Heiress of Haddon eBook

Heiress of Haddon

Contents

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Page 1

CHAPTER I.

At first sight.

There is a spirit brooding o'er these walls
That tells the record of a bygone day,
When 'mid the splendour of these courtly halls,
A pageant shone, whose gorgeous array
Like pleasure's dream has passed away.

Anon.

Where both deliberate the love is slight;
Who ever loved that love not at first sight?

Marlowe.

Amid the hills of Derbyshire which cluster around the Peak there rises, in a lovely dale slyly peeping out from behind the surrounding trees, the fine old pile of Haddon Hall.

Perhaps the old shire of Derby, with its many rich examples, can present to view nothing equal in historic and legendary interest to this old mansion. Its turrets and towers, its windows and its walls, its capacious kitchens, and its fine halls and banqueting rooms —unspoiled by the hands of the "restorer"—have gained for it the almost unchallenged position of being the finest baronial residence which still exists.

There stand the grey old walls whose battlements have proudly bidden defiance to the storms and blasts of half a thousand winters, and there still stand the gnarled old trees which have gently swayed to and fro while many a baron has ruled the Hall, and whose leaves after growing in superlative beauty, seeming to partake in the grandeur and pride of the "King of the Peak," have drooped and fallen, after having made, with their rich autumnal tints, a succession of beautiful living pictures which have delighted the lords and ladies of Haddon for almost twenty generations.

When William the Conqueror had invaded England and had succeeded in seating himself upon his somewhat insecure throne, he began to reward his followers with liberal grants of the land he had won. Among these fortunate individuals was one, William Peveril, said to be a son of the Conqueror, and to him, in common with many other estates in and around Derbyshire, was given the manor of Haddon. Part of the fabric which was then erected is still standing, and it is surmised by some that traces are still left of a previous Saxon erection. In the year 1154, the estate was forfeited to the Crown, and it was granted by King Henry II. to the Avenals, from which family, two hundred years later, it was transferred by marriage to the Vernons.

Its fate has been strangely wrapped up in the history of its women, for as it passed from the Avenals to the Vernons by marriage, so again, three centuries later, by a similar process, it passed from the Vernon family to the Rutland, which ever since has retained it in its possession.

Everything around, both inside and out, is fragrant with interest. Everything seems to breathe out the spirit of departed ages. It is one vast relic of “Merrie England’s” bygone splendour.

Page 2

It was the old original “Palace of the Peak,” nor was it unworthy of the name. The glory of many royal palaces of its time indeed might well have paled beside its splendour, and as a matter of fact the baron of Haddon was a king within his own domain, who wielded a power which few around dared to question, and fewer still resist. Its hospitality was lavish, as the poor of a neighbourhood of no small radius knew full well; and the vastness and riches of the property which accompanied the ownership of Haddon was enough to maintain its lord in an almost regal state.

What happy scenes have taken place within its walls! How many fair ladies have stepped off the riding stone outside its gate, helped by the gallant but superfluous aid of chivalrous knights, each striving to outdo the others by gentle acts of courtesy! What brilliant cavalcades have issued from its portals! How many merry hunting parties have started from its iron-studded gate; and what jovial monster feasts have taken place within its rooms. If walls could speak, what a tale would Haddon have to tell.

The spring of the year of grace 1567 had just commenced, and the trees were beginning to adorn themselves once again in their green array, when the Knight of Haddon, Sir George Vernon, led out a merry company for the first hawking expedition of the year. The winter had been unusually long, and more than extraordinarily severe; and whilst the knight and his sturdy friends had been enabled to pursue their sport by submitting to a more than usual amount of inconvenience, yet the ladies had been almost entirely confined within the limits of the Hall. Winter at Haddon was by no means a dreary imprisonment, for fetes and balls were continually taking place, and however rough the weather might be, and the condition of the miserable tracts which in those days did duty for roads, there were not a few cavaliers, both old and young, who would gladly adventure the discomforts of a journey to Haddon, even were it to be only rewarded by a smile, or perchance a dance with the two daughters of the host, whose beauty, though of different types, many were ready to swear, and to maintain it, if need be, at the point of the sword, could not be surpassed in all the counties of the land.

Indeed, the beauty of Margaret and Dorothy was almost as famous as the reputation of the “King of the Peak” himself, and the old knight, owner as he was of immense wealth, was often heard to assert that his two daughters were the greatest treasures he possessed.

Many eyes were cast upon these two fair maidens, and many hearts were laid at their feet. Margaret, the elder, was already being wooed by Sir Thomas Stanley, and some gossips even went so far as to say that she had already plighted her troth to him. The younger sister, however, had kept her heart intact, and in spite of the persuasions of Sir George and the threats of Lady Maude, had refused to comply with their request to accept Sir Henry de la Zouch as her betrothed.

Page 3

Although by no means dreary, yet the continual round of winter feasts had at last begun to assume an aspect of staleness, and lords and ladies alike had for some time past been eagerly anticipating the time when they might once more pursue their noble sports. As the winter had gradually withdrawn its ice and snow, and occasional gleams of sunshine appeared, hearalding the advent of spring, the excitement had increased. Dancing was discarded, the tapestry work was laid aside, and all with one mind began to make preparations for the coming excursions.

And now the long wished for day had come. The number of guests at the Hall had been largely augmented by fresh arrivals, and as the jovial baron looked round the table at the feast of the previous evening, he declared that a better company could not be found in all the land.

The scene as they started out was animated in the extreme. The ladies, in their many-coloured dresses, riding on horseback, were gracefully coquetting with the knights and squires who surrounded them and dutifully paid their court to them with all the reverence of a fast-departing chivalry.

The chase was to be on foot, and in the rear followed a number of pages, each leading his dogs and carrying his own as well as his master's jumping pole. Everything promised well. The turf had dried after the recent floods, with a pleasing elasticity. The sun shone brilliantly upon the gold-trimmed jerkins of the hawks, and the hum of conversation, with its occasional outburst of merry ringing laughter, added to the tinkling of the sonorous little falcon bells, or the bark of the dogs every now and again as they ineffectually tried to break away from the leashes in which they were held, all tended to put the party in the best of spirits.

Dorothy Vernon, as usual, was surrounded by a circle of admirers, each of whom was anxious to bring himself under her especial notice by anticipating her wishes, or quickly fulfilling her slightest commands.

Sir Henry de la Zouch was there, as a matter of course. He was most assiduous in his attentions, and although it was plainly visible that his presence was as little appreciated as his suit, yet he still kept by her side.

"Methinks, fair demoiselle," he began, "thou art hardly so sprightly this morning as the occasion might warrant. Now, Mistress Margaret, there—"

"Aye, Margaret again, Sir Henry," interrupted the maiden; "thou art for ever placing me beside my sister Margaret. He bears too hardly upon a simple maiden, does he not, Sir John?"

Sir John de Lacey, a little fidgety old man on the wrong side of sixty, nervously played with his collar, and, delighted at the opportunity thus afforded him of paying back a

grudge of long standing, he summoned to his aid all the dignity he was capable of assuming, and declared that the whole of Sir Henry's conduct was ungallant to the last degree.

De la Zouch darted a look of intense wrath at the old man, but as the latter was yet rearranging his collar, the effort was lost.

Page 4

“Nay, nay, sweet Dorothy,” he said, “I meant to say naught that would vex thee, for I would have thee smile upon me and not frown; and if my words have not been pleasing to thee in the past, I am sorry for it, and will endeavour to amend my ways in the future.”

“Where do we go to-day?” asked Dorothy, not noticing his last remark. “We are full late for the woodcock, and the partridges are not yet ready.”

“There are plenty of sparrows on the wing,” exclaimed Sir Benedict a Woode, who had been anxiously awaiting an opportunity to join in the conversation.

“Aha! Sir Benedict,” she replied. “Methought thou wert too unwell to join us to-day, but thou hast weathered the attack, I see.”

“Now, could I stay away, fair cousin, when I knew thou wert among the merry company?” gallantly responded the knight.

“’Twas but the wine got into his head, Dorothy,” insinuated Sir Henry.

Dorothy, according to the fashion of the time, was carrying a hawk, one which she herself had trained, upon her wrist, which was protected from the beak and talons of the bird by a large thick glove. She looked upon the noble bird, and felt proud of her treasure.

“St. George,” she said, “would scorn a sparrow, though, or else, I fear, most noble Benedict, he shares not in the pride of his mistress.”

St. George cocked his head on one side, as if to receive the compliment in a most befitting manner, and catching sight of a hand upon the saddle, it rapidly dipped down its head and made a vicious peck at the intruding fingers.

It was the hand of De la Zouch, and he withdrew with an ejaculation of anger.

“There, Mistress Dorothy,” he exclaimed, “did I not say the bird was but imperfectly taught, and now see here;” and he ruefully pointed to the bleeding finger.

Dorothy was so overcome by the tragic attitude Sir Henry assumed, that instead of offering him her sympathy, she burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, in which the rest of the company joined; and, burning with indignation, the unlucky knight hastened away to join the group around the elder sister.

Having fallen behind, Dorothy and her companions had now to hurry forward, for they learned by the blowing of the horns and signals of Sir George Vernon that they were now close upon the scene of the day’s sport.

“Come, Doll,” shouted the baron, “we are waiting for you; we are ready to begin, and there are some strangers with whom I must acquaint you.”

They soon joined company, and Master John Manners, together with his friend, Sir Everard Crowleigh, had soon passed through the pleasant formality of an introduction to one of the prettiest and wealthiest heiresses in England.

Page 5

John Manners, who plays a prominent part in this veracious narrative, was the nephew of the Earl of Rutland. As he reverently kissed the dainty hand which Dorothy held out to him he was so smitten with the charm of her beauty that Cupid led him, an unresisting captive, to yield his heart to the keeping of the maid. He was deeply smitten, nor was Dorothy herself insensible to the more masculine beauty of the scion of the house of Rutland, for as his dark, flashing eyes met her own, in spite of herself, she felt the power of a strange attraction which drew her towards him. The sprightly god of love had already done his work, and, although perhaps neither of them was aware of the fact, they were each being bound by his chains.

It was a case of love at first sight.

CHAPTER II.

A *jealous heart and crafty*.

He that sows in craft does reap in jealousy.

Middleton.

Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand;
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.

Shakespeare.

The scene of the pastime had been reached, and the preparations for the hawking had already begun. The falconers brought up their birds, the pages gave up their masters' jumping poles, and the dogs were sniffing the air, eager for the chase to commence.

At last the jerkins were taken off, and the straps which had held the hawks were unloosed; the dogs were sent to the front, and the real work of the day began.

Sir George was in capital humour, and closely followed by Sir Benedict a Woode and the others, he led off at a rare pace, with the ladies following upon their steeds a little distance in the rear, and, behind all, a number of admiring rustics, eager to see a little of the sport in which it was not their lot to participate.

Sparrows were plentiful, but no other kind of bird was to be seen, and Sir Benedict was just thinking that Sir George would have to humble himself, when the dogs began to bark.

"Quails, as I'm alive! See!" shouted the baron, in high delight.

"And a whole bevy of them, too," added De la Zouch, turning round to the ladies.

The excitement, which had simmered before, now suddenly became intense, and away went lord and lady, knight and esquire, over wall and ditch, in their eagerness to keep up with the hunt.

Dorothy had not flown her bird, for she had noticed that Master Manners was without a hawk, and now she sent it forward to him by her page, and waited with a beating heart to learn whether her offer had been accepted.

Manners himself came back and thanked her.

“But marry, fair Mistress Vernon,” said he, “I could no more rob you of your bird than I could steal away your beauty or take possession of your heart.”

“Nay, now,” replied Dorothy, not paying the proper amount of regard to the truth, “I am already for-wearied of the hawking; and it were more to my taste to follow on in a more leisurely fashion,” she added, seeing that he was about to refuse. “St. George is a good bird, and is anxious to try a flight; and thou art a stranger, too; thou must take it,” and she placed the merlin on his wrist.

Page 6

Manners had never felt more embarrassed in the course of his life, and, ready-witted though he was, he found himself at a loss how to reply. Before he had collected his scattered senses, Dorothy had gone, and he, left alone, was a long way in the rear. The horns of the hunters, which were continually sounding, proved a sufficient guide, and being nimble of foot, he started off in great haste to rejoin the party, which was now well out of sight.

All this had not escaped the jealous eyes of De la Zouch, for, securely hidden within the friendly foliage of a patch of brushwood, he had seen and heard all, and, with perceptions sharpened by the jealous spirit which raged within his breast, he had at once divined the secret which neither of the two, as yet, understood.

As Manners departed, he emerged from his hiding-place, gnashing his teeth with rage. His anger was terrible to behold.

“So, so!” he exclaimed, as he watched the retreating figure, “it has come to this, then, that I am to yield my share of the riches of Haddon to this usurping churl. But no; it shall never, never be! John Manners shall lie in six feet of solid earth ere I forego the prize!”

Had he been more careful, Sir Henry would have discovered that he was not alone. Had he been less rash, whatever he might have thought, he would have kept his opinions to himself; for hardly had he spoken, when a rough voice at his elbow awakened him from the reverie into which he had fallen.

“Such words, noble sir, are costly, and I ween thou hadst rather not have them repeated to the King of the Peak.”

De la Zouch turned sharply round and fiercely confronted the well-known figure of the Derby packman.

“Thou art over bold for a knave,” he exclaimed; “get thee gone.”

“Not till I am the richer, or I will hie me to Sir George, and tell my tale to him,” was the cool reply.

“Villain!” hissed Sir Henry, “begone!” and obeying the impulse of the moment, he dealt the pedlar a blow which felled him to the ground.

“There will be a few more nobles for that,” groaned the man as he slowly regained his feet.

De la Zouch glanced contemptuously at him and turned to depart, but he was not to go so easily.

“Nay, forsooth,” cried the pedlar, clapping his hands upon the shoulders of the nobleman. “And thou wilt forget thy debts it behoves me to insist.”

With a curse the latter turned round again, but seeing the determined aspect of the man, he pulled out three golden nobles and offered them to him.

The packman laughed.

“What!” he exclaimed. “I must have more than that for my bruises alone.”

“Thou art insolent; that is all I shall give thee; take it or leave it and get thee gone. Thy word would never weigh against mine.”

“Well, master,” returned the other, “it is a case of life or death, and you value your life at three sorry nobles? I would take that rather than the money, for Manners is a friend to the poor,” and grasping his thick stick with both his hands he struck at De la Zouch with all his might.

Page 7

The blow was parried by Sir Henry, who received it upon his jumping pole, and with blood now thoroughly aroused and life on either side to fight for, the conflict was furiously sustained.

The packman's attack was at no time equal to the defence of his adversary, and as he rained down blow after blow they were coolly caught upon the pole, which, used in skilful hands in much the same fashion as the quarter-staff, made quite an admirable weapon both for attack and defence.

Such an unequal contest could not long continue. Science must ever triumph over mere brute force, and this occasion proved to be no exception to the rule, and as the man tired, his blows perceptibly weakened. Had Sir Henry by any piece of misfortune failed to protect himself, the end might have been different. His skill, however, saved him in the end, and as the fury of his opponent abated the knight became more vigorous in his attack.

The end soon came, for, raising his stout ash pole high up in the air, De la Zouch brought it down with, tremendous force, and easily breaking through the pedlar's guard, it alighted heavily upon his head. With a groan the unlucky man staggered back and fell upon the turf. The blow had struck home, and the Derby packman was no more.

Whilst this scene was being enacted, Sir Henry's page, missing his master from amongst the hawking party, had turned back in great trepidation to seek him. Guided by the sound of the blows, the youth had experienced little difficulty in attaining the object of his search, and, standing at a respectable distance, he had been a silent witness of the tragic conclusion of the encounter. Seeing that all was over, he slowly advanced, in a very uncertain state of mind as to the character of his reception.

De la Zouch was too busily engaged in a scrutiny of his late opponent to notice the arrival of his page, and upon the latter devolved the unpleasant duty of announcing himself.

"That was a featly stroke, my lord," he began.

Sir Henry turned round, and a sigh of relief escaped him as he found it was not a fresh combatant with whom he would have to contend.

"Ha, Eustace," he said, "There are many who would like to learn the trick of it; 'tis known to few besides myself, but I will teach it thee some future time."

Eustace, too, gave a sigh of relief. His master was unusually gracious.

When Sir Henry spoke again, his voice was changed.

"Hast thou seen all?" he asked.

“I saw the end of it.”

“But the commencement?”

“No! I was—”

“Ah, well,” interrupted the knight, “’twas not my fault; I would fain have had thee witness its commencement, for, by my troth, the knave brought his fate upon himself.”

He rolled the corpse over and they turned to go, but ere they had proceeded many yards they came to a halt. De la Zouch had an idea, and they wheeled about and returned to the body once more.

Page 8

“Empty the jerkin,” said Sir Henry, as he pointed to the man’s jacket.

Eustace shuddered, but the command was given in so peremptory a tone that there was no option but to comply. He stooped down and emptied the capacious pockets of the dead man’s jerkin, wondering the while-time whether or no his master had suddenly turned robber.

“There is little enough to take,” said he.

“Tut, I want none of it,” replied the knight, and picking up the assortment, which consisted of a huge jack-knife, a pair of spectacles with monstrously wide rims, some bootlaces, a broken comb, and a few coins, he carefully scattered them about the scene where the struggle had taken place. He was not yet satisfied, though, for espying the hollow trunk of an old tree close by, he made the unwilling page help him to deposit the body there.

Eustace wonderingly helped him. He would much preferred to have left it alone, but he dared offer no resistance. He could only hope that if the matter were heard of again, he might not be implicated in the plot.

De la Zouch critically surveyed the scene, and after lightly covering the body over with grass and twigs, he turned to depart.

They walked on in silence for some distance before either of them spoke: the knight deeply wrapped in thought; the page eager and yet fearful to learn the particulars, yet not daring to question his master.

At last Sir Henry spoke.

“Mind you, Eustace,” said he, “say naught of this affair. I would not have my name mixed up with it, and if they ask thee, say thou knowest naught.”

Eustace felt mightily relieved, and readily gave the required promise. He was used to these little deceptions which his master was wont to use on pressing occasions.

“And see,” continued the knight, after a pause, “I am hurt, for although I have come off victor without a scratch, I have not come out of the tussle without a bruise or two. I shall tell them I have had a fall. You understand!”

The page acquiesced, the conversation ceased, and the two walked on in silence to rejoin their companions.

CHAPTER III.

The close of the day.

See how the wily rascal plays his part.
With many a groan and many a practised art.
Around his victims he the net entwines,
Nor rests till he is snared within its lines.
But sure such hurtsome craft and wicked toil,
Will eftsoon on the villain's head recoil.

In the meantime the chase had grown in excitement. The hawks were as eager to distinguish themselves as the birds were to escape, and the sport waxed fast and furious.

As the sun declined, the scattered hawkers struggled back to the appointed rendezvous to partake of refreshment ere they began their return journey. By ones and twos they came, bearing with them the trophies of their sport, which they deposited in a heap before the ladies.

Page 9

No one missed De la Zouch at first, and it was not until nigh upon the conclusion of the meal that his absence was remarked.

“Why, where is Sir Henry de la Zouch?” asked the old knight.

No one had seen him for some time.

“Ah, well,” exclaimed Sir George, “’tis a bad plan to be betwixt towns at mealtimes, eh, Doll? I suppose he’ll come soon, though. Perhaps he’s having the best run of the day all alone;” and the knight sighed at the bare thought of his being away from it.

But Sir George’s anticipations were not fulfilled, for when the meal was finished De la Zouch had not appeared.

“He may have met with an accident?” suggested Manners.

“I rather think Sir Henry is afraid of me,” stammered old Sir John de Lacey, as he buried his face in the last tankard of ale.

“Then he were wise indeed to stay away,” added Sir Thomas Stanley, with a sly wink. “I, for one, would not lightly risk a combat with so doughty a knight as yourself, else Margaret might eftsoon weep for a lover departed.”

As there was still some time left, and there was no certain knowledge that Sir Henry needed their assistance, it was determined to return slowly homewards, and if sport offered itself upon the way to turn aside and follow it. The party had not been long in motion before it roused a “fall” of woodcocks, the very sight of which—so excessively rare at such a time—infused into the sportsmen all the animation of which they were capable. The hawks shot up after them, and their bells, which could be heard tinkling even when the birds were beyond the range of vision, served in some degree to inform the hunters which direction they should take.

“Well, if De la Zouch is doing better than this, why then he is welcome to it,” said Sir George, as with his coat sleeve he wiped away the perspiration which was streaming down his face. “’Tis fine sport, this, Master Manners,” he added, and the old baron chuckled with glee.

It was at this moment that the head falconer approached.

“We have found Sir Henry, my lord,” he said. “He is sorely injured by a fall.”

“Ha! is that so? Then you were right, Master Manners,” exclaimed Sir George, as he turned round to the falconer. “Where is he?” he asked.

“Over the ditch, my lord, close by the wall where his page is standing by his side,” and he pointed to where Eustace stood.

Sir George blew his horn, and in answer to the signal the eager hunters broke off their chase and returned, puzzled in no small degree by the summons they had received. In a few brief words the situation was explained to them, and the party rapidly pushed on to rejoin their injured companion.

De Lacey, upon hearing that his quondam friend was hurt, was so overcome by a most chivalric spirit of forgiveness that he determined to be the first to reach his side, and to offer him what relief lay within his power. Filled with this noble resolve, he hurried forward, but, unfortunately for him, he was not destined to accomplish his mission, for as he was crossing the ditch his pole snapped asunder, and he suddenly found himself located in the very centre of the rank mud dyke. There he was, and all his efforts to free himself caused him only to sink deeper and deeper.

Page 10

“O, Blessed Mary, save me; save me!” he yelled out in an agony of anguish as he felt himself slowly but surely sinking; but not, apparently, feeling very much assured about the answer to his prayer, he turned from things spiritual to things visible and mortal.

“Help me; save me, George,” he cried.

Sir George Vernon was too much overcome by the ludicrous aspect of the affair to lend any assistance just then, for he well knew that two feet, if not less than that, was the excess of its depth.

“Let him alone,” he cried. “If he had not so befuddled his head with ale he would remember as well as I do that twenty inches would reach the bottom of the mud.”

Had Lady Maude been there she would in all probability have sent her lord and master to aid the poor unfortunate, but she was safe at Haddon, and, rejoicing in his freedom from restraint, he laughed louder and louder as he watched the frantic efforts of his friend.

“Don’t let me die,” pleaded poor De Lacey. “Don’t let me die like a dog. Oh, dear, I’m going, I’m going! Blessed Virgin, help me; save me!” and the old man made a last great struggle to free himself.

Manners could bear it no longer. He clearly perceived that what was fun to them was mortal terror to the pitiable object of their merriment, and, advancing to the edge of the dyke, he held out his pole at arm’s length to render him what assistance he could.

“Here, take hold of it,” he cried.

Sir John endeavoured to obey the injunction, but he could not even touch it, and he sank back again in despair.

“Why, man,” laughed Sir George, “as I’m a Vernon, you know as well as I do that thou canst never sink deep in two feet of mud.”

The words roused De Lacey to struggle to his feet and attempt to extricate himself. He staggered forward and advanced a foot or two, but the slimy mud had such a determined hold of him that he overbalanced himself, and fell forward at full length into the ditch. This time, however, he was closer to the bank, and making another effort, he grasped the pole which was still held out to help him. Manners leaned forward, and pulled with all his might, but for some time it was an open question whether he would go in or Sir John come out.

At this critical juncture Dorothy arrived upon the scene of the disaster. The sight of the old man’s distress at once appealed to her womanly nature, and she had but to murmur a word of pity, when, in a moment, half-a-dozen knights leapt over to fulfil her unspoken

wish. With this accession of strength the captive was easily freed, and a queer figure he was. It would have been difficult for a stranger to have determined exactly what he was; for, covered as he was to the depth of several inches with black mud, he looked more like an animal of prehistoric times—such as we see represented by fossils—than any human being.

De Lacey was promptly rolled upon the turf, and the pages set to work and endeavoured to reach his person by scraping away the adhesive slime with the aid of sticks and stones.

Page 11

“Get up, man, get up,” exclaimed Sir George. “Here is Doll waiting to honour thee with a dance.”

Dorothy shrank back, while Sir John, utterly exhausted, sank back again helplessly upon the ground. Seeing that he was totally unable to walk of his own accord, and in too dirty a condition to lean upon anyone’s arm, a rough extempore litter was made, upon which the unfortunate knight was set and carried away, loudly lamenting the unkindness of the fate which had brought him to such a sorry plight.

“And now let us see what we can do for De la Zouch,” said Sir George Vernon, and they proceeded to the spot where the injured knight was lying.

“How now, Sir Henry? What’s this, any bones broken, eh? How did you do it, man; was it here?” and having delivered himself of this string of questions, the King of the Peak leaned against the wall and awaited the reply.

“More hurt than injured, I believe,” replied the other, “but Eustace here will tell thee all about it;” and Eustace, who had carefully got the story by heart, recounted how, when they were after a fine bevy of quail, his master’s pole had snapped as he was springing up, and instead of clearing the wall he had fallen heavily against it.

The pole, broken in twain, which lay upon the grass close by, attested the truth of the statement.

“Sir Benedict,” exclaimed the baron, “thou art somewhat learned in leechcraft; see if thou canst do aught. Tell us what is amiss.”

A Woode stooped down, and after a prolonged examination he gave it as his opinion that some of his friend’s ribs were broken.

Another litter was quickly made up and De la Zouch, who was now feeling the full effects of the injuries he had received, and who in reality stood in need of assistance, was placed upon it and carried off in the wake of Sir John de Lacey.

Leaving them to pursue their way homewards, the hunting party set off once more to make a fresh attempt at sport ere the day should close. But now the fortune which had so favoured them during the day deserted them. Not a bird was seen, and after vainly beating about for some time the party at last reluctantly determined to wend its way once more towards Haddon. Sir George sounded his horn again, and in answer the wanderers returned from all quarters of the wood, all of them light-hearted and most of them light-handed too.

The route now taken was precisely the same by which they had advanced during the day, and they soon arrived at the spot where the struggle had taken place. Dorothy discovered the first signs of the conflict.

“Why, what in the name of faith is this?” she cried, as she pointed down to the ground. “’Tis a noble, I declare.”

“And here is another,” added Crowleigh, stooping down and picking up the glittering coin.

“And here’s a comb, what a nice—”

Sir Benedict never missed that sentence, for as he bent down to pick it up he caught sight of the body of the packman, and he started back affrighted at the sight. “Look!” he cried, “’Tis a—the blessed saints protect us, ’tis a murder see!” and he pointed to the tree.

Page 12

“A what?” asked Sir George, coming up. “What’s a murder? Where?”

“Here, see!” and a Woode pulled away the twigs which had but half hidden the body from view.

“Heaven forfend us!” ejaculated the baron as he gazed horror-stricken at the body. “’Tis a foul villainy, and so near Haddon, too.”

“’Tis the poor Derby pedlar,” exclaimed Dorothy, “and it was but yester e’en since he was at the Hall.”

“Ha! ’tis lately done, I see. Trust me, I shall see to this. We’ll have no ghosts round Haddon, Doll. To-morrow we’ll enquire into it. I must get to the root of this.”

“’Tis evident it was a robbery,” suggested Manners. “Even now the knaves may be lurking round.”

Sir George took the hint and the vicinity was closely examined, but, of course, not a trace of the perpetrators could be found; so, leaving the followers to bring on the body in the rear, the party hurried forward to gain the friendly shelter of the Hall and to partake of the bountiful feast which the Lady Maude had provided for them.

CHAPTER IV.

Dame Durden’s ordeal.

Fear fell on me and I fled.
* * * * *
I took the least frequented road,
  But even there arose a hum;
Lights showed in every vile abode,
  And far away I heard the drum.
Roused with the city, late so still;
  Burghers, half-clad, ran hurrying by,
Old crones came forth, and scolded shrill,
  Then shouted challenge and reply.

AYTOUN.

Next morning the Hall was early astir. The news of the murder had spread far and wide, and had caused a feeling of consternation in the neighbourhood, which was intensified by the mystery in which it was enshrouded.

De la Zouch had grown worse during the night, and soon after the break of day had departed, with Eustace, for Ashby Castle, declaring that in spite of the good intentions of Sir Benedict his case was not understood, and that it had been aggravated rather than improved by the attentions he had received from his friend.

Sir George, as magistrate of the district, had caused the body to be dressed, and for a long time he sat in his dressing-room pondering what steps he had better take next. There was absolutely no clue, yet the baron was determined not only to discover the culprit, but to make such an example of him as should effectually deter a repetition of such a crime in the neighbourhood of Haddon, at least for some time to come.

At length he issued from his room, and, passing along the corridor, he ascended a short flight of stairs, and stopped at the door of the room in which Dorothy was busily engaged in making some new tapestry hangings. He paused, uncertain whether to turn back or to enter.

“Yes, I will,” he muttered; “she has the clearest head of them all,” and suiting the action to the word he gently turned the handle and went in.

Page 13

Dorothy had dropped her work, and so intently was she gazing through the open lattice window that she did not notice the arrival of her father.

The knight stood still for a moment or two, and involuntarily admired the graceful figure of his daughter, and stepping gently forward, he tapped her lightly upon the shoulder.

Dorothy turned hastily round, and as she did so he caught her deftly in his arms and printed a loud, smacking kiss upon the fair girl's cheek.

"There," said he, "I'll warrant me thou wert longing for it; come now, confess."

Dorothy disdained any such idea.

"Nay," she replied, "I was but thinking of the poor pedlar. I had bought these from him only the day before," and she pointed to a little heap of silks which lay upon the table.

"I had come to talk it over with thee, Doll," replied the baron as he sat himself comfortably down upon a chair. "I think it was a robbery, eh?"

"Yes," slowly replied the maiden, "I should think so, too. Meg and I paid him six nobles."

"And only two were found."

"Only two?" asked Dorothy.

"That is all," replied the knight. "The knaves must have made off with the rest. That ill-favoured locksmith would be as likely a rascal as any; I must examine him."

"Nay, that cannot be, he was all day in the stocks."

Sir George scratched his head in despair. He had privately determined that the locksmith was the guilty one, but now that his idea was entirely disproved he felt sorely at a loss how to proceed.

Dorothy watched him in silence; she was as helpless as the baron.

"Was the packman staying in the village?" asked Sir George, lifting up his head after a long pause, during which he had kept his glance upon his foot, as if seeking inspiration there.

"He stayed at Dame Durden's, I believe."

"What, the witch?"

"Yes."

“I have it, then,” he exclaimed as he struck his hand heavily upon the table. “I have it!” and without saying another word he hastened out of the room.

Although the knight had thus decisively declared that he “had it,” yet whatever it was that he had got, he did not feel equal to proceeding in the matter alone, and before he had proceeded many steps he turned back again.

“Come, Doll,” he said, as he opened the door again, “we will go together,” and the two went off in company to consult the rest of the family.

The Lady Maude was seated in a low, easy chair, And with an air of languor upon every feature of her countenance was listening to Sir John de Lacey, who was reading to her out of Roger Ascham’s treatise on Archery. As the knight stepped into the room the remembrance of the previous day’s mishap was strongly brought back to his memory.

“What ho! sir knight,” he exclaimed; “better, eh!”

“A little stiff about the joints, mine host,” he replied, “for which I have thee to thank.”

Page 14

“Tush, man, don’t mention it,” laughingly returned the baron. “There’s no question of thanks betwixt me and thee.”

“They gave me some hot sack, and then rolled me in the river,” whined De Lacey, “and the pity of it is I cannot remember which of them it was, or else I’d—I’d—”

Sir John de Lacey paused to consider what course of action he would have taken, but ere he had resolved, the door opened, and Sir Thomas Stanley entered, bringing in with him the Lady Margaret.

“Well, well,” returned Sir George, “since it baffles thy wits to discover whom it was, thou hadst best have the grace of forgiveness, it will become thee well. But a truce to this. I came to counsel with you of the murder. Any more news, Sir Thomas?”

“I hear that the old hag, Durden, had a quarrel with the pedlar the day before his death,” answered Stanley, “and she told him to his face that he would come to no gentle end.”

“They have often quarrelled,” added Margaret, who felt bound to add something to her lover’s statement.

“Yes, then,” said Sir George, “I have it now. I guessed it was her from the very beginning.”

“Nay, nay,” interrupted Dorothy, “you suspected the smith at first.”

“Well, Doll, it makes no matter of difference if I did. ’Tis the old witch, sure enough, and she will either hang or drown for it, I swear.”

“Not so fast, either though, worthy knight,” interrupted Stanley. “I am not yet satisfied that it really was the witch, for she seems to have been at home all day, except when she was by the side of the stocks.”

“Courting the proud smith,” added Lady Vernon, referring to a rumour in the neighbourhood.

“But he was killed in the woods,” said Dorothy.

“Tut, there’s not a doubt about the matter,” pursued Sir George, “not the shadow of a doubt.”

“Nevertheless there is something in what Dorothy urges, and we had better make some sort of inquiry,” suggested the more cautious Stanley; “for thou hast many jealous enemies, Sir George, who would gladly score a triumph over thee an they had but half a chance.”

“Sir Ronald Bury, for instance,” added Margaret.

“But why Sir Ronald?” asked De Lacey. “He is a simple enough knight, I trow.”

“Pooh, I care naught for him,” replied Sir George Vernon; “he is jealous of the beauty of my daughters.”

“And wants a husband for his child,” added Lady Maude.

“Let him want, then,” testily returned the baron. “He may turn green with envy for aught I care. I’ll do it to his face, I will.”

But in the end wiser counsels prevailed, and the knight gave way so far as to order a trial of touch—a superstitious form of trial much relied upon in the times when witchcraft was commonly believed in.

The witching hour of twilight was chosen for this crude but solemn trial, and at the time appointed a large crowd was gathered in the great courtyard of Haddon in obedience to a mandate of the King of the Peak, which they dared not disobey.

Page 15

As the crowd swayed to and fro it was in marked contrast to the usual way in which they were wont to assemble within the great walls of Haddon. No loud laugh or sound of boisterous merriment broke the stillness of this solemn eventide; no tricks were attempted now upon unconscious friends, and even the almost invariable little groups of admirers listening to the marvellously strange tales of those who had crossed the seas were not to be found. All was silent save the screeching of the owls every now and again, and the subdued hum of conversation which rose up from the awestruck assembly as they patiently awaited the test which was to bring home the guilt of the murderer.

They had a long time to wait, and the moon had long been out before the proceedings were properly commenced.

A loud blast from the trumpets of the sentries gave the first intimation of the approach of the head of the house of Vernon. The great gates swung open and Sir George slowly advanced through the throng, which respectfully fell back on either side and made an open passage for him. A few yards behind followed a bare-headed priest, chanting prayers for the departed, and heading a diminutive procession, in the midst of which the body of the unfortunate pedlar was carried on a bier. They stopped at the foot of the steps which stretch across the courtyard; the doleful chant ceased, and an impressive hush fell upon the assembly, as with bated breath they awaited the next scene in the awful drama.

Sir George did not hurry himself, for it was necessary to the success of the ordeal that the culprit, whoever that was, should be duly impressed with a sense befitting the character of the moment, and a little suspense, he shrewdly guessed, would tend to make the guilty one tremble and offer signs which would make detection the easier.

At last he spoke.

“Mary Durden, Joel Cobbe, Henry Bridge, and Nathan Grene, step out,” he said, “take the oath; touch the body in our presence, and prove your innocence if you are able.”

Every whisper was smothered into silence as they watched to see the individuals named perform the test. No one stirred, however, and the order had to be repeated.

“Mary Burden, Joel Cobbe, Henry Bridge, and Nathan Grene,” thundered the baron, “I command you to answer to your names, or by your silence shall you be condemned.”

Joel Cobbe and Henry Bridge, two of the most disreputable men in the whole district, went forward in company, and succeeded in touching the body without a rupture of blood taking place or the body moving its position one iota.

“Mary Durden, spinster, Nathan Grene, locksmith,” repeated Sir George, “answer to this third, last challenge, or thy last hope of escape is gone.”

Nathan Grene, fuming with ill-concealed rage, stepped out, and a loud shriek announced the presence of Mary Durden, who was unwillingly pushed into view by those around her. As soon as she had gained the little open space that was yet left she fell upon the ground and swooned away.

Page 16

“See,” said one, “the witch is guilty, she dare not touch the body.”

“Drown her,” shouted another. “Drown her or burn her.”

The clouds which for some time had been gathering together, and which by this time had completely obscured the moon, now burst with a torrent of rain. A flash of lightning for a brief moment illuminated the scene, and then died away again, leaving it more weird even than it had been before. A faint roll of thunder broke upon the unpleasant reverie into which the company had fallen, and Sir George’s voice ordering the oil lamps to be lighted, somewhat reassured the more fearful among the spectators. A long five minutes elapsed before the lights appeared, minutes of darkness and suspense, disturbed only by the flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, which rapidly grew louder in sound.

Nathan Grene had touched the body, and the trial had proclaimed him innocent. Indeed, Sir George fully expected it would do so, seeing that Nathan had been fast bound in the stocks at the time the crime was perpetrated. His name had only been called out because the baron had a standing dislike to the man. But the woman still lay on the rough stones without offering a sign of life.

“Sir George, is that the witch?” asked De Lacey.

“It is.”

“Then she is praying to her master the devil. Listen!”

In the dread stillness of those awful minutes it was not difficult to discover that she was moaning. The crowd was stricken with terror, and catching up the words which Sir John had let fall, reiterated the cry which even yet added to the dismal terror of the scene.

“This cannot long endure,” said Sir George, as a vivid flash of lightning almost, for the moment, blinded him.

A long, loud roll of thunder, which terminated in a crashing peal, was the only answer he received, and while the noise was at its loudest, Mary Durden started to her feet and dashed forward to touch the body.

She just reached the bottom of the steps when, catching her foot on the uneven pavement of the yard, she over-balanced herself, and tumbled heavily upon the bier, almost knocking the body off as she fell.

“Guilty!” eagerly shouted Sir George; “she is guilty; seize her.”

But before he had finished the sentence, Mary had turned and fled, and far from attempting to hinder her in her headlong flight, the awe-struck people, one and all,

shrunk eagerly back to escape being brought into contact with one who had just given such unmistakable proofs of witchcraft, and who had been condemned a murderess by the almost infallible ordeal of the bier.

CHAPTER V.

A *visit to Nottingham*.

One sole desire, one passion now remains,
To keep life's fever still within his veins.
Vengeance, dire vengeance, on the wretch who cast
On him and all he had the ruinous blast.

Page 17

Moore.

It was upon the third day after the occurrences narrated in the last chapter had taken place that a lonely traveller might have been seen urging his way across the fields just outside the town of Nottingham. The gates closed at dusk: it was now past sunset, and he hastened forward to gain admittance.

It was the man known at Haddon by the name of Nathan Grene, the locksmith, whose actions had ever been at variance with his character, and whose nature had always seemed to have been unequally yoked with the common occupation of a smith.

Nathan, in fact, was no true smith. He was a brother-in-law of Sir Ronald Bury, and having taken up the practice of astrology and alchemy, this fact had been seized upon by his foes, and he had been obliged to fly in disguise to save himself from one of those persecutions which were so readily and frequently levelled against the followers of the "black arts."

In the character of a locksmith he had lived for some months in an uneasy state of security at Haddon. The lack of comfort which he was compelled to experience in his new position being compensated for in some small degree by the kind attentions he had received at the hands of the widow Durden, which began directly upon his arrival, and which soon rapidly ripened into a sincere regard for each other, and from that eventually progressed into love.

Being well born, Nathan Grene—or rather Edmund Wynne, for such was his proper name—had never taken kindly to the conditions imposed upon him by the disguise he had chosen to assume. He had never sought for work, and had done as little of it as he possibly could, and he had held aloof from the people around him, treating them with a supercilious indifference which they were not slow to resent. Under such conditions it was by no means surprising that he was decidedly unpopular in the neighbourhood, and the dislike to him was heightened by the intimacy which grew up between himself and the woman who was regarded as a witch.

It was for his vigorous defence of Mary Durden that he had been placed in the stocks. His whole spirit revolted from such a degradation; he had pleaded and had raged, but all in vain, and even Dorothy's appeal on his behalf had failed to save him from the bitter humiliation.

The ordeal, again, had been a very trying scene for him, and his annoyance was more than doubled when he saw how his beloved was being persecuted by her neighbours and oppressed by the baron. As she escaped through the gateway he made up his mind to strike Sir George down, but in spite of his resistance he was carried out beyond the limits of the Hall in the wild rush that took place when the first moment of surprise and terror had passed away.

All night long he lay upon the floor of his little smithy pondering schemes of revenge, but when he ventured out on the following morning all his ideas were dispelled by the sight which met his gaze, for there was Mary Durden hanging from the branch of a tree at the foot of the slope which led up to the gateway of the Hall.

Page 18

He rubbed his eyes in sheer astonishment and looked again, but the second view only confirmed the vision of the first. His worst fears were realised; his Mary was dead!

Mechanically he walked to the tree; there was a paper fastened to it upon which was some writing in the hand of the baron. He read it:—

MaryDurden.

The storm availed her naught.

Impatiently he snatched it down, and tearing it into a hundred fragments, cast them down upon the ground, and slowly turning on his heels, he walked homewards, utterly dejected and cast down, and with a bitter heart. The last tie which bound him to Haddon was now severed, and he longed to get away.

In melancholy silence he dug a grave in the little garden behind his lowly cottage, and then, with all the coolness which is lent by desperation, he proceeded again to where the body was hanging, and cut it down. He had brought another paper with him, and this he affixed in exactly the same place as the one he had destroyed. It was laconical enough, for it had but one word, and that was

Revenge!

He laid the body in the grave, and put some plants upon the top, and then, after watering them with the tears which copiously ran down his cheeks, he turned his back on Haddon, and started for Nottingham with few regrets, leaving behind him little enough to love, and much to be revenged.

Footsore and weary he hastened to the Chapel Bar, glad indeed to find himself so near the end of his journey; but before he had quite reached it he had the mortification to hear the sound of the closing bell, and when he arrived there the gates were shut.

“Ho, ho, there, porter!” he cried, and he violently kicked the iron post by way of emphasis to the call.

“Aye, aye, there; steady now, thou’rt over late,” replied the burly porter as he tantalisingly rattled the heavy keys in his hand.

“Yes, but only a minute,” Edmund replied; “you can let me in, and you will.”

“Nay, master, not till next sunrise,” he returned. Edmund groaned.

“But I cannot stay outside all night,” he said. “Come, open the gate, there’s a good fellow.”

“I were like to lose my position if I did,” answered the other. “I cannot unless—,” and he significantly jingled some coins in his pocket.

“Unless what?”

The gatekeeper thought Edmund Wynne uncommonly dull of comprehension, and with a little hesitation he suggested that it were surely worth a trifle if he did break through the rule.

“Here, here’s a groat then,” exclaimed the smith, bringing out his last coin as he saw the other moving away.

“Pooh, a sorry groat!” said the keeper, “Make it two, and then!”

“But I must get in to-night,” expostulated Edmund, “I have urgent business with Sir Ronald Bury. It is important, it is a matter of the State.”

Page 19

At the mention of Sir Ronald's name the key was inserted in the lock, and by the time the sentence was completed the great gate was swung open, and the visitor found himself, to his great satisfaction, beyond the barrier.

"I was but jesting," humbly said the man as he re-locked the gate; "for you must well know that we are not allowed to take bribes, though where the harm of it would be, I confess I cannot see."

Having succeeded in passing the barrier, Edmund did not stay to argue the question with the gatekeeper. He turned his steps towards the Castle, and in a very few minutes found himself at its embattled entrance.

The gates, of course, were fastened, but the bell-rope was hanging down, so seizing hold of that he gave it a vigorous pull.

"Holloa, my hearty, what's amiss?" asked a stentorian voice. "That's the third summons to-night."

"I want to see the constable of the Castle," replied the traveller.

"Well, thou hadst better hie thee to London, and happen, if you're lucky, you may find him there."

"Sir Ronald at London!" exclaimed Edmund, in blank dismay.

"Sir Ronald!" repeated the other. "No, the Earl of Rutland."

"But Sir Ronald Bury?"

"He's the deputy-constable."

"Well, I would see him. Is he here?"

"Yes, he is here," responded a gruff voice. "I am Sir Ronald; who art thou? What dost thou require at this time o' night?"

"I want to see thee privately, upon a matter of much importance," answered the pseudo smith, somewhat annoyed not to be recognised by his brother-in-law.

"See if he has any weapons on him, Wilton," said the knight, "and let him enter if there is no suspicion of foul play. It will go badly with him, though, I trow, has he ventured here on no sufficient reason."

Wilton approached him to obey his master's commands, but Edmund waved him back by an imperious gesture of the arm.

“Nay, cousin Ronald,” he exclaimed in high dudgeon. “It is beyond a joke to take matters so far. Ellice might well expect that a little kinder treatment would have been extended to her brother at the hands of her husband.”

“Eh, what! Are you Edmund; risen from the grave?” asked the knight in high surprise.

“I am Edmund, sure enough,” was the reply, “but I have not risen from the grave. I am not astrologer enough for that. This is a sorry welcome, and no mistake.”

“Faith, man, how could I tell it were thee? We thought thee dead twelve months agone. Come in, man, come in; there’s no occasion for thee to tarry there now. Let him in, Wilton, and be sure the gates are well fastened to-night. Robert and Lucy will be right glad to see you again,” he said, “especially Little Robert, who has never forgotten those little iron toys that you made for him two years ago.”

Edmund Wynne needed no second invitation. He hurried through the open portals and the two walked up together towards the inhabited part of the building.

Page 20

“This is indeed a strange surprise,” began Sir Ronald, as soon as they were out of danger of being overheard. “We felt sure that thou wast dead, and have often thought of thee. Where hast thou been?”

“Hiding in the country. I have been a village smith.”

“A smith!” cried the knight. “Then that fancy of yours for working with metals has stood thee in good stead for once?”

“It has indeed; but it was a base use withal.”

“Thou has been well hidden, for Her Majesty’s servants have scoured the country to discover your where-about.”

