Mr. Child laughed too.

"I like dancing well enough," he said; "'tis not that daunts me. 'Tis the ladies, Harcourt. Frankly, I am not a man of fashion, and I'm not used to such grand folks; the belles at Arderne Park will expect me to be more courtly. I've none of the winning ways and languid speeches that I believe are the mode with fine gentlemen."

Harcourt laughed again. "You need not be bashful; it will be a thoroughly country-bred gathering—you and I will perhaps be the only beaux who will venture to attempt courtly dancing. The chief belles there will be the Misses Arderne and their cousin, the heiress of Calcot. The Misses Arderne have been to London, but their cousin. Mistress

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Frances Kendrick, I'm told, is a thorough hoyden. I fancy a jig or a country dance will be more to her taste. She hates forms and ceremonies. I'm told she even quarrels with any man who ventures to pay her a compliment. She's a beauty, though, I can tell you, but as wild as a hawk. 'Gad, who knows but you may tame the beauty of Berkshire. Come, old fellow, it's a bargain then; you'll come, won't you? Shake hands upon it, for I am up to the ears in preparation for this unlucky event. Had I known 'twould have cost such a world of trouble, I should have thought twice before I paid my addresses."

"The prize would not be worth having if it cost no trouble," said Child, smiling. "Yes, I'll come, and I thank you for asking me, when you must have so many other friends. "I'll try and not disgrace your

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preference. You'll not have much time for all you have to do, I suppose?"

"Faith, no; and now I think of it, I have an appointment with my tailor. Good-day, Ben."

They shook hands, and Child went downstairs with his friend.

Harcourt nodded carelessly, and went back towards the Strand, swinging his cane so as to take up a considerable share of the narrow walk. "Ben's a fool," he cried, "to be so little of a coxcomb; with his face and figure he should carry all before him. The world always rates a man at the value he sets on himself. 'Tis true enough that if Algernon Topham had not broken his leg, I should never have invited Child; but he's the best-looking fellow I know; though he's so quiet, he looks like a duke, and he's a

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good dancer, and that is the sort of man to please Lady Arderne."

Child stood looking after his friend with a smile. He was pleased that Mr. Harcourt should wish him to be at his marriage, but he was surprised that a man of such fashion should choose out a quiet recluse to stand by him on. such an occasion.

"Reading," he said, "why I might pay the visit I have promised Lyndford ever since I left college. I would sooner stay at his house than at Arderne Park, if the distance is feasible."

Then he remembered that Mr. Harcourt had given no practical details, and, going back to his rooms, he proceeded to write a letter to an old school friend, a lawyer, of Reading, telling him of his intention to fulfil his long-promised visit, and inquiring

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the distance between the town of Reading and Arderne Park.

By the end of the week a reply reached him from lawyer Lyndford, written in a formal hand, but containing a hearty welcome.

After expressing his pleasure at the prospect of a visit from his old friend, Mr. Lyndford congratulated him on the distinction of being an invited guest to Arderne Park. "Lady Arderne," he wrote, "is a woman of quality in our county. You will find at her house some of the best blood in Berkshire, and you will also see our fair young heiress, Mistress Frances Kendrick, whose face and shape match her fortune. She is not yet twenty years of age, but has had the control of her estates since her seventeenth birthday, according to the terms of her father's will. So that,

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as you may suppose, she is closely besieged by all the likely bachelors of our county; but inclines, I am told, to none among them. She will be a rare prize to whomsoever among them obtains her at last."

Child's lip curled in some contempt.

"They seem all in the same story about this wench," he said; "I expect, like all stories, there is another side to it; the heiress has either a bad temper, or her beauty is less perfect than Harcourt and Lyndford represent it to be. Mayhap her suitors are not rich enough to please her. Harcourt should be a judge of ladies, but what time or inclination can a staid middle-aged lawyer have to study young women? I'll wager this Mistress

Frances is red-haired or wall-eyed. Money goes as far as a cosmetic as silver does in the swallowing

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of a pill—'tis a marvellous disguiser; but I am curious to ascertain the truth, and I shall ask Harcourt to present me to the heiress, so that I may judge for myself whether she is worth the fuss they make about her. Now to see how much I can afford to spend on a wedding suit."

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CHAPTER II.

A MEETING.

SHE was dancing a minuet, and the slow measured steps showed to perfection the graceful lines of her tall figure, and its well-developed symmetry.

Now resting her weight on one shapely foot, her well-set head turned over her shoulder towards her partner as she prepared to leave his side—her round white arm curved to wave him a farewell, the pose of her lovely figure was so perfect that a buzz of admiration circled the room.

Her partner, a tall, well-built man, with

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a strikingly handsome face, performed his part skilfully, and it was remarked among the bystanders that the pair completely realised the meaning of the figure they had just executed, and that they seemed very loath to part. His eyes were riveted on his partner's beautiful face, framed by long golden curls, and guiltless of paint—for as the couple

met again after this temporary separation, the delicate colour on the fair girl's cheeks was seen to deepen, and her blue eyes darkened with pleasure.

"She is beautiful—vastly beautiful—no other word can fitly praise her—eh! why do you look so glum. Wilder?"

This was said with some impatience by the most fashionable among the men in a group near the ball-room door, to the gentleman who stood nearest to him. Sir Henry Wilder.

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Sir Henry did not look fashionable. He had rather the air of a student. He was dark and thin, with an intense expression of sadness in his dark eyes.

"I never gainsaid it, Knollys," he answered; "she is beautiful, graceful too, and every other charming name you can find to give to her outside perfections, but that is all—she has nothing within. There it ends—she is cold-hearted as a stone." Sir Henry Wilder turned sharply away, as if the subject vexed him.

Sir Charles Knollys laughed heartily—he had a pleasant laugh, which showed off his fine white teeth and made his companions feel at home with him, though at first his rich dress and extremely fashionable appearance, and his French bagwig, made some of his old country friends, in their long perukes, feel shy of him after his long absence from Berkshire.

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"I," Sir Charles went on, "can only speak as I found—I sat next Mistress Frances Kendrick at dinner time, and I found her behaviour delightful; but then"—he looked slyly at Wilder—"I am not enamoured of this too fair Frances."

"No, no—oh no—egad, we all know the reason of that," lisped another of the group—a fair-haired, thick-lipped youth, who kept his eyes fixed on Mistress Frances with a stare of gaping admiration.

Sir Charles frowned and turned his back on the youth, but he went, on speaking to Wilder, who was again gazing at the dancers. Wilder's pale dark face looked yet more gloomy as he noticed the glow in the lady's eyes.

“I can't understand you, 'fore George, I can't,” Knollys went on; “what has come to you all about this girl? Years ago, before

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I went to Italy, when Frances Kendrick was still a child, she was the pet and darling of the county; and now I come back and find her an orphan and a great heiress. Is it true, Iwardby”—he looked at a grave middle-aged man who had just joined the group—“did your grandmother really leave your cousin Frances fifty thousand pounds, besides the Calcot estates, which come to her under her father's will?”

Mr. Iwardby nodded.

“By the Lord,” said Knollys, “this should have made the girl far more interesting, and yet all through this day, whenever her name comes up, I do not hear a good word said of her beyond her beauty. One says she is lovely, but a coquette; another vows she is divine, but a heartless jilt; and, according to Wilder, who is the most bitter among ye, she is as cold as a stone.” He

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looked round the circle of faces—some of them vexed, others confused, but all ready to fulfil what he had said—to blame the fair dancer.

“Wait till the end of the evening,” lisped Sir Francis Englefield; “you will see for yourself.”

Knollys laughed again. “By the Lord Harry,” he said, “what has the poor wench done to you all?”

Wilder turned away abruptly, and before either of the others could answer, Mr. Iwardby stepped forward.

"Come with me, Knollys," he said, "I want to show you an antique in the other room. Lady Arderne tells me you are quite a connoisseur."

He drew Sir Charles's arm through his, and they went into a large room close by. There was not much light, except near a

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blazing wood fire on the hearth. The sudden change of atmosphere from that of the heated ball-room was very perceptible—the more so from the want of human life. Only a few old ladies sat crouching over the fire, discussing the bride and the wedding arrangements, and Mistress Frances Kendrick the heiress. Most of the elder guests were deep in play upstairs in the card-room at the top of the great oak staircase.

One of the dowagers looked inquisitively at the two gentlemen, and Mr. Iwardby, who recognised her as Lady Barbara Parry—a noted gossip of the neighbourhood—drew Knollys on to the farthest of the deeply-recessed windows, shaded, but not closed up, by heavy crimson curtains. The moon shone brightly over Arderne Park, silvering a broad grassed glade beyond the stretch of lawn—silvering, too, the lofty rows of elms

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on each side the glade—which, from time immemorial, had made a silent unused avenue on this side of the house. The scene outside made a pleasant contrast to the glare and heat the two gentlemen had quitted.

"Dancing began early to-day," Mr. Iwardby said, "and I fancy the young folks will keep it up till cockcrow—these wedding parties are so pleasantly irregular. At one of her usual assemblies, Lady Arderne lights up all her rooms in a very brilliant fashion, but I suppose evening has crept on imperceptibly—and the servants being very busy—this delicious moonlight is spared to us."

"It is quite early still," Sir Charles said; but you did not bring me here to look at the moon, did you, Iwardby?"

"No." Iwardby looked over his shoulder towards the group of gossips beside the fire. "I wanted to speak to you about my cousin.

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Frances Kendrick. It would not do to provoke a quarrel on her account to-night, with any of those foolish fellows; but it chafed me to hear you repeat that nonsense. This is how the matter stands: Her father made a foolish will—left the girl her own mistress at seventeen, and gave her as guardian her aunt, who had at the time four unmarried daughters. Well, the upshot is that Lady Arderne has left Frances to take care of herself, and that she prefers to keep her freedom. Englefield and all the rest have, one after another, solicited her in marriage, and she has refused them all; and yet my wife says the girl is very frank and noble-hearted, disdaining all coquetry. I can't see why she should be made the subject of public blame. Why should she be forced to marry till she meets with the man of her choice?"

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"Has she refused Wilder?" Sir Charles Knollys asked.

"Well—no; she has a respect for him; he is not a mercenary suitor; and as he seemingly has shown his devotion pretty plainly, she, in return, has shown him by her manner that she wishes to spare him the mortification of being refused. Hence his anger. He is very hard hit, poor fellow."

"But, in the name of wonder, what makes the girl so difficult to please? There are some pretty fellows among these suitors, and she is easy and pleasant enough in her talk. There's something more in this than you fancy, Iwardby. Are you sure there's no one in the background for whom she has a liking? Who was she dancing with just now?"

"I have been asking"—Mr. Iwardby looked grave—"but I can only learn that

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his name is Mr. Child. He is a Londoner, I hear—an old friend of our bridegroom."

"If so, as far as looks go, Harcourt is luckier in his choice of a friend than he has been in a bride. Molly Arderne is not a tempting morsel." Knollys laughed. "No wonder Lady Arderne looks bright to-night. She could never have expected such luck as to get a fresh young husband like Harcourt for one of her freckled awkward squad; but never mind the Ardernes, you set your wife to watch Mistress Frances; I warrant she is no more of a stone than Wilder himself. Look at her eyes, man, and see how they change while she talks; by gad, I ought to know something about women." He smiled and showed his teeth.

"I feel certain that Frances has no attachment," said Mr. Iwardby; "I agree with you she is not cold, but she is no

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ordinary girl sighing for lovers, and looking on marriage as the paramount business of life. Camilla thinks she is possessed with an intense love of freedom; and having been made her own mistress so young, she is resolved to keep free as long as she can do so. She is not vain, poor child—I sometimes wish she were less wealthy, and then she would be left free to do as she pleases."

Sir Charles smiled. "You're wrong there," he said; "her money is a protection. I am surprised, however, that she does not take pity on Wilder; he seems a perfect Colin in his love. They would suit to a hair. She so bright and frank, and he deep and earnest and reserved; 'pon honour I must see if I can forward the affair. Though he is my cousin and I am his next of kin, I'll go and sing his praises to the heiress."

Mr. Iwardby shook his head. "No

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match-making, Sir Charles; leave that to the ladies. I believe in the old saying about marriages—those of men's contriving too often bring hell on earth."

At this Sir Charles laughed so loudly that Lady Barbara, whose long thin neck had for some time been craned in the direction of the speakers in the far-off window, now began to fan herself, and protesting that she felt "vastly hot," she rose from her seat and walked softly towards the speakers.

"Well done, Iwardby," Sir Charles was saying, "I see you stick to your Old World notions; you still believe in turtle-dovery and all the billing-and-cooing folly of a painted fan. You see you were married quite twenty years ago, when folks lived in Utopia; all that sort of thing is out of date now, 'pon honour."

Mr. Iwardby reddened and looked awkward.

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"You must excuse me, Sir Charles, I fancied I was on safe ground; I heard that *you* yourself were about to make a marriage of inclination."

Sir Charles bowed, but Lady Barbara had now reached the edge of the carpet, and the tapping of her heels on the highly polished floor gave warning of her near approach. He looked over his shoulder, and went on in a lower voice:

"I am going to marry, and you have been correctly informed. Mistress Caroline Courtenay and I have a prodigious esteem—regard if you will—for one another. You look grave; now what more do you expect of me? I imagine you do not think that I fell in love like a linendraper's apprentice, wrote doggerel verses to my mistress, or committed any such romantic folly; you have not so poor an opinion of me, I trust."

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"You must pardon me," Iwardby smiled; "I confess I hoped your affections were really engaged, and my creed is that real love has a power of transformation."

Sir Charles put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and gave him a smile full of complacent pity.

"See what it is to live in the country and grow rural," he said; "the sort of pastime you call love in courtship is quite gone by, unless for men one never hears of, with a few

hundreds a year and no expectations. 'Fore George, we manage matters more easily nowadays. My aunt, Lady Ombre, presented me to her ward. Mistress Caroline Courtenay, and told me the lady was in every way qualified to be mistress of Beaumont. I, on my part, took the trouble to satisfy myself of the correctness of Lady Ombre's judgment. I saw Mistress Caroline

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at the play; and then we met in the Mall and were presented to one another; and in a few more meetings the thing was done, and thank Heaven will soon be over." Here he stopped, pulled out a snuff-box set with emeralds round a porcelain plaque representing the Graces, tapped the lid, and presented the box to Iwardby. "My dear fellow," he said, when each had taken his respective pinch, "you must come and judge for yourself the sort of hostess Lady Knollys makes when we return from the Continent. Faith, I must see dear Paris and Versailles once more before I settle into harness. When you see her, I think your dictum will be *non c' è male!* as the Italians say. Now shall we go and have another look at Mistress Frances Kendrick?"

"While they stood talking in the moonlight the room had been lit up behind

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them, and now, as they turned round, the sudden brilliancy roused up Sir Charles' boisterous gaiety. "Fore George, I must have a dance," he cried. He left Mrs. Iwardby and hurried to the ball-room intent on getting the promise of a dance from the much-sought-after heiress.

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CHAPTER III.

THE CONSPIRACY.

Sir Charles stood watching her till his turn came to claim her hand. He thought her still more lovely as he gazed; her face was full of expression, and this so frequently varied! Fearless and frank without any bold or masculine quality, and there was besides a peculiar freshness of look about her, an original simplicity that made her irresistibly attractive to such a hackneyed man of fashion as Sir Charles Knollys.

But now his turn has come and he claims his partner. He has seen that she can

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dance well, and he also dances a minuet with Mistress Frances. They move gracefully, but there is not the universal buzz of admiration that followed her dance with the stranger. Mistress Frances looks as lovely as ever, but her heart seems less in this dance than in the other. Perhaps the room is warmer, for the flush on her cheeks grows bright, and yet her eyes do not glow with her cheeks. Sir Charles is fascinated. He cannot help, under the influence of her beauty, whispering some high-flown compliments.

"What a thing it is, madam," he says "to be queen of beauty and yet to have a heart insensible to love and pity. If I had not heard the moans of your slain and wounded, I should never have dreamed that so fair a form could hold so hard a heart."

Frances looks at him gaily. "Are

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you employed as advocate, sir?" she says.

"Heaven forbid, unless in my own cause; but in all seriousness, madam, I must take the privilege of old friendship, and inquire the meaning of the complaints which I hear preferred against you."

"Do you really call yourself my friend?" Her eyes sparkle as she looks at him, and Sir Charles thinks her perfect, and he begins to wish both his engagement and Mistress Courtenay blotted from existence. "You do not know how glad I am," says Frances; "I was afraid you had forgotten our nutting days and the blackberrying, and what sport we

had, and what a lazy boy you used to be!"—this with a saucy smile—"and do you remember how I used to tear my gowns and spoil my hats in gathering you the ripest berries? Do you remember when you rolled

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downhill? Oh, I shall never forget you!" She claps her hands with delight.

Sir Charles laughs too and shakes his head." A fine stroke of policy, madam; you attack me in order to defend yourself, but you will presently have to answer my charge. Do I remember those days? faith, only too well!" He gives her an expressive look. "I have a distinct vision of a mischief-loving bright-eyed fairy of a child, full of life. As to the rest—eugh!"—he gives an affected shrug—"the notion of eating blackberries sets my teeth on edge."

Frances laughs merrily.

"Now you are a Londoner again," she says; "I am glad I have never been to London, a visit there might change me as much as it has changed you."

"Possibly, though it could not improve you." Then more earnestly: "But I must

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beg of you to treat me as a friend, and to answer my question; for now our dance is over, Lady Arderne will be carrying me off to judge of some so-called 'old masters' she has brought from Italy. Tell me, fair friend, why do you treat all those sighing swains so harshly? I have watched them hovering round you, and I see you will not dance twice with one among 'em. What have you to say against Wilder? He is a vastly pretty fellow." He looks keenly at her, but she meets his eyes frankly.

"I am not vain enough to think they can all care for *me*. If I had not this unlucky fortune, I should be less suspicious."

"But I assure you, most incredulous of heiresses. Sir Henry Wilder is simply dying for you—you yourself—and he is to my mind worth all the rest of 'em. What objection can you find to him?"

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I was not thinking of Sir Henry Wilde when I spoke; but when one likes all alike one must treat all alike. I dance with then when their turn comes." She says this thoughtfully; then, with her usual archness". But this is a ball, and I am here to dance and not to hear you plead for your clients, Mr. Advocate." She looks round the room till her eyes rest on the group near the door. "Can you tell me," she says carelessly, "who is that gentleman standing beside my enemies, as I call them—look, he speaks now to Mr. Blagrave?"

Sir Charles's eyes follow hers, and he looked piqued.

"Why, you have already danced with him!"

"Yes, but his name escaped me."

"I have not a notion who he is, except that he is some Londoner probably with more size than wits."

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He speaks sneeringly, but Mistress Frances does not answer. A slight frown comes upon her face, and she seems intent on watching the stranger, whose fine countenance varies rapidly in expression as he listens and talks to his companions.

Sir Charles bites his lip with vexation, but before he can interrupt Mistress Frances's reverie, Lady Arderne comes up, and carries him off to her pictures.

When they had left her, Frances seated herself between a plain but stately mother.

Mistress Aldworth, and her overgrown awkward daughter. She scarcely noticed the appearance of her companions, but immediately the eyes of the group opposite remarked her action.

"Was ever such vanity!" lisped Sir Francis Englefield; "she has chosen the two plainest women in the room to frame her face between 'em—I wonder at her."

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"She has already learned the use of a foil," said another with a sneer.

"She was tired and she has seated herself on the first seat at hand." Wilder spoke contemptuously; he liked to blame Mistress Frances, but he shrank from hearing her thus spoken of before an entire stranger, and Mr. Child still stood among the group of censors. Next moment Sir Henry crossed the room and asked Mistress Frances to give him the next dance.

She looked up, but there was no brightness in her face.

"I had sat down to rest," she said; "but I believe I promised you a dance, Sir Henry; it may as well be this as another."

He bowed, but a dark flush rose on his face, and he bit his lip with mortification.

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It was an old-fashioned country dance, for the minuet had not been long introduced, and was not much in vogue among the untravelled gentlemen of the time, and no one ventured to compete with Sir Charles Knollys and the stranger from London. So that Sir Henry could get little satisfaction beyond that of looking at his partner, excepting the few words he had time to say as he led her up the middle at the end of the figure. But the touch of her fingers tonight made him lose the self-control which her coldness, as he called it, had roused his pride to maintain towards this fair creature. His dark eyes shone and his lips trembled with feeling as, when the dance ended, he took her hand and led her to a seat. Instead of taking her back to her former place, he turned abruptly so as to oblige her to make the tour of the ball-room

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with him before she could reach Mrs. Aldworth, thus securing to himself a few minutes of *tête-à-tête.*

Frances saw the manoeuvre, and she smiled with some disdain.

"'Twould have been shorter if we had turned back," she said, and she looked weary.

Wilder had been studying the behaviour both of the stranger and of Sir Charles with regard to Frances, and he had told himself that he was too serious, too inclined to chide this fair bright creature, so with a great effort he conquered his mortification and smiled down at the pensive face.

"It would have been shorter doubtless," he said, so gently that the girl looked up in surprise; she had expected a bitter answer. Then, as he met her eyes, he said pleadingly: "I have known you as long as

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Knollys has, and you have honoured him with your discourse; may I not hope for a like privilege?"

He spoke very quietly and he kept his eyes from hers. He did not want her to read his purpose just yet, though his impatience almost maddened him. He even forced his fingers to hold hers in a looser clasp. He so wanted to put her entirely off the guard of reserve which she had hitherto set between them.

"I made an exception in favour of Sir Charles," she said; "we have not met since we were children, and just now he is our prodigal, is he not? and we are all bound to show him kindness."

He looked at her keenly. She spoke with a frank smile, and he felt sure she did not care for Knollys.

"You tempt one to become a wanderer,"

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he said, "if one could be sure of such a welcome when one came home."

Frances laughed gaily.

"Yes, yes. Sir Henry, go away and try; travel will suit you vastly. Who knows! when you come back I may perhaps find that you are worth dancing a minuet with."

His fingers clasped hers closely; his passion flashed out at his eyes, and Frances saw her danger.

"Can you, will you then," he whispered ardently, "give me a grain of hope?"

She shook her head. She knew nothing of the power of love, poor child, and she could not understand this endless persecution.

"I have tried to prevent this," she said coldly; "you must not complain, Sir Henry, if I avoid you in future; you and I

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can never be more to one another than we have always been."

