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From the Author

B L Farjeon

Dunecan 15th January 1866

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SHADOWS on The SNOW
A CHRISTMAS STORY
BY B L FARJEON

SHADOWS ON THE SNOW:

A CHRISTMAS STORY,

BY B. L. FARJEON.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

BY N. CHEVALIER.

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frontispiece, facing page 59 & the vignette
on page 1
Dedicated to Charles Dickens.

PREFACE.

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In presenting this Christmas Story to the public, the Author hopes for welcome as much from the kindly feeling engendered by the time, as from any merit of the work itself. It has long been a matter of surprise to him, that Christmas in this and other Colonies should have been so often allowed to pass without some literary effort being made to recognise its genial influence. If the publication of this book serves as a link in the chain that binds the hearts of residents in the Colonies to their home-lands, his ambition will be satisfied.

The Author desires to thank Mr. N. Chevalier for the generous readiness with which he has contributed, by his artistic pencil, towards the success of this Christmas Story. Had the Author's acquaintance with

Mr. Chevalier been of longer duration, the reader would certainly have had the benefit of a larger number of Illustrations.

The Author must cease to speak of his work and of himself, but, in doing so, he would earnestly repeat the words addressed to millions of readers by a greater writer than the Colonies can hope to produce—"May we meet again!"

Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand,

Christmas, 1865.

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SHADOWS ON THE SNOW.

PART I.

HOW THE SHADOWS APPEARED AT WARLEYCOMBE, AND WHAT THEY SAID AND DID.

OUR story commences in a quiet lane in Devonshire — in a narrow, quiet lane where, in the summer, the flowered hedgerows on either side shut out from view the pretty homesteads in their rear, and where, in the winter, the naked branches threaded the air with snow lines fantastically, while the sharp, thin twigs were whitely lighted up with pearl-drooping eyes of icicle. A quiet, narrow lane, luxuriantly dotted with violets and forget-me-nots, delicious in the drowsy summer, when the hum of bees could be faintly heard in the tangled bush of honeysuckles and wild roses. A quiet, narrow lane, at the end of which came, suddenly and quaintly, a view of a shallow reach of a noble river fresh from the sea, where the clear water lay calmly in its rustic shelter, while on its bosom glowed the shadow of its gardened banks. A quiet, narrow lane,

wherein, summer and winter, a thousand new graces unfolded themselves, and where Nature made holiday in every season of the year.

It was the evening of a sharp wintry day in December, so near to Christmas, that the sun threw golden shadows on its holly-crowned head, and welcomed its approach with a fiery splendor. Even the old elm tree that stood outside Stephen Winkworth's house, long before Stephen Winkworth was thought of, blushed crimson sympathetically, and then, as if ashamed that so venerable a piece of timber should be guilty of such emotion, grew gradually grayer and grayer until it resumed its wonted equanimity. Certainly there might have been a cause for this, for Stephen Winkworth himself, as he stood at his door watching the declining day, was no very pleasant addition to the landscape, and did not show in his face any signs of rejoicing. Indeed, had the ancient elm tree possessed reflective powers, it would probably have thought that the obliteration of Stephen Winkworth's presence from the scene would have been no great loss. Be that as it may, there he stood, watching the deepening shadows in the sky. Bitter, morose, and discontented, there he stood, at war with the world and with himself. "Stephen the woman-hater," people called him; they might have added man-hater also, for all the love he bore his sex. It made one bad-tempered to look at the surly wrinkles in his face, and people felt an inclination to snarl at each other when he was in their company. He was not ungainly, either, and was still in the prime of life; but as he showed himself to the world, he was like a dried-up piece of

anatomy, with every drop of the milk of human kindness squeezed clean out of him.

There was only one occasion throughout the year on which, of his own free will, he mixed with his neighbors, and that was Christmas Eve. And there was only one house in all Devonshire in which, even upon that exceptional occasion, he could be seen in the company of his fellows, and that house was Warleycombe Lodge, the residence of his once firm friend, Reuben Harrild. Harrild and he had been friends in their youthful days, and in one of their boyish confidences had pledged themselves never to spend Christmas apart from each other. Stephen Winkworth had not broken his promise; and so upon this Christmas eve he stood at his door, watching the glowing tints darkening in the sky, and thinking of the gay company in which he would presently find himself. The house of his friend was within view, and he could see the reflection of the dying sun in each pane of glass, that shone like a fiery eye upon the landscape. No softening influence came upon him, even as he gazed upon this solemn splendor. With deep-set lines upon his face, and with form immovable, he stood like an image carved in stone—stern, impassive, relentless, and unfeeling.

As he stood thus, a cheerful voice accosted him, and he turned abruptly, as if angry at the interruption to his thoughts.

"Good evening, neighbor. Fine weather this for Christmas!"

The speaker was a good-looking man of some five-and-twenty years of age, William Fairfield by name. He was a farmer in the neighborhood of Warleycombe, and

although regarded somewhat in the light of a new-comer, had been cordially welcomed into the society of his neighbors. It was doubtful whether the common life of a small country farmer would have suited a nature such as his—daring, impulsive, and ambitious. But he had been thrown into the society of Reuben Harrild's daughter, Laura, and between the two an attachment had sprung up sufficiently strong to bind him to Warleycombe. William was accompanied by a singular-looking individual, scarcely five feet in height, but with a head so enormous, that it might properly have belonged to one of the sons of Anak. This man was an institution in the neighborhood; had come many years ago from nobody knew where, and had gradually worked himself into the confidence, and gained the love and esteem, of every man, woman, and child, for twenty miles round. Nothing more was known of him than that his name was Bax, that he was a Doctor, and that he practised his profession more for love than for gain. Doctor Bax was welcomed everywhere, and by everybody. He took an interest in everything. Women would speak of him as Dear Doctor Bax, and husbands were not jealous to hear; children would run out to meet him, and "Laocoon" his legs without putting him out of temper; young men in love would press him into their confidence; and young women would whisper their little troubles into his ear. He had a kind word and honest advice for all, and never seemed tired of doing good gratuitously.

Now, one would have thought that the very sight of such a man would have been sufficient to induce some sign of cheerful recognition. But not so thought Stephen

Winkworth; he evidently looked upon the little Doctor as an intrusion, and did not care to conceal his feelings in the matter. But as for Doctor Bax, bless your soul! sour looks had no more effect upon him than upon the Sphynx, and he returned Stephen's surly recognition with a smile genial enough to have melted all the ice in every water-butt in Devonshire.

"Fine weather, sir!" exclaimed the little Doctor, rubbing his hands and sniffing in the air. "It's finer than fine weather, sir; it's glorious weather. Smell it!" and here he gave another vigorous sniff. "Take off your hat and bow to it;" and taking off his hat, he bared to the fresh air a poll as smooth as a billiard ball and as polished as a looking-glass. "Fine weather, sir! By the Lord, if one could live in such weather for fifty years, he would not be a day older at the end. If old Parr had had such weather as this, he'd have lived to a thousand. Not a year less, as I am a living man!"

Stephen made no reply, unless the sour look he threw at the speaker could be construed into one.

"We live in a glorious climate," proceeded Doctor Bax, looking round with a thorough sense of enjoyment. "Christmas would lose half its charm if it were not for the snow, and the ice, and the life-giving cold air. We breathe in youth in such weather as this."

"You are a fortunate man, Doctor," said Stephen, with a little cynical laugh.

"Fortunate! yes I am fortunate," quickly, yet somewhat gravely responded Doctor Bax.

"Fortunate," continued Stephen, who had a manner of pursuing a speech without heeding interruption, "in

disposition, I mean ; fortunate in being able to think so well of things. Now, for my part, I think the evening is cold, and chilly, and damp, a friend to rheumatism and bronchitis. I see nothing fine in it."

"Probably not—probably not," returned the Doctor ; "but that is not your fault ; that is the fault of your temperament. You can't help that, you know. You were born with it, and you are not to blame. The question is," continued Doctor Bax, musingly, "who is to blame? You can't throw it upon your father and mother, for they did not know anything about it. We are all born with differently shaped heads ; we are not accountable for that. You see, if a child came into the world with two tongues, he could not help speaking double could he? Rather a comical idea, that. Ha! ha! ha!"

But although the Doctor laughed heartily at the notion, and was as heartily joined by William Fairfield, Stephen Winkworth did not seem to think that any demonstration of enjoyment was necessary on his part. On the contrary, he appeared rather displeased with the hilarity of his companions, and a short pause elapsed before he spoke.

"You call yourself a philosopher, I should not wonder," he then said, scornfully.

"If philosophy mean contentment with things as they are," said Doctor Bax, "then I say, yes, I am a philosopher."

"I suppose you have never had any domestic misfortunes," Stephen said ; "you have never experienced any heart-shock that turned your blood from its natural currents and diseased it. You are a happy man, contented with yourself and with the world."

"I am happy, and contented with the world," returned Doctor Bax; "but I have seen misfortune, and I thank God for it."

"That is your cant, and of a piece with other human hypocrisy," sneered Stephen. "You thank God for misfortune, because it sounds well. You bless outwardly what I curse inwardly. It is wise in you—for the world likes you, and welcomes you, while it turns its back even upon my shadow."

"That is the view you take of it, Stephen Winkworth," replied the Doctor, gently. "It is not your fault—it is the fault of your temperament, and I pity you."

"I do not need your pity. Bestow it where it is more welcome. Why, look you here, Doctor Bax, who is the braver of the two, you or I? You, who cringe and crouch beneath unmerited misfortune; or I, who resent it, and curse it? As I do, as I shall, until I die! And so the world may go and hang itself for all the love I bear it; and I might go and hang myself for all the love it bears me. That's my philosophy. A tougher one than yours, I'll engage."

"A tough one, indeed," said the Doctor, shaking his head sadly, "but all the fault of your temperament. I lay no blame to you for thinking thus, and I take no credit to myself for being different. Why, here is our young friend," indicating William Fairfield, "engaged to be married to the sweetest girl in Devonshire. Suppose he thought as you do. A pretty kettle of fish that would be. And nice ideas your's are to carry about with one at Christmas time. I declare, seriously, I think you are much to be pitied."

"And so you are going to marry Reuben Harrild's daughter," said Stephen, turning to the young man. "You love her frantically, of course?"

"I love her as she deserves to be loved," was the simple reply.

"Take care she does not deceive you!" exclaimed Stephen, with sudden passion. "Watch her—never let her out of your sight, or she is no true woman if she do not play you false."

"Do not answer him, William, do not answer him," said the Doctor, checking the reply that rose to William's lips. "He does not know what he is saying—he of all others should not doubt the purity of woman's love."

"Love!" said Stephen laughing bitterly, "a fiction! a sham! a delusion! It can be bought and sold. Believe in it, trust in it, lavish all your thoughts on it, work for it, centre all the earnestness of your soul on it; and wake up one day from your dream, and look at your idol, defaced, dishonored, lying at your feet."

"No, no," interrupted Doctor Bax, earnestly. "He does not mean it, William. Do not believe that he means it. He knows that it is no delusion—he knows that it is all good and holy. Why, William, think of his daughter ——"

"Hush, man," broke in Stephen, casting an almost frightened look round him. "Do not let her hear you."

"Dear—dear!" said Doctor Bax, as he and William walked away; "what an unfortunate temperament that man has. Come, Will, let us have a race to the house."

And off they set, running as fast as their legs would carry them, towards Warleycombe Lodge, where they arrived in a state of laughing breathlessness.

Meanwhile, Stephen Winkworth, with the same stern, relentless look upon his countenance, with the same bitter feelings at his heart, stood watching their departing forms, without a thought in unison with the sacred peacefulness of the evening. The shadows grew deeper and deeper, and the reflection from the dying sun's couch of fire grew darker and darker every moment. And as the night crept on, his thoughts appeared to keep pace with its increasing sombreness.

"Father!" came a low plaintive voice from within the house, and at the word a quivering emotion passed over Stephen's face.

"My child!" and the man's voice, before so harsh, had a soft sweet sound as the words issued from his lips.

He turned to go in, but to his side had crept a figure so wan, so pitiful, that strange eyes looking upon it for the first time would have filled with grief at the unhappy sight.

A girl, dwarfed and mis-shapen, with a face on which a quiet grief had so firmly set its seal that an expression of gladness upon it seemed almost an impossibility. A girl, scarce eighteen years of age, without a trace of youth in her form or countenance. Yes, one. Hump-backed, ghastly as she was, masses of silken hair enveloped her, and gave her something that belongs to the grace of youth. As the man looked down upon her crippled form, a shudder of remorse passed across his features, and he stooped to lay his cheek against her upturned face, caressingly.

"Well, my lass," cried he, "we must make ourselves fine to-night. Reuben Harrild's house will be filled with gay company, to welcome Christmas, forsooth! as if Christmas could not go on well enough without their tom-foolery."

Nothing but a sigh answered him for a time. Presently—

"Father," she said, "I wish you would not speak so lightly of Christmas. It is the only holiday we have through the year. It is a good time."

"No time is good for me, child, when I see you thus," and his voice trembled with strong emotion as he turned her hair from her face. "I have no holiday while you are suffering."

"Yes, yes," she answered dreamily, "it is wearisome, wearisome. But I am not quite unhappy, father. It cannot last for ever. I often feel contented with my pain when I think of by-and-bye. And Christmas is a good time."

"I could think so, child, if I saw you, as I see others, enjoying the time as they do. All times would be good for me—aye, even me, whom all men hate"——

"No, no, father," she pleaded.

"All times would be good for me," he continued, unheeding the interruption, "if I could see you, as I see others of your age, happy and light-hearted—if I could see you as I see you in my dreams, as I should see you but for the blight that fell upon my heart when you were, thank God! oh, thank God! too young to remember. Forgive me, child, for causing these tears. There, let me kiss them away."

"It cannot be helped, father," she said, with a kind of pitiful humor. "Doctor Bax said I could never come straight again;" and she cast a look of pity upon her stunted shape. "And I might be worse, you know. I can see, and hear, and speak; all these are blessings of which I might have been deprived, and so I am thankful. When I look up to the sky, on such an evening as this, I feel almost happy. And the time *is* good, father, is it not? Christmas *is* a good time."

But no assenting answer fell from his lips. He stood there, with his poor maimed child by his side, gazing at the floating clouds, and fighting with his heart.

"I could be happier—I know I could be happier, if you and the world were different to each other—if you did not look upon it as your enemy. But it cannot be, father, can it?"

"No, child, it cannot be."

"You are good and kind to me, father. Stoop down and kiss me. I love you as dearly as I know you love me. Why should you so love me and be bitter with all others? All men are not bad."

"Child, child, do not torture me."

"And nature is full of goodness," she continued, "still sweetly pleading; "and see, father, see! there is my angel."

And pointing upward, the child showed him a large gray cloud, with white fleecy wings, which her imagination had quaintly fashioned into the figure of an angel.

"Look at his arms, extended as if he were blessing us and the time. I can sometimes almost distinguish his face. His wings are stretching now as if he would

enfold all heaven to his bosom. I never saw him looking so grand before. I know he is at his best because of the time. Say that Christmas is a good time, and make me happy."

"Christmas is a good time, child," he said, almost doggedly.

"No, no! not like that! From your heart, father—I want you to say it from your heart. Look upon me, father, look upon me, with gentle thoughts, and then sit down by my side, for I must tell you something or I shall die."

There was so much vehement passion in her action, there was so much agonised emotion in her voice, that, almost fear-struck, he seated himself upon the door-step.

For a few moments she could not utter a word. Presently she said—

"Father, I am very much deformed, am I not?"

"Not to me, darling."

"No, not to you, father, for when you look at me your eyes are in your heart. But I am, in reality, very ugly, very uninteresting, maimed, deformed, and a cripple. It is very sad."

She had a way of pitying and speaking of herself in commiserating tones that was very touching.

"I am not like any other girl I have ever seen. There is Laura Harrild, now, she is very pretty, is she not? But I know she is, for when I look at her, I feel as glad as when I see the early primroses peeping out of the ground, telling me that Spring is coming."

A sharp anxious look passed into Stephen's eyes when he heard her mention Laura Harrild's name.

"And she *is* like Spring, and as good as Spring. If you were to ask me my idea of perfect happiness, I should say Laura Harrild. For she is young, beautiful, and good—and she loves, and is beloved: oh, my heart!"

There was such anguish in the poor girl's voice, that Stephen's face grew white as he supported her head upon his shoulder.

"Do you know my secret, father?" she whispered, without moving her head.

"I guess it, dear child."

"I cannot help it. I have always loved him. He is so brave and strong. And there it is, you see," she said, recovering herself a little. "He so brave and strong, and I such a poor cripple. What is my life worth; is it worth having, I wonder, in such a shape? If I were anybody else, and could see such a one as myself, I should look down with pity upon her, and wonder whether she would not be happier if she were dead. You have plenty of money, father?"

He nodded assent to her question.

"Yet, what is the use of it? Money will not buy love, will it? Money will not make me different to what I am. I wonder if all homes are like ours. There is no light in it; it is desolate and deserted. You and I, father, are like two hermits, shut out from the world. Must it always be so? Surely there must be something better in life than my experience has shown me. There *is* something better in it. There is love in it, which, ah me! I shall never, never have."

She was speaking to herself now, while he, with humble breath, sat watching her, silently. Unforgiving and

imperious as he was to the world, here he was a slave; and had he possessed the power, he would have laid his heart in her lap, to have made her happy.

"To-night is Christmas," she resumed, "and we shall go round to Mr. Harrild's house, and see so many young people dancing, and laughing, and playing forfeits—while I shall sit in a corner, watching them, like the envious old witch I have read of in fairy stories. I am quite as hideous, I know; and it is natural and proper that they should not come and pay court to me, as they do to each other. And I deserve it, father," she continued, her humor suddenly changing again. "I deserve it, for reviling the world and everybody in it, as I am doing. I deserve it for having bad and wicked thoughts at such a good time as Christmas—for it is a good time after all, is it not?"

No words can express the entreating earnestness with which she urged her pleading inquiry; and thoroughly humbled, the hard man said,

"It is a good time, child," and said it from his heart.

And then they went into the house together.

Now, at Reuben Harrild's there was assembled on this evening as merry and gay a company as ever met within four walls. You would have thought that in the whole of the happy group there did not exist a single anxiety. But it was not so. For anxiety is a component part of the business of human life, and it can be seen at odd moments peeping out from the corner of every man's eyes. Some wear it habitually; others casually; but all possess a stock of it, more or less, stored upon the shelves of the

mind. And it is good thus; for if life were all sweet, affection would be valueless, and happiness a negative good.

I do not suppose that in the kitchen the question was regarded in at all a philosophical light; indeed, it is questionable whether it was thought of at all. But it is certain that even in that region of shining saucepans and stewpans there were heartburns, albeit they were mild ones. For Samuel Nock had, some quarter of an hour since, incontinently come upon Kitty Grater in the passage, and had seen her then and there in the act of being kissed, beneath the miserable pretence of a piece of mistletoe, by a retainer of low degree, who had been engaged to assist in the domestic arrangements. Between Samuel Nock and Kitty Grater an attachment had been supposed to exist for the last fifteen years—an attachment which was always budding into promise, but had not yet blossomed into proposal. Each looked upon each as the other's property, and it was tacitly understood between the two that if any philanthropic individual should happen to step forward and say, "Wilt thou, Kitty Grater, take Samuel Nock to be thy lawfully wedded husband?" or "Wilt thou, Samuel Nock, take Kitty Grater to be thy lawfully wedded wife?" they would jump joyously into each other's arms, and the matter would be settled. But during those fifteen years that happy idea had not occurred to any philanthropic individual, and the twain were still in a state of incipient courtship. The mental condition of the two at the present moment was not analogous; for Samuel Nock stood, pipe in mouth, leaning against the chimney piece, seriously contemplating the advisability

of punching the head of the retainer of low degree, and wondering whether such an act would be accepted by Kitty as a downright declaration, about which there could be no mistake; and Kitty, busy at the dresser, was furtively watching Samuel, inwardly enjoying his state of mind, and wondering whether he would be goaded by jealousy to say something worth hearing, without any nonsense in it. But Samuel Nock's indignation was not easily appeased; his moral dignity was hurt; and he preserved silence.

