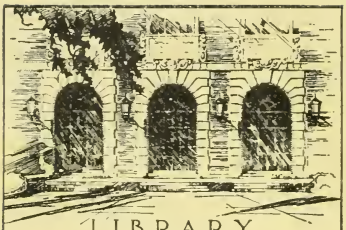

AT FAULT.

VOL. I.

AT FAULT.

A Novel.

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF
"BREEZIE LANGTON," "BROKEN BONDS," "SOCIAL SINNERS,"
"THE GREAT TONTINE," ETC., ETC.

"For the lords in whose keeping the door is
That opens on all who draw breath,
Gave the cypress to love, my Dolores,
The myrtle to death."

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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AT FAULT.

CHAPTER I.

"JOHN FOSSDYKE, SOLICITOR."

"OUGHT to have a theatre, sir—of course, it ought to have a theatre—the idea of a thriving, go-a-head place like Baumborough being without such a thing! We've a mechanics' institute, assembly rooms, hospital, college, covered market, Conservative club, public gardens, a town band—the most thick-headed and irascible municipality in the kingdom, school of Art, and all the latest fads of the times we live in, and no theatre. It can't be—it mustn't be. Do you mean to elevate the

masses or do you not? Are these not days in which culture is everything? What are mutton-chops to mezzotints, or ducks to dados? Who would think of table sensualities when the intellectual banquet of Hamlet by the great Dobbs awaited him. No, Baumborough, with its thirty thousand inhabitants, is astir with dramatic interests. We have local artists, sir, who only want opportunity; suckling Shakespeares in our midst who merely want some slight study of stage craft to blossom into metropolitan fame. No, Dr. Ingleby, despite the supreme stupidity and obstinacy of the Corporation, you and I have pulled through a good many ticklish matters, and we'll work this. Baumborough must have a theatre, and when I, John Fossdyke, tell you so, you know the thing will be."

That was the keynote to John Fossdyke's career—his indomitable self-assertion. Fifteen years ago he had settled in Baumborough as a solicitor, a young man with no introductions,

not an acquaintance, much less a friend, in the place, and now he was practically their leading citizen. From the very commencement it signified little what it might be, but whatever there might be to be done in Baumborough, about it Mr. Fossdyke had much to say. Shrewd, hard-headed, pachydermatous, and a fluent speaker, he had proved from the first totally irrepressible. He began, as naturally all leading citizens do begin, in the opposition, and speedily demonstrated that to have John Fossdyke's fluent tongue and keen brain against a thing was to make its accomplishment a matter of some trouble. A man this to be propitiated, and cookers and contrivers of snug local jobs came quickly to the conclusion that this was a man to have on their side, and made overtures accordingly. Energetic, irrepressible John was in no humour to turn up his nose at well-buttered bread, and speedily had not a finger but his whole fist in every pie worth baking. Practice came rapidly to him,

and he had plenty of ability to take advantage of it, and having succeeded in marrying the daughter of a well-to-do clergyman in the neighbourhood, who had inherited a nice bit of money from her deceased mother, he conjoined the lucrative profession of money lending to the selling of law. It was soon spread about amongst the farmers round Baumborough that lawyer Fossdyke had clients ready to advance a little money on decent security should the banks prove rusty, and in his early days John Fossdyke took care to outbid the banks and demand one per cent. less interest than they did. He throve and waxed fat in substance year by year, as men with this vehemence of clutch always do, obtained the appointment of town-clerk and a monopoly of all legal pickings connected with the Baumborough municipality. At the time this narrative commences, and Mr. Fossdyke feels it incumbent on him to express his sentiments concerning the erection of a theatre for Baum-