She curtsied, and as they had just reached the place from which he had taken her, she resumed her seat; but she did this with so much smiling grace that no one could have guessed at the nature of her conversation with her partner.

Wilder stood still, raging with passion. For a moment he thought he would force this proud girl to take back her refusal, and then he recollected himself and the busy eyes that were doubtless observing his behaviour. Happily his back was towards them, and as he turned round he forced a smile; but the effort at composure had made him ghastly, and when he rejoined his companions Sir Francis Englefield asked him languidly whether he had found the heiress too much for him.

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"Can't you talk of someone else? she is not the only lady here to-night," said Wilder carelessly, and then he turned away to save himself from further speech. The others looked at the stranger, who still stood among them, as if they expected him to say something. To their surprise he walked away across the vast room, but without any of the languid indifference and courtly grace of Sir Charles Knollys and other men of fashion, so highly prized by ladies of the time, and bending down over Mistress Frances Kendrick, he begged her to give him another dance.

Frances had been trying to look perfectly indifferent, but as Mr. Child approached her, involuntarily her face beamed with pleasure.

It was another country dance which separated Frances from her partner. It was just over when Sir Charles came back, but.

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as he passed by the couple now sitting side by side, he heard Frances speaking in low earnest tones to this unknown "clown," as he inwardly termed him, and his face flushed with annoyance.

"I can scarcely believe," Mistress Frances was saying, "that you come from London. You appear to see life in such a different way from Sir Charles Knollys. He seems to get so little enjoyment."

Her partner smiled. "Our position in society is very different," he said. "Every one worth knowing is acquainted with and glad to see Sir Charles Knollys. He can go to balls whenever he chooses: he lives for pleasure and amusement. I, on the contrary, am a poor struggling barrister, and have led so recluse a life, reading hard in the Temple, that gaiety and society have always the charm of novelty for me. He,

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of course, is so used to them that they have become wearisome, while to me they are always fresh."

"We are alike then, sir." She raised her lovely eyes with a look of sympathy that roused yet more anger in the envious watchers over the way, and in Sir Charles, who was still gazing at her. "I have been to so few balls that I find them delightful. I so love dancing for its own sake. But I do not think I should like a London ball so well as—as this."

"Why not, madam?" he said, smiling, "a London rout is a far more brilliant affair than a country ball is."

"No doubt," she answered, "but to me 'tis the difference between a tulip and a rose. I should doubtless enjoy the brilliancy of the entertainment and the variety of the dresses, but next day I should miss the

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fresh pure air. You see I am such a country-bred girl that I cannot exist without hillside breezes."

"You prefer a country life then, and its quiet pleasures, to the gaieties of the town?" he said with interest. "I too love the country, but I should have thought that you would care to shine in London."

"My life has been spent in the country—I have known no other," she answered, meeting his earnest gaze so frankly that he could not doubt her truth. "I am quite content with my rides and my hooks and flowers. I have, besides, my people and all the live-stock on the farm. I have plenty to do, I can tell you," she said, her eyes brightening with eagerness; then she sighed and a cloud came on the sparkling face; "if I could but live in peace, no girl would be happier than I."

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"In peace!" he said eagerly, "why, who can venture to molest you?"

Frances looked round; she saw Sir Charles Knollys, but she knew he was out of earshot.

"I have some acquaintances," she said, "who are officious, and I prefer to live without the friendship they offer."

She speaks lower, and unconsciously their heads draw nearer together, and the patience of the group of jealous watchers opposite can hold out no longer. Before Frances can answer, Sir Francis Englefield stands beside her, claiming her as his partner for the next dance.

Mistress Frances feels vexed by the interruption, but she smiles at him.

"You mistake, Sir Francis," she says coldly. "I promised you the first dance after supper," and she turns to the stranger and resumes her conversation.

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"Madam," Sir Francis smiles, but he looks full of malicious delight, "I am concerned to differ from you, but you are mistaken; this is the sixth dance from the time when I asked the honour of your hand."

Frances pouted.

"Very well, sir," she said, "I thought it was the fifth. I am at your service."

She rose and gave him her hand with some disdain.

"I was loath to disturb so interesting a discourse," Sir Francis lisped in a penitent voice," and I cannot wonder at your reluctance to keep your promise, but had I not claimed you, you might have complained of my neglect."

Mistress Frances shrugged her faultless shoulders.

"I should have got over it, sir, but I wonder you are so punctilious, when you

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usually spend the time we are together in trying to provoke me to anger."

Sir Francis pat his hand on his heart.

"You wrong me, £air lady," he said; "my sole aim in life is to deserve your good opinion—ah! too fair Frances, if you could but see the love I feel, its flames might move your pity before they reduce me to ashes."

He was holding her hand as he spoke, for the couples passed in succession under the raised arms of two dancers at the bottom of the line, and as he and Frances stooped to follow the rest, he gave her fingers a tender squeeze.

Mistress Frances blushed scarlet with vexation.

"The impertinent fool," she muttered, "but he shall not have the satisfaction of seeing that he can vex me."

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"The room is vastly warm," she said, as she stood fanning herself; "when our turn is over I shall leave the dance. Mistress Kitty Aldworth yonder will doubtless be willing to take my place."

"I thank you, madam," Sir Francis said sharply, "but if you persist in deserting me I prefer to choose for myself. Without doubt Mistress Kitty would welcome me or any other partner, for she has not left her mother's side once this evening. I would not willingly disturb her; shall I take you to your aunt, or to Mistress Iwardby?" he said with emphasis.

Frances made him a low curtsy. "I will not give you that trouble," she said brightly. "I will take care of myself and the first vacant seat I can find," she added with a meaning smile, as she stopped at the chair she had occupied between Mistress Kitty

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Aldworth and Mr. Child, who were sitting where she had left them.

He smiled with delight at seeing her.

"I feared our conversation was ended," he said; "you are too attractive to be left in peace."

"You see something of what I meant just now," she says; "I am not even free to speak to whom I please."

She looks up. Mr. Blagrave stands before her bowing.

"May I have the honour of your hand, madam, for the next dance?"

"You have had your dance, sir," she says haughtily," and I do not know that I shall dance again."

She turns from him to her companion, but the spell is broken, the charm with which each had listened to the other, that indefinable charm which seems to consist in

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showing and gaining a glimpse of the inner thoughts of each, is at an end. The stranger tries again to draw forth his companion's sweet frankness, but a chill has fallen on her; and as one after another, at short intervals, one of the group of cavillers comes and asks her for a dance, her lovely-blue eyes brighten with anger, the colour deepens on her fair

face, and she sits proudly erect and silent. Her companion frowns and restrains himself with difficulty.

When Mr. Aldworth comes with the same request as his companions, she looks at him with cold contempt.

“I am fatigued, sir—so much fatigued that perhaps I shall not dance again this evening. Pray, sir, tell your friends what I say, so that I may be left in peace.”

Her tone is so haughty that her companion

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looks surprised, and Aldworth draws back, his face full of anger.

There is a silence. Frances feels deeply wounded at this evident conspiracy, and yet she cannot talk about it, for she feels sure it has been planned as an interruption to her conversation with her pleasant companion.

Presently they begin to talk again, but on indifferent outside topics. Frances questions her companion about London, and they discuss the wedding, the bride, and then the bridegroom, and Frances learns that her partner's name is Child—that he is an old friend of the bridegrooms—staying with friends in Reading, and is returning thither tonight, as Lady Ardene's house is full of visitors. They have just got on the subject of the old town, when Sir Charles Knollys comes up with a smiling face.

“Forgive me, madam” he makes a low

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bow to Frances—“for intruding on your talk. You, sir, told me you liked pictures,” he says very courteously to Mr. Child; “I shall be honoured if you will give me the favour of your judgment. Lady Arderne has had some paintings brought from Italy, but I fear she has made a bad bargain. Will you tell me what you think of them, if Mistress Frances Kendrick will excuse your absence?”

Child rises and bows to Frances, but she can scarcely conceal her anger; she flushes deeply as the two gentlemen walk away.

"Sir Charles is mean and ungenerous to join with the rest," she says," and he pretends to be my friend. Why may I not talk to whom I please? I indulged Sir Charles in a long conversation. Ah, I see how it is, I gave him too much license, and he presumes on it. He shall not have a second chance of doing this."

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She keeps to her resolution and does not dance again. She hopes that Mr. Child will return to her when he has seen the pictures, for the seat beside her remains unoccupied; but when he comes back to the ball-room he still goes on talking to Sir Charles, and Frances grows weary of sitting alone.

"How quiet you are! Why are you not dancing, child?" a gentle voice says.

Mistress Frances starts. She has been so lost in reverie that she has not heard Mistress Iwardby's approach. She looks brighter at once, as she gazes up into the sweet peaceful face. Her cousin's fair smooth forehead tells how tranquil Mistress Iwardby's life has been, and her gentleness soothes the girl's wounded feelings. "I thought, child," the sweet voice goes on, "that you meant to dance all through the

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evening. You said yesterday one could not dance too much at a ball, and I am sure it is not the fault of the gentlemen that you sit still. Tour dancing is one of your attractions, Maurice says."

"I am tired, dear Camilla."

"Are you not vexed too?" Mistress Iwardby says kindly. "You do not tire so easily; your bright face does not look itself. Surely your partner, the handsome stranger I saw you dancing with, has not said anything to vex you, or"—she looks round—"or any of the others?"

"Oh no, no; never heed my looks," Frances laughs, "it is nothing; I am only tired and silly. But are you going away, Camilla?" for Mistress Iwardby rises.

"Yes, my love; Maurice has ordered our coach to be called, so I just came to bid you good-night."

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Frances also rises.

"I am to sleep here to-night, and I wish I was abed," she says, yawning, "so I shall make my escape when you leave, and tomorrow I shall go home before breakfast; I cannot stay to hear this evening's doings publicly discussed," she adds with a troubled look.

Mistress Iwardby sees that she is flushed and agitated.

"You are right," she says, "you want rest, child; and if you are tired of dancing there is nothing to stay for."

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CHAPTER IV.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

Homewards did she then return,
But her heart with flames did burn.

Old Ballad.

SHE soon sent away her maid, but though she had declared herself ready for bed, she sat down before the dressing-table, with its bevelled looking-glass in a black trefoil-headed frame, and the two massive silver candlesticks that shed scarcely any light over the gloomy bed-chamber. Her maid had loosened tor soft fair hair, and it fell like a golden shower to her waist. Nowadays, such a huge four-post bed, with feathers at each comer, and embroidered satin

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hangings and quilt, would suggest ideas of strange unearthly visitants in the dark and spacious sleeping-room. The great oaken presses looked big enough to give shelter to a family of ghosts, and the tapestry on one side waved fitfully as the blaze from the fire roared up the chimney, and drew the wind through every chink. But Frances was well accustomed to such a bed-chamber, and she was far too full of pleasant thoughts to heed her surroundings. Sir Charles Knollys, Sir Henry Wilder, and all her other persecutors were forgotten as she sat, her fair face more flushed and pensive than usual, going over every word, every tone, spoken by Mr. Child. She closed her eyes, and he seemed to stand before her; how manly, how noble he was, and how true he seemed—how unlike anyone she had ever known! He had not boasted, he had

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not flattered, he had employed no art either to win her regard or to display his own perfections. “I did not think such a man lived,” she thought. It was not so much what he had said—for they had not had much conversation—but that he had sympathised with her so warmly, and his eyes had been full of earnest feeling and of respectful admiration. “Thank Heaven he does not consider me a doll or a simpleton either; he did not flatter me; he treated me like a woman who can think of something be-sides herself and her looks,” she said ardently.

It was so new to be treated in this fashion, and by one who fulfilled her ideal of outward seeming, and who appeared full of merit. Frances leant back in her chair, and gave herself up to that delicious dream, the glamour of first love. She saw Mr. Child invested with all the perfection

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which her imagination flung round him, a perfection so exalted that she could not choose but worship it. The sound of the music from the far-off ball-room reached her,

but did not interrupt the growth of her sudden passion—too sudden—too new to rouse any struggle against it, till at last she became aware of total silence, and, opening her eyes, she saw that her candles had burned low; she started to her feet, and stretching as if she had been sound asleep, she roused mentally to the feeling that she must, she would see Mr. Child again.

She looked round shivering. The fire had sunk on the broad hearth, and the logs were white with dead ash. Not a sound stirred in the sleeping house; the silence felt oppressive, almost as if it were tenanted by invisible forms. Frances said her prayers quickly, and very soon she was lying in the huge bed, her white arm curled round

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her lovely head, sleeping as soundly as an infant.

She waked early, and summoned her maid, and long before the other guests had left their beds, Mistress Kendrick's carriage stood at the hall door, and in a few minutes she was driving rapidly through the keen crisp air, between brown hedges, with here and there a bunch of dried-up berries, a relic of their autumn glories.

She had not far to drive. Very soon she had left the high-road, where a hand-post pointed ghost-like arms in two directions, and turning down a leafy lane, towards which it did not point, she reached her own park gates, and the old avenue that led to the house.

But when she had breakfasted, Frances was far less happy this morning than she had been in her over-night reverie. She could think only of Mr. Child, and her home and

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all her accustomed surroundings seemed to reproach her for her apostasy.

“I who have always railed at men,” she said, as she paced the broad terrace at the back of the house, on to which the chief sitting-rooms opened. “I who know so well their greedy selfish hearts, and how cleverly they can use a woman's vanity to further their own ends, can it be that I have let a man take up so much space in my thoughts? It is

sheer idleness, and I must drive it away."

She stamped her little high-heeled shoe angrily on the gravelled terrace, and so startled a peacock sitting on one of the stone balls that topped the steps which led into the flower-garden below, that at once the bird rose, shook out his plumes, and spread his tail in the sunshine. "Yes, you poor fool," Frances said

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angrily, "you are just like a man, full of vanity; all he wants is for his own pleasure, his own profit; he cares not a jot for the pleasure of others; indeed you are better, for your lovely plumage is a pleasure to others."

She went indoors again, and sat down to her harpsichord. Mechanically, she found herself playing the measure she had last danced with Mr. Child.

"This is folly, idiocy," she said indignantly. She rose up, and going to the well-filled book shelves, took down a volume. It was a romance, but though the tale was exciting, the part at which she had opened it seemed to her tame and insipid. The love scenes, especially, provoked her; they read so unlike the reality she had dreamed of. She laid the book on her knee, and at once her fancy called up the face of Mr.

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Child on the open page; she seemed to hear his grave firm voice in her ear.

"This is too weak," she said to herself, "I will not submit to this tyranny; a canter on old Dapple will cure me of this nightmare."

She rang the bell, and then she paced up and down the old library, her favourite retreat. It was just the haunt for a middle-aged student, but too dreamy a place for so fair and bright a mistress as Frances Kendrick, with its old-world quaintness; for all was old here, from the dulled gilding of the volumes which surrounded three sides of the room, to the row of old portraits just below the heavy wooden cornice of a coved ceiling, elaborately painted with the downfall of Phaeton. The floor was dark and shining, but in front of each of the writing and reading tables was a

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Persian rug. The chairs looked more quaint than comfortable, tall carved backs and horsehair seats, or plain wooden, seat and back alike, except for the row of thin sticks behind. Perhaps the chairs suited the books, for Frances's father. Sir William Kendrick, had been a virtuoso in his time, and there was in the library a fair array of old black-letter volumes, and rare editions in heavy wooden and leathern bindings, books that asked for good hard study, not books to be lounged over and skimmed through, curled up on a sofa, or in a modern easy chair.

There were doors, one at each end, but even these hints of an outer world were screened by dark red curtains of the same stuff as those which fell heavily on each side of the windows. The harpsichord, the blazing fire with a work-table beside it, some

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fresh flowers in a blue and white pot on one of the tables, told that the room was lived in, and not only resorted to for reference.

Its fair owner had fallen into a reverie, while she paced up and down, but as the clock on the high oak mantel-shelf strack ten, she flushed, threw back her head, and hastened to her room to be dressed for her ride.

She looked fairer than ever, mounted on her horse, in the laced riding-coat and hat worn by ladies of that day—of so masculine a cut that, but for the petticoats showing below the skirts of the coat, Frances might have been taken for some gay young cavalier.

As she cantered through the stately avenues of Calcot Park, the mere exercise and the fresh keenness of the air restored

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her spirits, but soon the signs of wealth on every side of her brought back disquieting thoughts.

"If I were only poor, I should be left in peace by these heartless coxcombs, and——" a bright blush checked her. "How ungrateful I am," she went on after a while, "to be so thankless for all I have, while I lavish my thoughts on a man who has no doubt by this time forgotten I exist." At this her blush deepened, and spread over face and throat also—she had never thought of this possibility before. Would he forget her?

No, he would not; she could see still the sweet glances he gave her when she spoke of her love for the country—he had taken pains to show her that he preferred her taste to that of town-bred ladies.

"Oh my foolish vanity!" cried poor Frances aloud; "are there no other country

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girls besides me far more attractive too than I am?"

She was riding along a grassed alley—something made her look up. Close beside her was Sir Charles Knollys, gazing at her with a calm satirical smile.

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CHAPTER V.

MR. BENJAMIN CHILD.

MR. CHILD left the ball-room soon after Mistress Kendrick's departure.

A seat was offered him outside Lady Bab Aldworth's coach, and as the evening had become distasteful to him, he preferred to return to his friend Mr. Lyndford at Reading, instead of sleeping at Arderne Park, as that house was already overcrowded with guests. He, too, had a sleepless night, and as soon as breakfast was over he told his host that he should start for London by the morning's stage-coach.

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"La, Mr. Child, I vow you surprise me

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Below the window was a pleasant garden, with plots of primroses and delicate spring blossoms, bright sunshine doubling all outside

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beauty, and lighting up the dingy old books as it streamed into the study. As soon as the door was closed, Mr. Lyndford turned round on his friend, and considered him with some curiosity. “I have made a rule,” he said, with his head a little on one side, “never to question a man before a woman, so I said nothing in Lucy's presence; but perhaps, Ben, now that we are alone, you will inform me why you go back to smoky London and musty law a day sooner than you had intended? Did you get a brief thrust upon you at the wedding yesterday?”

The young lawyer smiled. “Alas, no; but why should law be mustier in London than it is here, Lawyer Lyndford?”

“Why, my good fellow?”—the benevolent middle-aged solicitor smiled blandly at his younger friend—“inhale that sweet balmy

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breeze rushing through the room, and answer your own question; do you think that would not sweeten even the mustiness of parliamentary records?”

“I do not know.” Mr. Child rested one knee on the cushioned window-seat, and gazed dreamily at the white and gray tower of St. Mary's.

“You are too hasty, old friend,” said Mr. Lyndford, “I wish you would change your mind; why not take the chance of seeing our famous heiress again?” he added this with a comical raising of his left eyebrow.

"There is no saying what a pretty fellow like you, Ben, might not effect, and I know you found Mistress Frances charming; I heard you saying so to Lucy."

"Yes, I do not deny it, her beauteous face and winning manner haunt me still; but as to seeing her again" Child paused, and then turned round from the window.

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"To be plain with you, Lyndford, I dare not run the risk; 'tis better for me to believe her the heartless flirt all call her, and go away heart-whole, and try to forget her. Poor girl! she is much to be pitied, to have so many enemies already."

"Pitied! by the Lord Harry, you had better tell Mistress Frances Kendrick she's to be pitied, and make the best of the answer she will give you," said Lyndford laughing.

"Is she ill-tempered then?"

"Nay; she has, I believe, the sweetest nature a woman was ever blessed with; but she has got a devil of a spirit, and I'm told she would rather die than be pitied by anyone."

"A noble disposition, truly; the more I hear of this lady, the better I like her," said Child musingly; then rousing himself he said: "No, I am sure I had best not see

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Mistress Kendrick again, it is best so." He looked out of the window once more for some minutes, as if he were counting the crocuses; at last he turned round to his friend. "I must go," he said, "and 'tis time I was off, old friend." He shook hands heartily with Mr. Lyndford; then he said carelessly: "Write and tell me if she marries. I'll wager it will not be one of those contemptible puppies who paint her in such black colours; somehow I felt a longing to thrash 'em all round last night—the cowards. At first I would not listen; I cried out, and told them they were attacking an undefended woman, but that would-be-friend of hers, Sir Charles Knollys, somehow persuaded me that my defence damaged her: 'She has them all on her side at first, that is her plan,' says he; 'your evidence tells, against her.'"

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"Is Sir Charles Knollys her friend?" said Lyndford; "he has been abroad for years, is a new-comer among us, and now report says he is engaged to be married to one of the Devonshire Courtenays."

"I do not believe in his good faith towards her; now I think it all over, it seems to me that his faint praise did her more harm than good in my opinion. Every word he said seemed to hint that she deserved blame, but that he was resolved to shield her.

Even if she has refused such a pack of cowards and slanderers, who can blame her? I vow not one man among 'em is fit to buckle her shoe."

He looked keenly at his cautious friend.

Lyndford shook his head. "Some of 'em are my clients," he said. "For my part, I don't think she is a coquette; I believe the worst story against her is about Sir Henry

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Wilder—he has never actually solicited her in marriage to my knowledge, but 'tis said she sometimes encourages him, and then repulses him, till the poor fellow's absolutely mad about her. Odso! if she don't many someone soon, there'll be a love and murder case, depend on't. Sir Henry's is not an easy temper."

"She is far too good for any one of them, a set of tale-bearing, pitiful fellows," said Mr. Child bitterly, as he went to see after his valise.

Lyndford sighed and looked after him. "Ben is foolish and faint-hearted. If he stayed a little longer, he might at least take his chance with the rest. With his face and figure," he said to himself, "setting aside his agreeable qualities, he might have had a chance with a generous-hearted, simple-minded girl like this Frances Kendrick—

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heiress though she be. Faith, I should like to draw the marriage settlements in his favour. However, match-making never prospers, and 'tis not in my way of business, but

maybe Dame Fortune has still a prize for Ben in her cup. He is too fastidious and refined to take up with a girl in his own class, and yet because he has no money to offer any woman, he is too proud to try for an heiress. We shall see; he is well-favoured enough to win the heart of a princess." And he went on with his writing.

But here was Mr. Child again; he had sent on his luggage to the Crown; and once more he grasped his friend's hand, and thanked him warmly for his hospitality.