"Oh, Samuel," said Kitty, who had just come from the parlor, and who saw that it was no use waiting any longer for him to speak; "Oh, Samuel, they're a playing such a game upstairs."

Samuel only grunted.

"They're playing," said Kitty, slily, "I love my love with an A, because he's Amiable, and Amusing, and an Angel, and I hate my love with an A, because he's Aggravating, and Absurd, and Annoying; and his name is Alexander, and he comes from Aberdeen, and I took him to the sign of the Axe and Anchor, and treated him to Apples and Anchovies."

"And I don't love my love with a We," grunted Samuel Nock, jumping to the other end of the alphabet, "because she's a Wixen, and Wicious, and Wile; and I hate her with a We, because she's Wulgar, and Wain, and a Wiper, and her name is Wenus, and she comes from Wandieman's Land, and I took her to the sign of the Wenomous Wampire, and treated her to Winegar and Water."

"And I hate my love with a B, because he's a Brute, and his name is Samuel," said Kitty, rather vaguely, and with a very red face.

"Don't be windictive, Kitty," remonstrated Samuel. "It's a low, wulgar sign."

"Don't be aggravating, Samuel," rejoined Kitty, goaded to such a state of mind that, looking upon the retainer of low degree as the cause of the quarrel, she suddenly turned upon that inoffensive individual, and boxed his ears. Not content with which, she seized his head, and rapped it sharply against the kitchen wall; which had such an effect upon Samuel Nock, that he caught her in his arms and kissed her into good humor.

Every room in the house had such a bright look about it that there was no mistaking the time. Had old Father Time himself suddenly made his appearance out of his weather-beaten residence, and told you it was all a mistake, and that it wasn't Christmas, you wouldn't have believed him. Not Christmas! A nice thing, indeed! As if you did not know better! As if every saucepan in the kitchen did not know better! As if the very sparks flying out of the fire up the chimney did not know better! Not Christmas! Ask Mrs. Ramage! Who was Mrs. Ramage? Why Mrs. Ramage was a Large woman (the printer will please put a large L to the word) with a Large mouth, and a Large nose, and Large eyes, and Large limbs, and a Large way of asserting herself which there was no resisting. And in Mrs. Ramage was merged Mr. Ramage, who was a little man (the printer will please here put a little l) with a little

mouth, and a little nose, and little eyes, and little limbs, and such a very little way of asserting himself that no one took the slightest notice of him. If, by the merest chance, he was mentioned, he was spoken of as one who had vested the whole of his right, title, and interest in and to human life in the wife of his bosom; who, indeed, had parted with it to her so thoroughly and completely that it might be regarded as a sum, which she added up, subtracted from, multiplied, or divided, at her pleasure.

Not Christmas! Why here was Mrs. Ramage, this tremendously solemn and magnificently Large woman, actually laughing, and beaming kindly smiles upon poor little Mr. Ramage, who hopped meekly about her, and bobbed his little head in ecstasy at her affability.

Not Christmas! Ask the Woys and the Wymers, of Messrs. Wymer, Woy, and Wymer, the celebrated firm which transacted all the legal business of the district. The firm originally was Wymer and Woy, but a female Wymer, sister of the senior partner, having in her own particular right become possessed of a sum of money which the firm was anxious to pass to its credit, would only consent to invest it on the condition that her name was added to the firm. As she was a strong-minded and bony old maid, her condition was accepted, and the title thenceforth was Wymer, Woy, and Wymer. They were all long, lank, and lean, and grew, as did their parchments, more shrunken and shrivelled every term. Life to them was not made up of happiness and sorrow, sympathy, love, affection, charity, and other such-like trifles, but it was made up of Law. They talked nothing but Law—they knew nothing but Law—they breathed nothing but

Law. They played the game of existence with Law, and they played it so skilfully that they never missed the odd trick. Yet even they looked frostily pleasant, and thawed a little under the genial influence of the time; dimly recognising that kindliness at such a season was an enactment of some old law of humanity.

And if there was a shadow of a doubt on the subject —if any misguided person still entertained the most infinitesimal particle of disbelief as to the fact—he had but to look at the face of Laura Harrild, and the thing was settled. There was nothing extraordinarily handsome about Laura — she was simply a dear, lovable woman, gemmed with the graces of a happy, innocent youth. A pleasant gladness rested on her face, and shed its influence upon all around her. Such women are the roses of the world; happy the man who has one blooming in the garden of his life!

"To think," said Doctor Bax, as he sat dandling on his knee a privileged, curly-headed youngster, "to think of those two children going to get married in three months! Why, Mr. Harrild, what on earth will you do without her?"

The person addressed, a sober-looking man of nearly fifty, gazed thoughtfully at Laura and William, who were sitting among a group of young people, laughing and chatting gaily, but he made no reply.

"Dear, dear!" continued the Doctor. "Three months! And to-morrow we shall be looking back to it, and saying it was only yesterday that they were married. Life, indeed, is nothing but a breath of wind"

"No such thing, sir; no such thing," interposed Mr.

Wymer, who was close by with the other members of the firm. "Life a breath of wind, indeed! Pooh, pooh Doctor, you know nothing about it. If everybody took such a light view of it, what would become of all its most important relations? What would be the use of making marriage settlements in favor of a breath of wind? What would be the use of making one's will, involving large interests—often tremendously important interests, let me tell you—in favor of a breath of wind? What would be the use of actions at law, writs of ejectment, pleas, interpleas, rules nisi, criminal prosecutions, chancery suits, and insolvencies? What would become of Law?"

"That is no breath of wind, I grant you," said the Doctor, good humoredly; "it is a grim reality. But I spoke philosophically."

"Philosophically, my dear doctor," returned Mr. Wymer, in no way appeased; "of what practical use is it to speak philosophically? Speak legally, and you are all right. Speak legally, act legally, live legally, die legally, and you can go to the other world with your title-deeds in your hand, and take possession. What I find fault with in people now-a-days," continued the speaker, illustrating the point with his forefinger, "is, that they diverge from the straight course. They are dreamy, sentimental, unpractical, and unbusiness-like. Now, there is no dreaminess or sentimentality in law. You must be wide awake, my friend, when you deal with law. You must be business-like and practical, or you will get the worst of it," and Mr. Wymer emitted a dry, chuckling laugh, as if he was in the habit of dealing with people who were

unbusiness-like and unpractical, and who were always getting the worst of it.

"But the uncertainty of the law," Doctor Bax ventured to remark.

"That's the beauty of it," answered Mr. Wymer, rubbing his hands pleasantly. "You never know where to have it. It always gets the best of you when you least expect it. You might study it for a hundred years, and it would trip you up after all. It is wonderfully and beautifully complex."

"There are cases which have lasted sixty or seventy years, are there not?" asked the Doctor.

"More, sir; more," replied Mr. Wymer, gleefully. "What could more fitly illustrate its amazing ingenuity, than such cases? Think of the study, the speeches, the learning, the arguments that have been used in one simple suit. Think of the briefs"——

"The fees," the Doctor put in slily.

"Of course, they follow, for every laborer is worthy of his hire; and we are all laborers after a fashion."

"How on earth did the world ever get on without lawyers?" asked Doctor Bax, maliciously.

"It never did, sir. For did not Abraham, the patriarch, buy 'the field of Ephron, which was in Machphelah, which was before Mamre; the field, and the cave, which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about'—the very words, sir, you read in Genesis. And do you mean to tell me that any one but a lawyer could have written such a description? Why, sir——"

"Stop, stop!" exclaimed Doctor Bax, putting his

fingers to his ears. "I yield, I give in. Whoever argued with a lawyer and got the best of it? besides which," he muttered, as he walked away, "I would sooner have five minutes' chat with Laura and William, than spend a week in the company of that dried-up old folio."

The lovers were standing at the window, looking out upon the night. The snow flakes were falling fast, and a field of purest white spread before them, as far as eye could reach. The window was in a recess, shut off from the room by heavy curtains, so that they were almost in seclusion. William Fairfield had once an idea of emigrating to the Colonies; but the lucky chance that watches over true love had made the sentiments of these two young people known to each other, and his intention now was to settle down into the quiet life of a country farmer. He was speaking to her tenderly; and her pure, truthful face, though turned somewhat away from him, showed how lovingly she was following his words.

"It is strange," he was saying, "how entirely my mind has been weaned away from its intense desire of emigrating to the Colonies. I think I must be a miser, Laura dear, for I used absolutely to devour the news of each fresh gold discovery in the other part of the world. I used to dream night after night of tremendous nuggets, almost too heavy to lift, and to wake in a rage to find it a delusion. Why, I went to Wymer, who had found a purchaser for our little farm, and gave instructions to draw up the conveyance. Old Stephen Winkworth was the purchaser; but you know what happened just then, darling?" and he drew her tenderly towards him: "I

discovered, what I scarcely dared to hope, that you loved me, and away to the four winds went all ideas of selling the farm and emigrating."

His was an impulsive nature, self-willed and obstinate. He had a rapid, confident way of speaking, and was, as he looked, bold, manly, and fearless. Laura gazed into his face somewhat timidly, and said,

"I sometimes think, William, that it would have been better for you if you *had* gone away"——

"Why, Laura!" he broke in, amazed.

"What I mean is, Will, that it would have done you good. You are going to settle into a quiet, humdrum life, not suited to you exactly, I think. You are so impulsive"——

"That is just what Stephen Winkworth said. Why, do you know, Laura, when he went to the lawyer's, expecting the deeds were ready for signature (and he went with his money in his hand, I can tell you—six hundred golden sovereigns), and I told him I had altered my mind, and did not intend to sell the farm, he called me rash-headed and impulsive—said that the bargain had been made, and that I could not draw back from it. And there the money is to this day—at least, so old Wymer is always telling me—and there are the deeds, ready for signing; and all I have to do is to go to the office and put my signature, and pocket the six hundred sovereigns, which, of course, I do not intend to do—no, not if there were six hundred thousand instead of six hundred; for your love, darling, is worth all the gold in the world to me, and I would not lose your love for all the nuggets I have ever dreamt of."

And he meant it, did William Fairfield. He loved the girl with his whole heart. A year ago he might have gone away, and time would have cooled his passion; but now, when his love had found expression, it could never be extinguished. He believed in her implicitly: his was a blind faith; he did not question it or doubt it.

"We shall be very happy, William," presently she said softly. "But tell me, what made you so eager to go to the gold colonies?"

"I can scarcely tell you. It was a restless craving for excitement; and then there was a friend of mine, who had been a scapegrace in his very young days, and he had gone over and reformed, and made lots of money; and he wrote so eloquently about the mode of life, and the independence, and the gold, that it turned my head."

"Your friend?" said Laura, and then stopped hesitatingly.

"Yes?" he answered, questioning.

"What had he done wrong?"

"A great deal. He forged his father's name"——

"Oh, William!" she cried, in such a voice of pain that he caught her in his arms, and asked her what ailed her.

"Nothing, William, nothing," she replied, half hysterically, and begging him, between laughing and crying, to proceed with his story.

"Well," continued William, "he forged his father's name, and it was discovered; and the old man gave him means to take ship to Australia. He escaped, although his father was almost ruined."

"And then?" said Laura.

"The old man died, and the young scapegrace made a fortune, and became a first-rate member of society. Why, Laura, you look quite scared."

"It is a melancholy story, William," said Laura; "but see, there is Stephen Winkworth and poor Alice."

"Go and speak to her, Laura, and bring her here. I like to be away from the lights and the people when you are with me. And here in this little nook we can see everything without being seen. How it snows!"

"How beautiful!" said Laura, nestling up to her lover. "The flakes float downwards from heaven to earth, like feathers from the wings of the angels. I will bring Alice here, and we will sit together as long as they don't miss us."

"Stop, Laura," exclaimed William, as she was turning away, "what is that outside? There, do you not see it moving?"

It was the shadow of a man, who appeared to be lurking about the house. As Laura looked, her heart sank within her, and she turned as white as the falling snow.

"Evidently some skulker. Not here for any good, that's certain, said William; "I will go out and see who it is."

"No, no, William," implored Laura, with sudden earnestness, clinging to his arm, "do not go. I beg, I implore you, do not go."

"Why, Laura, this is the second time to-night you have almost frightened me with some unaccountable emotion. Let go my arm, my dear."

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed, with strange vehemence, and still clinging to him, "you shall not—you must not go. And see—it is gone—it was only a shadow, after all. We have been standing here away from the lights so long that we are growing fanciful."

And leaving him, she walked towards Alice Winkworth.

Strange contrasted were these two girls. One, lithe, supple, graceful, handsome; the other, deformed, maimed, white, and sickly. A world of tenderness was expressed in Laura's face, as she bent over Alice's chair.

"I am so glad to see you, Alice," she said; "William wants you to come and sit with us by the window."

A glad light passed over the sick girl's face, as she rose and walked with Laura to the curtained recess. Her look turned to one of surprise, when Laura whispered, "Talk to him for a little while, Alice, until I come back. I will not be long gone."

"Where are you going, Laura?" asked William.

"I must attend to the guests, Will," Laura replied; "I will be back presently." And she turned away somewhat abruptly.

"Strange," muttered William, "she seems quite changed to-night. By heavens, there it is again."

And, looking out, he saw again the shadow of a man who was lurking about the house.

"I have a good mind to go out and see about it. But, no; Laura will be vexed with me, and perhaps it is nothing, after all."

So he sat down by the side of Alice, half discontented, and not knowing why.

In the meantime the snow was falling slowly but steadily outside the study of Reuben Harrild, who had left his guests for a while to their own devices. As he leant his face upon his hand, gazing dreamily out of the window, it could be seen that old memories were passing through his mind. He looked older than he was. Some lives, wild and stormy, are prolific of wrinkles: others, smooth and uneventful, do not raise a furrow on the face. A life is counted, not by years, but by events; and in some men's lives occur earthquakes which leave chasms never to be closed. The pages of a man's life are blotted with tears; and memory, as she scans the records, lives over again, with bitter brevity, the shedding of each tear. As Reuben Harrild sat, wrapt in thought, the ghosts of former joys and former griefs clung about him with their sad faces, and a thousand pale spectres rose and haunted him from the grave of his past life. He was deep in these memories when the presence of his daughter roused him.

"What want you here, child?" he asked gently, smoothing her hair, and kissing her.

"I want a Christmas-box, father," she said, half laughingly, half earnestly.

"I have a great mind to give you one," he said, raising his hand playfully; but seeing something in her face that spoke of grief, he asked gravely, "Has anything happened, child? Has William been unkind?"

"No, father, he is too good. I do so wish I could be brave, and speak to you what is in my mind."

"You may say what you please, dear child, on every subject"——

"On every subject?" she questioned earnestly.

"But one," he said, gravely; "and that subject must never be mentioned between us. You know me, Laura; you know how I love you—no father could better love a daughter; but you must obey me, dear child, in this, as you have done in all other things, and be to me always what you have ever been—a child I can love without one shadow of remorse, without one spark of reproach."

As he spoke, she saw outside the shadow of the man upon the snow, and drawing her father hastily away, she stood between him and the night.

"To-night, Laura," he said, as he placed his arm around her, and led her out of the study, "I have been thinking of the past. Never a Christmas passes but I think of what I know is in your mind. But I would rather lose my life than my honor. A stab at the one may be cured; at the other, never! And as I have resolved, so will I perform, though it fill my heart with pain. Every man has a skeleton in his house, and I must not grumble at mine. I think I will get an iron safe, and lock my skeleton in it, and throw the keys into the sea, so that it cannot get at me."

"But it will get at you," said Doctor Bax, who had heard the last sentence as he came into the passage with the household cat upon his shoulder; "you can't get away from it—no safe is strong enough to keep it. Just think what a lot of skeletons there are in this house at the present moment. I warrant you every man's skeleton has stepped out of its cupboard to accompany its owner to your Christmas party, and that there are a score of them jostling up against us, if we could only see them. Just

for curiosity, now," he continued, drawing them to the half-open door of the room where some of the elderly people were playing cards, and most of the young ones playing forfeits; "look at Stephen Winkworth: there is a skeleton he has got—it is a perpetual day-mare and night-mare. It never leaves him. It sits grinning upon his shoulder like the bird of ill-omen we read of. And his daughter, poor little child, hasn't she got a skeleton! Heaven help her! her lot is the hardest of all to bear. Look at little Mr. Ramage—Mrs. Ramage is his skeleton—and isn't *she* an awful one, hanging round a man's neck! Ah! you may laugh," he said to Laura, who was smiling; "but you have got your skeleton—do not look so grave, my dear—and I have got mine, here! here!" and he smote his breast theatrically, and upset the cat.

"Your skeleton, Doctor Bax," exclaimed Laura; "why, what sort of a one is that?"

"A tearing, staring, horrible, malicious, wicked skeleton," said the Doctor, so loudly, that the eyes of every one in the room were turned upon him. "A fearful, hideous, monstrous, hobgoblin kind of skeleton. I will tell you what it is—in confidence: I love you, and you are going to marry another! If it be not true, may this kiss I am going to give you under the misletoe be my last!"

But Laura had darted away, and the little Doctor pursuing her, turned all the card-tables topsy-turvey, and set the whole room in an uproar.

Oh! but it was a merry Christmas party this, and little Doctor Bax was the soul of it. I verily believe he kissed every female in the house half-a-dozen times over. Even

Mrs. Ramage submitted to the salute; and as for Mrs. Wymer, she stepped under the misletoe like a lamb to the slaughter, and smacked her lips after the operation.

There were two or three little rooms about the house, in which the guests found themselves almost by chance, if they happened to stroll out of the drawing-room, where the merriment was going on. In one of these, an hour later, were Stephen Winkworth and his daughter.

"Take me home, father," said the girl. "I am weary of this; I want to be at home."

"I thought you wished to be here," he said wistfully. "It is gayer for you than our dull house."

"I know it is—but how can I be gay, seeing what I see?" she exclaimed, fretfully. "I am like a baby crying after a toy, which somebody else has got."

"Oh child," whispered Stephen, "if William Fairfield loved you, you would be happy."

"Do not speak of it, father," sobbed the girl. "It can never, never be."

"I don't know that," muttered Stephen to himself, in so low a voice that she could not hear him. "Why should she deceive him as she is doing? I do not love William Fairfield, but I could love anything for her," glancing at his daughter; "and why should the woman, whom he is going to marry, deceive him? Upon my word," he added with a cynical laugh, "I could almost persuade myself that I ought to do a good action. What hypocrites we are! By chance, I discover this Laura Harrild—this rival of my child in the affections of the man she loves—playing her lover false. By chance, I see her in the arms of another man, and hear her make an

appointment with him at midnight. At midnight, by the lord!" and his low, bitter laugh floated discordantly on the night air. "This girl, so outwardly fair, this paragon of modesty and virtue, is like the rest—false, false, false to the backbone! Oh, my ladies! shame, shame upon you! I would whip your false bodies with whips made of your delicate hair—aye, every mother's daughter of you!"