“I have been at Haddon in the Peak,” he replied.

“Haddon: phew! Do you know that arrogant knight, Sir George Vernon?”

“Do I know him?” echoed Edmund. “Would to heaven I had never cast my eyes upon him.”

“Ah! he has stung thee too, I perceive?” exclaimed Sir Ronald. “I hate him like poison. It should go ill with him did I ever have the power. I hear he is a Papist; cannot we prove aught against him on that score?” and the excited knight wistfully regarded his companion’s face, waiting for a favourable reply.

“I should like some supper first,” drily suggested the toil-worn traveller, “and then,” he added, “I may satisfy your eagerness to the fullest extent. I have a score of my own against him to clear off yet, and, what is more to the point, Ronald, I have the power. It was for that I came to visit you.”

“Ha!” ejaculated the knight, expectantly. “He can satisfy my craving to the fullest extent,” he mused. “This is fortunate.”

“Yes,” continued Edmund, “we shall have him cited to London; he is surely within our power. He hath grievously broken the law, and will have to answer to the charge of murder and treason; and if we cannot compass his ruin, then, between us, I have other ways, of which no man knows.”

“Hush,” said Sir Ronald. “That led thee into trouble aforetime. Here is Lettice coming down the steps.”

“That is not Nicholas with her, surely?” exclaimed Edmund.

“No, Nicholas has discarded us and turned monk, I hear, but where he is I cannot tell. That is John Manners, the nephew of the Earl of Rutland. He is after my Lucy, I trow.”

“Manners, Manners, John Manners,” murmured Edmund; “I have heard that name before. I have met him somewhere I am sure.”

“Well, hither he comes,” said the knight; “now do you remember him?”

As soon as Edmund caught sight of the young man’s face he recognised him.

“Why,” he exclaimed, “that’s—I know him well enough: I have seen him at Haddon.”

“At Haddon!”

“Yes, let me hide myself; I would rather not meet him here; it were better so for both of us. Where shall I go, tell me; quick?”

“Steady, ho! steady, man,” said the knight. “Hie thee back again to the lodge and wait for me there. Wilton shall let you share his supper if thou wilt. I will tell them you are a gardener if they ask aught about thee,” and in answer to the beckoning of his wife, Sir Ronald left his newly-discovered relation and hastened across the green.

Page 21

CHAPTER VI.

De la Zouch indulges in A *little* VILLANY.

If I can do it
By aught that I can speak in his dispraise,
She shall not long continue love to him.

Shakespeare.

The Courtly hall of Haddon was never quiet for long together, and very soon both the death of the witch and the warning of the locksmith were forgotten amid the preparations which were being made for a grand ball. Sir Thomas Stanley, having wooed Margaret, had successfully petitioned the sanction and blessing of Sir George and Lady Vernon, and the event was to celebrate their betrothal.

The morning of the festive day had opened fair, and as the day sped on, the guests rapidly assembled. De Lacey was there, delighting the ladies, as usual, with his braggadocio. Manners and Crowleigh were both there too, by special invitation, and, of course, cousin Benedict a Woode, who made no scruple of inviting himself to Haddon Hall if by any means his invitation had not come; and also, to Dorothy's great disgust, Sir Henry de la Zouch was there.

The musicians struck up a lively tune, and very soon the steaming boar's head was placed upon the table. Father Philip pronounced a very long benediction, and the singing of an old Latin rhyme beginning—

"Caput apri defero,"

announced that the feast had commenced in earnest. The venison pasties of Margaret's make disappeared with a truly marvellous rapidity, while Dorothy's confections had a very short lease of life, and fared no better, either because they were nice or that Dorothy was the maker of them.

"Pass round the wine," hailed the baron, "and drink to the health of the ladies of Haddon Hall."

"Hurrah!" vociferously replied the guests, "to the health of the ladies of Haddon."

"But stay; what's the matter with Master Manners?" asked De la Zouch, whose eagle eye had discovered that *his* tankard was not upraised with the rest. "A discourteous guest, upon my troth."

“May I drink it in water?” asked Manners, as he felt the eyes of his host fixed sternly upon him.

“Nay, you must have the wine, sir,” replied Sir George, “but whether it goes down your throat or your arm makes little matter,” and as he spoke he pointed to the iron ring fastened in the door post ready for such contingencies.

“I suppose the arm must have it, then,” he replied, “for I am sworn to taste no wine until I have performed a solemn vow.”

“Waste good wine!” exclaimed De Lacey, as he gazed in blank astonishment at the speaker; “what a pity.”

“Have you forsworn ale too?” asked Dorothy.

“No, only wine, sweet demoiselle,” replied Manners, smiling as he caught the drift of the question.

“Then fill his glass with ale,” commanded Doll, “and drink the toast without delay.”

Page 22

This happy suggestion was loudly applauded, and the healths were drunk off amid acclamation, the only one who did not heartily join in it being Sir Henry de la Zouch, who was annoyed to find that his petty attempt to spite his rival had failed, and that, too, by the intervention of Dorothy herself.

“Confound it all,” he muttered, “he shall not escape me like this. Eustace.”

“Did you call?” asked the page, bending down.

“Yes,” whispered De la Zouch. “Listen, you remember the Derby packman?”

“Aye, too well, I do.”

“Nonsense,” he replied, softly; “Master Manners killed him.”

“Oh!” gasped the astounded page.

“Remember,” added his master, “it was Manners.”

“Yes, Master John Manners,” repeated Eustace.

“Hush, that is all. A little more of that delicious jelly of yours, sweet Dorothy,” he added in a louder tone as he turned round again to the table.

Whilst the feast was progressing, De la Zouch was pondering the fittest way of broaching the topic which lay so heavily upon his mind. Sir Thomas Stanley had won the elder sister, he argued, why should he not win the younger? He clearly saw that Dorothy was receding from his grasp, and that the longer he delayed, the fainter grew his chance of success. Lady Vernon daily grew less favourable too, he noticed, and so without delay he resolved to ask Dorothy for her hand. The present occasion was most propitious, and he determined to carry his plan into operation at once.

When the meal was ended—and that was not very soon—the company broke up into little parties and separated, to amuse themselves in whatever fashion they liked best. Margaret, as the heroine of the day, was surrounded by a number of knights and ladies, who contentedly watched her as she played at chess with Benedict. Sir John de Lacey racked his brains to the uttermost in order to sufficiently garnish the veracious little scraps of his own autobiography, and succeeded both in making the group around him open their eyes wide with surprise, and at the same time in making his listeners roar with laughter.

A marvellous hero was Sir John. He had been the ruling spirit in more than one Continental Court during his one brief sojourn in France. He had slain dragons, in different parts of the globe, in numbers enough to make St. George turn green with

envy; and only his excessive modesty has prevented his name from being handed down to posterity.

Manners, naturally enough, joined Dorothy's party, and went out upon the lawn to take part in a game at bowls.

"Dear me, how careless I am to-day," she exclaimed; "there are six of us, and I have only brought four balls; I must fetch some more," and she started to go back.

"Let me go," said Manners.

"You," replied Doll, "you could never find them; I will go, and you must entertain the ladies while I am away," and she tripped across the green to the Hall.

Page 23

“Ha, Doll, dearest,” said a voice, as she turned the corner of the terrace, “I have been searching for thee.”

Dorothy turned round and met the gaze of Sir Henry de la Zouch.

“For me!” she exclaimed, without pausing.

“Nay, prithee, now don’t hurry so,” he replied, catching hold of her arm, “I would ask thee a weighty question.”

“But I am in a great hurry,” she replied.

“Then I shall not keep thee long, but thou canst stay a little while, surely?”

“Indeed, I cannot, Sir Henry,” she replied. “There are some visitors awaiting my return.”

“John Manners for one,” sneered the knight.

Dorothy blushed deeply, and bit her lip to repress the sharp retort which came readily to her tongue. Sir Henry saw that he had committed an error, and he endeavoured to recover his position.

“Sir Thomas has wooed thy sister Margaret,” he exclaimed, “and I have long been wooing thee, and now the time has come when I am to offer you my hand.”

Dorothy struggled to get away, but her suitor held her fast.

“Nay, cruel one,” he continued, “I must have an answer. I shall be an earl in good time, perchance, and if you will but say ‘aye’ to my proposal you may be a countess—think of it, Dorothy, a countess—and the hostess of Ashby Castle.”

He let go his hold of her, and dropping down upon his knee, he raised his clasped hand in the most approved fashion of the time, and continued his suit.

“Dorothy,” he went on, “will you—?”

“Never,” she replied, cutting him short in the middle of his speech, and, finding herself at liberty, she rushed precipitately into the Hall.

De la Zouch gazed after her in mute astonishment, and, staggered as he was, he remained in the same position until he was startled by a voice behind him.

“At prayers, sir knight?” asked the baron. “Father Phillip’s grace at the table was long enough to serve me through the day.”

“No, Sir George,” replied the crestfallen lover, “I have been pleading my suit with Dorothy.”

“And what said she?”

“She is bashful.”

“What! My Doll bashful? That were hardly polite to thee, methinks.”

“Perchance I should have more success with thee?” pleaded Sir Henry, as pathetically as he could.

“Let us withdraw into the bower, then,” replied Sir George, “we can talk it over there, and we shall not be disturbed. Ha! here comes Lady Vernon, she will know what to do.”

Lady Vernon came up at the bidding of her lord. The lover would fain have seen Sir George alone, but there was no help for it, and he had to brave the circumstances with the best grace possible.

“Maude, we must take your counsel,” began the baron. “Sir Henry de la Zouch would take advantage of to-day’s festivity to ask for the hand of Doll. What think you; can we spare her too, as well as Margaret? We should lose them both together then. What dost thou advise?”

Page 24

“That depends upon many things,” replied the stately dame, as she seated herself. “Dorothy would be a splendid match for anybody. What has Sir Henry to say?”

“I hope to be an earl soon,” he replied, “and she would be a countess as you will. My father is infirm, he cannot live much longer, and I expect news of his death from Florence every day. And as for the estates, though they may not be equal to those of Haddon, yet they are by no means insignificant.”

Dame Vernon knew all this, and the knowledge of it had influenced her before; but lately she had heard ill tidings of Sir Henry, and she was by no means so enthusiastic on his behalf. And, besides, a fresh competitor had entered the lists.

“Humph,” growled the old knight, “we don’t want to sell the girl.”

“Be quiet, Sir George,” interrupted his worthy spouse. “The thing must be done properly. Does Ashby Castle fall to your share, sir knight?” she asked.

“Certainly. To whom else should it go?”

“Have you spoken to Doll about it?” continued the dame.

“She is too dutiful a daughter to commit herself without the consent of her parents,” answered De la Zouch. “But I doubt not, that when once again you have spoken to her, I shall speedily be rewarded with success.”

“Ay,” exclaimed Sir George, “Doll was ever a dutiful child.”

“She would bow to our will, anyway,” replied Lady Vernon, “but I think she has another suitor. We must think the matter well over ere we settle anything.”

“Another suitor,” laughed the baron; “why there are scores of them.”

“Ah, you see, Sir Henry, the baron has not the quick, discerning eye of a mother—or a love either,” she added shyly. “Bless his innocence, he knows naught of it yet. Sir George, I trust Master Manners is a trusty young man?”

“John Manners is goodly enough, forsooth, for aught I trow,” returned the King of the Peak, reflectively. “Aye, and a likely enough young man, too!”

“But Manners cannot seek the hand of so guileless a maiden as sweet Dorothy,” interrupted the dismayed lover. “His hands are stained with blood.”

“A soldier should do his duty,” quickly returned Sir George.”

“But he is a murderer!”

“That is a bold statement, De la Zouch, to make against a guest of mine,” exclaimed the baron quickly, “and I fear an thou persist in it that it will prove awkward for thee if thou canst not prove it, and worse still for him if it be true.”

“Are you certain of it?” asked Lady Maude.

“I have a witness,” was the calm reply.

“Then by my halidame,” quoth the irate knight, “as I’m a justice o’ the peace, he shall be faced with the offence. When was it perpetrated?”

“At the hawking party.”

“What, here at Haddon?”

“You don’t mean the pedlar, surely?” inquired Lady Vernon.

“Aye, but I do; he was murdered in the wood.”

Page 25

“Tut,” angrily exclaimed Sir George, “’tis all a tale, and I for one don’t believe a word of it. The witch killed him, and was punished for it too.”

“But I saw it,” stubbornly returned Sir Henry, “and I have a witness; one who saw it done.”

“We tried Dame Durden by the ordeal, an she was found guilty and hanged,” persisted the baron. “And, beshrew me, that’s enough for any man”; and the Lord of Haddon reverently crossed himself to show that the trial had had the approval of his conscience.

“But,” urged De le Zouch, “I tell you I saw it done myself, and I am ready to prove it any way you choose.”

“Come now, Sir George,” interrupted Lady Vernon, “the trial may for once have led us astray, as it did in the case of Thomas Bayford sixteen years ago. Doubtless Mary Durden got no more than she deserved, and mayhap she was punished for deeds we wot not of. Perchance Master Manners would not deny the charge if he were here, and faith! I remember me now that Margaret did say he was left behind with Dorothy, and then Doll left him and galloped on.”

“Yes, that was it,” Sir Henry said, “and Eustace, who was left behind, saw them quarrelling and fetched me back to stay the strife.”

“Well, prithee now, go on,” exclaimed the knight. “You saw him killed, and said naught?”

“No.”

“And let me hang another for it. Truly, ’tis a right noble way to treat a host.”

“Nay, you are too hard upon me. I thought he was but thrashing the knave, and as that was no affair of mine I left him to it, but afterwards his body was found in exactly the same spot. I was away when the ordeal was performed, else I had told thee what I had seen. Eustace will bear me out in all I have told you; question him for yourselves. But now, if you still think well enough of Master Manners to mate him with the peerless Dorothy, I am sorry alike for her and your vows of knighthood.”

“Come that is right enough,” exclaimed the dame, “and Master Manners has not denied the accusation yet.”

“Then he shall soon have the opportunity,” said the baron, “for hither he comes; he could not have come at a readier moment.”

John Manners had waited a long time for Dorothy’s return, and now, half fearing that some accident had befallen her, he had willingly acceded to the request of the ladies

and had set forth to find her. Hearing voices in the house, he approached it to pursue his inquiries, when the watchful eye of Sir George Vernon immediately espied him.

“Pardon my intrusion,” exclaimed Manners, “but I am in search of Mistress Dorothy. She left us to fetch some balls and has not returned.”

“Hie, man,” interrupted Sir George, “we have a serious charge preferred against thee; thou art just come right to answer it.”

“Have I been stealing some fair maiden’s heart?” he laughingly inquired.

“Nay, listen! ’tis a charge of murder; but I tell thee frankly, I don’t believe a word of it.”

Page 26

“A charge of murder,” echoed Manners blankly, “a charge of murder, and against me! This is past endurance, ’tis monstrous! Whom have I slain, I pray thee tell me?”

“The Derby packman,” promptly returned De la Zouch, “and thou knowest I saw thee do it.”

“You lie. I never saw the man until he was dead. Thou shalt prove thy words, Sir Henry de la Zouch,” returned the esquire, “or I shall have thee branded as a knave. There is some cause for this, Sir George,” he added, turning to the baron, “of which I am in ignorance. I am the victim of some plot.”

“Like enough, like enough,” returned the baron, sympathetically. “Then you deny the charge? I knew De la Zouch was wrong. The ordeal—”

“But I saw him myself, and so did Eustace,” stuck out the disappointed lover; “and Margaret remembers that Master Manners was left behind.”

“And for the matter of that, so were you,” said Sir George sharply.

“And Eustace is but a page who must, perforce, obey his master’s will in everything,” continued Manners. “Crowleigh was with me all the day, save when I went back to Mistress Dorothy. How tallies that with your account, eh?”

“That was precisely the time it occurred, and bears me out in all that I have said,” glibly responded the scion of the house of Zouch. “It all but proves his guilt, Sir George.”

“Nay, not so much as that,” quoth Lady Maude; “but since it cannot be agreed upon, I should advise you to let the matter drop.”

“Stop,” exclaimed Manners. “If De la Zouch has a spark of honour left within him he will step out and measure swords with me, for by my troth I swear he will have to render me the satisfaction my honour demands.”

This was by no means to the taste of the knight of Ashby. He had not calculated for such a course as this; but, fortunately for him, Lady Vernon spoke, and unwittingly released him from his difficulty.

“Nay, not before me,” she said, “and on so festal a day as this.”

“As you will it,” said De la Zouch, assuming an air of injured dignity.

“They must settle it in true old knightly fashion at the tourney,” exclaimed Sir George decisively.

“Since you command it I suppose I must obey,” replied Sir Henry; “but I had rather not have stained my weapons with the blood of so foul a caitiff.”

“You will be good enough to leave me to decide that matter,” said the baron testily.

“Then, by St. George, I shall be ready,” replied Manners. “I am as well born as he, and can give him a lesson or two in good breeding, besides showing him a trick or two with the sword that I learned in the Netherlands. In the meantime I disdain him as a dog;” and boiling over with rage the maligned esquire left the little group and stalked across the terrace to rejoin the ladies on the green.

CHAPTER VII.

Page 27

Dorothy overhears something.

The cruel word her heart so tender thrilled,
That sudden cold did run through every vein;
And stoney horror all her senses filled
With dying fit, that down she fell for pain.

Spenser.

And, meanwhile, where was the innocent cause of this disturbance?

Dorothy had been half expecting some such course of action on the part of De la Zouch for some time past, and had carefully prepared a stinging answer which should once and for ever decide the question between them. Though she was petted and admired on almost every hand, yet she had sense enough to value such conduct at its proper worth; and whilst with the coquetry of a queen of hearts she accepted all the homage that love-sick cavaliers brought to her, she looked below the surface, and had a private opinion of her own about all those with whom she was brought into contact.

Her opinion of Sir Henry de la Zouch was distinctly unfavourable to that knight; for, with the instinct of a woman, she had divined from the very beginning that his motives were more mercenary than genuine, and in spite of all his protestations of love towards her, he had failed to convince her that he loved her for herself alone. A little watching on her part had quickly convinced her that the dislike she felt for him was not without sufficient reason, and as the evidence against him accumulated, she congratulated herself that she had escaped the clutches of a villain of so wily a disposition.

Long before the appearance of John Manners she had determinedly refused all the advances of her would-be lover, and his every attempt had been met by her with chilling sarcasm; or, were she in a lighter mood, she had retreated into safer ground under cover of a burst of merriment. Had De la Zouch been possessed of ordinary perceptions he would have noticed that his conduct was alienating Dorothy from him more and more; but, like many others, he was so eager to gain his ends that he was partially blind as to the means employed.

The manner in which Sir Henry had just preferred his suit had taken her so completely by surprise that she had entirely forgotten what she meant to say; but the indignation she felt at his conduct in detaining her against her will would have deprived her of the power of expressing the prettily turned speech so long prepared, even if she had remembered it. She fled into the house, and without casting a look behind to see if she were being pursued or not, she rushed through the deserted state chambers and never stopped until she found herself in her own room and had turned the key in the lock.

She flung herself down upon the bed, and her overwrought feelings found relief in tears. How long she would have so remained would be impossible to say, but she had barely succeeded in locking herself in when she was startled by a gentle rap at the door.

Page 28

She stopped her sobbing and listened. Surely De la Zouch would never venture to follow her to her own boudoir! No, it was incredible, and she dismissed the idea.

The silence was broken only by a second rap at the door. It was too gentle for Sir Henry, it must be her tire-maid, Lettice, or her sister Margaret, maybe. She rose up, and in a tremulous voice inquired who was there.

“It is I, Lettice, your maid,” replied a gentle voice.

Lettice was of all people just the one whom she stood in need of most at such a moment, so she unfastened the door and let her in.

“My lady is troubled,” exclaimed the maid, as she entered. “Is there aught that I may do for thee?”

“Oh, Lettice,” she sobbed, as the tears chased each other down her cheeks in quick succession, “see that he does not come. Stop him, keep him outside. Don’t let him come to me.”

“Who, my lady, whom shall I stop? No one dare follow thee here.”

Dorothy returned no answer, she was trembling all over with excitement; she fell upon the bed and wept, while the sympathetic Lettice could only look on in silence, and wonder what it all meant.

“My lady is troubled,” she repeated at length. “Someone has been frightening thee. Tell me who it was! Who is it thou art feared would try to come at thee here?”

Still there was no answer.

“You ran through the hall,” the maid went on, “just like a frightened hare, and cast never a look at one of us, and now—the saints preserve us, thou look’st as if thou hadst seen the ghost of Mary Durden.”

“Was he following me, Lettice?” asked Dorothy, raising her head from the pillow. “Was he there?”

“Following thee, no. Who’s he? There was no one else went through.”

“I thought he was close behind.”

“Who?”

“De la Zouch.”

“Sir Henry de la Zouch!” repeated the maid. “’Tis he then who has been treating thee so ill. Were he not a noble, my Will should thrash him soundly for daring to offend so sweet a lady.”

“Take these balls to Master Manners, Lettice,” said her mistress, composing herself as well as she was able. “You will find him waiting for them on the bowling green. Tell him I will rejoin him soon.”

Lettice unfastened the door and disappeared down the passage in obedience to the command whilst Dorothy re-arranged her disordered head-dress, hesitating the while whether to venture out again or to stay within doors.

Ere she had decided which course to take, Lettice returned. Her face was deeply flushed and her manner unusually agitated.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Dorothy. “Has he assailed thee, too?”

“He is telling the baron such a tale,” replied the maid. “He says thou lovest him, and he is asking Sir George and my lady for thy hand. O, Dorothy, believe me, ’tis only that thou art so fair and so rich that he seeks thee, and when he has thy gold and the bloom of thy beauty begins to fade (which God forfend!) he will care naught for thee, and leave thee for another.”

Page 29

“I know it, Lettice.”

“They are in the little bower, and I could hear everything,” pursued the maid. “That De la Zouch is jealous of another, and is seeking to get him out of the way. He says that Master Manners killed the pedlar, and ’fore heaven, we all know it was the witch.”

“Master Manners?” echoed Dorothy.

“Yes,” returned the maid, “and he says he can prove it, but the good knight, your father, won’t believe him. Master Manners denies it, of course—but lack-a-day, what ails thee now? Thou art as white as the veriest ghost!”

“’Tis nothing,” replied Doll, as she sank down into a chair. “I am a trifle faint; give me some water, Lettice.”

“Nay, but it is something,” returned the other, as she speedily complied with her mistress’s behest. “Thou canst not throw me off like that. Come, my good lady, tell me what it is; there are few things you hide from me.”

“There is nothing to tell you, Lettice,” she replied, “but prithee go on; what did Sir Henry de la Zouch make answer?”

“He said he had a witness, but I had to hasten away, for I heard footsteps approaching; but come, I can read your secret; Master Manners will make a worthy knight.”

“Keep such thoughts to thyself, Lettice,” Dorothy blushingly replied.

“Trust me,” said the maid, with a toss of her pretty head. “I will do thy bidding; but faith! you will be a comely pair.”

“Hush, or I shall be angry with thee. I tell thee he has said naught yet.”

“And I tell thee, Mistress Dorothy,” returned Lettice, “he is head and ears in love with thee. I would stake my troth on it; there!”

“I wish it were so,” sighed Dorothy, “for I love him dearly.”

“It is so, assuredly it is,” replied her companion, decisively. “Let me give him a hint, my lady.”

“No, Lettice, not another word; don’t breathe it to a soul unless I bid thee.”

“My Will could do it,” continued the other, “an you would but let him try. He can do anything that way, Will can.”

“Be quiet, Lettice; and mind you take care of your tongue. No one must even so much as guess at the truth; there, begone.”

“Happen you would like to see if they have settled the matter?” suggested the tire-maid; “let us go and see.”

Dorothy willingly agreed, and away they went through room after room, until at last Lettice stopped.

“Let me open the window,” she said; “we shall hear better here than anywhere else,” and she stepped upon a chair and silently pushed the latticed window open. The balmy breeze came pouring into the room, bringing in with it the sound of the conversation from outside.

“That’s splendid,” she said. “Now, my lady, listen.”

“I tell you it’s of no use, Sir Henry. I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Nevertheless, Sir George, it’s perfectly true.”

“Well, I cannot believe it,” returned the baron, sharply, “but all the same, you will have to fight him now. We shall make quite a grand affair of it; ’tis a rare long time since there was a tournament at Haddon.”

Page 30

“I had rather it passed off quietly,” suggested De la Zouch, who was by no means confident of his own prowess in a stern contest with naked weapons. “It is only by thy direct command that I have consented to enter the lists to fight him. ’Tis more a case for the assize than for thee. Sir George, and I have my honour to maintain.”

“You must let that remain with me,” replied the baron. “Eustace is but a page, and as Manners rightly enough pointed out, his word would count for little in such a circumstance. But apart from all such considerations, I flatly tell you, Sir Henry, that I don’t for a minute think him guilty. The ordeal—”

“Tut, bother the ordeal,” broke in De la Zouch, who was rapidly losing control of his temper. “Then you doubt me?”

“You are rash, sir knight,” interrupted Lady Maude. “You do not do proper justice to the baron.”

“Hark! what’s that?” whispered Lettice, “There’s someone coming.”

“Inside?”

“No, don’t you hear them coming on the gravel?”

“Listen,” exclaimed Doll, nervously, “’twas but Eustace, the page, stealing away; he’s been playing eavesdropper.”

“Like us,” laughed the maid.

“Hush! Sir Henry is talking. How excited he is. Listen.”

“I humbly crave his pardon then, fair lady. When shall I learn what fate you have in store for me?”

“Not till after the tournament, at least,” promptly replied Lady Vernon.

“And that will be—prithee when?”

“This day week, and in the meantime I would advise you as a friend to practise well with your arms,” and, added the baron with grim humour, “say your prayers day by day, Sir Henry, for Manners has not fought in the Netherlands for naught.”

“Then I shall present myself before you, Lady Vernon, at the conclusion of the tourney,” he loftily replied, “and I will have my answer then.”

“If so be, that is, that there be aught left of thee to come,” supplemented Sir George, considerably nettled at the other’s tone, “for I hear that Manners is terrible with the sword.”

“Thank you, sir baron,” was the proud retort, “but I have learnt ere now how to hold the lance, and can wield the mace;” and without deigning to cast a look behind him he strode away in an ill humour with himself and everybody else, to scowl in silence at the group of merrymakers on the green.

“There, a pretty lover!” exclaimed Dorothy, as her suitor walked away, “but I have given him his answer.”

“Hush, my lady,” whispered the maid.

“We shall be able to get it all arranged for a week to-day, and you shall be queen of the tourney, Maude, if it so please you.”

“I, Sir George? I indeed!” replied the dame. “Pooh! my queening days are gone. It must be either Margaret or Dorothy.”

“Fancy,” whispered Lattice, “you the queen of the tournament!”

“Hush!”

“But I hear he is likely to lose the Ashby estates. Think of that, Sir George; think of that. He would be a poor man directly.”

Page 31

“Why, how?”

“The Ashby estates were forfeited to the De la Zouches, but King Henry granted them back before he died, and I hear they are like to go at last.”

“It were a pity for Sir Henry, but in truth, Maude, I like him not.”

“Pooh, nonsense! He wants none of our pity, but I tell thee Dorothy is too good a match to throw away upon him.”

“Perhaps so, Maude,” replied the baron; “it may be so, but I shall be much mistaken if, after the tournament, he is able to ask for her again, but if he does I will refer him to you.”

“That will do, Lettice,” said Dorothy. “I have heard quite sufficient. Shut the window; I will go now and see how they are faring on the bowling green. I have a lighter heart now.” And followed by a “God speed you” from her maid, she opened the door and passed out of the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

A *tournament*. *The combat*.

At this the challenger, with fierce defy,
His trumpet sounds; the challenged makes reply.

Dryden.

Grass did not grow beneath the feet of the good people of Haddon during the week which ensued. Inside the Hall everything was in confusion and disorder. Rooms were being emptied of hangings which had lain undisturbed repose for many a long year, and everybody was eager to bring to light such old relics of previous tourneys which had ever taken place there as could be discovered outside, and the stir was not one whit less. The level sward through which the Wye rippled on its way to join the Derwent, having once been selected as the battle ground, was immediately transformed from a scene of lovely rustic peacefulness to a very pandemonium of noisy workmen, out of which slowly evolved tents and pavilions for the accommodation of the numerous visitors who were expected to witness the struggle.

The news had spread far and wide, and a large number of persons, attracted by the well-known splendour and hospitality of the King of the Peak, as well as by the desire to witness the rare exhibition of a tournament, which was now about extinct, assembled at Haddon as the time appointed for the fray drew nigh.

At length the eventful morning dawned. Everything was fully prepared. The white tents, with their fluttering pennons of many lines, occupied one side of the ground; the balconies, decked with their brightly coloured hangings, faced them from the other side, and a slightly elevated platform, upon which was the throne for the queen of the tourney, filled one end, while the other was left open for such of the neighbouring villagers as liked to come.

Page 32

Long before the appointed hour the space had been filled up by eager sightseers. Men and women, lads and lasses, old folk and young, all alike were there, tricked out in holiday attire. Not a coign of vantage was lost sight of, and every tree which might reasonably have been expected to yield a glimpse of the scene was crowded by rustics, eager to gaze upon so rare an exhibition. Behind all rose the grey old towers of the Hall, which presented a very picturesque appearance as the sun flashed upon its turrets, and its flags waved to and fro in the gentle breeze. Haddon had witnessed many stirring scenes before, but surely never a more brilliant one than was about to be enacted.

Jousts were divided into two classes. The “joust a plaisir” was a mere knightly display of skill, and was fought with weapons, the edges of which were dulled; but the other, the “joust a l’outrance,” was of a far more dangerous kind. Lances, swords, and even, occasionally, mace-like weapons with sharp spikes were used, and it rarely happened that serious injuries did not result, while not unfrequently it was accompanied by a fatal termination.

Additional interest was attached to this tournament, inasmuch as it was of the latter class, and when the sound of the herald’s trumpets was heard, a shout of admiration went up from the assemblage, as the gates swung open and the party descended from the Hall; and round after round of praise was accorded by the crowd as the cavalcade wended its way through it, and took up its allotted position in the tents and on the balconies.

Without waiting any time Dorothy seated herself upon the throne, and giving the signal to commence by waving a dainty little flag, the trumpeters took it up and blew a loud blast upon their instruments.

This was the summons for the combatants to appear, and amid the tumultuous greetings of the whole assembly, Manners and De la Zouch came forward from either side of the balcony, and each, well protected with armour, stood leaning upon his charger while the herald read aloud the order of the King of the Peak, by whose command the tourney was held.

Having read it out, this functionary retired with all the grace and speed at his command; the trumpet sounded again, and the two assailants leapt simultaneously into the saddle. A minute later the galloping rush, the sound of contending horsemen, and the noise of shivering lances told the outsiders that the conflict had begun.

So terrible was the shock as the two met together in the centre of the ring that it seemed utterly impossible that either of them could recover from it, but after the first thrust and parry they each passed on, apparently uninjured, and wheeling their horses around, with lances couched they paused to spy out a weak point in the other’s defence.

Every breath was hushed, and every eye was strained, to the uttermost as the anxious onlookers stood on tiptoe to follow every movement of the competitors.

Page 33

But neither the knight nor the esquire appeared to be particularly eager to commence the struggle. Each waited for the other to advance, and for a moment or two they stood perfectly still, keenly regarding each other through the bars of their visors.

“They are not going to fight, Sir George,” exclaimed De Lacey, in piteous, tones, “and I’ve come all this weary way to see the sport.”

“Never fear, Sir John,” replied the baron cheerily, “you’ll see sport enough soon; they will begin directly, but they don’t know each other’s mettle yet.”

Even as he spoke Manners rode forward and the conflict was renewed.

Sir Henry de la Zouch was famous at the London schools for his brilliant lance play, and many of his friends had accepted his invitation to witness his triumph; but, although it was anticipated that he would win easily enough with that weapon, it was feared by his well-wishers that unless he succeeded in placing his combatant hors de combat then, his chance of doing so with the sword would be considerably less.

De la Zouch himself knew this, although he would not own it, and it made him cautious. For a long time he stood carefully upon his guard, but at last, espying a favourable opportunity, he darted a fierce blow at the vizor of his opponent, hoping it would pierce the bars and transfix itself there. It was a well-aimed thrust, and almost proved successful, but, unfortunately for De la Zouch, Manners unwittingly foiled him by rising in his saddle at the same time to deliver a similar blow at him, and instead of receiving the lance upon his helmet, he caught it in the very centre of his breast-plate. Still the blow was delivered with so powerful a stroke that, standing in the stirrups as Manners was, it completely upset his balance, and he fell over.

A great shout rose up at this feat, but Dorothy turned her face aside, fearing that he whom she loved was stricken down never to rise again, and wishing, for the fiftieth time, that she was in her own chamber, peacefully occupied in stitching at her tapestry.

But the shout was broken off suddenly—to be succeeded the next moment by another, louder and more prolonged, for, although taken unawares and overturned, Manners put into execution a trick he had learned in Holland, and sliding under the belly of the horse, he nimbly swung himself up by the girths on the other side, and reseated himself in the saddle, much to the astonishment of De la Zouch, who imagined he had unhorsed him, and much to the delight of the audience, which greeted him with plaudits again and again renewed.

“See!” exclaimed De Lacey, with eyes wide open with astonishment, “where’s he come from?”

“Never saw a neater thing in my life,” replied Sir George, enraptured at the trick. “Look now!”

Sir John looked as he was bidden, and saw the astounded De la Zouch receive a stinging blow on his arm from his opponent ere he had recovered from his surprise.

Page 34

As the lances of both were now broken, the trumpet sounded, and the combatants, nothing loth, rode off for a few minutes' rest, and a fresh supply of weapons.

The latter having been procured, they very quickly renewed the struggle, and this time De la Zouch had better fortune, for just as the bugles were sounding for them to cease he pierced the joint of Manners' armour, and inflicted a nasty flesh wound upon his elbow.

As the latter would not own himself vanquished, even at Dorothy's request, the conflict was resumed, and this time with swords, and here the inferiority of De la Zouch was soon apparent. Though he was no mean swordsman, yet his opponent was far more than a match for him, and blow after blow was rained down upon him, whilst on his own part Sir Henry was too busily engaged in defending himself to attempt to act on the offensive. He was hard pressed, and it was fortunate indeed for him when the signal was given which called upon them both to desist awhile, in order to gain fresh breath, and to put to rights, as far as they were able, the damages they had already received.

The interval was filled up by the shouts of the onlookers, who now made up for their previous silence by loudly criticising the deeds of their respective champion, and vociferously calling out their particular favourite worthless instructions how to proceed when the conflict was continued.

Eustace stood ready to receive his master, and give him cordials wherein to reinvigorate his nerves, while Crowleigh was in waiting in lieu of a page, to bathe his friend's wounds with water.

The sight of blood, which slowly trickled from Manners' arm, reminded a Woode that he was a doctor, and, leaping from his seat, he clambered over the balcony and rushed across the arena to where the wounded esquire was standing.

"Let me see it," he cried. "This must be stopped at once. Sir Henry, I declare you the winner of the——"

"Hold there," cried Manners, "I have not yielded yet."

"Leave him alone, Sir Benedict," added Crowleigh. "He will make a sorry example of De la Zouch even yet."

"But," persisted the old knight, "I declare——"

His speech was rudely cut short, for with a yell of pain he darted off across the arena, closely followed by a huge mastiff, whose tail he had been unfortunate enough to tread upon.

With the doctor out of the way the conflict was speedily renewed. It was a terrible combat. De la Zouch, intent on ridding himself of his adversary, declared he would give no quarter, and, altering his tactics, he hewed and lunged away with all the temerity of a man who fights for death or victory.

Manners' superiority with the sword, however, was so apparent that after the restarting of the contest the final issue of it was never for a moment doubted, not even by the veriest tyro present. Sir Henry's wild thrusts were parried with consummate ease, and while the knight's sword moved hither and thither with lightning-like rapidity, the trusty blade of the other moved equally quick, but with far more certainty.

Page 35

He waited until De la Zouch began to tire before he exerted himself. The time came at last, and then with a few quick strokes he laid his foeman before him on the ground.

“Strike!” shouted a score of voices. “Strike!”

The victor uplifted his sword, and poised it high above his head to bring it down with all his might. The people waited with throbbing hearts to witness the stroke which should finish the combat, but instead of striking Manners paused and turned round.

“Strike, man, strike!” yelled a chorus of onlookers.

Humbly bowing before Dorothy, he magnanimously declared that the fate of his rival rested with her.

“’Tis a tournament, not a murder,” decided Doll promptly; “you have proved your cause, and if your foe will yield we are ready to spare him.”

Amid the plaudits of the crowd, Manners bowed low upon his knee, kissed the hand held graciously out towards him. He murmured his perfect acquiescence to her will, and was about to pass out of the ring, an easy victor, when a horseman rode in, and without in anyway announcing himself, he sprang off his horse and scanned the company.

“What does this fellow want?” growled Sir George, as with knitted eyebrows he scrutinised the intruder. “Thou art a Royal messenger,” he added, turning to the man, who had advanced until he stood before the baron.

There was little sympathy between the Court at London and the King of the Peak, and the baron surmised little good from the arrival of the courtier. As the latter urged his horse through the crowd, and entered the arena, Sir George anticipated trouble.

“I want the King of the Peak,” replied the new comer.

“I am Sir George Vernon.”

“Then,” replied the other, “I deliver into thine hand this summons, which cites thee to appear at Westminster to answer the charge of slaying Mary Durden.”

The baron started with surprise, and thought for a moment of laying violent hands upon the man, but a moment’s reflection convinced him of the unwisdom of such an act.

“And if I refuse to come,” he doggedly said, “what then?”

“Then you do so at your peril,” he replied, and leaping again upon his horse, he departed as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving the awe-stricken assembly to

disperse with much less pleasure than they had anticipated from the scene of such an exciting exhibition of manly prowess.

CHAPTER IX.

At the cock tavern, *London*.

London! the needy villain's general home,
The common sewer of Paris and of Rome.
Here malice, rapine, accident conspire,
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush mere relentless villains lay,
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey.

Johnson.

Five days after the tournament had taken place, two travellers reined in their steeds at the gates of the Cock Hostelry, just within the Temple Bar. They were dusty with hard riding, and evidently in no good humour with themselves nor with anyone with whom they were brought into contact—a result doubtless attributable to the discomforts of a long journey on roads rough enough to try the patience of any man.

Page 36

The elder of the two, throwing the reins upon his horse's neck, alighted, and leaving the ostler to take the steed away, he strode quickly into the inn without uttering a word. The young man, however, got off his saddle in a more leisurely fashion, and before he followed his companion he proceeded to the stable to see that the horses were properly attended to.

"The old man is a trifle out of sorts," the ostler ventured to remark, as they entered the yard together.

"Perchance so," returned the other, "but that is no affair of thine; but an you keep good care of his horse he will think well of thee."

"Yes, yes; certainly!" replied the man, grinning. "I always look well after gentlemen's horses, I do. You'll not be wanting them in the morning, I suppose?

"Yes, no; that is—I don't think we shall, but anyway you had better have them in readiness, we may possibly want them for the return journey to-morrow: tend them well;" and leaving a few final instructions, Sir Thomas Stanley, for he it was, passed out of the stables and entered the parlour of the inn.

Sir George Vernon was so engrossed in poring over a document which lay stretched out on the table before him that he did not notice the approach of his friend, and it was not until the latter inquired whether the meal was already ordered that the baron looked up and saw him.

"Oh, it's you," he exclaimed; "yes, we shall fall to directly; but I want you just to look at this first."

"What is it," inquired Stanley, "the summons again?"

"The summons, of course," replied Sir George, as he thrust it into the other's hands.

"What did the attorney say?"

"He said it was a bad case; a very bad case. He said, in fact, that he never came across a more unpromising case for a client of his since he set himself up as a lawyer."

"Humph!" returned Sir Thomas, "they always do say so. I tell you it will come out all right in the end."

"Happen so; but he says the ordeal would go for nothing, they don't count now in courts of law here. They would do if the trial came off at Derby, I know."

"Aye," assented his friend, "I'll warrant it would count there, for no one would dare to resist thee; but you see, Sir George, it's at London, and that makes all the difference."

“Warder, read the summons through,” pursued the baron. “I could not understand it, of course, I’m not much of a lawyer; but he says ’tis the work of that villainous locksmith. I wish I had hanged him at the same time, and then—”

“Well, what then?”

“It’s too late, now,” said Sir George, bitterly. “If they do condemn me I shall claim the benefit of clergy. I know some of the prayers, and if I can only find the right page I shall get on well enough. They will only fine me, though, at worst.”

“But you have enemies at Court, remember.”

“Well, let them do their worst. I shall not disgrace myself when the time comes, and in the meantime I will address myself to Lord Burleigh; he is all-powerful now.”

Page 37

“And if he fail us,” added Sir Thomas, “I will take thee to Sir Nicholas Bacon.”

“The Lord Keeper?”

“Yes, why not?”

“He is a hard man.”

“He is honest, and will take no bribe, if that is what you mean, Sir George; but if there is a flaw in the proceedings he will point it out for us, and that will be better than naught. We shall have the satisfaction of knowing that everything was properly done, at least.”

“We will try my Lord Burleigh first,” sighed the knight.

“Sir Nicholas might intercede for thee with the Queen,” Stanley went on. “He owes me some service, and is not ungrateful.”

“Hush! there is someone coming,” interposed the baron. “Let us say no more at present.”

It was the maid bringing in the dinner; and, folding up the paper, Sir George carefully deposited it within his breast pocket, and relapsed into a moody silence as they began and continued the meal.

Meanwhile, outside the inn a very different scene was being enacted.

No sooner had Sir Thomas Stanley entered the house than the ostler, having quickly stabled the horses, emerged into the yard again, and putting his fingers into his mouth he blew a soft peculiar whistling note, and reared himself up beside the wall to await the answer.

It was not long in coming, for almost directly the door of the stable loft above him opened, and the head of the locksmith of Haddon cautiously peeped out.

“Is all clear?” he inquired.

“Yes, they have both gone in to dine. I didn’t know you were there. I will come up and join you.”

In another minute the ostler stood beside the once more disguised Edmund Wynne, and the two, secure from intrusion, began to converse with unrestrained freedom.

“Well, are they the right ones?” he asked, as he fastened the trap-door down.

“Yes,” replied Edmund; “what did Sir Thomas say to you; I could hear him speaking?”

“Who’s Sir Thomas?”

“Sir Thomas Stanley, of course.”

“Oh! He didn’t mention the affair at all.”

“H’m! Did he say aught about me?”

“How should I know even if he had?” returned the ostler, “for I don’t know your name yet. He did not mention anybody, only to say how that the old man, the baron would think well of me when parting time came if I took good care of his horse.”

“Call me James,” quickly replied Edmund.

“Very well,” returned the other, “it shall be so; but I don’t believe your name is James, nor do I think you are a broken-down wool merchant either; but so long as you pay me what we have bargained for, I don’t care a straw what you are or what you call yourself.”

“Just so, that will do exactly,” Edmund promptly replied. “That is just what I require.”

“I’ll call you James, then, and if anybody asks about you I don’t know aught of any such person.”

Page 38

“Exactly; yes.”

“And I will get to know as much as I can from the maids, and will keep you well informed of the movements of your friends. Their trial comes off, you say, to-morrow?”

“I think it does.”

“They will not go far to-day, then?”

“I cannot say, but they will be well watched. What accommodation have you here for half-a-dozen stalwart fellows?”

“Plenty in the inn.”

“I don’t need telling that: but here——in the yard. I am expecting some guests for the night.”

“Let me see. It means money.”

“Of course it does.”

“And I shall run great risks.”

“You will be well repaid, though,” said Edmund, “and they might as well be here, I trow, as elsewhere; only see that they don’t have too much drink, and be careful that they are not seen lounging together about in the yard.”

“Trust me,” laughed the ostler, “I shall manage that easily enough. I shall bolt the doors and fasten them in, and nothing except a rat could get out then.”

“Nay, you misunderstand me. They are not prisoners, but men who have been hired for the journey.”

“I see now; ah, I see,” returned his companion in the most unconcerned manner possible. “In that case they only want a little watching.”

“And, mayhap, a little restraining, yes. Here is a shilling for some ale, which they will be expecting. You will meet them for me, and take charge of them?”

“Very well, James, so be it; where shall I meet though? It would never do for them to hang about here that’s very certain, for our landlord would have his eyes upon them in a minute. He is awfully sharp on tramps and beggars and such.”

“No, certainly not,” agreed Edmund; “meet them at the Temple Gates at six.”

“It shall be done; and in the meanwhile you will have a first-rate view of the entertainment from here.”

“What entertainment?”

“The players are here to-day. See, there is the stage and everything. ’Tis the Earl of Leicester’s company, too,” and pushing the door still farther open, he pointed out to Edmund Wynne’s astonished eyes one of the rudely extemporised platforms which passed in those days for stages.

Those who have witnessed the splendid scenic triumphs which have been achieved by managers of late years would be astonished indeed were they confronted by one of the theatres of the earliest dramatic times. Nothing could present a much greater contrast than the elaborate drapery and the ingenious trap-doors, side wings, and numerous other mechanical contrivances which are now a necessary complement of the modern stage, and the superlative simplicity which characterised the theatres of three hundred years ago.

Theatres, indeed, there were none, and the troupes of players wandered about from city to town, and from village to hamlet, giving their performances in open-air; or, if they were fortunate, in the courtyards of inns.

Page 39

It was a scene such as this that the two men gazed upon.

A slight wooden shed afforded protection to the actors from the burning rays of the sun or the more uncomfortable showers of rain. The stage, which was a movable wooden platform, was supported at a little distance from the ground by a number of empty boxes —which a torn piece of faded tapestry vainly endeavoured to hide from view. A small gallery ran along the wall at the rear of the stage, which was ready to do duty as the wall of a castle, a fort, a mountain, an upper room, or a window, or anything else, just as the necessity might be; while a flag, which floated in the breeze from the summit of a stunted pole, announced to the general public that the play was about to commence.

