Why I Married Him? or, The Woman in Gray.

By Sara Claxton.

Chapter I.

The Stranger.

I remember that night as well as though it were yesterday. It was that on which Mrs. Harding, the housekeeper, had told me the legend of the curse.

It was just the place and just the night for such a legend. A low-celled room, with a great beam across, dark wainscoted walls, a great carved fireplace, before which I could picture Elizabethan ladies in ruffs and farthingales sitting on winter nights, ponderous oak furniture, deep-mullioned windows with small, latticed panes—and all this seen in the dim light of a wet summer evening.

Outside there was a leaden sky, and a steady rain was falling; and the drip, drip from the eaves and gable-ends of the old Tudor house, was a most appropriate accompaniment to the words she was uttering.

Lost in the wonder of it, I made no comment when she had finished, but sat staring out of the window at the little globules of rain that hung from the point of every leaf.
Suddenly I started; for, in all an instant, a human form had come between my eyes and the pendulous drops. There was nothing very terrible in the figure. It was that of a slim young man in a light waterproof coat, his head covered by a broad-brimmed white hat of soft felt, and in his hand a camp-stool and a small case.

"What is the matter with you?" the man asked, as if it were nothing unusual to startle me in such an apparition; but at that moment, in the overwhelming condition of my nerves, I had a sense of a hare or a rabbit scuttling across the grass that would have made me start.

How was it I had not heard the crunching of the leaves beneath the shadows, felt the rattle of the hand upon the terrace wall, beneath his feel? I suppose I was too deep in my dreams.

"What is the matter with you?" cried Mrs. Harding, as if some focus or other had leaked out. "AVONDELL, AVONDELL," repeated Mrs. Harding. "AVONDELL was always famous for hospitality," replied Mrs. Harding. "But then," I answered, "avon dell was not the only person he had impressed. I could not remain by myself in that great, lonely room, especially after the story was over, and so begged Mrs. Harding to sit with me."

All of a sudden, after a long silence, she looked up, and said, "Do you know, my lady, I have been puzzling myself about that stranger."

"Indeed," I said. "It seems to me I have seen him somewhere before to-day. Perhaps, in some shape, he is lurking about the place."

"I cannot for the life of me tell where or when."

As she left me in my bed-chamber door, she remarked, "You look pale and low-spirited, my lady. It's that dreadful legend. I am sorry I told it to you. But you must not put your courage in very superstitious men-I don't, and I am sure no wicked curse could fall upon such an innocent young head as yours. Besides, you are not of the direct line. Let's detour through the turret.

"Oh, no; I'm not at all superstitious-only a little dull," I replied, smiling faintly. But the tenderness of her voice and manner of my name (and perhaps the dearth of other sounds that day) touched my heart, and kissed her as though she had been my mother.

"It was not very dignified, perhaps, for the housekeeper to be among the servants, and some of my stately ancestors would have frowned upon such an action; but I was only a girl, and not quite used to my new dignity.

As she went up the stairs, I heard her mutter to herself, "I oughtn't to have told her; I should have been very tactful and have on speaking."

"It is a glorious old place," he said, meaning the fine old porch, the millioned windows, and the ivy-covered walls with the appreciation of a fine taste. "I must have another day's study of it before I leave. Thank you very much for your information."

Here he caught sight of me, and fixed upon me a gaze, the intensity of which made my heart sink. I grew more shy, though the idea of her rejection was utterly free from rudeness. She again raised his hat, and said, "Good-night, ladies," and was gone.

"What a fairy-like man—quite like a gentleman; and what a sweet voice!" remarked the housekeeper, as we went back to the room.

But, a few minutes afterward, I observed, "In the old days that I have read about, we should not have turned a stranger away from the door, but have offered him hospitality."

"Avondell was always famed for hospitality," replied Mrs. Harding. "But then," I answered, "Avondell was not the only person he had impressed. I could not remain by myself in that great, lonely room, especially after the story was over, and so begged Mrs. Harding to sit with me."

All of a sudden, after a long silence, she looked up, and said, "Do you know, my lady, I have been puzzling myself about that stranger."

"Indeed," I said. "It seems to me I have seen him somewhere before to-day. Perhaps, in some shape, he is lurking about the place."

I could not find a finish for the sentence.

When your daily helpship saw my ragged clothes, she said, "You are a sad woman," and the stranger woman with bitter irony, "you said to yourself, 'Here is some horrid tramp; I must give her a shilling, because I'm afraid she'll molest me. But if I'd come to your door when you had your servants about you, you would have told them to drive me away.'"

"Indeed I should not," I replied, earnestly, becoming very frightened, and yet afraid to move, for she held me as did the Ancient Mariner the Wedding Guest—by the "glittering splinter.""

"You, no doubt, think yourself very beautiful," she went on, cying me with a look of scornful superiority; "but I have made horses pusillanimous."

I was beautiful, one, and men that would not have bestowed a second glance on you have knelt at my feet for a touch of my fingers."

"I'm mad," I thought. "I thought, and I could feel my limbs almost sinking beneath me.

What could I do? If I ran, she would overtake me. Oh, how I prayed that the gardener or some of the servants would pass this way!

Fancy men sighing at my feet. Why they would shudder at the sight of me now!"

She was gone, with a bitter laugh, that made my blood run cold.

Then, with a sudden change of tone and look—"As you do now; but as I am, so should you."

The extraordinary creature passed as though she expected some answer; but my tongue was cleaving to my mouth. I could not speak.

I could only glance directly and with paths.

Folding her arms upon her breast, she surveyed me with the look of a woman whom her conscience had worn but a moment before.

"Had a vagabond like I am now used such language to me when I was your age, I would have given her a piece of my mind," said she. "Don't be afraid; I shall not harm you. Give me your shilling and go, poor chicken heart!"

She was only too glad to hand her the coin, and hurry away.

I had not gone many paces before I heard her strident voice calling after me.
WHY I MARRIED HIM

“"What is the name of the house I see among the trees?"

"Avedell," I replied, without turning.

I felt a shiver from her lips, and then a peremptory: "Come back!"

But, once started, fear gave me wings, and my vision seemed to touch the ground as I fled on.

As I came to a turn in the path, which the next moment would bring me in sight of the house, I could not forbear glancing round.

The woman was standing just where I had left her, like one transfixed; but as she caught my glance, she raised one of her skinny arms, and moved it through the air.

I had not gone many steps further when I almost ran against Sampson, the gardener. Then I felt safe, and stopped to take breath.

"My lady?" he inquired, touching his hat.

"You look a little forlorn," he added.

"They have been frightened by a woman."

I thought she said, "mad," I answered.

"Where is she, my lady?"

I walked with him to the spot where I had last looked round; but she had vanished.

"A moment ago," I said, "she was standing close to that tree," pointing to a large oak, whose gnarled roots rose high out of the ground.

"She has passed the branch there," he added; for Sampson was running toward the spot I indicated, looking about on all sides, and the next moment turned among the trees, and came back with nothing.

And now my cheeks began to burn at the thought of the cowardice I had shown. I had suffered that horrible woman to treat with that same contempt I could show to her, and shiver just as my own household might have done. Without being brave or strong-minded, I was not untruthful; and but for her it was something that filled me with a strange fear that seemed to deprive me of all power.

All my new ideas would associate in our minds at times! All the while she was speaking I was thinking of that other terrible woman in the story of the curse, and was identifying this poor ragged crone with that proud beauty. But I could not help feeling mortified and humiliated and very angry with myself for not showing more spirit.

While we were talking, Sampson sent in word by the maid, who was waiting, that although he had searched the woods in all directions he could find no trace of the woman. But if she had been there; for if the poor creature was indeed out of her senses, I should have been very much grieved to have heard she had been seen.

I resolved, however, not to take lonely walks through the woods for the future. As a matter of course I told Mrs. Harding of my adventure, and it put her into great indignation.

"Why, my dear lady, she might have murdered you, and got away just as she has now! I do hate those low tramps! Let me catch any of 'em about here again, and I'll see what I can do to the constable! Deary, deary me, what an escape you've had!"

Unknown to me, she sent the men-servants about the neighborhood to endeavor to discover the woman; but no one had noticed such a personage, and no trace of her was to be found, which only added to the constable's, as such a strange-looking being could not fail to attract any one's attention.

But the adventures of the day were as yet far from over.

While I was sitting reading at the open window, a little before luncheon-time, my maid, looking very white and scared, rushed into the room and breathlessly declared that my lady was there! Johnson, the game-keeper, has been and shot somebody!

"Oh, heavens! not the woman!" I cried, my thoughts instantly turning to her. "Oh, no, my lady; it is a man!"

"He is not killed! They are bringing him up to the house!"

And at that moment I heard a trampling of heavy feet upon the gravel; and looking through the window, saw four men bearing a body between them toward the house.

Before I could take a second glance, I felt a trembling hand grasp my arm, and draw me away from the window.

It was Mrs. Harding.

"Don't look—don't look, my lady," she said.

"Who is it? Is he dead? How did it happen?" I asked faintly.

"I don't know anything about it! Oh, dear! oh, dear!" exclaimed the old lady, wringing her hands.

I heard the heavy feet mount the steps without cut, then shuffle along the hall.

An irresistible curiosity drew me to the door, and as I fell upon the white, lifeless face that hung forward upon the blood-stained chest, I recognized the stranger who had inquired his way on the previous night.

I could not gaze at the "Dead" with an inquiring glance of terror.

"No, my lady; he isn't quite dead," replied one of the men.

"Thank Heaven!" I ejaculated. "Take a horse, one of you, and ride off for Dr. Graham! Don't lose a moment!"