"Don't name it, my good fellow"—the lawyer patted Child's shoulder—"I hope you'll try us again soon; we owe you thanks for your company, that's poz; you don't

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seem to consider how a little light from London brightens up our country faculties; there's Lucy, now, quite taken up with the new modes you brought her, and the barrel of oysters was a rare treat to us both."

"Ah"—Mr. Child looked radiant—"I'm glad you liked 'em. Oysters are food for the gods. That's just one point, Lyndford, in which the country can't touch London there aren't any oyster-shops."

He nodded and laughed, and took his way out of the red-brick house, while his host stood in the quaint little porch and watched his departure.

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CHAPTER VI.

MALICE.

Mistress Frances flushed with surprise, and for a moment her usual self-possession deserted her. Sir Charles raised his hat, and coming nearer, he bowed low on his saddle.

"I called at the house, madam," he said, "and was told to follow this grassed ride in order to meet you here. I was anxious to learn that you had recovered from last night's

fatigues, but I need not ask, the bloom on your cheeks vouches for it. You are radiant as a Hebe, I vow."

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Frances felt shy again—her self-possessed grace had deserted her, for she feared Sir Charles might have overheard her last words.

He turned his horse and rode beside her, talking on as if nothing had occurred on the previous evening to disturb their friendship.

Presently they came upon a herd of deer, the park being well stocked with these pretty creatures, but they scampered away at the sound of the horses' tread, looking like white and brown spots between the boles of the leafless elms.

Frances turned towards the house, and the conversation, which had hitherto been on mere general topics, began to flag. At last Sir Charles said:

"Did you enjoy the wedding yesterday?"

"Yes and no!" Then Frances struck her horse lightly with the little whip she

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carried. "I must ask you to excuse me," she said smiling, as she looked towards the house; "I see that I am wanted."

A stately old butler was standing on the terrace shading his eyes with his hand from the glare of the morning sunshine, and looking in all directions.

"Poor old Downes is so blind," she said, and then she rode up the edge of the sunk fence which divided the park from the garden.

The butler hurried down the stone steps and between the now empty garden plots, till he got within speech of his mistress, while Frances kept a waiting look on her face which checked further speech from Sir Charles.

"If you please, madam," the butler said, "Mistress Purley is awaiting you in the library."

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"Mistress Purley! Is it possible that the dear old lady is still in existence?" Sir Charles exclaimed. "How fortunate to find her here. I shall be charmed to renew our acquaintance; she was a kind old soul. I will come in to see her if you will permit me, madam."

Inwardly he cursed the person who had disturbed his *tête-à-tête* with the heiress, but there was no trace of vexation in his face as he assisted Mistress Frances to dismount at the hall-door, on the other side of the house, and followed her to the library.

Mistress Angelina Purley—for the good lady was a spinster in spite of more than one praiseworthy effort on her part to change her condition—had been the trusted friend of Lady Kendrick, who in dying had begged her to watch over her young daughter; for Frances had lost both her

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parents very early, and had been left ostensibly to the guardianship of her aunt, Lady Arderne. But, as Mr. Iwardby told Sir Charles Knollys, there were four awkward unattractive Miss Ardernes, some years older than the bright heiress of Calcot Park, and it was not surprising that her cold worldly aunt considered Frances a dangerous rival.

In accordance with her father's eccentric will. Mistress Frances became her own mistress when only seventeen years old, and she then announced her intention of living alone at Calcot Manor House, without other chaperonage than that of Mistress Purley, her old friend and near neighbour. Lady Arderne did not oppose her niece's wish. She felt glad to be released from any supervision, and she felt, too, that if Frances lived alone she must of necessity live in seclusion, and would be less likely to

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eclipse her cousins; it would be time enough to provide her niece with a husband when all her own daughters were disposed of.

There was a set of rooms at the Manor House appropriated to Mistress Purley's use, but the old lady preferred to keep an independent house of her own, though she came every day to see Frances. This morning she had come over to Calcot extra early, to hear an account of the wedding festivities.

She started up from her seat when she saw Frances, and gave her a hearty kiss.

"You look ill, sweet child," she cried; and then, all at once, perceiving that Mistress Frances was followed by a gentleman, she gave a little start, dropped a low curtsy, and bridled till Frances introduced Sir Charles Knollys.

"Sir Charles Knollys," the old lady made

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another deep curtsy; "an uncle, I presume, or a relative of the young gentleman, your playfellow in former times. Mistress Frances?"

It was against Mistress Purley's code of manners to address her young friend more familiarly before a gentleman.

"Good faith, madam, spite of my antique look, I am myself that young gentleman."

Sir Charles held out his hand—then smiling at her evident discomfiture: "I hope the pleasure I feel at meeting so old a friend is reciprocated, dear Mistress Purley; 'tis plain that time has worked backwards with you; in faith, I might rather ask if you are a younger sister of the fair dame I so well remember."

Mistress Purley was tremulous with delight, and a pretty pink flush showed on her faded cheeks.

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"I vow I am vastly pleased, Sir Charles," she said, but she looked confused and spoke fast, "only—but—I may say I am incredulous—I mean I am surprised at your rapid growth, sir. Have you not reached man's estate too quickly?—that is, I should say, outgrown your strength, I fear."

"My dear lady"—Sir Charles was now laughing heartily—"I am seven-and-twenty; surely 'tis high time I had left off growing."

Mistress Purley looked suddenly serious; she pinched her lips together and shook her head.

"La! Sir Charles—seven-and-twenty!—now really you should not, but you were always droll. Still, even in jest, you should not advance your age; people will remember your words and forget that you spoke merrily."

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"I am not jesting, dear madam, 'pon honour." He was bent on tormenting her.

"Sure"—he turned to Frances, who was listening with some amusement to his dispute with her old friend—"there must be a book somewhere in this old library where I can show you my age faithfully set down; not only mine, but yours, and this fair lady's as well." He began to examine the book-shelves behind him.

Mistress Purley tossed her small head with an air of indifference, though she was inwardly alarmed at the threatened disclosure of her age. "Too-too-too, Sir Charles," she said, with an upward jerk of her small chin, "people who write books are, I am told, quite untrustworthy. They print many falsehoods on this subject of age even in the Peerage." Then, anxious to check his researches: "How did you enjoy

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the ball last night, my dear?" she said with interest.

Sir Charles looked keenly at Mistress Frances. She coloured, but she answered at once: "Vastly, Aunt Purley." Then, seeing Sir Charles's eyes still fixed on her, her spirit was roused, and she went on gaily:

"The wedding was entertaining, and I thought 'twas a most pleasant evening, but I fancy you. Sir Charles, must have found it dull and tiresome after your gay London assemblies."

He bowed. “I know you disdain compliments, madam, but you have given me a fine opportunity.”

“Which you seldom seem to need,” she answered saucily, and her eyes sparkled.

Mistress Purley 's lips puckered with propriety.

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“Now, my dear, my dear,” she said anxiously, and she shook her fan at her young friend.

“There were several strangers at the ball, people of distinction, madam,” Sir Charles said.

Again he gave Frances a searching look, though he spoke carelessly.

Frances felt the warm colour rush to her temples, and she stooped down to pat Mistress Purley's little pug-dog, just then amusing himself with the fringe of her long riding-coat.

Mistress Purley's curiosity was fully aroused; her quick eyes had taken note of Sir Charles's manner, and of her favourite's blushes.

“Ladies or gentlemen, Sir Charles?” she said slyly.

He was quietly watching Frances.

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“Both, madam; but there was one special gentleman from London, who, if size goes for aught, was quite a person of distinction. You danced with him more than once, I think, Mistress Frances, and he doubtless told you his name on the second occasion, or in the long discourse that followed between you. 'Twas an everyday name, was it not?”

His lip had a malicious curve in it. He hoped to confound Frances, and he was surprised to see her turn round and look him steadily in the face.

“Do you mean Mr. Benjamin Child, Sir Charles? He was the only stranger with whom I danced.”

Her calmness so irritated him that he resolved to try its strength.

“Yes, madam, I think he was the happy man you so greatly distinguished by your

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favour; and if I may judge by the very pleasing discourse with which he afterwards favoured me, you must have found him a most agreeable partner. I must apologise for having interrupted you as I did, but I wished to improve the acquaintance of a gentleman so evidently honoured by your good opinion; however, your friends Mr. Blagrave, Sir Francis Englefield, Sir Henry Wilder, and the rest so besieged Mr. Child with their attentions during the rest of the evening, that he had no ears for me."

"La! now, I vow I am surprised," said Mistress Purley, with a simper; "I thought those gentlemen were fonder of besieging ladies."

"Ha, ha!" Sir Charles laughed, "that is excellent. Now I dare swear, madam, you are all agog to hear what these gentlemen talked upon to Mr. Child. 'Twas a

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fair enough subject, marvellous fair, in truth; but I must be discreet, you know; I might breed mischief unawares."

He paused to see the effect of his words, and looked full at Frances. She had risen, and she now walked away to the farthest window with stately steps, so angered by Sir Charles's impertinence that she could scarcely contain herself.

Mistress Purley looked round too, and seeing that Frances was out of hearing, snapped greedily at Sir Charles's bait.

"You may confide in me in all safety, sir," she said coaxingly. "I never tell tales."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You must not blame me, dear madam. I tell you, as you are the confidant of our fair friend, I tried my best to take her part, when Mr. Child questioned me as to the accusation made against her."

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"Accusation, Sir Charles!" Mistress Purley looked fluttered. "I protest I do not understand you, sir."

"Do not agitate yourself, madam, I beg," he went on in a lower voice, "this accusation is not new; it appears that these gentlemen. Sir Henry Wilder and others, have for some time past considered themselves ill-used and unfairly treated by Mistress Frances; you must know best whether they are right. I, in duty bound, as an old friend, flatly refused to believe that so fair a face belonged to so cold a heart, and I acquainted this Mr. Child with my opinion; but I was by evil chance too late.

These discarded suitors. Sir Henry Wilder, Sir Francis Englefield, and the rest had been firm and united in their story. They had told him, to their shame be it said, that our fair friend is a cold-hearted coquette, that she

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tries to inspire love in every man she sees, for the simple pleasure of refusing him when he proposes to her. I do not wonder you look affrighted, my dear madam, at such scandal. I did what I could—I said there were two sides to every tale; but Mr. Child, who is a self-sufficient pragmatical Londoner,

refused to take the word of a stranger on the scene against those of men who declared themselves the victims of the fair lady's vanity, and so forth; and I fancy the pitiful fellow left the ball thanking his stars that he escaped heart-whole from the charms and snares of our sweet Frances. He plainly thought her a too dangerous attraction, and *entre nous* madam, she certainly showed him marked favour."

Mistress Purley had grown pale with fear. She sat agitated and perplexed, one finger pressed on her lips, thinking how she could

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best refute this calumny, the other drumming on her black paduasoy skirt; but as Sir Charles went on mingling his blame with judicious praise of Frances, she began to waver. She saw that though he defended her darling in words, and was evidently a

stanch friend—for did he not *profess* himself such?—yet he implied a belief in the truth of the accusation; and when at last, flushed with eagerness, he bent down and whispered, looking handsomer than ever: "On my conscience, it grieves me to the soul even to repeat a word against so fair a creature," the old lady's mind misgave her altogether, and doubts of Frances took possession of her feeble soul. She had already thought it strange that her young friend had not wished for her company at this ball; was it possible that there had been something the child desired to hide from her?

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Sir Charles kept his clever eyes fixed on the weak troubled face. At last Mistress Purley burst out sobbing.

"Dear, dear! all this is terribly sad and foolish. This comes of a young girl, scarce out of the nursery, being let guide herself Poor Sir William, he did it for the best; but it was a mistake, I knew it was. I'm sure I've tried hard to teach the dear child how to behave with decorum—well, well!" she whimpered and pulled out her handkerchief.

Sir Charles felt that he had done enough mischief, and he might now retire. He lounged carelessly up to the window where Mistress Frances stood.

"Farewell, dear madam," he said, "I grieve to find you in so serious a mood this morning; may I venture to ask, is it fatigue or melancholy that oppresses you?"

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Frances turned round, and her eyes brightened with anger.

"More likely vexation, sir," she said.

"I have been sorely vexed and wearied this morning, and I am the more vexed that I have let so small a cause disturb me. But"—and she laughed—"'tis but a puff of smoke after all."

Sir Charles grew scarlet. "Next time we meet, madam," he said, "I hope to find you better pleased with yourself; "then he hurried away biting his lip, and made a low bow and short work of his adieux to Mistress Purley.

As he cantered back to Reading he was surprised at his mortification and his revengeful feelings. At the wedding dinner he had been far more charmed with Frances Kendrick than he chose to own to himself, and while he danced with her his senses had

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become captivated by her grace and beauty and sprightly talk. Something deeper than even his vanity had been roused by Mr. Child's devoted manner to this beautiful girl, and the evident pleasure with which she had listened to this stranger; and it had been at Sir Charles's own instigation that the rejected suitors had poured out their complaints to Frances's partner, though Knollys had afterwards affected a lame defence of the fair heiress.

He had come over this morning to Calcot Park divided between love and jealousy, but Mistress Frances's coldness had determined his feelings, and he resolved to destroy the interest which she had betrayed in Mr. Child.

“And if I ever see this fellow again, by the Lord Harry, I'll mark him for life; she

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shall take no more delight in his barber's block of a countenance.”

He had reached the quaint old town, and as he drew near the market-place all thought of Mistress Kendrick suddenly vanished.

An immense crowd had collected here, and an itinerant hawker, standing raised on a tub, was spouting from a broadsheet, in a strong nasal twang, to the gaping rustics, an account of the glorious victory, news of which had just arrived.

“'Fore George,” Sir Charles exclaimed, “I must go back to town at once; there'll be a rare stir about this.”

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CHAPTER VII.

A RESOLUTION.

MISTRESS FRANCES left the library as soon as Sir Charles had departed, and did not come downstairs again for some time. When she appeared she looked more charming than ever, spite of the languor in her eyes. She wore a white damask negligee—a loose wrapping-gown trimmed with the palest blue—and this opening in front showed an underskirt of pale blue, trimmed with soft flounces of the same stuff, the colour adding brilliancy to her exquisite skin. The skirt hung closely, and as it was somewhat short

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in front, it showed her pretty little black shoes with their silver buckles and high red heels. She looked like an embodiment of spring coming into the old gloomy room.

"Not reading, not working. Aunt Purley," for the old lady sat bolt upright with her mittened hands clasped in front of her; "how can you be so lazy?" she said saucily, while the pug looked up at her with an intelligent air of bewilderment; then stooping so as to bring those soft exquisitely tinted cheeks near the withered puckered face, she gave Mistress Purley a little shower of kisses, and gently pinched the old lady's ear.

"Why so miserable? Poor Lion clearly thinks you are going to die. Come, auntie, come, no secrets from me, you know. Has the game-cock pecked the chicks again, or has the Angora cat gone astray? Poor old

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Lion, you don't understand such dismal looks." At his name the comical-faced pug jumped up on her and wagged his tail. "'Come, Aunt Purley, out with it; you know you'll have to tell me sooner or later, so begin. What has Sir Charles been saying to you about me? I know he has not spared me." She took a chair facing Mistress Purley, and fixed her eyes gravely upon the troubled old face.

Mistress Purley began to stammer : "Oh dear—dear—dear! my poor child! what is to be

done?" She took out her handkerchief, but the laughing girl snatched it from her hand; then she hesitated, but Frances shook her head and looked grave; at last, in words that stumbled one against another. Mistress Purley began to repeat Sir Charles's confidences, dwelling on the way in which the girl had behaved to the

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rejected suitors. She sighed deeply between each sentence. But no answer came from Frances.

"Good Lord!" the old lady went on, "'twas different when I was young; then, if a girl had taken half the freedoms 'tis said you have used, Frances, she'd not have dared hold up her head at a ball. I cannot tell you, I cannot indeed."

Frances flung herself on her knees before Mistress Purley. "You must tell me all," she said; "how can I mend my manners if I don't know all that I've done amiss?"

"Dear—dear, 'tis sadly changed, child; girls judge for themselves, and give pert answers and flout men till they vex them into saying all manner of ill of them. Oh, 'tis a sad change of manners!" Here she put her handkerchief to her eyes, for she expected that Frances would fly into a

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passion. But instead she sat listening till Mistress Purley ended her confidences by telling how Mr. Child had been informed by her rejected suitors of her misconduct, and how earnestly Sir Charles had tried to defend her; and then the old lady sighed deeply, keeping her handkerchief to her eyes.

Still no words came from the young girl. Presently there was a deep shuddering sob.

Mistress Purley looked up briskly, and let fall her handkerchief. The bright sunny head was clasped in the fair hands, and tears were falling on the pale blue skirt.

"What's this, my dear—my poor dear child!" Up jumped the little old lady and put a thin trembling hand on Frances's heaving shoulder. "Too-too-too—there—there, my poor lamb;" but the shoulder was turned

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from her, and a decided shake of the head bade her desist. She waited a while, and then she tried scolding and soothing and petting by turns; but all were useless, Frances wept uncontrollably, with bitter deep-drawn sobs.

At last her grief seemed spent, her sobs grew quiet. All at once she turned to the discomfited Mistress Purley.

"What a goose I am! why should I care a feather for all this scandal? In truth I am quite overdone with fatigue and excitement. Yesterday was the first wedding I ever attended, and it shall be the last,'" she said, smiling, and shaking the bright hair back from her tear-stained face; "people should take two days to get married in, if everyone else has to work so hard in making merry. Now, farewell. Aunt Purley, I shall go lie down and rest."

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Mistress Purley had been giving utterance to a sort of clucking, intended to express regret. She looked guilty, too, for conscience reproached her with having perhaps judged too hardly and hastily.

"I cannot leave you while you are in trouble, dear love," she said, and then she cleared her throat; but a glance from Frances warned her not to revert to the subject of the trouble. "Yes, yes," she said purringly, "yes, you had better lie down, sweet child, and I shall sit beside you till you fall asleep. I will not speak, I promise you."

"As you please," said Frances resolutely, "but if you remain then I stay here; I certainly shall not even try to lie down till you are out of the house. Come again tomorrow if you choose. Aunt Purley; but you must go away now, or I stay here."

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She fixed her eyes resolutely on her old friend, and then Mistress Parley yielded. She

made a few more remonstrances, and kissed her very tenderly; then bade her go to bed at once, and went back to her cottage full of lamentation that Sir William Kendrick should have made so eccentric a will, and that such a lovely spoiled child should be at liberty to guide herself. "Misguide, I should rather say," she said ruefully, "she lacks discretion; a sad want in a woman!" and her tears began again; but when this burst of regret had spent itself, the good old lady did not feel quite so satisfied with herself as usual. There was a thorn in her self-complacency. She was conscious that she had listened too easily to Sir Charles. She had too readily believed evil of Frances. She ought to have silenced him. She ought to have told him that she

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knew the dear child better than any of them did.

Frances went to her room as soon as she was alone, dismissed her maid, and gave orders that she was not to be disturbed; but she had no intention of going to sleep—she wanted solitude—she felt altogether roused out of herself, and she longed for quiet in which to think.

She had often pondered her lonely life, and though her mind was too bright and too elastic to mourn over it, except as regarded the loss of her parents, lately there had come to her a strange unaccustomed longing for sympathy, sympathy different from the tepid intercourse she had hitherto had with neighbours and acquaintances. She was utterly weary of the flattery and homage paid to her beauty and her wealth. She longed to give instead of receiving—she craved for

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something on which she could lavish the powers of her heart and mind, something better and nobler than herself, something which would claim worship as well as love. Every day it seemed to her that she jarred more and more with the tastes and sentiments she heard expressed, and that this new chord or want in her nature thrilled every day more strongly through her.

Suddenly, at the ball last night, it seemed as if this inward craving for what she had not found, found response. All these longings after what she had thought an impossible ideal had been satisfied; the soft tender fibres of her nature had been laid bare, and were ready to vibrate at the breath of love.

She almost worshipped her conqueror, for not only had he inspired these delicious sensations, but he had proved to her that the ideal she had created was no mere conjuration of a

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girl's fancy, but a living reality. And he also had seemed to find full sympathy in her. She could have sworn she saw disappointment and anger in his eyes when Sir Charles came and broke in on their talk, when she had been teased by her admirers. And now, what had happened? Before this germ of preference for her had time to root in his heart, in the very hour of its beginning, she had been slandered to him, so slandered that he would set down every sympathetic word, every responsive glance she had given him, to coquetry and falsehood.

She walked up and down her room in fast increasing anger, her heart swelled against the treachery that had been practised, for she intuitively guessed the share Sir Charles Knollys had taken in defaming her.

"Oh! it is hard," she said passionately; "if all the world had slandered Mr. Child

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to me, I should not have believed a word without proof, I should have protested his innocence. How could he believe the tales of these foolish men? strangers to him, too, for he told me he knew no one at the ball.

Ah, my folly! what is he but a man himself; will not a man always take the word of men against women; do not all men delight to catch us women tripping; and why should I feel trust in him more than in other men; what right have I to believe in him?"

She walked up and down faster, asking herself this question over and over again: By

what right could she expect Mr. Child's disbelief in these tales against her? "What previous knowledge had he of me? But does he believe these stories?—yes, he does. He did not approach me afterwards; and if he does believe the slander, he will just go to London without trying to see me

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again. Yes, he is only a pitiful fellow after all."

At last she stopped, and flinging out her arms she cried passionately:

"But I have a right that he should trust me, that he should believe in me. He has destroyed my peace; till I saw him, my heart beat stilly; all men were the same to me, and now—now all is changed. How does he dare trouble me with these unquiet thoughts and throbbings, and yet go on his own way free? It shall not be; he has robbed me of my happy life, and I will have some redress."

She stamped her foot angrily on the oak floor; the hollow sound that came back seemed to mock her; she smiled at her own vehemence.

"How silly I am! how more than silly I am!—unmaidenly, contemptible; what can

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I do? I cannot make him love me against his will. Ah no! men must despise unsought affection, and turn from it with disgust; but though I could never seek him, if he saw me again, cleared from the slur of these black falsehoods, would he not—might he not—?"

She clasped her hands over her eyes, she longed to frame in the delightful vision that presented itself, and she stood still wrapt in this happy more hopeful mood.

But, sighing, she soon roused.