Edmund Wynne had never witnessed such an elaborate display before, and for a time he watched in silent wonder as the people congregated below.

“There will be a goodly company to-day, my lord,” exclaimed the ostler, as he drew his head in after a prolonged look round the yard. “’Twill be a notable day, will this.”

“I tell you I am not a lord,” angrily interrupted Edmund Wynne. “I only wish I were.”

“So do I, James, with all my heart, but look here; here is a proper lord for you, a great lord, too. See, do you know him?”

“No, where?” he quickly replied.

“Do you see that little platform there?”

“With a lamp hanging from the roof?”

“No, that’s the moon for the players. They will light it soon, and we shall know that it is night then, and folks can’t see each other without the moon. Look there;” and he pointed to where two or three gaily-bedecked ladies and some equally gaily-attired gallants were conversing together in a part of the courtyard which was separated from the rest by a rope which stretched from end to end.

“Well, I see them,” he said. “Who might they be, prithee?”

“They might be Pope Joan and the cardinals, but they are not.”

“Then who are they?”

“That thin man, with the big buckles on his shoes, is Sir Henry Sidney.”

“Never!” ejaculated Edmund, “he is too gray haired.”

“Even so, James. He is the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and that light-haired boy beside him is little Philip. He is the pet of the Court already, but heigho! whom have we here? Why, it is, yes—it is the Lord High Treasurer himself!”

“So it is,” murmured Edmund, as he carefully retreated well into the shade. “This door won’t attract attention, eh?”

“No, thank goodness, for I can’t very well get out now. You see, ’tis only a loft door, and it is as often open as shut. They will think I have been pitching some hay in.”

Page 40

Nevertheless, Edmund was by no means satisfied. There was only the distance now of a few yards which separated him from his persecutor, and he feared, in spite of his disguise, lest he should be discovered. He upbraided himself a thousand times for his foolhardiness in exposing himself to the perils which he knew beforehand would beset him in the capital; and in the extremity of his fear he absolutely shook with terror. Fortunately, however, for him, his companion was too engrossed in watching the new arrivals, as they rapidly flocked in, to notice his agitation, and for some time he was left to his own uncomfortable reflections. In vain he wished himself safe within the walls of Nottingham Castle. Even Haddon would have been preferable, but even that sorry refuge was denied him too. However much he wished it, he could not break away from the fact that he was at London, almost within arm's length of his persecutor, and he already began to look upon himself as lost.

CHAPTER X.

In dire Straits.

And if the worst had fall'n which could befall,
He stood, a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped;
But 'scaped in vain.

Edmund Wynne was rudely awakened from the train of thought into which he had fallen by the rough hand of the ostler, which alighted upon his shoulders with a smack which was re-echoed in the farthest corner of the yard.

"Now, James," said his companion, whose ready familiarity was becoming exceedingly distasteful, "they are about to begin, see!"

The courtyard was, in fact, already more than comfortably filled. Those of the audience who formed the pit squatted unceremoniously down in groups upon the ground, and having brought with them a plentiful supply of fruit and provisions, they were already busily engaged in discussing them; whilst the more select company, which paid a higher price and represented the modern gallery, occupied the reserved part on the other side of the rope, and was amusing itself in a general way, by looking down with supercilious contempt upon the common folk below.

Edmund stretched himself slightly forward, and peering out of the darkness of his retreat, was just in time to witness the appearance of the musicians, who, after making their bow to the audience, passed along the stage and made their exit through a doorway at the other end. A profound silence fell upon the company, and as the music

of the violins floated gently on the breeze, the players made their appearance on the stage.

“What grotesque figures,” he exclaimed, as an involuntary smile stole across his face; “why, they are covered with ivy leaves.”

“See how Lord Burleigh cheers,” interrupted the delighted ostler, as the play commenced, “and Sir Henry, too; see! Hang him, that’s old Boniface rooting about; what can he want, I wonder? I believe he is looking for me.”

Page 41

“Who is Boniface?” meekly asked Edmund.

“The landlord, of course; and your friends are with him, too,” was the curt reply.

Edmund shrank back still further into the shadow of the room. “It would never do for them to see me here,” he explained; “it would upset all our plans. You must screen me somehow, won’t you?”

“Take care of yourself, sir,” returned the ostler as he snatched up the pitchfork and began to toss the hay about. “Take care of yourself, sir, for he’s coming up here, upon my faith he is. Here’s luck!” and the hay flew about in all directions.

No second bidding was required. Edmund scrambled over the heaps of hay and straw which lay upon the floor and never slackened his haste until he found himself hidden from view behind the stack in the further-most corner of the loft. Barely had he succeeded in ensconcing himself there, when footsteps were heard ascending the ladder, and a moment later a sharp knocking at the door announced to the only too conscious conspirators that the landlord was waiting to enter.

“Halloa,” shouted the ostler, as he stamped upon the floor with his fork, to convey the impression that he was busily engaged, at work. “You can’t get in here, I’ve got my work to do.”

Edmund was astonished at the cool impudence of his friend, and he lifted his head to accord him a nod of approval, but a bundle of straw which the ostler purposely tossed at him from the other side of the room made him quickly withdraw his cranium again into the shelter.

“Let me in, I say,” shouted a voice from below. “You knave, let me in, I tell you.”

The ostler had played his little game, and, having sheltered his companion, he now anxiously awaited the result. Glancing round to see that Edmund was completely buried from sight, he dropped upon his knees, and moving the catch on one side he slowly raised the door.

“You knave! you villain!” exclaimed his irate master, as he stepped into the room. “Wasting your time in looking at puppet-shows. How dare you, sir; how dare you? Get you gone, sirrah!” and he gave him a kick which considerably accelerated the speed with which he disappeared below.

Having thus satisfactorily vented his displeasure, his brow relaxed and he turned to the baron and Sir Thomas and conducted them to a seat so lately vacated by the guilty pair, with an urbanity which looked positively impossible to ruffle.

“You see, my lord, there is a seat ready provided,” he exclaimed, as he pointed to the bale of hay which stood beside the wall. “Perhaps your lordships will be pleased to seat yourself on that? I’ll warrant me ’tis clean enough, for I espied the rogue sitting on it.”

Sir George Vernon, nothing loth, accepted the proffered seat.

“I will reach another bundle down for you,” continued the loquacious innkeeper, turning to the younger knight. “I will get you one of a convenient size; most of them are far too big to be comfortable, I fear, but I have them in all shapes and sizes; you shall be made comfortable in a trice, my lord.”

Page 42

He cast his eyes about in search of the bundle “of convenient size,” and his choice fell upon the one which covered the gap where Edmund Wynne lay hidden. Having once selected this he proceeded straightway to climb over the impeding bundles to reach it from the corner where the ostler had tossed it just before.

This, however, proved no slight task. He was burly and heavy, while the bundles were frail and loosely stacked and failed to yield to his feet that amount of support which, of all men, the stouter ones are supposed most to require. This being so, it was not surprising to find that ere he reached it he stumbled and fell several times, until at last Sir Thomas took pity upon him and told him to desist.

“I would stand, my good man,” he said, “rather than thou should’st break thy neck, or I might lay upon some of this soft straw for the nonce.”

“A prison bed,” chimed in Sir George. “Well, some folks like one thing and some another, there’s no accounting for tastes.”

The landlord scouted the proposal at once. He felt that somehow he was on his mettle, and it was incumbent upon him to vindicate the honour of his house. “Had the kind nobleman been possessed of a better acquaintance with him,” he said, “he would have known that it was not in his nature to be overcome by trifles. Things, thank goodness, were managed better than that at the Cock hostelry,” and to support his statement he wiped away the perspiration from his brow, and made a further attempt to reach it down.

Edmund’s feelings during these critical moments would be easier to imagine than describe. Every moment he expected that the bundle would be lifted off, and he anticipated the mortification of being dragged out and being brought face to face with the man whom he now most dreaded. As the other advanced and the unstable walls of his shelter quivered until they threatened to fall upon him, he crouched down further and further into the corner, preferring rather to be buried under the solid squares of hay than to be discovered in such a position. Sir Thomas’ words inspired him with a ray of hope, but his expectations were dashed as suddenly as they had arisen by the words of the baron and the action of the busy landlord, who, all unconscious of the torture he was inflicting, struggled valiantly on towards his quarry.

At last his perseverance was rewarded, and he found himself able to grasp the object of his toil; but Edmund as he felt the protecting roof of hay departing, snatched at the withes which bound it round, and dragged it down with all his might.

In vain did the furious landlord pull and tug. Try as he would, it would not move an inch, and he was about to give it up in disgust and offer some reason for his lack of success, when Stanley again came to his aid.

“Stand aside, man; thou art too old for such a task, and too fat, too, perchance. Let me get it out. Odd’s fish, my good fellow, but there’s been much to do about a little thing. Here it is, see.”

Page 43

Edmund had, for the moment relaxed his hold, and it was at precisely that same moment that Sir Thomas Staley took hold of the top of the bundle to pull it up. There was but one chance left, and although it promised a little hope of success, he deemed his position desperate enough to warrant him in attempting it. He decided to leap out simultaneously with the withdrawal of the bundle, and, trusting to the confusion his unexpected appearance would create, to escape through the trap-door, and race away for his life.

However, when he saw the sole protection which had hidden him from his enemies begin to move away his courage failed him, and he had not sufficient boldness to carry out the plan he had so neatly arranged. Instinctively he threw his arms up to clutch the rope again, but it was too late, it had already passed beyond his reach; there was nothing left to save him. Another moment and his hiding place would be discovered, when——, Sir Thomas missed his footing, and with a gesture of impatience he let the bundle fall again, and turned his back upon it in disgust.

It alighted heavily upon the luckless Edmund's shoulders, and it struck him with so much force that almost before he was aware of it, he found himself most uncomfortably doubled up, and tight pinned beneath its weight upon the floor. He could neither free himself nor ease his position without attracting attention, for his arms were tightly wedged underneath him, while his legs had found a resting place between two lots of hay, at a height somewhat above the level of his head. One thing, and one alone, was at his command. He could at least, he thought, remain quietly there, an unwilling eavesdropper, until his persecutors had gone. This he resolved to do; meanwhile he could only submit to the conditions which a series of unfortunate incidents had brought upon him, and listen to the conversation in the hope that some of it, at least, might at some time or other prove profitable to him in the accomplishment of the object he had in view.

"How long will they be, mine host?" inquired Sir George, to whom the circumlocution of the stage proved uninteresting indeed.

"About two hours, my lord," suavely replied that individual, as he gazed proudly at the brilliant company assembled in the yard below, wondering the while how much they would expend at the inn when the play was over.

"Two hours!" Edmund groaned inwardly, but the groan was none the less sincere because it was inaudible.

"Two hours!" exclaimed the astonished baron, "then I'm off."

Hope again revived within the heart of the prisoner.

“Nay, stop, Sir George,” interrupted the younger knight; “you cannot see a play like this at any time you choose. Stay awhile and bid me company, and forget your troubles in a stoup of ale.”

“Aye, I have the best in the town,” added the host; “there is nothing like it in all London.”

Page 44

This was quite a new idea, and Sir George scratched his head, as if by so doing he might facilitate his judgment, and then he did what so many other troubled ones have done, both before his time and since, he sought to drown his troubles by gorging himself with his favourite liquor.

“Ha! well,” he muttered, “the ale is good, as London ale goes, I trow, but——”

“It is indeed,” added the tavern-keeper promptly. “There’s none better, though I say it.”

“But I think I will have cider,” continued the baron, not heeding the interruption.

“I will fetch it myself,” exclaimed the proprietor of the Cock; “and sure I am, ’twill be the best that ever you have tasted.”

“Nay, hold,” interrupted Sir George, “I will go with thee. I will trust none to spice my drink except it be Lady Maude, or Dorothy. I will go with thee and spice it myself.”

“And I will have some simple sack,” said Sir Thomas.

Sir George Vernon and the landlord descended the ladder, and threaded their way through the crowd into the tavern, while Sir Thomas Stanley, left to his own devices, continued to lie quietly down upon his couch of straw, watching with intense interest the progress of the play.

Edmund, meanwhile, hearing no one stirring, and not being in a position to see, concluded that all three had descended together, and that he was the sole occupant of the room. He waited for a moment or two, and then, as the silence confirmed him in his opinion, he began to make strenuous efforts to free himself. There was no sign made in response to the noise he made in the attempt, and, without any interruption, he released himself from his uncomfortable position.

Slowly and painfully he raised himself up, but as he reached the top, the thrill of triumph to which his new-born hopes of liberty had given birth, died away, and a sigh of dismay escaped him as he discovered that he was not alone.

For a time he stood perfectly motionless, too terrified to advance, and too paralysed by fear to regain his hiding-place. Fortunately, however, for him, Sir Thomas Stanley’s back was turned towards him, and so intently had he fixed his attention upon the scene which was being acted on the stage before him, that he was in complete ignorance of the events which were transpiring in his rear. Edmund wistfully cast a look at the ladder which protruded temptingly through the trap-door, but the look more than satisfied him that he could not hope to gain it without attracting the attention of his most unwelcome companion.

There was only one idea which presented itself to the unlucky man's mind which promised any fair successes, and that left no alternative. He must put Sir Thomas out of the way!

However repugnant this plan might be, and Edmund felt all its hideousness, he felt every moment more and more convinced that it was the only safe way. He had suffered too much already to venture willingly back into the torture-chamber from which he had just escaped, even if he could safely have regained its shelter—in itself no mean feat; and at the bare idea of spending two more hours of like agony he trembled. He resolved that rather than he would be driven to that uncertain refuge again, Sir Thomas should pay the penalty of death.

Page 45

At this stage of his reflections he was rudely stopped, for the young knight, as if conscious of some impending danger, withdrew his head into the room and rolled over upon his back, leaving Edmund so little time in which to screen himself from view, that in attempting to secure a cover he toppled right over and fell back upon a thin scattering of straw.

Sir Thomas stopped the yawn with which he was indulging himself, and got upon his feet, surprised in no small degree to find that no one had entered the room. He went to the ladder to satisfy himself, but meeting with a like measure of ill-success there, he came away in a discontented mood; not perceiving Edmund, who lay, holding his breath, behind a heap of hay.

“I thought it was my sack coming,” he muttered; “but it was only those confounded rats. What a time they are gone, to be sure,” and as a last resource he sat himself down upon Sir George’s seat and watched the play afresh.

Edmund during all this time was slowly making up his wavering mind. The memory of Dame Durden was still fresh within him, and it was in fulfilment of his scheme of revenge for that that he had united with Sir Ronald Bury to bring the baron to book for his misdeeds, and was now in London. Why should he not wreak his vengeance upon Sir Thomas Stanley, and then at once accomplish the work on which his heart was set? In the intensity of his passion he could find no satisfactory answer to the question. There were powerful reasons both for and against such a plan. Sir Thomas was seriously jeopardising his present safety; but would his death at all affect the baron? Margaret would feel it, mayhap, and so might Sir George to some extent, but he was fully aware that Sir Ronald’s aim would be by no means compassed by such a termination; nor was he at all certain his own desire would be accomplished even then. The danger of his present position, however, was too apparent to be lightly put aside, and it proved too much for him. Were the others to return now his ruin would be assured; and realising this, he cautiously raised his head, and finding the young nobleman again deeply interested in the progress of the scene before him, he quickly drew out his knife and crept silently on towards his unsuspicious prey.

CHAPTER XI.

An unfortunate denouement.

But

In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o’ mice and men

Gang aft a-gley.

Burns.

As Edmund drew nearer to Sir Thomas Stanley his heart began to fail him, and when at last he was sufficiently near the knight to have carried out his design, his courage oozed out at his finger ends and he felt powerless to strike.

Finally he relinquished the attempt altogether, and a new idea flashing upon him, he tossed the knife into the furthest corner of the room, and rising to his feet, he tapped the still unconscious nobleman upon the shoulder, trusting that his careful disguise would preserve him from being recognised by Sir Thomas at least, for circumstances at Haddon had brought them into connection with each other but a few times at most.

Page 46

“Come at last, eh! and time, too,” exclaimed the young knight, as he listlessly held out his hand for his potion of sack. “What, not brought it yet?” he added, as he saw the other’s empty hands; “I have been kept waiting for it more than a quarter of an hour.”

“Will you have it cool or spiced, my lord?” meekly asked Edmund, following up the idea thus thrown out. “I have but just received the order for it.”

“Spiced, indeed!” replied the knight contemptuously; “not I, let me have it fresh from the cellar, and that quickly. No, here, stay,” he added by the way of afterthought, “where is Sir George?”

“Sir George! Is that the oldish gentleman with the master?”

“That is Sir George Vernon, yes.”

“He is lying down in the parlour,” was the ready reply.

“Humph, that’s queer, poring over that confounded document again, I’ll warrant me. I will go back with you,” returned Sir Thomas.

“I will bring it to you in half a minute,” gasped Edmund.

“Nay,” returned the other, “I will accompany thee. Ha! here he is, coming up again. He’s crossing the yard now, and Sir Nicholas Bacon is with him, I perceive.”

Edmund had played his last card, and the game was lost. Fortune had forsaken him at every turn; not one of his efforts had met with any success, and after all his endeavours he found himself as securely caught as the rat which was even then writhing within a few inches of his feet, in its last vain endeavour to free itself from the trap in which it was held.

For a moment or two he stood irresolute, but then, quickly gaining a mastery over the feeling of despair which had at first stolen over him, he made for the ladder, only to find, as he put his foot on the topmost step, that Sir George had set his foot upon the one at the bottom.

There was no help for it. He could neither advance nor retreat, so he stood at the top, carefully selecting the darker side, to await the course of events which could bring him no good fortune, but only evil in a greater or lesser degree. The completeness of his disguise, which had so completely deceived Sir Thomas, encouraged him to hope, for the moment, that he might also pass unrecognised even before the eagle eyes of the King of the Peak, and he solaced himself by trusting that if he were discovered the landlord might dismiss him in as summary a manner as he had done the ostler before him.

As Sir George passed him by, deep in conversation with Sir Nicholas Bacon, Edmund's hopes were considerably augmented, but the same ill-luck which had followed him heretofore did not desert him now. His hopes were dashed as soon as they had arisen, for the eye of the worthy Boniface was fixed upon him ere that person had fully entered the room.

Had he been attired in a manner more befitting his station, Edmund would undoubtedly have received a more befitting reception; but clothed as he was in shabby knee-breeches, loosely tied at the knees, a coat which was out at the elbows, a hat minus a portion of its brim, and with a dilapidated ruffle round his neck, which had been in its prime years ago, he presented a striking similarity in appearance to the ordinary marauding beggar of the period, such as were then so exceedingly common, and for one of whom, indeed, the landlord took him to be.

Page 47

As soon as this worthy had ascended, Edmund coolly made for the ladder, but he was motioned back by a sweep of the arm, as the landlord loosely fastened down the door.

“Who might you be, pray?” he asked, turning to the terror-stricken captive; “and what are you doing here, eh?”

At this sally Sir Thomas Stanley, who had just been exchanging compliments with the Lord Keeper, turned round.

“Who might he be,” he laughed, repeating the words he had just overheard; “well, by my troth, Sir George, he does not remember his own servant, even the one he sent about my sack. You have been priming him with his own ale and this is the result.

“Not a drop,” interrupted the baron.

“What do you say?” gasped out the astonished innkeeper. “This rascally knave a servant of mine! Pooh, does he look like it, I ask you? You impudent jackanapes,” he pursued, as he clutched the unfortunate Edmund by the collar. “What are you here for, eh? What are you here for? Speak.”

So far was Edmund from complying with this command that he remained absolutely silent. He dare not open his mouth for fear that Sir George would recognise his voice.

“Prowling about for as much as he can lay hold of, I’ll warrant me,” continued his captor, addressing Sir Thomas Stanley, who had advanced towards them. “How long has he been here, my lord?”

“Nay, I know not,” said Sir Thomas. “I saw him but just before you came up.”

“Then you may satisfy yourself that he had watched us out,” replied the other sharply, “and was surprised enough to find anyone left up here.”

“Like enough,” assented the baron.

“He was pretty smart with his tricks, then,” said Sir Thomas. “How was he to know I wanted any sack, I should like to know?”

The question was unanswerable, and no one attempted to reply.

“How did you know that, eh?” asked the proprietor, emphasising the question by a series of hearty shakings.

Still there was no answer; Edmund would not speak.

“Did you see him enter?” asked Sir Nicholas.

“I did not know he was in the room until he tapped me on the shoulder. I was watching the play.”

“These rogues are wonderfully sharp,” muttered Sir George.

“Then probably he was in the room all the time,” suggested the Lord Keeper.

“What did the rascal say to you, my lord?” went on the tavern keeper.

“He asked me whether I would have my sack spiced or no.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” laughed Sir George; “that was cool enough, at any rate. I think we ought to let the knave free this time for his wit.”

“And let him prey on somebody else?” added Sir Nicholas.

“Bad policy, Sir George, bad policy. He might try his hand on you next time.”

“I wonder how much property of mine he has taken already?” continued the host. “I will have him thoroughly searched. I know the rascal well enough, he’s been here before now many a time. There’s a whole lot of them prowling around the neighbourhood; a regular gang. I’ll make an example of this one, I will. You might as well give me what you have taken,” he added, turning to his captive, “and save me the labour of taking it from you.”

Page 48

“I have nothing of yours,” replied Edmund, in a strangely foreign voice.

“Not been through the house yet, maybe, eh!”

“No.”

“Humph, I don’t believe you. Here, Hugh,” he cried, hearing the ostler moving about below, “come up here.”

Edmund’s quondam friend and fellow conspirator came up in answer to the summons in no very enviable frame of mind, anticipating very correctly what was about to take place, and debating within himself what course of action to pursue. He quickly decided, however, that inasmuch as he had not yet possessed himself of the money due to him from the captive, that he would screen him as far as he was able—compatibly with his own safety.

“What’s this fellow doing here?” demanded his master, as soon as Hugh stepped into the room.

“Can’t say, sir,” replied Hugh, gazing at Edmund with well-simulated surprise, “maybe he’s in drink.”

“A likely story, that. Do drunken folk climb up ladders, eh?”

“Not always, sir.”

“How long has he been up here, now?”

“Never seen him afore, sir,” returned the unabashed ostler, with an air of perfect candour.

“You will be getting into serious trouble some day if you don’t be careful to speak the truth,” exclaimed his master, “so I warn you, sir. Now, out with it; he was here when you went down.”

“I had not seen him then, by the blessed Virgin I had not. I have never clap’t eyes on the knave before!”

“Now, mind, I warn you, so be careful.”

“I had only just got up, master; upon my word I had. I had not sufficient time to see anybody before you came and sent me down,” and at the remembrance of that event he stepped back a pace or two in order that his previous experience might not be repeated.

“You good-for-nothing rascal you!” broke out the landlord. “I stood and watched you myself, you were looking at the play. Get you gone, you idle vagabond,” he added, in high dudgeon, “get you gone, and bring me up some stout cord.”

Glad to escape, Hugh quickly made his exit, having come off far more easily than at one time he feared. He reappeared in a short time, but with empty hands.

“Well, where’s the cord?” angrily enquired his master.

“An it please you, sir,” he replied, with a sly wink at Edmund, “I cannot find one strong enough to bear him.”

“You can’t hang him yet; let him have a proper trial. There has been naught proved against him as yet,” eagerly interrupted the baron, upon whom the lesson of his own trouble had not been lost.

“He shall have a proper trial, my lord,” exclaimed the landlord, “and to-morrow we shall have him in the pillory. The proprietor of the Cock Tavern is no hangman; I only wanted to bind him. Fetch me a piece of cord, you knave, and be quick, or I’ll lay it about your back when it does come. Nay, you don’t do that,” he added, turning to Edmund, who was struggling to free himself; “not yet, my fine fellow. I have not done with thee yet,” and by Sir Nicholas’ timely help the prisoner was laid upon his back and then firmly secured with the cords which the ostler brought up a minute later.

Page 49

Leaving Edmund to bemoan his fate to himself, the party drew nigh to the window to witness the play afresh. They were just in time to witness the advent of another "silent scene."

"Let me explain it to you," proffered the once more equable Boniface. "I know all about these things, they oft-times visit us here. I know every bit of this play as well as I know my creed."

"Happen you may not be very familiar with the creed, though," laughed Sir Thomas.

"Don't I know it, though?" he replied. "Sir Nicholas, if I might be pardoned for mentioning it, knows full well that every citizen of London knows the creed by heart."

"Yes," assented the Lord Keeper, "everyone is compelled to attend some church at least once a Sabbath."

"Or else they are smartly fined for staying away, as I was," ruefully added the landlord. "Yes, my lords, I know my creed full well."

"Well, what's that fellow drinking now?" asked Sir George.

"He's fainting, poor fellow," replied Sir Thomas.

"Fainting," laughed the host, "fainting! not a bit of it. He is drinking some of my best Malmesey wine, that's what he is doing; only you must think he is taking poison. He is Gorboduc, the king."

"Well?"

"Oh, I forgot, you know naught of him as yet. Well, he, a king of Britain years ago, has just told everybody that the kingdom is to be divided between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. Some of his councillors advised 'Yes,' and some said 'No,' but the old king was decided upon having his own way, and the land had just been divided between them."

"Get on," said the baron impatiently, as the other paused and finally came to a dead stop. "They are beginning to act again."

"And one of the old councillors strongly advised the king to keep his realm entire," continued the man, "I remember his very words. He told the king how bad any division would be, not only for himself, but also for his sons. He says:—

But worst of all for this our native land.
Within one land one single rule is best,
Divided reigns do make divided hearts,
But peace preserves the country and the prince."

“As correct as the creed itself,” whispered Sir Nicholas.

“It may be so,” exclaimed the young knight, “but we will let the poetry go. For my part I can’t understand that new-fashioned poetry, and I don’t want to either. I only like it when it rhymes, like Chaucer.”

“That all means,” resumed the landlord, “that Queen Mary of Scotland had far better leave our gracious Queen Elizabeth (God bless her) to herself. We don’t want Roman Catholic princesses here again, Sir Nicholas.”

“No, indeed not. Mary was enough.”

Sir George Vernon frowned heavily. He was too sincere a Papist himself to relish such remarks, but he dared not show his displeasure in the face of the Queen’s minister.

Page 50

“And I don’t care for poetry anyhow,” he gruffly said, “so finish without any more of it if you can.”

“I will then. You saw those two mugs offered to the king?”

“Both made of common horn, yes.”

“They both came from my bar. One was full of wine, but the other held water.”

“Then when my sack comes I would prefer it without the water,” Sir Thomas replied, amid a chorus of laughter.

“You exercise your wit upon me, my lord,” replied the landlord with some asperity, “but I have not the means wherewith to retort. I am a man of business, not a Court fool.” Here he paused, astonished at his own trepidity, and also in fear lest his aristocratic customers should be offended. As he stopped his virtuous indignation passed away, and when he resumed again it was in a tone at once apologetic and placid.

“The water,” he continued, “was offered by the good councillors, but Gorboduc took the poison, and now he has drunk it off, so——”

“Look at your prisoner,” interrupted Sir Nicholas, “or very soon you will not have one to look after.”

Edmund had, in fact, been thrown down just over his knife, and very soon finding this out he had, by dint of considerable trouble, succeeded in cutting the cord which bound his wrists, and was busily engaged in freeing his legs by a similar process when he unfortunately attracted the attention of the Queen’s Councillor.

No time was lost in securing him afresh. In spite of his strenuous efforts he was quickly overpowered, and after all his labour he only found himself more hopelessly a prisoner than he had been before.

“Why, the fellow must be bewitched,” exclaimed Sir George, “I never saw his like before. Take him away before he does us any injury. Take him away, we don’t want him here.”

“He is safe enough now, my lord.”

“Take him away, I say,” repeated the baron. “We want him here no longer. Do you hear me, sirrah! Take him away I say, and lock him up in safety,” and amid the oft-continued reiteration of the baron’s order, Edmund Wynne was carried below and consigned to the care of the ostler until such time as the gaol officials could be conveniently communicated with.

CHAPTER XII.

A *confession of love*.

It was my fortune, common to that age,
  To love a lady fair, of great degree,
The which was born of noble parentage.
  And set in highest seat of dignity.

Spenser.

The sun was declining, after a gorgeous display of its fiery hues; gilding with a translucent light the grey walls of Haddon, and casting weird shadows on the closely-cropped bowling green, when two figures emerged from the shades of the neighbouring wood and passed into the meadow which lies below the Hall.

Sir George Vernon had not yet returned from London; indeed, nothing but a note from Margaret's lover had given them any information about the two travellers since they had departed, six days ago, and although news of them was now considered overdue, yet, in those days of bad roads and slow travelling, communications from distant places were never, or seldom at best, rapidly transmitted, and, bearing this in mind, no concern was felt on that account.

Page 51

Haddon, usually so gay, wore for the time being a sombre aspect. Sir George was its life and soul, and now that he was away and exposed to the machinations of enemies who were hungering and thirsting after a share of his riches, a gloom settled down upon the place and enveloped it in an ill-befitting aspect of dreariness. Baits and hunting parties were alike abandoned; no one felt in the humour to participate in gaieties, of whatever kind, so long as the baron was away; and the guests who had assembled to witness the tournament had, with few exceptions, returned to their homes feeling deprived, in a large measure, of that succession of festivities and enjoyments to which they had looked forward with so much expectancy.

Sir Henry was still confined to his room from the injuries which he had received in his encounter with Manners; and Cousin Benedict, who had stayed to take the baron's place during his enforced absence, had found his position so intolerably lonely that he at last took refuge in such copious libations of wine that henceforward his interest in contemporary events entirely ceased.

This air of desolation had infected Lady Vernon, too. Her temper, never of the mildest disposition, now became exceedingly irritable, and finding little consolation forthcoming from Sir Benedict, she vented her spleen with all those with whom she came into contact, and finally shut herself up within her own room and added to the misery of the household by obstinately refusing to hold any intercourse with the family.

Margaret and Dorothy were thus thrown much upon their own resources, and they managed to spend the time wearily enough at the tapestry frame until Manners and Crowleigh paid a visit to the Hall—ostensibly to inquire after the health of the wounded knight. Their arrival, as might be readily imagined, was cordially welcomed by the girls, and nothing beyond a first request was required to induce the two gentlemen to stay; and, so once again, Manners found himself, to his heart's great contentment, housed under the same roof as the lady of his love.

This time, however, he had come with the firm determination to bring matters to a crisis. He felt that his passion for Dorothy could be no longer controlled. Her bearing towards him had fired him with hope, but her position and her surpassing beauty had brought so many suitors to worship at her shrine that he was driven to despair between the conflicting emotions of hope and fear.

For a whole day he waited a favourable opportunity to carry out his purpose, and in vain. The two sisters seemed to be inseparable in this time of trouble, and try as he might he could not get the interview for which he so ardently longed. The fates were unpropitious, and one after another his artifices were defeated until at last he was obliged to fall back upon the assistance of his friend, and ask him, as a last resource, to help him out of his difficulty.

Page 52

As the shades of evening crept silently on, and the cooler air began to assert itself over the torrid atmosphere of the day, Sir Everard Crowleigh opened the campaign on behalf of his companion by suggesting that a walk would not only be refreshing to the two maidens, but also positively beneficial. “I don’t pretend to know much of the skill of the leech,” he added, “but I think that fresh country air is the finest physic out for young ladies, both for health and beauty too.”

“And maybe ’tis good for gentlemen as well,” laughed Dorothy.

“It is the true elixir of life, for which the alchemysts labour in vain to find,” exclaimed Manners. “Sir Benedict knows leechcraft, let us take his opinion upon its merits.

“Nay,” laughingly responded Margaret, “Cousin Benedict, I fear, is too much engaged in other affairs to attend to us just now.”

“Why, how?” asked Crowleigh in surprise, “surely no one would be ungallant enough not to lend their services to two such fair maidens. Never! I cannot conceive it.”

“Margaret means,” interposed Dorothy, “that he has been taking too much wine again, and then he goes wandering about the cellars and passages until he falls down and goes to sleep. Nobody takes any notice of him now, though, we have all got too familiar with his ways.”

“Well, we will go,” decided the elder sister, “but which way—north, south, east, or west? Bakewell, Rowsley, or where? Let us determine quickly, for it will soon be dark.”

“We are at your service,” gallantly responded John Manners. “Any way will suit us equally well.” Certainly, provided that the walk was long enough, the direction they should take was of little importance to him. He had a more important matter on his mind.

“Let it be Rowsley way, Margaret,” asked Dorothy.

“Well, then,” she agreed, “we will say Rowsley, ’tis a pretty walk; but we might first see our venerable protector in safety, then nothing could be nicer. Follow me, brave gentlemen,” said Margaret, and the two girls led the way through the banqueting-room and down the stone-flagged passage into the capacious wine cellar below.

Benedict was not there, but it was evident, from signs which could not be mistaken, that he had been there shortly before. All the neighbouring cellars were thoroughly explored, but to no purpose; he could not be discovered, and, finding that he had just been seen in the vicinity of the old archer’s room, they turned their feet in that direction, only to find themselves once more baffled when they arrived there.

“No, your ladyships,” replied the serving-maid, in answer to their inquiry, “he has gone again just now; you will be sure to find him in the kitchen, though.”

“’Tis as good as a badger hunt,” laughed Crowleigh, as they trailed into the kitchen again, “but prithee, fair mistress, what shall we gain by discovering the august knight?”

Page 53

“In truth I cannot tell,” replied Dorothy; “but, trust me, Margaret has some plan or other in her head.

“Yes,” said Margaret, “but see him, here he is; the master of the house, our guardian, our protector; behold him where he lies,” and she pointed to where the too festive knight lay doubled uncomfortably up in the salting trough.

“I expected about as much,” she went on, “and I want to cure him; what shall we do?”

“Salt him,” slyly suggested Dorothy, “that is the usual way.”

“Fasten him down in the box for the night,” suggested Crowleigh.

“We will,” she said; “here is the lid, we can easily fasten it down so that he cannot undo it, and we will have a peep at him to see that he is not smothered when we come back.”

In accordance with this decision Sir Benedict was unconsciously made a prisoner, as securely as any culprit in Derby gaol, and leaving him in this position the merry quartette started off upon their evening stroll.

Disdaining the highway, they followed the beaten path which led through the wood to Rowsley, Crowleigh doing his part to aid his friend by walking on with Margaret in front, and so deeply engaged her interest by recounting some of his adventures in badger hunting that she entirely forgot her sister, who followed behind her in a more leisurely fashion with Master Manners.

In vain the anxious esquire sought to broach the topic which lay so near to his heart; the words would not come, and beyond a few gallant and courtier-like remarks—to the like of which Dorothy had often listened beforetimes with impatience—he could not succeed; and when at last he began to give expression to his feelings, it was in a wild and almost incoherent manner.

As for the maiden who lightly tripped by his side, although she wore a sober, pensive look, yet she was filled with a silent joy, and the great fire of love which was burning in her breast she found difficult to control. With that quick and subtle faculty which belongs to womankind alone she had intuitively guessed his mission at the outset, and with perceptions rendered keener by the intensity of her passion, she was on the alert to detect his advances and respond to them with a due amount of proper maidenly reserve. Finding, however, that he was slow to approach the subject, yet feeling sure of his intentions and fearing lest the opportunity should slip by, she sought to precipitate his movements by a few, delicate hints.

“Why, we are all alone,” she exclaimed, “Wherever can my sister be? Let us hasten on.”

“She is in safe hands, fair Dorothy,” he replied, “and you will not be missed awhile.”

Dorothy noted with satisfaction that he had dropped the “Mistress” from before her name, and this, she argued, denoted that he was awakening at last, and encouraged her to venture again with another remark.

“Margaret is such a scold,” she teasingly said; “I fear we must really hasten forward.”

Page 54

“Nay, we will not hurry, we should not catch her now were we to try.”

“Why not, prithee?”

“Because—because: well, do not let us try,” he responded. He had fully meant to have declared his love to her then, but that “because” stuck in his throat and blocked up all the other words he would have said. The very intensity of his love hindered him from declaring his passion.

“What would Sir Thomas Stanley say if he knew Sir Everard were out courting with Meg?” wickedly suggested Dorothy. “Would he not be in a towering rage?”

“There would be another tournament, maybe,” laughed Manners, not noticing the tender tone in which his fair companion had addressed him.

“Poor De la Zouch will remember his attempt to provide amusement for us for some time yet, I fear,” she continued coquettishly. As her previous efforts had led to nothing, she had started afresh in another vein, mentally resolving that her companion was wretchedly slow in responding to her advances.

“I fear he will,” he replied; “but he is improving, I hear. Sir Benedict seems to understand his case.”

“He is like to be scarred for life, though,” Dorothy returned. “Poor Sir Henry.”

“You are sorry for him,” exclaimed Manners, who felt a little piqued at the tone of Dorothy’s reply, as, indeed, she intended he should be.

“Yes,” she said, “I am; very sorry.”

Manners bit his lip with annoyance, and made a foolish remark.

“Ha, he was your lover, perchance?” he said.

Dorothy flushed up hotly at the taunt. Manners saw it, and would have done much to have recalled his hasty words, but they were gone.

“Master Manners!” Doll exclaimed, turning quickly round upon him; “I have spurned him; I have told him what I think. Once and for ever have I refused him, and he knows I shall not change.”

“Fair Dorothy, sweet Dorothy,” Manners penitently exclaimed, dropping hurriedly upon his knees; “you shall be my queen. Forgive me—or condemn. I sue you for your pardon, nor will I rise until I have gained it.”

“I will visit you to-morrow, then,” she said, turning to go. “Farewell.”

Her voice was sweet again, and her brow was once more clear.

“You have forgiven me?” he cried, rising up and following her.

“What, sir knight?” she exclaimed, in feigned surprise, “risen, eh? Upon my word, you are a fickle cavalier. Well, I suppose I must extend my clemency to you. At what price will you be willing to purchase my forgiveness?”

Manners was just going to tell her he would give himself and all he had to her if she would take it, but a sudden bend in the path brought them face to face with Margaret and Crowleigh, and the words were left unspoken.

It needed no question to inform Sir Everard that his friend’s mission was not accomplished yet. He looked to see the sparkling eyes and a countenance beaming with delight, but was met by a face the very picture of disappointment; and shrewdly seeing that their company would be in no wise acceptable at such a juncture, he adroitly led Margaret on, still an interested listener to his wonderful tales, and intimating that they were returning to Haddon, they passed the lovers by.

Page 55

For a time Dorothy and Manners walked on in perfect silence, the one preparing to pour out the story of his love, and the other waiting and expecting the declaration.

“We had better retrace our steps now,” exclaimed Dorothy at length.

They turned round and began to wend their way again towards the Hall, in a silence that was positively painful to both.

“You are dreaming, Master Manners,” she exclaimed, as they neared the narrow bridge which spans the Wye just outside the gates of Haddon.

“Come, sir, declare your thoughts; let me be your confessor, for I will shrive thee right easily, and the penance shall be pleasant enough, I assure thee. Now confess!”

“I was thinking of—of love,” he stammered out.

“Love! then I forgive thee,” she exclaimed with a beating heart, “’tis a common sin. Proceed, my son.”

“I was thinking of a little poem.”

“Oh!” That was a disappointing continuation.

“’Twas a verse of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s. Shall I tell it thee?”

“‘Hide nothing from me,’ as Father Philip says,” replied Doll, brightening up again, for she was well acquainted with the verse of that unfortunate nobleman, which was almost all on the subject of love. She thought she knew the verse which he would tell her, nor was she mistaken. Almost everyone knew that verse, even if they knew none other.

The young esquire fixed his eyes upon her, and began—

A face that should content me wondrous well.
Should not be fair, but lovely to behold;
Of lively look, all grief for to repel,
With right good grace as would I that it should
Speak, without words, such words as none can tell,
Her tress also should be of crisped gold;
With wit, and these, I might perchance be tried,
And knit again with knot that should not slide.

“Then I perceive you are difficult to please, my son,” she replied.

“Listen, stay Dorothy,” he said, quickly, as she stepped upon the footbridge, “surely that means you. Oh, Dorothy, let me speak. I must tell you. I cannot let you depart yet. I love you. I have loved you ever since I saw you first.”

He paused, but as the maiden did not speak, he continued.

“Ever since the hawking party I have loved you. Do you remember that?”

“I do,” she demurely replied.

“Nay, stay, leave me not thus,” he cried, as Dorothy unconsciously moved. “You must stay, you must listen. Dorothy, I cannot flatter you like some; I speak the truth. I cannot live without you make me happy. Will you be mine?”

“But, sir knight—”

“Nay,” he interrupted, “say it is so. I am no knight, I am but a simple esquire, but though you be the daughter of the rich King of the Peak—”

“Nay, do not talk like that,” she interrupted quickly.

“Let me do something to show the vastness of my love,” he went on. “What shall it be? Bid me do aught, or go anywhere; command me what you will, but say you love me.”

Page 56

“And if I do, what then?”

“What then?” he echoed; “I would live or die for you—for you alone.”

“I do love you, then,” she replied, with downcast eyes and blushing face.

Manners stood up erect, and glanced straight into the honest eyes of the beautiful girl as she stood on the bridge beside him.

“You do?” he exclaimed; “say it again.”

“I do love you.” she repeated; “and will be yours for ever if you love me as you say.”

“What!” he cried, “you, the fair Dorothy Vernon, the Princess of the Peak, the fairest jewel in the land, you give yourself to me—John Manners, a simple esquire? I can scarce believe my ears.”

“I will show you. John,” she replied; “my life shall prove it. I have loved you dearly ever since that self-same hunt”; and permitting her love-troth to be sealed by a kiss, she buried her fair face in his bosom and quietly wept in the excess of her joy.

CHAPTER XIII.

Father Philip’s accident.

And thou hast loved him! Faith, what next?
It had been better far for thee
That thou had’st ne’er been born, than this.
Brood on thy folly, and return,
But when thou hast repented on’t.

A *woman’s whim*.

As the two lovers, happy in their newly-pledged love-troth, entered the gateway of the Hall they were encountered by the news that Father Philip had met with an accident. Margaret and Sir Everard Crowleigh had not yet returned, and messengers were even then, by the chamberlain’s commands, preparing to go out to secure aid.

“’Tis a sad mishap, my lady,” said that functionary, as Dorothy entered. “That stupid old horse of his threw him against a tree, and we cannot find Sir Benedict anywhere; the poor father is bleeding to death. He’s dying, my lady, dying; what will the baron do if he return?”

“Hush! Thomas, of course he will return.”

“May the blessed Virgin take pity on us,” pursued the wretched man, “there is an evil spirit o’er the place. Someone is working a spell against us.”

“Where is the father?” asked Manners abruptly.

“He lies in the chaplain’s room; I can hear him groaning now. The saints look down in ____”

Dorothy passed on, heeding not the continued invocations which the old man made to all the saints in the calendar, and led her lover into the little room in which the unfortunate priest lay.

The portly form of Father Philip lay stretched at full length upon a wooden bench, and the room resounded with his painful groans. As they approached nearer to him they could see the fearful injuries he had received; and the continued reiteration of the sufferer that he was about to die needed no other confirmation than a glance at his pale face, upon which the mark of death was plainly written.

Page 57

Father Philip, despite his faults, was universally beloved in the neighbourhood—by the poor for the bounty he dispensed at the gates from the well-stocked larder of the knight; by the rich because he was by far the best tale-teller of the district, and the success of a feast at which he was present was at once assured; and by the children generally, for the confections and little silver pence he bestowed upon them, along with his kind word and cheery smile, in a most liberal manner.

At Haddon he was a prime favourite with all alike. He had entered the service of the Vernons soon after the monasteries were dissolved, in the time of Henry VIII., and had grown old in his office. Throughout the critical and changeful reigns of Edward and Mary, as well as the early years of Elizabeth's time, he had, in spite of all the attempts made to oust him, retained his position as confessor to the family and priest of the chapel at Haddon, and, as he had christened Margaret, he was looking forward with pleasurable expectancy to the occasion when he would be called upon to marry her also.

Leaving Dorothy standing on the threshold of the doorway, Manners advanced to the injured man's side, and endeavoured to sooth him by instilling into his mind a ray of hope.

"O, Dorothy," gasped the priest, disregarding the words of his would-be comforter, "I am dying, dying like a dog. O, for some of Dame Durden's simples now. For the blessed Virgin's sake fetch Sir Benedict. O, dear! O, dear!" and he sank back with a groan.

Dorothy turned, and with a fast-beating heart hastened to deliver the captive knight, while her lover endeavoured to staunch the flow of blood by binding the wound tightly up in strips of cloth.

By dint of much shaking and shouting cousin Benedict was at last roused from his drunken sleep, and also at last was made to understand somewhat of the exigencies of the case for which his aid was needed.

"I will come soon," he exclaimed, in answer to Dorothy's entreaties.

"You must come now!" she replied, in a peremptory tone, which admitted of no prevarication.

"Where is the wine?" he asked, as he rubbed his eyes and glanced around; "why, this is the kitchen."

"Come along, Benedict; Father Philip is dying, I tell you. Do you understand?"

Benedict a Woode stood up as still as he was able, and rubbed off a quantity of the salt which tenaciously adhered to his garments, then, noticing for the first time that he was

in the great salt trough, he exclaimed in a tone of great surprise, “What! have I been here?”

“You have,” she answered severely, “but why do you not come and succour Father Philip? He is bleeding to death, while you, who are staying here, might help him.”

As the knight rapidly collected his scattered senses, he became more and more ashamed of himself; and now, clambering out of his ignominious confinement, with bowed head and tottering feet he humbly followed his fair companion across the yard. Not even the gigantic vat, which was still steaming from a recent brew, the pungent odour of which could be plainly scented, induced him to alter his course; he meekly entered the room at Dorothy’s heels.

Page 58

Whatever effects of his recent indulgence remained with him before he entered the room, they were quickly dispelled as he beheld the pallid countenance of his friend, and falling down upon his knees, he scrutinised the injuries the venerable father had received.