"Now, my lady, if you'll leave everything to me, I'll see that all is done that can be done," said Mrs. Harding, who had by this time recovered something of her nerve, leading my guest into another room, where a wouned man lay half conscious with a surgeon, and you may trust me to tell the doctor comes. But if you can't clean yourself after all the excitement you've passed through, though, I must tell you I am not so silly as not to perceive the truth of her advice, and endeavor to profit by it. But I could not in any way compose myself, for you left the room, and I saw no hope. But by this time I have come to a conclusion, and I am writing to the doctor. By this time, I am sure, he will have written me the report, my sympathies for the unfortunate man burst forth in another direction, and I ordered that the gamekeeper who had fired the shot should be put to bed."

I had not liked this man from the first; he was a big, burly, uncouth-looking fellow, and he entered the room there was a dogged, sullen expression in his face, and a look as if he was not much concerned about the accident, that quite exasperated me; and, speaking very sharply, I demanded: "Twas all his own fault," replied the fellow, sulkyly; "he was trespassing. What did he want perched up in a tree! How should I know how long he had been there?"

"But you shot him."

"I tell you it was his own fault—"

"I do not turn you off for the accident, but for your brutality," I answered, I would not have you serve another hour on any consideration."

I had never felt so relentless against any person in my life as I did against this man. He was a terrible looking fellow, as if he could fancy one of the old, stately dames of Avedell, whose portraits hung in the picture gallery, and somehow the circumstances seemed to me. I saw the hot color mount into his sunburned cheeks, and an evil expression come into his small, deep-set eyes, and turned insolently upon his heels, muttering words, of which I only caught something about "upstart," and "is disgrace to the old family;"

But before the mask covering the excitement that burned within me, I could not brook the insolence of this ruffian, and, firing up, called out, peremptorily, "Come back!"

He turned round.

"Bag my pardon for your insolence," he said.

He hesitated a moment longer, and then, with what I thought was something in my look—all my sure eyes were flashing and my cheeks as red as fire—that brought him to submission.

"Why, this is investigated to the point—"

"Now go!" I said, pushing to the door.

His parting look told me I had made at least one enemy that day.

And now, Mrs. Harding, I acquainted her with what I had done, but without mentioning his muttered words, which I would not condescend to remark upon.

She looked very much astonished, and rather doubtful.

"Why, the Johnsons have been gamekeepers at Avedell for more than a century," she said.

"If they had been so for a dozen centuries I would not keep that man another day," I replied.

"Ahl now you do indeed look an Avedell," exclaimed Mrs. Harding, admiringly.

When the doctor came, he confirmed the old lady's diagnosis, that the wounded man was dead, which, however, inclined to be feverish, he said, and must be left at perfect rest.

CHAPTER III

IN THE WOODS.

Of all the days of my life the fortuitous which followed the eventful morning I have never felt more aloof from the world. I have no memory. I cannot believe I was a free agent. Absurd as it may sound, I still firmly believe that my part in the incident was determined by some outside power, which is impossible for me to define or understand.

That, an impressionable, romantic girl of Eight should fall in love with a handsome young man, of refined manners and poetic temperament, was not at all astonishing; indeed, it was the most natural thing in the world, and even the mightiest among the gods might have been of the same opinion. I was at that time a poor artist of unknown parents. Such things have been common since the world began, and will continue to be so while the world endures. But the conception of this was a kind of glamour in the whole thing. Perhaps this idea has come of later events; but it is, and has been, the turning point of my life.

Within a week, his wound was well enough for him to leave his chamber. As his hurt had been inflicted by one of my servants, and, as I shuddered to think, might have proved fatal, I felt myself responsible for it, and was most eager to testify this feeling in every possible way; and when he was able to come downstairs, I talked with him, read to him, played to him, sung to him, showed him my own humble attempts at drawing, listened gratefully to his criticisms and instructions; in fine, treated him as if I had been a poor artist of unknown parents. Such things have been common since the world began, and will continue to be so while the world endures. But the conception of this was a kind of glamour in the whole thing. Perhaps this idea has come of later events; but it is, and has been, the turning point of my life.

Had there been any one possessed of the most ordinary worldly experience near me, they must have perceived the danger of such an excursion; but no one was near me; Mrs. Harding, who would not have thought it possible for any person with one drop of the Avedell blood in their veins to demean themselves by being so childlike, would have considered an unworthy passion.

Although I did not trouble to investigate the cause of the taste at the time, I think it was highly significant that, although I wrote two or three letters to my uncle I never once mentioned the presence of Adrien Sylvester at Avedell.

A few days after he left his chamber, he
had to content himself with first inflating the front of the scene, then with taking a few turns up and down the terrace; but one evening he felt quite strong enough, he said, to walk through the woods. Not thinking of what he was doing, I offered to be his companion.

It had been an oppressively hot day; but toward seven o'clock a light breeze blew up, and I thought it was then that we strolled out into the open.

"I have not felt so well and strong since my accident," he continued, "I am very glad to have you with me.

"I am very glad to hear you say so," I replied.

"The satisfaction is damped for me by the thought of how far I am from my beloved one; but I have had a presentiment of my future happiness ever since that time; and I know of a place near the river where I can have a good view of it."

I was contented with the idea of being too warm when too cold.

"You are very kind, but I could not pass through this place without your hospitality, which I need, as I have no time to stop for the moment of my life," he answered, mournfully.

How my heart sunk at the thought of his going away! "How shall I miss him?" was written in my heart.

We walked on in silence for some minutes.

"My life has not been a very happy one," he resumed, presently. "I never knew peace the moment I was born. I was reared on charity. One night, a poor French artist, Adrien Sylvester, while crossing the Pont Neuf, in Paris, saw a woman leaving the house in the rain, and the matter took my hand. Believing, from her manner, she was about to jump into the river, he ran to her, just in time to draw her back, and a bunch of flowers from her hair, which she had inten- tionally to drop into the water. With a wild cry, she fled, was lost in the darkness, and was not found the next morning. When he opened the bundle, he was shocked to find it contained only a few weeks old. At first, he thought of sending it to the Foundling; but he was a churchman, who led a quiet, sedentary life. He was fond of children, and determined to adopt me. He gave me a respectable education, and brought me up to his own profession. When I was about ten years old he came over to England. The lady was very dear to him, but my life was not a happy one, and since then I have been alone in the world, fighting the battle of life, and a toil- ible hard one it has been."

He had been speaking in a tone of deep sadness; but when he spoke of the future, raised his head, and his lips and nostrils quivered with energy and pride.

I thought I had never seen so handsome a face before.

"If talent will win it, I am sure you will!"

I cried, enthusiastically: "for you paint very beautifully. That is to say, I am no judge, but..."

"Do not spoil the most precious flattery I have ever received from human lips," he broke in, earnestly. "Your sympathies and noble heart, which you know I do not despise, may be judged; but those words will be such a pleas- ant memory to me in my hours of toil and loneliness.

I could have cried at my own mal-adress- ness. This was the second time I had spoiled a real outburst of feeling by some cold words that were so painful to me.

I instinctively understood his motive in making what, to a proud man, as I was sure he was, was an admission of infirmity and feel- ings of his doubtful birth. It was that he wished me to know him truly, without false impressions.

Yet in my part, felt embarrassed that he should regard me as a being so infinitely superi- or to himself, when I owed my grand posi- tion only to chance. Except that there was more than a touch of mystery about my parents, my position in life a few months back had not been so great- ly above his own. I felt that it was due to his generous confidence to make him a similar one.

"Your story somewhat resembles mine," I began, a little eagerly. He started at me, so much so, I cannot remember what he said, or how the conversation continued. "Indeed, it does. I was not born to all this grandeur. I have not even a right to the name of Avondell, except so far as the law of primogeniture, and my grandfather's giving me the title of Sir, is concerned," he said later, to a distant branch of the family. The loss of my father, who was an officer in the army, when I was ten years old; my mother, when I was twelve, and my stepmother, when I was sixteen, made me a bachelor uncle took me into his home out of charity."

I felt a pleasure in using that word as he had used it.

"About six months ago Sir Geoffrey Avon- dell died childless, and I received the astounding intelligence that no heir stood between me and the Avondell estate; that was the head of the ancient house. I had often heard my mother talk of its grandeur, and of her cousin Geoffrey, then so near to me. I had heard there was any commu- nication between them. We were far too humble people to be noticed by such a grandee, I suppose. I haven't lived here a month yet, and I have not yet been able to find out to what extent his business would allow him to take a holiday, and come down with me; but I am burn- ing to see the grand old ancestral mansion, and I am too impatient to delay my visit; but I ex- pect him down now in a few days. I shall be so glad when he comes, for it will be very lone- ly when you are not here."

Again I felt my tongue was running away with me, and again could feel the color mount- ing to my face.

This time I stepped in to relieve my embarras- sment.

"You will have plenty of visitors, no doubt."

"I suppose so, when the London season is over; but so far every one is away now. I have received a few calls of congratulation from the neighboring gentry—very stiff people, that I did not at all like. So, you see, I am not such a very great lady, after all, and there is not such a wonderful distance between us."

I spoke in a half-jesting tone the thought that was uppermost in my mind, and that I had not put him at his ease—to divulge his mind of that inflated idea of my superiority, which, I felt, must be humiliating to him. If I had been told what was in his mind, I should have been happy in my position, for I had never expected to be the only one that I am."

"In the beginning of the world, when men lived in the garden of Eden, and my father was the first man, I was there with him. He was the first man, and I was the first woman."

I had never heard this story before, but I knew it was a true one, and that it was the Bible story told by ancient men.

The sun was fast setting, and its crimson rays, glinting through the leafy branches, fell in the hollow of the oak tree, and there, standing close beside it, in the red rays, was the woman her- self.

Her face was turned away from us, and she did not seem to perceive our coming.

I stopped and turned to my companion, who was a few paces behind me.

"Look at her," I said.

"At what?" he asked.

In that instant the figure had disappeared.

Did you see a woman standing against that tree?"

"No," he replied; "but I was not looking in that direction."