There was a strange, biting bitterness in the man's voice. He was like a wild beast, striding up and down the room, with vengeful thoughts and bitter memories glaring out of his eyes.

"Yet, what business is it of mine?" he continued. "Why should I interfere in the character of a virtuous eavesdropper? Let him marry her, and let her deceive him. It is of a piece with the rest. But, my child! she loves him! Oh! God! grant her some compensation for the torture of her life—grant her a recompense for her long misery."

"What are you saying, father?" said Alice, raising her head, and adding, without waiting for a reply, "I thought this night was to be such a happy one, and it is so different."

"It may be happy yet, child. Come, darling, I love you, I love you," and he pressed her passionately to his breast. "I would lose my soul for you"——

"Hush, father!" and she put her hand to his lips.

"I would. We will not go home yet; we will wait another hour. Let us go in."

As they entered the passage, Laura passed swiftly by them, out of the house. There were traces of tears upon

her face, and William was standing holding the handle of the door in his hand, and looking somewhat annoyed.

"Why, William," said Stephen Winkworth, "you look as savage as a Bengal tiger."

"That is no business of yours, Mr. Winkworth," returned William. "I generally mind my own."

"Hard words, lad, hard words these, upon Christmas Eve," said Stephen; "but perhaps I was in the wrong. I beg your pardon."

"No; I beg yours, Stephen Winkworth," said William, remorsefully. "There is my hand."

"And perhaps you are surprised at my speaking to to you," said Stephen, shaking it. "I am not over-given to conversation, at the best of times; but I would like to speak a word with you, if you will come into the open air."

And so they went out into the air. The snow-fall had ceased, but had left a thick, soft carpet upon the earth. The moon was peeping out, and the Heavens seemed bright with the glorious whiteness beneath them. As far as eye could reach, everything was shrouded in white. The tall elm trees stood like white sentinels, erect and watchful. The sloping roofs sloped whitely down to the eaves, and the chimney pots reared their heads whitely to the skies, while the cowls upon them looked like the shrouded heads of white monks bending in prayer.

"I knew your father, William Fairfield," Stephen commenced, after a short pause; "and though interest for human things is almost dead within me, I still can feel an interest in you, and wish you well."

"You did not wish me well when you wanted to force me to sell my farm and emigrate," said William. "You seemed to wish to get rid of me quickly, for all your interest."

"That was a matter of business. And my part of the bargain I will carry out any day. I am not a boastful man, but what I do I do, and when I promise I perform. If you go to the lawyer's to-morrow, you will find the money ready for you, if you will only sign your name."

"I know that. Mr. Wymer has told me so a dozen times."

"Besides, what better would a young man have than a pocketful of money, and a new land to go to, where, with but common prudence, he could multiply it by ten in a few years?"

"You must have plenty of money, Stephen Winkworth, to allow six hundred pounds to lie idle for nearly a twelvemonth. It is a pity you have not a family to benefit by it."

"I have my daughter," retorted Stephen, quickly. "She will have all; and if I had, or if I have a hundred times as much, she will still have it all. She will bring a rich dower to the man who marries her."

William looked sharply at Stephen's face, but it was expressionless as stone.

"Well, you broke that bargain, my lad," continued Stephen. "The fault of your father was, that he was too impetuous and impulsive. The fault of your father's son is the same. Had you fulfilled your bargain, you might have been a happy man. As it is"——

"As it is?" said William, impatiently taking up the words as Stephen paused.

"As it is, I think you stand a fair chance of being anything but a happy man."

There was no mistaking the meaning Stephen intended to convey, and William Fairfield paused long before he could muster sufficient coolness to speak.

"This is not the first time to-day," he then said, "that you have thrown out insinuations to which I should not listen. What do you mean by them?"

"Fair and softly, my lad. I mean nothing but what I say. Instead of emigrating, you engaged yourself to Laura Harrild. Would you marry a woman who does not love you?"

"By Heaven!"——

"Forbear, and listen to me. I could be your father, William Fairfield, for the years I bear. Forbear your tongue, and hear me out."

William Fairfield made no reply, but stood with his back against a tree, clenching his hands, and beating his foot impatiently against the trunk. They had wandered some little way from the house, and the notes of merriment within fell but faintly upon their ears. Otherwise, not a sound broke the stillness of the night.

"You know what I am," Stephen said; "you know the estimation in which I am held. If any man, woman, or child in Devonshire were asked who in all Devonshire was most disliked, most hated, most shunned, the reply would be—Stephen Winkworth. If any dumb animal in Devonshire could shew its dislike to one person more than to all others, it would be to Stephen Winkworth. No one has a smile of welcome for him. Were he to be deprived of his wealth, and were he lying parched and

starving by the roadside, no one out of love would give him a cup of milk—no one out of compassion would give him a bed of straw to lie upon. Were Stephen Winkworth to die to-morrow, no one but the undertaker would attend his funeral, and even he would be glad when the job was done."

The picture he had drawn was true. He spoke in his usual bitter tone, as if he knew well and was satisfied with the penalty he had invited.

"Yes," he continued, "such is my fate. I do not complain. I have brought it upon myself, and I can bear it. But I was not always thus, William Fairfield."

"I have heard so; but you were always so in my remembrance."

"That's right, lad; speak the truth. No, I was not always thus. I once had a happy home—I once had friends!—Friends!" he echoed bitterly, "I would scratch the word out of the dictionary, had I my will, and send it to hell to burn out its false meaning. Friends! vultures! lies! call them what you will; I once had them. Do you know what made me what I am?" he asked abruptly and fiercely, turning to William.

"I do not."

He took off his hat, and bared his head to the cold wind. In this man's heart was raging a tragic fire which a score of lives could not quench. The memory of early wrongs was burning within him as fiercely as when they were first perpetrated. For years had he been hugging them close, and fanning them into a blaze, which Death alone could extinguish.

"What is this thing that men call life?" he asked.

"The grave opens wider for us every day that we live. We grow old, feeble, childish in our actions. Years have passed over me like the rest of men, and left their marks upon my frame; but fresh within me as at first burns the wrong which set me against my fellow-men for ever and for ever."

He stooped and took up a handful of snow, with which he bathed his fevered head, and then resumed.

"You, in the hey-day of youth—you, with the dream of life spread before you like a garden—you love. All men do, some time in their early youth. Each man, in his time, sees some woman whom he sets before him as an idol, and falls down and worships, poor blind fool! as if she were Heaven-born. Even I, in my youth, did this thing; even I set up within my soul a painted sham, a beautiful lie, and worshipped her as if she were my salvation. I have read books wherein woman's love is described as something divine—wherein a niche in a woman's heart is said to sanctify a man's life, and make him better and fitter for the life to come. Woman's love! What woman loves like a man? Their natures are too false, too petty, to cope even with the idea of the strength of a man's devotion! He sees a smile upon the face which nature gave her, a smile of heavenly sweetness, which fills his soul with adoration; and this trick of the features, which she practises in his absence a hundred times an hour, he believes to be a heart-welcome to him, and to him alone. I who, before my marriage, went courting as you have done to-night, and would snigger up in out-of-the-way corners with my love"—(no pen can express the scornful expression he

put upon the word)—"I would often meet her with such a smile upon her beautiful face, and my heart would laugh within my breast as the sunshine of her eyes fell upon me!"

Scornful, bitter, as he was, his voice here grew softer as old associations flocked around him.

"She was all in all to me; she was my life, my hope, my prize in the world's lottery! I was always a scheming, money-making man; but I did not yearn for wealth for myself—I yearned for it for her. Every fresh success I gained was doubly welcome, because she would share it. I have often rubbed my hands gladly to myself, and thanked God I had succeeded, for *her* sake. I used to whisper her name for luck if I entered into a new speculation. With her name upon my tongue, with her image in my heart, every step I mounted in the ladder of life brought me nearer and nearer to Heaven. I took this piece of clay, this image of dust, and fashioned it, and painted it, and beautified it; I filled her face with innocence, her eyes with love, her heart with faith; my devotion gave music to her voice, sanctity to her touch. And I loved her—I loved her as man never loved before!"

There was such a depth of tenderness in the man's voice and action, that William Fairfield instinctively moved nearer to him, and would have taken his hand, pityingly; but Stephen repulsed him, and continued—

"After some time, we were married. There *is* a Heaven upon earth for some men, during a portion of their lives. Most of us can remember some few weeks, some few months, which shine out from the past as if they belonged to another and a happier life. I can look

back to the first few months of my wedded life, and wonder at myself. It is not often that I am stirred to emotion; but when I think of the glory of happiness which bathed my heart during that brief time, and when I look to my home as it is now—shunned, deserted, cold, and joyless—I am lost in miserable wonder. I had a smile for all men, then; aye, even for one whose name would blister my tongue were I to mention it, the very thought of whom drives my blood from its natural channels, and fills me with a maddening thirst for everlasting revenge!"

In his passion he raised his hand, and struck at the tree as if it were his enemy.

"He was my friend, and I trusted him. He was my friend, and he sat by my hearth like a brother. He was my friend, and was admitted as a sharer of my social happiness. He was my friend, and I lauded him to my wife, and sang his praises in her ear, in our moments of confidence. He was my friend, and he betrayed me. Curse him!"

Again he struck at the tree, and waved his hand defiantly to the clouds.

"I will hunt that man through all the worlds. Whatever may be the life we live when this is done with, in whatever sphere or shape I meet him, he shall expiate the blight he has cast upon me! My wife bore me a child, a daughter, beautiful as the day. I declare that as often as I returned home and saw my darling in her mother's lap, I used to bless God for His goodness. Even as her little fairy fingers would enlace themselves round one of mine, so did my love for her enlace itself and

grow round the roots of my heart. You would scarcely believe, would you, that this exquisite baby-beauty—straight-limbed, bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked—could become the deformed thing she is now! You would scarcely believe that my poor maimed daughter and my baby-beauty are one—that so fair a shoot should produce such a stunted and mis-shapen tree!"

"Poor Alice!" said William, pityingly.

"Aye, poor Alice!" Stephen echoed, laughing bitterly. "But for me, she might have been the pride of Devonshire—but for me, she might have been loved, admired, cherished—but for me her life might have been all Spring, and her youth would not be, as it is, a cold and cheerless winter!"

"One day," he resumed, after a short pause, "I left my home on a journey. I was to be away only twenty-four hours. It was the first night I had passed out of my house since our marriage. Why did not my horse fall down with me and kill me, instead of bringing me safely back to the home I had left, honored and happy? But what some men call Fate, others Chance, others Destiny, ordained that I should live and grapple with my misery. For when I arrived home, William Fairfield, I found that my wife had fled—had fled with him I called my friend; I learned that she whom I loved with my whole soul had betrayed me; that he whom I trusted with my whole heart, had played the Judas. It took me no time to learn all this. I had not been in my house five minutes, before it flashed upon me like a picture suddenly revealed. The past years spread out before me like a map, and every glance and word that had passed

between us during that time, bore a new signification. Her love had been a simulation; for months her heart had not been mine. She had been to me a living lie; and all a woman's artifice had been employed to hide the truth from my knowledge. What would you have done, William Fairfield, had you been stricken with such a a blow? What would you have done, had you found your life's happiness thus suddenly crumbled to ashes upon your household hearth?"

He did not wait for a reply, but went on—

"The thoughts and memories which clung about me in those few moments of time would make an epic. Amidst them all, one picture struggled to the foreground. I saw, in my fancy, the face of my wife lying upon the pillow in the early morning—a face of child-like, almost angelic beauty—a face, which, could an artist paint and call it Innocence, would immortalise his name through all ages. She had fallen asleep in my arms but a few hours before, with words of love upon her lips. I saw her face, and it was heaven to me. But I could not see her heart; and now that it was laid bare in all its naked untruth, faith, love, religion, fled from me affrighted. I looked round and saw her child lying in her cot; she opened her eyes and smiled; and as in that innocent smile I caught the reflex of her false mother's beauty, I raised her in my arms, and in my rage dashed her to the ground."

The memory of that terrible time raised thick beads of perspiration upon his face; and again, in a wild reckless manner, he scooped up a handful of snow, and scattered it over his head.

"I scarcely remember what followed. I know that I pursued them day and night. I cannot remember whether I ate, or drank, or slept. My life was compassed by but one thought—to overtake them and kill them. I flung money about like a madman. Hearing that I was in pursuit, they schemed, and baffled me for some days. Could one for a time destroy all else in nature, and annihilate space and every living thing that intervened between me and my vengeance, what a picture would be seen! The false wife and the false friend flying from the vengeful husband. Pluck from their hearts and minds the thoughts and feelings of the three, and show them in a palpable form, and all other tragedies of human life would pale before the terror of this."

William Fairfield shuddered at the vehemence of the man's words, and almost fancied he saw flying through the air the dark shadows of the picture drawn by Stephen.

"At length I came upon them. I do not know how many days or nights had passed, until their faces flashed upon me one night at a railway station. Despite all warning cries, I jumped upon the step of one of the carriages, as the train was moving off. I did not think of my own danger as I was whirled along—I only thought that *they* were there, and that I must get to them. The window through which I had caught a glimpse of their faces was far in front of me, and with feverish impatience I worked my way along the side of the train. How I escaped being dashed to pieces is a marvel. At last I came to the window, and peering in, I saw them nestling side by side. Never shall I forget the moment when with a glance, came mutual

recognition. I tore at the door like a wild animal, but it was locked, and all my strength was powerless to open it. I shouted—I raved—I believe I must have been mad. The engine was before me, and at the thought I found myself upon it, struggling with the engineer, who endeavoured to prevent my mad purpose. I can remember nothing more. A sudden crash—the flying of a million fiery particles in the air—and then, oblivion! When I recovered my senses I learned that a terrible accident, inexplicable now to all but me, had occurred; that my wife and her paramour were killed, with a score of others, and that I should never see their faces again upon this earth!"

At this moment, William, looking towards the house, saw again on the snow the shadow of a man, and he would have moved towards it, had not Stephen's next words stayed him.

"When I arose from my bed of sickness I was another man. I had tasted the sweetness of life, and it had poisoned me. I closed my door upon all my former associates and friends. The shadow of Death was hanging over my house—for oh, William Fairfield, when in my despair I had dashed my baby-beauty to the earth, I had not killed her, although she lingered in pain for many years—I had not killed her, but I had maimed, deformed her, beyond all mortal cure, and she grew what you see her now. I, her father, made her what she is—I, her father, wrecked her young life upon the rock of my despair—and I, her father, hour after hour, and day after day, bear within me the seeds of a remorse so strong and agonising, that I would chop

myself limb from limb to atone for the misery I have made her bear."

The night was very still; no sound of merriment floated from the house. The shadow, too, had disappeared. As William noted this, there stole into his heart a doubt, which made him shudder.

"Do you wonder now that I am morose, sullen, and uncharitable? Do you wonder now that I shun my fellow-men—that I hate them all, scorn, distrust them all? Why have I told you my story? I scarcely know; except it be to save you from the same fate which has fallen to my lot."

"The same fate!" echoed William.

"Aye, the same fate," returned Stephen; "you love Laura Harrild's face, as I loved the face of my wife, but do you know her heart?"

"Her heart!"

"All women are the same," said Stephen, scornfully. "I warrant, now, she plays love and devotion to you when you are together; and yet to-night"——

"To-night!" echoed William.

"This very night, I saw her clasped in another man's arms"——

"Hold!" cried William, in an agonised voice; "hold! Stephen, for God's sake!"

"I must tell you the truth," continued Stephen, doggedly. "But two hours since, I saw her yonder," —and he pointed to where William had seen the shadow—"pressing to her heart a man who was not William Fairfield."

Two hours ago! That was the time that he had

seen the shadow of a man upon the snow, and had called Laura's attention to it—the very time that she had implored him not to go out, and had then left him for full half-an-hour. His heart stood still at the thought. Why, it was but this night that he had drawn again from her lips the sweet confession of her love—but this night that they had pictured forth the home she was to sanctify! He staggered against the tree, and looked vacantly into Stephen's face.

"Aye, it is true, lad," said Stephen, as if answering some question; "it is hard to bear, but it is true. And there is more yet; for I heard her, as I am a living man, make an appointment to meet him at midnight behind the house!"

An appointment at midnight! His love, whom he had thought as sacredly pure as she was beautiful! Oh, shame! shame! Should he go to her, and accuse her to her face? Should he go to her, and proclaim her shame in the midst of her gay company, and then fling her from him for ever? Was it true as this man said, that all women were frail? Was it true that they lie to a man's face, and laugh at him behind his back? He had given his heart to this girl—he had sold himself to her—and she was playing him false! What was his life worth to him now? The recollection of every tender word she had spoken to him rose in judgment against her. The memory of every loving look he had received from her made the present more bitter to bear. Should he openly dishonor her? No, he would watch first; this night he would play the spy upon her, and satisfy himself if Stephen's words were true. If they

were, and if at midnight this false girl met her lover secretly, why, then——

But he could think no further; a dozen times his thoughts carried him to this point, and there he stopped, dazed and confused. Then he looked at Stephen Winkworth. Was it possible that he should ever grow like this man—hated by and hating all? She had made the world so beautiful to him; his love for her had grown into a faith; and if this faith were overturned, in what or whom could he believe?

If his faith were overturned! Why, already he doubted her! Even now she was not to him what she had been only an hour before; already in his heart her pure image was defiled.

"Oh!" he groaned, as he clenched his hands in mental agony; "oh! Laura! Laura! how could you so deceive me?"

He had judged her. Weak, unstable as he was, he had already condemned her; the first thought that she was unfaithful, had been to him a proof of her guilt.

But he would watch to-night. To this his mind was settled; and so resolved, he moved mechanically towards the house.

"Never mind, lad," said Stephen, as he walked by his side. "It is hard to bear; but it is better now than after."

"Be silent!" exclaimed William, savagely. "You have told me to-night that which may blast my life."

Yes; this man had poisoned the well that had sweetened his existence. This man had made him doubt.

He met Laura in the passage. Uneasy at his long

absence, she had been looking for him about the house, but had never thought that he had been out so long in the cold night. Her face lit up gladly as she ran towards him. Oh! could he not see that there dwelt only purity and innocence! Could he not look into her truthful eyes, and see there the reflex of her stainless soul!

No; doubt and jealousy had blinded him. Maddened by the tale he had heard, by the suspicions that had entered his heart, he pushed almost rudely by her.

"Oh, William!" murmured the poor girl, going up to him, and drawing him backward to the porch.

"Forgive me, Laura," he said, as, with a sudden remorse, he stooped down and kissed her; "I am not well."

She repressed the tears that were welling to her eyes, and looked up anxiously. Oh! blind and infatuated, could he still look and doubt? She laid her hand timidly upon his shoulder, and nestled up to him confidingly. In her trusting love, she did not notice that he refrained from drawing her closer to him.

"I have missed you ever so long, William," she said, sweetly; "and poor Alice has been asking after you so anxiously, that she must have thought you were lost."

"Laura," he said, suddenly, and with a fierce passion in his voice, "do you love me?"

"You frighten me, William," replied the girl, drawing back from him.

He noticed the action, and misconstrued it.

"Answer me," he said abruptly. "Do not shrink from me, or evade my question. You know I love you, do you not?"

"Yes, William."

Every harsh word he spoke to her wounded him as if it were a dagger's point. He knew the suffering he was inflicting upon her, by his own pain in the infliction, but he set his teeth close, and did not flinch.