A brief examination satisfied Benedict that, unskilled as he was, the case was entirely beyond his power, and he knew not what to do. He unloosened the bandages which Manners had made, and let the already over-bled man bleed still more; and then, bethinking himself of summoning superior aid, he hastily concocted a dose of simples, which the sufferer could with difficulty be prevailed upon to take, despatched a mounted messenger to Derby, and sat himself down at the foot of the bench to await the course of events.

The effect produced by the dose was evidently what Benedict had wished, and for a long time the sufferer was far more quiet.

“O, Benedict,” he feebly exclaimed, “my head, my head!”

“Well, it will be better soon.”

“Nay, I know I’m dying; ’twas a fatal fall, and I cannot shrive myself.”

Benedict saw that his patient was getting excited, and he mixed another draught, which the father absolutely refused to take.

“Oh, dear, I’m dying, dying,” he gasped.

“Tut, man! rubbish. There’s life enough left yet in you. We shall be out together again in a day or two.”

“Send for another brother,” pursued the unfortunate man. “I am dying; my end has come, and I know it.”

“Tut, man!” returned the knight, “I tell you you will be better soon.”

“A witch told me I should die like this,” continued the father obstinately, “and the time has come. I am too old to survive it now.”

“Go to sleep, father,” interrupted Manners, “you ought not to talk now; you want rest.”

“Yes, sleep,” assented a Woode.

“I cannot, I am dying,” he gasped; and he groaned in agony again and again.

“Father Philip,” interposed Dorothy, “you must rest yourself. Master Manners is a soldier and has seen many hurt like you, and even worse; you must do his bidding an you would get well again.”

“What in the name of faith does all this mean?” asked Margaret, as she stepped into the room. “What is all this stir and commotion about?”

“I am dying, Margaret,” repeated the confessor, as he gasped for very breath. “I thought to marry thee, my daughter, but now it is denied me. You will pray for the repose of the soul of Father Philip, will you not?” he inquired, looking up into her face as she bent over him.

“When you are dead, yes,” she replied, “but not until.”

“Don’t talk to him, Mistress Margaret,” said Manners; “he will only injure himself by talking in return. I have enjoined quietness, but he will take no heed. He ought to refresh himself by quietness, and sleep if possible, does he not; is not that correct, Everard?”

Page 59

“Aye, it is indeed,”

“I shall be dead soon, Margaret, and—”

“Go to sleep, man, or at least lie still,” growled a Woode. “What is the use of all my care and simples if you won’t do as I order you?”

“And you will ask the baron to forgive an old man’s follies, Margaret?” slowly pursued the father, between the gasps, quite heedless of the counsel given him to remain silent.

“I’ll stop this,” Sir Benedict broke in savagely, as he proceeded to tie the bandages on afresh. “Father Philip, you shall be silent, or die you must. That’s better,” he exclaimed, as his patient fell back unconscious. “He will, perforce, be quiet now awhile, and we may safely remove him to his room.”

“Is he badly hurt, think you?” asked Margaret.

“I don’t think he will ever get better again,” Benedict gravely replied; “he is old, and it is a terrible wound.”

“Neither do I think he will weather it,” added Crowleigh; “I have seen men hurt like that before, fair Mistress Margaret, and we soldiers soon recognise the mark of death.”

Slowly and with great care the poor father was carried into the hall, and as soon as he was laid upon his bed, seeing that there were no signs of returning consciousness, Margaret and Dorothy quietly retired.

“Meg,” exclaimed the younger sister, with glistening eyes, as they sat in cheerless solitude before the blazing logs in their own room, “I have something to tell thee, and I shall mayhap want your aid ere I have done.”

She stopped short, to see if her sister had guessed her secret, but it was apparently undiscovered, so she went on.

“I don’t expect Lady Maude will be very willing; she always opposes us, does she not?”

“Sometimes,” said Margaret drily.

“He is not so rich as De la Zouch,” pursued Dorothy, “so I don’t think she will agree to it at first.”

“To what? What do you mean? Father Philip’s accident has turned your head, I verily believe,” replied her sister, as a terrible suspicion of the truth flashed into her imagination.

“Nay, Meg, dear, listen. I have plighted my troth to-night.”

Margaret jumped from her seat as if stung, and her face turned livid with anger.

“What!” she exclaimed, “you have dared to plight your troth to Master Manners?”

“To John Manners, yes.”

Her voice was quiet and her bearing firm, nor was she half so agitated as her sister, a fact which Margaret was slow to understand.

“Speak fair, Dorothy,” she said, as she tried to persuade herself that she had misunderstood her meaning. “None of your riddles for me. You are joking, surely.”

“Nay, I am in earnest, Meg. Ask him yourself; he will tell you whether I was joking an hour ago. De la Zouch knows I would perish rather than be his countess. I told him so myself. And oh! Meg, dear, I am so happy now, for I love John Manners so very, very much.”

Page 60

“’Tis a sad night’s work for *you*”, burst out Margaret. “What right have you, prithee, to make arrangements such as these? You are to be betrothed to a brother of Sir Thomas Stanley. Edward is coming from the Isle of Man within a month to arrange it all, and a nice affair have you made it with your forwardness.”

“Edward Stanley?” echoed Doll, in blank dismay.

“Yes, surely.”

“Never,” she replied, decisively; “I will have none of him, nor could I if I would. I am betrothed already.”

“You foolish child,” returned Margaret. I must rate this Master Manners for his presumption. Sir Thomas will have talked the matter over with your father ere now, as they journeyed up to London.”

“It will be of no use even if he has. John Manners has my pledge, and I shall keep it with him, too.”

“Tut, child, this is idle talk. By now the matter is all arranged for you, and very thankful ought you to be. If Master Manners is a gentleman——”

“He *is* a gentleman.”

“He will think no more about you, then, after he knows the facts,” said Margaret sharply, and passing out of the room she left Dorothy alone to her tears, while she tried to discover the happy esquire to give him a piece of her mind.

CHAPTER XIV.

An unpleasant night.

> But justice though her dome she doe prolong,
> Yet at the last she will her own cause right.
>
> *Spenser*.

When the landlord of the Cock Tavern thoughtlessly gave his prisoner into the custody of the ostler he put Edmund Wynne in the way of the only piece of good fortune which fell to his share on that unlucky day.

No sooner did the two conspirators find themselves alone than Edmund began to implore his companion to set him at liberty, offering large prospective bribes for freedom; but quickly perceiving that his keeper was inexorable, he turned his attention

to the best possible provision for the safety of those who had embarked on the expedition along with him.

It was patent to both that for the meeting of Edmund's associates to take place, as had been arranged just previously, would now only involve them all in one common ruin; and arrangements were accordingly made for them to be warned of the danger their presence would incur. The conference, however, was prematurely ended by the advent of the minions of the law, who, for once in a way, were prompt in the execution of their duty, and in a very short space of time Edmund found himself securely lodged within the precincts of Fleet Market Gaol.

Page 61

Little ceremony was shown him at his new resting-place, for no sooner had the outer doors of the prison closed upon him than he was rapidly dragged forward across the courtyard and thrust into a dimly-lighted, evil-smelling room, the very appearance of which, with its strongly-barred windows high up in the wall, and the massive studded door which was closed and double locked upon him almost before he had entered the room, struck a feeling of shrinking terror deeply into the prisoner's heart. He sank disconsolately down upon the cold stone bench just beside the door, and placing his elbows upon his knees, he propped his head up between his hands, and peering into the dimness bitterly bewailed his fate.

He was startled from the train of thought into which he had unconsciously fallen by hearing a sound not far from him. He raised his head and rubbed his eyes, half expecting to be confronted by a spectral visitor; but not being able to distinguish anything in the deep gloom to which his eyes were not yet accustomed, he dismissed that theory, and ascribed the noise to the rats.

"Rats, ugh!" he exclaimed, and he lowered his head down again, feeling a trifle less dejected because of the trivial interruption which had for the moment excited him, and changed his dismal channel into which his thoughts had flown.

"Who says rats?" exclaimed a voice in tremulous tones, evidently from the corner of the room.

Edmund's head was upraised in a moment. His hair stood on end, for, as he hastily glanced around, his eye lighted upon a form enshrouded in white. He was convinced that he was at last confronted by one of the ghostly fraternity, of whose existence he was a firm believer; and hastily springing from his seat, he retreated as far as he could in the opposite direction.

To his terror the figure rose up at the same time, and advancing towards him, frantically waving its arms, and repeating the words Edmund had just uttered. He was in a frenzy of despair, and rushing to the door, as the spectre had come up to him, he had made an ineffectual effort to open it, and was busily engaged in kicking its stout timbers to attract the attention of the gaolers.

All this took but a moment, but it was a terrible time to Edmund, and he found himself, in spite of his efforts, completely nonplussed by the unearthly foe beside him.

"Rats, who says rats?" piped the figure again in its shrill, thin voice. "Where are they?"

For answer Edmund turned round, and in his desperation lunged out with his foot towards his persecutor. It struck something solid, and to Edmund's intense relief the spectre limped away with a howl of pain just as the key turned in the lock outside.

A moment later the door swung slowly back upon its creaking hinges, admitting the gaoler, and, at the same time a flood of light, which disclosed to view the form of a haggard man writhing in pain upon the wooden bed, sparsely covered with straw, in the very corner of the room.

Page 62

“Here’s a pretty pickle,” quoth the new comer, as he stood upon the threshold of the door. “Which of you made all the din? Halloa, why Peter,” he added, as he stepped up to the side of the bed and gazed upon the emaciated form of an old and well-known inmate of the Hut, “what does all this portend?”

No sooner had he stepped into the room than Edmund, seeing the doorway clear, bolted out on an ill-timed venture of escape. He rushed along the passage, hotly pursued by his custodian, and ran without interruption into the yard; but here, alas, he was at bay. It was not the same yard through which he had entered so shortly before, and he could find no way of exit. It was futile to attempt anything further, and, discovering this unwelcome fact, he passively yielded himself up, and was rewarded for so doing by receiving sundry cuffs and jerks from his captors, who carried him straightway before the governor.

There are some people in the world who seem to have been born under a lucky star. Everything upon which their hands are laid at once turns into gold; all their ventures are successful, or if they have a slight mishap it is more than compensated for directly afterwards by a grand success. Fortune is never weary of smiling upon them; they are her prime favourites, and she marks her approval by heaping favours upon them in a most indiscriminate and prodigal manner. Upon others she continually frowns. All their efforts uniformly bring back a plentiful harvest of disappointment. Their labour is ever in vain, they are left to languish in misery and to repine over the illusion which tempted them with a feigned promise of success ever nearer and nearer to ruin.

Edmund was one of these last, and this was the more inexplicable both to himself and a certain number of his friends, inasmuch as he, being an astrologer, had discovered that he was born under a lucky star.

His interview with the governor was short, but decisive. The gaoler stated the case against him, adding to the facts here and there to embellish his story; and in a very short space of time he found himself manacled with heavy chains, which fastened him down to the floor of the damp cell into which he had been thrust.

At the Cock Tavern Sir George was ill at ease when he retired to rest that night. His slumber was broken, and when he slept it was only to dream of his trial on the morrow. Hobgoblins were judges, and legions of little imps bore witness against him. Old Dame Durden rose up from her grave on purpose to bear witness against him in person, and as, in his vision, he saw her stretch out her long, bony arms towards him, he felt her cold, clammy hand upon his head, and awoke to find himself in a cold perspiration.

He attempted to quieten his fears, and tried to reassure himself, and, having succeeded in some degree in doing this, he fell asleep again.

It was a vain search for rest. This time a myriad of hostile pygmies were dragging him down into a bottomless pit. They tugged, and pushed, and danced upon his helpless body, and laughed in spiteful glee as he descended further and further into the dread abyss.

Page 63

He rose at cock-crow, unrefreshed both in body and mind, and, descending into the lower regions, he paced abstractedly through each tenantless room in turn.

He found it, however, a forlorn and cheerless way of killing the time. Everything seemed dead; not a sign of life was visible. The rooms were desolate, and looked the worst, while the fire grate, empty save for a few dead ashes, seemed but a picture of his own misery, and instead of yielding him even a grain of comfort, its bars, appeared to grin upon him with solid defiance. Everything seemed comfortless in the extreme, and as the melancholy train of thought into which he had fallen was in no wise cheered by this manner of proceeding, he passed into the library, which seemed least cheerless of all, and sat himself down.

Still he could not enliven himself nor shake off the gloomy feeling which had settled upon him; all around was perfectly still, and the very silence palled upon his fancy. It was, he imagined, the calm before the storm; the tempest would be raging round him soon in all its fury; and moving the empty horn cups aside—the relics of the night's carousal—he reached down a volume from the thinly-populated bookshelf, hoping to calm his excited feelings by arousing an interest which might for a time distract his attention from the forthcoming trial. It was a book of poems, and with a contemptuous "tush!" he impatiently replaced it upon its shelf, and sank down into his seat and fell into a fitful doze, only to be tormented afresh by hosts of enemies, each of whom was eager to destroy him, while he could only look on in dismay and witness his own fall.

Sir George was no light weight, and under the pressure of his body the table was gradually pushed further and further away from the bench upon the smoothly polished boards, until at length it failed to offer him any support and he was suddenly awakened by falling heavily upon the floor.

Half dazed by the fall, and still uncertain whether he were awake or asleep, the good knight rubbed his eyes and looked around. He heaved a sigh of relief to find that he was yet alive, for he had at first imagined that the furies had succeeded in encompassing his ruin. He ran his fingers through his iron-grey locks of dishevelled hair, and comprehending that he was seated upon the floor, he made an effort to rise.

As he placed his hand upon the floor it touched something which yielded to the pressure. Involuntarily he drew it back and placed himself instinctively in an attitude of defence. He hated vermin of every kind, and this he instantly resolved was a rodent of some description.

His first hurried glance showed him that he was mistaken. It was but an innocent roll of paper, and laughing at his fears, he picked it up, and placing it upon the table, regained his seat.

Page 64

He turned it over, but there was no superscription on its exterior to offer any clue as to its owner, and taking it with him to the window, he pushed the lattice open and removed the shutter. The dial pointed to six, and the sun had risen. He peered closely into the roll he held in his hand, and pressing the packet slightly open, he slowly deciphered the writing. It was that of a lawyer. The first word he encountered was his own name, and brushing all scruples hastily aside, the baron burst the package open, and with little compunction sat down to peruse its contents.

It took the knight, who was no fluent scholar, some considerable time to read it through, and when, after the exercise of much patience, he had reached the end, the legal terms, which were so profusely employed, so baffled his simple understanding that he had decidedly failed to grasp its true intent. Of one thing, however, and only one, was he perfectly sure, and that was that he had come across the name of Mary Burden and Nathan Grene several times in close connection with his own; but what heightened his surprise and added to his discomfiture was that the name of Sir Ronald Bury also appeared.

In this predicament he bethought himself of seeking aid to unravel the mystery, and he hastened up to arouse his companion.

Sir Thomas was dressed, and he met the baron at the top of the stairs—much to their mutual surprise.

“Good morrow, Thomas,” exclaimed the baron, “I had come to awaken thee; see here!” and holding up the document he had discovered, he dragged the heir to the Derby estates downstairs without uttering another word or allowing any time for explanations.

“Read that,” he said, as soon as they were seated.

Sir Thomas took the roll from the other’s hand, and after a superficial scrutiny he was soon deeply engrossed in carrying out the command, while Sir George leaned his elbows upon the table and carefully studied the changing emotions which followed each other in rapid succession upon the young man’s face.

Sir Thomas Stanley read it through twice, and then carefully folding it up, he gave the baron a prolonged inquiring look.

“Well,” exclaimed Sir George, “you have read it?”

“I have.”

“Is it important?”

“Assuredly it is. What have you done in the matter?”

“Naught, save that I have shown it thee.”

“Is that all, Sir George?”

“All! yes. Why?”

“It is valuable; where did you get it?”

“I found it upon the floor under the table. What is it, though?”

“Show me your summons first. You have discovered information, I believe, which will tide you safely over the trial.”

“Eh!” ejaculated the old knight, dropping the bulky summons upon the table; “found what?”

Sir Thomas returned no answer to the query, for, leaving his companion to grasp the importance of the words he had just uttered, he spread out the two documents side by side upon the table and busied himself in comparing them together.

Page 65

CHAPTER XV.

Sir George at Westminster.

Go, let the treacherous throw their darts
And sore the good malign
Perjure their conscience, stain their hearts,
To gain their foul design.
Yet shall right triumph at the end;
And virtue fortune shall defend.

Anon.

For some time the two noblemen sat in silence, but at length Sir Thomas Stanley looked up and gave the baron some very pleasant news.

“You are safe,” he said. “You need no longer fear this Nathan Grene, nor Sir Ronald Bury, nor anybody else for the matter of that; you are perfectly safe.”

Sir George Vernon simply opened his eyes and his mouth wide in sheer surprise, and seeing that he made no attempt to speak, Sir Thomas proceeded.

“This is a letter from Grene’s own counsel. It is of the utmost importance. Nathan Grene must have been here yesterday.”

“What! at the inn here? This very inn?”

“Aye! and in this very room. Here is his signature, dated yesterday. Maybe he is above even now.”

“Like enough,” said the baron fiercely, and he looked as if he would like to search each separate chamber in the house there and then.

“Listen,” said Stanley, “this is what the lawyer says: ’I am doubtful if, after all, the prosecution will not fall through. The summons was issued by your direction against “The King of the Peak,” whereas it ought to have read “Sir George Vernon.” Warder, who, I hear, is the agent of the Vernon family, will surely recognise this, and if the baron refuses to answer the title contained in the summons, then our case will fall to the ground. We must hope for the best, as we can do no more. It is too late to rectify the error now.’”

“Here,” said Sir Thomas, looking up, “the counsellor stops; but our friend Grene has added a few notes of his own, evidently directions to some of his friends.”

“Go on, then,” commanded Sir George impetuously.

“‘We must get Warder out of the way till the trial is over,’ he writes. ’The ostler here, who brings this message to thee, is in our confidence, and may be trusted. Meet as arranged to-night. If we fail at the trial we will have our revenge elsewhere. I am in danger, and may not meet you yet, but follow Sir Ronald and he will reward you.’”

He stopped reading, for while they had been thus together the household had become astir, and it was evident that someone was about to enter the room in which they were seated.

His conjecture was right, for barely had he paused ere the door was pushed open, and the ostler stepped quickly in, startled indeed to find the library already occupied. He started to retire, but the baron called him back.

“Come hither, sirrah,” he cried, regardless of his friend’s wiser counsel to desist.

Page 66

Hugh unwillingly returned.

“Do you know that?” Sir George exclaimed, holding up the packet he had discovered.

Hugh had come purposely to seek it, but deeming it unwise to admit the fact, he boldly answered in the negative. “That will do,” said the younger knight quietly; “you can depart.”

Again he started to go, but again Sir George called him back.

“Read it,” he said peremptorily, and he thrust the parchment into the ostler’s hands.

“I cannot read,” he replied; but suddenly bethinking himself that he was implicated by the written evidence, he quickly changed his mind, and eagerly snatching the document from the baron, he hastened out of the room and turned the lock sharply upon the wonder-stricken knights.

No time was to be lost; Hugh knew their knocking would soon be heard, and that before long they would be released, when there would be hue and cry after him; so, rapidly catching up a few of his own things—and he had few of his own handy enough to take—and adding a few convenient valuables belonging to his master to pay for his services, he quickly passed out of the house and sped on his way to join the confederates of Edmund Wynne.

Edmund, too, had passed a sleepless night. At first he had attempted to burst his chains asunder, but soon realising the utter uselessness of such conduct, and being also covered with bruises, he desisted and passed the next hour in calling out for relief. No relief came; only the mice and the insects heard his cries, and the former affrighted, sought seclusion in their holes, leaving the latter to survey in silent surprise the new comer who had intruded upon their privacy.

Wearied out, he gave over shouting at last, and lay upon the floor of his damp cell, tossing uneasily about from side to side. The sun set; the dark night came and went; the morning sun arose, and yet he knew it not. It was too dark for him to see anything, for even no ray of light found its way inside to gladden the heart of the prisoner. He was altogether shut off from the world; he was, for the time being, to all intents and purposes, buried alive.

At length, after a night of abject misery, which seemed as if it never would end, he heard the key turned in the lock, and in another moment the gaoler entered. He fastened Edmund’s hands securely behind his back, and unlocking the fetters he bade him follow him to the court.

The landlord of the Cock Tavern was already there, much enraged at the loss of his property and the conduct of his servant, which he laid to the charge of the prisoner. In a

very short space of time Edmund Wynne was convicted as a vagabond, and he listened akin to relief as the Judge sentenced him to be kept in the stocks for the rest of the day and threatened him with a whipping in the pillory if he were brought before him on a second occasion. Much to the annoyance of the innkeeper, the attempt to connect the prisoner with the loss of his property and the ostler's flight entirely broke down; and disgusted with everybody and everything, the good man returned to the tavern to smile with counterfeited pleasure at his customers, and to vent his rage upon the servants who were left him.

Page 67

The loss of the paper somewhat disconcerted Sir George Vernon, and after the disappearance of the ostler he sat for a minute or two quite dumbfounded, gazing in speechless surprise at the closed door. His companion was a man of action, however, and undaunted by finding the door locked, he hastened to the window, and would have attempted an exit there had it not been that the windows were too narrow for such a procedure.

Baffled again, but in nowise disheartened, he began to thunder at the door, and with the assistance of Sir George Vernon he soon made noise enough to attract attention.

The first to hear them was the chambermaid, and she, very naturally suspecting that thieves were in the room, ran out into the yard and intimated as much, at the top of her voice, to all the neighbours.

Meanwhile the knocking continued, and was, if anything, more vigorous than before. Startled by such an unusual din, the worthy Boniface awoke from his slumbers, and, in no very enviable frame of mind, set off, poker in hand, to summon aid. Help soon came, and, armed with pokers, brooms, and pitchforks, the door was quickly broken open and the gallant company rushed in, knocking Sir George over as they entered.

In the pause that followed the first rush the mistake was discovered, and the situation was explained. The landlord was profuse in his apologies, the more so as he caught the look of anger in the baron's eye, but peace being quickly made, he rewarded his followers and sallied out to discover the whereabouts of his delinquent servant, breathing out dire threatenings against him. He searched in vain, and after a thorough examination, returned in ill mood to partake of the first meal of the day, and to discover the extent of his losses ere he proceeded to appear against the unfortunate Edmund Wynne.

As the baron and Sir Thomas rode together to Westminster a few hours later, it was with spirits considerably higher than they could have expected four-and-twenty hours earlier. Sir George had resumed his haughty bearing, but he was, in truth, though he would never have confessed it, more than a trifle nervous. At last the great Justice Hall was reached, and, with a parting injunction not to answer to the challenge, Sir Thomas separated from him, passing in by one door while the baron entered by another.

Sir George's nervous temperament was severely tried upon this occasion, for he had a considerable time to wait, and he found no better plan of whiling it away than that of impatiently pacing up and down in the little room allotted to him; and he imagined himself suffering all sorts of horrible tortures.

At last his turn came. The door opened; his name was called; and composing himself as well as he was able, he stepped into the crowded hall with considerable dignity,

accompanied by a pompous member of the Court, and at once became the cynosure of all eyes.

He stood impassively, casting his eyes around in search of Sir Thomas Stanley, and curious to recognise as many as he could among the motley crowd which had come to see him tried. During the time the charge was being read, and just as he had discovered his companion in the throng straight before him, he was challenged by the Clerk of the Crown to plead.

Page 68

“King of the Peak,” cried the officer of the law, “hold up thine hand. Thou art accused of the murder of Mary Durden, spinster. Art thou guilty or art thou not guilty?”

Instinctively he held up his hand as directed, and in a bold and fearless voice which echoed along the passages answered, “*Not guilty*.”

As soon as he had uttered the words he remembered that he had done wrong, but it was too late to recall it now, and filled with no pleasant forebodings by learning that the one who had just stepped out of the place in which he had stood had been committed to the Tower, he watched the swearing-in of the jury with stolid indifference.

It was soon evident that something was wrong somewhere. The minions of the court rushed hither and thither in the utmost haste; messages passed from the Judge to the clerks who sat at the table below; and by-and-bye the fact leaked out that neither the prosecutor nor the witnesses were in attendance.

“Nathan Grene,” called the clerk, “stand forth.” There was no answer.

“Nathan Grene,” he repeated in a louder voice, “come forward and accuse this man.”

The cry was taken up both inside the hall and without; but still no Nathan Grene appeared, nor was he likely to, for at that time he was sitting securely in the stocks; the sport of every passer-by, and the delight of some little mischievous urchins, who were amusing themselves by pulling his hair and sprinkling him with dirty water, while he was powerless to defend himself in any way.

“Nathan Grene,” exclaimed the Judge in tones of awful dignity, “you are called upon to support the charge of murder against the King of the Peak; a charge made by yourself. This is the last time thou wilt be summoned to answer, and unless you now appear, or afterwards show good, full, and sufficient cause for thine absence, the law shall turn its course on thee.”

The long silence which followed this speech was broken only by the Judge, who rose again from his seat, and turning to Sir George told him he was free; and amid the congratulations of his friends and the concealed disappointment of his enemies, he passed triumphantly out of the hall which had proved so fatal to so many of the nobility before him, as it has also done since.

CHAPTER XVI.

A *night adventure*.

But whatsoe’er his crime, than such a cave
A worse imprisonment he could not have.

* * * * *

But here a roaring torrent bids you stand.
Forcing you climb a rock on the right hand,
Which, hanging penthouse-like, does overlook
The dreadful channel of the rapid brook.
Over this dangerous precipice you crawl,
Lost if you slip, for if you slip you fall.

Wonders of the Peak, 1725.

Elated by their success, the two noblemen at once left London and hastened on towards Haddon, and leaving the city behind them with few regrets, they arrived at Derby late in the afternoon of the day following the trial.

Page 69

It was Sir Thomas Stanley's time to be impatient now He was anxious to behold Margaret again, and leaving the baron behind him to settle a few matters of business he rode off upon a fresh horse to carry the good news to the Hall, and to herald the approach of the knight.

John Manners was keeping Dorothy company on the top of the Eagle Tower when Sir Thomas appeared in sight. A "look out" had been on the watch for the last three days, waiting to announce the approach of the expected messenger from London, and each night a beacon fire had been lighted, that in the darkness he might not pass by. But no messenger came, and anxiety was beginning to make itself apparent on more faces than one when the two lovers espied the fast-approaching rider, and proclaimed the news to the household below.

Margaret soon joined them company. She was burning with impatience to read the long-expected missive and she eagerly watched the horseman draw nearer who was bringing her tidings from her betrothed.

"See Meg," exclaimed the overjoyed Dorothy, "thither he comes!" and she pointed to a cloud of dust in the far distance, in the midst of which might be seen every now and again the indistinct form of a horse and its rider.

"Maybe he will pass by," exclaimed Manners.

"Not he!" scornfully replied Margaret, "he will none pass by. None other than a messenger to Haddon would ride like that. The steed is hard put to it; surely it is near its journey's end."

"Well, we shall soon see," interposed Doll, "he is making good speed."

It was as Dorothy said. Even while they had been talking, the rider had considerably lessened the distance which separated him from the Hall, and, had it not been for the dim twilight which was then slowly deepening, they would have been enabled to distinguish more than they had already done.

"He rides well," said Margaret, more to herself than to either of the others. "Methinks I know that ride."

"'Tis like Crowleigh's," said Manners.

"But Sir Everard is with Father Philip. It cannot be him," returned Dorothy.

"There is but one man who bestrides a saddle in such a fashion," exclaimed Margaret, as she carefully scanned the horseman. "But no! it cannot be so. I thought it was Sir ____"

“Sir Thomas Stanley,” exclaimed Dorothy, taking the words out of her sister’s mouth.

“I thought it was he,” she confessed; “and see,” she added, raising her voice, “it is Sir Thomas; I thought it was,” and she left the lovers as she had found them, and hastened down, greatly excited, to meet her own beloved, and not without some feelings of dismay at seeing him return alone.

Leaving the succeeding scene to be imagined rather than described, we will hark back to Sir George at Derby.

He accomplished his business more expeditiously than he had anticipated, and in a very brief space of time started out of the town, hoping with a hope soon to be dispelled that he might, perchance, overtake Sir Thomas.

Page 70

Without a halt he arrived at Matlock at just about the same time as his companion reached Haddon, and reining up his steed at the village inn close by the churchyard, he alighted for a short rest and some refreshment ere he finished what remained of his journey.

He was well known here, and his peremptory commands were obeyed with the utmost alacrity.

His first enquiry was about Sir Thomas Stanley, and he learned to his satisfaction that he had passed safely through there a good hour or so before.

“In good sooth, your lordship is surely going no further to-night,” exclaimed the host, as Sir George made the preliminary preparation for resuming his journey.

“Tut, man, why not? Of course I shall.”

“Your horse is stabled,” responded the landlord; “surely you will not attempt to ride further to-night.”

“My horse stabled,” thundered the baron, “I said not so; ’tis fresh from Derby. Out with it, man, and let me away.”

The horse was quickly unstabled, and brought round to the tavern door, but the innkeeper was loth to let the good knight depart. It was a thing he would not do for a trifle, and he feared for the safety of the baron.

“The roads are very bad,” he exclaimed, as they stepped into the little passage together, “and it will be dark ere you reach the Hall, my lord. Had you not better change your mind?”

The knight declined the request in the most emphatic manner, and placed his foot upon the stirrup to mount.

“There be many rogues and footpads in the neighbourhood of late, and especially to-day,” pursued the other. “I have had as ill-looking a crew in my house to-day as I ever clapt eyes upon; I am sure they bode no good.”

Nothing, however, could persuade Sir George to stay, and seeing that his guest was obdurate, the host continued,

“Stay awhile, Sir George, an’ thou wilt, thou shalt at least have a man of mine to accompany thee. The neighbourhood is full of knaves of late, and I like it not that thou should’st go alone.”

But the offer was lightly refused; and fearing nothing for his own safety, the old knight spurred his horse forward, and in a few moments was lost to sight in the fast-settling gloom.

Little time as he and Sir Thomas had lost in leaving London, and quick as they had been in reaching Derby, there had yet been those who had been more expeditious than they.

Upon the receipt of the unwelcome news which the ostler had brought to them, Edmund Wynne's confederates at once departed from the city, and under the leadership of Sir Ronald Bury hastened on, with few rests, to the wilds of Derbyshire, to perform the deed, still enshrouded in mystery, which they had been hired, if necessary, to perform.

Blissfully unconscious of the trap into which he was rushing, and wholly contemptuous of the idea of being benighted, the lord of Haddon rode fearlessly on. The way was dark to be sure, but he knew it well, and what added to his confidence was the fact that he was right in the very heart of his own possessions.

Page 71

He had barely ridden a couple of furlongs, though, before his horse became restive, and in response to a free application of both whip and spur only pricked up its ears and advanced in a more unsatisfactory manner than before.

Still suspecting nothing, the baron applied the whip more vigorously. He perceived, clearly enough, that his charger was frightened at something or other, and to inspire it with a little of his own courage he started to whistle a lively tune which he had heard Dorothy play upon the spinet till he got it well by heart.

The tune was never finished, for barely had he begun it when the branch of a tree, which was hurled at him from the side of the road, completely unhorsed him and sent him rolling into the ditch on the other side.

Before he could rise or place himself in any posture of defence he was roughly seized, and in spite of his struggles was carried away as helpless as a child, whilst to aggravate his position his eyes were tightly blindfolded.

“What does this mean?” he shouted out in desperation; but no one deigned to answer.

“I am Sir George Vernon,” he added stoutly, but if he had thought that this was information, or that his captors would be inclined to quake before this declaration of his rank and person, he was sorely mistaken, and the brief answer they returned soon convinced him on the point.

“We know it,” they laughed; “we are no fools.”

“Nathan Grene,” he passionately shouted, “you shall rue this day.” He no longer wondered now at the non-appearance of his adversary; he felt confident that the recreant smith was there, and the thought of being thus within his power goaded him into a frenzy of passion.

“Thou shalt live to rue this bitterly,” he repeated, but before he could say anything further his mouth was filled with grass, and in spite of his attempts to speak he could no longer succeed in making himself heard.

How far he was being carried he knew not, nor yet did he know the way; and beyond making a few desultory attempts to disengage his nether limbs from the vice-like grasp in which they were enclosed, the baron made no further attempts to free himself.

It was quite dark before they stopped, and when his bandages were taken off he had only sufficient time to discover that they had halted at the mouth of a cave before his captors seized hold of his person and unceremoniously pushed him in, sending, after a brief consultation, one of their number after him to see that he made no effort to escape.

“Where is Nathan Grene?” inquired the outraged nobleman, as soon as he found himself at liberty; “I want to see him.”

“Happen you do!” replied his keeper, who was none other than the ostler; “then, maybe, you will find him at London. You were near enough to him in the stable loft; maybe he is out of the stocks again now.”

“Don’t talk with him,” commanded an imperious voice from the exterior, “or he will be taking you unawares.”

Page 72

The order was literally complied with, and to all his queries thenceforward the baron could gain no reply. At length he gave up the attempt, and watched in sullen silence his captors kindle a fire just within the cavern mouth.

He meditated a dash out, but the venture seemed to promise little hope, and seeing, after a time, that the man had fallen asleep, he proceeded to explore his prison.

It was a long cave, and there were many fissures and passages branching out on either side, but he found to his intense disgust that instead of leading out into the open they all terminated after a few yards in a solid wall of rock.

Nothing daunted by his successive disappointments, the lord of Haddon carefully wound his way round the circuitous cavern path. He found it difficult work, however, to walk in darkness in an unknown way, and he made little progress until, suddenly remembering that the ostler had charge of the tinder and flint which his associates had thrown in after kindling their fire, he stole back as quickly as he could to fetch it.

He found everything exactly as it was when he left it. The ostler was still asleep and loudly snoring; the noisy gang beyond were cooking their evening meal, and without attracting their attention he succeeded in gaining the coveted articles, and rapidly retreated with them in his possession.

He waited before obtaining a light, until a sharp bend in the cave secured his position, and then, stooping down, he struck the flint and steel together and made a torch of his cravat. He was now able to hasten forward, and fearful lest his torch should burn away ere he had effected his escape, he pushed quickly on, and soon reached the farthest end.

The cave, which had been gradually narrowing as Sir George advanced, instead of suddenly rising up into the ground above, or ending in a narrow opening, as the good knight had fervently hoped, terminated in a deep chasm, and far down below there rushed a tumultuous stream. Even as he stopped short, startled by the discovery, a stone rolled over the brink, and after a pause of several seconds' duration the forlorn explorer was suddenly recalled to a sense of his position by hearing a faint splash in the deep waters far below.

He turned round regretfully, and commenced to return, fully decided, unless he quickly discovered a way of escape, to attempt to surprise his captors by rushing through their midst, trusting to the darkness of the night to favour his escape.

He had not gone far before he discovered that his absence had been noticed. The ostler must have awaked; the echoing cavern resounded with the imprecations of his companions, and their approaching footsteps warned him that they were coming in search of him. Not a moment was to be lost, and espying a large shelving rock which

jutted out from a side passage, Sir George Vernon hastily clambered up and extinguished his light.

Page 73

The mass of rock upon which he had taken refuge was fairly flat, and he was able to maintain his position upon it; but he soon discovered that it would not be big enough to screen him from view were the searchers to look in that direction. It was too late to think of moving now, for his pursuers were close at hand; he could even distinguish the reflection of their torches; there was only one course open for him, and that was to endeavour to squeeze through the narrow fissure at the end of the ledge on which he lay.

A squeeze and a cut or two, a tug and a stifled groan; another squeeze more violent by far than the former one, and the portly baron rolled panting through the jagged briar-covered little crevice, just as the light of the searchers illuminated the place from which he had only a moment before released himself.

Some painful moments elapsed ere he stopped rolling, and then it was not until he found himself entangled in the strong but friendly embrace of one of the tough blackberry bushes which were growing in profusion, and still continue to do so, on the hill sides of Derbyshire. He had, in fact, found out a way of escape just as he had abandoned all hope of doing so, and carefully extricating himself from his uncomfortable position, he pursued his way by Masson's shadowy heights, boiling over with rage against his ruffianly captors, and made the best of his way to the nearest inn to secure a horse to carry him home.

CHAPTER XVII.

A *dale abbey hermit*.

Far in a wild, unknown to public view,
From youth to age, a reverend hermit grew;
The moss his bed, the cave his humble cell,
His food the fruits, his drink the crystal well;
Remote from man, with God he passed his days,
Prayer all his business, all his pleasure praise.

Parnell.

Sir George's first care upon his arrival at Haddon was to send off a number of his retainers to capture, if possible, the gang which had entrapped him; but after searching for nearly a couple of days they were obliged to return and communicate their failure to their lord. The villains had all made off and left not a clue behind them.

His next care was to calm the overwrought feelings of Lady Maude and his daughters, to whom the suspense of the last few hours had been painful in the extreme; and then after he had refreshed his inner man, he retired to seek that repose for which he was so well prepared.

Time sped on; the days soon passed into weeks, and the lovely spring had merged into a still more lovely summer. John Manners' visit had come to a close, and he was longing for an invitation for another visit and seeking to find some decent excuse for becoming a self-invited guest.

At last, much to his relief, he received the long-wished-for invitation. He and Crowleigh were invited together to one of the numerous feasts of Haddon's hospitable Hall, and De la Zouch, whose wounds were now fast healing, was wishful that a reconciliation should take place between them, and professed himself even anxious to make some advances towards his late adversary.

Page 74

Without loss of time the two guests sped on their way at the appointed time, and were amongst the very first of the visitors. Disappointment, however, awaited them. Father Philip was dying. The Derby leech had done his best to restore the injured man, and although he had succeeded in prolonging the patient's life for a little while, all his efforts to save the unfortunate confessor failed, and seeing the father suddenly begin to sink, he had, the night before John Manners arrived, given up all hope of saving his life, and announced that the end was nigh at hand.

Under these circumstances mounted messengers were at once despatched to inform the invited guests that it had been found necessary to postpone the feast, and asking them to defer their visit until they should hear again from Haddon. This, in almost every other instance, had succeeded in staying the visitors; but Manners and Crowleigh had started at the break of day, and were well on their way before the messenger had found his way to stop them.

A little manoeuvring on Dorothy's part gained, to Margaret's qualified delight, an invitation for them to stay from no less a personage than the dying man himself. Father Philip had taken kindly to Crowleigh from the first, and was grateful to him for the skill and patience he had bestowed upon him on his previous visit, and he was ready enough to accede to any request, whatever it might be, that his Dorothy, his beloved Dorothy, thought well to ask.

Not a brother of the cloth could be found to take the father's place, and this loss proved exceedingly awkward to all at Haddon at this juncture.

The Reformation had come in with so much vigour; the enactments against the Roman Catholics were so stringent, that not even another priest could be found to shrive him. The pendulum of fortune had indeed swung back again with a vengeance. From one extreme the religious laws had gone to the other; and so it befell that the father, to his exceeding great regret, found himself dying with never a minister of his own persuasion near at hand.

Crowleigh again came to his relief. He had a friend, a staunch Catholic who had been expelled from Oxford University soon after Elizabeth's accession on account of his strong religious views. He had turned monk, and, during the recent pitiless times, it had frequently fallen to Sir Everard's lot to befriend him. He was at this time in hiding at no great distance from Crowleigh's estate, and the latter had sufficient confidence in his friend's willingness to come to promise Sir George Vernon that he would fetch him.

The offer was gladly accepted. Without any delay the two best horses in the stable were saddled, and within a very short space of time both horses and rider were well started on their way towards the south-western boundary of the shire.

Nicholas Bury had for two years lived the life of a hermit. In his seclusion he had become happy, and though the reverence was denied him which the early hermits had accustomed themselves to receive, yet he was at least unmolested, and thanks to Sir Everard, who ever assisted him in time of need, he was never left to want for the few necessaries of life that he required.

Page 75

Sir Everard Crowleigh rode hard all the morning, and stopping on his errand but once—-to partake of a light meal—he arrived at the abode of his friend as the twilight put forth its gentle mask of gloom.

Deepdale was an attractive spot, but it was not the natural beauty of the scene which had first attracted the eyes of Nicholas Bury so much as the facilities it offered for his purpose. Centuries before a pious Derby baker had retired to the self-same spot, and besides this hallowed memory there was the still more substantial cell to hand which the saintly old recluse had left behind him.

This, cut out of the solid rock, and situated at the summit of a deep declivity, was overgrown by a curtain of ivy, which not only screened its tenant from the wintry winds, but also hid his retreat from the gaze of the innocent passer-by. The Abbey, hard by, had been dismantled before Nicholas knew it, but it was a source of gratification to him to be so near so sacred a building, and at eventide he would wander fondly about its walls and murmur his vespers to himself.

Sir Everard paused before entering upon the solitude of his friend, and would fain have rested his weary limbs on the mossy banks of the slope, but remembering how nearly Father Philip was to death he overruled his feelings, and, brushing through the ivy covering of the doorway, he entered quietly into the sanctum of the hermit.

Nicholas was evidently deeply engaged in his devotions, for he was kneeling before the little altar of his cell, and, catching somewhat of the spirit of reverence, Everard paused upon the threshold, loth to penetrate any further. The lamp gave but a fitful flickering light, hut the devotee heeded not; and, by-and-bye, as the knight stood spellbound, the wick sputtered in the oil, and making a final effort the flame shot up for a moment with a brilliant glare and then died slowly out, leaving nothing but a fragment of smouldering wick and a sickly odour to attest its presence.

Crowleigh roused himself as it died away, and came to the resolution that it was high time to announce his presence; and failing to distinguish any signs to intimate that his friend’s prayers were nearing conclusion he advanced towards him.

He had scarcely moved a step when he started back with horror. There was little enough light entered within this solitary abode, but yet there was quite enough to enable him to see curled up together upon a bed of leaves a number of snakes of different kinds. His first impulse was to rush out and escape, but bethinking himself of the defenceless position of his friend, he picked up a huge stone and let it fall upon them.

Still Nicholas did not stir, and heedless of the badger, which fiercely showed its teeth and looked as if it meditated an attack upon him, Sir Everard strode softly up to his friend’s side and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

“Nicholas,” he exclaimed.

Page 76

Nicholas returned no answer, and his friend stood dumbfounded. Surely that pale face and that emaciated form could not belong to the once sturdy companion, or—and he noticed that the eyes were closed; or else—and he trembled at the bare idea—Nicholas Bury must be dead!

He put out his hand and shook it gently, and he was speedily rewarded by seeing his friend open his eyes.

“Lie still, Leo,” he commanded, addressing the badger.

The faithful animal, which had regarded the intruder with marked disfavour, rolled itself up again in obedience to the command, and remained in the corner watching the knight with glistening eyes.

“Nicholas,” repeated Crowleigh, for he had not yet been noticed. Nicholas turned slowly round, as if his ears had not deceived him, but on seeing his friend and benefactor standing by his side, his face lighted up with pleasure, and he quickly arose.

“My good friend, Everard,” he exclaimed, as he warmly shook the proffered hand, “thou art indeed a stranger here.”

“Aye, I have a mission to thee,” he replied.

“A mission,” the hermit echoed. Art thou, then, the bearer of ill-tidings to me? Is my safety jeopardised, or what? Tell me, Everard, let me know it all. I have done no man evil that I wot of—unless in these evil days it be wrong to visit the sick and the afflicted; but I am ready for aught, even though it were instant death.”

“Nay, Nicholas,” returned his friend, “thou art in a gloomy strain. I am a messenger of peace; I bear good tidings to thee, not ill-news. Thou must away with me at once.”

“I cannot go; but see! my lamp is out. I must light it again. You see how indifferent I am,” he apologetically exclaimed, “I even fall asleep over my prayers.”

“Ha! I perceive thou art over-weary; take my advice for the once, and do not rise so soon, nor pray so long.”

“Ah, Everard, ’tis not that,” replied the holy man; “I have not been to my poor couch since yester morning. I have been praying through the night for the speedy restoration of our holy Church.”

“And see, whilst thou hast been sleeping I have saved thy life,” interjected Everard; “but I must tell thee on my journey. I would have thee accompany me back to Haddon.”

“My poor pets!” exclaimed the hermit sorrowfully, as he lifted up the stone; “they are all killed.”

“’Tis a case of death, I fear,” pursued Crowleigh, referring to the father’s illness.

“I fear it is,” replied the other, looking ruefully at his dead pets. “Thou hast killed my companions, Everard.”

“Ugh! pretty companions, I trow,” said the knight, scornfully; “but we must hasten. I will acquaint thee with the whys and wherefores as we go. Nay, never mind the lamp, thou can’st say adieu to that. Our horses are tethered to a tree below, and thou must shrive a friend who is at death’s door—a priest. I have ridden throughout the livelong day to fetch thee. Art thou ready now?”

Page 77

“What, so soon? This is sudden indeed.”

“Aye, man, so soon. Death tarries for no man, and, beshrew me, it will not tarry for us either.”

“I must take Leo, then.”

“Very well, pick him up, but let us be off I pray.”

“This is *too* sudden, Everard, indeed it is. I have many sick to visit, and I would fain go to the monastery just once again, to bid——”

“There must be no buts about it, Nicholas,” returned his friend quickly, “the father is dying, and the baron expects you.”

“Give me but an hour, then I will go with thee. ’Tis sad to break away from a spot hallowed by so many sacred memories, and at so short warning, too. I am loth to go, Everard, even now. There is no other spot on earth like this to me.”

“’Tis a cold and cheerless home, truly,” exclaimed the knight, sympathetically, “and I will find thee a far better one, Nicholas. See, I will give thee half-an-hour, and then you must bid adieu to this place or I must return alone and leave thee.”

Nicholas submitted to the decision of his friend, and in less than the stipulated time they had both turned their backs upon the hospitable shelter which had been a home to the monk when every door seemed shut against him, and were on their way to Haddon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The chamber of death.

Child, if it were thine error or thy crime,
  I care no longer, being all unblest;
Wed whom thou wilt; but I am sick of time.
  And I desire to rest.

Tennyson.

Haddon Hall was sighted by the two travellers just before mid-day, and long before they reached it Manners had been despatched in great haste to hasten them forward with the news that the poor father was almost at his last gasp.