borough to his esteemed friend, Dr. Ingleby, he had acquired for himself a pleasant villa about a mile outside the town, with about a hundred acres of grass and pleasaunce around it, and was as leading and prosperous a man as any in Baumborough. The building of this theatre, which now occupied his restless mind, was another of those local improvements which he so persistently floated, and which had in no little measure made him. His fellow-townsmen appreciated the public gardens, mechanics' institute, &c., all of which were in great measure brought about by his unwearied agitation, and which he took good care should more or less contribute to his advantage. "A warm man, and a good sort, and likes a bit of sport," said that large country side of which Baumborough was the market town, and the popular solicitor so far endorsed the latter laudation as to be ever open to the offer of a day's shooting or coursing, and to generally put in an appearance at the cover-side, when the hounds met

within easy distance. But with all these virtues there was one allegation sometimes made against Mr. Fossdyke, namely, that though he doubtless had made a good bit of money, he was a very difficult man to get money from. These detractors were chiefly the tradespeople of Baumborough, who, though perchance mere scandal-mongers, it could not be denied were certainly in a position to form an opinion.

"Well," said the doctor slowly, after a pause, "I suppose if you have made up your mind, Fossdyke, we are to have a theatre, a theatre we shall have. You generally carry out what you go in for, but it's no use pretending your schemes are always successful. You shook us up to begin with. We had got stagnant, and the municipality wanted new blood, but you're over-doing it now. The assembly rooms are not open twice a year, the covered market draws no custom, and the public gardens so far are mere sand, ashes, and sticks."

"Things must have a beginning," rejoined Mr. Fossdyke cheerily. "You must educate your public to prefer legitimate space for dancing to the delights of crushed and torn flounces. Trees must have time to grow, while as for the covered market, I'll leave the climate to bring that into fashion. Walk out to the Dyke with me, have some lunch, and discuss the theatre."

But Dr. Ingleby declined that offer, and the prosperous solicitor strolled home by himself.

Prosperous, well-to-do men's houses are not quite so pleasant inwardly at times as their exterior would indicate. Good Lord! there are many things we hanker sadly after that, could we only take a peep behind the scenes, we should never wish for more. John Fossdyke had married well, so said all Baumborough. It was regarded as a considerable step up the social ladder when he, at that time a struggling solicitor, won for himself the hand of the only daughter of the Rev. Maurice

Kimberley, J.P., and rector of Bimby, a parish lying some two or three miles outside the town. It was true Mary Kimberley was no chicken, and some years older than the aspiring attorney, but still Mary had a nice bit of money, and was considered at the time to have thrown herself away rather, although it did not seem quite so clear what other matrimonial alternative was open to her. Marriage no doubt is no necessity for women, but when she has passed five-and-thirty, if she has any inclination that way, it behoves her to give due consideration to such proposals as may fall to her. Mary Kimberley was a little tired of Bimby rectory; life there was somewhat stagnant, and she had a vague longing to change it for a world with somewhat more "go" in it. She was a sensible young woman, and when John Fossdyke asked her to marry him replied she would give him an answer in twenty-four hours. She had "a good think" over the business, and having arrived at the

conclusion that there were only three courses open to her, namely, to remain mistress of the rectory, to marry some impecunious curate, or say yes to John Fossdyke, made up her mind to the latter, and said yes the next day. So far Mary Kimberley had shown wise discretion, but the pity of it was, that as Mary Fossdyke she forgot to continue it. Many a man has been indebted to his wife for his first start in life, but if ever a man feels that he has borrowed the capital that floated him at usurious interest it is when his wife persistently reminds him of the fact. Mrs. Fossdyke always kept before her husband that it was her social pre-eminence that placed him where he was, that it was her money which was the foundation of his fortune. Perhaps it was; no doubt there was considerable truth in it; but the perpetual recapitulation of conferred benefits is about as trying as any known method of exasperation. Nobody accused the Fossdykes of living a cat-and-dog life, but it

was generally conceded that Mrs. Fossdyke, though a well-meaning woman, was a little trying at times, while it was urged on her behalf that she had fair cause of complaint about the manner in which she was often left alone for weeks at a time. Mr. Fossdyke's business was extensive, and by no means in these days confined to Baumborough. He was a man with a good many irons in the fire, and such irons, as we all know, require constant watching, and energetic John Fossdyke was not the man to let the kettle boil over from being out of the way.