"You know how perfectly I love you, Laura. You know the hold you have upon my heart. You know that I had better be dead than live in the belief that you loved me, and find that it is not so. You know this, do you not? Answer me!"

"I believe it, William," she answered, choking back her sobs.

"And now, answer me again, Laura," he said, almost solemnly, "do you love me?"

"Yes, William," she answered, calmly, and looking fearlessly into his eyes.

Did this content him? No. The doubts that beset him were phantoms that haunted every word she spoke, and bore them to his sense with a distorted meaning. What had Stephen told him? In another man's arms, but an hour agone! Oh, shame! shame!

"I wonder," he said, with a quiet bitterness, "whether girls often deceive their lovers!"

"Oh, William! William!" cried Laura, turning her face from him, her sobs breaking out almost into a paroxysm.

He was frenzied with his jealousy and his love. Her tears fell upon his heart like scalding rain, withering every flower that erst was blooming in his soul. But he could not be indifferent to her emotion. He bent over her and tried to soothe her; and although she was almost

heart-broken, her sweet, loving nature conquered her womanly resentment, and after a time she looked up through her tears and smiled. Fool that he was! why did he not then speak to her of his doubts, and ask for an explanation? No (he thought), it will look like an accusation: I will judge for myself.

And so the evening came to an end, and the guests prepared to trudge to their several homes. Each one wished his neighbor a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Even the Woys and the Wymers were jovial and genial enough to shake hands with all sorts of people. And as for Doctor Bax—there was not one in the company who did not behave as if he were in a raging thirst, and took the little Doctor for a pump!

"The worst of it is," said Doctor Bax, as, his face beaming with good nature, he was tying a cravat round his throat, "that everything must come to an end" ——

"Except the Law," interposed Mr. Wymer—as much as to say, That is Eternal.

"Well, if you like, except the Law," said the Doctor. "Here is a pleasant evening, pleasantly spent, come to an end before we know where we are. It is distressing to think that, although we shall have plum-pudding to-morrow, we shall be looking back to to-morrow as we are doing now to to-day, and sighing over the remains of the feast we have not yet tasted. But then there are our duties to attend to the day after that. As Mr. Wymer would say," added the Doctor slily, "there is the Law to look after"—(Mr. Wymer nodded pleasantly) "and no one will grumble at doing that,"—though whether he meant his duty or the law he did not divulge.

"And it is pleasant, after all, to know that we part from each other with kind feelings in our hearts, and that, when we wish each other a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, we mean it truly and sincerely."

And so, with many more good wishes, the party finally broke up.

William Fairfield had wished Laura good night. He had repressed the passion that was raging within him, and had somewhat soothed her agitation. But now, as he wandered from the house in the cold night, the jealous fire blazed up with fury. He looked back to the house a dozen times, as if expecting to see evidence of her guilt. Do what he would, he could not get Stephen Winkworth's words out of his mind. Clasped in another man's arms!—Could Stephen be lying? What purpose had he to serve by so doing? No—it was true, and she had deceived him! He stopped and conjured up the picture before him—Laura and her lover! and he saw their lips utter voiceless words of affection; and he saw her lay her head upon his shoulder: and he ground his teeth with jealous rage.

This was his Christmas Eve! Next Christmas they were to have had a merry party at their own house: it had been arranged that night. If he proved Stephen's words to be true, where would his next Christmas be spent? And here he laughed in helpless derision. His future was gone; and what recked he now where or how his life was passed!

Some short distance from the house, but within sight of it, stood an old gnarled tree, prolific in queerly-knotted excrescences and twisted limbs and branches.

It was so old that there had rotted away, nearly at its roots, a space sufficiently large to allow a man to seat himself easily. Here William mechanically rested; and, with a weary body, but active mind, set himself to the task of watching Reuben Harrild's house. Above him spread the fantastic outshoots of the tree, and, looking up, William could almost fancy he saw queer faces peeping down upon him—over-leaning one another to look at him as he sat. Some smiled, some frowned; and one old fellow, with a great knot in his forehead, eyed him so sternly, that he turned away half-angry at the delusion. As he turned, his attention was attracted by the beautiful appearance of the hedgerow which lined the boundary of Reuben Harrild's land. It was nearly man-high; and one could look through the tangled skein of bare and naked bush, snow-lined in purest white, and see pictured a thousand queer fancies in the maze. It needed but little imagination to conjure through the interlaced vista, castles, and rocks, and battle-fields, with shreds of armies flying from eager pursuers; or churchyards with a myriad white spectres in their winding-sheets, gauntly stretching out their attenuated limbs. And there, wonder upon wonder! was the same grim old fellow with the knot in his forehead, eyeing him as severely as ever, and beckoning him to approach. William blinked and rubbed his eyes, and looked again; but there still stood the grim old man, beckoning him to come. The old man was not alone this time; but on each side, and at the rear of him, dozens of white phantom-shadows stood, inviting William, with the same beckoning gestures, to join their company. As he looked on with

wonder, their numbers increased. The whole landscape became filled with motioning snow-shadows; and, glancing upwards, a myriad white faces seemed crowding down upon him, urging him to rise. Mechanically he stood upon his feet, and, looking towards the house, found that it had disappeared, and that he was standing on a great plain, carpeted with snow as far as eye could reach, without a single speck or mark upon it to show that it was inhabited. Trees, hedges, houses, all had vanished; but although the plain was crowded with shadows moving restlessly around him, and although he was himself continually turning about to note with amazement their queer antics, the surface of the snow did not present a single mark or stain to show that it was trodden. But now a great wonder took place. A sudden excitement appeared to possess the phantom throng; and the ranks dividing, a figure of surpassing loveliness approached. It was that of a beautiful Woman, with a crown of crystals upon her head. A thousand corruscated icicles appeared to gleam about her. She was robed in garments of snowy whiteness, which hung loosely upon her form. Her limbs and features were faultlessly beautiful, and in her eyes there dwelt an expression of such perfect love and goodness, that William felt as though he could have knelt and worshipped her. But the most remarkable thing about her was, that although she appeared to be a palpable embodiment, she was nothing but a crystal transparency, and lying on her heart could be seen the form of a sleeping child.

As William gazed with delight on the vision, he felt a cold touch upon his arm, and turned, as if expecting

some new sight. But the space was vacant, and a voice whispered into his ear the word,

"Faith!"

He knew that the presence of an Invisible Shadow was about him, and that this was the name of the spotless woman who stood before him.

Again the vast mass of white phantoms upheaved, and the woman disappeared; but in her place stood another form, which made him shudder to look upon. The form of a Thing, with scowling features, with dishevelled hair, with bloodshot eyes, with nervous trembling limbs. Its garments were soiled, and close upon its brow was fixed a crown with sharp points pressing inwards on its forehead. It was transparent as the first, and lying on its heart could be seen the form of a sleeping child, with a dagger in its breast.

For the second time, the cold touch came upon his arm, and the voice whispered,

"Doubt!"

Once more the shadowy throng moved restlessly about, and the scowling form had vanished, while where it stood there crouched a pitiful-looking figure, with tears streaming from its eyes. As it turned its face heavenward, William saw upon it an expression of almost hopeless despair, and noticed that in its arms there lay the form of a child, cold and dead.

And then the voice whispered for the third time,

"Remorse!"

No sooner had the word been uttered, than the vast throng of phantom shadows made a sudden leap into the air, as if it were an army performing an evolution, and

plunging headlong into the snow, vanished from his sight.

William trembled with amazement. He looked upon the ground, but could see no traces of the phantom groups. The snow had closed upon them as if it were a sea, and the great plain lay naked in the eyes of heaven. But he knew that he was not alone, for he felt about him the presence of the Invisible Shadow, and he heard the voice addressing him—

"Upon this evening, of all evenings in the year, when men's hearts should be filled with love and goodwill, have you allowed the seeds of doubt to be set within your breast. Upon this Christmas Eve have you allowed to be defiled the love which hallows life. She whom you love, and who loves you with all the strength of a pure woman's love, is stainless and truthful. This morning, Faith filled your heart—this night, Doubt occupies its place—beware, lest to-morrow comes Remorse! Behold what you were, what you are, and what you shall be, if you let passion and unreason blind you!"

And as the voice ceased, William sank down, down into the snow. In vain he strove to save himself. Down he sank, lower and lower still, until he felt dizzily afraid that each foot beneath him would disclose a yawning precipice, over which he would be dashed to pieces. But, although the soft white snow enveloped him, he felt strangely the presence of shadowy spirits about him, and ever and anon there would gleam athwart his otherwise blinded sight, the vision of a face which filled his soul with wonder. Eyes of lustrous beauty peered suddenly upon him, and as suddenly vanished.

Strangely-familiar faces flashed upon him, and faded slowly, as others usurped their places. Then a thick darkness fell upon him; and when sight was restored, he found himself standing before a house, surrounded by waving fields, the golden corn gleaming in the sun.

Strange! It was his own house before which he was standing; they were his own fields he saw around him: not as he had seen them last—the evidence of careful husbandry and cultivation was everywhere apparent. It was the vision of what he had pictured to himself his home and farm might have been a few years after he had married. And there, in the garden, was Laura, more matronly, but not less beautiful, than in her maiden days. He walked up to her, and laid his hand upon her shoulder, but she did not turn and look up to him. He spoke to her, but she betrayed no sign of recognition. He clasped her in his arms, but she melted from his grasp, and he saw her looking with a glad light in her eyes out on the landscape. Wonder upon wonders! He saw a form approaching—himself, with a little girl upon his shoulders, crowing and clapping her tiny hands to Laura, who ran towards them smiling, and was taken to her husband's embrace. And then he knew that he was a shadow, invisible, impalpable, and that his other self had taken his place in Laura's affections. The day passed, and he saw them in the evening sitting by the window, her head resting lovingly upon his shoulder. And he heard her speak, and he saw in her eyes such an expression of perfect love, that he gnashed his teeth with despair, as he thought that he had faded out of his place in the world, and that another filled it. She

was speaking to him of the past, of the time before they were married. "Do you know, William," she said, "of what I am thinking?"

"No, darling," he answered, as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

"I am thinking," she said, "of the last Christmas Eve we were together in my father's house, before we were married. When you went away, I was so unhappy, and I did not sleep the whole of the night. How I sighed for the day to come, so that I might see you, and tell you all. And when I saw you coming over the field, oh, William! I ran up to my bedroom, and cried for very happiness. For I thought that you might not come, and that, perhaps, I should never see you again."

"Do not speak of it," he said; "the remembrance of my blind jealousy on that night always fills me with pain."

"But I like to speak of it, and to think of it, William," she persisted, "for it was such a proof of your love. And I am so happy in your love, William; and I bless God for it, hourly and daily."

And then their forms melted in the night, and the history of those two lives passed rapidly before him. He saw them in their youthful wedded days—contented and blessed. Years passed quickly over their heads, and children grew around them, enriching their home with perfect love. Then sickness came, and he saw them standing in the chamber of death over the lifeless form of one of their young ones, gathering consolation in their bereavement from their mutual affection, and from their faith that He, whose all-seeing eye watches equally over all His earthly children, would yet unite them with their

child again in the blessed band of immortality. And so, through the valley of the years, he watched them living their honored lives, until they were gathered to the fold of Him whose children live through all eternity.

Again, he felt about him the presence of the invisible shadow, and the voice said—

"Such lives as these are the reward of Faith and Love. Doubter of all that is most holy and beautiful, behold what shall spring from the seeds you have allowed this night to be set within your heart!"

And then he saw his home and farm again, but, ah! how changed! Neglected lay the rich fields around his homestead; and in his garden, overrun with weeds, stood Laura, looking out upon the landscape: but not the Laura whom he loved. Although the familiar features were there, the expression of anxious pain upon them struck him with fear. Presently, his second self came up to her; but she was not, as before, taken to her husband's embrace, and he made no response to the yearning look with which she lifted up her eyes to his face. In silence they walked side by side into the house, and then he said—

"Any one been here, Laura?"

"No, William," she replied.

"Sure?" he exclaimed, sharply.

"There has been no one here, William," Laura said, with a gasping sigh.

He did not speak again, but turned away from her. And William saw what an unhappy home was here before him: not illumined by Love, but darkened by Doubt: not sanctified by Faith, but gloomed by Disbelief.

The evening came, and he saw the wife creep timidly to her husband's side, while in her eyes there dwelt a mingled look of love and fear.

"William," said she, "why do you still continue to doubt me?"

"Why do you give me cause?" he asked, gloomily.

"Heaven knows, I do not," she replied. "I have been true and faithful to you, in deed and thought. Oh, William! our past life has been very unhappy; do not darken the future—there is no cause. Cast from your heart the doubts that beset you, and do not entirely wreck our future happiness. I love you still, despite your unkindness."

"Of course," he said, bitterly; "my unkindness—throw it upon me. Like all you women. Stephen Winkworth was right; you are all alike."

"William, William," she cried, the hot tears rising to her eyes, "you will break my heart."

But William left her abruptly, without reply—left her to weep over the cold ashes of her love.

And so the next two or three years passed. Thinner and paler grew the wife—more anxious and haggard grew the husband. Then came a time when she lay upon her bed of death; her still sweet face looking up to his, while the angel of Love and the demon of Doubt were fighting within him.

"Stoop down and kiss me, William," she said, slowly and painfully. "I am sorry, and glad, to leave you. Our life has been different to what I hoped it would have been. Do you remember how happy we were before we were married? But it is all ended now; and when we

meet in Heaven you will love me again as you used, will you not?"

He choked back the spasms that rose to his throat, and, kneeling down by the bed, laid his hand in her's.

"Thank God!" she said, as she put his hand to her wasted breast, and then raised it, feebly, to her lips; "it is all over—life was very hard to bear without your love. I gave you all my heart, William; but you took yours from me. When I am gone, think of me sometimes, with love in your thoughts. Look, William, look!" —and she rose in her bed, and pointed out of window— "there is father's house! why, surely it is night, and the snow is falling. It is very cold—but the light is coming"——

And as the light came, her features grew again into youthful beauty, and her soul winged its way to the bosom of Our Heavenly Father.

"Such lives as these," said the voice of the Invisible Shadow, "are the fruit of Doubt. Behold Remorse!"

And William saw himself, a prematurely old, gray-headed man, sitting alone in the midst of a desolate home. No light of love shone upon his house; the happy voices of children were not heard within its walls. Unfriended, uncared for, he sat with all the evidences about him of a wrecked and wasted life. He was filled with regretful thoughts and remorseful memories, and he shuddered despairingly as the picture of what his life might have been rose before him. And so he went down into his grave, unsanctified by human love or human sympathy.

And for the last time the voice spoke.

"The story you have heard to-night from the lips of a hard, bad man is true. But if one sin, are all guilty? Your life is now sanctified by the pure love of a pure woman. Cast it not from you. Live and be blessed with the angel Love! Live and be cursed with the devil Doubt! The choice is before you. You have received your warning!"

And then the voice ceased, and William starting to his feet, rubbed his eyes, and looked about him. Had he been dreaming? He looked up to the tree, but saw no faces in its twisted limbs and branches. The hedge-row beyond was very beautiful, but no beckoning shadows were there. The stars were shining in the frosty heavens, and the moon was throwing a soft tender light upon the snow fields smiling in her face. The night was very lovely; all nature was in repose. Surely he had been dreaming. He looked towards Laura's house—and there——

His heart stood still, and the next instant his body was full of maddening pulses. Stealing out from the house, he saw a female, her form throwing a long Shadow upon the Snow. He could not mistake the step, the graceful turn of the neck as she looked around. It was Laura! Another form meeting hers—the Shadow of a man upon the Snow! As the two met, William pressed forward in mad excitement: he saw warm kisses pass between them—he saw them clinging to each other in fond endearment—he saw her, his Laura! lying in another man's arms: and he dropped into his seat with a bitter cry! His love was stricken dead!

PART II.

THE SHADOWS IN THE SNOW RANGES.

FAR, far away from English homes and English firesides, our story takes us, on a dark and cheerless night, to a little narrow tent, pitched in a gully, on each side of which frowning ranges rear their lofty heads, grandly. To this little narrow tent we come across wild and stormy seas, through storm and tempest, through tropical waters where the moon rises blood-red from a lurid ocean, past icebergs looming threateningly near, through miles of phosphorescent light gleaming in the eyes of the solemn night—to this little narrow tent, wherein, mayhap, are centred all the hopes and fears, all the joys, sorrows, ambitions, which make up the sum of human life in the great world beyond. Months fly, seasons change, and once-glowing aspirations fade away, and are lost for ever in the gulf of time. The drama of some men's lives is played out upon many stages; in others, a single scene upon a narrow stage suffices for the commencement and the end. One man's life may be a cyclopædia; another's, a word of but one syllable. A look, a thought, a motion of the hand, may be sufficient to change the peaceful current of an existence into a turbulent whirlpool.

A dark, cold, cheerless night. With the exception of

this little tent, no trace of civilization near. Here Nature reigns supreme. The lofty mountains, rising range over range, appear to shut out from the world the gully in which our scene is laid. And yet, between this sterile, savage spot and our peaceful Devon lane, there is a close and human connexion. The thoughts of one man at least, sitting in the tent are travelling back to that pleasant yet bitter nook in Devon, wherein were culminated his life's happiness and his life's sorrow. Again the scene rises before him. Again the old familiar faces shape themselves from the air, and visit him with loving looks and smiles. Again a tearfully-happy face is resting on his breast, and loving eyes seek his, yearningly. Again the fond arms are thrown around him, and a tender form nestles confidingly to his heart. And then he wakes, and, looking round with a bitter smile, shakes off the dream, angrily.

Within the tent four men are seated round a miserably scant fire. The canvas above their heads scarcely screens them from the inclemency of the night; and strong and hardy as they are, they huddle close together for warmth, and greedily watch the dying embers before them. Outside the tent, no sign of human habitation or human life can be seen. The district is wild, barren, and dismally bare of vegetation. The men are rough-looking fellows, with great beards and strong limbs, and a decided exertion of physical strength in their every action. Each has a short black pipe in his mouth, which he puffs vigorously, and with a will; and all are alike attired in rough jackets, moleskin trousers, and billy-cock hats. Although they are in as desperate a condition as four men well can be; although the country, for miles around,

is knee-deep, and, in some places, man-deep with snow; although a heavy drift without is raising barriers almost impassable; although their last handful of wood is burning on the fire, and they know that they can obtain no more; although they have not three days provisions in their tent—scarce an anxious thought crosses their minds. Some three or four weeks before, they had set off on the track of a party of men, who were supposed to have found a new Gold Field. Stealing out in the dead of night, lest they themselves should be discovered, they had plunged into a portion of the country which they did not hope to find other than barren, inhospitable, and incapable of sustaining human life. With the indomitable courage and recklessness which appear to form part of the gold digger's character, they had set themselves the task of tracking the men before them, and discovering the locality of their workings. No pluck in the world can beat the pluck of the gold digger. He laughs at obstacles at which others would pale; he fights with the barrenness of nature, and, conquering, opens up country, which, but for his hardihood, might remain with its treasure for ever shut out from the knowledge of mankind. There is no pioneer so brave, so persistent, so enduring. It may be questioned if, in any age, or in any country, the nobler physical qualities of man have been more worthily exercised. In these our antipodean Colonies, the gold digger is the pioneer of progress.