They needed not the urging, for they had ridden hard, almost without a rest, and not only was Nicholas thoroughly wearied out by the unusual exertion of riding but the horses were sorely jaded too.

In a few minutes they all three rode up to the doorway together, and leaving their steeds to Manners, Sir Everard Crowleigh took the priest to the sick man's chamber.

Father Philip was reclining upon the well-cushioned couch when they entered. His eyes were closed, but he was not asleep; he had not enjoyed the luxury of a sleep for days past, and the haggard expression of his face, and the twitching muscles of his body, foretold only too truly that the end of the father was not very far away.

The sick man knew it, and was willing to escape from his agony as soon as he had received the proper consolation and preparation of his religion. His only fear was that he would not linger long enough to receive it, but that he might his lips were even then moving in prayer.

Dorothy was sitting by his bedside, and as Nicholas Bury stepped gently forward she silently arose, and, with a heart too full to permit her to speak, she offered him her hand as a token of welcome, and led him up to the chair upon which she had just been sitting.

Page 78

Her courtesy was acknowledged by a most profound bow, but, refusing the seat she proffered him, Nicholas reached another for himself and sat down upon it by the side of the maiden.

It was a long time since Nicholas had witnessed so much magnificence gathered together in one room, and tired by his long ride and soothed by the grateful odour of the incense which filled the room, and also struck by a feeling of reverential awe by the solemnity of the whole scene, which readily appealed to his religious instincts, he remembered nothing of what had just transpired, but leaned his head upon his hand and fell into a reverie, such as he had allowed himself to indulge in when alone in his solitary Deepdale cell.

“He is not asleep,” said Dorothy, stretching forward and laying her hand upon his arm. “He has been waiting long for thee.”

Her voice startled Nicholas, who had become sublimely unconscious of his surroundings; and incoherently murmuring some remark, maybe the conclusion of one of his prayers, he turned round and fixed his gaze upon the form of the dying man.

“Reverend father,” he exclaimed in a subdued and quiet voice, “I am here to aid thee.”

Father Philip turned himself round with difficulty and faced the speaker.

“Dorothy,” he called.

“I am here, father,” she replied, “I have never left thee.”

“Take it away from my eyes, child,” he commanded.

Father Philip never called her child except on rare occasions when her conduct displeased him, and she would have felt hurt at the appellation now had it not been for the unusual circumstances of the case. She looked inquiringly at him to fathom his meaning, but, seeing nothing to remove, she would have asked him what it was he meant, had he not interrupted her.

“Take it away, Dorothy,” he repeated, “I cannot see.”

“Poor brother,” exclaimed Nicholas, noticing the discomfiture. “I fear me thou art blind. There is naught to take away, save the film from off thine eyes.”

“Brother, did you say?” asked the dying man. “Did you say brother; are you then the priest? Praise be to God; I shall die easy now,” and he buried his face in the pillow and wept for joy.

“Let him lie as he is,” whispered Nicholas; “he will be far easier so. Poor man, he is indeed at the portals of death.”

“The leech said so,” replied the heart-broken Dorothy, and then for a long time they sat motionless, watching with intense earnestness each movement of the dying man.

The good father wept unrestrainedly. His whole frame quivered with emotion as the sobs escaped his breast; until, after a time, the sounds gradually and yet perceptibly grew weaker and fainter, and finally died away altogether.

“He is dead!” sobbed Dorothy, after a long pause.

“Nay, see,” replied her companion, “his bosom heaves, but the end is very near. May my last hour be as calm as this,” he added earnestly, as he gazed as the father.

Page 79

“Amen, so be it, Nicholas Bury,” said a voice from the region of the doorway.

The monk started at the sound of his name, but did not move; the tapers were burning before the altar, and the curtain was drawn, and he failed to distinguish the features of the visitor.

Dorothy, even through her ears, noticed that he was startled and discomposed, and she hastened to reassure him.

“No harm, no harm, good father; ’tis but Master John Manners,” she said.

“You have not forgotten me, surely?” inquired Manners, stepping forward, and throwing the light upon his face.

The priest gave a start of surprise as he recognised the visage of the new comer.

“Forgotten a Rutland?” he exclaimed. “No, never! Right glad am I to meet with thee again, but hush! This is the chamber of death. I will see thee afterwards. The father moves, see.”

Father Philip endeavoured to turn himself over, but he was too weak to succeed, and he fell back exhausted.

“Oh, dear,” he groaned, “I am a sinful man.”

“So are we all, brother,” returned Nicholas. “The best of us are very sinful.”

“Dorothy.”

Doll stood up and leaned over the bed.

“Give me your hand, my daughter.”

She placed her hands between the thin hands which the father held out feebly to her, while the hot tears trickled down her face and fell in rapid succession upon the quilted coverlid beneath.

“Will you kiss me, Doll?” he asked. “I shall never ask aught of thee again. Tell the baron,” he slowly continued, addressing the priest now, “tell him that I blessed her and told her yes.”

Dorothy bent down thoroughly heartbroken, and kissed the marble-like forehead, dropping as she did a shower of tears upon his face.

“What is that, the holy water?” he asked, placing his finger upon one of the drops.

“I could not help it, father,” she sobbed aloud, “indeed I could not. They are tears, but I will wipe them off.”

“God bless thee, Doll, thou hast a tender heart. Nay, nay, leave them on I beseech thee, they shall be thy last gift to the old man; I will take them with me into my grave.”

He paused, but Dorothy could not speak. She covered her face with her hands and wept on.

“May the Blessed Virgin ever be your friend,” he continued, resting his hand upon her head, “and may the saints protect thee. I have naught to give thee, Doll, but thou shalt have my blessing. God bless thee, Doll, God bless thee and thy lover,” and he sank back upon the bed completely exhausted.

They sat motionless by his side for some minutes, only Dorothy’s sobs and the sick man’s broken sighs breaking upon the silence, until at last Manners advanced, and taking the hand of his betrothed, led her unresistingly out into the garden.

Nicholas sat, after their departure, until well into the night, watching by the bedside, before Father Philip opened his eyes again. Many inquirers had visited the room, but they had departed again, and, though they knew it not, they had looked for the last time upon the familiar form of the confessor, ere he breathed his last.

Page 80

As the morrow dawned the old man passed away, happy, inasmuch as Nicholas had afforded him the last rites of his religion. As the twilight descended the chapel bell rung out upon the stillness of the eventide. It was the Sabbath, but amid the sorrow and the gloom which reigned around, this fact had been well-nigh forgotten.

The summer breeze carried the sound a long way along the dale. It had not been heard since the day of Father Philip's accident, and its sound had been sorely missed.

But now it was no longer the herald of peace, nor the token of joy, for the villagers knew full well that it was tolling the knell of the departed priest, and their hearts were heavy with sorrow for the friend they knew had just passed away.

The chapel was open. It was free for the once to as many as could enter, and there were few around who did not wish to show respect to the man who had surely, in one way or another, proved himself their friend.

The limited number that the chapel could accommodate took their places long before the vesper bell stopped ringing, and when Sir George came in, bringing in with him the Lady Maude, and followed by his daughters and the two guests, there was a large concourse of disappointed worshippers outside who were bent on remaining as near the sacred edifice as they might get. Though they were denied admittance, they would hear the solemn chant as it sounded through the open windows, and they felt that they would fall under the same sacred influence as those who were inside; and whilst these latter were favoured by the hallowing influences of the sanctuary, they were compensated for this by the rustling of the leaves, which seemed to moan in sympathy with them as the wind swept gently by.

Of all who mourned the loss of the father—and there were many who regretted that he was taken from their midst—none was more sincere in her grief than Dorothy, and none apparently was so little affected by the loss as Margaret.

This maiden had watched the growing familiarity of the intercourse between her sister and John Manners with no friendly eyes. She had perceived that it was necessary to take action at once in the matter, and at her express command her lover was even now on a mission to his brother to secure the double alliance between the two houses of Vernon and Stanley, upon which she and Lady Vernon had set their minds.

The absence of Sir Thomas had intensified her feelings in the matter, and seeing Manners leading Dorothy out of the sick man's chamber with his arm interlinked with hers, it had goaded her to such a frenzy that, regardless of the inopportunity of the time, she had proceeded straightway to Sir George and Lady Maude and had laid the matter before them in a most unfavourable light.

Page 81

And now, as the impressive requiem was about to be sung—a dirge full of soul-stirring reflections and sacred grandeur—Margaret's head was full of bitterness, and she failed to respond to the sympathetic sublimity of the service, or to notice its serene beauty either. To her it was nothing more than a tiresome form; her interest was centred on Dorothy alone, and she heartily condemned herself for not arranging that. Dorothy should not sit beside the esquire. It was a dreary and unpleasant time to her, and when she raised her eyes from her sister it was only impatiently to watch the deepening shades of the approaching night as they registered themselves upon the glass-panes at her side. The windows gradually became more and more difficult to see through; each time she looked it had grown a shade darker, until at length the pure glass had changed, to her unmitigated satisfaction, in hue from clear transparency to green, and from that to black.

At length the service was over. She hailed its conclusion with a sigh of relief, mentally promising the new confessor but a small portion of her favour if he were always as long-winded as he had been on this occasion; and she anxiously awaited the moment when Sir George would rise from his knees and lead the way out, so that she might carry Dorothy off in safety.

The time came in due course. The baron rose; the others followed his example, and as Lady Maude, less haughty than usual, led the way out of the chapel, Margaret eagerly caught hold of her sister and led her away in silence across the courtyard and into the hall.

CHAPTER XIX.

"*The course of true love*."

'Twere wild to hope for her, you say, I've torn and cast those words away, Surely there's hope! For life 'tis well Love without hope's impossible.

—*Coventry Patmore*.

Father Philip had lain under the sod but one sunset before the fruits of Margaret's intriguing began to make themselves apparent.

It was with a secret sense of misgiving that Manners received an invitation, which he readily construed into a command, to attend the baron in his private room, and it was with a fluttering heart that he prepared himself to meet Dorothy's father. Nor were his forebodings set at rest or in anywise lightened by the first view he got of the baron.

Sir George was pacing up and down the room, but hearing the door open he stopped suddenly, and when Manners entered he saw upon the knight's face a look which at once struck a chill to his heart.

“Sit down, Manners, sit down,” said the baron curtly.

He was nervous and excited, and as Manners obeyed the injunction he clearly perceived this fact, and it afforded him a little satisfaction.

“You wished to see me?” he exclaimed, breaking the awkward silence which ensued after he had sat down.

Page 82

“Eh, yes, I did.”

Another long pause followed, which was painful alike to both.

The baron’s agitation increased, and it did not need any great exercise of shrewdness to guess the cause. The lover guessed it intuitively, and deftly altered the topic which was just about to be broached.

“Poor Father Philip is gone,” he exclaimed in a sympathetic tone.

“Ye-e-s,” slowly assented the baron.

“And you miss him, I perceive,” pursued the esquire tremulously.

“Very true, but—”

“And I hear Nicholas Bury is about to depart,” hazarded Manners, interrupting the baron.

“Eh! what?” exclaimed Sir George. “Father Nicholas going?”

“He has informed Everard so.”

“No, he must stay,” returned the knight, banishing the wrinkles that had contracted his brow; “of course he must stay.”

He was clearly off his guard now, and Manners breathed easier again; for, thanks to the efforts of Dorothy and Crowleigh, as well as to his own perceptions, he was by no means ignorant of the conspiracy of which he was the victim, and he wished to procrastinate the inevitable interview until a more favourable time presented itself for the purpose.

“Where did he come from?” continued the baron, drifting innocently farther and farther away from the purpose of the interview.

“Am I to trust thee with his secret then?” asked the lover.

“Of course, let me know all. I shall protect him, come what will.”

“Then he is Sir Ronald Bury’s brother.”

“He is a better man than his brother, then,” exclaimed Sir George, when he had overcome his astonishment. “Did Sir Everard fetch him from Nottingham?”

“Nay, from Dale Abbey.”

“Ha!” ejaculated the baron, “say you so? The abbey is dismantled, and methought I knew every Catholic in the shire.”

“Then, Sir George, you forgot the hermitage,” was the prompt reply.

Sir George had just caught sight of his good lady through the open lattice window, and as he saw her wending her way quickly along the path it painfully recalled him to a sense of his position.

“I sent for thee,” he said suddenly, changing the conversation and knitting his brow, “because I wished to see thee on a matter of much importance.”

“I am honoured by your confidence,” promptly returned the esquire, making a gallant effort to escape the subject, “but pray on no account tell either Everard or Nicholas that it was I who gave the information. I was charged to tell no man, by my honour.”

Unluckily, Lady Vernon passed the door just as he was speaking, and the sound of her footsteps kept the subject too well in the baron’s mind for him to wander from it again.

“About Dorothy,” he explained, ignoring the last remark.

Manners was nonplussed; he attempted no rejoinder, and the baron paced the room again in great perturbation. At length he stopped.

Page 83

“’Tis an awkward piece of business,” he said, “and I had much rather it had not fallen so; but I suppose it must be done.”

Still Manners vouchsafed no reply, and his silence added to the baron’s discomfiture.

For a long time neither of them spoke. The baron wiped the perspiration from his brow and tried to frame together the words which proved so troublesome to utter, while Manners sat, ill at ease, waiting to hear the worst.

“Most young men fall in love,” exclaimed the knight at length. He jerked the words out rather than spoke them, but they were at least uttered, and feeling that he had broken the ice he heaved a sigh of relief.

“I did so myself,” he innocently rambled on, “more than once.” He had almost said “and once too many,” but he paused with the words upon his lips, and the recollection that Lady Maude might not be far away decided him to leave the remark unexpressed.

“I have done so, too, once and for ever,” exclaimed Manners, mustering up courage enough to break into the subject at a stroke. He felt that it must all come out now, and the sooner it was over the better pleased would he be; therefore he plunged headlong into it, hoping, perchance, to fire the baron with a little of the same enthusiasm with which he was himself possessed.

“It has been my good fortune,” he continued boldly, “to fall deeply in love with your daughter, your Dorothy—and she has not spurned me.”

“No, Doll is a rare girl, a bonnie girl, and a good one, too. I love her better than I love myself, and forsooth, young man, we value ourselves at no sorry figure neither.”

“I wonder whoever saw her that did not love her,” said the deeply-smitten swain sententiously.

They were both engaged in conversation now in common sympathy, and the eyes of the old knight sparkled with joy as he thought of his darling and her many charms.

“She is the light of my life,” he replied. “See, there she goes, with her bewitching grace,” and he caught hold of Manners and drew him into the recess of the oriel window and pointed out where Dorothy and her sister were talking together on the green.

“Margaret is to wed Sir Thomas Stanley this autumn, I hear,” ventured the esquire.

“Yes—and Dorothy is to be wedded this winter also,” replied the baron as he heard the partner of his joys pass again outside the door.

“This winter!” echoed Manners in blank dismay. “Dorothy to be wedded this winter! To whom, I pray?”

“To Sir Edward Stanley.”

Manners staggered back against the wall as though he had been smitten by some invisible hand. His face blanched, his lips quivered, and he gasped for very breath. This was news indeed, far beyond his worst anticipations, and he was almost crushed by the blow.

The baron watched him with a feeling akin to dismay. He hated his unpleasant task, and half regretted the promise he had made Sir Thomas Stanley. He pitied the unfortunate esquire who stood before him, and sincerely blamed himself for accepting the business, and the dame for thrusting it upon him.

Page 84

Manners soon rallied, much to Sir George's relief; and the two sat down together at the little table. The baron, tried to express his sympathy with him in his great disappointment which had just come upon him, but his words were clumsy, and afforded no relief.

"It is not yet quite decided upon, is it?" asked the young man.

"We expect Sir Edward now at any time," the knight replied.

"But, Sir George, Dorothy has plighted her troth to me."

"Ah, we know it; Margaret has told us of it. 'Twas a foolish thing to do."

"And Father Philip blessed the match," pursued Manners.

"But she has been promised to Edward Stanley," was the quiet reply, "and a Vernon's promise is never broken, never."

The two remained silent awhile. Sir George had made wonderful progress with his mission of late—a fact due to the knowledge that Lady Vernon was standing just outside the door; and before either of them spoke again she entered the room, and making a formal courtesy to the visitor, she advanced to her husband's side.

"You have told Master Manners, I suppose?" she inquired in a harsh, unfeeling voice that stabbed the lover's heart by every word.

"Yes, my dear," he replied, looking as if he were ashamed of the whole business, "I have told him all."

"But surely you cannot understand Dorothy's feelings in the——"

"Dorothy will do as we desire," interrupted Lady Maude, severely.

"Do you really love your daughter, Sir George?" asked Manners, in desperation. "Then I conjure you by all the affection towards her you possess, that in this, matter you consult her happiness. I cannot live without her, and she will fade away like a tender flower if you baulk her choice."

"Do I love her?" repeated Sir George, impatiently. "Aye, that I do; am I not her father?"

"Hush, Sir George," interrupted Lady Vernon, "Master Manners is outrageous. I will talk with him, and you can depart an you wish it."

Nothing loth, Sir George turned to go; glad to wash his hands of the whole affair, and feeling thoroughly ashamed that it had ever fallen to his lot to treat a guest in so inhospitable a fashion.

“I am sorry, Master Manners,” continued the dame, as she watched the retreating figure of her lord, “that Sir George has played his part so ill. It had been kinder on his part had he introduced the subject in another way, but he is ill-fitted for matters of business.”

Manners had heard the rustle of her gown outside the door some time before Lady Vernon had entered, and he shrewdly suspected that she had been listening to the conversation. The manner in which she re-opened the subject at once convinced him that his conjecture was right, and knowing the integrity of the baron he was ready to defend him.

“Sir George meant well enough,” he said.

“Come now, Master Manners, that was bravely said,” replied the lady. “He has a kind heart, but it is apt to be too kind at times, and then I have to go over it all again; you understand?”

Page 85

“Perfectly, but Lady Vernon——”

“And you will perceive that we are within our rights in disposing of Dorothy as we wish,” she continued. “Of course, she will consent to it in time.”

“Never,” returned Manners, stoutly.

“You are but a youth, therefore you are bold, but mark my words, young man, you will have less faith and more caution as your years come on.”

“Will you accept Dorothy’s choice?” asked Manners bluntly, disregarding the last remark.

“Do you suppose, Master Manners,” replied Lady Vernon, “that Dorothy will withstand us? We are all agreed in the matter.”

“All except Dorothy, maybe.”

“And *she* will soon——”

“I tell you never!” he replied hotly.

Lady Vernon laughed; a light, incredulous sort of laugh, which only tended to enstrange them farther still.

“There are considerations of which you appear to be ignorant, sir,” she replied, “but I am not willing to wound your feelings.”

“That may be, and yet, perchance, there may be somewhat to be said on the other side,” he calmly rejoined.

Lady Vernon fixed her eyes upon him, astounded at his presumption, but instead of crushing him under an avalanche of her wrath, she restrained herself, and broke into another superficial burst of laughter.

“Pooh,” she said, “you are simply an esquire, and he is a knight.”

“And he a knight,” echoed Dorothy’s lover, scornfully. “As if he were aught the better for that.”

“A knight is a knight,” replied the lady stiffly; “and he is the son of an earl.”

“And I, by the favour of fortune, am the nephew of an earl; and, moreover, Dorothy and I have plighted our troth together.”

“Then you were over bold.”

“I might accept your decision for myself, Lady Vernon,” he said; “indeed, I had done so ere now, but Dorothy’s happiness is at stake as well as mine.”

“You accept it perforce, then?”

“Nay, I will abide by Dorothy’s decision alone. She shall have the ruling of it, and I know what she will say.”

“I must be plain with you, Master Manners,” said Lady Maude, with considerable asperity. “It can never, no, never be as you desire. We have other designs for Dorothy than that she should marry a soldier of fortune. Her portion,” she continued, curling her lips in scorn, “is a half of the whole estate of Haddon, which, you must admit, is no small dowry; and what have you to set against that? Your lands would not maintain yourself alone,” and, having delivered herself thus, she cast a triumphant glance upon the young man who stood before her.

“I may win renown,” he quickly replied.

“You possibly might,” she replied, with another contemptuous curl of her lip, “but that is a shadow, a mere myth. Besides, you can put no value on fame; you cannot even live upon it.”

“I have a true and loving heart, and a strong arm.”

Page 86

“Tut, man,” she laughed; “so has every beggar. Prithee, now, as a matter of business, what have you to offer? Nothing.”

“What! Surely you do not want to barter her away?” cried Manners. “Why talk of business?”

“Certainly not,” she replied; “but it is our duty to make as good an alliance for her as we can. You ought to perceive that this is to her advantage, and if you care for her welfare as much as you would have us believe, you would help us to secure it for her, instead of placing her in a position which can only breed discontent and mischief,” and without giving Manners time to reply she swept proudly out of the room and left him alone with his sorrow.

CHAPTER XX.

The trothplight.

Yet even now it is good to think,
While my few poor varlets grumble and drink,
In my desolate hall where the fires sink;
Of *Dorothy* sitting glorious there,
In glory of gold and glory of hair,
And glory of glorious face most fair;
Likewise to-night I make good cheer,
Because this battle draweth near,
For what have I to love or fear?

W. *Morris* (adapted).

John Manners sought out Dorothy as soon as the interview was concluded, and he was fortunate enough to find her alone.

Poor Dorothy; she had long expected this meeting, and she had tried to prepare herself to face it. Her love, subjected to such a terrible strain, had come like gold out of the refining fire. It had grown stronger and better, and as she saw her lover emerge from the room she realised for the first time how much she really loved him.

The tale was soon told, and as he poured into her ears the unwelcome tidings her tender heart was lacerated by each successive word.

“And now, my own sweet Dorothy,” he concluded, “you know all. I have told thee all the pitiful story. Would to God it had been a pleasant tale I had to tell thee, but alas! I have told thee but the truth.”

He looked fondly into her face, and wondered how often he would be permitted to see it more. It was deadly pale, and her lips quivered again as she endeavoured to keep them tightly closed.

“John,” she murmured, “in any matter but this I should obey them; but—but——” She broke down under the mental strain. It was a terrible struggle between conflicting affections, and, unable to sustain it, she would have fallen in a faint upon the ground had not the strong arms of her lover supported her.

Manners laid her gently down upon the bank and sprinkled some water upon her, for they were on the slopes of the Wye, and in a few moments she mastered her feelings and opened her eyes.

“I am dizzy,” she apologetically exclaimed, as she saw the form of her beloved bending over her. “I shall be better soon.”

She fulfilled her prediction quickly, and when he would have led her back into the Hall she begged him to wait.

Page 87

“Nay, nay, John,” she said, “the Lady Maude will soon devise a plan for separating us, but let us remain together while we may.”

“But, Doll, you are ill,” he exclaimed, “and I must take good care of thee.”

“I should be worse were I severed from thee,” she sweetly replied, “and, John, I have somewhat to tell thee.”

“Speak on then, sweet one.”

“You will be true to me, John, whatever happens?” she asked.

She was timid to approach the subject, and blushed deeply at the sound of her own sweet voice. She had more than half a mind to take the words back lest they should strike a single pang into his heart, but they were spoken, and before she could enter into any explanation, he had bent down and kissed her.

“My precious darling!” he passionately exclaimed. “I never could forget thee; thy name is written on my heart; I shall never cease to love thee. The saints forfend me, Doll. I were a miscreant indeed were I to play traitor to thy love.”

“I shall trust you, John,” she replied, bestowing upon him a look of undisguised affection; “I do trust thee; I shall be happy in thy love. Whatever trouble comes I shall be happy, because I shall know your heart is trusty and true.”

“That it shall be, Doll,” he cried, “a right trusty heart—though they do make thee wed Edward Stanley.”

“John!” she exclaimed quickly, flushing scarlet again, “have I not given my troth to thee? They shall not force me into it. You can trust me.”

“O, Doll. My love, my darling, it would break my heart to give thee up; but I must do it for the sake of thy happiness.”

Poor heart, he spoke but the truth, but he spoke it as bravely as he could.

“Hush, John,” Dorothy hastily broke in; “you must not say such things.”

“Alas! you little know, my sweet one, to what misery you would consign yourself if you proved staunch to me,” he continued. “This fragile form was not made to suffer, but to recline in ease,” he added, as he gazed fondly at the graceful form of the maiden.

“I have recked the cost,” she simply replied. “You do not doubt me, do you, John?” she asked, looking up into his troubled face.

“Doubt thee, no;” he replied, “but I would save thee from a host of sorrows.”

Dorothy held her head down in silence, and seeing that she did not answer. Manners continued.

“I must be frank with you, Doll. The husband they have chosen thee may be an earl in time to come, and is a Derby to boot. He is rich, and mayhap he may love thee, too, and I—and I——”

“Stop, John, stop,” she commanded. “Would you thus trifle with my love? I have seen in thee a noble heart, a kind heart, a loving heart. I have refused many before thee. I have just refused one lord, and I shall refuse the other. You would not so dispraise yourself but to dissuade me; but you have yet to learn the constancy of a maiden’s love.”

Page 88

“Are you resolved?” he asked, almost choked by the feelings of joy her words had caused.

“I am,” she firmly replied; “I shall brave the worst, and be happy in your love. What more can I desire?”

Manners was too much overcome to speak. He could only weakly articulate a fervent “God bless you, my love;” but if Dorothy had desired anything more to prove the intensity of his feelings, she would have found it had she looked to see it in his eyes.

While matters had been progressing thus at Haddon, Sir Henry de la Zouch had been gradually improving in health, until by now he had found himself almost as well as he had been of yore, and he had intimated that he was fast getting ready to return to Ashby Castle.

His passion for Dorothy had not abated one whit, and he was deeply mortified to find how rapidly Manners had been wooing and winning the maiden.

Yet, although his suit had been rebuffed at every point, he was not discouraged. Indeed, had his other qualities equalled his perseverance, he had richly merited a full and good reward; but, unfortunately, this was his only redeeming trait, and the baseness of that motive which prompted it poisoned that very virtue too.

He was neither dejected nor cast down, because he felt that he had within his power a mode of wooing the maiden which, were he but to use it, could not fail to insure complete success. The plan had its drawbacks, to be sure, but it was the only one at his command, and even as he lay upon the sick bed, tossing in agony from side to side, he was considering whether or no he should carry it out. When he was better he determined to put it into force upon the first opportunity, but every relapse undid his resolution, and made him pay attention to his conscience, which bade him reject the idea.

As a compromise he determined at last to ask Dorothy again for her hand, and he availed himself of an early opportunity of doing this. He used all his persuasive eloquence in vain. He pointed to his haggard face, and told her that a refusal would inevitably complete the work that Manners had begun, but she was firm; and seeing that nothing would shake her resolution, he resolved to put his plan into operation immediately upon his recovery.

It was a deeply-laid scheme, the scheme of a villain, and it revealed its author in its proper light. As he communicated his plan to his page, when the latter paid him his final visit, his face glowed with satisfaction, and he imagined the chagrin his dupes would feel when they found themselves within his power.

It was necessary, in the first place, to throw Manners off his guard, and, smarting under the humiliation of his defeat, De la Zouch determined that his victor should also come within the reach of his net; and, as he witnessed the growing familiarity which existed between his rival and Dorothy, he was more than ever determined to have vengeance upon him, and more jubilant at the prospect of attaining the consummation of his wish.

Page 89

This was the motive which caused his readiness to meet Manners as a friend. He rightly judged that Manners once put off the scent, the rest would follow his example, so he appeared to accept Dorothy's refusal with a better grace, as a thing inevitable; and once face to face again with his gallant foe, nothing could exceed the extravagance of the language he employed to convince him that he regretted the follies of the past and to instil into his mind that he wished for the future to be counted as his friend.

It is a noticeable feature about villains that they almost always overreach themselves at some point or other—in story-books they always do—and to this characteristic De la Zouch proved no exception, for the very intensity of the words he chose, and the excessive flattery he employed, instead of gaining their object, aroused in John Manners' mind a feeling of suspicion of which he could in nowise dispossess himself. He would have communicated his fears to Dorothy, but he feared lest she should misjudge him and interpret it as an ebulition of jealousy, and there was none other except his friend Crowleigh in whom he could confide. Unwilling, however, to wound the susceptibilities of De la Zouch, who, after all, might have been actuated by the best of motives, he fairly met all his advances, and though he was all along mistrustful of his intentions, yet he was careful that Sir Henry should perceive no signs of it.

Lady Vernon soon gave Manners a hint that his visit to Haddon might terminate at any time he chose; but, although wounded in spirit by her words, he was in no great hurry to depart from Dorothy's side, and Sir George, eager to make amends for his dame's shortcomings, and ashamed that the traditional hospitality of his mansion should be so roughly contradicted while he was the lord of Haddon, appeared most anxious to prolong the visit, and endeavoured to make the enjoyment of his guest as complete as it could possibly be, the circumstances being duly considered.

To the surprise of them all, De la Zouch added his request to the baron's, declaring that he and Manners would depart together in a few days, and if his late antagonist did not offer any serious opposition to the plan, he intended to entertain him for a short time at Ashby, adding that he had already given commands that the castle should be prepared for their reception.

The request was couched in such a manner that Manners could do no other than accept it, but he immediately resolved to curtail his visit into Leicestershire as much as he possibly could, and he felt that it would be a relief to him when the visit was concluded.

The days swiftly passed; all too quickly for the two lovers. Sir Thomas Stanley had sent a messenger to inform them that his brother had met with an accident, and was too ill to travel then, and he feared he would be obliged to return to Haddon alone; but the letter brought the unwelcome news to Dorothy that Edward Stanley would come and claim her as his bride before the year had passed.

Page 90

CHAPTER XXI.

The plot in progress.

His eyebrow dark, and eye of fire
Showed spirit proud, and prompt to ire;
Yet lines of thought upon his cheek,
Did deep design and counsel speak.

Scott.

It was with mingled feelings of sorrow, suspicion, and gladness that John Manners received news from Sir Henry de la Zouch, who had gone over to his castle some days before, that he was coming back upon the morrow to escort his guests to Ashby.

Sir Thomas Stanley had returned to Haddon, and though he was well satisfied, upon the whole, with the result of his mission, yet he clearly perceived the real state of affairs, and was far too astute not to make strenuous efforts to alter their course.

He had interposed himself as much as possible between Dorothy and her forbidden lover, and had succeeded in some degree in keeping them apart. He might, however, have spared himself the trouble, for, although he prevented their meeting on some occasions, yet love was conqueror in the end, and with Lettice as a trusty helpmeet, the two lovers found ways and means by which to see each other of which he never dreamed.

Sir Thomas was too much of a gentleman to affront Manners, as he had been secretly urged to do, but he made no secret of his opinion that it would be a relief to him when the time came for the visitors to depart.

True to his word, Sir Henry arrived at Haddon on the following day, bringing with him an invitation for Sir Thomas Stanley and Crowleigh to accompany him on his return.

Sir Thomas refused it, as indeed he was expected to do, but Sir Everard Crowleigh, glad to be able to bear his friend company, promptly accepted the offer, and Manners began to look upon the prospect of his stay at Ashby with a little more hopefulness.

Sir George Vernon was too hospitable a host to let even De la Zouch depart again upon the self-same day upon which he had arrived. He would not tolerate the idea for a single moment; there must be a carousal and a dance at night in honour of the departing guests, and then they would be at liberty to depart upon the first grey streaks of dawn if they were so minded.

De la Zouch, well aware that the King of the Peak was the soul of hospitality itself, had calculated upon the offer, and at once accepted it; while the baron, not content with what he had already done, when the morrow came, drew the designing Stanley with himself into his private room, and, under the pretext of taking counsel with him, kept him by his side, leaving the way open for Manners to have a farewell afternoon with Dorothy.

De la Zouch proposed a ride, and as there appeared to be little prospect of enjoying undisturbed peace at Haddon, the two lovers fell in with the suggestion, and very soon after the mid-day meal they met, booted and spurred, at the gate of the hall.

Page 91

“Aye, aye, there,” hailed a voice, as Manners was helping Dorothy off the riding-stone into the saddle, “whither away so gaily?”

“Aye, Everard,” replied his friend, as he turned round and saw who it was that called. “Hurry up, we are off for a ride.”

“Shall I come, too?” he inquired, as he hastened up and stood beside them.

“Do,” returned Dorothy. “Make haste, though, for time is precious with us now.”

“I will not keep you waiting, fair Mistress Dorothy,” he gallantly responded; “I will follow thee anon. Which way am I to come, Bakewell, Cromford, or which?”

“Oh, Cromford,” replied Sir Henry quickly. “See how restive my horse is, he will bolt off if I try to hold him in much longer. Are we ready? Let us go then; time is short, remember,” and giving the rein to his steed he started off at a good pace, whilst the others followed quickly in his wake.

It was a beautiful day, and the scenery around was so majestically grand that even its familiarity did not detract from its beauty in the eyes of the little party as it rode laughingly by. The early leaves were just beginning to drop from off the parent stems; the ferns and bracken, which grew in abundance on either side of the road, were just assuming their peculiar fading, golden hue, whilst the hardier leaves were just beginning to bedeck themselves in the full glory of their rich autumnal tints.

“This is beautiful,” exclaimed Dorothy, enthusiastically, as she gazed enraptured at the rich variety of form and colour which met them at every turn. “Look at those cliffs. It is lovely, it is grand.”

They had just passed the little hamlet of Matlock Bath, and were approaching Cromford. There were no stone walls then to hide from view even the smallest portion of the gorgeous picture. From the road to the Derwent there sloped a narrow strip of marshy meadow, which covered itself with a superabundance of luxurious tall grasses and tough bracken. Beyond the stream there rose, standing straight up by the water’s edge, a wall of jagged and scarred rock, overgrown with trees and climbing foliage, which was faithfully mirrored in the placid water below. The scene could hardly fail to appeal to their sense of beauty.

Manners avowed that he thought it the fairest spot on earth, and De la Zouch, not to be outdone in gallantry, added that the presence of so fair a maiden as Dorothy Vernon in the midst of so much natural beauty made a picture a better than which he never desired to see.

“And, after all, fair Dorothy,” he concluded, “I wot that it is but the reflection of thine own sweet form and peerless grace.”

Dorothy frowned. She did not care for compliments from Sir Henry de la Zouch; she always feared them, for they generally had a sting somewhere, and she had noticed that, as a rule, they were followed by something more or less unpleasant.

“Sir Everard has not come yet,” she exclaimed, turning round in her saddle, “perhaps he is not coming after all?”

Page 92

“He is sure to follow us,” replied Manners. “Maybe he has been delayed, and yet we have come slowly. Hark! I hear the ring of hoofs upon the road even now.”

They halted to await their companion, but they soon discovered, as the sound of the galloping grew rapidly more and more distinct, that the horseman was advancing towards them from the opposite direction.

“He is hindered, surely,” exclaimed De la Zouch, who heartily wished he was stating the truth, “and it will soon be time for us to turn our faces again towards the Hall.”

“Not just yet, Sir Henry,” Dorothy quickly replied; “but you may; and you will.”

“Not yet, eh! Then let us have a race along this lane,” suggested De la Zouch, evading the hint and pointing to a long lane almost completely overarched with the massive branches of the overhanging trees which grew on either side.

Dorothy looked at Manners appealingly.

“What say you, Doll?” he inquired. “You shall determine.”

“Nay, you decide.”

“To that clump of trees,” interposed De la Zouch.

“Well, if Dorothy does not object—”

“Not I, in truth,” she interrupted.

“Away we go, then,” replied Manners. “There and back at once?” he asked.

“No, only there,” replied Sir Henry, ill-concealing a malicious grin. “It will be a long, long time before you come back this way, I trow,” he added under his breath.

“But we are not yet placed,” said Dorothy’s lover, as De la Zouch was about to start away. “We two must fall in the rear, Sir Henry.”

“Nay, I am equally as well mounted as you,” returned the maiden. “We will run upon our merits, or I shall withdraw.”

In a few minutes they were careening along the course in gallant style, as nearly as possible all three abreast, but as they neared the trees which formed the winning mark, Sir Henry fell behind and left the other two to finish the exciting race alone.

“Curse them, a murrain on them!” he muttered, as he pulled his horse to a standstill; “where can the fellows be?”

His objurgation might have been heard, for no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he saw, rising up from the brushwood, the men of whom he had just spoken in such uncomplimentary terms.

Burdened as he was with anxiety for the successful issue of his plot, and fearful lest at the last stage it should miscarry and snatch away the prize for which he had struggled so long, and which already seemed to be within his grasp, De la Zouch was in a terrible ferment of hope and fear.

“The villains,” he muttered, as he sat still in his saddle impatiently watching; “why don’t they move? It will be too late in a minute. I’ll thrash every mother’s son of them when we get back to Ashby, that I will. Dear me! what a fool I am to forget the signal;” and putting his hand to his mouth he blew a loud shrill whistle through his fingers.

Page 93

Manners and Dorothy had just raced up together to the trees, and hearing the unusual sound that their companion made, they turned round at the same instant to see how much they were before him, and to ascertain the meaning of the noise. Just at this juncture, in answer to the signal of their lord, De la Zouch's hirelings rushed through the already prepared gaps in the tall hedges and fell upon the lovers, taking them completely by surprise.

Dorothy was quickly unhorsed with no more roughness than her own resistance necessitated, but it was not so with her lover. Though Manners had nothing to defend himself with, except the stock of his riding-whip, yet he gave so good an account of himself, and wielded his paltry weapon to so much purpose that he quickly freed himself, and rushed to aid poor Doll. This purpose, however, he failed to accomplish. The odds were ten to one, but even then it was for some time an open question whether the one would not prevail over the ten. All his skill was brought into play. He laid about him right and left until his weapon broke, and then, undismayed, he lunged out with the remnant, and succeeded in wresting a bludgeon from one of his injured opponents, and plunged into the fray with renewed vigour.

In spite of his efforts, however, he was unable to rescue Dorothy. Having once got her into their possession the men were determined to keep her, and she was borne away from the contest ineffectually struggling with her captors, who, having retired to a safe distance, awaited with their quarry until Manners himself was captured too.

De la Zouch sat aghast at this exhibition of his rival's prowess. Whatever the cost might be it was imperative that Manners should not escape to tell the tale at Haddon, and he alternately groaned and cursed each time he witnessed his followers quail and fall beneath the terrific blows of their antagonist. He had come, he thought, prepared for any contingency, but it appeared as though his force was by no means strong enough to achieve the desired end.

Manners himself, suspicious of De la Zouch, as he all along had been, perceived at the outset the trap into which he had been led, and now, finding it useless to attempt Dorothy's rescue any longer, and feeling the first approach of weariness come warningly over him, set spurs to his horse and galloped back again towards Sir Henry de la Zouch, intent on wreaking a full vengeance upon him, and at the same time determined to make an effort to escape in order to discover aid by which to rescue his betrothed.

"Villain!" he hissed, "thou shalt pay dearly for this."

De la Zouch did not wait to meet the overpowering fury of his foe. He no longer marvelled at the result of the tournament. He had seen enough of Manners' prowess already to have much faith left in his own powers of defense. To him distance lent enchantment to the view, so turning his horse sharply round he galloped away, bidding Manners do his worst.

Page 94

It would have fared ill with the knight of Ashby had his foe but once reached within arm's length of him; but Fortune, after wavering about as if uncertain which way to make up its mind, declared itself at last upon the side of villainy, and Manners was stretched low upon the ground by a stone hurled at him by one of his assailants.

With his fall Dorothy's last chance of escape was taken from her.

De la Zouch heard the groan of his injured foe, and turning his face round to ascertain its meaning, he was just in time to see his rival drop from his saddle upon the road, where he was quickly surrounded amid a considerable show of bravery by the minions of De la Zouch to whom he had just given such a terrible exhibition of his skill.

"You cowardly knaves," cried that worthy, "secure him ere he escapes again."

Not a man stirred, for Manners had inspired them with so wholesome a dread of the power of his arm that, although he was sorely wounded, no one was willing to venture within his reach.

"Secure him, I say," imperiously repeated Sir Henry, who, from his safe position on horseback, could well afford to ridicule their fears and give his commands with confidence.

Manners with difficulty managed to raise himself upon his elbow, and he looked so fierce and desperate that the solitary man who had advanced towards him retreated with dismay.

"By St. George, seize him, sirrah," exclaimed the knight, springing off his saddle in high dudgeon. "You are all cowards together."

"Seize him, do you say," returned the man, insolently; "seize him, do you say? Seize him yourself, then, for I vow I have had more than enough of it already. He fights like a dragon; see here," and the man bared his arm and showed a number of bruises upon it. "Now then, master," he continued, "seize him yourself, say I, for I will have no more to do with the affair;" and to this his companions sullenly murmured assent.

"A woman would have less fear than thee," returned the knight contemptuously, as he glanced at the arm held out before him. "Why, I have fought for hours after being grievously wounded in the fray."

It had been more to Sir Henry's mind to have struck the man down to the ground for his insolence, and this he felt strongly impelled to do, but seeing the threatening aspect of the man's companions he restrained his fury, promising himself that his punishment should lose nothing by the fact of it being reserved to another and a safer time. It was with difficulty that he had contented himself with returning so mild an answer, but the

man's retort drove him at once beyond the bounds of prudence and patience, and made him utterly reckless.

"Mayhap you have," returned the man incredulously, "but I'll warrant me it was no fault of thine. You showed us some of your skill just now."

"I will prove it," shouted the knight, furiously, and, suiting the action to the word, he seized hold of the nearest weapon, a stout ash stick, and advancing towards the dazed and bleeding esquire, he dealt him a blow on the head which stretched him insensible upon the turf.

Page 95

“Coward!” cried the man, springing forward from among his companions. “You are the coward. I will be no party to such a cold-blooded murder as this,” and his bosom swelled with indignation as he turned round to his companions and pointed to where Manners lay.

“Who says I am a coward? Who dares to speak such insolence?” demanded De la Zouch, trembling all over with rage.

“I do, and I repeat it,” replied the other, bending over the prostrate form of his late antagonist.

For a moment Sir Henry stood in speechless amazement at such unlooked-for presumption, and then suddenly raising his weapon, he brought it down upon his offending servant, and stretched him beside the object of his sympathy.

“Who says I am a coward now?” he fiercely asked, turning upon the abashed companions of the latest victim of his temper.

Whatever the others thought, they wisely held their peace, and, terrified and cowed by the lesson their lord had taught them, they silently raised the two inanimate bodies, and, according to their instructions, proceeded to rejoin Dorothy and her guard ere they began their journey back to the castle at Ashby.

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXII.

On A *false scent*.

I can counterfeit the deep tragedian!
Speak, and look back, and pry on every side,
Tremble, and start at wagging of a straw.
Pretending deep suspicion; ghastly looks
Are at my service like enforced smiles,
And both are ready in their offices,
At any time to grace my stratagems.

Shakespeare.

Dorothy Vernon had impatiently awaited the conclusion of the contest, and the prodigious amount of faith she had in her lover’s capabilities, coupled with what she had already witnessed of the fight, led her to hope that he would yet return victorious to deliver her.

She had ceased to struggle ere the victors returned, partly because of the hope with which she had deluded herself, and partly because her attempts had only wearied her without bringing her any nearer to success; but at the first glimpse of the slowly approaching company she broke away from her too trustful captors and fled precipitately towards the advancing party.

“Let me go to him; is he hurt?” she cried, as one of her guardians overtook her and pulled her to a standstill, and starting forward again she left a fragment of her dress between the man’s fingers, and hastened on again until she reached her lover’s side.

“Speak, John,” she exclaimed in piteous tones, as she gazed upon his pallid face and livid form. “Speak just one word to me.”

But Manners did not speak. Thoroughly stunned by the blows he had received, he lay quite unconscious in the position in which he had been placed, and he was so weakened by the loss of blood from his wounds that his immediate return to consciousness was exceedingly problematical. He lay deaf, and apparently dead, whilst Dorothy pleaded in vain for a word from his lips.

Page 96

“Just one word,” she repeated, pathetically.

“Poor Lady,” exclaimed Sir Henry’s page, who was in charge of the party. “Don’t take it to heart so much; he will come round soon, and be himself again. Nay, touch her not,” he commanded, as one of the men was about to take her away, “she will do no harm.”

“He is dead,” she sobbed, and ere she could be assured that her conjecture was wrong she fainted away, and was gently laid beside her lover, while they were borne swiftly and silently, by sequestered roads, from the scene of the adventure.

Sir Henry watched them departing till a turn in the road hid them from view, and then, bethinking himself of his position, he mounted his steed and rode rapidly away, feeling immensely relieved that, after all, he had proved successful.

A few minutes in the saddle sufficed him, and then dismounting, he took of his hat and belaboured it well with the stock end of his whip.

He satisfied himself at length, and ceasing from his efforts in that direction he laid it on the ground and surveyed the effect.

It looked battered indeed, and evidently well pleased with the result, the knight set busily to work upon his clothes. He carefully tore them here and there with a sharp-pointed piece of wood, while to complete the deception, he spoiled the appearance of his attire by daubing it freely with dirt.

“I trow that will be enough,” he murmured, as ceasing his labours he complacently gazed upon the transformation he had effected; “but no!” he added, “I had best be on the safe side,” and he gently scratched his hands to give himself the appearance of having passed through a long and stern struggle.

“A bruise or two would improve my appearance considerably,” he added, “but then bruises hurt and are apt to turn awkward; I think I might safely spare myself the pain; but I might, at all events, break my whip-stock and carry the end of it back;” and having settled these points to his own satisfaction, he mounted his saddle afresh, and setting spurs to his horse he never drew rein until long after he had passed out of the lane, and was well on the high road to Haddon.

As he neared the vicinity of the Hall he proceeded to put into practice what yet remained unfinished of his disguise. He had treated his own person, and now he turned his attention to the faithful steed which had carried him often and well.

There was no time to waste. He had lost much precious time already. He would have found little time in which to be sentimental had he been so inclined, but such an idea never entered into his head, and pulling his jack-knife out of his pocket, he opened the blade and stabbed the horse in the shoulder.

As previously related, De la Zouch had thought of ornamenting himself with a few slight bruises, but he had decided to forego whatever advantages might accrue to him from such a course of conduct, but now the matter was decided for him in a manner which he had never considered.