Mrs. Fossdyke, dear good lady, although honestly fond and proud of her lord, could no more resist that irresistible luxury, a grievance, than the rest of us, and was wont to murmur over these constant absences in plaintive manner to her intimates. "After all I've been to him, my dear," she would say, "after my lifting him into society, after my even finding him the money with which he was

first enabled to embark in these great undertakings. John's clever there's no denying, energetic I grant you. Few men, even with all his advantages, would have achieved what he has done, but John is not considerate. He should remember what I have been to him, that I occasionally require change, and am not above roughing it a little when necessary; in short, he might, I think, take me with him on some of these business excursions."

But John Fossdyke remained impenetrably deaf to all such hints as these. When his business required him to leave home he went, but never found it incumbent on him to take Mrs. Fossdyke. That estimable woman possessed the advantages of a steely grey eye, an aquiline nose, and much fixity of purpose, but she was fain to admit in moments of confidence that John would have his way in some things, and one of those things was the transacting of business without counsel from his better half. It had taken some time to instil

this into the good lady's mind, for she was by no means diffident concerning her abilities to conduct anything, of any kind, and from laying out a flower-garden to the buying or selling of Egyptians, from the cooking of an omelette to the question of what had become of the lost tribes of Israel, never hesitated to express a decided opinion. About this last question, indeed, she was deliciously feminine and illogical. She said the Jews were unbelievers, and therefore not entitled to credence, consequently there was no real reason to believe that there were any lost tribes, such evidence as there was concerning them being utterly unreliable—an ingenious bit of sophistry more easy to deny than disprove, and which caused Mrs. Fossdyke to be spoken of by the surrounding clergy as a clever woman, but with rather unsound opinions. So John Fossdyke went his way silently and solitarily on these business excursions, while his wife aired her imaginary grievance with much petty

satisfaction. She was not exactly the woman to take a real wrong quietly, and, though she was very far from suspecting it, neither was John Fossdyke the man to put up with anything but absolute submission to his will when the occasion waxed strong enough. People may live a long time together, and while life progresses in the ordinary grooves, form a very mistaken estimate of each other's character. The indolent man thoroughly roused for instance, the dictatorial bully sharply collared, the meek patient woman at last outraged past endurance, or the shrinking shy girl, suddenly called upon to play a heroine's part, constantly astonish those who fancy they know them thoroughly. It is some sudden discovery of this nature, which labelled incompatibility of temper, very often furnishes employment for the divorce court.

Seated in the drawing-room at Dyke, in desultory conversation with Mrs. Fossdyke, was a tall rubicund elderly gentleman, who,

sad to say, was wont to be the cause of some acrimony between the lady and her spouse. Mr. Totterdell, by appearance, should have been devoted solely to his own comfort, the pleasures of the table and port wine. So he was, but he unfortunately conjoined with these tastes a most insatiable curiosity. No child could have been more exacting as to "the why" of this, that, and the other, and his presence on one occasion of the packing of John Fossdyke's portmanteau had driven that gentleman to the verge of madness. He wanted to know why he took dress things with him; why he took shooting boots, when he said he was going to London. Whom did he expect to dine with, &c.? In short, he possessed one of those petty inquiring minds that are very trying to a quick, energetic temper. He was Mrs. Fossdyke's godfather, had made a comfortable bit of money at some business in the city, and had now retired and settled at Baumborough, where his principal

occupation was the supervision of his neighbours' affairs. Notably was he much exercised concerning the goings and comings of John Fossdyke, and that energetic gentleman was the last man in the world to succumb tamely to such supervision of his affairs. What with Mrs. Fossdyke thinking that her advice would be invaluable, and old Mr. Totterdell's doddering curiosity concerning them, there was a good deal of friction in the domestic life of John Fossdyke.