These four men, bound together for the time by the almost brotherly tie of gold digging freemasonry, differed widely in nature and appearance. Each of them might have moved in different grades of life in the old

country.; but conventionalities were here set aside, for a gold digger's existence levels all distinction. Their great beards made their faces so many distinct puzzles, physiognomically; but there was that about their general appearance, their gait, and their conversation, which in some measure served as an index to their several characters. One of these was known as Gentleman George. There was no satire meant in the name. Gentleman George was simply a man of good breeding—a handsome fellow enough, with laughing blue eyes, and the strength of a Hercules. Opposite to him, squatting upon his blanket, was Cornish Tom. He had been a gold digger for the last fifteen years; and had mined in California, New South Wales, Victoria, and New Zealand. He might have made a moderate fortune half-a-dozen times, for he had had fully that number of chances. But there was no rest for the sole of Cornish Tom's foot. No sooner did he hear of a "new rush," than he was off. Many were the rich claims he had abandoned to be among the first on a new Gold Field. Hundreds and thousands of miles of bush and plain had he traversed, patiently and cheerfully, to find that he had been following a Will-o'-the-wisp. Yet he was always hopeful—always sanguine. Free-handed, simple-minded, hard-working, and restless, he was the type of a class which will be easily recognised in the Colonies. The third of the party was a young man, remarkable chiefly for his reticence and his furious love for hard work. He hoarded his gold like a miser. The very opposite of Cornish Tom, who flung his money about with utter recklessness, Dick Driver spent never a shilling in waste, and was so con-

sistently steady and saving that he often brought upon himself the ridicule of his companions. The fourth of the party was William Fairfield.

Yes, maddened by what he had seen that Christmas night, William Fairfield had gone the next morning to Mr. Wymer, and signed away his farm to Stephen Winkworth. He wrote but a few words to Laura. They were these: "I was outside your house last night, and saw all. Oh, Laura, how could you so deceive me! I leave you with a pang at my heart which time can never alleviate. May your future be happier than that I see before me. Farewell." And without waiting for explanation or reply, he travelled hastily to Liverpool, and took passage in a ship just then departing for New Zealand. Very commonplace reading this; but life is made up of lights and shades, and ordinary events require but ordinary language to express them.

As he sat by the miserable fire on this cold and bitter night, his thoughts, with strange persistence, wandered back to that Christmas Eve. Indeed, his thoughts were always dwelling upon that time. He would lie awake night after night wandering through the maze of the past. In the midst of his work, the memory of some trifle, which had given him pleasure, would thrill through him again; and he would linger upon it, although to do so was torture. At times he would wonder what *she* was doing at the moment of his thought, and he would set the old wound bleeding by calling up the image of her face—her face, so innocently beautiful, so fair, so sweet to look upon. He kept the memory of it lingering about him, although he extracted from it nothing but exquisite misery.

One thought continually haunted him. Could he have been mistaken? Had he been rash in judging her? No; he would sigh, as the memories of the shadows he had seen upon the snow hovered again and again about him. But still his thoughts would wander back to the theme, and still the doubt remained.

"Whew!" whistled Gentleman George, casting his eyes somewhat apprehensively round, "I hope the wind won't blow away the tent. I half expect we are in a pickle as it is, but that would make it ten times worse. Just take a peep out of doors, Willy, and see what it looks like."

Willy (that was the only name by which William Fairfield was known) went to the door, and cautiously opening it, and holding it fast lest it should be blown out of his hand, let in a gust of wind that raised the dying embers of the fire into a furious but deceitful blaze. Stepping out quickly, and pulling the door behind him, William gazed around and shivered. In truth, it was a bitter night. A heavy wind was driving the snow before it fiercely. The tremendous ranges which hemmed in this little band of men were snow-clad from base to summit, and the flying drift blowing into William's face almost blinded him. Shading his eyes with his disengaged hand, William looked about him keenly, as if in search of some familiar object, and then, hastily stepping into the tent, fastened the door, and resumed his seat.

"Well?" said Gentleman George, in a tone of inquiry.

"Did you see the fork this afternoon?" abruptly asked William, without heeding Gentleman George's query.

"Yes," was the reply.

The fork was a tree with a quaintly forked branch, which stood about a hundred yards from the tent.

"Sure?" asked William.

"Certain."

"Well, it has either been blown down, or the snow has covered it. If it is not blown away, there must be twelve feet of snow where it stands."

A low whistle broke from the lips of the three men, and Cornish Tom, carefully re-filling his cutty, asked composedly,

"Ever snowed up, George?"

"No," replied George; "and never want to be."

"Dare say," returned Cornish Tom, lighting his pipe; "but you'll have a chance now."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Cornish Tom spoke again.

"Look here, mates," he said, "I reckon we're in for it; we haven't three days' grub in the place, and can't get any more. This snow-storm is going to last, and I'm blessed if I can see how we're to get out of it."

No one thought of disputing with Cornish Tom; he was known not to be fond of giving idle opinions.

"I have heard from some of the shepherds, that places like these are snowed up at this season of the year, sometimes for months together," said Gentleman George.

"The best thing we can do," said Cornish Tom, "is to try and hump it back again to-morrow. Did you see any smoke from the next gully, to-day?"

"No," replied William.

"I saw it yesterday," continued Tom; "perhaps they're off. An eternal shame it is," he grumbled, "that

when we've found a rich gully like this, we should have to run away from it. Why, we could make a pile in six months. I wonder what sort of ground they've got in the next gully."

"I wonder if they've got any provisions," speculated William.

"It strikes me," said Dick Driver, speaking very slowly, "that we shall not be able to get out of this as easily as we think. Look here," and he kicked the side of the tent, against which a mass of accumulated snow was heavily pressing; "there is an awful drift going on; all the tracks are rubbed out, and if the fork is buried, we might as well try to walk through the sea as try to get out that way. I shouldn't be half surprised if we were never to get out at all! Hark! what was that?"

They all bent their heads and listened. The only sound they could hear was the roaring of the wind past the tent.

"We may as well look at it right in the face," resumed Dick; "I was never very religious, but if I had been, I think I should say my prayers twice over to-night."

The only answer Gentleman George and Cornish Tom gave to this, was a steadier puffing at their pipes. They were well aware of their danger, but they did not care to talk over-much about it; they all knew and could grasp the full extent of their peril—all but William Fairfield. He had never realised it until this night, and now it came upon him with terrible force. Never to get back! he thought; to be snowed up here, and be buried and lost to the world for ever! Never to see

dear Devon again! never again to see or hear of Laura! And now an intense desire seized him to see and speak with her once more; for he loved her still—loved her dearly. Swiftly to his thought came her sweet face to his mind; and the yearning that filled his soul made him sick with desire.

"Oh!" he groaned to himself, as he had done hundreds of times before, "would it have been better for me not to have seen?—It would, for I should not have known; I should have been blest and happy, and now"——

He looked round, shiveringly. Heedless of the blinding snow, he went again to the door, and stepped out. He strained his gaze across the hills, as if he could see Warleycombe in the distance. And if he could—if at that moment a vision of what was passing in his old home had visited him—what would he have seen and heard?

He would have seen Laura sitting, listlessly, at her bedroom window, overlooking the garden, now radiant with Nature's loveliest gems. He would have seen her, with a wistful look in her sweet eyes, gazing far, far beyond, as if she, too, yearned to annihilate space, and look again upon the form of the man she loved—for she did love him, truthfully, faithfully; and she yearned to take him to her heart, and weep over him and forgive him.

He would have seen her father enter slowly, and have seen her turn to him, and lay her head gently upon his breast. He would have heard Harrild say,

"Still thinking, darling?"

"Still thinking, father," she answers, softly; "as I shall always do."

"Child! child!" Reuben Harild says, "he is not worthy of you."

"Yes, he is, father," she replies, laying her hand upon his lips. "He is mistaken, that is all. And, oh, father! would that he were here, that I might forgive him."

Looking again, William would have seen Laura upon her knees, her prayer being that her lover might return to her, or that she might die.

William might have seen another home—that of Stephen Winkworth. He might have seen poor crippled Alice lying sick upon her bed, and Stephen standing by in anguish; Doctor Bax being present, looking somewhat graver than of old.

"Something better to-day, Alice," says the little Doctor. "We shall have you presently running about the house, as lively as a cricket."

A weary, incredulous smile passes over the girl's face, and she murmurs something about never getting better.

"Nonsense, child! nonsense!" says Doctor Bax. "You don't mean to say, you little goose, that you know better than I do. Why, you would upset the whole science of making people well if you had your way."

"There is only one thing that can make me better, Doctor Bax," says the girl.

"And what is that? Just say it, and you shall have it in a twinkling," replied the Doctor.

She shakes her head sadly.

"No," she says; "you cannot get it for me. If William Fairfield would come back and marry Laura, I think I

should be better. She is very unhappy, is she not, Doctor?"

"Very unhappy, child."

"Poor Laura!" says Alice, pityingly. "What made him go away?"

"What made him go away?" echoes Doctor Bax, irascibly. "How on earth should I know? An unfortunate temperament, I suppose. It is a most unaccountable thing. I have lived all these years in the world, and the more I live, the more I am puzzled. How such a young man could run away from that sweet girl—for she's an angel, my dear, and so are you—is the greatest puzzle I have ever met with. Upon my word, I think the world is going crazy. Good day, my dear, I will see you to-morrow;" and Doctor Bax goes out, rubbing his head vexedly.

But William Fairfield saw nothing of all this. He saw nothing but the desolate white ranges; and as he looked, a great despair gathered round his heart. The thought of dying uncared for in this wild spot, almost drove him mad. But he could not bear the cold, and presently he re-joined his companions.

"I am not much of a believer in presentiments," Gentleman George was saying, "but I have got the idea in my head that we shall never get out of this, alive. We could keep the snow away for a good many days, but we shall have enough work to do to keep ourselves from freezing. Then, we have nothing to eat."

"And the bacca's nearly run out," grumbled Cornish Tom. "I'd give a pound of gold for a pound of Barrett's Twist. I wouldn't care if we had plenty of bacca."

"I wonder if the folks at home will ever have an idea of our fate, if we shouldn't get away," said Gentleman George.

"Don't keep on talking like that, George," remonstrated Tom; "you make me feel as low-spirited as—as"—but Tom couldn't get a simile, so he rattled the ashes out of his pipe and re-filled it.

"I can't help it, Tom; I have not seen my mother or father for over ten years, and although I don't write to them, and don't know, indeed, if they are alive, I can't help thinking of them at such a time as this. I I never heard you speak of yours, Tom."

"Haven't got none," said Tom, shortly.

"Have you, Will?" asked Gentleman George.

William shook his head.

"You have, I know, Dick," George pursued, "for I have seen you reading their letters. You see I was a scapegrace at home, and they were glad to get rid of me, and I was not sorry to go. But I should like to see their dear old faces again."

"And so you will, George," said Tom, energetically; "but you're not going the right way about it. We must keep stout hearts, and we shall be all right. At all events, we won't stay here until we're so tightly snowed up, that we can't get out. We'll start to-morrow, and cut our way out of it."

"Hark!" said William, who had been listening with bent head to something outside. "Do you not hear a cry!"

They all listened attentively, but no sound reached their ears but the moaning of the wind.

"I thought I heard some one crying out," said William, after a pause.

"You couldn't hear anything in such a wind as this," said Cornish Tom. "Lord! What is that?"

They all rushed to the door. A deadening roar, soft at first, but increasing every instant, had struck upon their ears, and looking out, they saw a sight which filled each man with awe and wonder. An avalanche, slipping from the summit of one of the loftiest ranges! Down, down it thundered, throwing out huge snow-sprays, each one sufficient to bury a hundred men. Down the steep side of the mountain it rushed, increasing in volume with every foot it rolled, and detaching great masses of snow and ice, which leaped over each other with terrible velocity, until they thundered into the gully. A roar as of ten thousand evil spirits: an angry rush as of a giant army of white monsters, filling the air with terrible sights and sounds: and then the avalanche spread itself, with a great thud, at the base of the mountain. The lookers-on held in their breaths; all thought of their own peril gone in the terrific grandeur of the scene.

"We shall be blown into ice-blocks," presently, said Gentleman George, as a sigh of relief escaped him, "if we stand here much longer. Thank God, we were not under it!"

And so, with a deep feeling of thankfulness at their hearts, they went into the tent, and, scraping up the scattered embers of the fire, huddled round it in close companionship.

"I don't think any one of us is in the humour for sleeping," said George; "tell us a story, Tom."

Tom, without more ado, settled himself comfortably and began.

"When the Victorian gold fever was at its height," he said, "people were literally mad with excitement. Lord! lord! the queer sights I have seen, and the queer stories I could tell, would fill a dozen books. I have worked with all sorts of mates, and lived all sorts of lives. The strangest mate I ever worked with was a man who went by the name of Cranky Bill. He was as thin as a lath, and as tall as a may-pole, and he would talk—Lord! he would talk, I believe, for days and nights without stopping, if he could only get some one to listen to him. He had come out to the colony under a cloud. When I say under a cloud," said Tom, taking his pipe from his mouth, "I don't mean that he had done anything wrong; but he was obliged to run away from England for a reason I didn't know then, but which I learned afterwards. He had brought his wife out with him: a poor, weak, delicate creature, who died soon after he landed, leaving behind her a little girl. This little girl, Cranky Bill left with some people in Melbourne, and came to the diggings to try his luck. I was working in Dead Dog Gully, near Forest Creek, which was just discovered, and Cranky Bill and me had somehow or another come together as mates. A better one I never wish for. Barring his gift of the gab, which was an awful nuisance, to be sure, I never had anything to complain of. He never shirked his work; and once, when I was laid up with low fever, he nursed me like a woman, and worked the claim without a murmur. Soon after I got

well our claim was worked out, and we had to look elsewhere for another, for every inch of the gully was taken up. . I remember the night we parted. We were sitting in the tent, with the gold before us, and our revolvers on the table; for we had to look out pretty sharp, those days, mates. Many's the man who has been robbed and murdered without any one being the wiser; strange things have been done on the diggings, which man's tongue will never speak of. I've seen some sights which make me shiver when I think of them; just the same as Cranky Bill——but I mustn't spoil my story.

"Well, we were sitting there with the gold before us. Our claim had been a rich one, and we had over three hundred ounces to divide, after all our sprees.

"'Tom,' said Cranky Bill, as he sat looking at the gold, 'if I had had my share of that gold at home, I should never have come out to the gold fields, and my wife would not have died.'

"How can you tell that, Bill?" I asked.

"Ah, but I know," he said. "You see, ours was a love match. We lived at Birkenhead. There was an old hunks of a money-lender wanted to marry my Lizzie; but although her father tried to force her to the match, she would not consent, and we were married one morning, quietly, and without their knowing. We were very happy—she was a good girl, was my Liz—and we could have got along very well, if it had not been for that money-lending miser. To spite me for marrying the girl, he bought up all my debts—they were not much, about four hundred pounds—and almost worried me mad.

And do you know one morning I caught the villain in the act of insulting my wife, and learned that this was not the first time he had done so, threatening that, if she mentioned it, he would sell me up and put me in prison. I didn't show him any mercy, you may be sure; I beat him till he was sore, and kicked him out of the house; and the next morning I had to fly, for his bailiffs were on the look-out to arrest me for the debt. He sold me up, and turned my wife into the streets, and we came together to Liverpool in a sad plight. However, I shipped before the mast, and a friend assisted me to pay for my wife's passage. It was not until we had been at sea a week that she told me that the doctor had said if she left England she would not live a twelvemonth. She died within the year. So, you see, if I had had my share of that gold at home, I could have paid that old scoundrel's debt, and my wife would not have died. If I can ever get enough money to go home and ruin him, I shall die contented."

"And he broke out into a storm of oaths and curses.

"'I tell you what, Tom,' he said, after a bit, 'I shall go down to Melbourne and see my little daughter, and then I'll go prospecting. I know that there are places where the gold can be got in lumps, and I mean to find them out. I dreamed the other night that I came upon it in the rock, and that I had to cut it out with a chisel.'

"I tried to persuade him from this; for I did not like the idea of losing my mate, but I might as well have talked to a mile-post. So we divided the gold, and that very night he started on the tramp to Melbourne.

"I did not see or hear anything of Cranky Bill for

some months after this; and, somehow or other, luck was against me—every hole I bottomed turned out a duffer. I went to every little rush; had half-a-dozen different mates in as many months; and didn't earn tucker any week during that time. I wonder," said Cornish Tom, meditatively, "where all the names they give to the gullies come from? I've worked in Jackass Gully, Starvation Gully, Donkey-woman's Gully, Pegleg Gully, Choke'm Gully, Dead Horse Gully, and lots of others—I've sunk holes in them all. But no place is so strong in my mind as Madman's Gully, and I shall never forget the way I came across it.

"I had been working for nearly three weeks on Murdering Flat—nice sociable names, ain't they?—and was pretty well down on my luck. I remember that I had made about seven pennyweights in those three weeks; and I also remember that I hadn't an ounce of gold left in my bag. I was working as a 'hatter,' and I had been particularly unlucky that day, having got about three grains, which I flung away in a rage. I was just thinking whether I might not as well go to the grog shanty for a nobbler or two—it was nine o'clock at night—when who should walk in but Cranky Bill. I did not know him at first, for he had let the hair grow all over his face, and he was covered with it up to his eyes and down to his breast; but I wasn't long in the dark, for I recognised his voice directly he spoke.

"'All alone, Tom?' he asked.

"I nodded; and without saying another word, he went out, and brought in in his arms a beautiful little girl, asleep. She wasn't above six years old, but she was so

pretty, and looked so like a little angel, that I fell in love with her at once. Of course, I was a bit surprised when he brought her in, and he could see this as he laid her down upon my stretcher.

"'This is my daughter, Tom,' he said, answering my look; 'if ever I go to heaven, I shall have her to thank for it. She is my good angel.'

"'Where are you come from, Bill?' I asked, after we had covered her up with the blankets.

"He looked cautiously round, and then taking a seat close to me at the end of the stretcher, said, in a whisper,

"'I've found it Tom!'"

"His eyes glared round so awfully, that I felt quite scared as I asked him what he had found.

"'I've found the place where the gold comes from,' he said, in the same voice; 'I know I am near it. I always thought I should find it at last. Look here.'

"And he pulled out of his breast-pocket, a nugget weighing nearly seventy ounces, and half a dozen others, from fifteen to twenty-five ounces each. Lord! how my heart beat as I looked at them, and how I wished I could drop across some of the same kidney. I don't know how it is with you, mates, but although I don't value the gold much when I have got it, I can't express the eager delight which fills me when I come across a rich pocket. I think the sight of bright shining gold down a dark claim, is the prettiest in the world.

"'How are you doing, Tom?' Cranky Bill asked, as he put back the nuggets.

"'Can't make tucker, Bill,' I answered; 'my luck's dead out.'

"'Well, look here,' he said, 'you're all right now. I have come to fetch you, and shew you where you can make fifty ounces a day. Will you come?'

"That was a nice question to put to hard-up digger, wasn't it?

"'When shall we start, old fellow?' I said.

"'Stop a minute, Tom,' he said, gravely. 'I have something to say to you first. I want you for a mate again: but we've got to make a bargain. You see my little girl there?'

"I nodded.