"No," she said sadly. "It all comes back to this. No man has a right to act as he acted last night." She paused, and then went on vehemently. "He must have seen that I was a frank simple girl, and he tried to steal my heart out of my body; and then, because he heard me falsely accused, he turned his back on me and

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condemned me unheard. He did not seek me again, and he might have done so before I left the room. He would not even give me a chance of justifying myself; he behaved like a coward. No, unless I regain my peace, and that quickly, I must evermore hate Mr. Benjamin Child."

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CHAPTER VIII.

MISTRESS PURLEY'S COUNSEL.

AT breakfast next morning Frances's heavy eyelids and pale cheeks told tales of sleeplessness; she had had a wakeful and feverish night. But when Mistress Purley came tripping into the old dining-room, almost as if she were in her teens, the girl ran forward to greet her with all her usual gaiety.

"How bright you look this morning, Aunt Purley!" She took the old lady by the shoulders and kissed her heartily, and indeed the spinster's delicate face glowed with rosy colour, her pretty eyes sparkled,

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and it seemed as if the dark front of curls flattened on her still fair forehead reflected the morning sunshine. "But, my dear thing"—Frances went on unfastening the huge black-silk hood which surrounded her friend's face, and made a very becoming frame for it—"you smother yourself up till I wonder you're not stifled."

Mistress Purley laughed, but she shivered when she was freed from her wrappings, and proceeded to feel with both hands whether her towering cap was safely fixed on her head; then she glanced down at her black paduasoy gown, shook out her skirts, pulled her mittens straight over her small thin knuckles, and finally went through sundry

evolutions with her fan.

"Now, shall we adjourn to the library, my love?" she said, with an air of business, and off she trotted, her small erect

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figure perfectly straight in its outlines, looking yet stiffer against the graceful curves of Frances, while Lion, the pug, trotted on importantly in front as a guide.

When they reached the library Mistress Purley seated herself, and taking her knotting out of a black velvet reticule, she seemed for some moments absorbed in her task.

Meantime Mistress Frances walked up listlessly to a nosegay of snowdrops set in a blue and white china pot drilled full of holes, and bending over them seemed to smell them.

"Snowdrops don't smell, my dear." The good woman's eyes seemed fixed on her knotting, but she was watching Frances curiously from under the lids. "And how pale and heavy-eyed you look, child; I dare venture you have not slept a wink."

Frances did not answer; she moved away

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to the window and stood there, tapping her fingers idly against the glass.

"Come, come," she said gaily over her shoulder, "don't coddle me and moan over me, Aunt Purley, or I shall run away and go off on Dapple, and canter a colour into my cheeks."

"Yes, child, 'tis wonderful what a colour the fresh air gives"—Mistress Purley was eager to seize the opportunity offered—"a sweet rosy colour you had truly when you came in yesterday, and so for that matter had Sir Charles Knollys. What a fine handsome fellow he is!"—she paused for an answer—"so droll, too; I warrant he has an excellent wit, and he is full of agreeable qualities. I hope he will soon be here again, my dear."

Frances turned round—there was plenty of colour in her face now—her cheeks were scarlet with anger.

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"Sir Charles Knollys will never enter this house again with my goodwill," she said vehemently; "he is a conceited presuming coxcomb, and spiteful too, man though he calls himself; I despise him."

The knotting dropped into Mistress. Purley's lap, and she clasped her hands in shocked wonder.

"Ah my dear, my dear," she cried beseechingly, "I do entreat you, be careful; such words are not fit for your lips, Frances; they are vastly ungenteel."

"Ungenteel!"—the girl's well-marked eyebrows knit angrily, and she stamped her foot with such emphasis that Lion actually roused himself to stand up and bark. "I do wonder at you. Aunt Purley"—and then the genuine alarm in the foolish pretty old face provoked a laugh, and Mistress Kendrick checked herself.

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"Oh, well, never mind the paltry fellow; he is not worth a thought; you know, dear, I hate contradiction," she said. "I hate things to happen against my will, and it chafes me to think of the spitefulness of these gentlemen."

She had crossed the room while speaking, and now she flung herself down carelessly on the rug at Mistress Purley's feet.

Mistress Purley hesitated and gave a little cough. "My dear child," she said at last, "I have been young myself, and I"—she bridled, and a pretty rose colour crept into her faded cheeks—"well, I have had lovers in my time; ay, plenty of 'em, Frances. I never would consent to marriage, you know," she shook her head with pitying superiority, "but I kept the balance even between 'em all, child; and yet I remember if they fancied, only *fancied* my

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dear, that I showed the smallest favour to one in preference to the others, the rest of the poor fellows would be driven to—desperation—poor fellows!" She fumbled in her reticule for her pocket-handkerchief. "There were vastly pretty fellows among 'em! Ah me! some of 'em are dead now." Frances bent down to play with Lion to hide the smile she felt rising, but Mistress Purley went on to point the moral of her recollections. "This, my dear, is just what happened to you at Lady Arderne's ball; and I must say, child, what happened after was really your own fault."

"How, madam?" Frances left off teasing Lion and sat upright, though she still kept her face turned away from the old lady. "Do you mean to say that the calumnies were founded on truth?"

"La, child, how you frighten me; you

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must not be so hot-blooded and hasty. I protest you take things up so strongly. I did not mean such a thing. I meant that if you wish to live quietly, you must treat all men alike, give each a kind word and a smile in his turn; keep the balance even, child, and then there can be no room for scandal".

Frances clasped her fingers round her knees and laughed.

"Good heavens! this is just what I am blamed for! I have done this precisely, for I like none of my suitors, so I am barely civil to one among 'em; but see here. Aunt Purley"—a gentler tone came into her voice, and her face drooped over the hands that still clasped her knees—"suppose one's inclination should ever lead one to prefer one lover to the rest, what is one to do? the heart will show its feelings."

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Mistress Purley shook her head and closed her lips tightly. "Ah my dear child, there it is," she said warningly," in my time well-bred young women never knew that they had inclinations and hearts. Hearts indeed! they are most dangerous things, let me tell you, Frances; dangerous to have and still more dangerous to think about. Bless me! they are

the sort of things which a virtuous girl should not have in her own keeping at all. All manner of mischief comes of having hearts." Here her head waggled, and she looked as if she wanted fanning.

Frances glanced up archly and broke into a merry laugh. She turned round and rested her hands on Mistress Purley's lap.

"Dear Aunt Purley, it does me good to hear you talk, and to get such good advice; no one ever told me this before. Do tell

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me," she said mischievously, "to whom did you give your heart and inclination, just to keep, you know, when you were too young to take care of them yourself?"

Mistress Purley shook her head and held up her finger at the lovely sparkling face. "Fie, you are a saucy child, and I see what you mean, but you misconceive me. I was telling you that in my day a young woman would not have thought of disposing of such things, or, indeed, thought about them at all, till her parents or guardians presented to her some well-chosen gentleman as her future husband."

"Ah, how nice that must have been! all trouble saved! But, dear aunt," said Frances demurely, "what can I do? I have no parents; you know I cannot help my orphaned state."

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"No more could I, my dear," said the old lady, with some vivacity. "I was not an heiress 'tis true; but, like you, I was left at an early age alone and independent, and yet you see I did not entangle my heart or my inclinations, child." She drew up her head and pinched her lips together. "I did not consider it right for a single woman to possess any such things."

"Well, but"—Frances laughed and blushed—"suppose when I discover mine I make them over to your keeping, aunt; will you find some very discreet person to entrust them to?"

Mistress Purley beamed and bridled with satisfaction. “Now that's vastly sensible, Frances; that will save you all scandal. 'Twould be the safest plan, I protest. I will do it with the greatest possible pleasure, child.” She hesitated, and then, smoothing

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down her apron with her mittened thumbs, she said slyly: “But now, my dear, what think you really of Sir Charles Knollys? He fought your battle bravely with this Mr. Child, who seemed to think your conduct—well, somewhat trifling.”

Frances's colour fled. All her trouble rolled back in a huge wave of wretchedness. She rose up hastily and turned her back on the spinster.

“Don't talk of him; I said some one discreet. Sir Charles Knollys is neither discreet nor honest; besides, he is as good as married already,” she said angrily.

“Married! la, my dear, and who may the lady be?”

“His intended is a faded beauty with some wealth—Mistress Caroline Courtenay. Oh Aunt Purley,” she said wearily, “how

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can you sit there wasting this lovely sunshine and talking gossip? Come out on the terrace with me directly, and make this fat old dog of yours come too.”

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CHAPTER IX.

NO HOPE.

Many noble persons courted
This young lady, 'tis reported;
But their labour proved in vain.

They could not her love obtain.

Old Ballad.

But even the fresh crisp air did not bring back peace to Frances Kendrick. It seemed to her that her old friend was teasing and contradictory; nay, she even got so far outside her fondness for the spinster as to think her silly, a fact to which affection had hitherto blinded her.

So that she soon relapsed into silence, and

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let the old lady prattle, giving lecture on lecture, and counsel on counsel, without any pretence of listening. Only when Mistress Purley began to make plans for the afternoon, Frances roused herself.

"No, dear aunt," she said decidedly, "that will never do. It is kind of you to wish to amuse me, but I am best alone to-day. Life is crooked—I feel as if all was going wrong with me—I am as cross as two sticks; you had best leave me to myself, then, if I choose, I can get rid of some of my ill humours on Sukey; she is like enough to give me a chance before the day is over." She turned as she spoke to go back to the house.

"Mighty well, my dear"—Mistress Purley smiled, but she tossed her head petulantly—"I never stay where my company is not wanted. I may be wrong—of course we are

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all liable to err, that is if we are human, and you know, Frances, you and I are both frail human beings—but it is so very sad to be headstrong, my dear; you should try to remember the old saying, child : 'Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.' I wish you a good morning, my dear—no, I prefer not to return through the house, I thank you."

"Aunt Purley," Frances exclaimed, but the old lady had already walked quickly off in

high dudgeon, and as just then the butler came forward and claimed his mistress's attention, she was obliged to let her old friend depart unappeased.

"After all, it is better," she thought; "I am too cross just now to beg pardon properly—by afternoon I shall have come to my senses, and then I will go round to the cottage and bring her back to sup with me;

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poor old dear. She has given me the best advice she can. Now, Downes, what has happened?"—for the butler's face was full of penitence as he approached her. "I'll wager he has broken a china jar," she thought; "what a blinking old owl he is."

"By your leave, madam"—the butler bowed gravely—"there is a visitor for you in the library." A bright flush rose on the girl's face, and sudden hope thrilled her heart. "I said, madam, that you was not able to receive visitors, but the gentleman would take no denial."

"How could you be so stupid, man"—her eyes were bright with anger—when did I forbid you to admit visitors?"

The butler stared open-mouthed. This was the first decided rebuke he had received from his sweet-tempered young mistress.

"'Twas only yesterday, if you please,

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madam, you said if Sir Charles Knollys, or Sir Henry Wilder, or—"

"Peace," said Frances sternly, "but this is a strange gentleman; did he give you his name?"

"Lord, no, madam!"—the butler spoke eagerly, for he felt in the right now—"I took no heed to ask his name; I've known Sir Henry Wilder, boy and man, twenty years or more."

Frances frowned; she was too angry to speak, and as she looked towards the terrace, she saw Sir Henry Wilder open one of the library windows; he was evidently coming to seek her.

"This is too bad," she said. "I could lay a cane about that old fellow's shoulders; well, there is no help for it," and she slowly mounted the terrace steps. One thought consoled her in the midst of her vexation—

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the absence of Mistress Parley—she could behave as she pleased without being twitted and lectured afterwards.

Sir Henry Wilder had come out on to the terrace; he made her a low bow, and Frances made an equally low curtsy, but she did not offer him her hand. She saw that he seemed moved out of his usual reserve, and she resolved that the interview should be as brief as possible. He also saw that Frances was not himself.

"I hope, madam," he began, "that I have not offended by presenting myself."

His dark eyes had an almost pathetic expression of entreaty, and Frances was touched against her will.

She felt that this gentleman, however mistaken, was in earnest, and that she had not to fear the covert insolence and sarcasms of Sir Charles Knollys. She felt, too,

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that she had a certain empire over him, and that he would be loth to offend her.

"My servant had orders against admitting visitors," she said calmly, "and I cannot invite you indoors, Sir Henry Wilder. My friend Mistress Purley is not with me to-day to help me entertain my friends."

She paused. She had striven not to look vexed, but she had also striven to speak with dignity. She was wholly unprepared for Wilder's next words.

"Thank Heaven, madam, I find you alone! Hitherto, on one pretext or another, you have refused to listen to me! I can bear it no longer; now I tell you that you must hear me out!"

He looked at her piercingly, as if to read her soul, but she met his gaze without fear, and her lip curled as she answered:

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"It was noble and truly worthy of a gentleman to try and surprise a lady alone! You can say what you have come to say, Sir Henry," she added coldly.

"Pardon me, dearest Frances!"—he clasped his hands beseechingly—"have patience with me! You know nothing of the tortures of love! your pure guileless heart lies cold and unsunned as a flowerbud! If it could but feel the fierce heat that consumes mine it would know all I suffer—it would long to soothe and bless. Ah, fairest as well as dearest, do not steel yourself against me thus!" for Frances had turned from his passionate gaze, and was now secretly wishing that her old friend was beside her. "Give me but a hearing—let me try to win you! I will submit to any trial you may impose; give any pledge you may require; wait any time, so

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long as you bid me hope that at last you will smile on me, unworthy as I am of the prize I seek!"

He had knelt down while he spoke, and catching at her dress he raised its hem to his lips and kissed it passionately.

"Oh," cried Frances, for his agitation transported her out of all control, "have some pity, Sir Henry, on yourself and on me! Rise, I beseech you; I cannot speak while you kneel!"

He rose at her words, but his strained eyes did not leave her face. Despair and hope struggled fiercely in him as he waited breathlessly for her answer.

Frances saw that he suffered, but she thought that he was extravagant in the expression of his feelings. As yet she knew little of the agony of love!

"I have tried before to-day," she said

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sadly, "to make my meaning plain. I may have seemed colder to you, Sir Henry, than to the rest, but that was because I believed you were honest. I respected the sincerity of your feelings and shrank from wounding them. I felt real esteem for you, but indeed I cannot do as you would have me; if you waited twenty years I could only give you the same answer."

"And that is—?" He spoke with studied calmness; he tried for the time to smooth the anguish from his dark sallow face, and Frances was deceived. She thought he did not after all care so much for her.

"What is your answer?" he said imperiously, when she did not speak.

"I do not love you," she said quietly.

She spoke simply but decidedly. She wanted him to feel that this subject was impossible, that it must be for ever

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banished from their talk if they were to meet again.

He bent over her, devouring her with his glance, as though he was resolved by its ardour to bring to life the hidden germs of love in her soul.

"You must not say those words," he said resolutely. "If I cannot force you to unsay them, I will stab myself in your presence. Life is valueless without your love."

He put his hand on his sword. For an instant Frances recoiled from his pale menacing aspect. But then her courage came back. She could not cry out for help, and she had only herself to depend on. Her heart fluttered painfully, and her lips trembled, but her blue eyes did not flinch as she looked at him.

"You are again forgetting yourself and the respect due to me, sir," she said as calmly

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as she could; “your threat does not terrify me; only I did not expect such behaviour from you.”

“You have provoked it,” he said fiercely. “I am desperate.”

“There is no use in quarrelling,” said Mistress Frances, in her most queenly manner. “I wish you good-morning, Sir Henry, and I must ask you to avoid me in future.”

She turned from him as she curtsied, but he roughly grasped her arm, holding it with a strength that gave her pain.

“Stay,” he went on, heedless of her remonstrances. “You wish to avoid me; then you shall hear all I have to say. You drive men mad—men who have given you years of love and devotion—by bestowing your smiles and favours on a mere adventurer, the plaything of an hour; and you fancy you can do this and go free. So long as I

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saw you cold to all alike, I could bide my time; I could hope that my long service, my true love, would at length awaken some feeling in your cold heart; but now that I have seen that you know how to warm under the mere semblance of love, that you can give glance for glance, and those of melting sweetness—my God ! I had nearly come in between you and the painted coxcomb who was fooling you to add to his conquests. I had nearly stabbed him at your side.”

A burning blush had spread over Frances's brow and throat as she strove vainly to free her arm from Sir Henry's grasp. Her blushes added to his frenzy.

“Yes,” he went on, “you confess it by your face. For the sake of this impostor and his sugared flatterings you trample on my love. May you learn to suffer too,

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proud girl; may neglect and indifference teach you too late the worth of a heart that worshipped you——".

He was going on, but a sudden movement of Frances checked him. She was looking eagerly towards the steps of the terrace.

Wilder looked over his shoulder, and at once his grasp slackened, and the girl, freeing herself by a sudden wrench, darted in through the library window, and left the angry man to meet Mr. Iwardby, as he came at rather a quicker pace than usual up the steps of the terrace.

"Heyday!" Mr. Iwardby's eyebrows were raised, and he looked ruffled out of his usual placidity. "What has been about between you and my cousin Mistress Frances, Sir Henry Wilder? You were wooing after a somewhat clownish fashion, sir, if my sight did not deceive me."

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But Wilder was much too over-wrought to endure rebuke. "You can think what you please, Iwardby; 'tis I who should complain. I will ask you to tell your cousin she will never again see me. I leave my home and my estates; I go forth a wanderer into the world, cursed with love for a woman who—nay"—he smiled bitterly—"I at least will not do her the harm she has done herself, so that when she hears of my death she must perforce weep for one who never harmed her even in thought. Do not stop me," he cried imperiously, and, pushing his way past Iwardby, he hastened to the front of the house, where his horse and his servant awaited him beneath the projecting portico.

He rode home at wild speed, and then, with a set calmness which deceived even his old steward, he gave orders that his house

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should be shut up till he sent fresh orders, that his wardrobe should be packed and forwarded to London, and that in an hour's time his own body servant should have his valise ready to ride with him to town.

Next morning, as Sir Charles Knollys, in his brocaded silk dressing-gown, was sipping his chocolate, lounging back in his easy-chair, with one of Defoe's pamphlets in his hand, his servant came with a knock to know if he might be disturbed so early by a visitor.

Sir Charles frowned at the disturbance. “Confound you, sirrah, what do you mean! On no account can I see anyone. I am indisposed.”

The man retired abashed, but the door had hardly closed before it was thrown open again, and Sir Henry Wilder walked in,

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looking heated and tired, his face as disordered as his hair and dress were.

A flush showed on Sir Charles's face at this unceremonious intrusion, but he rose, and displaying his teeth with his customary smile, he shook his visitor's hand cordially.

“Where, in the name of wonder, have you sprung from?” he said. “You look as if you had not been abed.”

Sir Henry looked round him, and then he sat down in the chair which Sir Charles pushed forward, and gave a sigh of relief.

“I have not been abed,” he said gravely, “and I should ask your pardon for breaking in upon you at such an hour but that my time is short, and I have much to do in it. I am going to foreign parts, Knollys; I hear good soldiers are wanted, and in faith I am in a mood to fight”.

At this Sir Charles, who was leaning back

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with an amused smile on his face, for he had been criticising his cousin's abrupt manner, roused into earnestness.

“In faith, Harry,” he said, “'tis a pity to leave England unless 'tis for pleasure-seeking; stay here, cousin, a few weeks, and I will find you as much amusement as fighting will

give. 'Tis rural life has given you the spleen. I should become a vegetable if I lived in the country. The town will set you up."

Sir Henry frowned.

"Look you, Knollys, you are speaking in ignorance, prescribing physic for you know not what ailment. I am a desperate man, and need a desperate remedy. I am in a mood if I stay this side the water to join in one of the plots which we hear of for restoring his Majesty King James."

Sir Charles gave a startled glance, and

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looked towards the door. "Hush, hush," he said in a low voice, "you are in no mood to talk politics, but what has brought you to this pass, man?" He looked hard at Wilder, and noted the confusion that showed in his sombre passionate eyes. "Eh," Sir Charles went on, "it can't be that you are willing to fling away life and lands for the sake of the scornful beauty at Calcot ?"

Wilder ground his teeth in the effort to control his passion.

"I saw her yesterday," he said, "and I swore to myself that she should suffer for her scorn. She is of that nature that my death will mightily oppress her, and when she hears that I have fallen, fighting for my country's honour, she will suffer, and it may be repent her coldness."

Sir Charles could not keep back a smile.

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He took a pinch of snuff, and passed the box to his companion. But Sir Henry had noted the smile, and he looked impatiently away.

"This is sheer rhodomontade," said Knollys; "you will reach her feelings far more quickly, and with more hope for yourself, if you pick a quarrel with the barber's block of a fellow for whom she flouted us, and run him through the gizzard. Why, he's here now—in London."

Wilder's eyes brightened; he smiled eagerly. “You are right. Where is he to be found?” he said. “I will lose no time in fastening a quarrel upon him, and we will settle this question;” he scowled, till his face looked darker than ever.

Knollys clapped him on the shoulder.

“Before George!” he said heartily, “I like your spirit, cousin, and if he escapes you,

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he will have to fight it out with me. We will so contrive that if he will not fight, he shall not again venture among gentlemen.”

CHAPTER X.

IN THE TEMPLE GARDENS.

LIFE had all at once put on its gloomiest aspect towards Mr. Child. As the heavy coach of those days lumbered on towards London, he thought it had never gone so slowly. The day, which had been full of bright sunshine when he quitted Reading, clouded over as he travelled eastward, and before long a pitiless hail storm rattled about the heads of the outside passengers, and among the leafless branches of the trees.

Then as—after a weary day's journey—

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they drew near the city, a thick fog added to the natural darkness and gave it an element of terror. The linkmen mustered in greater force than usual, and their hoarse cries and the mysterious glare of their torches, shrouded by fog vapour, made all objects weird and distorted.

It took Mr. Child some hours to reach his rooms, so utterly tired out that he went to bed supperless.

The next two days were to the young barrister the dreariest he had ever spent. He repented that he had left Reading so hastily—that he had not sought an opportunity of seeing the fair Frances again. All flavour had gone alike out of everything. He had no zest for his work and his studies, no interest for his accustomed pursuits. In summer-time his favourite recreation was to row up the river, and in

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the winter to walk in the fields round St. George's Hospital, winding up perhaps at the Water Theatre in Piccadilly. But on the day after his return he had felt sullenly indifferent. It was as if the sudden brightness that had burst upon his life, to be as suddenly withdrawn, had dimmed and tarnished all else. Next day restlessness came to add to his despondency. His rooms had never looked so dingy, so ill-furnished, and he, usually so contented and uncovetous, found himself longing for a profession which would raise him more quickly from his present limited means.