Was it fancy—a mere hallucination? If so, it was not a very pleasant one, I thought.

He asked what I had seen.

And, glad to find some indifferent topic of conversation to rest my mind from the in- timation of silence which had fallen upon both since my last blundering speech, I related my adven- ture.

"Some poor, half-mad creature, who is wan- dering about the country, I suppose," he said.

"It would be a charity to do something for her—to place her under proper restraint, if necessary."

"I will speak to the steward about her," I said, eagerly; "and if anything can be done, it shall be. Poor creature! perhaps she is wan- dering about aimlessly and starving, leaving these lands, while I have more money than I know what to do with, and more luxuries than are good for me. I am sure one of us is very wicked of me not to think of these things!"

"You are a noble-hearted creature, Miss Avondell!" exclaimed Adrien, warmly. "I would that all the rich and great thought like you; there would be far less misery in the world!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

Upon returning to the house, I went up- stairs to my room; for I wished to be alone; and, sitting down in an open window, watched the crimson glow of the sunset fade into the purple grayness of twilight, lost in a reverie, in which many images, shadowy and indistinct, were blended in a hazy dreamy fashion.

Presently there was a knock at the door.

Vexed at the interruption, I bade the in- tender, in a sharp tone, "Come in!"

It was Mrs. Harding.

"I hope I am not intruding, my lady?" she said, hesitating a little.

"No, no; not at all. What is it? I inquired.

"Well, I did want to say a few words, if—"

"Come and sit down, then, Mrs. Harding. Nothing the matter, I hope?"

"Oh, no, my lady; nothing the matter. It was only something that came into my head just now I wanted to speak to you upon; but I hope you will not think it is a liberty upon my part. You are a very young lady, and I am an old woman, and—"

"Speaking of liberty, Mrs. Harding! I am sure you will not offend me, whatever you say," I interrupted, with a guess as to what was coming.

"Well, then, it is about that young man. Do you think it is proper for a young lady to be in such a position to be so familiar—or, I should say, condescending—to a person like him? I am sure you have never thought about it."

"This time twelvemonth I should have re- garded Mr. Sylvester as quite my equal," I re- plied, quietly. "He belongs to a glorious pro- fession, and is decidedly a gentleman."

Mrs. Harding was that intesent of all aristocra- tics, an old servant, and she looked at me as though I had uttered the most insulting blas- phemies. To talk about any person who had not a family tree and a rent-roll being a gentle- man, was, to her, Communistic, Red Republi- canism, Socialism, and atheism, and all that

I am prepared. I am sure that in that moment I sunk fathoms in her estimation.

"But, my lady," she cried, "if your uncle were—"

"What is there for him to hear? A gentle- man meets with an accident close to my door; he is brought apparently lifeless into the house; I give him a shelter and a chance to speak as an equal. Surely, not one of my ances- tors would have done less—or the one that would not, I am sure, was very warmly, for I felt greatly annoyed, more by her manner, more by what she left unsaid, than what she spoke."

"I am sure, my lady, I did not mean any offense!" she stammered.

"No, no; I am aware of that," I said, her mortified looks making me sorry for having
spoken so sharply. "Mr. Sylvester is going away, so it is not worth while to say anything more about the matter."

"Well," I said, "face to face at this announcement. And without further remark, she changed the conversation to some question of domestic affairs, and then retired.

"I no longer shared any mood from one of dreamy reverie to restless excitability. Strange questions began to rise up in my mind — questions to which I dared not seek the answer even in self-confidence. The atmosphere of my chamber became hot and oppressive.

"Leaning upon my window-sill, I looked out upon the moon."

The full moon was just rising in the cloudless, starless sky; all looked so calm and cool, and delightful without, so dingy and gloomy within. In the outer world of nature, the skies were cloudless, and the earth was smooth and still; but in the inner world of my soul, the skies were dark, and the earth was rough and tumultuous.

"I thought of my youth and of my Anne's time, and of the happy days when she used to talk to me on the terrace."

Suddenly I heard footsteps coming from the direction of the door, and saw the figure of a man advancing toward me. How my heart leaped! — what a strange trembling came over me! Had there been time, I would have fled.

"I have been seeking you, Miss Avondell," said a silvery voice, "to say good-bye. I found a letter waiting for me when I got back from our stroll in the park, telling me to return to London at once. Some mysterious personage has been seeking me; refuses to tell his business, but says it is most important, and that I must take the trouble to come to a picture, perhaps, that is to make my fortune. I shall be gone before you have left your room in the evening."

"Speak hurriedly, with an air of lightness that I could feel was only assumed. "Perhaps it is some one — some relative who has sought me in order to make him return to England."

"Then he must be supernaturally clever," he replied, with a forced laugh. "There is no foot step that he ever trace me in that way, or desire to do so."

"Stranger things than that have come to pass."

"I hope that may never come to pass. I am afraid that any discoveries upon that point would be far from satisfactory," he replied, glancing at me with an expression that I could not interpret.

"I was leaning against the balustrade close beside me, with eyes fixed upon the ground. "I shall always think of the few days I have spent here as the happiest of my whole life," he said, looking up after a pause. "It will be a memory as sweet, since the reality can never return."

"I meant to write you a letter to such a gloomy view of the future," I answered. "You are young, have talent, and are certain to rise in your profession; and who holds a position of importance in society, the successful artist is what we shall be."

"But it is only a hollow one," he replied, bitterly. "Would one of the grandees, merchant, or squire, or noble, who is so delighted to welcome him to his drawing-room, to show him with his pictures and old china, and other curiosities, give him a daughter in marriage? Such a proposal would be received without indignation, and no more would it suit a man of his social position. Dukes marry merrie' and distillers' and bankers' daughters, even though the fathers may have begun life as errand-boys; but who ever heard of an artist or a plebeian giving his daughter to a man solely in consideration of his genius? No; so, though he were a Shakespeare or a Michael Angelo!"

"But woman's love is not mercenary," I answered, warily. "History and romance abound with instances of the kind."

"No true woman ever loved a man for the accidental advantages of fortune, but because he was good or noble, or brave or clever."

"The artifices of society; the artificial restraints of society hem them in so closely that they are powerless to act as their hearts dictate."

"Then they too are slaves."

"Then I遐me watch the opportunities presented to a declaration!"

"I snatched away my hand, and drawing back, exclaimed. Mr. Sylvester, do not misinterpret me! I speak so foolishly, so recklessly, at times!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Avondell," he said, with a mortification that was only my own. "I, too, was carried away. Let me beg of you not to think of it any more. I forgot myself; I shall never offend again. Farewell, and Heaven bless you!"

"He was hurrying away, but I could not let him go like that, to evermore think of me as a mere empty-headed girl, or an empty-headed, romantic girl, who was engaged to an in-discreet avowal, and then scornfully repulsed him. Oh, any thing was better than that!"

"Stay one moment," I said; "there is no presumption. It was not any such thought that made me shrink from you, but a fear that you would misconstrue my words."

"I did; I thought you were answered, coldly, "and I am right; I shall be at liberty to answer for any presumption. Oh, Miss Avondell," he burst forth, "what can you think of me? How you have been deceived! But perhaps you are not a man born to be happy, who might have died but for your generous hospitality! And how have I requited it! By insult, by—"

"Surely I must have been sharpened by some less pleasant experience," I interrupted."

"In his agitation, he had clasped his face in his hands, as though to shut out the picture his imagination had conjured up."

"I laid one hand upon his arm. I felt him thrill beneath my touch. He uncov-ered his eyes, and gazed down upon my upturned, tear-stained face, upon which the moonlight fell full.

"Something he read there that produced in him a strange revulsion of feeling, for the next moment my head was pressed close against his breast.

"Can this be possible," he murmured, "or am I in a dream?"

"I made no response, for I was still half ashamed of the part I had played."

"There was silence for a moment, then came an interruption which made us both start."

"It was the sound of the clock."

"We turned simultaneously in the direction whence it came, and there, standing against the moonlit fountain, in the pale moonlight, was the woman I had seen at the window."

"There was something supernatural, it seemed to me, about the sudden and inexplicable appearance of this woman, and she cast upon me a nameless horror, so that shone the shadow of some evil destiny that was haunting me."

"It is a pity to disturb a pair of silly fools in their paradise," she said, mockingly. "Like Adam and Eve, the dark angel will soon drive you forth. And so an Avondell woman stoops to such schemes to love me to death! That is reversing the old story. But the end will be the same—the end will be the same! You can't alter that!"

"Is this the way you spoke of, darling?" he whispered to me.

"Yes; let us go and call the servants."

"Low as I spoke, she caught the words. Your servants?" she cried, with the same mocking laugh.

"Is there anything to be done for you?"

"Adrian, kindly. Miss Avondell wishes to take me to her friends; I wish to get into present miserable life. Come to the house now, and—"

"Enter that house," she answered, with a shudder, "to be shut up in some dungeon or lonely room, and left to perish of hunger! Ah! you would like that, wouldn't you?" she burst forth, wildly; "to be never troubled by me any more—never to be haunted by my avenge- ing shadow, so that you might sleep in peace, without the least suspicion of the future! Generations and generations, and generations on and on, until—"

"Many an Avondell has lived and died since then, and it has never touched them; but its fulfillment is fast approaching. The name of Avondell is built upon, as I have learned, by the outcast, whom no man will ever own; then shall the pride of your race be struck down, and the earth, and your house be leveled to the earth!"

"As she half-chanted the last sentence, with her bony arm extended and shaking menacingly, I shrunk close to Adrian, appalled, for in those words I recognized the burden of the curse.

"Then again she burst into a wild laugh, and turned and started toward the flight of steps leading to the terrace."

"As she reached the top, she turned again, and, in a tone of savage hatred, added, "And you will never be over near you till it has come to pass!"

"The next moment she vanished into the darkness beneath."

CHAPTER V.