"'Well, she is the blood of my heart. I am like a plant, Tom, which would wither, if deprived of God Almighty's blessed dew. She is my dew. And if anything was to happen to her, I should wither, and rot, and die. I want you for my mate, because I believe you to be honest and true. And I am going to show you a place which, of my own free will, I would not show to another man in the world. But do you know, Tom, that since I have had my little pet with me,'—and he laid his hand, oh! so gently against her cheek,—'all my recklessness and courage seem to have gone clean out of me. For I think what will become of her if I should die—if I should slip down a shaft, or the claim should tumble in upon me, or I should fall ill of a fever, or anything of that sort. These thoughts haunt me day and night, and I have a presentiment of something I cannot express. Now, Tom, listen to me. The place I am going to take you to will make you rich—if we can keep it to ourselves for two or three months (although there *is* another in the secret, but he won't peach for his own sake), we'll get five thousand

ounces, and perhaps more. Now, lay your hand upon your heart, and swear that if anything happens to me, you will take care of my pet, and be a second father to her, when I am gone.'

"I rose and bent over the dear little one's face—I can feel her sweet breath again upon my cheek—and kissed her. Then I said,

"'That kiss is a sacrament, Bill. By all that's holy, I will be a second father to your little girl. So help me God!'

"He took my hand, and the big tears rolled down his beard. We neither of us spoke for five minutes, and then he commenced again.

"'Now, I will tell you all about it. You remember my leaving you to go to Melbourne, after we had worked out our claim in Dead Dog? Well, I went down and found that my little girl was not being well treated. The people she was living with had taken to drink, and had neglected her. And my heart so grew to her—her face is the picture of my Lizzie's—that I made up my mind never to leave her again. We've travelled together, since that time, I don't know how many hundreds of miles.'

"'How did you manage that?' I asked; 'the little thing could not walk.'

"'Sometimes I carried her,' he answered; 'and I got her odd lifts, now and then, upon the drays and wagons. There was never a drayman or a wagoner who refused to give my little girl a ride, if he was going our way. Why, do you know,' he said, laughing, 'once she saved me from the bushrangers. They were upon me in the

Black Forest, before I knew where I was, and called out to me to stand. We had just been having tea, and I was stooping over the log fire to get a light for my pipe. I jumped up, and saw them before me. There were three of them. They were splendidly mounted, and were dressed in red serge shirts and silk sashes. Well, my girl runs up to my side, and stands looking at the three men. They were dumfoundered. "Is that yours, mate?" they asked. "Yes," I answered; and then one of them got off his horse, and asked my little girl to give him a kiss, which she did; and he knelt down before her, and put her two hands on his eyes, and kissed them over and again. "If every man had a little angel like that by his side," he said, "it would be the better for him." And then, taking off his silk sash, he put it round my girl's waist; and they all wished me good night, and rode off. That was a lucky escape, was it not? However, while on the road, I could not get along as quickly as I wanted to, so I bought a wheelbarrow.'

"'A wheelbarrow!' I exclaimed, surprised.

"'Yes, a wheelbarrow,' he said with a comical look; 'and I put my little girl in it, and wheel her wherever I want to go. Well, to get along with my story, I came upon the gully where I am working now. Directly I saw it, I knew that it was right for gold. I went to a station, about twelve miles off, and laid up a stock of provisions. Then I set to work. Oh, Tom! it *is* a gully; and rising up steeply on one side of it is a rocky range, with great masses of quartz sticking out. I've broken up a lot of it, and have got plenty of little nuggets out of the

stone; and I know that if we could get a shaft down, we should find the gold in lumps. I worked by myself in this gully for two months, and got over four hundred ounces; but one day, when I was cradling, I saw a man looking at me. My mind was made up in a minute. He had wandered by accident to the place, and had discovered me working. So I took him for a mate, and we were together until the day before yesterday.'

"'And now you have parted,' I said.

"'Yes. My pet don't like him, and I absolutely think he doesn't like my pet. Then there's my dog Whiskey snarls at him whenever he comes within chain-length; and I believe in dogs, Tom. I had a stand-up fight with him, the day before yesterday. He said something to Liz, that made her cry; so I gave him a thrashing, and told him I would have nothing more to do with him. I knew you were knocking about in these parts, and I determined to come and find you.'

"'Did you bring the child in the wheelbarrow?' I asked.

"'Yes,' he replied, 'it is in the bush, half-a-mile away, with my swag, and Whiskey is taking care of them. No one must know where you are going. What do you say to packing up your swag, and starting right off?'

"My swag did not take long putting together, and Bill, taking the little girl, who was half asleep and half awake, in his arms, led the way into the bush."

Cornish Tom had got thus far with his story, when a motion of William Fairfield's finger to his lips, made him pause.

"I could swear I heard a cry for help," said William, listening anxiously.

They all went again to the door, but when they were outside, the wind was so violent that they could scarcely stand. They peered about them, and searched, and called out for fully a quarter of an hour, but they saw nothing, and heard no sound in reply to their shrill cooeys.

"Fancy, Will," suggested Gentleman George, as they went in.

"No," said William, "I don't think it; I have thought two or three times that I heard a cry. But it may have been the wind, after all."

"There can't be anyone there," said Cornish Tom, "or they would have heard our cooeys, and answered them."

So they huddled together again, and Tom proceeded with his story.

"We travelled the whole of that night, lest we should be tracked, taking it in turns to wheel the little girl, who slept soundly all the time. It was a beautiful starlight night, and as we went along, Cranky Bill pointed out lots of likely looking places, that had never had a pick put in them to prove if there was gold there or not. I wanted to stop and try some of them, but Bill kept urging me on, and would not listen to an hour's delay. We lay quiet, and slept by snatches during the next day, and at night we pursued our journey. Well, about midnight, we came to the gully. We had been travelling for two or three hours over a heavy rocky range, and what with the steepness of the hill, and the

weight of our swags, and the wheelbarrow with little Liz in it (although she often got out and walked, or was carried in our arms a bit), it was awful work, I can tell you. At last we got to the top, and there beneath us, some five hundred yards down, was the gully. It was scarcely a gully: it looked to me, when I first saw it, for all the world like a large basin, shut in by the steep ranges. You would have thought there was no outlet from it, unless you climbed over the hills; but when you got down you discovered two or three artful little turns, which took you to other gullies and basins, almost as queer-looking as this. As we walked down, Bill showed me his tent, and said that he should not wonder if his mate was sleeping in it. Sure enough, as we came near, out he rushed with a revolver in his hand, and he let one barrel fly at Whiskey, who had sprung at him the moment he made his appearance.

"'Lie down, Whiskey,' said Cranky Bill, seizing the dog by the collar; 'and you, Ted, put down that revolver, or I'll wring your neck for you.' And, almost on the words, Bill let go the dog, and jumped on the fellow, wrested the revolver from his hands, and sent him spinning a dozen yards away. It was not too soon done, for I believe he would have shot us in another minute. He was a desperate-looking fellow, was Teddy the Tyler. I heard some queer stories about him afterwards.

"'You murdering villain, you,' said Bill, as Teddy the Tyler rose from the ground, with an evil look, and shook himself; 'what do you mean by pointing your pistol at me like that? Do you know you might have shot my little girl?'

"She was standing at his side, and clinging to him, trembling with fear.

"'A good job if I had,' muttered Teddy the Tyler, vindictively.

"Cranky Bill strode quickly up, and seizing him by the shirt-collar, forced him to the ground by dint of sheer muscular strength.

"'Now, just you listen to me,' he said, as Teddy lay helpless at his feet. 'If ever you raise your hand against me, or my little girl, or my mate, or my dog, or anything that belongs to me, I'll break your infernal back for you; I will, by the lord!'

"'What do you bring loafers into the gully for?" growled Teddy.

"'That's my business,' answered Bill; 'this is my mate now, and if you call him a loafer again, I'll knock your ugly teeth down your throat. But I'm not going to have anything more to do with you. I make you a present of the gully; I know a better one—ah! you may stare, but you'll not put your foot into it, my lad. To-morrow morning I shall take my tent away, and you can work here by yourself till you rot, if you like. I don't think you are fool enough to get the place rushed, for that would put an end to your little game. Pick up that revolver, Tom, and stick it in your belt. Throw out of the tent everything that belongs to the thief.'

"I carried his blankets and some clothes out to him, and threw them down, while he stood scowling.

"'There's another thing in there,' he said; 'there's my neckhandkerchief.'

"And I flung to him a bright-colored handkerchief,

which he wore round his neck. As he slung it carelessly over his shoulders, the light of the moon caught it, and I noticed particularly the combination of bright colors in which it was woven.

"'Ain't you going to give me my revolver?' he asked, sulkily.

"'Not likely, my lad,' replied Cranky Bill. 'You might find too much use for it.'

"'All right,' he said. 'But just you look out, Bill. I'll make this the worst night's work for you, that you have ever done. If I don't make you smart for this, may I be"——

"We did not take any more notice of him, but, putting the chain on Whiskey, we went into the tent, and lay down till morning.

"We were up with the lark, and out. As we passed along the gully, I noticed that Teddy the Tyler had put up a sort of mimi, and that he was asleep under it.

"'Now then, Tom,' said my mate, 'I'll shew you a place that will open your eyes. That fool there doesn't know anything about it. You remember the old school-boy maxim, that 'cheating never thrives.' Upon my word, I believe it to be true; for if I had not found out that he was a cheat and a thief, I would have shown him a better gully than this one.'

"Coming to the end of the gully, we walked over a little bit of a rise, Bill leading the way, through a heavy clump of timber on the other side. We might have gone half a mile, when Bill clapped his hands before my eyes, and told me not to look. We might have walked a hundred yards further, when he took his hand away, and

told me to open my eyes. It was a strange-looking spot, to be sure. It was a steep gully, that seemed to have been scooped out of the range, and it was just the shape of a saddle.

"'Look here, Tom,' said Cranky Bill, stooping down before the stump of what had been a large tree, and scraping up the earth from the roots; 'here's a couple of pennyweights;' and he held up a little nugget he had found in the dirt. 'We shall get some heavy nuggets in the saddle.'

"Well, to cut a long story short. we removed the tent here, and commenced sinking. Talk of jewellers' shops! One of our claims took the shine out of all of them. And as day after day went, and our bags got heavier and heavier, I began to talk to Bill about going home, and buying a farm, and settling down. It was all settled. We were to live together, and the girl was to grow up into a beautiful young woman, and get married, and then we were to take care of the children —and she used to listen to us, and laugh, and clap her little hands——lord!" mused Cornish Tom, "when I think of those five weeks we worked together, I can scarcely believe that what took place afterwards was real. How I loved that dear little angel! She called me Father Tom, and every night, as she knelt by the crib we had made for her, she used to wind up her prayers with 'God bless dear papa and Father Tom, and make me a good child!' Then, on Sundays, we would take a walk, and gather wild flowers; and Bill in the evening would read a chapter out of the Bible. Do you know, mates, (said Tom, suddenly breaking off,) that I don't think

Sunday on the diggings is at all properly spent. I know lots of diggers who make a practice of spending it in sly-grog shanties, and ﬂobblerising. I don't know where the fault lies, but it's true enough there's something wrong. Those Sundays, with Bill and his little girl, are never out of my thoughts. I wish I could spend my Sundays now, as I did then.

"During this time, we had only seen Teddy the Tyler once. About a fortnight after we started working, he came strolling upon us in the after part of the day. A tin dish, with nearly a pound of gold in it, was lying by the claim, and as he came up she threw a woefully covetous look at it. I should tell you that the little girl was asleep in the tent.

"'What do you want here?' asked my mate. We were both at the top of the claim.

"'Nothing particular,' he said. 'I came to see how you're getting on.

"He had his pick and shovel hanging over his shoulder, and, walking past the claim we were working, he stuck his pick in the ground, and began tucking up his shirt sleeves.

"Cranky Bill went up to him, and taking the pick and shovel, pitched them a dozen yards off.

"'Do you remember me telling you that you shouldn't come into this gully?' he asked.

"'You might say what you pleased,' said Teddy the Tyler. 'It is as much mine as your's. I mean to fight for it, mate, at all events.'

"'That's fair, said Cranky Bill. 'If you lick me, we'll give you our claim, and get another. Tom, come and see fair play.'

"And to it they went. But Teddy the Tyler might as well have stood up against a rock as against my mate. Bill was the strongest man I ever saw, and he gave Teddy such an awful thrashing, that he threw up his arms in less than a quarter of an hour.

"'Had enough, mate?' asked Bill, coolly.

"Teddy did not reply, but shouldering his pick and shovel, he walked away without a word; throwing a devil's look behind him though, as he went.

"'He'd murder us, if he could,' I said.

"'I dare say,' said Bill, 'but we won't give him the chance.'

"You would hardly believe, would you, that in five weeks we got eleven hundred ounces of gold? We did, though; and then something happened that makes my blood shiver to think of. I had started the night before to get some provisions. We used to start off in the night, so that we should not be discovered, and when we went to the station early in the morning, for meat and flour, the people did not suspect we had been walking all the previous night. I was the whole day getting back, for I took my time, and kept my eyes well about me, to see that I was not followed. I was within half a mile of our gully, when who should I meet but Cranky Bill, looking like a madman. Running up to me, he said, wildly—

"'Tom, for God's sake, answer me quickly: have you seen Lizzie?'

"'No,' I said, while an uncomfortable feeling rose at my throat.

"'She's lost! She's lost!' he screamed. 'Oh, my pet,

my darling! if I don't find you, may the world be burned, and all that's in it.'

"I really thought he was going mad. I had a deal to do to keep myself cool, for I was full of fears, and you know I loved the little thing as if she were my own daughter. When I got him a bit calm, I said, as quietly as I could—

"'Let us be cool, Bill, and we shall have a chance of finding her. If we don't keep our wits together, we might be her death.'

"'I know! I know!' he said, repressing his agitation. 'What are we to do?'

"'First, when did you miss her?'

"'This morning,' he replied. 'I got up at daylight, and left her sleeping in her crib. I kissed her before I went out. I shall never kiss her again! I shall never kiss her again!' And he broke cut into a passionate fit of sobbing.

"I waited quietly until this was over, and then I told him to go on.

"'I came back to breakfast, and she was gone; and the dog had been taken off his chain, and was gone, too. I've been looking for her all day, and I shall never see her any more!'

"'I am glad the dog was with her,' I said. 'How long is it since you were at the tent?'

"'I was there an hour ago; but all this talking will not bring her back. Let's search for her. Perhaps she has climbed over the range, and is lost in the bush.'

"'She could never do it—she hasn't strength enough, the dear little thing, to get to the top. Now, Bill, listen

to me. I am cooler than you are, and I intend to keep cool; although I'd give my legs and arms rather than any hurt should come to her, I am not going to let my feelings run away with me. If I am to assist you, I must know everything. Let us go back at once to the tent, and start from there. Here's my hand, Bill, and I'll search till I drop before I give her up.'

"He took my hand, and we went back to the tent. The first thing I did was to look at the dog's chain. It had been unlocked in the usual manner, and the key was lying on the table.

"'That's plain proof,' I said, 'that Lizzie herself let him loose, and took him out with her. Had she all her things on?'

"Yes, her hat and mantle were gone, and also a little basket which she used to take with her sometimes, and fill with wild flowers.

"'You see,' I said, 'she went out flower-gathering. Now, which way did she go?'

"I was puzzled for a few moments, and then I thought she would probably take the road she knew best; and that was the one that led to the gully Crazy Bill had first worked. There was a creek on the road, pretty deep in some parts, and I jumped at the idea at once, that she might have fallen in. All this time, Bill was behaving in a most dreadful manner. He took up the little things that belonged to her, and kissed them over and over again. He called her by name, as if she could hear him; spoke of his dead wife, as if she were standing before him; and, altogether, he was about as useless as a man well could be. Then, taking a match-box, half filled with gold, he threw it on the ground, shouting—

"'To the devil with all the gold! Devil gold! Devil gold! Why did I come here and lose my pet for you? Oh, Lord! take all the gold, and give me back my daughter.'

"'Come along, Bill,' I said, without appearing to pay any heed to his ravings, for I knew that was best; 'I am going to the creek to look for her.'

"'She hasn't fallen in!' he cried. 'How do you know she has fallen in? It's not true! My little pet is not drowned! No! No!'

"'I don't say she is drowned,' said I. 'God forbid that she is! Behave like a man, Bill, and keep your senses about you, or we may as well give her up altogether.'

"You see, I could not help speaking so to him, and after a time I got him to be a little more reasonable. Then we started to walk to the creek. I searched carefully all the way, but could see nothing that would give me the slightest clue. When we got to the creek, Bill absolutely shook with fear. We tracked it up and down for a long way without any success, and then we sat on the bank, looking at each other.

"'Don't be cast down, Bill,' I said, after a little consideration, 'she can't be drowned.

"'How do you know that?' he asked moodily.

"'Why, the dog can swim,' I answered, 'and if he could not have saved her, he would be somewhere about.' And then, as a sudden thought came into my mind, I said, 'Bill, have you been to Teddy the Tyler?'

"He gave a sudden jump, and turning quite white, he whispered—

"'Why, do you think'——

"'I don't think anything,' I interrupted, decidedly. 'Let us go and see him.'

"So we walked in silence to Teddy the Tyler's tent. It was late in the evening, now, and Teddy was sitting by a log fire, smoking his pipe. He barely looked up as we approached, but I noticed that he drew near to him with his foot an axe that was lying on the ground.

"'Good evening, mate,' I said, by way of commencement, although I felt more inclined to throttle him than to be civil to him. As for Bill, he was trembling with excitement. There was a gleam in his eyes I did not like, and I knew that I must keep myself cool for his sake.

"Teddy did not reply to my good evening, but still sat smoking. He had one eye on the axe, though; I didn't miss that.

"'Are you deaf?' I asked.

"'No,' he snapped. 'Are you?'

"'Look, here, mate,' I said——

"'And look you here, mate,' he interrupted, 'I don't want any of your good evenings, or any of your company. What are you loafing about my gully for? I'll split your skull open if you stop here much longer.'

"'Keep a civil tongue in your head, mate,' said I. "'We've come here especially to see you, and I am going to ask you a question or two. You will have to answer them, my lad, or you will never answer another.'

"'You can ask a thousand questions, if you like,' said Teddy, 'you won't get me to answer one.'

"'We shall see,' I replied. 'We are in search of

little Lizzie. She has not been home all day. Have you seen her?'

"Cranky Bill had been quiet all this time, but had never moved his eyes off Teddy. He did not seem to like this, didn't Teddy, and he shifted his position more than once. When I put the question to him, he gave us both a sharp, quick look, but made no answer.

"'Have you seen Lizzie?' I repeated. 'Has she been here to-day?'

"Still no answer.

"Suddenly, Bill made a spring at him, but Teddy was on his legs in an instant, brandishing the axe over his head. Bill avoided the blow, catching the handle on his arm, and, closing with Teddy, had him on the ground in no time, with his knee on his chest, and his hand at his throat.

"'Hold off, Bill!' Teddy choked out. 'Take the madman off, or he'll throttle me!'

"'Answer that question,' shouted Bill, loosing his grasp a little; 'if you don't, I'll kill you!'

"'She hasn't been here to-day,' the fellow gasped.

"'Have you seen her anywhere, you devil?' asked Bill.

"'No,' was the sullen reply.

"'You may get up,' said Bill, rising; 'I believe you are lying, you thieving knave. If I find that you are, I'll tear your heart out. Mark me, Teddy the Tyler, if I discover that you have seen my girl to-day, and have been telling us lies, you shall cry blood. Come away, Tom, the sight of him turns me sick.'