"He's too venturesome, Mary; I've said so all along; he's always starting something new in the town," wheezed old Totterdell from the depths of his easy-chair. "What does he want with all these new notions down here? they are all very well in London, but Baumborough can't support such things. I have heard that a theatre is a profitable speculation in the metropolis, but we don't want one, and what can John know of matters theatrical? Mark me, my dear, I don't want to croak, but your

husband will get into trouble by meddling with matters he don't understand. What is all this business that requires his perpetual absence? Something, Mary, that he knows his old friends would pronounce hazardous if they knew of it. No, no, you ought to exert your influence. A wife should be her husband's confidante."

"It's too true, godpapa, and John makes me miserable by the mystery in which he insists on enshrouding his business transactions."

"Not only those, but I can't understand him at all," returned the old gentleman, fidgeting in his chair, and toying with a heavy pair of double gold eye-glasses. "I have only settled down here about a twelvemonth, and can consequently claim no longer acquaintance with your husband than that; but now who is this companion you have got? Where did she come from? Nothing wrong in it, no doubt, but still where did she come from?"

"How should I know?" rejoined Mrs. Fossdyke. "Miss Hyde's account of herself is plain and straightforward enough. Her people are not rich, and she was tired of living at home. John—and it was kind of him to think of it—thought that it must be dull for me while he was away, and suggested I should have a companion. Miss Hyde answered our advertisement, and here she is."

"And a very nice-looking, lady-like girl she is to look at, I admit; in fact, if anything, perhaps a trifle more good-looking than most ladies would care about as a companion."

"Don't talk nonsense, godfather," retorted Mrs. Fossdyke, sharply. "John has never made me uncomfortable in that way, and Bessie Hyde is no coquette."

"Quite so, my dear; but still, where does she come from?"

"Good gracious, what can it matter? She's a nice lady-like girl, and whether her father is a retired tradesman or a broken-down

professional man is no consequence," and Mrs. Fossdyke's foot tapped the floor with somewhat unnecessary vehemence.

Her godfather's insatiable and absurd curiosity occasionally exasperated Mary Fossdyke, but there were, unfortunately, times when it roused distrust in her surroundings. The old proverb of the Romans tells us that the constant drip wears the stone; the constant friction breaks the spring, the nerves, or the temper, and when once the why of all the actions of those with whom we habitually live becomes matter of inquiry, suspicion must be the inevitable consequence. This was exactly what was gradually arising in Mrs. Fossdyke's mind. She had indulged in natural curiosity concerning the business that took her husband so much from home in the early days of their wedded life, but when also it was made manifest to her that John Fossdyke brooked no inquiries into his business affairs, she, like a sensible woman, made up

her mind to acquiesce in this decision. When he suggested that as they had no children it would be pleasant for her to have a young lady as a companion, Mrs. Fossdyke felt very grateful to her husband for his forethought, and she had found Bessie Hyde as bright, pleasant, and good-tempered as it was possible for a young lady of nineteen to be. Miss Hyde had arrived at Dyke nearly two years before the commencement of the narrative, while Mr. Totterdell had settled in Baumborough some twelve months later. It is necessary to mention these facts to explain the manner in which Mrs. Fossdyke, who was in the main an honest, good-hearted woman, gradually allowed her imagination to be inflamed and her judgment to be perverted by such a cackling curiosity-monger as Mr. Totterdell. That gentleman, since his retirement from business, found time hang heavy on his hands, and endeavoured to lighten it as best he might, by laudable watch over the

concerns of his neighbours. He inflicted a considerable amount of his leisure on his goddaughter, and though Mrs. Fossdyke was by no means enchanted by the attention, she bore with it for prudential reasons. The old man had beyond doubt a considerable sum of money to leave behind him, and Mrs. Fossdyke was about the nearest relative that he had. But the result of Mr. Totterdell's perpetually "wanting to know" had slowly resulted in engendering distrust in Mrs. Fossdyke's mind. She had got used to her husband's constant and at times long absences from home, but Totterdell's perpetual speculation as to what he went about had brought back uncomfortable thoughts to her mind that she had long since done away with; while his perpetually harping upon "where did Miss Hyde come from" was inoculating her with unwarranted suspicions concerning the girl. Mrs. Fossdyke was half ashamed of both these feelings herself, but nevertheless