BAD NEWS OR GOOD?

Since I had been at Avondell, I had accustomed myself to rise very early; but a restless night, after a day of strange agitation, made me drowsy the next morning, and I awoke more than an hour beyond my usual time, to find my maid at my bedside with a letter in her hand.

"Mr. Sylvester told me to give this you, my lady," she said.

After I broke open the envelope, I could feel my face flush crimson, and then grow pale. Could you leave me for ten minutes," I said.

I could never suppress the outward signs of emotion, and did not wish to have a witness to my tears. I read the letter. It was fortunate I took this precaution. It ran thus:

"MY DEAR MISS AVONDELL:

"I feel I have acted like a villain, a scoundrel, in addressing you so young and susceptible into such a declaration as passed between us last night; such would be the verdict of every honest man and woman, and such will be our opinion. I am, sure, when you are calm enough to consider. What has this love of mine imposed upon you? Have I acted? Great Heaven! I think with horror from your letter that I have imposed upon you! I should not have done so, no man, should dare aspire—but it is past! Yet your letter has raised some doubts in my mind. All I ask of you is not to think too hardly of me. You will ever be to me a hallowed memory — my faithful, true, and loving friend! Always,

"Sylvester, I sank back upon my pillow, overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions which this epistle called forth.

"He was gone—forever; and it seemed as if all the joy had departed out of my life—as if I had suddenly been cast upon a barren, illus-
tions were rushing through my mind, but no
suspicion of the truth—as how could it?
"Suppose," he continued, after a short pause
"suppose, now, that all this was a dream,
and that you were to awake in your little
chamber at Canbury, and find you had never
been, except in imagination, the Lady of
Avondell; never been the possessor of this
grand old house, never been the lord of a
rich heirress at all, but simple Mabel
Etheridge;—would the awakening be so very
dreadful?
"Do you mean to say that I am not Sir
Geoffrey's heirress? I inquired.
"I fear it will be brought in so," he
answered.
I, too, then glanced around, and took in
the coup d'etat of all I had lost.
Was there a living heart that would not
have felt a pang at such a contemplation—at
the thought that a few moments before I had
believed myself the mistress of all that lovely
landscape, of all the wealth and power it
suggested, and that I was secure, not only in
the grand old house, but keen eyes fixed upon
me while these reflections, in less than
three minutes, I was to be torn asunder, darted
through my mind.
"We shall feel a little disappointed after
awakening from such dreams," I replied; "but
the disappointment soon passes away. What
is the use to cry for shadowless day?"
I spoke in a cold, deliberate tone.
"My brave girl!" he said, kissing my fore-
head; and a hot tear followed the pressure
of his lips.
I could not help feeling a little awkward,
for I was not so deserving of his excited opinion
as he thought I was.
"Had you no love and no superstition
in my mind, should I have acted so heroically?
I fear not.
"Tell me all about it," I said, anxious to
turn his attention from what I regarded as my
hypocritical pose.
We sat down upon a rustic seat under the
shady trees, and he told me all:
Sir Geoffrey Avondell, the last of the direct
line, had, it had been supposed, lived and died
a bachelor. He had resided the greater part
of his life in India, and was a man of grossly
and misanthropic habits.
It would appear, however, that in his youth
there were stories in circulation that greatly
were not the product of a man of no more
gravity than I had never before witnessed
upon it.
"What is the matter?" I inquired, anx-
iously.
"We must breakfast before I can talk," he
answered. "I left London by the mail last
night, and feel rather sharp set." But although he made a great pretense of eating and enjoying my meal, I could perceive he had no real appetite.
At length, unable to keep up the face any
longer, and tired out after his ride, and, rising,
said, "Let us take a turn in the garden."
In a few minutes we were upon the terrace.
I was sufficiently excited to remove his house,
and upon the woodland landscape bathed
in the golden light of the morning sun; then he
uttered a deep sigh.
"You do not love it?" he exclaimed.
I could make no reply; I was too anxiously
watching him, and wondering what could have
made him so sad, so different from his usual
talk.
"Mabel, my child," he said, taking one of
my hands and placing it within his own, "I
have but little news for you. Your grandmother
had moved heaven and earth for you to experience
the disappointments of life, and the instability of all
earthly possessions; but I think you have for-
times, young as you are, to hear up against it."
I saw him turn away his head to brush a
 tear from his cheek.
What could it mean? A thousand sugges-

nent.
there could not have been a worse fall than to lose the Avondale title and estates.

We passed the day picnicking in the woods, and rambling for miles about the country, and we were once asked by the man who was to see that our house and all the servants were well looked after, what that sort of thing was to go on indefinitely.

"Well, at all events, you have got a good holiday out of it; Matel, and I a breath of fresh air. I hope you will get back a very good model of legal responsibility, which had not, as yet, uttered a word.

"There was a familiarity, mingled with a comfort, that I disliked. Sir Geoffrey's manner was that anything but agreeable to me, and it quite annoyed my uncle.

Miss Etheridge desires no compromise," he replied, with a look that I am sure was not before.

"The moment she heard that there were satisfactory proofs of your being the rightful heir, she fully admitted them, and resigned all claim to the manor house. I have written to London. Had we known you had been in such haste to take possession, we would have left before."

"Well, I suppose," he said, taking the hint, "it would have been the correct thing to have dropped a line; but I thought it would be more friendly in the circumstances, and more to the manor house."

"You are leaving to-morrow, I could not hear of such a thing. You must not hurry away on my account. I shall be delighted to have your company as long as you like to remain.

Here Mr. Lovett, who could perceive that his client was keeping coals of fire upon my uncle, got up and asked me to put on my coat, and left the room.

It was very good-natured of you, Sir Geoffrey, to propose this; but such a stay would scarcely be agreeable to the lady under the circumstances.

I took quite a liking to the good lawyer for this touch of delicacy.

"Oh, we shall all see about that," replied Sir Geoffrey.

At that moment dinner was announced, and he offered me his arm, which I could not refuse.

At table he was almost embarrassingly polite and attentive. He had a flow of conversation, and could talk even cleverly upon such subjects as could be mastered by observation only. Books he did not touch. Upon his manner did not please me, I endeavored to talk on constantly, as a man of his caliber would; but I did not anybody upon my part for speech, and that was an interpretation which I could not endure.

So I did my best to talk with him; and as I was determined not to remain another day at Avondale—a gentleman would never have thought of breathing such an invitation—

It was poor Lady Bridg-ecurse her falling at last!"

I avoided being conspicuous in the presence of your particularities; I was out of the way here, and there was no reason to believe that I was a better worth one," he answered, with a hard laugh. "I'm afraid, if your Quixotism were not so perfectly ridiculous, you would have found yourself terribly imposed upon. Never trouble yourself about this conniving vagabond, who is only playing a part——"

I have no doubt he has had a hard battle to fight with fate, and such experiences make men skeptical toward their fellow-creatures, and teach them to be more to blame than is he. I have no doubt he has hardened heart were being imposed upon. Of course a well-bred man would have humored you, even although he might have wished to change the present condition to prison as a vagrant the next day.

I was very much amazed to hear him speak in this manner, and still more at the apologue with which this very account.

"He is very much charmed with you," he went on; "was quite enthusiastic, indeed; and expressed his regret at the awkward position he had placed you in the most handsome manner."

Then he stopped again.
"Indeed," he added, after another pause, "I am the bearer of a very important communication from him to you."

"To me?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said. He has actually made me a formal offer for your hand.

"For my hand?" I iterated. "And what reply did you make?

"The reply I made to him, my dear Ma--bel."

"Then my answer is no—a thousand times, no!" I answered, with an energy that quite startled me.

"My dear, you are much too hasty. But that is the way with you women; you take the most unreasonable dislikes to the simplest of the proprieties, or what you choose to construe into a slight. I really condescendingly believed you were being imposed upon; but I am sure he would give a hundred pence to render the unhappiest words he spoke. He is not a polished gentleman, but he is a sharp, observant fellow, and will very soon pick up in good society the tone of which he lacks. He is good-looking, and very few girls would refuse him if he were even much less than a baronet. You know I am not a unreasonable man, and shall make no attempt to coerce your judgments; but I think it a very good match, and it would get over the awkwardness and mortification which you must feel."

"But my lord," I put in, "and can we have anything better than my best friend who were envious of your sudden elevation. Now, sleep upon it, and by the morning you will be more fitted to judge."

"I wish it impossible! I could never love him!" I answered, firmly.

"Not another word to-night. I will see you again in the morning. Good-night, dear!"

"Good-night, my lord." And away went away.

I cannot describe the state of agitation this offer threw me into.

"Oh!" I thought, "how those two ideas, fortune and position, can even sway the best of human hearts, as they have my uncle's!"

Even had my love not been already given, I could not have become a baronet. I was the future baronet of Sir Geoffrey Avondell; for I had, from the first moment my eyes fell upon him, conceived one of those uncontrollable repulsions of which we all have had experiences in our time.

My uncle was knocking at my door at six o'clock the next morning.

I was dressed, so came out, and we walked down stairs onto the terrace without exchanging a word beyond our ordinary goodwill.

"Well," he said, when we had taken one turn down the center walk, "what is the result of sleeping upon it?"

"I have changed my resolution in the last," I answered.

"Then you have decided to refuse him?"

"Positively?"

"I think it's a pity," he replied, with a look of disappointment. "But then you have only yourself to blame, so we will say no more about it."

Very much relieved by that declaration, I threw my arms about his neck, and kissed him very gratefully.

"It would have made me miserable for life--I--I feel it now.

"Then it is much better as it is; and, under these circumstances, we had better catch the first train.

"Oh, yes--by all means; I am quite ready!" I replied, eagerly.

As soon as Sir Geoffrey was out of his reach, my uncle sought a private interview with him.

I afterward heard that he was greatly astonished and very much annoyed at my rejection.