"We had a weary night of it. We searched in every

likely place: we lighted fires on every little rise, so that they might catch the child's eye, if she was any where near; but when the morning came, we were as far off finding her as ever. What puzzled me most, was the absence of the dog. We could find no trace of him. If anything had happened to the child, I thought, his instinct would surely have led him back to the tent. We came home tired and disheartened. We had not eaten a morsel the whole night. Bill, I don't believe, had tasted food since he first missed her. He had not even smoked a pipe. I was thinking to myself, what shall we do next, when my mate, who had thrown himself upon the ground, said in a low voice, as if he was frightened that any one should hear him, 'Tom, we have not looked down the claims.'

"The idea that our little girl might be lying at the bottom of one of the holes, dying, turned me quite faint.

"I jumped up without a word, and we re-commenced our search. Bill was terribly shaky, every fresh hole we came to. I went down myself, so as to save him the shock; and I cannot tell you the relief I felt when I came up from the last hole, without finding her.

"'Let's go to the old gully, and look there,' said Bill.

"And we went in silence. The sun was just rising over the hills, and the laughing jackass was waking everything up with its gurgling laughter. Teddy the Tyler was not out of bed, so I first went down the claim he was then working. I suppose the noise disturbed him, for he came presently, half undressed, and looked over the claim. Bill was standing at the top, and

Teddy had just come as I climbed out of the hole. He began cursing, and asked what we wanted now.

"'It's only fair to tell him,' said Bill. 'We're looking for my Liz. She might have tumbled down one of the claims, you know.'

"I noticed Teddy's lips turn white. But he commenced again grumbling and swearing, and we left him. We searched every hole in the gully, but found nothing; and then we went away. I noticed that Teddy was watching us all the time.

"And now, mates, something happened that I have thought of a hundred times since, with wonder. I was a better man then than I am now, for you see I had the impression of those Sundays with the chapters out of the Bible, and the quiet walks with little Lizzie, full upon me. And I thought at that time that God Almighty had assisted us to the end of our search. We had got out of Teddy the Tyler's gully, and were passing a gum-tree, upon which half-a-dozen laughing jackasses were perched. As we passed, they all set up a laugh, which, somehow or other, so grated upon me, that I threw my stick at them, and sent them flying away. I went to pick up my stick, which had fallen to the ground a good distance off, when I noticed an abrupt turn in the range, leading to a gully. Knowing we had not searched there, I called out to Bill, and we walked down the declivity.

"'Look, Bill,' I said, 'some one has been prospecting. Here's a six-foot hole.'

"And I put my foot at the side to go down. Before I reached the bottom, I saw that our search was over. There lay our little girl, with her face turned upwards,

as if she were asleep. I could not distinguish the expression of her features, and, indeed, I did not stop time enough, for directly I saw what was below, I came out of the hole again.

"'Well, Tom?' said Bill; and then seeing something in my face, for I was awfully white and fear-struck, he added, 'For God's sake, speak, Tom, is she there?'

"'She is, Bill,' I said, as quietly as I could, 'but be steady, lad, be steady, let us get her up first. Don't give way, Bill, as you love your dear little one; don't give way yet a while.'

"And all the time I was speaking, I was getting the rope ready to raise her. Bill was shaking and quivering all over, but he stopped himself and gave me what assistance he could, and in a very short time she was lying at the top of the claim. As she lay with her eyes turned blindly to the sun, I could scarcely believe she was dead. In her innocent young face, the roses were still blooming, and my eyes brimmed over as I saw grasped in her pretty little hands the remains of a few wild flowers she had been gathering. I stooped and kissed her pure fresh lips. Then I turned away, for my emotion was overcoming me.

"'Oh, my darling! my darling!' I heard Bill say, 'You are not dead. Look at me—speak to me, my pet. Throw your arms round my neck,' and he pressed her to his breast, with a fierce eagerness, and kissed her a thousand times. 'She can't be dead, Tom. Feel her heart, is it not beating? Feel, feel! I say!'

"I placed my hand upon her heart, to please him, but its pulse was stilled for ever.

"'Bill,' I said, solemnly, for it was an awful thing, was the sight of that dear angel lying dead upon the grass, 'she's dead! She has gone to a better world than this.'

"Dead!' he cried, springing to his feet, and throwing his arms wildly about him. 'Then strike me dead too!' And he looked up, as if expecting a thunderbolt to fall upon him.

"'Hush, Bill,' I said; 'do not blaspheme at such a time as this. It is God's will, and she has gone to Him.'

"He threw himself upon her body again. He clasped her in his arms—he nursed and rocked her, as if she were asleep—he called her by every endearing name; and then, as if awaking to the fact that she was dead, he sprang up, and screamed wildly—

"'How did she die, Tom? Who killed her? Do you hear me? Who killed her?'

"I was hurrying away, when he seized my arm.

"'Where is the dog, Tom?' he cried. 'Where is the dog?'

"And he tore about like a madman, in search of the dog. I looked for it too, for the absence of that dog was a thing I could not understand. I heard Bill's voice, calling out that he had got it, from a clump of bush hard by; and presently he came up to me, and laid poor Whiskey dead at my feet. The dog had been shot through the heart.

"'Who shot him?' he asked, a little more quietly. 'You see he's been shot. Who did it? Whoever killed the dog killed my child!'

"I knelt down and examined the dog's body. It was quite stiff, and had something in its mouth. Forcing the jaws

apart, I took it out, and recognised it immediately. It was a piece of the colored silk handkerchief I had thrown out of the tent to Teddy the Tyler, the first night we came to the gully. The dog had evidently torn it away savagely, for shreds of it were sticking in its teeth.

"'There has been foul play here, Bill,' I said.

"'I know, I know!' he exclaimed, impatiently. "Whose handkerchief is that off, Tom? I want to hear you say the name. Out with it, man!'

"'That is a piece of Teddy the Tyler's handkerchief,' I said; but I could say no more, for Cranky Bill had dashed off, like a madman, in the direction of Teddy's tent. Although I followed him at once, I could not keep pace with him, and when I got to the gully, I saw Teddy flying up the range, with Cranky Bill tearing after him. Teddy, who had a revolver in his hand, turned round twice, and fired at Bill. The last time he did so, Bill staggered, but recovered himself in an instant. The range, as I told you, was very steep, and as they scrambled up, Bill gained ground rapidly. Just before they got to the top, my mate seized Teddy, and grappled with him. Then commenced such a struggle as I never wish to see again; and, presently, down they dashed, one over another, locked in each other's arms. I ran up to the spot where I knew they must fall; and although they came down with a fearful crash, they were not separated. They were both dead. Bill had been mortally wounded by the pistol shot, but he had such a grasp on Teddy's neck, that I could not loosen his fingers. And that was the end of Cranky Bill and poor little Lizzie!

"I did not stop any longer by myself in the place, you

may be sure; but I went and told the story, and in twenty-four hours, five hundred men were working in what was called—how it got the name, or who bestowed it, I can't tell—Madman's Gully from that time.

"I buried little Lizzie and Cranky Bill in one grave, and the miners helped me to put a fence round it; and that is the end of my story."

Cornish Tom's story done, the men in the snow-shrouded tent sat about the fast-dying embers of their fire, and commented on it. The wind had somewhat abated, but the cold was intense.

"I can't help thinking," said Gentleman George, "of the party in the next gully. Do you know that when Will thought he heard some one cry outside, I fancied that they might have come over the range for company. Perhaps—who can tell?—they know a way out of this, and came to tell us."

"Likely enough," said Cornish Tom. "What do you say to our going over to them? We shall never be able, by ourselves, to make our way out of this. If we stop here any longer, we shall be frozen to death; all the firewood is used up—bacca nearly gone—and grub not very plentiful. I tell you what we'll do: we'll start off at once. I couldn't sleep if I tried. It is moonlight, and we shall be able to pick our way as well if it were day."

Cornish Tom's suggestion was eagerly listened to, and was adopted without any hesitation. Some of the party were inclined to sleep, and all were glad of the opportunity of being active. It was resolved that

Gentleman George, Dick Driver, and Cornish Tom, should go, and that William should be left to take care of the tent. They calculated to be back by daylight, when they would commence the task of retracing their steps out of the region of snow. They took some long poles and ropes with them, and in a few minutes William was left alone.

He was not sorry that they had left for a while. He wanted an opportunity of being alone with his thoughts. Standing by the tent door, he watched his mates treading their way carefully along until they were out of sight, and then he went in and threw himself upon his stretcher. As he lay dozily dreaming, a strange fancy haunted him. He thought he heard a cry for help sounding from afar off. He roused himself, and listened intently. Although the wind had lulled, he heard no sound, and he dozed off again—only to be again awakened by the seeming cry. It was but imagination; of that he was certain; but he could not rest, so he rose and went to the door. Nothing but the snow-covered peaks and hills could be seen. No sign of life was near; and a shivering feeling of desolation crept over him, as he thought that perhaps he might never look upon mortal face again. As this impression grew upon him, the scene reminded him strangely of his last Christmas Eve at Warleycombe. He looked around, almost expecting to see the queer faces and the shadows of his dream. The hill, down which had swept the avalanche, was before him; he could not see the faces he had seen peeping down from the tree at Warleycombe in which he had fallen asleep, but he saw——

Yes, he saw the great hill nodding to him grimly. By degrees it assumed the form and shape of a monster man, and his fevered fancy peopled its rugged sides with snow-elves and shadows, all staring at him with glittering eyes. For a few moments, he gave himself up to the vision, and allowed it to grow upon him. Yes, the Shadows started up from the ground on all sides, and surrounded him with their waving arms. As he advanced among them, they retreated, but beckoned him still to come. He felt as though drawn forward by an invisible power, and he had already wandered some distance from the tent, when, overpowered by nervous excitement, he sank down half insensible upon the snow. He did not lose his sense of consciousness; he was too nervously-wakeful for that; but everything around him assumed an air of strange unreality. He heard voices in the air, voices that filled him with dread.

"Crush him into the snow!" they said. "Bury him a hundred miles down! Freeze for ever the heart of the man who doubted Love, the Purifier!"

And as they spoke, he saw the Monster Man-Hill bend threateningly over him, lower, lower, lower! until he feared lest it should topple and crush him out of existence.

"My life is over," he thought. "Hope has departed from it. Love has melted out of it. The woman I adored was false!"

"No!" came an awfully deep voice upon his ear, and the word was echoed and re-echoed a thousand times by the surrounding hills. Then the echoes as suddenly ceased; and, like a bell-note upon the rarified air, clear

and sweet, stole a voice which smote him with mingled pain and pleasure.

"No!" it said, "the woman you loved was not false. Why did you judge unquestioningly? Miserable atom as you are! it would be a fitting punishment if you were left to die in your despair! She whom you loved is pure —pure as the snow which may be your grave. What are you, that you should destroy and wither her young life? Tear from the rose of Love the parasyte Doubt, and awake from your dream!"

The voice ceased; the Shadows disappeared; and William rose from the ground, and rubbed his eyes. His limbs were almost benumbed. He had wandered far from the tent; and he was about turning thitherward, when a dark shade upon the snow, some distance off, caught his eye. He moved forward; and he trembled with agitation as he saw stretched upon the ground the bodies of two men. He knelt and tried to rouse them. In vain: they were insensible; perhaps dead. The cries he had heard were real, and had proceeded from these two men! He could see their pale faces in the moon-gleam; and one, bearded as it was, struck upon his memory like that of an almost forgotten friend. He carried the men, still benumbed and rigid, to the tent, and tried every means in his power to restore their consciousness. Almost despairing, he searched in their pockets for some means of identification. In the pockets of the first he found nothing but a match-box full of gold, and an empty pipe. On the other, he found a pocket-book. As he knelt over him to take it from his breast, and looked into his face, the same

impression of an old familiar association struck him; and he passed his hand across his brow, as if endeavouring to trace the connecting link to the fancy which enthralled him. The next moment he opened the pocket-book.

Was he dreaming still? He started to his feet, his body all a-glow with excitement; for in his hand lay the picture of Laura Harrild, looking at him with her truthful eyes! With trembling hands he opened a letter, the characters of which were familiar to him; and with a despairing cry he dropped into his seat. Yes, he saw it all now. This man lying at his feet was Laura's brother. It was he to whom she was bidding farewell on Christmas Eve; and as William read on, his eyes were blurred with tears. He remembered Laura's agitation on that evening as they sat in the curtained recess, when he told her the story of his friend who had forged his father's name. Now it was explained. Some years before, her brother also had forged his father's signature. His father never forgave him, nor would he allow his son's name to be mentioned in his house. To all inquiries he returned but one answer—that his son was dead; and so the years rolled on, and to all Laura's entreaties for forgiveness for her brother Reuben Harrild turned a deaf ear. Willliam recalled the shadow of the man he had seen upon the snow outside the house, and Laura's entreaties that he would not stir to learn who was there; for her brother had bound her to secresy, and had especially enjoined her not to disclose the affair to her future husband. Wearied with his unsuccessful efforts to obtain his father's pardon, Young Harrild resolved to emigrate, and to trust to time

to heal the breach between them. And on that Christmas Eve he had bidden Laura a secret farewell. Through the window of the room in which the merriment was going on, he had watched once more for the form of his father, whom he might never see again; and so, with good resolves in his heart, he had said adieu to his native land, hoping that his future life might redeem in his father's eyes the wrong he had done in the past. As William read, an agony of remorse fell upon him, and the words he had heard the Shadow speak to him in his dreams bore a strangely new significance. Yes, she was pure—she was true. She loved, and had ever loved him. Even through his misery, this thought gave consolation.

"I have not seen him," Laura wrote in one part of the letter, "since the night you bade me farewell. He saw our parting, and misconstrued it. I forgive him, dear brother, for you know I never spoke to him about you. Daily I reproach myself that I did not tell him; for a woman should have no secrets from her husband. And, oh! dear Arthur, I loved him so, that my heart aches sorely at the thought that he should deem me untrue."

"Fool, fool! that I was," William muttered, as he read. "Forgive me, Laura, forgive me! And oh, God! pity me, for the blessing I have thrown away."

"If you should meet him," the letter went on, "for he has gone to the Colonies, speak to him Arthur, dear. Ask him to write to me, for I cannot live under the thought that he thinks I have deceived him. I will not grieve if he should have ceased to love me—I can bear that; but my heart is his, and I shall love him for ever. Tell him all about yourself, and about our parting that night; and if he is in error, undeceive him."

And then she bade God bless her brother, and prosper him, and bring him home again, safe and well; and prayed that he might be re-united to his father once more—for she still hoped to gain for him forgiveness.

When William had read on to the end, he bowed his head, and buried his face in his hands. He had thrown away his precious love, he had wrecked his life and her's by his unworthy suspicion. Going to the door of the tent, the drift whizzed by him in blinding particles, and the mournful wail of the wind filled him with dread.

"I shall die here," he thought, "and she will never know. Oh! Shadows! that visited me on that night, and on this, would that I had listened and believed!"

And he fell upon his knees, and raised his hands in an agony of pleading for forgiveness, while the flying snow about him shrouded his form in white.

PART III.

CHRISTMAS AGAIN AT WARLEYCOMBE.

THERE are two faces under every hat—one is worn in solitude, the other is shown to the world. Each mortal lives two lives—an outer and an inner life. Simulation appears to be a necessity; and the glossy cloak exhibited to the world has generally a somewhat ragged lining.

Another year has gone, and it is Christmas again at Warleycombe. The curtain has dropped upon the tragedy of many thousands of human lives, and myriads of hopes and fears have culminated and been engulphed in the awful Mystery which surrounds humanity. Life-sorrows have been quieted, and ambitions set at rest, since Father Christmas last smiled upon the pretty Devon lane. As we know, sorrow has visited Laura Harrild; but she still moves amongst her father's guests with the quiet grace of old. She has been smitten with a great grief, which will shadow all her future years; but she has her duties to perform in the world, and she performs them meekly and patiently. She dwells with calm sorrow upon the memory of her lover, and in her heart she cherishes the hope that he will return to her; and she will forgive him, and take him to her heart again. On that she has resolved; for a nature like Laura's loves only once, and loves for ever.

But still, it is very painful to her. This Christmas is so like the last: the snow is on the ground, and all around is so little changed; the company is the same; and, but for the absence of one, and the silent grief which dwells within her heart, old Father Time might have been standing still during the year.

The Woys and the Wymers are present, as are also the Ramages. Time certainly has stood still for them. There is so little change in them that they might have been put to sleep last Christmas Eve, when the party broke up, and might only have just awoke to continue the festivity. The very young people have grown somewhat taller, and have acquired additional experience: as witness an extremely young lady in white muslin and a blue sash, who last year was much too infantine to take an important part in the proceedings, but who is now flirting desperately with three little boys. It is wonderful, indeed, where and how women learn the thousand charms of manner which send the brains of the other sex a-whirling. One thing is certain—they commence very young.

In the kitchen are Samuel Nock and Kitty Grater. It is scarcely necessary to mention the retainer of low degree, who has been again engaged to assist in the domestic arrangements; for he has fallen to his proper level. Had he been presumptuous enough this Christmas Eve to attempt to kiss Kitty under a sprig of mistletoe, the chances are that he would there and then have been wiped out of existence by Samuel Nock; for, wonderful to relate, in this the sixteenth year of their courtship, Samuel's passion has found expression. How it occurred

—in what shape or manner—remains a mystery to this day. Neither of them can tell; but it has occurred, and it is a settled thing between them. But when marriage was talked of, Kitty resolutely shakes her head:

"No, Samuel," she says, "it's no use your talking to me of that. For until Miss Laura's sweetheart comes back and makes it up, I'll never marry, if I live to be as old as Methuselah."

With this, Samuel was fain to be content; and he had, indeed, by this time, accepted Kitty's ultimatum with perfect resignation.

Doctor Dax was there, as genial as ever. He had not changed a whit. And except that during the past year he had made himself more loved by his quiet sympathy, Father Time would also seem to have stood still for him. There are some men who never grow old; the goodness of their lives scares off wrinkles, and their faces are as pleasant to look upon in their age as in their youth.

And Stephen Winkworth and his daughter were not absent. True to his promise of spending Christmas with his friend, Stephen would remain until death. The faces of father and daughter showed the impress of the past year. Some fresh grief seemed to have fallen upon them, and Stephen's eyes were constantly wandering, apprehensively, to his daughter's face. In all that group, Stephen, probably, was the only one who knew the cause of William Fairfield's flight. He had not divulged even to his daughter, what had passed with William on that Christmas Eve; she had once or twice asked him questions which he had evaded; and he knew that she suspected him to be the cause of the estrangement

between the lovers. He had accused himself, over and over again, of his conduct on that night. True, he had but told William the story of his life, but he had told it with a purpose which he did not care to conceal; but he was not at all certain that what he had seen of Laura's conduct was blamable. Then, what had been the result? His poor child had been rendered more wretched; her happiness had been the stake, and he had lost. And she was for ever mutely reproaching him with her eyes, for the misery he had caused.

Laura was sitting in the curtained recess in which she sat last year with William. Her thoughts were dwelling sadly on that time; and as she looked out upon the unchanged scene, her eyes filled with tears. Her father, who was watching her silently, presently joined her at the window, and taking her hand, begged her not to grieve.

"I am not grieving, father," she said; "but I cannot help thinking of the difference between this Christmas and the last. It does make me a little unhappy," and unable to proceed, the girl laid her head upon her father's breast, and sobbed quietly.

"I wish," said Reuben Harrild, "that William Fairfield had been at the bottom of the Red Sea, before he thought of coming to Warleycombe."

"Hush, father!" said Laura, gently. "Do not say that. William is not to blame. It was all my fault."

"You are always saying that, child. How can it be your fault that he should deceive you?"