"Faugh!"—he smiled at his own folly when this wish took definite shape—"as if she would ever listen to me; she who can choose whom she will. I am a fool to waste thought on her after the timely warning I received."

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But whether he were a fool or not the fair face of Mistress Kendrick besieged his memory at every turn. At last, when the bright afternoon sunshine came streaming in at his window, he resolved to shake off the possession by some outward distraction, and carefully dressing himself, and taking his best hat, he went downstairs.

At this hour the benchers and barristers were accustomed, regularly during the summer and also on fine winter afternoons, to walk up and down the Temple Gardens, talking to one another and sometimes discussing legal difficulties. Often a courtier would appear on the scene, like a gay butterfly among the sober moths, in search of some more studious friend. Mr. Child was held in much esteem by some of his elder brethren, and more than one of the benchers would occasionally honour him by

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their notice; but he did not often show himself in the garden. He preferred to take the air in simpler fashion, and to-day he shrank from all public greetings.

As he now stood on his doorstep, half uncertain where to go, he saw at some distance the figure of a gentleman coming into King's Bench Walk.

The new-comer was picking his way along, evidently afraid of soiling his speckless shoes with their massive silver buckles; from these shoes upwards he was dressed with the utmost care and neatness; but there was too much colour and elaboration in his costume, and the neatness had no style about it. This, with his somewhat small figure and mincing gait gave him a foppish appearance, and robbed him of distinction.

At first Child thought of retreating, but a

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second thought told him that this acquaintance was doubtless coming to visit him, and that probably he would cheer him up. So he stood still and awaited his arrival.

"By the Lord Harry!" the new-comer exclaimed, as soon as he saw Mr. Child, "this is a rare bit of luck indeed. I had been counting your stairs as I came along, Ben, and I had mentally cursed the last flight. Come away, come away, man, I want to hear all about the wedding. We can have our talk in the garden; 'twill be far pleasanter to look at the river than at your chairs and tables. Come!"

Mr. Child's face cleared.

"I'm glad to see you, Jack," he said, "I've got a fit of blue-devils, and you are just the fellow to set one right with oneself. How have you been in my absence?"

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"To say truth"—Mainchance put his arm within his friend's, and they strolled down King's Bench Walk to the garden entrance—"I've been too busy to think of my health;

but now I bethink me, I've had a touch of lumbago, and my throat has been tickled with catarrh."

He gave a little affected cough as they went down into the garden, for his health and his clothes were two of Mr. Mainchance's favourite subjects of thought.

There was a fair sprinkling of learned votaries of the law strolling up and down, like hard-working beetles in the sunshine, which, spite of the clear crisp atmosphere, felt warm as our friends turned their backs on it and sauntered along. The trees were still leafless; but there were shrubs and

grass to refresh the tired eyes of students, and the ever-changing river and bright

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sky to bring fresh currents of thought to exhausted brain-workers.

Some of the elder lawyers however stood in a knot together, and grave jokes were evidently being exchanged between these as they stood out of earshot of the more ordinary strollers.

"'Slife!" whispered Mainchance eagerly; "why, there's Counsellor Makepeace joking with old Justice Bustle. I wish we could go a trifle nearer—what do you say, Ben? I'll wager there's good wit passing among 'em."

For all reply, Mr. Child walked nearer the edge of the path, so as to keep a wider distance from these dignitaries.

"Well, now," said Mr. Mainchance, petulantly, "have you not some news for me, Ben? What about the heiress you told me of; did you see her or did not you; and

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is she as fine a creature as old Lyndford's letter made out?" He looked at his friend, impatient at Child's silence and moody looks. "I was right, I was right," he said gleefully. "If you would only have listened, I might have won a crown or two. If you remember, I was ready to wager that either she limped or had a cross eye."

Child burst out laughing.

"And you would have lost, Jack. She is as fair a creature as the sun ever shone upon, but as far out of reach as the sun or moon."

"Fiddle-faddle!" The pea-green skirts of Mr. Mainchance's coat waggled with his impatience. "No woman can be out of reach of a man resolved to win her. I know 'em in their every twist and turn. Bless your faint heart, Ben, d'ye mind the old fable of the crow in the tree ? Old Æsop

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knew what lie was about when he made the crow feminine; you've only to ply a woman with flattery, and however coy she may be at starting, she'll fall into your arms at last. That is"—he shook his shoulders in a self-satisfied fashion, and settled his lace cravat—"that is to say, my boy, if she is properly handled."

"I tell you," said Child, with some heat, "that this lady is besieged with admirers, and she'll listen to none of them."

"Ah!"—Mainchance relapsed into the drawl he usually affected—"You did not tell me, but I see, I see, no room for you, eh ! you had no chance of pleading for yourself, well"—he stroked his chin reflectively—"I'm disappointed, I confess. I had hoped you might turn your good looks to some account, but odso, whom have we here? By all that's wonderful, yonder is

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Counsellor Knollys chatting with Makepeace and the rest, and 'slife, Ben, he beckons you; hasten, man, you're in luck to-day."

Child smiled with pleasure, and then he moved across to where three of the most noted lawyers of the day stood discussing a question which they were about to refer to him. An instant later, Mainchance was jostled by two gentlemen who had just entered the garden, and who came suddenly across to the two friends, but too late to stay Mr. Child's movements.

Mainchance turned round, and looked with huge contempt on the intruders. “Have a care, sirs,” he said superciliously, “you should see where you are going;” and then perceiving that one of the strangers looked pugnacious, he followed Child closely—not wishing to bring discredit on himself by any dispute within the precincts of

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the Temple when such dignitaries were present.

The two intruders were Sir Henry Wilder and Sir Charles Knollys, who, having been to Child's lodgings and found that he was out, had come to seek him in the Temple Gardens.

Knollys still cherished anger against Mistress Frances Kendrick, and it seemed to him that here was a fine chance of revenge.

“I said I would spoil that fellow's face for him,” he thought, “and 'fore George, Harry is ripe for any mischief. We'll find this Mr. Child among his fellows, and he will have to take his punishment from my crazy cousin—in the face of them all.”

He had no difficulty with Wilder when he proposed to him to seek Child thus publicly; the man's wild eyes flashed at the idea of revenge, and Knollys saw that he must

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be careful, or the affair would be carried much farther than he had intended.

They reached the Temple Gardens just in time to see Child beckoned by the three noted lawyers, but Wilder's eyes followed him angrily, and it was perhaps fortunate for Mainchance that his friend so absorbed Sir Henry's attention that he paid little heed to the petulance his push called forth.

“Why don't we follow him? come on,” said Wilder, who had a feverish light in his eyes. He looked impatiently, for Knollys had halted at once, with a very disturbed expression on his face.

"Ahem!"—Sir Charles did not move forward, but he laid his hand on Wilder's arm—"this matter requires circumspection and consideration, my good cousin; do you know with whom our squire of dames is at this moment conversing?"

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"It does not matter," Wilder spoke haughtily, "the more public the affront the greater the disgrace."

"Phoo, phoo, man, I must think of myself first. A few words with you apart: one of those gentlemen is my cousin, the most wealthy relative I am blessed with; he has promised to settle with my creditors before I marry; the other, Makepeace, is a relation of Mistress Caroline Courtenay. Now, if this Mr. Child is acquainted with those two gentlemen, he is not a man we can affront or cudgel in broad daylight, and before their faces too, to say nothing of our being in the Temple Gardens—'twould ruin my prospects; we must bide our time; the matter is taken out of our hands for to-day;" to himself he added, "and till after my marriage I can't risk such a chance."

But he had more trouble than he

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expected. Wilder's dark face looked murderous in its determined purpose as he gazed after Mr. Child, and Sir Charles, who hated unnecessary publicity, felt that the only way in which he could avoid a scene was to take his cousin from the garden as soon as he could, without letting him out of his sight for a moment. His strongest argument with Wilder was the damage his own prospects would suffer if they insulted Mr. Child; and when at last he brought him safely to his house at Westminster, he prevailed on Wilder to lose no time in getting the credentials and outfit necessary for joining the army as a volunteer. Nor did Sir Charles feel safe until some days after, when he took leave of him at Greenwich. "After all," he said, "I should have got him locked up as a lunatic whatever had chanced."

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Mr. Child had not recognised either Wilder or Knollys, and he laughed incredulously when Mainchance boasted of the manner in which he had set down the pair of swaggering coxcombs who had molested him.

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PART II.

I, that have so many slighted,
Am at length as well requited,
For my griefs are not a few;
Now I find what lore can do.

Old Ballad.

[NP]

CHAPTER I.

AUNT PURLEY'S COMMISSION.

THE cold weather had fled; first spring had come sprinkling the trees and hedges with tender green powder, and then with exquisite wrinkled leaves, and these had smoothed their wrinkles as the days grew longer and the sunshine added warmth to its brightness. The trees perhaps were a trifle too leafy and had lost the tender colouring of that first burst into life, which sets the heart dancing with delight on a fine spring morning; but it was early June, and every shrub and tree that

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can boast a blossom worth showing, was trying one against another to gain the prize of beauty.

But while the glades of her park had been beautifying themselves, and while her garden plots had grown gay with flowers, Mistress Frances Kendrick had faded like an autumn leaf.

As weeks and months passed by she had become pale and languid; she lost all relish for her favourite pursuits, her harpsichord was now rarely touched, her flowers were left to fade and die. It seemed as if even Dapple noticed the change in his young mistress. Instead of her frolicsome canters in Calcot Park, she now ambled pensively along; its avenues except now and then, when finding the struggle with her feelings beyond endurance, Frances started off her horse in a

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furious gallop, hoping that the rapid change of external objects might produce the same vivid transition in her thoughts.

But the relief was only momentary, the dart of love was too strongly barbed to be withdrawn thus easily, for with shame Frances had at last confessed to herself that this ever present trouble was love.

She confessed its presence, and she thought of Sir Henry Wilder with feelings near akin to remorse. “The others only wanted my money,” she said, “but he, poor fellow, he loved me truly—how sad he looked that wedding-day—I know it now. What despair was in his face the last time I saw him.

I fear I have destroyed his life. But what could I do? there must be love on both sides to make happiness.” For Sir Henry's self-imposed exile had been the talk of the country. But Frances would not yield

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herself wholly up to love's dream. She struggled on indignant at what she termed a slavish weakness; she strove with all the strength of her will to distract her thoughts, to displace the idol that each day she felt engrossed her more entirely; but when night came her torture returned, and feverish dreams disturbed her rest.

This continued struggle had begun seriously to affect her health as well as her looks.

Mrs. Purley, albeit not very observing, noticed the change in her favourite, and one morning proposed to call in the doctor.

"You will do no such a thing. Neither doctors nor their stuff for me, Aunt Purley," Frances said positively. "I don't believe in them to begin with. They know no more than I do, and they can do less; 'tis the change of weather affects me."

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This scene had been more than once repeated, and now on this bright day of early-Tune, Mistress Purley came into the library of Calcot Park. The sunshine streaming in at the open windows fell on the fair face of Frances Kendrick, and showed how sunken were her cheeks, and the feverish light that burned in her blue eyes. She looked wan and haggard in comparison with the radiant blooming girl who had teased "Aunt Purley," as she called her, three months ago.

She got up and smiled at her visitor, but the old lady's eyes had seen the previous look of suffering, and tears filled them as she tenderly kissed Frances.

"My child, my child," she exclaimed, quite moved out of herself by the sudden fear that had seized her at the pitiful sight, "you must see the doctor, you must indeed; you will die if you go on like this. Oh! my

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beloved Frances, let me go at once to Reading and find Doctor French; at least he will say what ails you."

The old lady's sudden and unusual passion moved the sick girl, weakened by her sleepless nights and unquiet days, and more than all by the constant self-reproach of

having given her love to a man who was almost a stranger to her, who had probably forgotten her—she burst into tears, and, hiding her face on Mistress Purley's shoulder, she wept for some minutes.

The old lady twittered and fluttered.

"Poor dear ! poor thing! There, there now! Come, dear love, cheer up now!" But the flood of grief, so long sealed from outward eyes, would have its way, and the girl cried till she seemed to be, like Undine, weeping herself away.

Mistress Purley fidgeted and fumbled

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in her dress. "Too-too-too! Bless my soul!" she said, "and my vinaigrette not in my pocket—too-too!—just like it to go astray! if I had not wanted it would have been there sure."

At last the series of indescribable sounds by which the old lady expressed her vexation roused Frances. She lifted her head, caught sight of Mistress Purley's perturbed face, and burst out laughing.

"Good Heavens!" cried the spinster, who began to fear the girl was losing her senses. "There, there! now quiet yourself, my love, or you will be in the hysterics before I can help you. I knew 'twas on the nerves. Oh dear, dear! it is wickedly wrong, it is indeed, my dear, to go on like his. When people can't tell what's the matter with 'em, they must have a doctor to tell 'em; the very sight of a doctor

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does one good. Now, look here, my love," and she patted Frances's hand, "I have a plan; I'm wanting much to-day to do some shopping in Reading. You'll wish me to see Doctor French when I'm there; now, won't you, Frances?"

Mistress Frances Kendrick had grown quiet, but she shook her head and stood thinking.

As she thought, her head, at first erect, bent lower and lower, and a burning blush covered her face; then, looking towards Mistress Purley, she met her eager surprised gaze, and turned away. “No, dear aunt; I'll not see Doctor French,” she said.

Mistress Purley longed to urge her point, but long habit had taught her the strength of her young friend's will, and with a deep sigh and a shrug of her thin shoulders, she seated herself in her accustomed chair, fixed

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her glasses firmly on her nose, and began the everlasting knotting she kept at Galoot Park.

Every now and then she glanced out of doors at the sunshine, and tapped her foot with some impatience.

“Too-too-too!” she clucked, “such a fine day for choosing colours to be sure; isn't it. Lion? I protest 'tis a pity,” she murmured, “and it may cloud over or rain tomorrow.”

All at once Frances came up to her smiling, and put her hand on the old lady's shoulder.

“Do you really want to go shopping, aunt? well, then, I will order the coach for you; and,” she said with studied carelessness, “you can, if you will, undertake a commission for me also, in Reading—not to fetch the doctor, remember.”

The old lady was in a flutter of delight.

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“A commission, child, that will please me vastly,” she said, “what can I do for you?”

“Oh, I only want a few questions asked”—and then Frances paused.

Mistress Purley's eyes opened widely, but she kept silence.

“You might ask, you know”—the girl looked straight at the books, but she spoke out boldly and quickly—“about Mr. Lyndford the attorney, whether he is old or young, and what sort of man he is; and whether his friend, Mr. Benjamin Child, ever comes to stay with him, and whether the sister, Mistress Lucy Lyndford, is at home. I'm told she's vastly pretty.”

Mistress Purley stared yet more; she felt puzzled and shocked, and yet though she thought the request strange, indecorous even, her heart was so touched by the change in

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her favourite's looks that she could not refuse her request.

"Very well, my dear; I cannot disoblige you in anything. Though you give me no reason for these inquiries, I feel sure you have a reason for making them," she said gravely; "but Mr. Lyndford is still unmarried—ahem!—so you know I must go to work discreetly, people are so evil-tongued"—she coughed behind her mittened hand—they might misjudge me; they might fancy I had a personal interest in asking questions about this gentleman."

Frances stopped her mouth with kisses.

"You dear old thing, you are too good to live—no one could think ill of you; you will do it all right, I know; ask just these questions for me then."

She hurried Mistress Purley's departure, and when she was safely seated in the

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lumbering vehicle, Frances put in her head and kissed her again.

"Learn all you can, there's a dear, about these Lyndfords—and—and—Mr. Child," she whispered, "and your news will do me more good than fifty doctors would."

Then she ran away without waiting to see her old friend start; she wanted to hide her face.

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CHAPTER II.

AT LAWYER LYNDFORD'S.

Lawyer Lyndford's old red-brick house looks redder than ever. Brilliant June sunshine is everywhere this afternoon; on the two overhanging gables with square windows below them—windows which also overhang those of the lower storey, and the quaint gabled porch closed in by a small gate from the busy street. On the left is a square entrance gateway, with rooms built over it, and these walls are older than the rest of the house, being half-timbered; a sort of long yard

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shows through this gateway, with a wall on the left and the vine-clad chequered brick house on its right. There is a quaint side entrance here, with a stone-mounting block beside it. The peep seen through the square opening is charming on this bright June morning, and if you go a little way down the yard you see a stack of diamond-shaped chimneys rising high above the gables. The sunshine is on the well-cleaned windows, on the china roses that cluster up the brickwork, and specially on the trim little garden at the back of the house seen from the study windows. The pretty little garden is now gay with pinks and gilliflowers, sultans and blue-bells and pansies, and fragrant with roses and sweetbriar; while mixed with the flower scents come more aromatic odours from lad's-love and rosemary, lavender and thyme, with basil and marjoram, and all the

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choice tenants of a little herb-plot, that Lucy Lyndford cultivates both for savoury use in the kitchen and for fragrance in the huge blue and white sweet-pots, which show handsomely beneath the buffet in the hall, and in the corner of the old square staircase, where two of them keep company with a tall wooden clock-case.

Mr. Lyndford is not alone in his study this afternoon. He would not be there at all but for the presence of guests, his office being down the yard between the house and the stables, and entered by the door with the mounting-block.

Leaning both elbows on the window-sill is Mr. Benjamin Child, and between him and Mr. Lyndford—who is writing rapidly on the black-topped table—stands Mr.

Mainchance; he looks fashionable in his bagwig, and plum-coloured coat, and embroidered

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long-flapped waistcoat. His ruffles reach below his knuckles, and almost hide the rings which sparkle on his fingers.

“I tell you what, Mainchance,” Mr. Child says, as he turns round from the window, “I don't care to be hurried back to town, just as I reach the country. I love the country, and I want to enjoy myself.”

“I've nothing to say against the country, my friend; a little of it is a pleasant change. But business, my dear fellow; business, business must be attended to.” Mr. Mainchance drawls out his words as if he finds speech a wearisome exertion.

“To the deuce with business—” Mr. Child is cut short by the entrance of a young lady dressed for walking. She is comely, plump, and cherry-lipped, with a pair of mirthful saucy dark eyes, and a colour like a clove carnation.

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Mistress Lucy Lyndford looks brightly at the three gentlemen, and then addresses herself to Mr. Mainchance.

“Come, Mr. Mainchance, I'm ready and waiting,” she says, “or am I to walk to the Abbey ruins by myself ? I thought you had a marvellous wish to explore them.”

“And so have I too. Will you allow me to go with you, Mistress Lucy?” says Mr. Child, with a sly smile. Then, noticing a shade of disappointment on the young lady's face, he adds: “But no, I forgot, I cannot have the pleasure of going with you this afternoon; I must settle several little matters with your brother, if Mainchance and I are really to start for London on Friday; so I wish you an entertaining walk. Mistress Lucy—I envy Mainchance.”

“La Mr. Child, how can you? what can there be to envy?” says the girl, and she

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gives Mr. Mainchance a coquettish smile; “there isn't much to see after all in the old ruins.” She tosses her head as much as to say: “My company is better worth having than the sight of old ruins.”

When Mistress Lucy and her escort had departed, Child turned to the lawyer with a laugh. “I say, Lyndford, unless I am out in my reckoning, I expect you will have Mainchance in Reading again soon, spite of his love for the town.”

“Why so?” The lawyer looked at Mr. Child inquisitively over his spectacles.

“Don't you see, man, that he's smitten with your fair sister?”

Lyndford pushed his spectacles up into his wig. “Bless me!” he said in surprise, “I confess I had not remarked his admiration; I thought he was too much taken up with himself.”

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Child laughed. “Ah, you see the charm of a pretty girl is working, and he's forgetting himself a little in thinking of Mistress Lucy. See how willingly he has gone into danger to-day! I suppose you would not object to his suit?”

“Egad, not I, I conclude he has enough to keep a wife.”

“Faith, yes, Jack Mainchance has money, and is making more; and he's a good fellow too; a little flighty, perhaps, but he has sown his wild oats. Will he suit, think you?”

“Suit, egad, he'll do well; of course he'll do. Why, Ben, do you think any man in his senses rejoices in the guardianship of a motherless girl of eighteen ? Only”—he pursed up his lips and puckered his forehead—“if I lose Lucy, I suppose I shall have to fill her place somehow. If I don't

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take this precaution, all the spinsters in Reading—and, egad, they are plentiful as blackberries—will be pulling caps for me.

But this is trifling, and now that I reflect upon it, I think you mistake, old friend; if his intentions are serious, why is your friend anxious to get back to town, eh, Ben?"

Mr. Child smiled, but he did not answer.

He took his post again at the window, and Lyndford went on with his writing. After a few minutes he looked up from his papers.

"Ben, must you really hurry back to town with your friend? Why can't you stay a week or two, and take your chance of finding a better-half in old Reading town?"

"I find a wife ! forsooth"—Child spoke bitterly—"a thriving attorney may think of marrying, but a briefless barrister must

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decay till his feelings and sympathies are weary and chill—till he's an old bachelor—and then he either marries a kitchen wench, or some chit twenty years his junior; and she plays fast and loose with him, or he breaks her heart by his selfish habits."

"By the Lord Harry, man, what ails you? what a fate you set before me should I wed! You've got the blues, Ben, you're becoming quite a cynic; you forget I'm an old bachelor already, and I'm fairly well content with my lot. Stay with us another "week, and we'll try and cure you."

"You're all kindness, and I like my quarters vastly, but I believe I'll go back with Mainchance. I have a feeling that some good luck, perhaps a brief, is waiting for me in my dingy rooms in King's Bench Walk."

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"By the way, Ben, I forgot to tell you,"—Mr. Lyndford looked at him over his spectacles with half-closed eyes—"I have seen Mistress Frances Kendrick since you were here; she's a sweet creature truly. You seem strangely incurious about our heiress and her doings; have you forgotten her?" he said.

"Oh no, the lady is too charming to forget."

Mr. Child spoke sharply, he turned round and looked out of window again.

"You wrote me that strange affair with Sir Henry Wilder, and your sister tells me this lady is still unmarried," he went on carelessly, "and that she lives in retirement. It is strange she has not been prevailed upon to change her state." He drew a chair beside the window, and resumed his former occupation of leaning on the sill and gazing out.