Page 97

It had never flashed upon the heated brain of the malignant knight that wounding a horse was a very delicate operation to perform, and in his reckless hurry he had never taken into account that such conduct would be attended with any danger, or he would have proceeded to accomplish his design in a more cautious fashion; and it was not until the horse kicked out after the first blow that Sir Henry de la Zouch became suddenly aware of the danger of his position. He had not the power to stay the second thrust, and before he could retreat out of danger he was sent sprawling into the hedge bottom.

Fortunately, the effects of the blow were considerably diminished, inasmuch as its greatest force was already spent ere De la Zouch was struck. Had it not been for this circumstance he would have come off ill indeed, but even as it was he was sorely injured, and lay insensible in the place where he had fallen until he opened his eyes at dusk and found himself being lifted up.

“Where am I?” he gasped, as he mechanically rubbed his eyes and gazed around. “I am hurt.”

“Lie still awhile,” returned Crowleigh, for he it was who stood over him. “You will be yourself again directly,” and raising his horn to his lips he blew a loud, clear note upon the still evening air.

“What does that portend?” asked the conscience-stricken and mistrustful knight. He feared that he was about to be carried off to answer for his misdeeds.

“There will be help soon,” said Crowleigh. “Lie still, for you are hurt. You will be better by-and-by. Drink this,” and he filled his horn with water and offered it to him.

De la Zouch took the water and drank it off. It appeared to do him good, for he rapidly rallied, and the reassuring words of Crowleigh had a magical effect in clearing his brow and helping on his recovery.

“Am I much hurt?” he inquired with a look of intense agony upon his brow.

“Bruised and stunned, I think, that is all. Ha, here they come;” and, as he suddenly stopped speaking, the sound of the replying horns could be distinctly heard, and within a few minutes, from different quarters, over walls and fences, the horsemen came riding in by ones and twos until at last there numbered a full dozen.

“Oh!” groaned De la Zouch, loudly, “it is painful, cannot you relieve me?”

“Where is Sir George Vernon?” inquired Sir Everard; “have none of you seen him of late?”

No one had, but they had all blown their horns, so he was sure to be in soon.

De la Zouch shuddered at the mention of the King of the Peak—he was hardly himself again as yet, but he was fast rallying, and by the time that the baron arrived he was quite ready to meet him.

“Heigho! found at last;” exclaimed the baron, as he made his way through the group. “But whom have we here; tush, where is my Doll?”

De la Zouch, for answer, began to play his game, and he only replied to the query with a deceitful and prolonged groan.

Page 98

“Where’s my Dorothy?” impatiently repeated the baron, disregarding the agonised look which met his gaze.

“There—miles on,” gasped Sir Henry, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, and pointing along the road by which he had just travelled; and then, as if the effort had been too much for him, he fell back panting upon the turf.

Sir George Vernon waited for no more, but hastily bestriding his saddle, he galloped away, bidding the others disperse again upon their search. Only Sir Thomas Stanley and one solitary retainer remained, and these from very different reasons; the former because he suspected foul play, and wished for the immediate future to have De la Zouch under his own eye; and the latter, much against his will, was constrained to tarry behind to help the unfortunate nobleman back to Haddon.

“Twenty nobles for the man who finds my Dorothy,” shouted the baron as he rode off, “and twice twenty if there has been any knavery and the rogues are caught”; and as the knight of Ashby heard the sound of the galloping grow fainter he was fain to own himself so far only partially successful, and as he was lifted up to be carried away, he shut his eyes and ruminated on the probable present condition of his captives, and wondered where they were.

Dorothy soon awoke from the swoon into which she had fallen on seeing the prostrate condition of her lover, and being graciously permitted by the page to have a considerable amount of liberty, she soon busied herself in trying to restore Manners to consciousness.

Eustace, the page in question, had judged her aright. There was little fear now of her attempting to escape. Indeed, the thought never entered into her head; her whole attention was concentrated upon the one effort of restoring her lover to consciousness, and even the heart of the hardest of the rough men around her was softened by the picture of grief which she presented.

At last John Manners opened his eyes, and as he caught sight of Dorothy’s tear-stained face bending over him, he smiled. His smile dispelled all Dorothy’s fears, as the rising sun dispels the morning mist, and through her grief she smiled responsively back upon her lover.

Eustace witnessed his recovery with a profound sense of relief. It was in ignorance of the plot that he had been inveigled to obey his lord’s behests, for though at Haddon De la Zouch had acquainted him with a part of the conspiracy, yet he had grossly deceived him. He had informed him that it was Dorothy Vernon’s wish to flee to Ashby, and it was not until he was undeceived by the conduct of the maiden herself that the fullness of his master’s treachery revealed itself to him.

True, he had been engaged on sundry occasions with his master in unworthy and unknightly deeds, but never until now had he perceived the outrageous conduct of his lord. His whole nature recoiled from the task which had been imposed upon him, and nothing but the extreme fear with which De la Zouch had inspired him during a long acquaintanceship held him back from releasing the two lovers on the way, and helping them back to Haddon.

Page 99

He was not yet courageous enough to pursue such a course, however. He felt that his master's eye was upon him, and he could not shake the evil influence off; but, although failing in this particular, he gave them a practical token of his sympathy by offering them such food as he possessed—a small flagon of wine, purloined from Sir Henry's store, together with a rough rye cake, which were gratefully accepted as a token of friendship, and before long were thankfully consumed.

He tendered them gracefully to the captives, and without waiting to be thanked he made his way to the rear, where, forming the men in order, he divided them into two companies, and sending the one on in front, the other half walked a little distance behind, leaving Dorothy and her lover free to converse as they chose. In this order, without molestation or accident, they reached their destination as the grey light of the succeeding morning melted into the clearer light of riper day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Dark suspicions.

But oh, that hapless maiden?—
Where may she wander now, whither betake her,
From the chill dew, amongst rude burrs and thistles?
Perhaps some cold bank is her bolster now.
Or, 'gainst the rugged bark of some broad elm
Leans her unpillowed head, fraught with sad fears.
What, if in wild amazement and affright
Or while we speak, within the direful grasp
Of savage hunger.

Milton.

The liberal offer which the King of the Peak made for the recovery of his daughter fired his followers with enthusiasm; for, although they had searched willingly enough before, both for the sake of love and duty, yet the tempting reward added to their zeal, and each one set out on his journey anew, feeling pretty confident that very soon he would be at least twenty nobles the richer.

As the shades of evening fell, and the twilight began to fade into darkness, the prospect of finding the maiden grew fainter and fainter, until at length the most hopeful gave up the search and returned disconsolately to Haddon, hoping that the maiden would be found at the Hall, and that with her return the chance of gaining the twenty nobles was irretrievably lost. Sir George was the last to return, and the jaded condition of his horse told far more plainly than ever words could have done how far he had ridden.

He had hoped, amid fear and trembling, that his lost darling had been found. He even half expected her to meet him upon his return; but all his anticipations were rudely dispelled. Not a trace of her had been found, and crushed by the ill news, he retired to the solitude of his dressing room, with his riding accoutrements unremoved, and gazed for a time meditatively into the empty fireplace, in an agony of fear as to the fate which had befallen her. So far, there was no clue to guide him; he could not even imagine or suspect any adequate reason for her absence; he could only ruminate sorrowfully on the fact that she was gone, and lament his inability to find her.

Page 100

He was pondering in this fashion when a gentle knock at the door aroused him from his reverie.

“Enter,” he gruffly and impatiently responded.

The door opened and Lettice entered. Her face was suffused with tears.

“Well, Lettice,” he inquired in a somewhat gentler voice, “what is it, eh?”

“Is there any news of my mistress?” she tremblingly asked.

“None,” he replied, “would God there were.”

The maid curtsied and withdrew, but ere she had closed the door, the baron called her back.

“Lettice!” he cried.

She was in the room again in an instant.

“Is Sir Thomas Stanley here?” he asked.

“He is with Mistress Margaret, keeping watch in Sir Henry’s room,” she replied.

“Bid him attend me here, then,” he commanded. Lettice closed the door again, and with a feeling of keen disappointment went off to discharge her mission.

Sir Thomas received the summons ungraciously, but feeling constrained to obey it, he bade the maid keep his betrothed company, and telling her not to let her eyes depart from De la Zouch he hastened to see Sir George.

When the good folk of Haddon awoke next morning, they were summoned to the Hall by the sound of the bell. The news of Dorothy’s mysterious disappearance had quickly spread, and feeling sure that some announcement concerning her was about to be made, they quickly flocked into the courtyard curious to learn the latest tidings.

They were not disappointed. Sir George repeated his offer of the previous day, increasing it upon the impulse of the moment to fifty nobles, and he at once despatched a number of his household to renew the search.

Meanwhile De la Zouch, to revenge himself upon the baron for his behaviour to him on the preceding afternoon, continued in a well-feigned semi-unconscious state, and throughout the day he declared himself too faint and dazed and altogether unfit to explain Dorothy’s absence. Although besieged with inquiries from early morning, he remained obstinately deaf to all entreaties, nor was it until the evening that he professed

himself able to understand their inquiries or returned intelligent answers to their questions.

“I was almost killed by that treacherous esquire,” he whined, as he began his explanation.

“Never mind that, tell us about Dorothy,” interrupted the baron.

“I am coming to that,” he replied. “No sooner were we started than I began to suspect mischief. I could see that Manners did not want me.”

“Very like,” interrupted Sir Thomas dryly.

De la Zouch felt hurt by the unfeeling remark, and he looked hurt, too, but Sir Thomas took no note of it, and the effort was futile.

“Why did you not come, Crowleigh?” he continued, changing the expression of his countenance from anger to agony, “then all would have been different.”

It would, indeed, but not as Sir Henry implied.

Page 101

“I was hindered,” returned Sir Everard, highly nettled at the other’s tone and speech. “My horse fell lame with a stone in his shoe, and I had to return.”

“At Cromford he set a pack of knaves upon me,” pursued De la Zouch, with the coolest audacity. “I was almost murdered; I tried to save her, but what could I do? They were ten to one, and whilst I fought like a madman, Dorothy and Manners laughed at me to my face and rode off together.”

“You lie,” returned Crowleigh, hotly.

“Do I?” he replied with a sneer, “then prithee what does this bespeak, and this, and this?” and he showed in turn the scratches and bruises on the various parts of his body.

“At Cromford?” inquired the baron. “Did you say at Cromford?”

“Aye, at Cromford, Sir George. I struggled hard to rescue Dorothy for thee, but it was of no avail. No man can combat ten and win.”

“I passed Cromford myself and saw naught of it, nor yet had any of the villagers,” said the baron severely.

“And what means this?” continued De la Zouch, pointing to the battered hat and soiled and torn clothes. “Do not these alone prove that I am speaking but the truth? Can you doubt me longer now?” and he glanced round indignantly, and acted his part so well that he almost persuaded himself that he was a much-abused and persecuted person.

“Did no one witness the struggle, Sir Henry?” asked the sceptical Stanley. “Was there not one during all that time passed by?”

“In faith, Sir Thomas, I know not,” he replied. “I found no time to look. I had work enough to do to save my skin, I assure you. He has taken her to London.”

“The ingrate!” warmly exclaimed Lady Maude, who had just entered the room. “And Dorothy is worse than he. Let them go, Sir George, they are not worth the finding; let them go.”

“Well, ’twas a knightly thing to do, to leave a lady; a right gallant thing, nay by my troth it was,” said Stanley, severely. “And my brother is on his way here, too; what will Edward say?”

“Poor Sir Henry, we have judged thee hardly, I fear, but we must try to make amends for it now,” said the dame sympathetically.

“She *must* be found; she *shall*,” interrupted the baron, emphasising the last word with a stamp of the foot. “Manners shall suffer though I—”

“Tush, Sir George, let them go,” interrupted his good lady. “They will want to return soon enough.”

“Nay, she must be traced and brought home again,” said Stanley. “Edward would die of chagrin else.”

“She shall be found,” repeated the baron decisively.

De la Zouch had mentally calculated that a slight relapse in his condition would probably arouse a wider feeling of sympathy for him, and to secure this end he closed his eyes and gasped for breath, but the feeling of suspicion was too firmly rooted to be dispelled so easily, and he opened his eyes again to find his companions as cold and unsympathetic as before.

Page 102

“You have not told us all,” exclaimed Crowleigh. “Manners would never leave his host in so graceless a style, I know.”

“Have I not told thee the truth, Sir George?” De la Zouch meekly appealed, “and do not these rents and scars bear me out? ’Tis a pretty reward for a noble fight is this,” and he finished with a sigh of profound discontent.

“I believe thee,” returned the baron slowly, to whom the evidence of the torn garments and De la Zouch’s wounds appeared irresistible.

“And was not my poor horse lamed by the miscreants, who would have killed it outright had I not interposed myself?” continued Sir Henry. “Are all these things to count as naught, and is not the absence of the lovers itself sufficient proof? What more do you require? What have you to disprove these things? Why should you doubt me?” and he looked round in triumph, feeling sure that his reply was perfectly unanswerable.

“He speaks the truth, Sir Thomas,” said the old knight. “We owe a debt of gratitude to thee, Sir Henry.”

“I found this knife where De la Zouch was lying,” said Stanley bluntly. “I thought it was his, and so I brought it for him.”

De la Zouch gazed with horror upon the tell-tale weapon, but in an instant he decided how to parry the thrust.

“’Tis mine,” he cried, hastily snatching it away. “The villains wrested it from my grasp.”

“And part of the blade was buried in the horse’s flank,” pursued Sir Thomas. “I discovered it there when the horse dashed into the yard covered with blood and foam.”

“The wretches!” interjected De la Zouch.

“And yet, Sir Henry, methought the struggle took place at Cromford, and that would be nigh three miles from where I found the knife.”

Sir Henry turned livid with anger, and was at a loss how to reply, when Lady Vernon fortunately came to the rescue.

“You struggled worthily, sir knight,” said she, “and I would that the cause had been more worthy of thy mettle. We cannot doubt thee more.”

“I cannot contradict thee,” went on Margaret’s lover, “but you will show us the exact scene of the fray, Sir Henry, of course?”

“Assuredly I will, to-morrow—if I am well enough,” he added carefully.

Sir George Vernon noted the answer with displeasure. He was not very strong in his belief of Sir Henry's innocence as yet, though the evidence in De la Zouch's favour would have been decisive enough for him had not Stanley shaken it so.

"Has thy Dorothy forsaken thee, then, Sir George?" asked Crowleigh pertinently.

"Why no, Sir Everard—yes; that is—I cannot say," he hopelessly replied. "It must be so, and yet, no! I cannot believe it either."

De la Zouch ground his teeth in ill-suppressed rage. Matters had taken a decidedly unfavourable turn; he was being sorely worsted, and he wished himself far away. The suspicions of Sir Thomas Stanley were pressing uncomfortably near him, and he found himself in a quandary how to evade them.

Page 103

“I am doubted, Sir George, I see,” he said angrily. “Lady Vernon is the only one who does me justice. I will go. Your deed shall be blazoned to the world. Is this the boasted hospitality of the King of the Peak?—then I disdain it. I shall shake the dust off my feet and shall depart at once, and you will find out when too late that you drove away in such a scurvy fashion the truest friend you ever had,” and boiling over with well-simulated fury, De la Zouch leapt from his chair and passed through the doorway, chuckling to himself at the success of his little scheme to extricate himself.

He was liberated now from the awkwardness of his false position. His day’s rest and the attention he had received had done wonders towards effecting his recovery, and ordering a horse to be saddled, a few minutes later he passed out of the precincts of the Hall, and hoping that he would never have occasion to return, he mustered up his strength and started out upon a midnight ride to Ashby.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The escape.

But in these cases
We still have judgment that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th’ inventor; this evil-handed justice
Commends th’ ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips.

SHAKESPEAKE.

When Eustace delivered his charges into the hands of the chamberlain at Ashby his task was ended, and he had no further responsibility in the matter.

The rest afforded him by the journey had the effect of refreshing John Manners to a considerable degree, and when he stood before Sir Henry’s deputy he felt well able to take care of himself and quite capable of resisting any unwarrantable liberties that they might attempt to take with him.

Simon Greenwood, the chamberlain of Ashby Castle, was a fit person to represent his lord. Indeed, had Sir Henry searched throughout the length and breadth of the land, he would probably never have discovered a man more after his own heart, or a servant who would have so faithfully aided him in the many questionable transactions in which he was from time to time engaged. He had grown up on the estate. His father had served the former lord of the manor, and entering into his master’s service when quite a youth, Simon had flourished on the success of his numerous petty stratagems; he had

supplanted those who had been above him, and now, as the right hand of his lord, he was ever eager to distinguish himself in Sir Henry's eyes.

He glanced at the two prisoners with an air of haughty contempt which would have done credit to De la Zouch himself.

"So you are John Manners, eh?" he drawled out at length.

Manners looked at him disdainfully, but returned no answer.

"And you be Miss Dorothy, I suspect," he went on with a most unprepossessing leer.

Page 104

“You will remember my lord’s instructions, Simon,” interrupted the page.

“Yes, yes, of course; be off, I know. I am not going to hurt her,” replied the chamberlain. “Well, Mistress Dorothy, I have got to take particular care of you,” he continued, ironically.

“And of Master Manners, too, I hope,” she fearlessly replied, not noticing the hidden meaning of his remark. “Remember that he is a gentleman.”

“Yes, oh yes,” returned the man, with a hideous grin, “we have got to take particular care of him as well. He will sleep downstairs for awhile,” and he laughed with a coarse guffaw, again and again repeated, at his own joke.

“Enough of this, sirrah,” broke in Manners, sternly.

“We are not here to amuse you. There will be a host of our friends here soon to deliver us, so thou had’st best beware of what thou do’st.”

Simon scowled darkly, but Manners’s threat had its effect, and he restrained his temper.

“I care not,” he replied, “so long as Sir Henry be here. I shall but obey my instructions nor more nor less.”

“And what are they?”

“You shall find that out for yourself in good time.”

“And remember that though I am within your power, I am the nephew of an earl, and have friends at Court who will avenge me on your lord,” Manners pursued.

“Then I shall put you in a safe place.”

The man was longing to assert his authority, but the bearing of the prisoner thoroughly cowed him, and he felt helplessly bound to be more civil to him than he wished.

“And what about this lady?” asked Manners.

“Sir Henry’s instructions apply equally to her as to you,” he replied.

“If she is treated ill you shall answer for it,” said Manners, fiercely, “so I bid you look to it that you treat her well.”

“Teach me not,” Simon hastily broke in. “I know what is expected of me, and, mark me, I shall do it. Captives ought not to be too conceited, mark that, too, an it please you.”

“Enough, sirrah, cease thy prating. I am no fool.”

“Take him away; take him to the old dungeon,” cried Simon, whose wrath was fast gaining mastery over him; “and mind you double lock the door.”

“The dungeon!” shrieked Dorothy. “No, not the dungeon.”

Manners looked round, but there was no chance of escape, nor would he have cared to have left Dorothy in such a position, even had the way been clear.

“Sir Henry said he was to be kept in the North Tower,” ventured Eustace.

“Did he, indeed,” sneeringly retorted the chamberlain. “You had better be off or I will have you whipped;” and smarting under the rejoinder, Eustace, who considered prudence the better part of valour, took the hint so broadly given and retired.

An hour later, as Manners sat brooding in his deep and lonely dungeon, he was startled by hearing the key turn slowly in the lock, and a moment later Eustace slipped into the cell and the door was closed and locked again.

Page 105

“Oh, Master Manners,” he cried, as he dropped on his knees, “this is a shameful thing; what can I do, I would help thee if I might? I am disgusted with my lord; I loathe him and I shall flee from him.”

“’Tis no fault of thine, thou art young,” kindly responded Manners, “but canst thou tell me aught of Mistress Dorothy Vernon?”

“She is safe in the topmost room of the tower,” he replied.

“Is she in danger yet?”

“Nay, she is safe, and will be treated well. Simon Greenwood’s dame says my lord left strange commands about her comfort, and she has already rated Simon soundly for his rudeness to the maiden.”

“Hist,” whispered a voice through the keyhole, “Simon is coming.”

Eustace threw up his hands in blank despair. “O, Master Manners,” he ejaculated, “I am lost; Simon, would kill me if he finds me here.”

“Creep under there,” replied the prisoner, quickly; “it is dark, and I will befriend thee.”

The page obeyed, and he was not a moment too soon; before he could comfortably ensconce himself in the damp and fusty hole under the stone bench, the door opened and the chamberlain entered.

He was flushed with wine, and not at all the same cool, calculated man who had stood before the captive an hour before.

“Well, my hearty,” he exclaimed, as he seated himself upon the stone bench just over the gasping page, “things are rather bad, eh?”

“Begone,” said Manners, curtly.

“Nay, now, that’s hardly polite,” he replied. “We will tame you down with the chains; ’tis many a year since I saw them used, and it would be quite a treat to see them on somebody once again,” and he kicked the rusty manacles which lay upon the ground.

“You dare not, and you know it,” retorted Manners fiercely; and, drunk as the man was, he cowered back beneath the glance.

“Ah, well, you are safe enough as you are, I reckon,” he returned, “and I am taking care of Doll for you,” he added with a sickening grin.

Dorothy’s lover started forward as the name of the maiden was pronounced.

“Scoundrel!” he cried, “weak as I am I would thrash thee well for such presumption, were I sure you would not visit your displeasure upon her.”

“Do as you list,” was the coarse reply, “but I swear Doll is a pretty lass.”

“Come here, you lout,” exclaimed a shrill voice, as the door opened and admitted a buxom woman of forty or thereabouts. “I have found you at last; come out with you,” and she emphasised the command by a smart clout on his head.

Simon turned quickly round and prepared to retaliate, but quailing under the stern glance of his better half, he obeyed her will, and meekly slunk out through the open door.

“I’ll teach him, sir, how to behave to his betters,” said the woman, turning to Manners. “He shall have a thrashing for this.”

Much amused, the captive esquire thanked her warmly for her kindness. “But I have another favour to seek at your hands,” he said. “I have had naught to eat as yet, and it is now evening.”

Page 106

“The dial only points to three as yet, sir knight,” replied the dame, who was not quite certain of the quality of the prisoner, “but you shall have some food.”

“Only three! Ah, well. And Mistress Dorothy?” he anxiously inquired.

“She is doing well. She has had a meal already. I have her under my own care, the sweet creature; heaven bless her! I had come to thee at her request to bid thee be of good cheer.”

“Aye, heaven bless her, for she is in a sorry fix,” assented Manners. “Tend her well, and I will well reward thee. Thou shalt have such gauds as thy neighbours shall turn green with envy at the sight of thee.”

“I want them not,” was the short reply, and Simon Greenwood’s dame passed out of the dungeon, leaving Manners alone with the page.

The door had barely closed before Eustace emerged from his uncomfortable retreat, covered with insects of many kinds.

“Ha, ha!” he laughed. “Simon boasts that he cares for no man, save his lord; but he has to care for Dame Greenwood, though, ha, ha! I would even venture in that vile hole once more to see him thwacked again.”

“Thank heaven Mistress Vernon is safe,” said Manners. “Simon will not disturb her, think you?”

“Not he, sir, never fear. Simon Greenwood knows better than that; and, see, I have brought thee this,” and the page pulled out a dagger and offered it to him.

“Nay, put it back,” said Manners kindly. “I would not kill my gaoler, he is but performing his commands.”

“But if it were for Sir Henry De la Zouch?”

“Ha! then I might, perchance.”

“You have much to forgive me,” continued the page, “for I have done thee grievous wrong.”

“How? Thou art but a lad, and I have seen thee only once before?”

“It was then, at the hawking party, when Sir Henry slew the pedlar. It has haunted me ever since.”

Manners was intensely surprised at this announcement. It was, indeed, startling and important news. The mystery was solved at last.

“It was Sir Henry, then!” he exclaimed. “I might have guessed as much.”

“It was Sir Henry, and I witnessed it, but I will tell thee afterwards. Listen, for time is short. Pierce this corner with the dagger; do it quickly, for the wall is thick. There is a passage on the other side, of which none knows save my master and myself. The wall is softest here, and I will help thee from the other side: but I must make thy gaoler drunk. He is full fond of ale, so you may be assured that you will be unmolested, and I will have horses saddled at a distance. Adieu until to-night,” and not heeding the thanks which Manners poured out from his grateful heart, he rapped at the door so that he might pass out.

The meal arrived in good time. A tankard of ale and a slice of bacon with wheaten bread, more than he could eat.

It was not long before Manners had satisfied his hunger, and in his feverish anxiety he could barely wait to hear Eustace’s cheery voice exclaim to the gaoler, “Mat, I have brought thee some ale for letting me in to see the prisoner.”

Page 107

“Welcome it is,” was the reply, and very soon a stentorian snore announced to the captive that his guardian had fallen into a drunken slumber, and told him that he might venture to set about his work with safety.

An hour’s labour proved very unsatisfactory, for the wall was much harder than he had anticipated, and in spite of the goodwill with which he worked, the injuries he had received the day before seriously retarded his efforts.

Eustace, however, was working with more success on the other side, and in a couple more hours a hole, sufficiently wide for Manners to creep through, had been made, and in a few more minutes Dorothy’s betrothed was a free man again, urging his steed to the utmost, to fetch help from Haddon, and to capture the miscreant knight who had effected so much evil.

CHAPTER XXV.

The last of de la Zouch.

Face to face with the past he stands,
With guilty soul, and blood-stained hands;
  And his deeds rise up against him.
Too weak to win, he cannot fly,
He begs for life and fears to die,
  But justice overtakes him.

The second day’s search for Dorothy proved as ineffectual as the first, and yielding with ill grace to the counsel of his friends, Sir George Vernon submitted to retire from active search, and agreed to remain at Haddon while others scoured the country round for the truants.

“It is of no use,” said the baron, “I cannot sleep. I shall not attempt it to-night either. It is enough that I should consent to stay at home.”

“But you must have rest,” expostulated Stanley, “or you will quickly break down under the strain.”

“I shall stay here, I tell you,” was the dogged reply, “and receive the reports as they come in. There are four or five out yet.”

“Has Crowleigh returned?” asked Sir Thomas abruptly.

“Not yet; may he bring her back.”

“’Tis most queer,” soliloquised the young knight. “I cannot understand it, I confess. Do you suspect him, Sir George?”

“No, I don’t,” he replied, bluntly, “do you?”

“I do now. I suspect the whole lot of them; and that Manners and De la Zouch are at heart at daggers drawn.”

“And Doll?”

“As for her,” continued Sir Thomas, demurely; “she is far too fond of Manners. I thought we should have trouble with her, for she has a stubborn will.”

“Like Lady Maude,” exclaimed Sir George sententiously, “but go! Leave me alone; you must be in the saddle early in the morning, and you at all events require rest.”

“Will nothing shake your determination?” pursued Stanley, as he looked in unfeigned pity at the toil-worn, care-riven brow of the unfortunate baron. “You will make yourself far worse else.”

“I shall sit and wait. Send me in Father Nicholas, for he alone shall bear me company.”

Page 108

“Well, well,” he replied, “I would persuade thee if I could Sir George, but since I cannot do that I will go, but you should rest,” and leaving these words to ring in the baron’s ears, the young nobleman retired to his couch and left the baron alone.

The sun had not long risen ere he was with Sir George Vernon again. His horse was ready to carry him once more upon the search, and he himself was ready for the ride. He had expected to find the baron asleep, but in this he was disappointed, for Sir George sat beside the table deep in converse with the priest. Crowleigh had returned, and so had the rest, but their tales were alike despondent; none of them had discovered a trace, and good Father Nicholas had found it a difficult task under the circumstances to revive the drooping spirit of his master.

“No luck, Sir Thomas, naught but ill news,” said the baron, as he replied to his friend’s greeting; “’tis an ill wind this. There is never a trace as yet, and——”

“Hist!” interrupted Margaret’s lover. “I hear the sounds of galloping hoofs.”

Sir George opened the casement window, and peered out into the gloom.

“I cannot see them yet,” he exclaimed, “but there are more than one, and they are nearing fast. If it should be Dorothy,” he said with a sigh of intense feeling; “what joy!”

“Aye, there are more than one,” said Stanley. “We cannot see them here. Hark, they are thundering at the gate even now; let us go and meet them, and heaven grant, whoever it may be, that they bring good news.”

“Amen,” ejaculated the baron fervently, and his prayer was echoed by the rest.

Before they could reach the gate, the horseman had been admitted; and as Sir George and his friends stepped into the yard they recognised—not the features of Sir Edward Stanley, as Margaret’s lover secretly thought, but the well-known form of Manners.

“How!—by my halidame, what meaneth this?” exclaimed the baron, delighted beyond measure to see the esquire again. “Tell me, Manners, where my Dorothy is?”

“Speak fair words,” cautioned Stanley, with a frown.

“Dorothy!” gasped her lover. “Hasten, I beseech thee. She is at Ashby. Where is De la Zouch, the villain?”

“On his way home,” answered Sir Thomas.

Manners groaned aloud.

“Heaven forfend us, then,” he cried. “He is a monster of iniquity. We must hasten back, an you would rescue Dorothy.”

“There is some conspiracy in this,” exclaimed Stanley. “Here is De la Zouch’s page lurking behind these horses. Come hither, sirrah, for I recognise thee well. ’Twere a bold thing of thee to venture on so rash an errand here.”

Eustace was pushed unwillingly forward, and as he stood before the knight his knees knocked together under the terrible frowns that were bestowed upon him.

“Nay, it is right,” expostulated Manners. “Leave him alone, Sir Thomas, he will be of service to us yet.”

Page 109

“But where is Dorothy?” asked the impatient baron. “What has become of her? Why does she not return with thee?”

“De la Zouch waylaid us,” answered the esquire, “and we fell into his trap. I have ridden hard from Ashby since the sun last set. I escaped his dungeon by the aid of this, his page, to save poor Dorothy. I am faint from my bruises and hard riding. Cannot you believe me?”

“Sir Henry,” replied the baron, with a sneer. “Sir Henry told us a similar story, but then it was you who had waylaid him.”

“The villain!” groaned Manners, “I will have revenge.”

“That’s just what he called you,” said Sir Thomas, promptly. “Two of a trade never agree.”

“My master felled Master Manners to the ground himself,” interposed the page; “or rather, I mean he struck him senseless while he lay injured on the ground.”

“And he carried Doll away to his castle,” said Manners. “I shall avenge her, though. I can understand your suspicions now, and forgive you, for De la Zouch has played you false as well as me, and has returned to his castle now to reap the reward of his villainy. I shall pursue him, though. He sought my life, defamed my name, imprisoned me, and now he has gone when I get here. Eustace,” he added, turning to the page, “let us return; I will gather friends of my own with which to rescue her, and I shall be strong till I have met and paid my enemy. God grant we may yet be in time. Crowleigh, you believe me? You will come, and, mayhap, we may intercept him ere his journey’s end, for he cannot long be gone.”

“Nay, nay, man; stay and have thy wound attended to,” said the baron sympathetically. “Thou’rt honest, I would swear.”

“And yesterday he seemed well nigh dead,” said Eustace, referring to Manners. “Sure I am he can ride no longer. We rode hard here, and well I trow his wound—”

“Stay not for me,” interrupted Manners. “This is precious time. I command you to hasten or it will be too late, for when De la Zouch discovers I am gone, he will certainly remove her to another place.”

“We will,” enthusiastically shouted Sir George, and in the twinkling of an eye he seized hold of the alarm-bell rope and in an instant awakened the tired sleepers of the neighbourhood by its clang.

“And thou art his page,” said Stanley. “Thou wilt show us the way.”

“Aye, that I will an it please you, my lord, but I will never return to him.”

“Meg, we are off,” exclaimed Sir Thomas to his betrothed, who had hastily descended from her own room, startled at the unusual noise in the courtyard at that early hour. “We are going to bring Dorothy back."’

“Where is she?”

“At Ashby Castle, so Master Manners saith,” he replied. “You will go with us, I hope,” he added, turning round to the esquire. “You will want to revenge yourself.”

“I will avenge her, yes;” he responded, not heeding the convert sneer, “that I will right heartily.”

Page 110

Meanwhile lanterns had been glimmering in the lower portion of the yard; men had been frantically shouting to each other, and their voices had mingled with the trampling of horses' feet; and now, everything being ready, the fact was announced, and in a few minutes the cavalcade started out upon its expedition, determined not only to rescue the maiden, but also to administer a sharp and well-merited rebuke upon the faithless knight who had decoyed her away.

De la Zouch arrived at his castle soon after the party started from Haddon, and although he had failed to lull the Vernons into a false belief in his fidelity, yet he had put them on a wrong scent, and he congratulated himself inasmuch as he had left behind him no strong suspicion of the truth.

Simon Greenwood had retired to rest. Sir Henry was not expected home so soon. Indeed, he had told his chamberlain confidentially that if events progressed aright he should probably not return for a week or maybe more, and the sudden return of his lord found the worthy deputy in nowise prepared to meet him, and he had his good dame to thank that, inasmuch as she had deprived him of liquor sufficient to make him drunk, he was in no worse condition than he happened to be.

"Ha, Simon," exclaimed the knight, as that functionary put in an appearance, "I am back again, you see."

"Troth, and in good time, too, my lord."

"Aye, I have come pretty quick, I assure you. The birds are safe, eh?"

"Safe enough, I would stake my head on that."

"That's right, I knew I could trust you, Simon. I am hungry though, and by all the saints in the calendar, I am sore and stiff as well. I am injured, too, for my horse fell down with me and crushed my leg."

"You look it, my lord, and worse," exclaimed Dame Greenwood. "You look badly hurt."

"Ah, my own fault, my own fault; I have been a fool. Eustace himself could not have ridden worse. Where is Eustace, I have not seen him yet?"

Simon looked inquiringly at his better half, and to his discomfiture, she stolidly returned the glance. Neither of them appeared to know anything of his whereabouts. In the scuffle and worry of the time he had been forgotten, and they had to make the best defence they could.

"Methinks he is paying a visit to some fair damsel of the town, Sir Henry, with his dulcimer," suggested the dame. "I saw him with the music some while before the gates were closed."

“He was prating this and that to me, my lord,” added Simon, who found his tongue at length, “until I threatened to whip him. He sneaked away quick enough then, ha, ha!”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the knight, as he divested himself, with Simon’s aid, of his riding coat, “he would order thee about, eh? But, by my faith, man, I am hungry, I swear. I am quite ready to sup when I have seen my prisoners.”

Dame Greenwood took the hint and went out to procure the meal. “Sir Henry is in wonderful good humour to-night,” she murmured, “and ’tis a good thing, too for Simon, that he is. What a fool he would be without me,” and comforting herself with this reflection, she hastened to obey her lord’s behests.

Page 111

“Dorothy is in the tower?” asked Sir Henry as he ravenously fell upon his meal. “How is she now? Proud, I suppose, eh?”

“Humph! well enough, though a trifle obstinate.”

“Well, we will go and see her. And Manners, what of him?”

“Ha! high and haughty. Rides the high horse, my lord. Has friends at Court and friends all around coming to release him.”

“A pretty tale, truly, Simon,” laughed the knight, as he finished his hasty meal and ordered some more spiced wine to drink.

“Yes, my lord,” replied the chamberlain. “So I put him in the old dungeon.”

“Eh, what! You have put him where?” asked Sir Henry, turning back breathlessly. “You idiot, you; where are the keys?”

“In the old dungeon, I said,” explained the wonder-stricken chamberlain. “The safest part of the castle, my lord.”

“Where are the keys?” thundered his master. “Quick!”

Simon handed them over, and struck with intense amazement at the sudden and complete change in his master’s manner, he awaited the course of events.

“Follow me,” said the knight, sharply, as he opened the door and started across the yard. “Did I not command thee to put him in the tower?” he cried.

Simon returned no answer. He was stupified. His head swam, and he half persuaded himself as he followed his master across the yard that he was the victim of some dread nightmare.

“See here!” exclaimed Sir Henry as he kicked the drunken gaoler aside and sharply awoke him; “and here!” he added, as he unlocked the ponderous door and held the glimmering lantern up. “See here,” he cried, “what’s this?” and he pushed the wondering Simon in.

“Why—how! He has gone,” he gasped.

“Of course he has.”

And true it was. The worst fears of De la Zouch were realised. Manners, as we already know, had found out the secret of the dungeon, and his flight was only just discovered.

Sir Henry de la Zouch was prompt in action, and immediately upon satisfying himself of Dorothy's safety, he set out, accompanied by a number of his retainers, to find her lover, feeling pretty well convinced that he would be discovered lurking somewhere in the neighbouring woods. It was in vain they searched. Under the eye of their ubiquitous lord, the tired followers beat every copse and glade, and it was not until the afternoon was well advanced that the Knight of Ashby relinquished the search and thought of turning back.

"Hark!" said Simon to his master, as the latter gave the order to return, "I hear the tread of horse."

"We will advance, then," was the reply, and the unwilling company once more turned their backs upon their homes, and marched further into the forest.

The two parties had for some time unconsciously been approaching each other, and when the quick ears of the chamberlain had detected the proximity of Sir George Vernon and his followers, they were only separated from each other by a narrow strip of thickly-grown wood, and a minute or two sufficed to bring them into collision.

Page 112

“Ha, ha!” shouted Sir George, as he sighted the faithless knight. “Ha, ha, torn clothes, we have you now. Here the villain is,” and he spurred his horse forward to cope with his enemies single-handed.

De la Zouch was amazed and staggered at the sight, and without waiting to meet the baron he rode back to his party, hotly pursued by the King of the Peak and his men of Derbyshire.

“Stay,” cried Manners, “we will settle this between ourselves”; and without waiting for assistance he dashed forward at De la Zouch, and made a furious onslaught upon him.

It was no tournament now; it was a struggle for life itself! And whilst Dorothy’s lover was animated by a stern resolve to punish his foe, at whatever the cost, De la Zouch fought like a madman, because he fought with a halter round his neck.

As for the latter’s followers, at the first charge, with one accord they turned, and leaving their lord, for whom they had little love, to meet his fate, they tried to save themselves by flight.

The struggle was not prolonged. Manners was by far the better swordsman of the two, and De la Zouch, disheartened at the flight of his followers gradually weakened in his attack, and at length fell mortally wounded, leaving no one now to hinder them from marching victoriously on to Ashby.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A *disguised lover*.

Imperious beauty,
Treading upon the neck of understanding,
Compelled me to put off my natural shape
Of loyal duty, to disguise myself.

Massinger

The autumn winds were howling among the trees and scattering the later leaves in all directions, when, with the fall of twilight, a gentle knock was heard at the door of the hut of the chief forester of Haddon.

A lonely traveller stood outside, shivering in his rough and scanty garments as he stood in the still evening breeze, and as he waited expectantly at the unopened door he heard a gruff voice inside the cottage trolling forth a simple ballad of the chase.

He waited patiently until the song was finished, and then, taking courage, he tapped again much louder than before, and was rewarded by hearing footsteps advance towards the threshold, and a moment later the crazy portal was standing open, and the unkempt head of the forester peered inquiringly out.

“What now, what now,” he inquired, as his eye lighted upon the strange figure before him; “who and what art thou?”

“Art thou Roger the forester?” asked the wanderer in reply.

“Roger Morton, at your service, yes.”

“Then, by the love of heaven, I beseech thee let me in.”

“Well, there are few ask that favour off me, but none shall ever say I turned an empty mouth away at night, e’en though it were a beggar’s. Come in.”

Thankful indeed to receive so ready an invitation, the traveller entered the hospitable cottage.

Page 113

“I am not a beggar, though, forsooth,” he began, as he seated himself upon the log which did duty for a seat. “You do not recognise me, Roger, I perceive.”

“Roger Morton, I repeat it, at your service.”

“Well, then, Roger Morton, be it so, but yet you seem to know me not.”

“Odds, troth,” ejaculated the forester, “I seem to know thee somewhat; we have met before.”

“A many times, Roger.”

“Roger Morton.”

“Well, well, Roger Morton, I am apt to forget myself.”

“Ha! you are Nathan Grene,” interrupted the man, as he laid before his guest some cheese and a mug of new milk. “I know your voice.”

“Are we alone?” whispered the traveller.

“We are,” replied Roger, as he picked up a stout stick with which to defend himself, “but he would be a bold man to tackle me alone, for I can take care of myself full well;” and he quickly placed himself in an attitude of defence.

“Tut, I mean no ill, ’tis a matter of secrecy which I am about to entrust you with; read this,” and pulling up a piece of cord which suspended from his neck, he drew up a tiny casket from his bosom, and, opening it, he drew out a neatly-folded slip of paper and held it out.

Slowly and laboriously Roger spelled the missive out, and having succeeded at last in making himself master of its contents, he whistled with surprise, and closely scanned the visage of his guest.

“What a change!” he exclaimed at length. “What will the baron say?”

“Hush, speak gently, or we shall be overheard. The baron must not know. Can you be trusted?”

“Surely. And you are Master Manners who killed that De la Zouch. To think of it, now.”

John Manners it was. His rescue of Dorothy had advanced his suit but little. Lady Vernon had been too proud to own herself defeated, and Sir George had passed his word to the Stanleys and was bound to keep to his promise, while Edward Stanley, who had arrived at Haddon soon after the maiden’s rescue, had taken a dislike to his rival

and had made matters so uncomfortable for him at the Hall that the unfortunate esquire had found it necessary to take the hint and withdraw himself from Haddon.

But though driven away he was not defeated, for he yet found means of hearing from his betrothed, and even occasionally to correspond with her, but he soon found that the long absence grew more and more unendurable, until at last he determined to venture forward at every risk to be near her again.

“And so they would force Mistress Dorothy to marry Sir Thomas Stanley’s brother?” said the forester after a pause, as he handed the little missive back.

“Yes, and Dorothy conjures you to help us. You will do it, will you not?”

“So good as she has been to my poor little Lettice, yes, that I will do; but how?”

“I must be a forester.”

“’Tis a rough life for such as thee, Master Manners.”

Page 114

“Yes.”

“And it is dangerous, too, at times.”

“Aye, I know.”

“And then if you were to be discovered?”

“Don’t talk of ifs, man. I talked it all over with Dorothy long ago. She could not dissuade me, nor can you. I am ready for anything for her sake.”

“Heaven bless her. I—”

“Aye, heaven bless her,” interrupted Manners. “I shall wed her yet, if heaven does but bless her.”

“You are decided to join our craft, then?” asked Roger. “We are two woodmen short, as luck will have it.”

“I have come to be one, then,” replied Manners. “I am disguised for that alone.”

And so it came to pass that John Manners, the nephew of an earl, whose uncle, even now, was high in favour with the Queen, and who had himself bowed the knee on more than one occasion before her throne, had become a woodsman, and joined the foresters of Sir George Vernon. Love, and love alone, could have induced him to humble himself so much. It was for love of Dorothy that he turned his back upon the Royal Court; and now, to win his bride, he was content, nay happy, to discard his own station in life, and take upon himself the lot of a common woodsman.

Fortune was indeed leading him by strange paths, but he trusted she would lead him to the prize at last.

Dorothy’s lot, meanwhile, had not been a bright one. Edward Stanley was relentless, and in answer to her piteous appeals that she loved him not, he cited the baron’s words, referred her to the promise Sir George had rashly made to Sir Thomas; he declared that he loved her fervently, and, had it not been for the baron’s interference, would have carried her off at the end of a month and have married her straightway.

Manners was sternly forbidden her; the gates of Haddon were closed against him, and even an excuse was found to keep Crowleigh away as well. It was fondly hoped that these stringent measures would have the effect of bringing Dorothy to her senses, but their plans completely failed. The maiden began to sicken. The colour fled from her rosy cheeks, and she began to grow rapidly worse. Lady Vernon ascribed it to mere obstinacy, and grew impatient with her, and made her worse than she would otherwise have been by finding fault with everything she did; and by setting her long tasks of

tenter-stitching to perform, making her unhappy lot more miserable still. The only friend she had to whom she could unbosom her secrets was her maid Lettice, and during this time the hearts of the two girls were knitted closely together, the one by a craving for sympathy, and the other drawn to love by the dual bond of love and pity.

Many a night had these two wept together in the darkness and silence of an unlighted room, and many a time had Dorothy laid her head upon her tire-maid's knee and sobbed until with swollen eyes she had sobbed herself to sleep; and many a night had Dorothy sat alone, forbidden to leave the Hall, while her maid had gone out on a fruitless errand to discover if her lover had yet come.

Page 115

“Not yet?” she would ask, as the maid returned, and Lettice had echoed “Not yet,” in reply, until she hated the very sound of the words.

“O, Lettice, he has not forgotten me?” she would sob distractedly, as she saw the disappointed face return.

“No, never, my lady. Something has happened, surely.”

“It must be so,” her mistress would reply, and then she would relapse into silence.

To-night Dorothy sat alone. Her eyes were heavy, for she had been weeping long. Her sky seemed overcast; there was not a rift discoverable anywhere, and she was almost broken-hearted. Nearly two months had passed, and no sign of her lover had she seen to brighten her. Edward had told her that her lover had renounced her, and in spite of herself she almost began to believe the story. Lettice had gone out on her mission once more, but she questioned whether she would ever go again, and she prepared herself, as the time for the maid’s return drew nigh, to receive the usual answer, “No, my lady, not yet.”

Later than usual Dorothy heard her well-known footstep lightly tripping along the passage. The very lateness of her return inspired her with a ray of hope, and opening the door, she went out to meet her.

“Has he come, Lettice, has he come?” she eagerly exclaimed, varying for once her usual despondent query. And, as she asked, her heart fluttered wildly within her, and the hot blood mounted to her cheeks.

“I have news of him for thee,” returned the maid, gaily.

Dorothy was too overcome to speak. The long-expected news had come at last; she fell upon the tire-maid’s neck and wept tears of joy, while Lettice drew her unresistingly along, and led her to her little room again.

“There,” she said, as she closed the doors so that none might hear. “Master Manners sends his duty to thee, my lady.”

“His *duty*, indeed,” she exclaimed, with drooping eyes; “why not his love forsooth?”

“’Twas love he said,” returned the maid. “He is a forester.”