"I am not in the habit of easily giving up any object I have once set my mind upon," he said; "and I certainly shall not prove false to my own interest, which I am certain the lady is a little piqued at my unexpected appearance when she thought herself sole mistress; but that will wear off in time, and then she may think more kindly of me and the position she has refused. Will you permit me to make a call upon you in London?"

My uncle could not very well refuse this, even if he had not a hundred pence to do so, which he was not, and so it was agreed.

But I was not told a word about it.

When we made our farewell, Sir Geoffrey's manner was coldly polite; mine, I am sure, was freezing.

Only for a moment did my eyes rest upon him, and that glance still further increased my prejubilation, for his countenance wore anything but a pleasant expression.

"I wish you well, by, Sir Geoffrey," I said.

"I wish you as recee, Miss Etheridge!" he replied.

We entered the carriage that was to convey us to the station. I felt one lingering look upon the grand old mansion of which I had so recently been the mistress, and we were driven away.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERY.

AND so, after being "my lady" for a few brief weeks, I quietly settled down in uncle's little suburban home again as Miss Etheridge.

All my friends were, of course, in a desperate flurry.

"Perhaps they didn't mean it," they said; "perhaps they meant it; perhaps they felt the opposite. It did not matter whether they did or not. And it was soon forgotten in some newer subject of interest.

Within a fortnight I had come to regard my late granduce much in the light of a very vivid dream, or of an exciting romance, that had made a great impression on my dreams.

But there was one person, one event, which no lapse of time could strip of reality.

Since I recorded my farewell note I have made no direct mention of Adrien; yet he was never out of my mind.

Had I known where to address, I should have written to him. But my uncle Avondell had no chance of fortune; but then, I thought, the story having got into the newspapers, he would, most probably, see it or hear about it. In our conversations at Avondell I had mentioned Canonbury as being the locality of my uncle's residence. A "Directory" would soon supply him with the name of the thoroughfare and the number; and I daily expected to hear some news of him.

This expectation, however, was not unprovided with a probative evidence of its reality. I went to the man, and what would he say to my rejecting a baronet for a poor, unknown artist, who owed even his name to the charity of a stranger?

As I have before observed, he was the most kind and indulgent of friends; but how would he be able to understand this suddenly-conceived love for one whom he had known a few days? Could I understand it, or explain it even to myself? But who could ever understand the glamour of love—why a heart should go forth to receive the crowd, who is neither better, cleverer, nor handsomer than many others—at least, in the common eyes—whom we meet with indifference! Such sympathies and experiences that make up our being. Yet, unless the case be our own, most of us, both young and old, regard such a passion as the one that ought to be very peremptorily dealt with.

The days, and then the weeks, passed on, and still no sign came to me from him. Once or twice I have gone over to Turnham Green, or Tottenham Court Road, I have made some excuse to myself for being there, but my real object was the hope of meeting him. I was doomed to disappointment, however.

Before leaving Avondell my uncle had proposed that we should have a month or six weeks at the seaside or the lakes, but returning home, I had decided against it, and as I had had my holiday, it was not my place to mention it. I could not help remarking that day by day he lost more and more of his old cheerfulness; that he had long fitted of gloomy reveries. Was I the cause?—was he annoyed with me for having refused Sir Geoffrey? I could not help thinking so, and the thought was a most severe one for me.

"I was not deceived, to be undeceived, and to learn that his dejection resulted from a far more serious matter.

"A month ago I left London, as I was sitting at work one morning, the servant announced to me that Mrs. Harding desired to see me."

"Oh, I was excused, with more animation than I had displayed for many a day.

And the next moment I had both the dear, fair woman's expressive hands clasped in mine, and was kissing her honest face; while she, quite overcome, began to sob like a child, and threw her arms round the neck of her "dear lady," as she still persisted to call me, and hugged me as though I had been her own daughter.

Then I took off her bonnet and shawl, and leading her to a couch, sat her down beside me. She was associated with my memories of him, and it seemed to me as though something of that time was brought back to me with her presence.

Then I asked her the news of Avondell. She had carried out her threat, and left the old lady in his care.

"If I had not done so of my own accord," she said, "I believe he would have sent me away; all the servants are under notice. But they are not on the list you discharged, and Ralph seems high in favor with his master.

"To my more direct inquiries, however, she was obliged to admit, although very reluctantly, that Sir Geoffrey's behavior was not open to any complaint upon the whole; that he treated everybody very well, and behaved himself in a very respectable manner.

"But he is not the kind of gentleman I have been accustomed to," she added, loftily: "he is more used to being among society than among innkeepers, and put on till he feels himself a little sure in his seat; then he'll show himself in his true colors, depend upon it!"

I was prepossessed against him, I was of a different opinion. I believed that he would always endeavor to fulfill the obligations of his position to the best of his ability, but did not vex the old lady by saying so.

"I thought it would have been my death to leave the dear old place, that I had lived in since a child," she added, and then went fast down her wrinkled cheeks.

"It was as if you uprooted one of the great trees in the woods, and carried it away to grow somewhere else. I felt as if I couldn't demean myself to it! And now, don't you think, my lady," she added, with a sudden energy, "there's something in such a feeling—that it's a sort of warning. If I'd been a real Avondell, my heart would have gone out to him, if he'd been ever so bad. It must—it would have been but natural! After their breach for generations, it would have come by instinct, as a mother turns to her child; but, instead of that, I took a dislike to him at once, and I couldn't be partly accounted for by your affection for me? I suggested.

"That might have had something to do with it," she said thoughtfully and reflectively, "but I have a feeling apart even from that."

Such arguments could not fail to have some weight with me, who was always disposed to believe the reports that were made, or who had a widow.

"I shall be able to see the old house, and shall look rather familiarly at it, and see if I can't be buried in the old church with the one who have gone before me."

She had come up to London for the sole purpose of seeing me, and begged her to remain.
two or three weeks—an invitation with which she was delighted, but which she accepted with some scruples.

"By the by," I said, suddenly, "has any
tale of the woman seen or heard of that poor
mad-woman?"

"Ah, my lady," that reminds me of some-
thing that happened a few days after you left.
You knew my aunt, Mrs. Edwards, who was
a very close friend of our family—very close.
She was out, I think, on a walk, and was
never seen since.

"I thought she was not going to tell
me, though it put me in mind of it. We
had it very hot down at Avondell the first
week after you went; and the butler, who is a
very close friend of my uncle, told me, know-
ing, could hear, at night, and used to sit at the open window
of his bedroom, which overlooks the terrace.
Well, one bright moonlight night—he said it
was between twelve and one—looking toward
the steps that lead up out of the grounds, he
saw a man coming up, carrying something
towards his shoulder. At first he thought it
was his master, and, being just going to give an
alarm, when, as the man passed at the top of
the steps to half-rest his burden against the
balustrade, and then put his hat to his form
head, and was lost in the full moonlight, he
saw it was Ralph Johnson.

"Well, he thought this very strange, and, of course, he immediately ran to
his uncle's house. I don't know, he could see his
movements very closely. Presently he
raised up his load again, and made toward
the house. As he came nearer, Edwards got a
better view of what he was carrying, and said
he felt all of a shiver, as though it looked like
a human body, covered over with a cloak,
or something of the kind. Johnson made for
the back door, and going through the
terrace, which leads by a private staircase to
the rooms usually occupied by the family, and
which are used by Sir Geoffrey. Edwards had
cautiously got his head out of window to watch.
He saw him standing before the door,
then heard a low whistle, and after a while the
doors were to be opened from the inside, and
Johnson went in.

"Very much excited by what he had seen,
Edwards continued his watch, and in about a
quarter of an hour, he noticed that the
stranger had come out again, walk along the terrace, and
disappear down the steps the way he had come.
He told me all about the next morning, and
suggested I should mention what he had seen to Sir Geoffrey.
"My advice," I said, 'is to keep it to yourself; don't mention it to anybody. Depend upon it,
Sir Geoffrey will take the best course."

"But what do you make of it, Mrs. Hard-
ing?" he asked.

"I don't know what to make of it, Mr. Edwards," I said, and I do not. Wasn't it a
strange thing, my lady?"

"Very, indeed," I answered, thoughtfully.

"I must tell you that Edwards has got
his notice with the rest, as I should have done had
I given the new baronet the chance."

Mrs. Harding did not seem to have the
slightest idea of why he had abandoned her
and the disappearance of the woman in gray.
And why should I?

But the two events became inextricably
associated in my mind.

When I came to recall Sir Geoffrey's pecu-
linar manner from the moment he caught sight of
the picture, it seemed to me that I could not
help thinking it was very strange.

He did not strike me as the kind of man who
could be so startled by a woman's nervous
exclamation as to have lost his coolness from
his head, and turn pale as a ghost.
The tone of voice, too, in which he had
ordered she should not be pursued, and the
manner in which he had expressed his
permission to quit the dining-room, seemed far more than the
occasion could possibly call for.

All kinds of strange and horrible solutions
began to present themselves to my imagi-
nation; but I drove them away, very angry with
myself.

"There is my old silly romance, running
eff, I expect, through my uncle's mind,
when I thought he was merely talking of
his connection to me."

I thought he inquired with a very marred
interest about Sir Geoffrey; and when she had
unfolded her budget—of course she made no
mention of the little mystery over which I
had been recently puzzling—he heaved a sigh, and fell into one of his reveries.

"He is thinking of my refusal, and regretting
it," I thought.

CHAPTER VIII

Two days after Mrs. Harding's arrival, I
received, early in the afternoon, a telegram
from my uncle to put off the dinner to seven;
we were, he said, to be having something
extra, as he was going to bring a gentle-
man home with him.

He returned at his usual time—half-past five
—but "I thought some one was to dine with us?"

I said, "Shall there be any?" "he replied; "he is coming later."