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Mr. Lyndford went on writing, and Lore than an hour passed in silence, only broken by the squeak-squeak of the lawyer's pen as it traversed a sheet of cumbrous better-paper.
After a while the pen stopped, Mr. Lyndford threw himself back in his chair, and looked anxiously at his friend.
He had known the young barrister all his life. Spite of the difference in age, they had been schoolfellows, and Child had been accustomed to share his joys and sorrows with this old friend, and to seek his counsel, for Mr. Child had lost both his parents while he was still very young, and he had no near relations; but during his visit he had been in strangely unusual spirits—usually silent and preoccupied, or, when roused by Mainchance, leaking into boisterous fits of mirth.

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Mr. Lyndford had seen the change in him, and expected a confidence this morning.
"There's a screw loose with him somewhere, that's poz," the elder man thought; "has he outrun the constable, I wonder?" He's a prettier fellow than ever he was, and he'd have a good chance, I believe, if he went in for Mistress Frances in earnest; but he is so confoundedly proud, he'd call it fortune-hunting."
The subject of his thoughts was still looking out of window, and he had been occupying himself in gathering some of the delicate perfumed blossoms of a china rose that clustered near in rich rosy masses; he was now picking the flowers to pieces leaf by leaf, thereby enhancing the perfume of the Berkshire breezes. Perhaps he was trying Margaret's question.
"Halloa, Ben, what are you about?" cried

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Mr. Lyndford. “Egad, you are pulling all Lucy's best roses to pieces. I thought you were gathering a posy to present to her, and, faith, you've covered the carpet with 'em. You are surrounded by rose- leaves!”

Mr. Child shrugged his shoulders.

“Humph, as rose-colour does not much abound in my horizon, you might be glad once in a way to see me surrounded by it, eh!”

Lyndford laughed.

“You are becoming an arrant grumbler and but a poor wit. Have you any special cause for sourness, Ben?” he said.

“Well, my friend, to tell the truth, I have felt strangely discontented with my lot these last few days; I suppose idleness has been the cause of it. I am so little used to the kind of luxurious life I have led both here and with the Mainchance family,

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that it disagrees with me, you see; once in harness again with my books in the old Temple, I shall be myself.”

Mr. Lyndford shook his head. “I grudge the time you spent with Mr. and Mistress Mainchance instead of coming here,” he growled.

“I promise you I spent more time with Jack on their bowling-green than I did with the old folks,” said Child, “though I do enjoy a chat with Mistress Mainchance; she's a good kind old soul, as dainty as her own white poodle.”

“I suppose her son—” but here Lyndford stopped; the patter of feet in the hall outside, and then Lucy's laugh, announced the return of the walkers. They came in, Lucy with a considerable increase of colour, and Mainchance very unlike himself, he wore a sheepish air of discomfiture.

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"Well, Mr. Mainchance," said Lyndford, "what do you think of our Abbey ruins?"

"The ruins! well, yes, they're vastly pretty, most elegant; but I never saw such water-lilies; Mistress Lucy says they're particularly fine this year."

"Water-lilies! water-lilies in the ruins!"

Mr. Child turned round laughing from his rose-leaves, and Lyndford also gave a hearty laugh.

Mr. Mainchance looked at them and repeated blandly: "Yes, water-lilies—'slife, what d'ye both mean by guffawing like a pair of cracked fiddles?" Then seeing the uncontrolled amusement in the faces of the two men, he turned to Mistress Lucy for support, but Mistress Lucy had disappeared.

"I tell you she called 'em water-lilies; you know the things, Lyndford. Large

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white flowers with golden centres, and leaves like great flat pieces of green leather, and stalks that go crawling about and around like snakes to the bottom of the river."

Botanising was a new occupation to Mr. Mainchance, and he became confused in his description.

By this time his listeners had recovered their gravity.

"I beg your pardon, Jack," said Child, "your description is perfectly correct, and I understand now that you have been walking beside the river—perhaps in the Warren—whereas we thought you went to explore the Abbey ruins."

Mainchance looked soothed.

"Oh, that's what your driving at," he said. "Well, we did start with that intent, but, egad, when we reached the Forbury, we found a fair there—so vast a heap of people.

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farmers and graziers, and that sort of folk, all in high talk, and smelling so egregiously of onions and the stable—faugh!"—he drew out his perfumed handkerchief as if to efface the remembrance—that we preferred a less crowded place."

"Of course you did," said Child, winking at Lyndford; "you were doubtless pining for solitude."

"I protest I don't know how we got there, but all at once we came to a bridge, and then to the riverside, and, egad, we've been fishing there for water-lilies ever since."

"Fishing, eh? did you catch any?" said Child demurely.

"Mistress Lucy wished for some lilies for her tub, so I tried all I could to get 'em, and deuced difficult it was, I can tell you."

"You should have pulled off your shoes and walked in; that's the way I get 'em,"

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said Lyndford; "'tis not easy, for the water is deep."

"I confess that your sister suggested that was your way, but"—he settled his wig—"but I didn't take it; you see I am afflicted with—ahem—catarrh, and was fearful of bringing on an attack, and"—here the look of discomfiture returned to his smooth face—"that reminds me I ought to change my stockings, for faith, in my efforts to land one very choice blossom I filled my shoes with water"—he looked down disconsolately at his spruce shoe-buckles and delicately coloured hose, which looked the worse for the adventure—"and, egad, I nearly lost my footing altogether."

"That was awkward," said Lyndford; "I wonder you got out so dry."

"If your sister had not come to the rescue, by the Lord Harry, I must have

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gone in to my neck, but she caught at my coat and steadied me in a trice—egad, she has a firm hand and a rare spirit; and then I tried to reach the blossom with my cane—you know my new clouded cane, Ben!—but as ill-luck would have it, just as I thought I had dragged the lily to land, 'slife! it drifted away again so suddenly that it pulled the cane

out of my hand—deuced hard, wasn't it—such a cane as you don't often see, and it went down the river as merrily as if it was a boat," he sighed dolefully.

"But," said Mr. Child, "surely you do not regret the sacrifice of a cane in such a cause?"

"No, no, of course not; it was a choice which should float, me or my cane," said Mainchance, trying to look happy; no easy matter, when he was suffering from a conviction

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that he had not only lost his precious clouded cane, but that Mistress Lucy had secretly enjoyed his discomfiture, and this he felt to be the more unkind, because he had exerted himself solely to please her; his feet were wet, and his delicate calves still smarted from the attacks of the furze and bramble sprays among which his enthusiastic companion had enticed him, to help her search after wild flowers.

Conscious too that he had made an amazing display of ignorance and unskilfulness in his attempts to gather the water-lilies, his self-complacency was considerably shaken; he gave a deep sigh of relief when Mr. Lyndford's staid maid Hannah brought a summons to Mistress Lucy's tea-table, and

he quickly escaped to remodel his deranged toilette. While he effected this, he congratulated himself that the mischance of the

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water-lilies had occurred just in time to prevent him from revealing the state of his feelings to Mistress Lucy before he had ascertained the exact amount of her fortune.

"To have declared myself before I knew that, 'slife, it would have been worse than the loss of a clouded cane or wet feet; but she's wondrous pretty and taking, and if there's coin I'll think about it."

Meanwhile Mr. Lyndford and his friend Child walked across the flagged entrance hall to Mistress Lucy's parlour.

In the hall, near the arch through which one passed to the old oak staircase, stood a quaint buffet with spindle legs and ring-handled drawers, and on this was a huge blue and white, china vase filled with lilacs, guelder roses, wall-flowers, and the many fragrant blossoms of early June, shedding colour and perfume through the place, while

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graceful ringlets of laburnum made a pendent glory round the other flowers, and gave a golden light to the hall itself.

The two gentlemen found Mistress Lucy seated at her tea-table, with a goodly show of cakes of various sorts, made by her own fair hands, arranged in dainty china plates.

She had arrayed herself in white, decorated with knots of cherry-colour ribbon, and she looked very pretty, and quite prepared to finish her conquest of Mr. Mainchance, while she offered dishes of tea to her brother and his guest, in small blue-and- white cups without handles.

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CHAPTER III.

JEALOUS.

FRANCES felt more than ever restless when her old friend had finally departed on her shopping expedition. She visited her favourite Dapple, and played with Lion; she roamed about the garden, then into the park, aimlessly, as if she could not keep still. But there was a hopeful light in her eyes that had not been there for weeks, and as she walked up and down the leafy alleys and listened to the birds, she told herself she had been greatly to blame.

How much wiser, she argued, it would

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have been to have made these inquiries sooner; then she should have known whether there was a chance of again meeting this idol of her dreams; or, if he were not what he had seemed to her—if he wholly undeserved her regard—then it would have been well to have known this long ago, and have cast him out of her thoughts.

At this memory blustered and reproved her loudly, and she told herself that she could not be deceived, that Mr. Child would prove to be the perfection she had dreamed he was. But she always ended in sadness—"If he had really cared for me, he would have made some effort to see me again."

At dinner-time she could not eat, though she tried to linger over the meal by way of passing the time.

Mistress Purley was to dine with a cousin in Reading, and to be home by supper-time.

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but that hour was still far off. The day was strangely long and weary; not once could the girl detach her thoughts from the one subject; she followed her old friend in thought, and pictured all sorts of probable and improbable happenings.

Mistress Purley might meet Mr. Child; but, even if this happened, she would not know him. Still he might be pointed out to her; but was it likely that the spinster would have the courage to accost him, and to speak of her?

"No, no; I trust she will not do that. I could not suffer that; I should die of shame. He knows who I am and where I live; and if he has come again to Reading and has failed to seek me, I am already answered, and he is not worth a thought."

She had told herself this many times, and

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now, just as she was repeating it, came the sound of wheels.

Frances flew to the hall, followed by Lion, and there indeed was Mistress Purley safe returned, her pretty old face flushed with eager excitement, and her arms full of parcels. The two men-servants who followed her seemed also laden with packages.

Frances restrained her eagerness to question, while the old lady began to unpack her purchases in the library. Mistress Purley descanted on the beauty of the paduasoy and lutestring and the varied ribbons and modes she had bought, holding them out, patting them, and then spreading them on the table with all the enthusiasm of seventeen, she asked Frances to guess the price she had paid for each.

"Wonderful bargains some of 'em, my dear, and vastly sweet. Now this lovely

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thing only arrived from London yesterday; 'tis a love of a colour, is it not ? Mr. Primrose says 'tis he sweetest shade he has ever had in his shop. 'Twas snapped up so fast, this was all he had left."

And so the old lady's tongue ran on. It was a relief to Frances when supper was announced. But still at supper Mistress Purley chatted away, detailing the trifling incidents of her day; more especially those which related to her shopping—whom she had met in Mr. Primrose's shop—what Lady This and Mistress That said, and how they looked and what they wore; while her listener grew flushed and fevered with longing for the one bit of news that did not come.

At length supper ended and the servants went away, and then Frances rose, and passing swiftly round the table she took her

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old friend by both hands and drew her to a chair beside the wide fireplace, where, spite of the time of year, some logs burned cheerfully. She pushed Mistress Purley gently into the deep cosy old seat, and then flinging herself down on the hearth-rug, she clasped her hands round the spinster's knees, and looked up entreatingly in her face.

"Well, child"—the old lady smiled and pursed up her lips—"now I'll be bound you want to know all the town gossip I picked up this morning; I never talk of that, you know, before servants, 'tis a bad example to set 'em; and you were quite judicious not to question me, my love. Well, to begin with, what do you think, my dear? 'tis positively

affirmed that Mistress Elizabeth Pettifer is not going to be married; the fellow has jilted her for the widow. Mistress Oglander.

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And what do you think, Frances? your cousin. Mistress Harcourt, is not one bit admired in London."

"Pish!" Frances shook her head and looked severe. "You know, Aunt Purley, I hate common gossip and town-talk."

"Well, well, my dear; then 'mum' must be the word, for mine is all mere town-talk; first about one neighbour and then about Mother. I thought it would cheer you, but as I'm mistaken, suppose we go back to the bargains in the library."

Frances gave a vehement squeeze to the knees she held clasped, and shook back her Bunny hair from her eyes.

"I vow we will do nothing of the sort, you naughty Aunt Purley," she said, "you have been amusing yourself all day in Reading town, buying and chatting, and coquetting too perhaps, while I have been

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moping here, and dying of the spleen. No, don't shake your head; I know you must have something better to tell me than about people's looks and the amount of admiration Martha gets in London."

There was a twinkle in her old friend's eyes, and Frances felt reassured. Hiding her face on the clasped hands, she sat listening.

"Better news, eh, my child? Well, that's as it may be." Mistress Purley tried to look unconscious of any special interest in her words. "By the way, I saw Lawyer Lyndford's house near St. Mary's Church, 'tis a vastly genteel residence; though to my taste 'tis too old, just at present he has two gentlemen for visitors, and one of these is a Mr. Benjamin Child from London"—she felt a sudden movement in the clasping hands, and she looked grave and perplexed.

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"I protest," she went on, "I don't know whether my news is good or bad—it seems that Lawyer Lyndford's sister still lives at home with him; she is a comely, dark -eyed, cherry-lipped young woman, and she and this Mr. Child are said to be vastly well together."

She stopped, for Frances raised her head and drew a long gasping breath; a rapid glance showed Mistress Purley that her darling's cheeks had reddened deeply, and with the intuitive tact that seems native to every woman in such a case, the old lady fixed her eyes firmly on the fireplace, and went on as if no interruption had happened.

"I am not so sure but that 'tis hard on Mistress Lucy Lyndford, for folks say that this Mr. Benjamin Child is no better than a London lady-killer, and that he

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intends to take back to town as many Berkshire hearts as he can carry. And, indeed, I did hear," continued the spinster, sagely nodding her head, "that such chits in Beading town as are taken by looks are all by the ears for him, for he is a vastly pretty fellow, they say; but I don't think the fellow is of much account beyond his good looks. Some say he is as poor as a church mouse, and Mistress Lucy Lyndford will have all her brother's savings, I take it."

Mistress Purley got these words out triumphantly, but she could not see their effect on Frances. The girl had bent her head again, and her face was hidden on the old lady's knee, but the clasped hands moved, and as Mistress Purley looked closer, she saw how the graceful shoulders trembled.

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There was a short silence, and then Mistress Purley said kindly:

"I think, dear, till you grow quite robust again, you should be abed early. As I sleep here to-night, I shall undress you and put you to bed, Frances."

Mistress Purley tried to speak with matronly decision, but Frances raised her head quickly.

"What, stay and tuck me up, dear Aunt Purley, as you used to do when I was in pinafores!" she laughed brightly and clapped her hands. "Oh! no—no—that would be too good a joke. You are kind, and good, and considerate, you dear old thing"—she flung her arms round her friend s neck, and wept a few quiet tears—"but if you would crown your kindness, please leave me quite alone, and don't notice or tease me any more to-night."

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"No—no—my poor dear child, I'll not tease you; but I seem to have made you unhappy—God knows I did not mean it—and you'll be fretting and worrying when I leave you alone; there, there, tell me what it is, Frances? What's on your mind? 'Tisn't kind to keep your old friend in the dark."

Poor Mistress Purley! If she could only have maintained her discreet reserve, and asked no questions, in another moment the wounded young heart would have poured out its sorrow; but the direct appeal froze Frances into silence.

"There is nothing of any consequence the matter, dear aunt," she said smiling though it was a dreary little smile; "nothing you need to worry about. I only want to be left alone."

"But at least, child, you will let

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see you to your bedroom, for it grows late," and Mistress Purley yawned behind her mittened fingers.

Frances jumped up and rang the bell.

"Your long day's shopping has tired you," she said. "You must go to bed, but I am not sleepy. No"—she shook her head in answer to Mistress Purley's attempted remonstrance—"there is no use in any arguing. I shall not leave this room till you have taken your departure. So if you think early hours good for me you have the remedy in your hands. I shall not stir till you are gone." She seated herself, and her tone was so decided, so despotic, though she spoke with a smiling face, that Mistress Purley yielded after another faint protest. When she left the room the girl followed her to the hall, kissed her warmly, put a candlestick in her

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hand, and parted from her at the foot of the square oak staircase.

Then Mistress Frances went back to the dining-room, and closed the doors. She stood quite still for a minute or two, and then she began to pace up and down; at last she stood still again and clasped her hands over her head in a kind of frenzy.

"Am I going mad?" she said desperately, "or what evil spirit possesses me? I, whose whole existence was peace and sunshine, who used to try and make others happy; now I am selfish and violent, ill-tempered, and uncontrolled in my desires and actions. What is it ? Why am I reduced to this sad condition? I see now too late my mistake. I have taken the best way possible of gratifying the vanity of a mere coxcomb—for is not this the character he bears?—a miserable fellow, who first tried to steal my

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heart by his winning ways, and has by this time forgotten my existence, or, at best, laughs with this Lucy Lyndford over his easy conquest. Yes—yes—I, who have treated all men coldly, am bitterly punished by this torture. By heaven I'll have my revenge. Why not? If a thief got into the house to-night and stole my silver, it would be my simple duty to prosecute and punish him." She paused, resting her hands on a tall wooden chair-back near the door. "Is not my peace of mind of more value than mere

worldly goods? Am I to be robbed of health, and gentleness, and loving-kindness, and all that is worth living for, and have no redress—?"

She looked up. Over the door near which she stood were suspended an ancient claymore and target, and lower down, on each side of the doorposts, hung her

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father's somewhat cumbrous pistols and his rapier.

Frances fixed her eyes on this last, and stood in deep thought. Presently she stretched out her hand and took down the sword. Then drawing it from its scabbard, she felt its point. The bright colour rushed to her face, and then she turned pale. Her eyebrows knitted in a heavy frown, and she bit her under-lip.

"He *shall* be punished," she said sternly. She rang the bell, and ordered lights to be carried to her writing-table in the library.

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CHAPTER IV.

A CHALLENGE.

LUCY LYNDFORD, the object of Mistress Frances Kendrick's jealousy, was the sole living ornament of her parlour, for her brother would not permit of posies in the living or sleeping rooms; but she had exerted her fingers and her skill to adorn her own special nest. There were tall, stiff, hard-seated stools, covered with elaborate patterns in cross-stitch. Three samplers, neatly framed and glazed, hung over the chimney-piece. On the shelves of a small triangular corner cupboard was the rest of

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the blue and white Nankin tea-service, in which Mistress Lucy regaled her guests with the fashionable beverage, always washing her china daintily herself, and replacing it carefully in its accustomed nook. On the lower shelves of this cupboard showed, through glass doors, Lucy's collection of rarities—sea-shells, sea-weed, some butterflies, and a stuffed lizard, supposed to have come from the Indies.

But on a table in the window lay the triumph of Mistress Lucy's skill—a fan painted with an exact imitation of the shells and sea-weed in her cupboard, except that, seemingly wishing for variety, although on the one side she had endeavoured to represent the natural colour of these objects, on the reverse she had painted them a lively blue. There were several china bowls and vases standing about, filled with rose-leaves,

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and the room had the peculiar quality of fragrance attendant thereon. But the walls of the room needed no decoration. From the floor to the ceiling these were oak-panelled in small squares, with a frieze of elaborate carving. There were carved pilasters too, at each corner and on either side of the high chimney-piece, and all this carving was of rare delicacy and exquisite design.

The ceiling too was panelled to match the walls, though here the spaces between had been filled with plaster; but the beam that crossed the centre was divided into panels, and these were richly carved.

Lucy looked very pretty this evening as she sat behind a quaint round table supported on a square frame-work; her dark hair, only slightly raised over a small cushion in front, fell in long glossy curls over her shoulders; she wore a black tabby

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mantua and a striped gray petticoat, her white muslin kerchief fastened with a cherry-coloured knot of ribbon, and her plump white arms showing through the long black mittens that reached her sleeve ruffles. She was fascinated by Mainchance's attentions,

and now, vexed with herself for having teased him during their yesterday's walk, and through the evening that followed, she was ready to atone; the consciousness gave a pensive droop to her eyelids, thereby showing a length of black lashes that rested on her blooming cheeks.

“I shall always be sorry to think. Mistress Lucy,” said Child, “that my friend Mainchance is not successful as a botanist. He seems to be quite miserable at his failure yesterday.”

Lucy reddened, and in some confusion put a lump of sugar in the cream-jug.

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“'Twas because I was so selfish, Mr. Child; but I do so dearly love water-lilies, and you would think them vastly pretty too, if you saw them swimming among their leaves in a wash-tub.”

“I do not doubt but I should, Mistress Lucy,” said Child politely, “and I am sorry to lose the chance of seeing them; however,” he went on with a smile, “with other opportunities you will no doubt be able to teach Mainchance the best way of gathering lilies and roses, too, perhaps!”

“La Mr. Child,” cried Lucy blushing.

Mainchance had come in while Child was speaking, dressed in a pea-green suit, with a richly laced neckcloth, and both he and Lucy looked foolish, but Lyndford came to his sister's assistance.

“'Tis *you* can best teach him to pluck roses—eh, Child?”

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It was now the young barrister's turn to look conscious, but before he could answer, Hannah came in in eager haste with a packet in her hand.

“A letter, master,” she said; “'tis to be read with all speed, the messenger says. He and his horse have travelled at such a pace that they are well-nigh spent, and the poor dumb

brute is covered with foam; for my part, I cannot tell which is worst blown—the man or his beast. I—"

"Well, well, that will do, Hannah," Lyndford smiled, "go and feed both the dumb and the speaking brute while I get an answer ready; I warrant they'll soon come round with com and ale."

On reading his letter, he found that the answer required was his immediate presence at the bedside of one of the richest squires in the county, who had delayed the

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consideration of his will to the last moment of his life, and must now make it amid the pains of death.

It appeared that Lyndford would certainly be detained a day, if not longer; and while his sister went with him to pack his valise, Mr. Child, to Mainchance's great chagrin, insisted that it would not be suitable for them to intrude on Mistress Lucy during her brother's absence. "We will go to an inn," he said, "and leave for town, early to-morrow."

"I do not see the need to do that," said Mainchance, as they went to their rooms upstairs; "let us stay at the inn till Lyndford comes back."

"Why, you were all agog to go back to town t'other day; what has changed your note?" said Child smiling. "We will make our adieux to Mistress Lucy

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now, and then we can talk the matter over."

They went down into the yard to see Lyndford mount, and when he appeared Child told him of their purpose.

"You will at least return and finish your visit when I come back," said the hospitable man. "I am vexed to be the means of sending you away."