“A forester!” echoed Dorothy in amazement. “My John a forester! Not a common woodman, Lettice, surely?”

“Aye, but he is. He has done it for thy sake. It was the only way.”

“And they told me he had forsaken me. Was ever man so noble as he?”

“He has sent thee this,” said Lettice, as she handed a letter to her mistress. “’Tis but roughly done, but he said you would forgive it, and he sealed it with a score of kisses before he gave it me.”

Dorothy hastily took up the note and read it. Evidently it pleased her well, for as she perused its contents her countenance flushed with pleasure.

“Lettice,” she exclaimed, “only you and I, besides your father, know that Hubert is the same as Master Manners. We must keep it secret as the grave itself. Is he well disguised?”

“In truth, I knew him not until he called me by name.”

Page 116

“’Tis well. He runs a fearful risk. Edward or Thomas Stanley would as lief kill him as they would a dog did they but recognise him again.”

“He has been ill, and he is deadly thin.”

“Poor John. He tells me so. I understand all now.”

“That will disguise him better than aught else, he said.”

“Perhaps it is so, but ’tis a cruel disguise,” said Dorothy sympathetically. “Did he give thee any word for me?”

“Naught, save that I was to tell thee he would write anon, as he could not see thee. He will hide the letters in the tree that Father Philip fell against; there is a hole in it, and he has shown it me. But you will see him soon; he wears a peacock’s feather in his cap.”

“I should know him well enough without a sign,” said Dorothy decisively, “and he were best without it, for it might lead him into peril.”

“Father will send him with the logs,” pursued Lettice. “He came but yesternight.”

“Hush, Lettice, is not that Lady Maude coming?”

“Gramercy no, I hope not, or it might fare ill with us,” said the maid, “but hide the letter, for the love of heaven do,” she added quickly as the footsteps quickly approached.

Quick as thought Doll transferred the missive into her pocket, and, with a guilty look which she vainly strove to hide, she turned to brave Lady Vernon.

Lady Vernon it was, but she passed hurriedly along the corridor, and having escaped thus luckily so far, they waited not to tempt fortune again, but bidding each other an affectionate “Good-night,” Lettice withdrew, and left Dorothy alone with her newly-gotten joy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A *narrow escape*.

The moon in pearly light may steep
  The still blue air;
The rose hath ceased to droop and weep,
  For lo! her joy is there.
He sings to her, and o’er the trees
  She hears his sweet notes swim,

The world may weary—she but hears
Her love, and hears but him.

P.J. *Bailey*.

John Manners found life uncomfortable enough in the new condition of life in which he had placed himself. The work was hard, and the fare was rough. There was no difference between his lot and the lot of those around him, and yet, in spite of this, he was looked at askance by his new companions, while to crown all, he found very few opportunities of meeting or seeing his beloved Dorothy.

Often had he made arrangements to meet her at different trysting places, but, just as often had he waited patiently, only to be disappointed by the non-arrival of his lady-love. In this sorry plight he had been obliged to content himself with sending messages to her through Lettice, whom he constantly met at her father's hut; or, failing her, as a last resource he fell back upon communicating with his lover through the unsatisfactory medium of the tree, where, not unfrequently, as he placed a fresh note in he found the previous one untouched.

Page 117

At last, however, after many fruitless attempts which would assuredly have effectually daunted less ardent lovers, they found themselves once more together in the woods. What bliss, what rapture, what delight, filled the heart of each as they gazed fondly at the other! Dorothy felt bright and lithesome as of yore, as she felt the touch of her lover's hands again. The weeks of misery through which she had just passed seemed but as a dream to her as she once more heard his cheery voice, and the haggard, careworn look, which had settled upon her fair face of late, was instantly dispelled as her betrothed imprinted a warm kiss upon her blushing cheeks. As for Manners, he was completely transported with delight, and for some moments he bathed his hungry eyes in the sunshine of her beauty. To see her again had been his dearest wish, and now she stood before him, and he felt that all the sacrifices he had been called upon to make for the sake of his love were more than compensated for as he heard her gently call him by the old familiar name.

"John," she said.

"Well, dearest one; we are met once more."

"You can trust me now?"

"Aye, indeed, I can," he replied, with glistening eyes. "Forgive me, Doll, I know you will."

"I do; I did long ago. I knew you could not doubt me long. How good of you to come, and to risk so much—for my sake," she added, raising her lustrous eyes up to his.

"Nay, Doll, it were for my sake, too. I could not be far from thee long; the saints forfend I should. But tell me, Dorothy, how go our fortunes now; I fear not well?"

"Alas, no! Lady Maude is stricter than ever," she replied. "Were I a lazy serving-maid mine were a happier lot."

"And Sir Edward, what of him?"

"He wooes me with threats. Was ever a maiden won thus, John? He vows I shall be his bride, and O—"

"What, dearest?"

"Margaret is to be wedded soon, and Sir Edward swears there shall be two weddings at the same time. He says I shall like him well enough in time to come. Margaret wishes it, Lady Maude wishes it, Sir Thomas wishes it, and Edward Stanley says it shall be."

"He knows it not," sturdily replied Manners, as he clasped her to his breast. "Our love is strong enough to conquer all that, Doll."

“I hope it will. I think it will in the end,” she replied, “but the way is very dark for us at present. But naught shall stay us now. Our love is too true not to win.”

“It shall!” he returned, decisively. “Be of good heart, my precious one, we shall soon have passed all this and be happy together.”

“Heaven grant it,” replied Dorothy, fervently, “but it is a terrible time now. With you exposed to danger every hour outside, and every hand against me in the house, save Lettice, ’tis terrible, terrible!” and the maiden burst into tears.

“Poor Doll,” said Manners, as he tenderly supported her. “Your lot is hard, but there will be a change ere long. The wind does not always blow from one quarter, you know; it will alter soon.”

Page 118

“I fear me not,” replied the maiden disconsolately.

“Oh, surely, when they see what an unconquerable will thou hast. Sir George loves thee too well to lightly disregard thy happiness. He loves you dearly; he will surely repent ere the time comes, for he hath a tender heart for thee.”

Dorothy laid her hand upon his arm and beckoned him to be still, pointing at the same time to a thick mass of the thick foliage with which they were surrounded.

“Hist,” she whispered. “Methought I heard the sound of footsteps, listen!”

She paused, and together they bent their heads and listened, but nothing was to be heard save the rustling of the leaves.

“’Twas thy fancy,” exclaimed Manners, “thou art frightened.”

“I thought I saw the form of a man pass by those trees,” she replied. “It must be fancy, though, and yet, methought I saw him stop and then pass on again.”

“Sir George will stand by thee,” pursued Manners, “he loves thee better than himself.”

“I know it, I know he loves me much, John; but he has promised me to the Stanleys, and when I told him of our trothplight he laughed, and said he was doing it all for the best. He forbade me to mention your name ever more, or even think of you again—as if you were not ever in my mind.”

“Does not Lady Maude relent at all?”

“Lady Maude relent! Nay, rather does she grow more bitter against me day by day, and that I may forget thee she makes me tenter-stitch from morn till eve. Even Margaret gives her voice bitterly against me now.”

“Thou hast no one to console thee, then?”

“Save Lettice, no.”

“Poor Dorothy. And Father Nicholas, what saith he? He is a friend of mine.”

“He is so grave I have not mentioned it to him.”

“Then by my troth, Doll, bid him meet me here to-morrow night. He shall help us, he shall befriend thee. Tell him all, he can be well trusted, I wot, unless he has strangely changed since he hath taken the cowl. Bid him come here alone and without fail.”

Soon, all too soon, the brief interview came to an end, and Dorothy had to go back to the Hall, while her lover, having reluctantly parted from her when he dare accompany her no further, slowly wound his way back to the sorry hut which served him, in common with the rest of his fellows, as a home.

He had no heart to join in the boisterous fun with which his companions were making themselves merry as he entered, and passing them unnoticed by, he took a seat in the furthest corner of the room and watched the faggots as they blazed and burned away upon the hearth in front of him.

Dorothy returned with a sad heart, too. The moment of bliss which had so transported her with delight had passed away again, and she found herself in pretty well the same downcast frame of mind in which she had been before, for she knew not when she would see her lover again, and she dare not let herself ponder on the terrible risks her noble lover ran.

Page 119

“Well, Dorothy,” said Lady Maude, as she burst into the maiden’s room ere Doll had found time to divest herself of hood and wimple, “thou art serving us a pretty trick. Thou would’st meet thy whilom lover all unbeknown to us, eh? Pick up thy things and follow me.”

It would have been worse than useless to have refused, and argument, Dorothy knew of old, at such a time would have been equally futile; so, while her blood almost froze with terror in her veins, she meekly obeyed her step-mother and followed her through the long ballroom into the banqueting-room below in a perfect agony of terror lest her lover had been taken and was about to be confronted with her.

The stone-flagged chamber, in which the festive table, which has creaked under many a load of beef and venison, still stands in grandeur all unique, was in full glory then. The musicians’ gallery was richly bedecked with gilt, and was adorned with antlers, the trophies of many a chase, in place of the dingy, whitewash-spotted, pictures which, hang upon its walls to-day (and look as if they were sadly in need of a washing). Gay hunting-scenes, and a canvas on which, were delineated the forms of the Virgin and her Babe, met the eye and pleased it. A savoury odour of newly-baked cakes floated along the passage from the kitchens right into the room, and a piece of tapestry, one of Dorothy’s first attempts, depended over the doorway of the carved wooden screen to keep out draughts, and at the same time give a warm and pleasing effect to the interior.

It was into this room, in which sat the baron and Sir Thomas Stanley, looking terribly grave and severe, that Lady Vernon led poor Dorothy.

“Come hither, Dorothy,” said the baron, as she entered.

The “Dorothy” sounded ominous, and she advanced in great trepidation.

“You have been out without our knowledge,” he exclaimed.

“Out; of course she has,” interrupted Lady Vernon. “See, she cannot deny it, she has the tokens of guilt upon her now,” and she derisively pointed at the tell-tale garments she had made her carry in.

“Hush, Maude,” said the baron, “you will frighten her. Dorothy, you have been with Manners,” he added, turning severely towards her.

Dorothy hung down her head, but vouchsafed no reply. She was in an agony of fear for the safety of her lover, but amid all her terrors she was resolved that no words should fall from her lips which might bring trouble upon him.

“Aye, and with Master Manners again,” repeated the dame.

“What have you to say, Dorothy?” asked Sir George quickly.

“Nothing,” she replied.

“Then you *have* been with him?”

“Nay, I said not so.”

“Of course she has,” exclaimed Lady Vernon, “who can doubt it?”

“We heard Manners speaking; I could swear to it now,” said Sir Thomas Stanley.

“I fear it is even so, Dorothy,” said the baron, not unkindly. “There is a guilty look upon thy face. Now tell us where he is and we will forgive thee thy share.”

Page 120

Dorothy returned no answer. She was determined that no words of hers should injure him.

“He saved my life,” she replied, as the question was repeated.

“Tut, tell us where to find him, else thou wilt have enough to thank that stubborn will of thine for,” interrupted the baroness, impatiently.

There was a sound of footsteps just outside, and they all paused to listen.

“’Tis Edward bringing Manners back,” said Sir Thomas quietly. “Here they come.”

The tapestry was quickly pushed aside, and the ruddy face of Sir Edward Stanley insinuated itself between, the fringes and the screen, but it was not the face of a contented man, for it wore a disappointed look.

“Bring him in,” commanded the baron.

“Nay, I have not caught him yet,” he ruefully replied. “Come and help us, he has hidden himself amid the woodsmen’s huts.”

“You go,” said the baron, addressing Sir Thomas. “I will stay with Dorothy”; and without waiting to be bidden a second time Sir Thomas Stanley left his untasted supper on the table and joined in the search for Dorothy’s forbidden lover.

Meanwhile, the subject of all this commotion sat innocently gazing at the burning embers, watching the logs as they blazed up and then gradually disappeared into powder to be blown away by the first slight breath of wind. Surely, he reflected, ’tis so with the baron’s will; he is in the height of his determined fury now. But soon—and as the door opened, another puff of wind blew away the airy ashes of a once stout log—-aye, surely, his opposition will vanish like as that.

“Never a soul came in here, your lordship, for a long time back,” said Roger, deferentially doffing his cap. “Your lordship must be mistaken.”

Manners turned round and beheld, with a feeling akin to dismay, Sir Thomas Stanley and his brother just within the threshold of the door.

“Tut, tut, man,” replied the knight, “I say he came in here; he was seen to enter, and no one has passed out since then.”

Sir Thomas appealed to the others, but they were all unanimous in supporting their master, and replied in one chorus of surprise. Manners had not been seen for weeks, and not a soul among them had any idea of his whereabouts.

“I suppose no one entered, then?” sneered the knight.

“No,” replied Roger complacently, “not for a long time back.”

“Did he not come in here?” appealed Sir Thomas to those outside.

“Aye, aye,” came the answer, “he did.”

“Then where is he?” demanded the knight fiercely.

“Nay, I swear by the Holy Virgin I saw him not,” replied the sturdy forester, in perfect truth, for he had not noticed his arrival.

“Hugh came in last,” said Lettice’s lover, Will. “Hast thou seen aught of this Manners of late, Hugh?”

Manners’ first impulse was to grapple with his pursuers, but he controlled himself, and trusting to the perfection of his disguise to screen him, without a moment’s hesitation he boldly answered in the negative.

Page 121

“Not I,” he said, emphatically. “I left my axe just outside, and it looks so like rain that I went to fetch it in, but I saw nobody; no, not a soul. Methinks it will rain hard, too, before the morning.”

“Tut,” interrupted Sir Edward. “Did you hear anybody?”

“No, not even a mouse.”

“Then we must search. Out, men, and help us. The man that catches him shall be rewarded well. We must find him; he is hereabouts, for I heard his voice. A murrain on the fellow—all this trouble for a woman’s whim.”

He glanced suspiciously round the cot, but finding no suspicious tokens he led them out and set them to work to discover him. Few of them, however, were zealous, for Manners had made himself popular among them during his visits to the Hall. Dorothy they adored and they were not at all anxious to bring sorrow upon her to oblige the imperious Stanleys. Besides these considerations, the whole affair was so romantic that it seemed more like an acted ballad than a serious reality while Manners’ position appealed to them in such a powerful fashion that they sympathised with him, and had not the search been conducted immediately under the eyes of the two nobles it would have been far more half-hearted than it was. A few, and a few only, were tempted to diligence by the offer of reward, and made a display of alacrity, and amongst the busiest, with a price upon his head, John Manners searched vigilantly for himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NOT YET

You might esteem him
  A child for his might,
Or you may deem him
  A coward through his flight.
But if she whom love honours
  Be concealed from the day,
Set a thousand guards on her,
  Love will find out the way.

Anon.

If love cannot sharpen the faculties of mankind; if it cannot quicken the perceptions; if it has not the power to make the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk—at least, sufficient for its own success—then, indeed—! But it is possessed of all these virtues, and more. If necessity be the mother of invention, then is love the mother of both; and

surely the most ingenious devices and the cleverest productions had been connected with this subtle passion.

Divers and many were the plans which Manners devised to meet his beloved Dorothy again, but the success he so richly merited was tardy in coming, and one after another his schemes were frustrated, until success seemed to have receded from his grasp for ever.

Dorothy, in fact, was too carefully watched to permit of her meeting her lover easily, and she was kept too busy at the tapestry frame to allow her much time for writing to him had she been so disposed. Whenever she went out she was well attended, and for a long time Manners was fain to content himself with an occasional glimpse of her pale face as she rode by, or by sending love-notes and receiving messages back by the kindly aid of the faithful Lettice.

Page 122

Still he persevered, and was rarely absent from the trysting place at the appointed time, for Dorothy might come on any night, and when she came he was determined she should find him there. But she never came. Lettice occasionally he met, but even she was suspected and was kept indoors as much as possible, and more often than not he sat his weary vigils out alone.

Good Roger Morton did his utmost to further his friend's design, sending him up as often as possible on missions to the Hall, and he went so frequently both with messages and faggots, that, seeing him so often, no one suspected that the young woodsman was any other than what he professed to be.

Time flew on: weeks passed by. Autumn brought its coldest and chillest weather for the winter to take up and carry forward. The steers were fattening in the stalls, or salting in the troughs, for the Christmas festivities. The capacious larders of Haddon were replenished to the full, ready to withstand the attack of the cooks; large piles of wood lay stacked up in the yard, ready to supply the many fires which were to cook the victuals for the feast; and the servants themselves grew daily more surprised at the constant arrival of fresh stores, and wondered if ever so magnificent a feast had taken place before.

With Dorothy the time passed slowly and painfully along. Her position had not improved one whit, and she was wearied of the life of restraint and imprisonment to which she was subjected. Her fingers were sore and ached again with the continual tenter-stitching she had to perform, and her whole nature revolted at the system of espionage which Lady Vernon and Sir Edward Stanley had set upon her. The daily visits of that unfeeling and determined nobleman with whom they would force her into marriage, Edward Stanley, always left her with a sadder heart than she had had before.

With Manners the time flew by quickly. He sorely wanted to see Dorothy again, and as the days rapidly passed he recked not of the disappointments of the past, but only thought of the few days which intervened between them and Christmas.

Surely the rumour must be wrong. There would never be two weddings at the Hall this Christmastide. He, at least, would not believe it.

"Nicholas," he said, as he met that worthy at last, "thou wilt only marry one?"

"The baron bids me marry the other as well. I would it were not so, for the maiden cares naught for him. I like not this brother; he is worse than Margaret's betrothed."

"You must help us, then."

"I must do my duty, but if in doing that I can aid thee thou hast but to speak the word."

"But you shall help us, Nicholas."

“Why, how?”

“I will tell thee.”

“I am a priest, remember. I cannot do anything unworthy even for a friend like thee; though thou wert my benefactor.”

He paused, as if unwilling to wound his friend by his words, and seeing the look of dismay upon the other’s face, he stopped.

Page 123

“Nicholas,” said Manners, “thou shalt do naught but stand. I must see Dorothy. I shall,” he added determinedly. “Some way or other I shall see her; even though blood be shed I shall do it,” and in the intensity of his feelings he involuntarily put his hand down to his side to feel for the dagger which was not there.

“I fear thou art too venturesome,” expostulated his friend, quietly.

“I am desperate,” he replied; “and you, Nicholas, by simply standing still might help me as much as I require, and might, perchance, prevent bloodshed, too.”

“Hush, friend John, talk not thus foolishly.”

“And the blood will be upon your head,” continued the distracted lover. “With or without your aid I must, I shall, see Doll; and that soon. You know my word is not lightly broken. Did I not succour thee and save thy life when all conspired against thee?”

“Aye, in truth, and—”

“And I call upon you now, Nicholas, to discharge that debt,” pursued Manners, hotly. “You must; I am resolved, I am well nigh desperate; and Father Philip sanctioned the troth, Nicholas, and blessed us ere he died.”

“Is that so?”

“Assuredly it is. Thou shalt help us, nor shalt thou be dishonoured in the deed.”

“An you will lead me into no evil I will consent, but I fear to trust thee, thou wert ever rash and headstrong.”

Two days later, ere the Sabbath mass began, there stole into the little chapel of Haddon the figure of a man, which ever since the break of day might have been observed crouched down at the bottom of the mighty brewing vat. Had anyone cared to look under the cloth which covered it they would assuredly have discovered him there.

The door of the sanctuary had just been thrown open, somewhat later than usual, for the servants had evidently overslept themselves, and were now to be heard throwing the shutters open, and bustling about in the kitchens, trying to make up for the time they had lost.

The man, by his garb, might have been taken for a labourer. His black hair hung in matted patches upon his shoulders; his clothes were torn and patched, and the coarse leather jerkin he wore, which was almost ready to be replaced by a new one, gave unmistakable tokens that the wearer was a man of toil.

In spite of all these signs the face of the man was handsome, and not without traces of hauteur. His hands were red and rough, but not hard and horny as those of other craftsmen were; and his whole bearing would have impressed a critical observer that this man at least was worthier of a better lot.

Yes, it was John Manners. He was bearding the lion in his den.

Pushing the inner door ajar, and casting a look around the yard at the same time to satisfy himself that he was not observed, he quietly entered the edifice, and closed the door.

“Ha, ha,” he mused. “At last we shall meet again,” and at the thought of it he heaved a sigh of relief.

Page 124

Seating himself in the family pew, he pulled out a book from his capacious breast-pocket, and as he anticipated a long period of uninterrupted peace, he commenced to peruse it. It was "Tottel's Miscellany," a collection of amorous sonnets, and little love sonnets and little love songs, and he read page after page, to the delight of his heart, until he was startled to a sense of his position by the sound of voices just outside.

"No, no, Sir Edward. We must give her a little longer time, she will come round soon to our opinion," were the words he unmistakably heard.

"But you promised her to me this Christmas, remember," was the quick reply.

"Aye, so I did," returned the first speaker. "I would that I had not promised her at all, she is so unhappy over it."

"And I have laid my plans according to that promise," rejoined his companion.

"We must allow her a little longer time," replied the baron, decisively. "Manners has been again to flame her passion for him anew. She will be ready to accept thee soon, but not just yet."

"I tell her John Manners has forsaken her, but she will persist in her waywardness, and I expect, forsooth, she will do so until—"

"Tut, tut, man," interposed Sir George, "it shall not be at Christmas, as we would have had it; but even as she comes not to her senses soon, you shall take her away. Say another month, Sir Edward, another month. There, that is settled, trouble me no more, and now we will off to mass."

They were in the garden, and through the open lattice window Manners could hear them without the slightest trouble. At the mention of mass he abruptly closed his book, and replacing it in his pocket, he crept carefully into the dismal hollow under the pulpit, and pulling the panel to after him he hid himself securely in the dark recess.

"So ho!" he murmured, as he fixed himself in his retreat; "the baron is good. Another month and then, oh! and then?"

He stopped and relapsed into thought. His brow contracted, his lips were tightly pressed, and his eyes stared fixedly through the darkness of his retreat at the chinks of the panels in front, through which he could see the place where his beloved would shortly sit.

"Aye, aye," he muttered, as he fiercely clapped his hand upon his thigh. "It cannot be the worse for her, nor yet much worse for me. She must do it; I will broach it to her now. Here they come."

The pulpit was none too strong, and as Nicholas ascended the stair and shut the door, it distinctly shook and tottered to and fro over the esquire.

“Why, by my halidame,” thought Manners, “the whole contrivance will fall down together and crush me.”

This fear was strengthened soon, for as the priest fixed himself conveniently in his elevated position, the floor above the esquire’s head creaked and groaned and threatened every minute to fall.

Page 125

The service quickly began, much to Manners' relief; but oh, horrors! Father Nicholas began to preach, and by the time the lover expected to have clasped his darling in his arms, the discourse was just getting into full swing.

"Stop, Nicholas, in the name of mercy, stop," he whispered through the floor; but Nicholas heard him not, and quietly pursued the even tenour of his way.

Another half-hour had elapsed, and the situation had become well nigh intolerable. Apart from being cramped, Manners was uncomfortable enough. He felt that it would have immensely relieved him to have screamed, but he dared not do it. He wanted to cough, or sneeze, but he had to repress his feelings. The place in which he was boxed up was damp and humid, and the darkness in which he was enveloped was oppressive. He could bear it no longer, and raising himself up he groped around with his hands, and easily lifting a piece of the old pulpit flooring, he looked up at Nicholas and groaned.

Nicholas involuntarily started at the sound, but recollecting the voice, he screened his friend by his presence of mind. Without a moment's pause he stopped and indulged in a prolonged fit of coughing, while the little congregation, which had been startled by the groan, attributed the noise to a premonitory symptom of the attack, and thought no more about it.

"For mercy's sake, stop," muttered Manners. But the priest placidly resumed his discourse, and drowned Manners' voice by his own.

The sand-glass, which was affixed to the pulpit desk to mark the limit of the time allowed for the sermon, had long indicated that Father Nicholas was trespassing upon the indulgence of his hearers before he stopped; but it was over at last, and confession time had arrived.

Well knew the wily preacher that the second part of the service would not be prolonged. Sir George had never much to confess while there was a good meal awaiting him, and what Lady Maude would have said upon such occasions was always cut short when the sermon had been long, and was reserved for a more fitting occasion.

Neither Sir Thomas Stanley nor his brother ever stayed for confession. They generally found some more attractive way of spending the time; and as soon as they could do so they slipped out, heartily cursing the long-winded priest, and wishing that Sir George were not, by far, so good a Catholic.

Margaret stayed longer than the rest, and when her confession had ceased she kept the father and took occasion to consult him about the marriage ceremony.

She went at last, and then it was Dorothy's turn. The way was once more open for the brave-hearted Manners to meet his betrothed again.

"Stop!" exclaimed Nicholas, as Manners eagerly kissed the maiden's blushing cheek. "Let Mistress Dorothy perform her duty first."

There was no gainsaying this. The good father would not be argued with, and so Dorothy bended her knee, and in humble penitence confessed her misdeeds and prayed forgiveness for her sins.

Page 126

The confession, though well meant, was constrained and short. The maiden was absent-minded, and though she would have entered into it with heart and soul, she found herself unable to bend her will, and even while confessing, her thoughts were fixed on her lover, whom she knew was impatiently waiting to embrace her as soon as she had finished her devotions.

“And now, my own peerless Doll,” said Manners, as she rose and came to him, “at last I may talk with thee once more.”

“Yes, John,” replied the maiden, “at last! We have waited long for this.”

“Nicholas, you will listen and warn us if anyone approaches,” said Manners.

“I pray thee forget not that the time goes on apace,” replied the confessor. “I will guard the door for thee.”

The lovers were alone; they were free to enjoy each other’s company for a little while, and in a short time the sound of eager conversation filled the room.

“Come, now, ’tis time,” broke in the priest, after a long pause. “Sir George will be wondering at the long delay.”

“A minute more, Nicholas, a minute more,” was the excited reply.

“Now, Doll,” Manners appealed, “I have told you all. What say you?”

“Not yet, John, not yet,” she demurely replied.

“O, say not so, Doll,” he pleaded, “they will never relent.”

“I cannot do it, John; indeed, I cannot. I would refuse thee naught save this, but this I must refuse.”

Her lover looked at her sadly. “Then we may not see each other again,” he said, “till thou art Lady Stanley.”

“Nay, nay,” she replied quickly, “I shall never be that. My heart would break first. I shall never be that.”

“Or I may be discovered, and—and then, Doll, what?”

“O don’t, don’t say that,” she cried. “You tear my heart. I cannot do it, John; at least—at least not now.”

“Mistress Dorothy, we must go now. I cannot, I dare not tarry any longer,” said the priest as he came up and stood beside the lovers. “We must go at once.”

“A minute more, just a minute, Nicholas.”

“Nay,” he replied, “we must not linger any more.”

“Go, then, I will follow thee,” said Dorothy, and taking her at her word the father bowed himself low before the little altar and departed.

“Not yet,” said Manners, “you cannot yet! Doll, it must come to this, and why not do it now?”

“Nay, nay, John, ask me not. I cannot, I cannot do it. Adieu, we shall meet again soon, trust me till then”; and giving him a farewell kiss, she left him alone and hastened into the Hall.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Angels of life and death.

He said no more,
For at that instant flashed the glare,
And with a hoarse, infernal roar,
A blaze went up and filled the air!
Rafters, and stones, and bodies rose
In one quick gush of blinding flame,
And down, and down, amidst the dark,
Hurling on every side they came.

Page 127

AYTOUN.

Deep down in the rock upon which Nottingham Castle proudly stands, there winds a passage which was used in the centuries long gone by as the readiest way of bringing the victuals in the castle, and which has long been commonly accepted as the veritable "Mortimer's Hole."

A man was busily engaged in arduous toil in one of the cavities hollowed out in the very heart of the rock. It was the chamber in which the dissolute Mortimer and the faithless Isabella had been captured by the youthful monarch, Edward III., two centuries and a half earlier, but no traces of its former grandeur—if it ever possessed any—now remained. It was changed into the abode of an alchemyst, and as Edmund Wynne ever and anon tapped an iron vessel his eyes sparkled with delight.

The room was full of fumes and smoke. Phials of many shapes and various sizes were ranged around on every side, filled with liquids of every imaginable odour and hue. A long rude bench, which ran along the farther side of the room, was crowded with boxes of crystals, crucibles, and bottles, and, to complete the scene, a log fire was smouldering away on the centre of the solid rock floor.

Edmund had long sought the elixir of life, but it had proved as delusive as a will-o'-the-wisp to him, and ever, just as he felt assured of success, the prize had slipped away from his grasp, leaving him further away from success than he had been before. But now it was not the elixir that he was seeking to find. From trying to discover something that should rob the grave of its prey, he had turned his attention towards the invention of an engine to hasten death. His heart was all aflame with the passion of revenge. The lord of Haddon had incurred his intense and undying hatred. He had heaped indignities upon him; he had slain the object of his affections; and the disgrace into which he had fallen at London was also ascribed, rightly or wrongly, to the baron.

Baulked of his revenge hitherto, his passionate desire for it had decreased rather than declined through his failures, and the very fact of his failing was itself another charge for which the baron would have to answer. Death, and death alone, would now be sufficient to wipe out the stain, and Edmund had long cudgelled his wits to secure the destruction of his foe.

"Aye, Edmund, Edmund," exclaimed Sir Ronald Bury, as he broke in upon Wynne's privacy, "at thy whimsical labours again, I see."

"Nay, not whimsical, Ronald," was the gentle reply. "My elixir is nearly right; only one ingredient more is wanted, and then!"

"And then, what?" laughed the knight.

“Why, then I shall have discovered what all the sages of the earth have sought in vain.”

“A toadstone, I suppose?” replied Sir Ronald, lightly.

“Ha, you may laugh, Ronald,” said the astrologer, severely. “Fools ever did mock the wise, like the rich despise the poor. You are but a soldier, and I am a man of science—-the great alchemyst! My name shall live; yea, mark me, Ronald, it will be known and revered in time to come, aye, even when this castle has crumbled into dust, and when the name of Roger Bacon has been long forgotten.”

Page 128

“Well, Edmund,” responded the knight, gaily, “let us hope so; only one more substance, eh?”

“Only one,” the enthusiast replied, while the look of triumph flashed already from his eyes.

“And then we shall—shall what, Edmund, what shall we do?”

“Live for ages.”

“For ever, in fact, I suppose?”

“My elixir will conquer disease, and man shall live until his feeble frame has worn away,” he responded grandly.

“Lucky man,” soliloquised Sir Ronald, facetiously. “But the dames, Edmund, you said naught of them. Cannot you discover aught for them? Surely they may share the blessing also!”

“No more is wanted; my elixir will serve for both,” majestically responded Edmund, as he placed a cauldron over the fire. He was too intensely in earnest himself to note that his companion was sceptically making fun of him.

“And will soldiers live for ages, too?” continued Sir Ronald.

“Those who are killed my elixir is impotent to bring back again to life. The dead are beyond all aid.”

“And the wounded?” persisted the knight.

“I can but stave off disease, Ronald; but what a glorious achievement have I accomplished then! Methinks I see the glory now, and when I am in my grave, pilgrims shall come and worship at my shrine as they have done these centuries at the altar of St. Thomas the Martyr at Canterbury. What glory, what glory!” and in the exuberance of his delight, Edmund Wynne gleefully rubbed his hands together.

“I am forgetting my errand, though,” exclaimed the deputy-governor, “I have a visitor for thee.”

Edmund quailed. He was not in the habit of receiving visitors, for he had few friends and many enemies, therefore the announcement gave him very little pleasure.

“For me?” he said, in a tone of unmistakable surprise, and equally unmistakable displeasure.

“Aye, for thee,” Sir Ronald replied. “Shall I bring him to you?”

“Bring him down here?” screamed Edmund, aghast at the very idea. “No, never.”

“You will come up to him, then? It makes no matter!”

“I am too busy,” he evasively replied. “Tell me, Ronald, who it is.”

“’Tis a friend.”

“Humph! He has heard of my elixir and wants—ah, well, I shall have friends enough now, I’ll warrant me.”

“He is an enemy of Sir George Vernon, then,” added the knight.

“Hey! Bring him down, then,” said the alchemyst. “I will meet him outside the room.”

“Well, Master John Manners will be down by and bye. Lady Bury meanwhile is entertaining him, for he was hungry.”

Edmund started.

“Manners, John Manners!” he exclaimed. “Nay, then, bring him not hither. Does he know that I am here?”

“Aye, I have told him.”

“You have!” ejaculated Edmund, in a frenzy of terror. “I met him at Haddon, he is a friend of the baron’s.”

Page 129

“He was,” replied his friend; “but things have changed, and now he is like to invoke thy aid. He will help us to have our revenge, maybe, for I have been persuading him; he is very bitter now against the Vernons, and will make thee a good accomplice.”

“Revenge,” murmured Edmund, “ha! revenge is sweet. The baron shall be punished; my machine—”

“Never mind the machine now,” broke in Sir Ronald, who was by no means anxious to listen to the well-worn rigmarole again. “You can show that to him, and tell him all about it. I shall bring him down, for he knows not the way.”

“Well, I will yield to thee; do as you list,” he replied, and the man of science turned his back abruptly upon his friend, and vigorously stirred the seething liquid which was beginning to boil over upon the fire.

In a few minutes Manners appeared, but Sir Ronald Bury had brought him purposely with so little noise that the alchemyst was not aware of his presence, and for a long time they stood in the doorway, and watched his movements.

He was talking to himself, as he often did. It was a habit into which he had unconsciously fallen. He had persuaded himself to think that the great posterity for which he laboured so hard could hear him, and in his isolation the reflection was a great consolation to him.

“Ha, ha,” he muttered, “thou hast had thy little day, Sir George Vernon. ‘King of the Peak,’ indeed—thy reign is o’er. And Margaret, proud Margaret, and the haughty Lady Maude, aha! You shall all tremble at my name.”

“Hist, move thee not,” whispered Sir Ronald, “he is, about to test his engine again; it blows off sparks of fire as if it were the smithy’s forge, but without the noise. I have seen him perform with it often. Hark.”

Edmund had brought out his engine from a deep recess in the wall, and a rough, unsightly piece of mechanism it was. It was intended to be square, but constant testings and trials had caused it to assume more the appearance of an octagon, and as the sides had thus bulged out, the bands which had held the instrument together became loosened and untrustworthy.

Edmund surveyed it affectionately. It was the offspring of his genius, and he blindly disregarded all its little imperfections amid the great love he bore towards it.

“Aha,” he murmured, “thou art done, thou art ready now. Thou art an angel of death, and thou”—turning to his elixir—“thou art an angel of life.”

“Mix them up, Nathan, mix them up,” gaily exclaimed Manners as he stepped into the room. “We will give the Vernons a dose.”

Edmund was startled, and he hastily retreated to his engine to protect it.

“Avaunt!” he cried, “touch it not.”

“Nay, I want not to injure it,” returned the other, whose smile contrasted with the alchemyst’s scowl. “Shake hands, man; I will do thee no harm.”

“Beware,” cried Edmund, distrustfully, as he covered over the angel. “Beware!”

Page 130

“Edmund, thou speakest over rashly,” interposed Sir Ronald. “Master Manners would honour thee, and thou treatest him so lightly. Together you may accomplish your designs and work whatever you will; the past—”

“Is buried with its forefathers and forgotten,” quickly exclaimed Manners. “Come, I greet thee on equal terms. I would be thy friend.”

Edmund shook the proffered hand as though it were a bar of red-hot iron he had been commanded to hold, or a phial of his precious elixir he was carrying, and he felt by no means flattered at the reference to their equality, just as if he, too, had discovered such mighty secrets.

“I shall not want for friends soon, forsooth; the great have ever many,” he replied.

Manners laughed.

“Thou hast few enough as yet, I’ll warrant, besides thy good friend, Sir Ronald,” he exclaimed. “I trow you cannot well afford to turn the first comers away, Nathan.”

“I can do all with my elixir,” was the proud response.

“Sir Ronald Bury tells me thou hast prepared this engine for Sir George,” said Manners, abruptly changing the topic of the conversation. “Is that so?”

“Aha, for Sir George Vernon, yes.”

“Can’st thou direct it against the Stanleys, too? I would have them punished if we could.”

“Thou art a friend of his,” said Edmund, suspiciously, referring to the baron.

“Albeit I seek revenge, justice, anything!” he said bitterly. “I have been spurned away from his door like as I had been a dog.”

Edmund looked at him incredulously. He was not convinced yet.

“If you mean no treachery,” he said cautiously, “call me by my name, for I am Edmund Wynne. I like not to bethink me of the past until—,” and he approvingly looked at his instrument of death.

“Until what?”

“Ha, I will show thee,” replied Edmund. “Stand not too near.”

Manners had not much faith in the destructive properties of the instrument, but the command was given in such an earnest and authoritative fashion that to have refused compliance would only have caused offence. Probably, too, Edmund would not try the experiment if he expressed his scepticism, and he was curious to see it, so he retreated to the doorway to watch his movements.

“This,” Edmund went on, “is to be put in the baron’s room.”

“Yes, but how?” asked Manners, perceiving that some sort of a remark was expected of him.

“Cannot I, who have invented it, find some means for conveying the engine there?” replied the inventor, with staggering emphasis.

Manners deferentially bowed his acquiescence, much to the amusement of Sir Ronald.

“You must not heed his words,” whispered the knight. “He is infatuated with his work. In all things else he is as timid as a mouse.”

“And then,” pursued the mighty alchemyst, “and then—! Nay, I will show thee, see!” and with some difficulty he forced open a little door at the side.

Page 131

Both Manners and Sir Ronald moved forward to examine it, for the room was but faintly lighted and they could barely see the dim outline of the instrument.

“Go back, go back,” screamed Edmund. “Ronald, I look for no treachery from thee.”

“Tush,” contemptuously replied the knight, as he poured some more oil into the lamp, “get on. We did but want to see.”

“This,” continued Edmund, unabashed, “is more dreadful than Roger Bacon’s powder;” and pulling out a short, stout iron canister, he poured some crystals into a hole. “Look and behold,” he added. “I invoke no saints, nor do I seek the aid of any deity, but see;” and rolling some of the crystals tightly up in some parchment, he dropped it into the midst of the fire.

For a few moments nothing was seen or heard of it, and the onlookers were smiling to each other when the wonderful crystals began to splutter and fizz, till the packet suddenly exploded with a loud report, rattling the bottles and jars together, while the rumbling report rolled up the long subterranean passage.

“Ha!” exclaimed Edmund, triumphantly. “You shudder at the sight; that is nothing, I can do infinitely more than that. I will do it with more crystals now.”

“Nay, we are convinced of thy prowess; when the fumes have cleared away, show us this engine,” replied Manners. “It is full of wheels; show us their purpose.”

“That shook this chamber,” Edmund replied, “but this could well nigh shatter it.”

“Great man, we acknowledge thy mighty genius,” responded Sir Ronald. “Reveal the limit of thy powers.”

“I will,” said Edmund, enthusiastically, “I will.”

All his reserve was worn off now, and he expatiated at length upon the wonderful powers of his mighty engine. No such power had been known before; nothing would stand against it; it was indeed a miracle of force.

“But, prithee,” asked Manners, heartily sick of the ceaseless explanations, and anxious to see the practical outcome of it all, “how worketh it? Show us, let it move this piece of rock.”

“You doubt me; I will show it thee; I will test it but this once again, and then the baron, curse him! dies.”

Edmund busied himself for some time in compounding some evil-smelling ingredients in a huge mortar, and, as he stirred the pestle round and round, the contents hissed and

crackled, and emitted sparks of fire. At length, after many bottles had been partially emptied, and many powders and the like had been employed, the mysterious substance was obtained, and he sprinkled a little of it upon the red embers, when a series of miniature explosions followed.

“Look, see!” he passionately exclaimed, “I have discovered something still more powerful; nay, stand back. I found it once before, but lost the art. Now we shall see; hey, hey.”

Slowly and cautiously the canister was replaced; the requisite powder was carefully measured and inserted, and after many an examination had been made, Edmund declared that everything was in readiness for the wheels to be set in motion.

Page 132

“Stand back, venture not too near,” he commanded, and placing a heavy piece of loose rock upon the case, he set the wheels in motion and stepped back proudly behind his handiwork.

“Thou shalt be convinced shortly, Master Manners,” he exclaimed. “Ha, ha, I shall have many friends soon. None know the power I have at my command, and princes and queens will court me to possess it. I can either kill or keep alive, my elixir—”

His voice was lost in the din of a great explosion. Bottles and jars were rattled together and smashed. The chamber was full of smoke and flame. Everything was suddenly thrown into frightful disorder, all was in confusion. Solid masses of rock were detached from the walls and roof, and went crashing across the room, destroying everything with which they came into contact, or else burst through the wall and bounded down the steep rock outside. The very room seemed to spin around, and Sir Ronald and Manners were thrown headlong upon the pavement of the passage outside.

What could it all mean?

Simply that the engine had done its work. Edmund had overcharged it, and it had exploded. The angel of death had slain its creator, and the wonderful elixir of life was lost to the world for ever.

CHAPTER XXX.

Stolen Sweets.

All close they met again, before the dusk
  Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil;
Close in a bower of hyacinth and musk,
  Unknown of any, from whispering tale.
Ah! better had it been for ever so,
  Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe.

Keats.

It was within a week off Christmas, and at Haddon all was in confusion and disorder amid the preparations for the forthcoming wedding. Manners had now relinquished all hope of Sir George ever relenting, and he waited with feverish impatience the time when, once more, he might clasp his darling to his heart, and pour again into her ears the oft-told story of his undiminished love.

He longed to see her again, or to be seen by her, even though no words were spoken; for he had been away awhile, and though he had bidden Roger send Dorothy word of

his absence through Lettice, yet he feared lest the message had not been delivered, and she would feel alarmed at his being away.

Ill news awaited his return. Dorothy was to go away with Margaret, for she was ill, and Benedict had prescribed a change of air. He was desperate, and in his desperation he was prepared to hazard anything which promised the remotest chance of success; but alas! his ventures, while resulting harmlessly, brought him no nearer the goal of his ambition than he had been before.

“Roger,” he said, “I shall get me to the Hall. Lettice should come soon; bid her hasten back and tell her mistress I am there awaiting her.”

“Aye, I will tell her,” replied the honest woodsman, “but methinks it is a sorry chance. Thou art far more likely to be discovered than to succeed, for there be many folks at the Hall, and few dare to be friends of thine.”

Page 133

“Nevertheless, I shall attempt it, good Roger; dissuade me not.”

“Faith, not I. ’Tis not for such as me to interfere. Thou art brave, Master Manners, and art worthy of success; may it come to thee, say I. But the Hall is full big to seek each other in; where shalt thou be?”

“In the dining-room.”

“In the dining-room!” quoth Roger, in surprise. “The dining-room! Thou’lt surely never look there? ’Tis as bare of hiding places as the flat of my hand. Why not in the archer’s room, or the tower?”

“I shall hide me behind the arras till she comes,” replied Manners.

“The arras,” laughed his companion, “why it will bulge out like the monuments in Bakewell Church; the first who comes will spy thee out. Take my advice, master, and wait in the tower. Why, the buttery were safer than the dining-room.”

“Tut, I shall go,” he replied; “there is more to hide one than you wot of, but my Dorothy knows it, and I shall meet her there;” and picking up a bundle of wood he started off to the Hall.

He was not long upon the way, and when he arrived at his destination there was no difficulty in getting into the kitchens, for he had been there scores of times before, and his was quite a familiar figure now.

“Ho, Hubert,” called one of the busy cooks as he entered the room, “lend a hand with this steer; thou hast the strength of a bullock, I verily believe.”

Manners dropped the wood and good-naturedly lent the desired assistance.

“An thou would’st chop it with this cleaver thou wert a good fellow,” continued the cook, as, having got the beast upon the bench, he surveyed its goodly proportions, and handed the cleaver to his newly-found helpmate.

“Nay, I am no butcher, I am but a woodsman, and should cut it wrong, I fear,” returned Manners, as he laid the chopper down. “Were it a tree—”

“Now, come,” interrupted the cook, persuasively. “I am wearied out; I have no strength left in my arm. See you, here, here, and here, and the thing is done.”

“I will do it an you will serve me a good turn, too?” he replied.

“Done, then,” said the other; “what is it?”

“Show me the Hall; I have long wished to see the ballroom. ’Tis a fine room, Roger says.”

“Fine!” exclaimed the cook. “I should think it is fine. There’s not another in all Queen Elizabeth’s land to equal it. I will show it thee afterwards.”

“Help me with this sack of flour,” exclaimed the baker, “and I will show it thee now.”

Manners chopped the carcase up, for which he was promised a share of the pie, and quickly satisfied the baker. His strength, indeed, was wonderful, and what two bakers had failed to do together, he easily accomplished alone.

“Thou shalt have a cake to-night,” exclaimed the baker, admiringly. “A milk-white cake hot off the hearthstone, such as my lord the baron loveth so well,” and they passed through the stone-flagged passage into the banqueting-room beyond to see the wonders of the Hall.

Page 134

“Nay,” exclaimed the chamberlain, as they attempted to pass up the steps leading to the upper part of the Hall. “’tis against the rules, you know.”

“All right, John, ’tis all right,” replied the baker. “Hubert is going to help me, and you cannot stay me, I trow, or Lady Vernon will come upon thee about the cakes for the feast.”

There was no gainsaying this argument, for John stood in mortal fear of his mistress, and at the mention of her name he stepped aside and allowed them to pass by.

“John likes to be flattered,” laughed the baker, as the door closed upon them, “but I use a different weapon. I speak of Lady Vernon, and he always yields.”

“I saw he was there,” replied Manners, “else I had needed no assistance to pass through. He despises us, I verily believe, and likes to show his power. So this is the ballroom, eh? ’Tis a magnificent room, surely,” he exclaimed in well-feigned innocence.

“The ballroom!” laughed the other, contemptuously. “No, this is but the dining-room. Come, I will show thee the ballroom.”

“I would linger here awhile,” responded Manners, with charming simplicity, “this tapestry takes my fancy so; and the ceiling, with such quaint devices. Nay, there can be naught to better this, I swear.”