"Any one I know?" I inquired, indiffer-
ently. "Yes; but the last person in the world
you would expect a visit from."

Struck by the peculiarity of his tone, I
looked up at him. There was something in
the expression of his eyes that gave me the
claw.

"You do not mean—"

I faltered, and could not finish the sentence.

"It is Sir Geoffrey Avondell," he said, turning
away from his chair.

His tone, his look, his movements would have
told me why Sir Geoffrey was coming, and his
next words confirmed my impression.

"Mabel, dear," he said, after a slight pause,
and speaking very earnestly, "I wish you to
make yourself as agreeable as possible to him,
for reasons which I will explain to you by
and by;"

"Very well, uncle," I answered, as calmly
as I could. But, oh, how my heart sunk
within me!

When I told Mrs. Harding who our ex-
pected visitor was, she was rather surprised.

Full of my trouble, I told her of his offer of
marriage, which I had not mentioned before,
and of course, and of the pressure that this
was to make me accept it.

I expected a burst of indignation; but, to
my astonishment, she took the announcement
very calmly.

"Well, my dear young lady, it would give
you back your own again, and we should have a
time at Avondell of the old days," she said.

"Then you think that the man whom you
are too proud to serve would make me a very
fitting husband?" I answered, indignantly.

"I do not think him at all worthy of you,
but it would give you back your rightful heri-
tage, my lady," she replied.

"Money, name, position, those are the only things that matter to you, and I will not
accept your surrender in that way. I thought, bitterly, "Such is the doctrine of
the world."

Sir Geoffrey arrived about half-past six. He
was most profuse in his compliments to me,
and I received them with as good a grace as I
could assume.

I thought his manner had toned down a
little since I saw him last. I could not help
acknowledging that he was decidedly good-
looking, and that he might easily have taken
his choice ofidors in any part of the
world. He was not often in a position to
notice in me anything more than a
appearance in every respect than myself.
Why, then, did he insist in addresses which he must
perceive were disagreeable to me?

I endeavored to carry out my uncle's desire,
and make myself agreeable to him; but I am
certain my manner was constrained. This,
however, he did not, or would not, perceive.
WHY I MARRIED HIM

mance that comes before. Lovers anticipate so much that the reality is always disappointment.

Sir Geoffrey must be fond of you, or he would not have given this offer after the severe snubbing you gave him. He cannot have any ulterior motive in making you his wife, as you will bring him neither fortune nor rank. But if he were ambitious, or if he were to his young friends, he would have sought a wife in some poor but aristocratic family, and incorporal for me, in how little he knew of my antecedents. I'd take a good round sum that within a month you will be as happy and contented as any woman need wish to be.

"Yes, Mabel; I must have the ten thousand within a week. Sir Geoffrey is impatient; and if you are to be his wife, I see no reason to delay it for a moment.

About noon the next day, the servant brought me Sir Geoffrey's card. He was in the dining-room waiting to see me.

I looked in; the glass at white as marble. I called up all my resolution and ascended the stairs.

His manner was grave and courteous, and he was altogether in better form than I had ever seen him before. That was at least a relief; had he shown his usual effeminacy, I am afraid I should have given him more cause to say "I know," he said, "you do not love me, may, that you even dislike me; but I have no fear that she will reject me."

It must have a very hard heart, if a devoted husband will anticipate her every wish and not even win it, and I am sure your heart is not hard. It may have been too impressionable at times.

The last words were spoken so significantly, and accompanied by a glance that told me my secret was known to him; and if he had been in doubt, I should have betrayed myself by the hot flush that overspread my pallor.

I was not sorry for that part of the speech with such unequalled earnestness, that my heart had quite softened to him; but the last sentence spoiled all. Had he not been very deficient in tact, he would not have been guilty of such an indiscretion.

"I have no reason to dislike you, Sir Geoffrey," I answered.

"That is nice, Young Uncle," he went on, not noticing this speech, "that pleased me with the hope that you will not plead for any delay to my happiness. I must be married within the week, and the ostentatious marriage that I have; and all the circumstances of our relative positions considered—I mean, of course, in regard to the Avondells' great private estate, which must be better. Most people will regard such a union as the most natural thing in the world—as a very good adjustment of rival claims. May I, then, fix Thursday next for the happy day?"

"I thought it was the lady's privilege to fix the day. Is that the one on which your uncle's liabilities become due?"

He colored up at that question, but answered, quietly, "That it is."

"Oh, Young Uncle," and this was Saturday! Although Mrs. Harding did not disapprove of the match, she was very indifferent at the hasty manner in which it was to be celebrated. Of course I had not explained to her the necessity.

"I'll venture to assert," she said, "that from first to last this young man fought at the battle of Agincourt, there has never been the like of it. The marriage of an Avondell has always been a great event to all the country round—a tiresome business, including the doctor, the lawyer, the church, the postman, the rent collector, and Miss Esheridge; I don't like it. It looks as if the old house was going to the dogs."

"What on earth will your comments be?" I inquired.

"Oh, mild or more; but, if you take that turning, pointing to an opening, 't will bring you into the Euston Road; then turn to your right; and it's a straight line to St. Angel."

I had been asked to follow these directions, when I almost ran against a gentleman.

"I beg—you began; then stopped short.

"Can it be Miss Avondell?" exclaimed the stranger.

This was Adrien Sylvester. After this secret meeting we stood for some seconds in an embarrassing silence.

"What a strange meeting?" he said, at length.

"It is, very," I answered.

My heart was beating wildly. With a passing "Good evening," I would have hurried on, but my feet remained rooted to the spot.

"How long have you been in town?" he inquired. "For another week, and not a moment more."

"We remained at Avondell only two or three days after you left," I answered.

"Indeed! That was very sudden, was it not? But you had no intention—at least, you did not mention—to leaving when I was there?"

"Is it possible? Have you not heard? I explained.

"Heard what?" he inquired. "I have heard nothing of Avondell since I left it."

"I am no longer mistress of Avondell; I am married to Sir Geoffrey," I replied.

My embarrassment was now rapidly disappearing, since we had found a subject to converse upon.

"Then, what do you mean?" he exclaimed, with an energy that caused a passet-by to turn round, and stare at us.

"Do you mean it?" I asked, as we began to walk slowly round the inclosure, "that you have not heard that a son of the late Sir Geoffrey has come to light, proved his birth, and taken possession of the estate and title?"

"A son of the late Sir Geoffrey?" he repeated.

"Yes, it was in all the newspapers."

"I did not see it; and this man is now at Avondell?"

"Yes; and on Thursday morning I am to become his wife."

I blurted out the sentence as quickly as I was able. I could not endure that there should be a moment's misapprehension between us now.

His arm dropped from mine as if it had been suddenly struck down, and he stared at me with a blank look upon his face.

Then, grasping one of the railings, his head drooped forward upon his chest.

Knowing not what to say or do, I remained silent, and the things I yearned to speak. Suddenly he looked up, and said, "Do you love him?"

"No."

"Do you marry him, then, for the sake of regaining the estate?"

"Yes," I replied, after a pause.

"I had just turned round, in no way betraying my position—and that I had no right to do to a stranger."

A look of questioning wonder was succeeded by a look of surprise, and surrision; I was some time to consider where I had got to.

The summer twilight, as we see it in London, was just dying in the smoky haze of the coming night, when I found myself in a square of old-fashioned, gloomy-looking houses.

I asked a servant-girl, who was standing at one of the doors, the name of the place.

"Pitney Road," she said.

Even then I had but a dim idea as to where I was. "How far am I from Islington?" I inquired.

"Oh, miles or more; but, if you take that turning, pointing to an opening, 't will bring you into the Euston Road; then turn to your right; and it's a straight line to St. Angel."

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"It is, very," I answered.

My heart was beating wildly. With a passing "Good evening," I would have hurried
out my hand, and not appearing to notice his last words.

"Good-bye, Miss Avondell!" he answered, releasing my hand; but I snatched it brusquely away, and, without another word, hurried on.

Once I cast a surreptitious glance behind, angry with him! I thought a tear was in his eye; then I regretted I had clasped my hand, but I snatched it brusquely away, and, without another word, hurried on.

As I entered the Eaton Road, a cab hailed me. I got into it, and told the man to drive to Canongate.

Then my tears found vent. Anger and mortification were their source.

"Thank Heaven," I murmured to myself, "I am not married!" It gave me some slight illusion. "He has passed out of my life forever!"

It was nine o'clock when I arrived home.

I ran up-stairs to my room, bathed my swollen eyes, brushed my hair, and removed all traces of my recent agitation.

"Good gracious, child! Where have you been?" exclaimed my uncle. "I was getting quite uneasy about you."

"I don't know what excuse I made." I answered, with a laugh.

"What color you have, and how your eyes are sparkling!" he remarked. "I have not seen you look so well for a long time!"

"Thank Heaven," I murmured to myself, "I am not married!"

At the top of the stairs, the servant called "my lady! I answered, gayly. "Would you not like some music, uncle dear?" I said.

"Do you think it is amusing, dear?" he said.

I looked around, and perceived that the station was decorated with festoons of flowers and some flags.

"May I have the honor of to-morrow," he whispered.

"It is to be quite a local event, I assure you. Short as your stay was among them, the people took a great fancy to you, and they are both well pleased that you are to be their minister, after all."

There was a good number of loiterers outside the station door, who gave a very hearty cheer as I stepped into the carriage.

"Heaven bless her, she's as beautiful as an angel!" I heard an old woman say. "May she be all the pleasure in life that I wish, and I'm sure she'll have enough!"

I was trembling like a leaf when I took my seat beside my uncle—the thought of a demonstration was always before me. It was time to eat. Dinner was waiting for us. Sir Geoffrey placed me next to him. His manner was excessively gentle, but never obtrusive. He was not the usual lounging young man, more unselfish, more sensitive to honor than the ordinary race of mankind. But I relented, and gently crushed the suggestion. What good could it do now? Better far that I should think the worst of him than have any lingering doubts fester in my mind to poison my future life.