And Mistress Lucy added her entreaties that they would return.

The worthy lawyer was soon mounted on his strong brown horse, and with oft renewed apologies for having to go so abruptly, he started off, his clerk following on a scrubby little pony laden with bags.

As soon as they had ridden away. Child followed Mistress Lucy to her parlour and bade her a courteous farewell.

“I hope the time is not far distant,” he

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said, “when you will be able to show me lilies in a tub.”

He did not wait while Mainchance said good-bye to Mistress Lucy, but adjourned to the hall, affecting great enjoyment of the fragrant nosegay on the buffet, into which he plunged his handsome face.

“Mistress Lucy means mischief,” he thought, “and she is a pretty piece of goods enough, just the girl for Mainchance.”

His friend's smiling excited face, when he came out from the parlour some minutes later, satisfied Mr. Child that the affair was progressing favourably.

Mainchance walked down the street beside him, quite restored to his usual jaunty self-possession, and humming a lively air. Before the friends could exchange a sentence, a little sun-burnt boy placed himself in front of Mr. Child.

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“Be ye Master Benjamin Child?”

“Yes, my boy—what do you want with me?”

“Here be a token for 'ee;” the boy thrust a large heavily-sealed letter on him and ran away at full speed.

Child instinctively started off in pursuit, but the urchin knew more about the ins and outs and twisting streets of the old town of Beading than he did, and he was soon obliged to give up the chase and return breathlessly in search of Mainchance, finding his

way back with some difficulty through the courts and alleys into which his heedless pursuit had led him.

"Where on earth have you been. Child? I thought you'd gone mad. What's that in your hand?" Mr. Mainchance, looking back for a last glimpse of his beloved's nest, had not witnessed the delivery of the letter.

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Child told him what had happened, and proceeded to open the important-looking packet. He frowned as he read the letter, and then with a puzzled face he read it through again—slowly this time, and weighing each word deliberately—but he looked still more bewildered when he came to the end. "I don't understand it," he muttered.

"What the devil's in the wind now?"—Mainchance felt extremely inquisitive. "Is it a dun? or does someone want the loan of a few guineas?"

Child handed him the letter. "Read and judge for yourself, I can make nothing of it; you are both keen and cool, and perhaps you may see the point of it better than I do."

"Phew! by the Lord Harry, a challenge! the point is sharp enough," said Mainchance. "Who's your challenger? you can surely give a guess."

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Child looked blank.

"No, I am utterly puzzled. Do you think it can be a trick?"

"Well, that remains to be proved; but, at all events, you must keep the tryst, old boy." Mainchance rubbed his soft hands, and his eyes sparkled with excitement. "Egad, perhaps I may get a little sword-play myself with this fire-eater's second. Of course we cannot go back to town now. I would not miss the fun for a fifty-pound note. We'll tap his hot blood for him. By good luck I have lately learnt a famous feint; I will teach it to you; but you must let me have your rapier, and I'll take it with mine to a cutler and have 'em both seen to. Now let's have a bottle of claret and discuss the matter quietly," said Mainchance, putting his arm within his friend's; "that done, we'll have a little practice."

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Child nodded his assent, but he was silent, and when they reached the inn to which they had ordered their baggage to be sent, he went at once to his bedroom, and sat down to think calmly over this strange event.

What did it mean?

He laid the open letter on his table, and passed his hand heavily over it, as if he would clear away its mystery with the creases in which it had been folded.

The letter was written in a large bold hand, and it was a formal challenge to fight with rapiers in the place of meeting described—a small open space of ground, surrounded by trees and bushes, near Tilehurst Church—at six o'clock next morning, and then came these words: "I, having been deeply wronged by the aforesaid Mr. Benjamin Child, solemnly demand, from

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him, as a man of honour, this meeting as the only reparation he can make me." Then came a few minute details as to the precise locality of the place of meeting.

Child leaned back in deep thought; he passed in review every incident of his life, but neither in childhood nor in his school and college experiences could he remember anyone whom he had deeply wronged. He paused to weigh every trifling dispute or scrape he could remember, but nothing to justify the charge made against him revealed itself. And this was the first affair of the kind he had been involved in.

"Surely it is a trick," he said; "and yet no, there is a character of truth in it which does not admit of doubt. Mainchance clearly believes it to be a challenge in sober earnest, and I know he has had affairs of this sort."

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He leaned his head on his hand. He was a brave man, and he had no special tie to life—no proud father, or tender mother, or loving sisters to mourn his loss; still his heart beat full and fast as the thought came without disguise that by next day he might be lying cold and dead, or he might have taken the life of a fellow 'Creature. This thought made him shudder. He wrote in pencil a few lines to Lyndford, telling him what had happened, and entrusting him with the disposal of his few possessions. He sealed this memorandum, and going downstairs he gave it into Mainchance's keeping.

Mainchance was in a voluble excited state, making passes with his cane and explaining the nature of his famous feint, anxious for supper-time and a bottle of wine. But Child, much to his friend's

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chagrin, made the necessity of early rising an excuse, and so presently bade him goodnight and went off to bed.

He could not sleep; this mysterious letter filled him with unrest. That very morning he had reproached himself for faintheartedness. Why had he not sought out the fair heiress of Calcot and put his fate to the test? And yet, what warrant had he for so seeking her? Surely her treatment of Sir Henry Wilder was warning enough for anyone. He had bitterly regretted the folly which had determined him not to follow up his first inclination, and this remembrance had been a potent motive to keep him from seeking Mistress Frances on this occasion. For would so proud and scornful a woman, as she had proved herself, ever forgive his delay; would she not rather think

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that, instead of believing in herself as she had shown herself to him, he had believed her slanderers, and had waited to let time clear her fair fame from the aspersions of Sir Charles Knollys?

But his doubts and hesitations always summed up in the thought that she was an heiress.

"She is so rich and I am so poor," he said; "she has all, I nothing. She would look on me as a needy adventurer. If she were only poor then I would try my chance boldly and win her, spite of all."

Now, as he lay tossing about in the warm June night, he rejoiced that he had not sought Frances Kendrick. He had once thought of proposing to Mainchance to delay their return to town, so that he might ride over to Calcot Park and try to meet its fair

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mistress, as it were by chance, leaving his future to shape itself; but now he rejoiced that he had not so acted.

Whatever happened now, he left no one to regret him—no one else's happiness was involved in this duel, if he fell. Mistress Frances Kendrick would never know how dearly he had cherished her image in his heart, though this unselfish thought gave him a pang. If he lived—the thought startled him; a vista seemed to open before him, it was the first light that had risen on the gloom that wrapped him round. Soft hope came stealing over his senses, and, turning on his pillow, he fell off, like a child, into deep refreshing sleep.

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CHAPTER V.

THE MEETING.

Covered with a mask, and walking,
There she met her lover talking
With a friend that he had brought,
So she asked him whom he sought.

Old Ballad.

A FRESH sunny morning of sweet "leafy June," so early that the birds had not finished their matin song, nor had the sun dried all the dewdrops, for many still hung on the delicate blue and pink blossoms that showed in rich profusion on the banks of one of the truly English lanes that still abound in the neighbourhood of Reading. Green hedges were topped here and there by

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tall branched elms, which made a pleasant shade as the two friends, having left their postchaise in the high-road, walked beneath them to the appointed meeting-place.

Mr. Child was very thoughtful, but still his eyes wandered admiringly from the snowy clouds of hawthorn interspersed in the hornbeam hedgerow, showing a creamy white against the blue sky above, and the bright and varied flower carpet on the banks, where the dry-eyed buttercup towered above the bridal stitchwort and the blue of the graceful ground-ivy.

Every now and then a rabbit popped out of his hole and ran across the path in front, and overhead the air was alive with butterflies and other winged insects, rejoicing in the early sunshine.

The birds were singing hidden among the

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leaves, and high up a lark was pouring out a gushing hymn of praise.

Mainchance is voluble, as usual; but he only gets short answers from his friend.

All at once the lane they are traversing ends on a wild-looking grassed road, bordered on each side by fir plantations. But as the friends proceed along this road forest trees mingle with the firs, and the plantation deepens into a wood of considerable size. Just as they make this discovery, and see how thickly they are surrounded, the grassed road widens into a sort of level lawn, belted in with oak trees.

“Here we are; as sure as sixpence this is the place,” Mainchance exclaims; “it corresponds in all particulars with the description in the letter. Here we have 'a thick oak grove with a fountain near,' and see—the water trickles out of yonder hillock; 'fore

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George, what a jolly place for a gipsy party! If we get well out of this, Ben, we'll run down again in August, and make Lyndford and pretty Mistress Lucy get up a gipsy party in this very place; rare sport we'll have too,” he says, rubbing his hands as he calls to memory Mistress Lucy's bright eyes and pretty ways.

“Be quiet, rattlepate.” Child stands listening. “We must be near the high road; I distinctly heard the sound of coach wheels above your torrent of words.”

“And why not cart wheels? Can't carts and waggons travel in lanes, my worthy Ben?”

“These were not cart wheels—they stopped just as I spoke—near us too. Hark! there are voices.”

“Tut, tut”—Mr. Mainchance looks scornful—“a hare or a squirrel. No, by the

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Lord, I vow there's a petticoat coming out of the wood yonder. What can she want here at this time of the day?”

While he speaks, a woman advances from among the oak trees in the corner of the grove farthest from the friends.

She comes forward slowly; they see that she wears a black mask under her cocked hat, and she is besides so enveloped in a large dark-coloured cloak, that it is impossible to determine her age or figure. In fact, but for the glimpse of petticoats below her cloak, she might as well be a man as a woman.

“Stay here, Child. I'll see what this charmer wants, and get her out of our way.” And before Mr. Child can interfere, his friend is halfway across the space.

But at Mainchance's jaunty advance the masked figure halts.

“On what errand are you here so early,

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sir?" a sweet but stern voice says. By the tone Mainchance sees at once that the speaker is a lady.

He bows and smiles. Here is an adventure of a different sort to a duel. He must conduct it, and he is a firm believer in his own power of fascination.

"Egad, madam, I protest, without offence, I may repeat your question"—he goes closer and adds, smiling as he thinks in an irresistible fashion—"but, my fair creature, your tone alarms me; what have I done to offend?"

"You are trespassing, sir," she says stiffly; "why are you here?"

"Remove your mask, mysterious charmer, and I will reveal my errand," says Mainchance bowing.

"This is nonsense, sir," she says imperiously, "say what you want or leave me."

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She makes a movement to proceed towards Child.

"Stay, madam, I am your slave, and I will tell you—'tis quite an adventure, a mystery," he laughs, "and 'twill amuse you vastly. I and my friend, the gentleman who stands yonder under the oak, have come here in answer to a challenge sent to him last evening—by whom he knows not—and if I may be so bold as to advise a lady, I would humbly suggest that you at once retire.

The challenger will doubtless be here directly with his second, and blood, my dear madam, blood will be spilt before your eyes."

"You mistake, sir"—her voice is less firm, it seems to Mainchance that it is agitated. "I am this challenger, and I demand instant satisfaction from your friend for the injury he has done me."

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As she speaks, he sees the handle of a rapier projecting between the folds of her cloak. Mainchance stands dumb with surprise at this announcement. He observes the lady's hands, and notes that spite of her thick riding-gloves they are small and shapely.

Next moment he smiles and bows. “This is, no doubt, some London madam,” he says to himself, “who has followed Ben into the country that she may take him by storm in this way. Egad, I'll be even with her, she shall pay for this scurvy trick.”

“I see your drift, madam,” he says mockingly; “perhaps I had best retire and leave you and Mr. Child to enjoy one another's company. I warrant you can amuse him well enough without a rapier”—he laughs—“or, will you yield *me* the preference. You will find me a far more devoted

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slave than my friend Ben—'pon honour you will—he's as cold as an icicle. Come, fair charmer.” While he speaks he tries to take her hand.

The lady draws herself away from him with a quiet dignity that subdues even Mainchance's audacity.

“Sir,” she says very coldly, and she throws back her head with a haughty gesture of impatience, “I did not come here to be insulted.”

“Egad, madam, pardon me. I protest—”

“Sir!” she interrupts haughtily, “we will leave you out of consideration; you are not wanted, except that you may be so good as to tell Mr. Child I wait for him to give me reparation. I am in solemn earnest, sir.”

Mainchance hesitates. He scans her masked face eagerly. “I believe the wench

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is deuced pretty, the turn of her neck is perfect;” then he looks round to make sure that Child is too far off to hear.

'"Have pity on me, madam," he says entreatingly, "you have already inspired a consuming passion in me. I know you are as beautiful as you are brave, and beauty is more akin to love than to war, you know."

"Let me pass, sir, if you will not cease your impertinent folly"—she tries to pass him as she speaks—"I must deal with Mr. Child himself."

"Nay, nay; why so hasty, madam? I protest—I vow—I swear I am all adoration, discretion, obedience, and—and respect." He spins out his words â€" trying to find a clue to the mystery—to knit into some form the ideas that flash through his inventive brain—since he has discovered the lady is other than he at first imagined. Her

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words, "Give me reparation!" assist him.

"What I mean, madam, is"—he keeps himself dextrously between her and Child—"that you should take my friend's love instead of his life! for, look you, whatever he may have done to you, poor fellow, he loves you devotedly—yes, dear madam, most devotedly."

The lady starts at these words. Mainchance notes the action.

"I swear it! For your sake he has forsworn the company of fair ladies. He is forever talking of you, madam. Now, hang it," he says to himself, "that must tell with a woman—they all resemble gudgeon."

"This is folly, sir!" but Mainchance again notes the hurry and agitation with which she speaks. "I cannot—you cannot know—your friend does not know who I

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am!" Her head bends forward a little, and she wraps her cloak round her more closely. Mainchance sees that somehow he has struck the right chord, and his interest is yet keener.

"Ah madam, you are indeed in error," he says earnestly. "I will not offend you by addressing you by your real name" ("which I haven't the least notion of," he mutters),

"but I now fully understand to whom I speak, and humbly I crave pardon for having tried your patience while I was still in ignorance. Forgive him, dear madam, forgive my poor suffering friend. (What the devil has Child done to her?) He has a vast fondness for you; on my conscience he adores you. I'll take my oath on the Bible, if you have one in your pocket!—I'll swear it in a court of justice! He has a consuming passion for

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you! To tell the truth, he has been dying for you ever since he first saw you."

"Sir," she says faintly, "sure you are deceiving me."

"No, madam, by Heaven! I speak the simple truth! But how can a poor barrister declare his passion for a rich woman? Heaven forgive me!" he says to himself, "I'm in for it now; this beats a stage play."

The lady turns away a few steps, and leans against a tree for support. "Is this true? how can this end?" she murmurs.

Mainchance catches at her words. "Egad, it's all right," he says to himself, "I knew she was rich. Leave it all to me, dear madam; the end is plain," he says, in much delight at his successful invention. "It seems to me that you also owe my friend a reparation for the agonies he has endured on your behalf. Come now, let us

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argue the point—is it not better to marry than to fight? Yes, marry him out of hand, madam, and thus avoid any scandal created by this meeting."

The lady still leans against the tree.

"But, sir," she says, suddenly rising from her leaning posture, "your friend came here with—with no intention of—of marrying me; he does not know"

Mainchance feels himself on sure ground now, and he considers that any means of gaining a rich wife for Child is justifiable, for he feels certain that the masked lady is rich.

"'Tis true, dear madam, that my friend did not anticipate the sweet delight of meeting you here this morning, but none the less, he had solemnly sworn not to leave Berkshire till he had become your husband—or," he adds quickly, as she gives a slight gesture of surprise, "at

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least, your accepted suitor. Good Lord, madam, he is dying by inches for you, actually fading away; he neither eats, drinks, nor sleeps; hollow cheeks; and you know what a leg he had—gone, madam, gone—only a drumstick remains."

The masked lady, who is eagerly listening, presses her hands closely together.

"How can you then, madam, for some fancied slight, some trifling indiscretion on his part, be so cruel as to defer his bliss?"

There is a pause, the lady keeps silence. Mainchance, astonished at the success of his invention, considers what he shall say next; how he shall clinch the matter.

"She's young," he says to himself, "I think she's rich, I dare swear she's pretty, and *sans* doubt she's desperately fond of Ben. I must work upon her feelings. Madam," he makes a low bow, "I am sure I can

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confide in your discretion, so I will be frank. Through no fault of his own, my friend is deeply involved; you are rich"—he pauses—"I knew I was right there;" he goes on with still more assurance, "you know my friend's agreeable qualities, and I vow to you he is the best fellow that ever breathed; then, madam, become his wife without delay." The lady starts. "Yes, madam, his wife, and you can relieve him of this trouble. In a word, if you do not wed Mr. Child this morning, I have no choice but to take him back to town, and once there again, there is nothing to prevent his being locked up for debt." He folds his arms as he speaks.

"Sir, is it possible, is it true?" says the lady in a trembling voice.

"'Tis a solemn fact, dear madam—and then you may never see him again—he will probably rot in a gaol, as so often happens;

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moreover, if he escapes imprisonment when he goes back to town, he has solemnly-promised to go abroad with me on an affair of great peril, in which he must risk his life—his life, mind you, dear madam," he adds with great earnestness, and he folds his arms across his chest. "I am sorry, but I cannot release him from his pledge while he remains a bachelor. You would doubtless at once grasp the legal bearing of the case had I time to trouble you with it, but I will not commit such a trespass on your patience. In brief, if you love Mr. Child, you will consent to marry him this morning."

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CHAPTER VI.

MR. CHILD MAKES UP HIS MIND.

If my judgment may be trusted,
Wed her, sir, you can't be worsted;
If she's rich yon rise to fame,
If she's poor you are the same.

Old Ballad.

MR. CHILD was becoming impatient. He stood under the oak branches with a growing look of vexation on his handsome face, and a growing conviction that he had been made a fool of.

It seemed to him that Mainchance was enjoying his talk with the masked lady; and also, judging from his lowered voice, and an occasional restless glance in his direction, he guessed that his friend did not

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wish him to overhear the conversation. Till now he had not been able to hear the lady's voice, but all at once a few words, distinctly-spoken, came wafted to him on the pure morning breeze.

Mr. Child started, and flushed up to the waves of his dark-brown hair, while a thrill of delicious surprise set his pulses beating. He looked up at the bronze-coloured canopy overhead, and then down at the brown carpet of last year's leaves; he could hardly believe he was not dreaming, or that his senses were not glamoured by some fairy whisper. He listened, straining his ears to hear that voice again, but the lady's answers seemed now to be spoken in a whisper, as Mainchance drew closer, and was evidently urging something strongly upon her. Benjamin Child looked intently at her, but the heavy

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horseman's cloak so concealed her figure that he could not make out any resemblance to the one person who was always in his thoughts. He called up vividly the face and figure that should match with the sweet clear voice he had fancied he recognised, and then he smiled at his own utter absurdity, and looked away.

All in vain. Next moment his eyes again sought the masked lady; his ears were again strained to hear the sound of her sweet voice.

“What is the meaning of this,” he said; “if this be a trick, I should only feel resentment towards its author, and yet each moment draws me more forcibly to that lady yonder.”

The cloaked figure had been leaning against a tree, and now she made a slight movement as if to retreat. At this Mr. Child felt carried out of himself.

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"There's something more than common in this," he said, checking the violent impulse that urged him towards the lady; "can it be possible that I have guessed rightly?" and then he rated himself for a presumptuous coxcomb.

The lady was turning away, and now she spoke distinctly. There could be no longer any doubt—it was she—Frances Kendrick herself, and Mr. Child forgot everything, and rushed across the space that divided them. But Mainchance bowed, kissed the lady's hand with much show of respect, and led her back among the trees.

At this Mr. Child stood still for a moment, and before he could resume his pursuit, Mainchance came out alone from among the trees.

He was smiling very complacently, and he rubbed his white hands softly together.

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"Well, Jack, what is it?" said Child eagerly.

"Faith, she wouldn't let me hand her to her coach, but I saw fast enough there was a coach beyond the wood there."

Then Mainchance looked up and saw his friend's excited face.

"In the name of all that's wonderful," said Mr. Child, "what does this mean?"

"What does it mean, my fine fellow?"

'Fore George, 'tis the rarest of good fortunes for you. Sure, Ben, you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth—egad, I should perhaps say a golden soup-ladle."

But Mr. Child went on impetuously.

"Who's that lady, Mainchance—why was she here—what have you been saying to her all this while?"

Mainchance took off his hat, and began to

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fan himself in a leisurely fashion; then seeing that his friend had started off towards the spot where the lady disappeared, he whistled.

"Stop there, Ben—you're too late— the bird has flown. What's the use of such a salvo of questions? give me one at a time, old boy;" then seeing his friend's wrathful face: "Don't be savage, Ben, because I kissed her hand; faith, you shall kiss her all day if you like. Now, 'pon honour, if you are going to turn sulky," for Mr. Child turned angrily away, "just when I've done you the best turn one man ever did another, you may go to the devil your own way, and, egad, I'll take care of the lady."

He walked off in affected anger, but Child caught him by the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon," he said eagerly; "I was hasty, the long suspense has been

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too much for my patience; for Heaven's sake tell me something."

"Ah!" Mainchance drawled out with his eyes full of mischief, "yes, yes, to be sure—I forgot—poor fellow, you have been longing to fight all this time. But you'll never guess—faith, it's beyond you—"

"Guess what? confound you, Mainchance! you'll drive me mad—do say what she came here for." Mainchance rubbed his hands with delight.

"She—came—to—fight—you. Now, do you understand, my *impetuoso*? she is your challenger; the wonderful cartel of last night was from the hand of that identical lady in the cloak and mask."

Child looked troubled again. "Come, Mainchance," he said, "have done with

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this fooling, or I will satisfy myself;" and looked again towards the wood.

"Fooling indeed—on my honour 'tis fact. Stand still, Ben—that is if you can—and listen; I see what you are after, but she's not in the grove; she's a mile off by this time. Well, here's the case, though it sounds more like romance than truth. That sweet creature in the mask came here, she vows, though I don't believe it, with the intention of running you through the gizzard with her rapier. Egad, she had one under her cloak, and I'll be bound she knows how to use it. Well, to cut the story short, I have convinced her

that it will be a far more christian-like and woman-like action if she marries you instead."

"For Heaven's sake have done with such fooling. I must and will follow her; I know who she is."