“Then you must stay alone, for I am busy,” replied his companion.

This was exactly what Manners wanted, and as he offered no opposition, the baker left him alone on the threshold of the ballroom, and returned to attend to his duties.

It was a matter of little difficulty to find the hiding, place, for Manners knew it well, and pulling the arras aside, he slid an old oak panel along and stepped into the cavity it disclosed to await with as much patience as he could command the well-known footstep of his beloved.

A long time he waited; each passing footstep caused his heart to flutter with expectation, only, however, to leave it to quieten in disappointment as the sounds receded and died away in the echoing ballroom above, or else mingled, maybe, in the turmoil of the busy kitchens below. No Dorothy appeared, and his heart at last began to fail.

“Surely she will not come,” he murmured at length. “Lettice cannot have been,” and his spirit sank within him at the thought. He was cold and fatigued, and once being infected with the idea that he was doomed to disappointment, he quickly discovered all the discomforts of his position and aggravated his misery by adding to them by his own imagination.

He had made up his mind to depart, and was about to put his resolution into practice, when a gentle voice broke the stillness of the room. He held his breath to listen. There was surely someone at the door, for he heard the handle turn; it creaked upon its hinges, and a moment later a gentle step resounded on the floor, and he knew that he was not alone. Could it be Dorothy? He pushed the door of his retreat ajar and listened intently, but only the responsive throbbing of his own heart could he hear.

Page 135

“Doll!” he exclaimed.

There was no reply.

“Doll,” he repeated, in a little louder tone as he pushed door and tapestry aside and entered the room. “Doll!”

“It is not Dorothy, Master Manners,” replied a gentle voice, “it is I, Lettice, her maid.”

His heart stood still; chilled with despair.

“Where is she?” he cried. “Tell me, will she come?”

“Nay, she cannot come; Dame Maude is with her, getting ready for the feast.

“And Dorothy cannot come,” he repeated, with downcast eyes. “Hast thou seen her; has she had my message?”

“One may not speak with her when my lady is there,” said the maid, “but she read it in my eyes. I would, Master Manners, I could help thee more, but I fear that cannot be.”

“Bid her keep her tryst to-night, Lettice,” he replied, “and thou wilt serve thee well.”

“I fear me she cannot. Oft has she tried and failed; she is watched too well. An she were to pass the gate alone the whole Hall would know of it.”

“Look, then, Lettice, could you come?”

Lettice often had done so before to meet her own stalwart young lover in the privacy of the wood, and she blushed at the question.

“I come?” she replied, “happen I might were I but to speak to the chamberlain first.”

“Speak to him, then, for mercy’s sake, speak,” replied the lover, quickly. “Lend Doll your hood and shawl, none will know the difference in the dark. Tell the porter to expect you. There, adieu; fail me not, good Lettice,” and without leaving her time to make reply he rushed hastily out of the room, and left her alone to carry out his instructions as best she could.

Dusk was rapidly deepening into darkness when John Manners stole out of his humble abode to wend his way to the old trysting place, whither he had been so frequently of late. His progress was watched by a pair of eager, jealous eyes, as their owner silently but surely dogged his every footstep; and when the tree was reached at last Manners lay wearily down at its foot, fully resolved not to depart from thence until he had brought matters to a crisis. At the same moment the figure of a young man glided stealthily into

the cover of a bush within a few yards of where the other lay. Manners was not aware of the fact; he had neither seen nor heard his pursuer, and in happy ignorance of the circumstance he awaited Dorothy's appearance.

The night was chilly, for the snow had just departed from off the ground, and the fast gathering leaden clouds threatened to quickly cover it over again; but, buoyed up with hope and excitement, Manners heeded it not. Quietly, but not calmly, he lay, impatiently awaiting the coming of his love.

At last she came, but she approached so silently that her lover was not aware of her presence until she spoke.

"John," she exclaimed, "I am here."

He was upon his feet in an instant.

Page 136

“My darling, my beloved;” he cried, as he rapturously embraced her in his arms. “This is good of thee, ’tis more than I deserve.”

“Say not so,” she replied. “I would do aught for thy dear sake. I have endured much for thee, but I have been happy in it because it was for thee.”

“Thou would’st do aught for me, my precious one?” cried Manners. “I have much to ask of thee. ’Tis well for me thou art so ready. None shall part us, Doll.”

“No, never,” she replied, firmly.

“Then, Dorothy, we must flee together.”

“What!” she exclaimed, in surprise. “Leave Haddon?”

“Hush, Doll, I fear it must be so.”

“Oh, John,” she sobbed, “I cannot do it, indeed I cannot do it. Is there no other way? Have you no other plan?”

“Sir George will never relent,” Manners replied, “and in another month—”

“Nay, nay, John, I have refused the one, I am resolved not to wed the other.”

There was a painful pause for a minute or two, but at length Manners spoke. His voice trembled and betrayed the depth of his feelings plainly.

“’Tis a hard choice, Doll,” he said, “but you must choose betwixt Haddon and me. If you say me nay, I shall lose you.”

“Wait, John, you can trust me?” she sobbed.

“Aye, that I can,” he returned, tenderly; “but the flower is withering, and will soon be gone. This face was not so pale nor yet so thin before. Dorothy, I cannot see thee droop like this before my eyes.”

“You can trust me,” she replied; “then wait awhile.”

“And then; what then?”

“If they are against us then, I will do thy will and go with thee.”

“Nay, Doll, I should lose thee, and that would break my heart; it must be yes or no, there is no other way of escape.”

Dorothy bowed her head upon his shoulders while the tears ran freely down her cheeks, and Manners stood over her, his breast heaving in fierce thrills of mingled emotions.

“Choose for thine own happiness, Doll,” he whispered, breaking again another painful spell of silence.

“I cannot leave my father so—and Margaret,” she added, after a pause.

“Margaret will leave thee soon enough,” replied her lover, “and Sir George would wed thee to Sir Edward Stanley in a month. Thou wilt have to leave them soon, anyhow—-why not with me? I would brave the world for thy sake.”

“I know it,” she replied, “but I cannot say ‘yes.’ Do not persuade me, I will give thee an answer in a little while.

“I have made arrangements,” Manners answered. “Everything is ready. We shall go to Nottingham; all our plans are laid ready for the wedding.”

“I cannot refuse thee, John,” whispered Dorothy, as she dried her tears, “but I cannot consent—not yet, at least. Lettice shall bring thee word.”

“So be it, then,” he said. “Kiss me, Doll, it may be for the last time; an you decide to stay, I shall go to the wars again.”

Page 137

“Hush, your words are over loud, John. If you go, I die. Listen!”

Manners needed not the injunction, for someone was unmistakably rushing towards them. He turned, and faced the intruder.

“Hold!” he cried, “or you shall rue it. Stand back,” he added, as the figure of a man ran towards Dorothy.

“Lettice,” exclaimed the other, “could I think this of thee? I had trusted thee better. What have I done that thou should’st treat me thus? As for thee—” he said, turning to Manners.

“Tut, man, doff thy cap,” interrupted the latter. “This is Mistress Dorothy Vernon.”

“Thou hast met here often enough before,” continued the unbelieving Will, “but I’ll warrant me this shall be the last time. Mistress Dorothy, indeed! A likely story that; but I know that hood too well to be deceived. You are Sir Edward Stanley, or Master Manners, perchance, I suppose. Roger Morton shall know of this.”

“Lettice is in the hall,” said Dorothy. “I know thou art to be trusted, Will, for Lettice ofttimes speaks of thee. This is Master Manners. Hush! not a word, tell it not to anyone.”

It was the voice of Dorothy, beyond dispute, and not the voice of Lettice, and the astonished youth dropped down upon his knees and sued forgiveness.

“And you knew me not?” asked Manners, as he clapped his companion familiarly upon the back. “I deceived thee, then? Have not the others found out my disguise? Methinks they have looked at me askance of late.”

The young woodsman rubbed his eyes to convince himself that it was a reality, and that it was not a vivid dream.

“Nay,” he replied, at length; “they said thou wert seeking to rob me of my Lettice, for we knew thee not.”

“I am a craftsman still,” returned Manners, “mind you tell them not. There, I shall rejoin thee soon.”

Lettice’s lover took the hint and departed, not at all loth to get out of the way, and feeling mightily relieved that things happened to be as they were, and were not any worse.

“Doll,” said her lover, as the retreating sound died away in the distance, “we have another friend in him. Do thou tell this to Lettice, happen it will enliven her. I will not press thee for thy answer now; we shall love each other to the end, I know. Remember

this, Doll, thy happiness as well as mine is at stake. Sir George cannot take back his words even though he repent them. He cannot relent, for he has promised thee, and he is the very soul of honour, but, an we please ourselves, he cannot help it, and all will come right. Nay, interrupt me not, I have weighed my words, there will never be such another chance for us to flee. There, now, thou knowest all I can tell thee, thou shalt decide anon."

Dorothy was silent, but if looks had speech, she had pleaded eloquently. Her resolution swayed to and fro in the terrible struggle of her affection: her soul was riven. She was too happy in the company of her lover to say him nay, and yet, at the same time, the bond of love which drew her to her father was far too strong to be suddenly snapped.

Page 138

“I must go,” she said, at last, “but whether it be aye or whether it be nay, in life and in death I am thine alone. Kiss me, John, and let me go.”

Manners was deeply agitated. He took her face in both his hands, and stooping down, he kissed her again and again.

“It may be the last time,” he said, “but trust me, Doll, I am only thine. I shall keep my love-troth true. Keep a stout heart, my sweet one, and by my faith we shall be happy yet.”

They had approached the Hall as near as was safe, and now the moment for parting had arrived Dorothy tried to speak, but her heart was too full, and words failed to come at her command. She listened to her lover’s last injunction to keep up a brave heart, and wringing his hands in agonised silence, she gathered her cloak around her, and hastened into the Hall.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The token.

And whilst the feast progressed apace,
  The music swelled in joyous strain;
But midst the group was one fair face
  That scarcely hid the look of pain.
And ever and anon she looked away;
And when the others went she turned to stay.

Early next morning, as Manners was engaged in collecting faggots for the hungry fires at the Hall, he was startled to hear himself addressed by his proper name.

He turned round aghast, but was reassured when he saw that it was none other than Lettice’s lover who stood by his side.

“Hush, Will,” he said, “call me Hubert still; it were dangerous for my name to be overheard. But thou hast news for me, I can read it in thy face.”

“Aye,” replied the youth, “Mistress Dorothy sent Lettice with a message for thee, but old Roger knew not where thou would’st be found.”

“Where is it?” cried the lover, impatiently, “let me see it; ’tis the answer, I’ll warrant me.”

“Nay, I have it not. Lettice awaits thee at the hut; she would not even let me bring it to thee, for her mistress, she says, charged her to tell it to none but thee.”

“At the hut,” repeated Manners, as he started to return. Is she there now?”

“She is awaiting thee; but, Master Manners, let me crave a favour first.”

“Quick, then,” was the hasty reply, “tell me what it is, for I cannot wait.”

“Lettice has been rating me well,” returned the downcast lover, as he started to return with Manners. “She is angered against me that I followed thee last night. She will not look at me now, and if I open my mouth about it she swears she will speak to me no more. A word from thee, good sir, would set the matter right again, else I fear me I have lost her favour, and there be many round about who would gladly take my place.”

“Oh,” laughed Manners, “I will see to that, and happen you may do me some good service in return?”

“Aye, master, that I will,” he replied, mightily relieved.

Page 139

Manners said no more; his mind was too much occupied, his thoughts were bubbling within him in furious turmoil. Leaving his companion behind, he rushed hastily on, and never stayed his course until he had reached his destination.

“The letter, Lettice, the letter,” he cried, as he entered the hut.

“Nay, I have no letter, Master Manners,” replied the maid. “My lady bid me tell it thee instead.”

“What is it? Is it yes, or no?” he cried.

“Neither, yet. My mistress went all through the weary night, and thought of naught else but thee and the answer she should give.”

“Poor Doll,” ejaculated her lover, tenderly. “’Tis time all this was ended, Lettice; she is fading away, yes, fading away, and what will come of it all, if she says me nay, I tremble to think.”

“She will not say thee nay, though, Master Manners,” replied Lettice. “I shall lose my mistress soon. She has told me all.”

“Told thee all?” he echoed. “She will not say me nay, and yet she consents not! You speak in riddles. Come, explain it all.”

“She knoweth not her mind as yet,” explained the maiden, “but I can plainly see which way it will all end. Even as she poured her story out to me I could see it; I could read it in her sobs and sighs. She had not wept so long had she not loved thee so well; and her love for thee is stronger than her other loves, else she had obeyed my lord the baron by now. It needs no astrologer to tell all this.”

“Heaven grant it may be so,” replied Manners, fervently; “but what did my Dorothy bid thee say? Thy words have made a sore commotion in my heart, fair Lettice.”

Lettice hung down her head and blushed at the unexpected compliment.

“Thou art to come to the feast to-night,” she replied, “and my lady will give thee answer there.”

“I shall be there, Lettice,” he promptly returned. “Tell her I shall not fail her. But how shall I see her, has she thought of that?”

“We have arranged it all, good sir; thou hast but to do her bidding, and all will go well.”

She did not say that Dorothy had been too distracted in mind to make any arrangements whatever, but, as a matter of fact, this duty had devolved entirely upon

the maid, for her mistress had done little more than nod assent through her tears to all the propositions of her companion. It was the ready wit of Lettice which had proposed everything at just the time when Dorothy was quite unable to suggest anything for herself.

“The wedding ceremony will take place in four more days,” Lettice continued, “and the feasting begins to-night.”

Manners was aware of the fact, and he bowed his head in silent acquiescence.

“And thou art to come to the Hall,” pursued the maid. “Thou art skilful on the lute, my mistress says.”

“I can play the lute,” he answered, “but what of that? Will she pipe me an answer back?”

Page 140

“Nay, Master Manners, listen. Thou art to be a musician for the once, and must join the minstrels in the gallery.”

“In the banqueting-room! Then I must seek a fresh disguise,” he said. “Hey, Lettice, I would it were night already, the day will drag wearily enough for me, I trow; but I shall look for my reward to-night. Thou art sure of what thou hast told me, Lettice, for were she to refuse me after all, it were hard indeed!”

“Trust me, I am not like to be deceived; she wears her heart upon her sleeve. Unless she changes, I have told thee aright, but my lady never changes in her love. Ah, me, I shall lose my mistress soon, and I am sad to think of it.”

“Nay, Lettice,” interposed Manners, “thou shalt marry honest Will, and he shall be my chamberlain. Thou shalt be near Dorothy yet.”

The maid’s countenance flushed with joy at the prospect of such bliss.

“That were happiness, indeed,” she cried, “for or! Master Manners, I love her; I cannot help it—who could? I love her dearly; to part from her—”

“Aye,” interrupted Manners, “who could help it indeed. Tell her I shall see her, I shall be there.”

“And if it be ‘yes,’ my mistress will drop her fan upon the floor,” went on Lettice; “but if the answer is ‘no’ she will tie a black ribbon on it. Thou must watch well, but it will surely fall.”

“Amen,” said Manners. “Then I should be the happiest man on all the earth.”

“But happen my lady will not be there,” the maid went on.

The lover groaned at the thought, and interrupted the maiden by so doing.

“Well, then,” she continued, “either will I give thee a letter, or, if that cannot be, thou must go to Bakewell Church to-morrow eve, and thou shalt find the letter squeezed behind the font. But there, I must away; the day will pass all too quickly for me, for I have much to do.”

“Stay,” he exclaimed, and plucking a sprig of holly from the bush which grew beside the door, he placed it in the maiden’s hand.

“Give her this,” he said, “and tell her it came from me. Bid her keep a stout heart within her; she must smile to-night.”

Lettice took the little bunch of green and red, and making a reverential curtsey to her lady's lover, she hastened away towards the Hall; and, as Manners watched her retreating figure, he saw the form of a man step out from among the bushes and join her company. It was her lover, who had waited with an anxious heart to discover the effect of the promised mediation.

True to his promise, Manners presented himself at the appointed time at the door of the orchestra, though not without inward misgivings as to the character of the reception in store for him. He need, however, have had no apprehension on that score, for everything had been conveniently arranged. The leader of the musicians (they were principally hired Derby men) had been bribed, and when the esquire presented himself for admittance he was warmly greeted.

Page 141

“Well, Ralph!” exclaimed that worthy as he almost wrung Manners’ hands off in the heartiness of his embrace; “thou hast come to thy old friend again, eh? We must cement the friendship this time with a tankard of Haddon-brewed ale, and if thou hast not greatly altered since I knew thee last, thou’lt not be averse to that.”

“Of course not,” replied Manners, readily; “and these are all fresh men? I cannot see one of the old faces among them all.”

“They are good fellows, though,” returned their leader, proudly, “and they play right well. Ha! here comes a messenger.”

The musicians, most of whom had until now been idly leaning over the balcony, gazing, with an interest of which they were not fully aware, at the servants below as they were putting the finishing strokes to the preparation of the feast, immediately took their allotted places, and Manners found himself at the end of the row within the shadow of the wall, and separated from the rest by the intervening body of the leader.

“The baron sends this for the musicians,” said the page, as he deposited a large pitcher of ale upon the gallery floor. “They are coming now, and he would like some merry tunes.”

Even as the lad spoke the guests came pouring into the room; laughing, joking, talking; almost all of them in the merriest possible mood.

Manners scrutinised their faces keenly, and he thought with regret of the time not long ago, when he too had been one of the happiest of all the merry guests of just such another party. But where was Doll? He could not see her anywhere, and so intent was he on searching for his beloved, that the blast of the trumpets by his side startled him and made him fairly jump with surprise.

Mechanically he took his instrument up. The tune was simple and he knew it well, but even as he played his eye wandered from the sheet before him to scan the merry throng below.

Ha! there she was. He discovered her at last, but her gait was lively and her dress was amongst the gayest of the gay; and as she entered leaning upon Sir Edward Stanley’s arm she wore a smile upon her face. His heart misgave him at the sight. Had Lettice deceived him? For a moment he entertained the thought, and he cursed the hope which she had planted in his heart, and then in a fear of anxiety he lay the lute down and looked to find the fatal bow of black.

What was it he saw? His gaze was rivetted upon her dress, by the side of which hung the long fan. His eyes seemed to dance about, his head swam, and, before he could determine the question, Dorothy had passed by and taken her place at the table.

Father Nicholas asked a blessing which was even longer and more wearisome than his predecessor had indulged in, and the occupants of the gallery took advantage of the long interval to quaff the greater portion of the refreshing beverage which Sir George, with characteristic generosity, had sent up to them.

Page 142

The prayer had a conclusion though, and when the good father reached it the fact was signalised by an unanimous, if not very sincere “amen” from the guests, while the band struck up another lively tune.

Throughout the meal the musicians had little rest. One tune was played and immediately another was struck up to take its place, and the gay company at the tables laughed and chattered the while with the utmost vivacity and glee.

For Manners it was a weary time! There appeared to be no end to the succession of dishes, and he impatiently waited for the time when the signal would be given which would give him unbounded joy or doom him to perpetual misery. To him, at least, the time dragged wearily along, the tunes were lifeless, the courses were inordinately long, and it was a positive relief to him when Nicholas rose up again and pronounced a benediction, equally as long and dreary as the opening grace.

The feast was over now, and as the guests defiled out of the room, another air took the place of the one just concluded. As for Manners, all his efforts were concentrated on watching Dorothy’s every movement. He ceased to play, for he had not the heart to continue, and, without making any pretence to be playing his instrument, he laid his lute down and watched with eager eyes.

He noticed that his rival sat by her side, nor did she repel him. When she arose he rose too, and together they started to go out of the chamber. Dorothy lingered; Stanley lingered too. What, O what could she be lingering for? In his anxiety Manners stood up to see the better. His pulse moved in jerks and bounds; his heart rose to his throat, and he gasped for very breath.

The lively tune pursued the even tenour of its way; the burly form of the leader screened him well from view, and that functionary was too much engrossed in the execution of the piece to remark the peculiar conduct of his companion.

Dorothy lingered to look at the pictures she knew so well; but Sir Edward tarried at her side. It was evident he was not at all disposed to leave her, and Dorothy herself at last gave up all hopes of his doing so.

Sir Edward said something to her, but the noise drowned the sound of his voice, and Manners could not hear what it was he had said, but the next moment she permitted Stanley to lead her towards the door. The poor minstrel’s heart sank at the sight. Was this, then, the fulfilment of Lettice’s promise? Had he so misjudged the character of his beloved? He dismissed the thought, for he could not believe it even then.

No, it was not so. Dorothy paused and turned back. Manners involuntarily stood up and followed her with his eyes. Margaret and her betrothed were behind, and to them she went. His spirits revived again.

She laughingly raised her fan and pointed to the carving on the wall.

Was the black knot on? He gasped for breath as he anxiously looked to see. It surely was not there. At all events he could not see it, but then his eyes might be deceiving him, for she was at the further end of the room. Ah! would she only drop the fan which was held up in her trembling hand, and then—

Page 143

With a clatter the fan dropped upon the pavement. Sir Edward gallantly stooped down and returned it to its fair owner, but Manners waited to see no more. She was his; the signal had been given, and picking up his instrument he set to and contributed as good a share to the gladsome melody as any of his fellows.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Plain John Manners Wins his bride.

One touch of her hand, and one word in her ear,
When they reached the hall-door the charger stood near:
So light to the croupe the fair lady he swung,
So light to the saddle before her he sprung!
“She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush, and scaur,
They’ll have fleet steeds that follow,” quoth young Lochinvar.

Scott.

Fast waxed the fun at Haddon, and loud above the strains of music rose the sounds of merriment in the grand old Hall.

It was the bridal night. Margaret Vernon had redeemed her troth-plight, given to Sir Thomas Stanley early in the summer, and in the former part of the day she had been joined in holy wedlock with her lover by Father Nicholas Bury, with more of the Roman Catholic ritual than Queen Elizabeth’s ministers would have approved of had they known it.

Never had Haddon been so full of visitors before. Never had it been so gay. None who came had been turned away. The baron kept an open house, and whilst the rooms of the Hall were strained to the uttermost to find accommodation for the numerous guests, the gate had been thronged throughout the livelong day by an eager crowd of expectant beggars, none of whom had gone away with empty hands.

But now the night was closing in, and the visitors were determined to make the most of it. Sir George was almost ubiquitous. Here, there, wherever the mirth was loudest, there the form of the jovial baron was sure to be found. Old knights and equally elderly dames congregated together in the capacious oriel windows, and, with the tapestry curtains drawn aside, talked of the good old times of “Bluff King Hal,” and pointed out with pride of superiority of their own happy age to these degenerate days. Middle-aged matrons sat proudly watching their offspring as they flitted to and fro, and noted with much satisfaction the matchless beauty of their own daughters, and the mediocrity of the rest; or, were they so inclined, footed it, as of old, with equally middle-aged gallants. Sir Benedict a Woode soon retired from the scene, and taking advantage of his intimate

knowledge of the building, he led a few convivial spirits, like himself, into the wine-cellar, which they did their utmost to empty, until, having imbibed too much, they were fain to lie down, through sheer inability to stand.

It was from the rising generation, however, that the greatest merriment arose. These, paired off in ever changing couples, whirled from one end of the room to the other, and then, without a pause, returned again, heedless alike of the gratulations of their elder friends as they passed them by, and of the indifferent gaze of those who were not their friends who looked at them with jealous eyes.

Page 144

Dorothy, with a heavy load at her heart, wore a bright and even smiling face. She received the flattering service of her admirers as of old, and danced impartially with all who asked for the privilege.

Even Sir Edward Stanley, although she cordially disliked him, came in for a goodly share of her favours. He had noted a change in her conduct of late, and that change was for the better. He imagined that she was readier to accept his advances, and when he had communicated his thoughts to his brother, they were confirmed in almost every respect. Sir Thomas had remarked exactly the same change, and they readily ascribed it to a yielding of the maiden's spirit.

Little did they suspect that this alteration in her bearing was due to any other cause than that Manners was being forgotten, and in his happiness at the change, Sir Edward was content to let her enjoy herself as she listed, feeling sure that ere the end of another month there would be another bridal party, in which Dorothy Vernon and himself would be the principal actors.

When the merriment was at its highest, and the boisterousness was at its climax, Dorothy remembered that the time was fast approaching when she would have to depart. Her lover—he who had risked so much for her sake—would be waiting in the cold meadow with the horses waiting for her! and she sank down to rest, well knowing the terrible strain she would soon be called upon to endure.

"Fair Mistress Dorothy is tired, I perceive," quoth a young knight, as he approached her, longing for her company in another dance.

"Aye," she answered. "I have danced too much, sir knight, and my shoe pinches too," she added, with perfect truth.

"Then by my troth," responded the gallant youth, "I swear you have a full small shoe."

"Come, Dorothy," said Margaret as she came up to her sister's side, "here is a gentle knight who would dance with thee," and she gravely introduced the veteran cavalier De Lacey.

"You will forgive me awhile, will you not, Sir John?" said Dorothy, "for I am wearied and the room is over hot," and smiling back at the gracious reply of the old knight, who accepted her excuse, she retired to the corner of the room, while the disappointed De Lacey proceeded to join company with Sir Benedict a Woode, and found solace in quaffing the baron's wine.

Dorothy's heart was beating fast; the critical moment had come. She was close beside the door which led into the ante-chamber, and a slight noise in that apartment recalled to her memory the fact that her faithful maid Lettice was waiting for her there.

She lingered, and her resolution wavered. It was hard to go and leave behind the scenes of merry childhood and all the pleasant recollections connected with the home; and as she sat there undecided, many pleasant recollections rushed back into her memory and pleaded powerfully with her tender heart. But the greatest pang of all was the parting from the baron. She loved him sincerely, and she knew that he loved her dearly in return. This it was which now held her back, but the movements of her maid in the adjoining room continually reminded her that her lover would be waiting for her with an anxious heart.

Page 145

The struggle which raged in her breast was bitter, but short and decisive. The love she bore to Manners outweighed all other considerations, and casting a last fond look at the scene from which she was about to tear herself, she chose a moment when a peal of laughter at the further end of the room attracted the attention of the company, and slipping behind the tapestry curtain, she pushed the door gently open and stole quietly through.

It was a desperate thing to do, and required all the nerve that Dorothy had at her command. How the door creaked as she closed it after her. It must, surely, call attention to the fact that she had passed through. But no one came, and she flung herself into the arms of her maid, trembling like an aspen leaf with fear.

“Oh, Lettice,” she sobbed, “tell the baron I love him still, and Margaret, too. Poor Meg! ’tis hard to be severed thus.”

“Hush, my lady,” replied the maid. “This is no time for weeping. Master Manners hath been here awaiting thee. I bade him go, for that were neither safe for him nor thee.”

“You shall join us soon, Lettice. But, O! give my duty to the baron. I should care naught were it not for him—and Meg; but Margaret is happy now.”

“And so shalt thou be soon. But haste! moments are precious now. Thy gown and everything has gone, and the brave Master Manners waits for thee alone. There, go. Hark! someone is coming,” and throwing a shawl over the graceful shoulders of her mistress, Lettice affectionately embraced her, and watching her hasten down the steps she waited until Dorothy was out of sight before shutting and barring the doors behind her.

As Dorothy passed the ballroom, she could hear distinctly the sounds of merriment within, but she heeded them not. The lights shone through the open oriel windows right upon her path, but she crept under the shadow of the wall and passed hastily on. It was a trying time, but she safely passed through it, and quickly found herself at the little latchet gate below the bowling green. It stood open, and through it she hastened, casting neither a look to the right nor to the left, nor yet behind her, but only anxious that her escape should be unknown. Down the slope she ran, nor did she stop until she found herself clasped in the fond embrace of her lover, upon the footbridge.

“My darling,” murmured Manners, “thou art come at last. God bless thee, my love,” and he kissed the tear-stained face over and over again.

“I am ready, John,” she murmured; “but quick, hasten! our start will be short, for they will mark my absence soon.”

Bestowing another shower of kisses upon her, Manners led her across the narrow bridge. How gaily the water danced and sparkled and made melody amongst the stones! How the wind sighed sweetly and whispered among the trees, and how the strains of music and the sounds of revelry sounded through the open windows of the Hall. But of all the sounds that Manners heard there was none which thrilled him so much, or caused him so much happiness, as the sound of Dorothy's dress as it rustled against the walls of the narrow bridge when they passed through.

Page 146

Once on the other side there was no delay. The horses were in waiting, and seizing the bridle of one, Manners helped Dorothy to mount into the saddle, and then lightly springing into another, he set spurs to his steed and away they started.

The most sequestered roads were chosen, for they wished to see as few people as possible, and to be seen by none. But Manners did not trust to this alone. He felt the preciousness of his charge, and had brought horses and men with him, whom he sent off in couples by different roads, to lead their pursuers on a false scent if pursuit were made.

All through the night they rode. Scenes which charmed them before they now passed by unnoticed, and their grandeur was ignored. Masson's heights, up which they had often wandered together, instilled no pleasant thoughts within their breasts now; their one object, which engrossed all their attention, was to hasten forward to gain a haven of safety.

As the grey light of the morning broke upon them, and the rising sun began to make its appearance, they crossed the border, and passed out of the county of Derby into the neighbouring shire of Leicester. Still they pushed on, for there was no telling how soon their pursuers might be upon them; nor did they draw rein until well into the morning, when, though Dorothy, animated for the time being with a wonderful amount of endurance, gave her voice for hastening forward, Manners deemed it advisable, for her sake, to stay.

They stopped their steeds at a wayside inn, but here so unusual a sight as two travellers on horseback—one a maiden of surpassing beauty, clothed in rare and costly silks, and the other a gallant young knight—soon caused a little crowd of curious rustics to congregate around the house.

"Poor lady," exclaimed one tender-hearted matron, as she watched Dorothy dismount. "She is of gentle blood; just see how weary she looks."

"Didst ever see the likes of such a riding dress afore?" asked her neighbour, as she eyed Doll's dress admiringly.

"Beshrew me," added an onlooker of the sterner sex, "'tis a runaway match, I'll warrant me. These horses are ridden to death."

Neither Dorothy nor Manners was disposed to stay any longer than was necessary amid such a curious people, and after partaking of a good breakfast, and indulging in a little rest, they started on their way again, with a fresh relay of horses.

This time they never stopped until they rode up to the little church, within which the shivering clergyman sat, anxiously awaiting the couple whom he had engaged to marry.

He was ignorant of the plot, and though he might have guessed it pretty well, he was by no means anxious to lose by over-inquisitiveness the handsome fee which the young man had promised. He only chafed at their delay, and when at length they arrived and entered the sacred edifice he proceeded straightway with the service, quite as anxious to get it over, so that he might partake of his breakfast, as were the couple before him, and almost as quickly as they could have wished.

Page 147

“Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?” said the parson, as he gabbled on with the service.

“Aye, I will!” responded Manners, in a clear ringing voice which was echoed among the rafters of the roof, and he took her to his bosom and sealed the pledge with a kiss—a proceeding so unusual and peculiar that the good clergyman opened his eyes and mouth, until finally he came to a full stop.

“I will!” repeated Manners, addressing the parson, “but why do you stop?” and he looked suspiciously behind to see if his pursuers had come to rob him of his prize. There was no one there, however, save a few rustics, who, prompted by sheer curiosity, had entered the church and stood lingering just within the sacred portal, and in a few minutes more the lovers emerged from the little church, safely joined together in the bonds of holy wedlock, followed by the parson, who wore a smiling face, inasmuch as he had been rewarded with a gift far beyond his utmost expectations. But the two lovers were far happier than he, and with the certificate of marriage, signed, sealed, and entered in the register, they remounted their steeds and proceeded at a steady pace to Nottingham Castle, where, the Earl of Rutland having unexpectedly returned, he extended a right hearty welcome to his nephew and his beautiful bride.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Peace at last.

Nor was she to be found! Her father cried,
“’Tis but to make a trial of his love!”
And filled his glass to all, but his hand shook,
And soon from guest to guest the panic spread.

Rogers.

Still at Haddon the fun maintained its uproarious course, and amid the whirl of festivity Dorothy’s absence was not remarked.

Sir Edward Stanley was far too elated with the vision of success which had opened out before him to bore Dorothy with his presence on this occasion, but in spite of this he rarely let his eyes depart from watching her.

“Hi, Sir Edward,” cried an inquisitive old dame from one of the deep window recesses. “Hither, good knight, for I would talk with thee awhile.”

He could not very well resist such a direct appeal, but he took his seat beside her unwillingly enough.

“I hear, Sir Edward,” confidentially began the dame, “that in a month you are to wed Mistress Dorothy Vernon; is that so?”

“It is,” he replied, curtly.

“You are a lucky knight, then,” she replied, “for, except my Isabel, Dorothy is the fairest maiden I have ever clapt eyes on. But then, Isabel, forsooth, is not so rich. We cannot all be Vernons, you know, though if everybody had their deserts we—”

“Yes, I trow that she is rich and fair; but for neither of these do I care so much as her love,” gallantly responded Stanley.

“Tut, now, Sir Edward,” pursued his tormentor, “both you and I know full well that people marry for riches and rank, not for beauty. You marry for riches, I suppose, and she for rank. Now, sir knight, am I not right?” she asked triumphantly.

Page 148

“Nay, my lady, you are far from it. You will excuse me now, I am sure; I am promised a dance with Dorothy shortly,” and he got up and departed, glad to get away so quickly, and deaf to her entreaty to return.

His temper was ruffled, and he walked away to look for his partner, to lose his irritation in the sunshine of her company.

But Dorothy was nowhere to be seen.

He paced up and down the length of the room, chafing at her absence, and peering into every corner and recess as he wandered along. The dining-room and banqueting-hall were searched equally in vain, and at last the baffled lover concluded that she had retired for a little rest.

He waited, irritated not a little at the long delay. His eye scanned each passing figure again and again, and rigorously searched each group, but it was all “love’s labour lost;” Dorothy could not be found; and finally, unable any longer to control the forebodings of his suspicious heart, he hastened to the baron and acquainted him with all his fears.

“Tush, man,” replied Sir George gaily; “maybe she is feeling somewhat out of sorts, or happen she is tired. Margaret!” he called, as the newly-married maiden was passing along, “do thou seek for Dorothy, my Lady Stanley. Thy new brother, Sir Edward, is jealous of her absence.”

“Ah, prithee do, good Margaret,” added that unhappy knight. “Her absence just at this time bodes no good, I fear, and makes me feel uneasy.”

“She shall be here soon,” replied Lady Stanley, and she went away to seek the truant sister, leaving her husband to beguile the tediousness of the time by engaging in conversation with his brother. Sir Thomas was in high glee, and could find no sympathy with the miserable forebodings of his younger brother.

“I tell thee what, Edward,” he said, “thou must let her have more freedom. You are too rash; you must be astute an you would succeed. Dorothy is drawn by affection, not driven by ill words or sour looks. It had been better for thee, I trow, an thou hadst not pressed for the marriage so soon; but thou hast done it now.”

“Lady Maude advised me in it, and I cannot say I repent it now, though my heart does misgive ever and again,” he replied.

“That John Manners,” continued the elder Stanley, “is a good enough man, a likely fellow, and would have done well for Dorothy; aye, and had not you been in the way, he would have won her, too. Thou art no match for him, Edward; thou art too impatient.”

Edward hung down his head, and gazed uncomfortably upon the floor. He was conscious of the truth of his brother's statement, and could not well refute it. He paused in silence, hoping that the subject would be pursued no further.

"Here comes Margaret," he said, lifting up his head and feeling mightily relieved that the awkward pause had come to an end; but sorely dismayed to see no Dorothy following behind.

Page 149

“Where is she?—she has gone!” he almost screamed as he saw the look of consternation on her face.

“I cannot find her,” Margaret replied, addressing herself to Sir Thomas. “I have searched her rooms, but all in vain; and no one knows aught of her, no one has seen her.”

“Said I not so?” furiously exclaimed Sir Edward. “She has gone; the bird has flown.”

“What bird?” asked the baron, coming up.

“Dorothy, Sir George. Dorothy has fled.”

“Fled; nay it cannot be,” returned the baron, stoutly. He had too much faith in Dorothy to believe that.

“They are searching for her now,” said Margaret. “Nobody knows where she is, and Sir Edward has missed her long. I cannot understand it.”

“Her clothes are gone. Her riding habit has gone,” exclaimed one of the domestics, rushing breathlessly up to the group. “Father Nicholas hath just come in and he says two horses, galloping, passed him on the Ashbourne road. One, he thinks might have been a lady, but it was too dark to see distinctly.”

This she gasped out in jerks, but her news was intelligible enough, and it threw the whole assembly at once into a ferment of confusion, amid which could be heard the voice of Sir Edward Stanley exclaiming, in a tone far above the rest of the babel—“That was Dorothy.”

“Gone!” exclaimed the baron, aghast. “Nay, search the Hall.”

“Out; to your saddles, ye gallant knights,” commanded Sir Thomas Stanley, promptly. “Here is a prize worth the capturing. She must be stopped!” and he quickly led the way to the stables, and in a very short space of time was mounted and urging his steed to the utmost along the Ashbourne road.

Sir George stayed behind; he could not believe that Dorothy had really gone; but when a thorough investigation of the Hall, and the outbuildings also, revealed the fact that she was nowhere there, he was stricken with dismay, and succumbed, for a time, to a feeling of despair.

“Nicholas,” he said, as the worthy father approached to comfort him, “thou art sure that one was a lady?”

“It was dark, Sir George,” the priest replied. “I was unsuspicious, and deep in meditation, but I fear it was so.”

“Was it my Doll?”

“I cannot say,” he replied. “I never saw the face, and did but imperfectly see the form.”

The baron sank back, regardless of the ladies who crowded round him, commiserating his ill fortune. He remained silent, with a bowed head and bleeding heart.

All night long the pursuit was kept up. Every lane was searched, every innkeeper was severely catechised, and although in several instances they had the satisfaction of hearing that couples, either on horses or in conveyances, had passed, yet when the quarry was hunted down, if it did not turn out to be an inoffensive market gardener and his worthy spouse returning from Derby Christmas market, in almost every other instance the horsemen were the decoys that Manners had so carefully provided.

Page 150

At last the chase was given up. Dorothy had proved one too many for them, and with mingled feelings her pursuers turned their steeds again towards Haddon, curious to learn if any of the others had been more fortunate than themselves.

The two Stanleys were the last to return, but after having been out in the saddle for more than a whole day, and that upon the right scent, they were obliged to return without having met with success.

The next day was spent in searching the neighbourhood. Every inn and every house was visited, but the night falling, they returned again empty-handed, and very disconsolate.

News came with the next day's courier, for Dorothy dutifully acquainted her father, in a touching letter, with all the details of the engagement, the elopement, and the marriage. Manners, too, sent a note to the baron, in which he pathetically pleaded Dorothy's cause. "And sure," the epistle concluded, "so doting a father as you undoubtedly are would not force so loving a daughter to wed against her will. You clearly sought her welfare and, in choosing Sir Edward Stanley, thought you were doing well for her, but it was a sad mistake. I have her undivided love, and even if we are for ever banished from 'dear old Haddon,' as Doll delights to call it, we shall be happy in each other's confidence and love; though I confess that Dorothy hath a tender heart and grieves to think how you must regard her. None but myself, she declares, could ever have led her to leave thee. I feel for thee, but I feel for my sweet Doll, too. At thy bidding, whenever given, we will gladly visit thee. Till then—adieu."

"Married!" cried Lady Vernon, aghast, as Sir Thomas Stanley read the letter aloud. She was speechless with rage and could say no more, but her looks betokened the feelings of her heart."

"Married!" echoed Sir Edward, in dismay.

"Aye, married," responded Sir Thomas. "You have lost her, Edward; it is as I said."

"Poor, foolish Dorothy," exclaimed the baron, in a decidedly sympathetic frame of mind. "Poor Doll."

"Poor Dorothy, indeed," retorted Lady Maude, sharply. "Wicked, perverse Dorothy, you mean, Sir George. I shall never look at her again. We must make her undo the marriage bond again, Sir Edward," she continued, turning to the disappointed lover.

Even that rash knight could see the futility of such advice, and he despondently shook his head.

"Nay," he said, "I fear that cannot be easily done."

“Easily done, sir knight,” tauntingly replied the dame. “Who talks of ease in a matter like this? It must—it shall be done.”

“It cannot be done,” replied Sir Thomas, promptly. “Manners will have been too careful to allow of that. We must resign ourselves to the loss; and you, Edward, will have to seek elsewhere for a bride.”

“‘Resign’ and ‘cannot,’” continued Lady Vernon, contemptuously. “Did’st ever hear the like of it, Margaret?”

Page 151

But Margaret was mercifully inclined, and by siding with Dorothy she would be supporting her husband. Therefore she could not agree with the angry declamations of her stepmother.

“Poor Dorothy,” she exclaimed, “I pity her, but she has done foolishly indeed.”

Lady Vernon was astonished; she had counted upon Margaret’s support at least.

“Pity her, indeed!” she scornfully laughed. “She shall have little enough of my pity if ever I clap my eyes on her again,” replied Lady Vernon. “She shall never come here again.”

“Hush, Maude,” interrupted the baron, “I shall settle that.”

Lady Vernon had never been spoken to in such a manner since she had wedded Sir George, and she staggered back in surprise as though she had been struck by an invisible hand.

“You will—!” she began, but checked herself. The baron’s brow was forbidding. She had never seen him look so threatening before, and she cowered back in fear and kept a discreet silence.

“I am furious,” the baron burst out, with a sudden revulsion of feeling. “To think that my Dorothy should serve me thus! and as she has chosen, so shall it be. She prefers Manners to me, then she shall have him. I disown her, she is none of mine. She shall never return.”

Flesh and blood, however, is very human, and, in spite of his stern resolve never to see Dorothy again, the baron’s naturally kind heart soon began to soften, and in a short space of time his feelings had entirely undergone a change. He longed to clasp his lost darling to his heart again, and tell her she was forgiven, but he was proud, and his pride held him back from declaring his sentiments.

It was not long to be endured. He became anxious. Dorothy was ill. Sir Ronald Bury had sent him word of that in a letter which was calculated to stab the baron to the very heart. He grew restless; his conscience pricked him day and night, until, unable to bear it any longer, he declared himself.

“Maude,” he said, as together they sat in the lonely dining-room, “Dorothy has been a month gone now.”

“Yes,” she carelessly replied.

“And I hear she is sorely ill.”

“Like enough,” said Lady Vernon, not unwilling to make the knight suffer a little, for she had not forgiven him yet. “She was ill enough when she went.”

“Then,” returned the baron, “she shall come back; we cannot do without her.”

Lady Vernon turned sharply round to expostulate with her lord, but seeing his forbidding countenance, she desisted, and her silence Sir George tacitly construed as acquiescence.

“I shall send for her this very day,” pursued the good old knight, “we must try to forget the past, Maude—for, in good sooth, we have all done amiss—and begin again. We have no Margaret now, and without Doll, gone in such a fashion withal, we were miserable indeed.”

“We must have more balls and feasts,” quickly suggested Lady Maude. “They will heal our wounds.”

Page 152

“Balls and feasts!” repeated the baron. “Nay, we are too old for those now. We should only get Benedict and old De Lacey to come, for, by my halidame, squires and knights won’t come to see us now Meg and Doll are gone, and then, Maude, after all, you know,” he continued slyly, “love will have its own way, and you trow full well that folk blamed me enough when I wedded.”

Lady Maude blushed. The comments on her marriage with the baron had been by no means what she might have wished, as the remembrance of them was not particularly pleasant to her even now, so she discreetly held her peace.

“We cannot blame her, Maude,” went on Sir George, waxing enthusiastic as the love of Dorothy asserted itself more and more within him. “We are all alike to blame, and had I been John Manners myself, I should maybe have done just what he has done. Who could help it, eh, Maude? Not I, in truth; and then, Manners has done us good service, too. We must welcome them back, and make them happy if we can. I shall send a message off now.”

Before his feelings had found time to change—even had he so wished—he scrawled a note of forgiveness to the fugitives, praying them to return, and before he returned to his wife the messenger was on his way.

* * * * *

A warm welcome awaited gallant John Manners and his beautiful lady as, a week later, they were met by the fond father just outside Haddon.

Impatiently, the baron had awaited their return. For two whole days he had done little else than watch for their coming, from the loftiest portion of the tall eagle tower, and when at last the little cavalcade could be distinguished in the far distance, wending its way with all possible haste towards the Hall, he started off to meet them.

It was a glad reunion. Even Lady Maude was touched, as she met them in the courtyard, and with much more kindliness than she had been wont to treat Doll for some time, she kissed the upraised face; Manners received a stately bow. He, at all events, had much to be forgiven yet; but the baron, casting the last particle of pride to the winds, warmly and repeatedly embraced his daughter, and frankly greeted her husband.

The menials with one accord united to welcome back the youthful couple, for Dorothy was universally beloved, and somehow or other the story of Manners’ disguise had got abroad and had made hosts of admiring friends for him, both high and low.

Even Lady Maude melted at last and regarded him with favour, but whether this was because she learned that his uncle, the earl, favoured his nephew and petted his bride,

or whether the highly satisfactory conduct of Master Manners himself gained her esteem, must be left for the courteous reader to determine.

Happiness now reigned once more in Haddon. The old Hall rung again with shouts of gladness, and in a short space of time Manners had the satisfaction of promoting Lettice's husband to a more honourable position than he had formerly occupied.

Page 153

At the end of a year, as the oft-falling snows betokened the coming of another Christmas, sad news reached Haddon. Margaret was dead. The dampness of Castle Rushen had brought on a fever, to which she soon had succumbed. Thus the whole estates of Haddon fell, ultimately, to Dorothy's share, which she presented to her faithful lover as her dowry. John Manners' descendants, the Rutlands, have had reason to be thankful for this, for it added largely to their riches, but Manners himself declared that had she brought him all the wealth that "Good Queen Bess" possessed, he had not been one whit the happier. He could see nothing he prized so highly as his wife, and in her he found his all in all.

It is only necessary to add that discord, never again invaded the domain of Haddon. The marriage proved a happy one; and no one, except the Stanleys, regretted it in

The end.