When I came down to breakfast, my uncle met me with more than his usual affection.

"I am glad to see you a little calmer this morning," he said. "Do you know you quite nickel?"

"You were alarmed to see me in good spirits?" I said, smiling.

"They were not natural spirits, Mabel."

After a silence of some minutes, during which he absently chipped an egg, he spoke again.

"I am afraid I have put your duty and affections to severe test in this marriage," he said.

"Do not talk of that," I replied, quickly. "I am glad to see you so much at ease with me and my father!"

"I make no claim," came back upon my memory to strengthen me with bitterness; and I broke in calmly with "I am quite willing to marry him, uncle, and I expect to obey him. I have no real desire whatever to do so. It is entirely of my own free will."

"You don't know what a burden you have upon your shoulders. You are my dearest daughter, Mabel!" he said, pressing me in his arms. "I have worried over the matter until I was beginning to believe I was a domestic tyrant, a sort of patriarch almighty. But I don't wish you to know what. Now I feel quite happy again. I am sure you are doing the right thing. Such a match is not to be lightly rejected by a portionless girl."

It was late in the afternoon when we left London by the Ludgate Hill Station for Avondell. Mrs. Avondell was going down there to settle, and begged to be allowed to dress me for my bridal as she dressed the late Sir Geoffrey's mother. I was only too happy to please her as a faithful attendant with me at such an hour.

The journey was little more than thirty miles, and the sun was still shining brilliantly on the upland.

Sir Geoffrey was, of course, there with a carriage waiting to convey us to the house.

At the gates the servant, who had come to the station to meet us, announced our approach. Sir Geoffrey then returned. But, catching my uncle's gaze fixed upon me, I overcame my emotion, and met Sir Geoffrey with a smile.

"I have heard, I'm hearing, dear?" he said.

The station was decorated with festoons of flowers and some flags.

"I have the honor of to-morrow," he whispered.

"It is to be quite a local event, I assure you. Short as your stay was among them, the people took a great fancy to you, and they are both well pleased that you are to be their minister, after all."

At length, the end came. One night a servant brought a message to Sir Gilbert that Lady Avondell was dying, and requested to see him. Sir Gilbert, who was Brocklehurst's constant and intimate friend, immediately replied that he would come at once, and if necessary, give his life to save her.

It was a terrible blow that met his eyes upon entering the chamber of death. His lady was propped up in the bed by pillows; and what a change had taken place since last he had seen her! The once fair, round face was little more than the bony profile of a skull, over which was drawn a livid, parchement skin; the once rosy lips were bloodless and fallen in from the want of teeth; the sparkling eyes lurked dimly within their cavernous deports; and, to make the contrast more terrible, she had arrayed herself in her bridal costume, and was still dressed so that her reputation was not revealed. Mabel's eyes were large as orange blossoms.

"Sir Gilbert, sit down, horrified."

"She gave a low, bitter laugh."

"What?" she murmured; "are you frightened at your own work?"

"Yes, sir" she exclaimed, with starting energy, she invoked a terrible curse upon him and his house, pronounced with the air and certainty of a prophetess."

"You shall, shall a child be born to you; but your heritage shall go to the man you hate! From this hour a blight shall fall upon your race; never shall you or any of Avondell's blood pass to the stranger, and be borne by the outcast whom no man will own! Then shall the pride of your house be struck down, and levied with the dust!"
"Then, with a low, wailing scream, she fell back, and expired."

As I uttered the last words, my uncle started, and in a sort of exaltation, he wrung up by the leg the legend I was relating. I could feel my face blanch, and my hair stir; for upon the deathlike silence of the night there broke a shriek, just such as I was describing—low, wailing, as of some soul in the last agony.

"What was that?" inquired my uncle, in an awe-struck voice.

"I do not know, what could it be?" ejaculated Mrs. Harding, who was standing behind my chair.

I seemed breathless.

All was again silent.

"It must have been an owl, or some other night-bird," suggested my uncle.

"I never heard or seen a night-bird utter such an awful sound as that," replied Mrs Harding, trembling. "It was like the voice of some evil spirit. Lor' 'mericy upon us!—there it is again!"

But this time it was a shriek of laughter. It seemed to come from a long way off, and ceased very suddenly.

"I fear Mrs Harding crept close together, overcome by terror.

My uncle sprung up, and rung the bell vigorously.

Several minutes elapsed before the summons was answered; for we were in a room of the suite of apartments which had formerly been mine, in the garret, and which was separated from the part of the house where all the servants were congregated.

When the footman appeared, he brought light, and thinking it was for those we had rung.

"What noise was that just now?" demanded my uncle.

"Who, sir?" inquired the man.

"There was a shriek, as if some one was being hurt, and then a laugh like a maniac's." He seemed startled, and thinking the scene was in another part of the house. I daresay it was the owls; they do make a dreadful noise out in the woods sometimes.

"Go and inquire among your fellow-servants if they heard anything. Stay! I will go myself."

"Oh, don't leave us!" I cried.

"I fear you might find a lady until I return," he said, to the man, and hurried away.

He was gone some time, during which we maintained an almost unbroken silence, expecting every moment to hear that the same or some other awful sound would break upon us.

But all was silent again. When the man came, he sent the footman away, and then told us that he had questioned every person in the house, but no one had heard it.

"There is nothing astonishing in that, however," he added, "for they are making noise enough to drown a thunder-storm. I believe it must have been the owls, after all."

"It seemed like an echo to the words I was speaking," I said, shuddering—"as though the spirit of the unhappy woman whose story I was telling was hovering round her, and her spirit was making inquiries in the coming fulfillment of her curse."

"I am surprised at you, Mabel, entertaining such wild fancies," he answered, irritably. "We might expect them from your maid, but not from an educated lady. Every old house and family has its legends and its curses, and its ghostly visitants and haunting ones. I wonder they don't say she walks; that her spirit is seen at certain times—"

"Oh, sir, don't make a jest of things so awful," demanded Mrs Harding.

"You had better go to bed, Mabel," he said, "or you will be ill to-morrow."

"Sleep with me to-night!" I whispered to the housekeeper.

"I should be too pleased, my lady, for I do not think I could dare to sleep alone," she answered.

"But no more horrors," said my uncle.

"Don't terrify yourselves further by dwelling upon this subject, and raking up all the horrid stories you can possibly remember, which people usually do under such circumstances. Depend upon it, the explanation is simple enough. The darkness, the silence, and the story had brought us into that electrical condition that we were certain to be magnified into something ghastly or portentous; and so the case of some belated owl, or the screaming of some sour-faced, half-deranged old owl, was exaggerated, in our imagination, into the cry of an evil spirit."

He spoke lightly, jestingly; but I felt certain that he was not so easy as he pretended to be.

"There! good-night, dear! Heaven bless you, and protect you from all evils, fanged or real! I shall not go to bed before I have investigated this matter further."

I threw myself, sobbing passionately, into his arms.

"This won't do, Mabel," he said, a little severely; "this is childish."

"Oh, it is not that?" I exclaimed. "But to-morrow I could proceed no further."

"Yes," he said, understanding me, "this is the last night of my guardianship. Henceforth you must do as you please."

Here his own voice gave way; and, unable to any longer endure the painful scene, he led me to the door, and passed me to Mrs. Harding, who was awaiting me.

I sobbed myself to sleep on the good old creature's breast, and slumbered until she aroused me next morning.

My only answer to my dressing-room.

He looked pale and heavy-eyed, as though he had not slept all night.

I remarked, in the faces of numbers who still pressed for admittance.

I stood before the altar, with my eye hand grasped in his, feverish one, and took the words in a voice through the very course of tears had been forever stopped.

At length the ceremony was over. I felt my husband's kiss upon my lips; then I had a hasty examination of my new apparel, followed by a shower of congratulations, of signing my name in a book, a great crowd, of shouts and bell-ringing, and then finding myself alone in the carriage again, my remembrances are all confused. A number of people, a buzz of conversation, the popping of champagne corks, some speech-making, a move of the body;—I forget it. This is all I can recall.

Until suddenly I saw the door dash open, and a white-faced, affrighted man rush into the room, imploring her. "Mabel!—the house is on fire!"

All sprung to their feet, and made for the door. I felt myself carried away by the crowd into the garden.

Then an appalling sight met our eyes. From the windows of that part of the building furthest from the door, were great flames; the windows of Mr. Gregofo's private apartments were situated, flames were darting and volumes of smoke rolling, while a strong wind, which blew from the garden, was sweeping them toward us. The rapidity with which the fire increased
WHY I MARRIED HIM.

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of the feasting and festivities which had been so terribly interrupted, and numbers of others, who had seen the flames in the distance, came out from their idling through the woods, each moment swelling the concourse.

Suddenly I felt my arm grasped.

It was my uncle.

His clothes were torn, his hands and face scorched. It was he who had rescued the unfortunate creature.

"Where is Sir Geoffrey?—how has he left you alone?" he said, quickly. He gazed at me inquiringly, as if to make sure that I was not a madwoman. But his strong, earnest, melancholy eyes finally told me his unease.

Then, putting his arm around me, he said, sadly, "This is a terrible wedding-day for you, my poor child."

I shuddered, but made no reply.

There were two medical men among the guests, and upon reaching Johnson's cottage, they accompanied any one entering with the body except the men who bore it, and myself, and uncle.

"Do you know this woman, Sir Geoffrey?" inquired one of the doctors, while the other applied himself to ascertain if any life yet remained.

No," he replied, without glancing in that direction.

"She was found in a vaulted chamber, of which none of the servants knew the existence."

Then how should I, who have only just entered upon possession of the house, be expected to know of it?" replied Sir Geoffrey, irritable, and turning away to the window.

The doctor looked surprised at his tone and manner.