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But Mainchance gripped him firmly. "Softly, my good friend; if you go after her you ruin us altogether, and knock down forever the fine house of cards I have been building. Ph—ew", he said, in his affected drawl, fanning himself gently with his three-cornered hat, "this is the compact—but the two of you are enough to give a poor devil a fever with your impatience; 'tis deuced hot work pleading for one's friend; 'fore George, 'tis far more fatiguing than pleading for oneself, and one gets sharp words and no kisses for one's pains."

"Great Heavens, how you chatter! do come to the point. What is this compact you speak of?"

Mainchance gasped, and went on fanning himself.

"Fair play—gently—gently; I'm coming to it. Let me breathe, Ben; let me see.

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where was I? Well, the lady, owing to my extraordinary powers of persuasion, has kindly consented to give up killing you—that is concession No. 1; concession No. 2 is more startling. Stop, do not interrupt, or you shall never hear the end—she will marry you instead, as soon as I can get a licence and a parson, and by good chance I know where to find both. Stay, stay," for Child is staring wildly towards the grove, "these are the conditions—you are to remain passive—a simple lay figure I am, I flatter myself, the chief actor in our drama this morning. The lady will meet us in two hours' time at St. Mary's Church. She will not unmask or enter into any explanation with—you; she will not even speak—to you. If you are content to wed her on those conditions she condescends to give you her hand, but no word will she

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say to you, even after you twain are made one, till we reach her house. I haven't an idea where she lives, but I fancy not very far off. 'Fore George," he rubbed his hands again, "you're in luck's way, Ben.

'Tis a fine morning's work, for I feel convinced she's vastly rich."

"I don't understand it," said Child dreamily.

"Nor I neither," said Mainchance, "but that matters little; you are in my hands; I undertake to see you married at St. Mary's Church, and then I accompany you home after the ceremony."

"Not if I know it!"—Mr. Child roused at this proposal—"your presence is not wanted after we leave the church. Master Jack; in fact, I protest against it," he said, with some excitement.

"Very well, sir; very well," said Main

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chance coolly; "then you may give the whole thing up. Your fair one is determined to reign supreme in this her last day of liberty. I had hard work enough, I can tell you, to make her consent to the marriage. She seems afraid you may think her forward, or some consummate nonsense or other. Trust me, Ben, she's neither old nor ugly, and that's the chief matter, I take it, in wedlock—after the money; I examined her pretty closely, spite of her disguise. She's got a delicious pair of red lips, a ravishing chin, and a devilish pretty foot, let me tell you, and plenty of silky-looking yellow hair; and spite of her lace neckerchief, I could see that her throat is white as milk, and she blushed divinely. Ah Ben, she's young, fair, and rich! By the Lord Harry, you're a lucky dog!

Come, let us hasten back to Reading, or

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she'll be at church before I've got the licence."

Mr. Child has been standing wrapt in thought, trying to reconcile the impossibilities which Mainchance's story have raised into facts, but now he turns round eagerly. "Yes, yes, let us go back to Reading," he says, "we're losing time;" and, breaking into a sudden smile, he says softly, "and suppose I can tell you what name to put into the licence. Jack.

"The devil you can!"

Mainchance stands staring, so utterly is he surprised at this information, and at the sudden result of his own eloquence. "And this is your man of delicacy and refinement," he says to himself, "willing, nay, eager to marry the first woman who asks him, without seeing so much as her face. Good Lord! I give it up." He indulges in a long whistle.

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"Come, come!"—Mr. Child turns to go back—"why are we losing time? let us go to Reading."

"By George!"—Mainchance hurries after Child's rapid strides—"you seem plaguy cheerful at the idea of taking a wife. Ugh, the word's an ugly one after all—like gulping down a pill," he says in his drawling way. "Though the pill were gilded by wealth and beauty, I could hardly tempt Providence in this way," he adds to himself, as they walk quickly to the place where they left their coach.

"Egad," he goes on, "I hope 'tis all right, but 'tis wonderful. Talk of a pig in a poke! And I've been the means of it all! Well, well, this beats all the cases I've ever had to meddle in!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD LIBRARY.

The library at Oalcot Park was full of sunshine this morning, and through the long open windows a wealth of sweetness poured in from the roses and jasmine, that climbed in pink and white starred luxuriance over the old stone balustrading of the terrace.

The terrace was so wide that only a portion of the garden below was visible from the room. This garden was small and chiefly occupied by grass-plots and clumps of flowering shrubs: the delicate rose of the tree-peony, the white dark-centred cistus,

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and huge bushes of roses. Beyond these masses of bloom came the sunk fence, but this was out of sight, and the stately-avenues of oak and elm seemed to stretch on from the flowering trees, and gave a fine variety of colour. Farther yet, mapping out the meadows, were trim hedgerows, now white with hawthorn blossoms, gradually losing themselves in the line of blue hills that made the horizon.

All was sunny, still, and full of peace. Presently, when the library door opened, and Mrs. Purley came in, her quick tread and the tapping of her heels sounded like a complete break-up of the solitude.

The spinster's pleasant face was troubled. She had been upstairs to take off her wraps, and she wore to-day one of the ponderous erections of ribbon and lace in those days called a commode; round her neck was

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a long piece of mechlin lace, carelessly twisted; altogether she was dressed in her best, and looked excited and expectant, with a tinge of pink colour in her cheeks, and a half benevolent half wise look in her eyes. She sat down first in her accustomed chair, but she was too much fluttered to remain there; so she jumped up and began to pace the long room, trifling with her fan and beating time on her chin with two mittened fingers. She had received a note early that morning from Frances Kendrick, and now she stopped before one of the windows and drew this note from her pocket.

"Too-too!" she said peevishly, "what can the child be doing?" Then carefully settling her spectacles she read:

"Come at ten o'clock this morning, dear aunt. Ask no questions of anyone, not so

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much as 'Where's your mistress?' but wait, like a dear patient soul, in the library for me. I'm gone into town on business, and perhaps I shall not be home for some time. Be sure to come."

She turned the letter over, refolded it, and put it in her pocket.

"Most strange and perplexing; most provoking, I may say. I hardly know what to think, and why such haste? She must have gone into town soon after cock-crow; fine doings indeed, and just when I thought she had quieted down a little."

Mrs. Purley shook her head with a wise air. She had not forgotten her long talk with Frances two days ago.

Yesterday she had not visited her young friend, having returned to her own home in early morning, and it seemed to her that something must have happened in the

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interval. And here she was, and yet forbidden to ask a question. She felt strangely restless; quite incapable of resorting to the eternal knotting which lay snug in the reticule hanging on the arm of her customary easy-chair. She could do nothing but long to use her tongue, and this was forbidden her.

"What can the child be doing?" she exclaimed; "surely she would not go abroad alone, and I may not even ask so much as this. 'Tis a shame truly."

But while she waited, curiosity grew rampant. She made another turn, and as she passed before the bell-rope it caught her eye.

She went up to it and stretched his hand, then shook her head, and went back to the window, but though this commandments the chief avenue she saw no sign of Fran return.

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She could no longer bear this suspense. “I need not ask questions,” she said, and she went again to the fireplace and rang the bell. Presently the grave butler appeared, there was a look of surprise in his raised eyebrows, and Mistress Purley felt in some trepidation at having disturbed so very important a person for so slight a cause.

She cleared her throat nervously. “I want to speak to Sukey,” she said; “will you say so, Downes, if you please?”

The butler bowed, but he made a wry face as he turned away.

“Airs and graces,” he muttered, with the insolence of an old servant who has never had the control of a master; “the old madam could have gone and looked for my young lady's woman herself; she's sure to be upstairs with her ribbons and band-boxes. Catch me going; John shall serve the turn.”

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Mrs. Sukey appeared after some delay. She looked in dress like a faded edition of her mistress, as she wore one of Frances's cast-off gowns, but her headdress was far more elaborate and fashionable, her hair being strained back over a high cushion, and surmounted by a cap trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons.

She made a mincing curtsy, and asked Mrs. Purley's pleasure.

The old lady's pink flush deepened. She had only asked for Mrs. Sukey, in order to discover whether Frances had gone out unattended, and she had not provided herself with an excuse, but she was not slow in finding one.

“Will you tell me if my head is set on straight, Sukey?” she said. “I feared I might have crushed it to one side in removing my wraps.”

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The maid fussed and twitched at the tall structure, till Mistress Purley felt as if her head was being pulled off.

"That will do," she said gently, "and thank you, Sukey. If all's true that I hear, we shall soon have no heads to fuss over. Have you heard that in London they've given up heads altogether? so I suppose we shall lose ours soon. 'Tis all over the town."

"Lawk-a-mercy, madam!" said the waiting-woman with a titter, adding to herself: "What can the old fool mean? for sure her wits are leaving her."

"Yes, yes," said Mistress Purley, with an authoritative nod, "I have it from a person of distinction in London; the hair and all connected with it will be worn flat, and commodes and the like will be thought hideous and out of date before many months are over."

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"La madam, really now, but something must be worn." Sukey looked disconsolate. "What will happen to the mantua-makers and milliners, ma'am? they must have something to sell. 'Twill be a pretty kettle of fish for 'em."

"I know nothing about that"—Mrs. Purley was now eager to be rid of Sukey—"but I thought I would tell you the news, lest you should be laying in a fresh stock of wire and ribbon for no purpose, and so waste your mistress's money. Your mistress I suppose is—ehem—yes—that is all my business with you, Sukey."

Mrs. Sukey was so much astonished by the news about the threatened "heads," that she forgot her indignation at having been disturbed in the midst of a gossip with the housekeeper as to the meaning of her young mistress's proceedings; for Mistress Frances

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had gone out without summoning her; and when she questioned the butler, who alone seemed to be in the secret, he had bade her ask no questions, and carry no stories, or she would lose her place.

But she had left Mistress Purley more troubled than she had found her.

Frances has been wild, and self-willed, and eccentric, but never before has she committed such a breach of propriety.

“Heaven bless me,” said the old lady, with puckered lips and frowning eyebrows, the child must have lost her wits, capering about by herself in Reading town at such a time of day—too-too-too!—What can she be doing there?” and again she took her post at the window.

As she stands gazing out on the peaceful scene, her alarm quiets a little.

Two grand old peacocks sit on the balustrade

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of the terrace motionless, as if carved in stone. They bask in the sunshine, which comes streaming in in a golden flood through the open window, and so permeates the library with its presence, that the log fire lit between the dogs early in the morning is dying out, white with jealousy at the heat that comes in from the terrace.

Mrs. Purley gives a hasty glance round to see if there is any sign of unusual preparation—anything to foretell the arrival of visitors.

No—there are flowers in the beaupots on the tables as usual, and on Frances's special writing-table is a spray of wild roses in a pot of blue china; but Frances has had roses ever since they began to blossom in the hedges, so that is no token of unusual preparation.

“If I could only just ask which way she

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went,” says the inquisitive spinster, drumming her fingers on the table. “'Tis really too unreasonable to shut my mouth in this way, Frances should know better. 'Tis unkind; I ought to know all she does—'tis my due.”

She purses up her lips, and glances again towards the windows. One of the peacocks has risen to his feet; he spreads his glorious feathers in the sunshine, gives a hoarse cry, and

then, turning round so awkwardly as almost to overbalance himself, he springs down into the garden below the terrace.

In another minute Mrs. Purley too hears the sound that has disturbed the peacock—a fast approaching roll of carriage wheels.

The peacock comes gravely up the terrace steps, and standing on the topmost he watches the carriage drive round to the front entrance.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITHOUT A MASK.

Like a moving angel bright,
She appeared in his sight.

WHEN Mrs. Purley beheld two carriages driving up to the front entrance, her excitement burst out of all control. She hurried out of the library, across the inner hall to the outer one, and had just time to get into Mistress Frances Kendrick's little business room on the right of the entrance before the first carriage rolled up under the long projecting portico.

It was evidently a hired chariot, and out of it got first one gentleman and then another, and on this last one Mistress Purley's attention was riveted.

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“Who can he be?” she wondered; “he's a vastly pretty fellow, tall and well grown, and as handsome as a picture.” She was in a quiver of delighted expectation.

“T'other one is not so much, but he's well dressed and has an air.”

The two gentlemen bid their driver move on, and then they stand waiting bareheaded under the portico while the second carriage drives up to the entrance, and the handsome stranger opens the door.

"Frances's own chariot, sure enough," says the spinster. "Lord bless us! who on earth is getting out of it ?" she cries, craning her neck at the risk of dislocation, for a lady wearing a mask, and so closely muffled in a cloak that not even her petticoat can be seen, descends the carriage steps. The shortest of the two gentlemen pushes forward officiously and makes her a

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profound bow; she holds a hand out of the folds of her cloak and he kisses it with great devotion; then he shakes hands heartily with his tall companion, gets into the hired carriage and drives back to the Avenue.

Mistress Purley watches his departure, and then she turns, with flushed cheeks and brightened eyes, to look at the cloaked figure and the tall stranger, but they have both disappeared.

"Good Lord!" says the spinster, clasping her hands. However, the sound of closing doors convinces her that they have come into the house, and she returns with all speed to the library.

The tall stranger stands by himself at one of the open windows gazing out into the park, but as the door opens he turns eagerly round, and a look of disappointment comes

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into his face. He bows, and the old lady-curtsies in her best manner; and then he turns to gazing out of window again. He is one of the handsomest men Mistress Purley has ever seen, but she feels more puzzled than ever as to his identity.

"He looks honest and amiable too" she says, putting her head on one side and scanning him carefully. "But, la, bless me, I suppose I may not ask him a question neither." She waits a little while, but the unknown continues to look out of window.

"Drat the man," she says impatiently, "why don't he speak to me, instead of doing mumchance out of window?"

She is almost choking, but there is no alternative, and at last in despair she pulls out her knotting and falls to work.

She raises her eyes now and then, and takes a keen survey of the stranger. He

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is either very impatient or very ill at ease.

He moves from one window to the other, and then he turns round and fixes his eyes on the old-fashioned black clock on the mantelshelf. The hand is pointing to twelve o'clock, and the silver chimes sweetly ring out the old English air to which Gay's words.

When the heart of a man is deprest with care,

have since been married.

But the music does not seem to soothe the excited nerves of the visitor; he looks flushed and agitated, and his eyes constantly turn towards the door as if in eager expectation. Presently he goes to the shelves and reads the names of the books, but he soon tires of that, and he walks from one end of the library to the other.

Mistress Purley longs to question him, and then she loyally represses her inclination

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and fixes her eyes once more on her work.

But the tax on her patience has been too long, and this last effort to keep silence has been so unreal that the reaction is quite beyond her control. It seems to her that she must have a fit if she does not speak.

“A vastly fine day, sir,” she simpers, and then the sound of her own voice startles her.

Mr. Child comes and stands in front of her. “Yes, madam. I presume, madam, that you are the mistress of this house? I may perhaps ask so much as this without offence?”

Mistress Purley's eyes open widely, but she purses her lips and shakes her head until the tower of lace and ribbon quivers.

“You are mistaken, sir,” she says, in a demure and repressive voice. “I confess you surprise me by such a question, but you

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are doubtless a stranger in these parts or you would know that this is Calcot Park, the residence of Mistress Frances Kendrick, commonly known as 'the beautiful heiress of Calcot' I am but her friend and confidant," she adds significantly. "May I ask your business here, sir, this morning? Do you wait to see Mistress Frances Kendrick?"

A question at last, and as she sees a furtive smile in the stranger's eyes, Mistress Purley is aghast at her indiscretion. "Good Lord!" she thinks, "I've done it now. What will happen?" She presses her hands together and bites her lips.

But Mr. Child is plainly quite untroubled. He gives her a steady smiling look, and says, after a slight pause:

"Well, no, madam; I do not come here to see Mistress Frances Kendrick."

A quick flush rises on the spinster s faded

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face. "He is making game of me," she says; "the impudent coxcomb. I'll be bound 'tis some adventurer after all who has got hold of Frances. 'Tis wonderful how they disguise themselves."

"Sir," she says loftily, "since you are unknown to me and have no desire to see Mistress Frances Kendrick, there must be some mistake. You have probably no business in this room at all! You will understand, sir, that this room is only for—for visitors." She tries to say "gentlefolks," but she cannot get out the word, though she draws up her slight figure and looks austerely at Mr. Child's still smiling face.

"Your pardon, madam"—he bows, and there is so serene a look in his eyes that the old lady feels yet more incensed by his daring—"there is no mistake," but as he speaks he hears a rustling behind him,

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the curtain of the door is drawn slowly aside, and as he turns quickly a lady comes in, and closes the door behind her.

Her face is still hidden by her black mask, but her charming figure is admirably revealed by the white dress she wears of some new and soft muslin texture.

Mr. Child has hurried to meet her, but at sight of him she stands still, and seems inclined to retreat; then seeing Mistress Purley, she takes courage, and removing her mask, she shows her lovely blushing face.

Mistress Purley has risen, but she stands still, knotting in hand, with widely opened eyes, all her ready wit scared away by these extraordinary proceedings.

She glances from Frances to Mr. Child. He, plainly, is not scared, for he has at once taken possession of the fair girl's hand, and he is kissing it tenderly, while Frances blushes and trembles.

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"Good Lord deliver us!" says Mistress Purley to herself, "am I asleep or awake?"

But Mr. Child is speaking, and she listens greedily; at last she shall learn what all this mystery means.

"My dearest love," he says in a fond voice, as he bends over Frances, "will you not present me to this lady? and then I can satisfy her that I am not quite the intruder I seem to be."

Mistress Purley's face has grown rigid with the awe of her curiosity; she fears Frances has been doing something very foolish indeed.

"Aunt Purley"—the sweet voice is choked and tremulous, but there is a lovely smile on Frances's blushing face—"I must present to you Mr. Benjamin Child—you understand;" and then she hesitates.

Mistress Purley draws herself up. "I protest, child, I understand nothing at all,"

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she says stiffly, “nothing whatever; I am in a sea of mystery”—here she remembers herself, and curtsies to Mr. Child. “Your servant, sir,” she says—“I have not the honour of your acquaintance”—and then she darts a reproachful glance at Mistress Frances, and almost wrings her hands in the excess of her agitation.

To her surprise Frances looks down, seemingly overcome with confusion, but Mr. Child is evidently quite at home and happy, and he gives Mistress Purley no time in which to decide against him. He still holds one hand of Frances, and leading her up to her old friend, he takes possession of both the clasped hands of the spinster and kisses them.

“Madam,” his beaming smile goes straight to the old lady's heart and almost subdues her, “you will forgive us for trying your

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patience; you will be my aunt too, will you not, now that this dear lady has so honoured me as to become my wife?”

“His wife! Great Heavens!” says Mrs. Purley—her knotting slips from her hand, and she sinks into her chair with so white a face that the young people are alarmed. Mr. Child puts his arm round her, and Frances runs to the bell.

But at this Mistress Purley sits bolt upright, though she is still pale and trembling.

“Stay, madam,” she says firmly, in so changed a voice that Frances grows pale as she stands near the bell. “No further scandal, I beg of you; you have committed imprudences enough for one morning, in all conscience; you need call no witnesses, *Mistress* Child. Sir”—she glances disdainfully at Mr. Child's arm, which, though she

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has risen from its support, still remains on the back of her chair—“I need no help—thank God, *I* can take care of myself. I wish you a very good-morning.”

She rises, makes a low curtsy, and puts her knotting hastily into her reticule.

Mr. Child frowns, and going up to his wife, he puts his arm round her. He wants her to feel that she now has a protector against all rebukes, a shelter against all troubles, but Frances breaks away from him at once, and flies to the side of her old friend.

“Aunt Purley,” she whispers, with her arms clasped fondly round the old lady's neck, and her blooming face nestled against the spinster's faded cheeks, “how can you be so unkind? Come, come”—she kisses between her words—“you dear old thing, if I did not love you so I would say fie on you,

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to flout me so before my husband—'tis setting him a bad copy, you know;” then very earnestly, and in a still lower voice: “Forgive me, dear aunt; you're vexed because I did not tell you; but auntie, I did not know myself this morning what would happen, and indeed—indeed I've married him in this sudden fashion to save his life;” and at this her head sinks on her old friend's bosom in uncontrollable agitation.

At sight of her darling's tears. Mistress Purley forgets her own wrongs and righteous indignation. Since Frances was a little trot of four years old the old lady has never been able to resist her, and as she feels her sobs on her bosom she raises the fair head and kisses the girl's tears away, as if she were still a baby.

At first Mr. Child has discreetly walked away to the window, but now he has come

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back to the two ladies, and stands regarding their proceedings with some impatience.

Mistress Purley looks up at him, and gives a guess at his feelings.

“Come, come, Frances, no tears on your wedding-day,” she says gaily, while with one hand she smooths her darling's ruffled tresses, “and we are making Mr. Child jealous; he don't like our billing and cooing!” and as Frances rises, tearful and rosy with confusion, Mistress Purley looks at the timepiece.

“Mercy on us, child!” she says, rising and bustling towards the door, “how time has been flying: 'tis nearly dinner-time. I vow you must be hungry, Mr. Child; I know I am.

I will go and hasten dinner while you help the dear child dry her eyes." Then she nods and winks at the bridegroom and hurries out of the room.

There is a moment's pause; then he walks.

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up to Frances—his arms are around her at last, and as he kisses the blushing downcast face, he whispers:

"Darling—*my* darling—ever since I first saw your sweet face! You have never been out of my heart since that night. My own wife," he says tenderly, "how can I ever thank you for giving me this happiness? By God's help no tears shall ever fall from these dear eyes again."

Frances tries to speak, but he stops her words with kisses.

The look of uncontrolled happiness in his friend's face at the close of the marriage service proved too much for Mr. Mainchance's philosophy, and when he got back to his inn he told himself that he could not return to town till his fate had been decided by Mistress Lucy Lyndford.

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"Egad," he said, "there's nothing so catching as this sort of thing; 'tis worse than a fever. Why should not I be as happy as Ben is?"

And his happiness was not long deferred, for in the following autumn he and Lucy Lyndford were married in the same church of St. Mary, in which he had stood "best man" to his friend, and seen him wedded to Mistress Frances Kendrick on that sunny morning in June.

Berkshire annals tell us that the marriage made in haste was not repented at leisure. Mr. and Mrs. Child lived together in great happiness, and Mainchance and his wife Lucy were often welcomed as guests at Calcot Park by the Berkshire lady and her husband.

THE END.