"He has not deceived me, father," Laura replied; "it was I who deceived him. Yes," she continued, quickly, stopping the hasty remark that was rising to Reuben

Harrild's lips, "I must tell you all, father. I cannot bear that you should wrong him in your thoughts. Oh, father, as you love me, let me speak, and listen to me patiently for a few minutes."

"What are you going to say, Laura?" asked Reuben Harrild, as a grave expression stole over his face.

"You have made me promise," continued Laura, "not to speak upon one subject; but I cannot keep silence any longer. Do not shrink from me," she said, as he turned his head; "look at me, dear father, and, as it is Christmas Eve, be patient with me, only for a little time."

He could not resist her pleading, and he motioned her to proceed.

"Do you remember last Christmas Eve, father?" Laura asked.

"Yes, child."

"Do you remember my coming to you in the study, and asking you for a Christmas box?"

He nodded.

"Father, I came then to ask your forgiveness for Arthur"——

"Laura!" He had risen hastily to his feet, but Laura caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. Doctor Bax, passing at the moment, carelessly arranged the curtains, so that the two were shut out from observation.

"I must speak, father," said Laura, passing his arm round her neck, and pressing it to her bosom. "I must speak now, if I never speak again."

He allowed himself to be drawn closer to her, and listened.

"He was out in the cold, the whole night, father," she

continued. "William and I were standing where we are standing now, and I saw Arthur's shadow on the snow."

"But William did not know?" he interrupted, quickly.

"No; William did not know. That is the cause of my unhappiness. William saw the Shadow, and wanted to go out; but I knew it was Arthur, and begged William to remain. Arthur had come to wish me good-bye, for he was going to the Colonies the next day. Oh! father, it almost broke my heart to part with him, and I begged him to see me once more at midnight. For I thought I might prevail upon you to forgive him, and I came up to your study to ask you; but you remember you would not listen to me. He was watching you through the window, father, and bade you good-bye in his heart; for for he loves you, and has never committed a fault since that one."

Reuben Harrild's countenance twitched convulsively, and he disengaged himself gently from Laura, and turned his face to the wall.

"At midnight last Christmas Eve, I wished him good-bye. He bade me, if at any time you would allow me to speak of him, to give you his dear love and duty, and to tell you that he would, through all his future life, endeavor to atone for the one fault of which he had been guilty. Oh! father, think of him with love, and forgive him!"

"Go on to the end, child," said Reuben Harrild, quietly.

"I have never seen William since that night. He wrote me a few words, saying that he had watched our

meeting—of course, he did not know it was Arthur—and he went away believing that I had deceived him. I did blame him a little at first," Laura said sweetly, "for doubting me. But I have thought since that he was hardly to blame. For he did not know that I had a brother; and I was wrong in concealing it from him."

"And all your unhappiness has sprung from my fault," Reuben said, drawing his daughter to him; "oh! my child! if I had only known"——

"You would have forgiven Arthur, father?" she asked, in a whisper, as she lay upon his breast.

"Yes, child! God pardon me! I would have forgiven him!"

"And you forgive him now, father?"

"I forgive him now, darling!" and he pressed his lips to hers.

"I am so happy," said Laura; "I can bear my pain, now, for I shall write to Arthur, and tell him."

Her grief seemed almost to pass from her as she spoke. And presently they joined the guests.

"It is a most extraordinary case," Mr. Wymer was saying. "I think the annals of the law can scarcely furnish anything more remarkable. The overland mail has just arrived, and I have the letter here, with all the particulars," and he pulled out an official-looking envelope, which he regarded with solemn satisfaction. "The man, that is, the father of the girl, was a sailor, and was in Port Phillip twenty years ago. Strolling into an auction room, where some Government land was being sold, he, with a sailor's recklessness, bid for an allotment. It was knocked down to him, and pulling some money out of

his pocket, he paid for it, and took a receipt. A few days after that, his ship set sail for England, and he arrived here with the receipt, which he gave to his wife, who in return gave him a great blowing up for throwing away his money. Years passed, and the sailor died, leaving behind him a little girl. The widow married again—this time to a tallow chandler, who also had been married before. The tallow chandler had two grown-up daughters, and these two women behaved unkindly to the sailor's little girl"——

"Quite a case of Cinderella over again," interposed Doctor Bax, pleasantly.

"I don't know anything about that," grimly remarked Mr. Wymer, and giving the little Doctor a severe look for the interruption. "I look at the matter only in its legal aspect. The tallow chandler dies, and the tallow chandler's second wife dies, and the little girl is left to the mercy of those two shrews. They treat her abominably. They beat her, they do not give her enough to eat; but for all that the girl grows up into a remarkably good-looking young woman, and a respectable young man falls in love with her. An attachment springs up between them, but the two shrews, directly they become aware of it, warn the young man away from the house, threaten the girl with all sorts of punishments if she does not break with him, and so persecute them that the young man emigrates to Victoria, promising the girl to send for her or to come home for her directly he has made some money. He arrives in Melbourne, and gets employment in a lawyer's office. His employers do a great business in conveyancing, and he has to search over deeds and

government grants in the government land office, until he knows who owns every inch of the city. One day he comes across the record of the government sale at which the sailor purchased this allotment—he sees the name of his sweetheart's father—he knows that he was a sailor"——

"Ebenezer!" here exclaimed Mrs. Wymer, warningly, "don't get excited."

"Only my enthusiasm, Eliza," said Mr. Wymer apologetically, and cooling down directly. "As I said, he recognises the name, and writes home to the girl for particulars. She writes, in return, that her father had once been in that part of the world; that she is very miserable, and hopes he will come and fetch her. At the same time, she sends him some old papers, which were her mother's; and, searching amongst them, he comes upon an old receipt, worn almost to shreds, and finds that the allotment the sailor purchased is in the very heart of Melbourne city. He lays claim to it on behalf of the girl, he comes home, and gives the case into our hands; we get up the case, and instruct proceedings, of course," and here all the members of the firm smile agreeably, "and this is the letter telling us we have won, and that the young man is coming home again with twenty thousand pounds to marry the poor sailor's daughter.'"

"Wonderful places, the Colonies," remarked Doctor Bax, "and wonderful things have taken place there; some very dreadful things, too. I read in the papers this morning, that at some new gold fields discovered in New Zealand, forty men were found perishing in the snow, and that most of them died. What is the matter, Laura?" he asked, as Laura rose, and, with a white face, walked tremblingly away.

She did not reply, but went mechanically to the door. How like to last year everything was, outwardly. Upon this spot, William had kissed her, and bade her good night; and she might never see him again. She shuddered at what Doctor Bax had said—"forty men perishing in the snow!" Her brother or her lover might be amongst those men. There was horror in the thought, and a sudden faintness came over her. In truth, she did faint, dead into the arms of Doctor Bax, who had followed her to the door.

"Poor dear! poor dear!" exclaimed the Doctor, looking at the white face lying upon his shoulder. "It is a sad Christmas this for you, my poor Laura. Come, cheer up, my dear," he said, as she opened her eyes; "we must not have you fainting away like this. Idiot that I am, to speak of such things. I might have known"——

"How could you have known, Doctor Bax?" asked Laura. "I do not know that he is amongst them. I am strong again, thank you. It is very foolish of me to give way. Go inside, dear Doctor. Don't let me make everybody miserable this Christmas Eve. Very well, if you will not go in without me, I suppose I must accompany you."

And, smiling almost cheerfully, she took the Doctor's arm, and joined the guests. The young people of the party were happy enough—sorrow had not entered into their lives; and most of them spent the evening pretty much as they had done a year before.

But there was one present who was, indeed, supremely unhappy. Hardened and cynical as he was, Stephen Winkworth could not look unmoved upon the form of

his poor, crippled child. His misery was intense, for it was not relieved by hope. Day by day he saw her wasting away. She bore her lot uncomplainingly, and in silence. In this lay his chief unhappiness. If she had confided in him as of old—if she had complained to him of her suffering—he would have been more content. But no: the bond that united them was loosened. She chose rather to suffer in silence than seek his sympathy. Hapless, indeed, is that mortal whose life is passed without the light of sympathy and love!

He had been watching his daughter the whole of the night. Not once did he see her smile;—not once had she looked to him with affection. He could not endure it longer.

"Alice," he said, in a hoarse whisper, as he bent over her chair; "Alice, I want to speak with you alone. Will you come out?"

He could not but speak tenderly to her. She was his child; she was all he loved on earth; and though his passionate agitation was mastering him, he schooled his voice so that it should sound as little harshly as possible.

Without a word, she rose and followed him. It was a strange fashion of her's, that she should wear her hair loosely; and as it hung down in heavy masses, it almost concealed her deformity when she was standing in repose

"Come out into the night," he said.

He scarcely knew what impelled him to take her into the cold air; but he felt stifled in the house, and experienced a sense of relief when he reached the garden walk that bordered Warleycombe Lodge. The girl stood patiently before him.

"Alice," he said, "why do you not speak to me?"

"What shall I say, father?" she asked, in a weary tone.

"Say!" he returned, almost harshly; "say anything. Why do you avoid my look? Why do you torture me with your silence?"

"Father," she said, solemnly, taking his hand, "look up to the stars. They are very beautiful. Not in my dreams have I seen a grander picture than this. The Divine Lord that shaped the world, that gave us eyes to see, and ears to hear, and mind to understand, is looking down upon us now. See! the earth so pure—the trees so lovely—the sky so bright! If Heaven be as beautiful as this, how blessed is immortality!"

"Well, child!" he said, awed into quietude.

"Well, father!" she returned; "we are sent into this beautiful world to enjoy its blessings. We are here not to repine, not to murmur, but to live, and be grateful. If any one of us has sorrow to bear, it must be borne. My lot, Heaven help me! is hard enough"——

"It is, child, it is," he groaned, remorsefully.

"Why should you make it harder?"

"Alice!"

"You have brought me here to speak, and speak I must. My heart cries out against you; I cannot help it. Since last Christmas, a new light has shone upon me. Father!" she exclaimed, turning her face suddenly to his; "why have you never spoken to me of my mother?"

Stephen staggered as if he had been struck, and a deadly shudder passed through him.

"I never saw her—I have never seen her picture. I

often wonder if I shall know her when I see her in Heaven; or if there is something which will shut me out from her love in the next world, as death has done in this. Father, speak to me of my mother!"

"I cannot, child; I cannot," he murmured, hiding his face in his hands.

"I so yearn for love, father. It seems to me that I can no longer live without it—your love—forgive, oh! forgive me!" and she wound her arms round his neck, and drew his face down; "your love pains me. It appears to me unholy; for you take it from all others to give it to me. Do you think that, when I see the want of sympathy that exists between you and all around you, I am not pained? Do you think I do not suffer when I see good men and women smile upon each other, and not upon you? When you shut yourself out from man's goodwill, you shut me out, also. Your life is not a blessing, father—Heaven pardon me for saying so—but it is a curse!"

Yes, he felt that what she said was true. His life *was* a curse, blighting everything with which he came in contact—blighting even his child's happiness.

"Alter it father, alter it!" she continued, earnestly. "Think better of the world. Live in it and be of it. Do you remember what I told you, last Christmas Eve, of my—of my love for William Fairfield?" and she blushed crimson, and trembled as she spoke. "I have conquered it, father. His love does not belong to me—it belongs to Laura. And oh! I pray that he may come back and make her happy. I *have* been silent to you. I *have* not been to you what I was; for I have felt within my

heart that you did something last Christmas night to part them. What you did was done for my sake, and when I look at Laura, who is good, who is true, I say to myself, that I am the cause of her misery. I do not ask you to tell me anything, but, oh! father, if you can remedy any wrong you have done, do so at once, and make her happy."

There was such anguish in his face, that she took his hand, and held it as if to comfort him.

"You can make my life different to what it is, father," she continued, softly. "Speak to me of my mother."

"child," he answered, as in agony, 'I cannot speak of your mother. She made me what I am."

"How long has she been dead? It must be a long, long time, for she has been dead to me all my life. Did she wrong you, father?"

"Silence, daughter!" he cried, in a voice of pain. "You must not question me!"

"I must not be silent," she returned, firmly. "Oh, if she wronged you, father, have you never forgiven her? It is awful to think that she has been dead all these years, and that the ashes of your anger are still burning. Bless me, father, in my mother's name, and say that you forgive her!"

She knelt down upon the snow, and raised her hands. Could he look upon his poor, maimed child, and not relent? Slowly the tears came into his eyes and blinded him. The flood-gates of his heart were opened once more, and the memory of happier times—of times when he was a better man—clung about him with softening influence. Blurred in the moonlight, he saw the form

of his daughter still kneeling on the snow; and placing his hands upon her head, he said—

"For your sake, my child, I forgive! In your mother's name, I bless you!"

There was certainly something extraordinary affecting little Doctor Bax; for Laura, who, struggling to forget her grief, had been playing forfeits with the young people, raising her eyes, saw him looking at her with an expression she had never seen before. Directly their eyes met, he turned away his head; but the next moment he was looking at her again, and still so strangely, that she asked him if anything ailed him?

"No, my dear," he replied, but speaking very confusedly, "there is nothing the matter with me. What should be the matter with me, you little puss, eh?"

"I don't know," said Laura; "but, upon my word, you look as if you had seen a ghost?"

"Ha! ha!" exclaimed the Doctor, laughing so loudly that all eyes were turned upon him immediately. "What do you think, Mr. Harrild? Do I look as if I had seen a ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts," replied Reuben Harrild, smiling, "therefore I am not a competent judge."

"You don't believe in ghosts, don't you?" said Doctor Bax, taking Laura's hand in his, and patting it gently. "I do; I see them often. I am always seeing them. I never pass a churchyard at night without seeing a hundred of them dodging round about the tombstones. I do believe, now, that if I went outside this house, I should see a ghost directly."

"What sort of one, Doctor?" asked Laura, almost gaily.

"I am a wizard, my dear," replied the Doctor; "and I should raise up the one I most wished to see. If you had your choice, now, what sort of a ghost would you conjure up?"

Laura turned very pale, and would have withdrawn her hand, but Doctor Bax held it firmly.

"Curious associations gather round one at odd moments," said the Doctor. They had drawn away from the company, and were standing by the window. "I am just thinking of a little episode which happened in our family. My father—it is forty years now since he died—had a brother, Frank, from whom he parted in anger, and whom he never saw again. Upon his death-bed, the thought of that brother was his greatest trouble. I was a youngster at the time, but I remember well his words. 'If I could but see Frank,' he murmured; 'if I could but see Frank!' And then he turned to me, and bade me solemnly never to nurse anger against mortal man. 'Your uncle treated me badly,' he said, 'and I have been at war with him all my life; but if I could see him now, and press his hand, and exchange a loving word, I should die happy.' I have never forgotten his words, and through all my life I have never let the sun go down upon my wrath."

He still held Laura's hand, and did not appear to heed the curious look that Reuben Harrild threw at him.

"There are mysteries and miseries in all families," the Doctor continued. "It is wonderful, the suffering man inflicts upon himself. You had a son, I remember, Reuben"——

Laura held her breath.

"Yes, I had a son," said Reuben, gently. "Go on, Doctor."

"You parted from him in anger," pursued Doctor Bax. "He went abroad: what if he should be dead"——

"No! no! Doctor Bax!" cried Laura. "Do not say that! For mercy's sake, do not say that!"

"What if he should be dead!" continued Doctor Bax, firmly. "What if he should have died, unforgiven! If it were so, would you not give your all, Reuben, to take him once more to your heart, as you used to do when he was a curly-headed boy?"

"I would, Heaven help me!"

"Last Christmas he was here, was he not Laura?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes, he was here," sighed Laura.

"You saw his shadow upon the snow," said the Doctor waving his handkerchief across the window.

"I saw his shadow upon the snow. Look, Doctor, look!" Laura gasped, for at that moment, the shadow of a man darkened the snow-plain without.

"Keep up your courage, Laura. Do not tremble so my dear. Reuben Harrild, if that were your son—if he were come to ask his father's pardon for a fault deeply repented of—if, rescued almost miraculously from a dreadful death, he should have travelled back over stormy seas, to the home of his youth, humbled, contrite, purified,"——

"It is he!" cried Reuben Harrild, as the shadow advanced. "Come, child, let us welcome your brother!"

"Upon my word," said little Doctor Bax, wiping his eyes, as he was left alone, "this promises to be the most glorious Christmas Eve in my remembrance."

And going amongst the company, he decoyed every woman and every girl under the misletoe, from the little thing in the blue sash to the dignified Mrs. Ramage, and kissed them all with the most intense enjoyment: which operation being satisfactorily concluded, he went out and joined the Harrild's.

Laura was weeping upon her brother's breast, while Reuben stood by, holding his son's hand.

"God bless you, sister!" sobbed Arthur. "But for your sweet counsel, this blessing might have been denied me. Oh, Laura, do not weep! There is a greater blessing in store for you"——

"Arthur!" she cried, raising her eyes to his with a hungry, yearning look.

"Yes, darling," continued Arthur, "there is a greater blessing in store for you. Do not turn away, Laura! He saved my life, dear: but for him, I should not now be holding you in my arms; and he has come with me to ask your forgiveness. You will forgive him, will you not? He loves you perfectly, dear. Thank God! thank God! This moment recompenses for all!"

At her feet knelt William Fairfield! She raised him to her breast, and on that blessed Christmas Eve, under the solemn splendor of the starlit heavens, the lovers were re-united, never more to part in life!

It was late before the Christmas party broke up. A happier company had certainly never assembled within

the walls of Warleycombe Lodge. There was gladness around all; everyone appeared to have grown suddenly younger. Even Stephen Winkworth's countenance wore a satisfied expression; and, much to the astonishment of the guests, he was observed to smile on two distinct occasions.

"Where is your skeleton now, Doctor Bax?" asked Laura, as she, William, and Alice walked up to him. "The skeleton you were grumbling at last year?"

"Gone, my dear," replied the good Doctor, gaily; "flown away, in company with a host of others. It is hiding itself in a corner, grumbling at my happiness. Ah, William! before you sleep to-night, fall upon your knees and thank God for the good he has bestowed upon you! As for you, my dear," he added, turning to Alice, "if I were not an old man, I would marry you to-morrow; but as it is, I suppose we must be contented with our lots, and go on in the same hum-drum way as ever. Stephen Winkworth," he said, as Stephen approached, "will you let William have back his farm? Come, say yes, good-naturedly."

"Yes," returned Stephen, turning very red, as Alice kissed his hand; "I have been wanting to offer it back to him, but I did not know how."

"Then, everything is settled," said the Doctor; "and, excepting that we are all happier, this Christmas might be last Christmas, and the year that has passed might have been a mistake. A mistake, however," he added gently, "which cannot be rectified, and which will not be taken into account when the life-account of each of us is balanced in the ledger of Old Father Time!"

The guests had departed, and William, who had lingered behind, was standing at the door with Laura, looking out upon the night. He had told her of his dream on last Christmas Eve, and was pointing out to her the place where he had seen the shadows.

"They have taught me a lesson that I shall never forget, darling," he said. "My Love, strengthened by Faith, can never yield again to doubt. Tell me once more, Laura, that you forgive me for the sorrow I have caused you."

"I forgive you, William," she said; "although it seems as if I had nothing to forgive, I am so perfectly happy. The sorrow of the past year was bitter; but its fruits will be sweet. And oh, William! I shall never think with any other feeling than gratitude, of the Shadows you saw last Christmas upon the Snow!"

[THE END.]