But at that moment his colleague drew his attention behind him, saying, "She is living!"

I saw Sir Geoffrey start, and round quickly; then again turn to the window, outside of which the crowd was pressing and peer- ing, trying to trace a glimpse of what was taking place within.

He seemed to ignore or forget my existence, at least, he took no notice of me. I could see the uncle's sharp, angry glances cast upon him.

"My child," he said, "this is no place for your Uncle avondell, is there no conveyance by which Lady Avondell may be taken to some house or inn, or place more fitted for her than this?"

A carriage cannot be brought into a wood?" he answered, insolently. "Lady Avondell will have to walk for half a mile. There will be one waiting directly to take us to the station."

"Surely you are not going away—"not going to leave Avondell in the midst of this dreadful calamity?" exclaimed my uncle.

"Oh, no!—I shall not go away now!" I cried, clinging to him.

"That is as I please now?" replied Sir Geor- frey, with a malignant sneer. "You are my ward; and what I say you may hate, will have to do as I choose!"

At these words, my poor uncle grew as white as death; and I heard him murmur to himself, "Oh, help!—Oh!"

I pressed his arm and whispered, "You should not notice what he says now; he is ex- hasted, and the sight and sound of this frightful calamity, re- member. Then, turning to Sir Geoffrey, and anxious to prevent a scene, I said, "I am ready to go. The ground is quite dry, and the air is warm; I shall not take any harm."

He cast an irresolute glance toward the bed.

"Is the woman likely to survive?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes; I think so," replied one of the doctors. "She has sustained no serious injury by the fire, although the smoke was rapidly killing her."

"That is the poor woman I was speaking to you about, Sir Geoffrey," I said.

"Yes; I know," he answered, quickly. Then, turning to the doctors, said, "She is a mad-woman—quite mad. You must not attach any importance to anything she may say. I will give orders to have her conveyed to the nearest asylum."

"She cannot be moved at present," replied one of the doctors, quietly.

"Nonsense! What is all this fuss about a mad-woman, who has had to sleep under hedges all her life?"

"She is a human creature, and should be treated as such. A vacancy. I mean,

"What is it to you? I am master here—no you?" retorted Sir Geoffrey, fiercely.

Indignation and astonishment were imprint- edly on his face. What a change had sudden- ly come over this man! The polished baronet had suddenly been transformed into a coarse, bullying ruffian.

"Madam!" he said to me; "the coach will be waiting for us."

"It will have to wait, then!" said my uncle, placing his back against the door. "My niece does not go until I have had some private con- versation with you!"

"If it is the money, to save you from bank- ruptcy, you want, and for which you sold your house, I have a check for it in my pocket-book."

While he spoke he was taking out his book, and, at the last word, presented the check.

My uncle snatched it from his hand, tore it to shreds, and threw it in his face.

You soumdread!" he cried, trembling with passion.

"But she has sold it, madam!" I said, to me; "the coach will be waiting for us."

"We'll see about that!" said Sir Geoffrey, livid with passion.

And he grasped my wrist so firmly that I could not reproce a cry of pain.

With a passionate ejaculation, my uncle raised his arm; and in another moment the two men would have been at blows, had not one of the doctors interposed.

"Sir Geoffrey," he said, "this is very ex- traordinary behavior. Pray collect yourself. You have hurt Lady Avondell, and I am she!"

I stood simultaneously turned toward the bed, and there was the woman in gray, sitting upright, and gazing wildly about her.

"Ay, Lady Geoffre Avondell!" she repeated, at the last word, presented the check.

"What's that about Lady Avondell?" broke in a hoarse voice. "There's only one Lady Avondell, and I am she!"

She had suddenly turned toward the bed, and there was the woman in gray, sitting upright, and gazing wildly about her.

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She had suddenly turned toward the bed, and there was the woman in gray, sitting upright, and gazing wildly about her.
up on the pillow, where she lay half insensible, and uttering low moans.

The doctor began to describe the effect of her words upon those present.

Consternation and unutterable astonishment were expressed upon every countenance, and every glance turned instinctively upon Sir Geoffrey.

No marble was ever whiter than his face; but his lips were set and deadly pale.

"I told you," he said, with a laugh, "she would make some extraordinary assertions. Mad people always fancy themselves great personages.

"I do not remember you saying anything of the kind," replied one of the doctors, quietly.

"That you have a bad memory," retorted Sir Geoffrey, sullenly, and conscious of the blunder he had committed. "You will tell me next you believe her story, I suppose."

We left the church as events, if she is Lady Avondell, she has acknowledged me to be her son, that is one comfort.

Before any one could reply, a voice was heard outside the door, saying: "Is there a Mr. Etheridge here?"

"Yes," replied my uncle. "What is it?"

"A message—this is a message for you, sir;"

He opened the door, and a countryman handed him a brown envelope.

He tore it open, and read the contents.

"Good Heavens! what can it mean?" he muttered.

"Who gave me this?"

"I did, sir. It was given me by one of the servants just now. He said he came early this morning, and he quite forgot to give it to you, sir."

"What is it?—any bad news? I inquire, anxiously."

"There is no need to be so bad, I fear," he replied.

He hesitated for a moment, then passed me the telegram, with the remark, "I do not see why I should keep it from you."

"I shall not give it from your lawyers, and contained these words:

"We are requested by Misses Strickland and Carey, highly respectable solicitors, from whom we have received a communication that justifies us in doing so, to send you this message. It says: Delay your marriage, if possibly, anything may happen to break it off."

The paper we had fallen from my hand had not my uncle caught it.

"What is this about?" Sir Geoffrey demanded.

"That is my business," replied my uncle.

"As it seems to concern my wife, it is mine, also."

Here, fortunately, the dispute was again interrupted by a man who passed his way through the crowd that surrounded the door, and came up almost breathless with running.

"Some gentleman at the Avondell Arms wants to see Mr. Etheridge directly," he said.

"I've been running about this hour and more trying to find him. Is he here?"

"Yes," replied my uncle.

"Come, Mabel—come with me," said Sir Geoffrey, advancing.

"Not after what this telegram has told me. Do you wish to make me read it aloud before all the people, villain, impostor?"

It was a shot fired first only to guess, but it told.

Sir Geoffrey qualified before it.

"Well, I'll have no scenes here. But she's my daughter, and I may be answered, defiantly; and where she goes, I go."

When we emerged from the cottage, the whole air was impregnated with the smell of fire and smoke, and the dress of the room, and we could, although half a mile distant, hear the roaring of the flames, which were still raging with increasing fury.

We hurriedly passed from the trees into the open, where we heard loud cries behind us, and a crowd of panic-stricken people running at full speed.

"The wood on fire—the wood on fire!" shrieked on all sides.

And, surely enough, we heard a gathering and awful groan at first, then grew nearer and nearer, mingled with a fierce crackling sound, until we saw a sheet of fire advancing with lightning speed along the ground, devouring bushes and fern, and keeping up the tumps of the great trees. A long continuance of hot, dry weather had parched and withered up the vegetation, rendering it an easy prey to the flames, which spread with a destruction as complete as the houses.

A carriage was waiting in the high road, and into this Sir Geoffrey, myself, and my uncle entered, followed by theClerk, with that awful roar in our ears, and with volumes of pungent smoke pursuing us, we rolled on toward the village itself.

Upon arriving there, we were told that the three gentlemen who desired to see Mr. Etheridge were in a private room upstairs.

My uncle held my hand, and Sir Geoffrey prepared to follow.

"I have private business with these gentlemen," said my uncle facing round.

"Leave them be;" he said.

"Not at any consideration!"

"Very well, then; where she goes, I go!"

"Be it so; perhaps you'll repent it!" answered my uncle, with a smile, as we descended the stairs.

We all three entered the room, to which a waiter conducted us.

There were three persons present. Two were elderly men, and strangers; the third was Adrien Sylvester.

A film gathered before my eyes, and I should have fallen, had I not clutched my supporter's arm.

"You are Messrs. Strickland and Carey, I presume," said my uncle.

"We are, indeed," replied one of the gentlemen.

"And this gentleman?"

"We will introduce him presently. You received our message?"

"Yes, I have."

"Dear! how could that be? Then Miss Etheridge is married to the so-called Sir Geoffrey Avondell."

"So-called! What do you mean?" exclaimed a fierce voice.

"Are you the person?" inquired one of the gentlemen.

"I am Sir Geoffrey Avondell."

"You mean you are the illegitimate son of Lady Geoffrey Avondell, born two years after her separation from her husband," was the quiet response.

For a moment the miserable impostor stared dumfounded at the speaker. Then he began to bluster.

"I'll trouble you for this, my friend! It's all a conspiracy, got up by you, old bankrupt, to extort money from me! But you won't get a farthing—you shall rot in jail!"

The mask which had been dropping bit by bit since the fire, now fell entirely, and exposed the features of the low-born ruffian.

But my uncle was not a man to be added, with a sneering laugh, "as this woman's husband. I've got the Avondell property, and you'll find it a hard matter to dispossession me of that!"

"I don't think we shall," was the reply, uttered as calmly as before.

"What's the wife's is the husband's."

"But supposing it is not the wife's?"

"If I am not the heir, she is."

"Perhaps not."

"Then how can you say it may turn out to be this gentleman?"

And the lawyer pointed to Adrien.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUNSHINE THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

THREE months have passed since the events described in the last chapter occurred. The scene once more changes to our quiet home at Canbury.
WHY I MARRIED HIM.

Another residence has, however, risen upon the same site—not so grand, not so imposing as the old one; but let us hope that the venerable spirit of the unhappy Lady Washington has been at length appeased—and years of almost uninterrupted felicity in the society of the noblest and best of men give almost certainly to the place where she has so long and so very longly waited for that with the death of the Woman in Gray the shadow of the curse passed forever from the House of Avondel.

THE END.

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