she could not help showing them to the two people from whom it most behoved her to conceal them—her husband and Bessie. The former resenting all reference to his movements fiercely, speedily discerned who it was that prompted his wife's interrogations, and was rude and curt enough in his remarks to Mr. Totterdell to have banished a more sensitive man from his house; but that old gentleman in his thirst for information was accustomed to encounter rebuff: he was case-hardened, impervious to snubbing, and callous to sarcasm, and short of telling him in plain English that you would have none of him, was no more to be got rid of than Sinbad's "Old man of the sea." To shut your door against your wife's relations requires some justification, and when you belong to the community of a country town, the ordering of your *ménage* is public talk. John Fossdyke, though not a man to be cowed by popular opinion, did see that to close the gate against

Mr. Totterdell would by no means close that garrulous old gentleman's mouth, and as the broadest hints that his company was undesirable had proved useless, had finally elected to bear it as best he might. Still his face darkened a little as he entered the drawing-room and discovered his *bête noir* ensconced in the easiest chair, babbling, as he had little doubt, over his, John Fossdyke's, affairs.

A dark, portly man of florid complexion, scarce a tinge of grey in his black hair, and with an eye keen as a hawk's, John Fossdyke looked what he was — a prosperous man; shrewd, with an air of *bonhommie* that disarmed suspicion. He had a rich mellow voice, could, indeed, troll out songs of the "jolly nose" type in rather superior fashion, an accomplishment that stood him in good stead amongst the farmers of the neighbourhood, who, moreover, liked the jovial attorney none the worse because, if he could snatch a day, he had rather a *penchant* for attending the

local races, and having what he facetiously denominated a few "spangles" on the principal event.

"Good morning, Mr. Totterdell," he said, as he advanced. "What is the best news with you to-day?"

"Dear me, I've heard nothing, positively nothing at all; nor has Mary, she tells me. There must be something new to talk about. What have you heard, my dear friend?"

"I have nothing to tell. I had nothing to do out of the office except attend the meeting about establishing a theatre in Baumborough; of course there are obstacles and there is opposition, there always is. We shall overcome them—people always do who persistently stick to a thing, and I'm a rare sticker."

"But godfather is quite sure a theatre in Baumborough can never pay, John," interposed Mrs. Fossdyke.

"And pray what does Mr. Totterdell know of either theatricals or Baumborough. He has

only been a twelvemonth in the town. I have been fifteen years and more."

"I never heard that you had any experience of theatricals," wheezed Mr. Totterdell.

"I was very fond of them as a young man, and knew a good many theatrical people, and occasionally look in at a theatre now, when business takes me to London," replied Fossdyke, a little tartly.

"Then all I can say, John, it's a great shame that you don't take me with you when you go away, when you know how I enjoy a theatre," chimed in Mrs. Fossdyke.

"Eh! you mixed a good deal with theatrical people in your early days! Now, what made you do that?" inquired Mr. Totterdell, eagerly. . "How did you get thrown amongst them? Tell us that, it will be very interesting."

"I shall not gratify your curiosity in any way," rejoined the solicitor. "I only mentioned it in proof that I had some slight

knowledge of matters theatrical. As for you accompanying me, Mary, on business trips, it is simply impossible. I rarely know when they may take me to London, and I have told you before that you would be only uncomfortable and disappointed."

"I should like to go once though," rejoined Mrs. Fossdyke, like a true daughter of Eve, none of whom would ever flinch from discomfort to see what any man they cared about might be doing under any circumstances.

"Are theatrical people pleasant acquaintances?" inquired Totterdell, who was all alive at the bare idea of getting a little insight into Fossdyke's early life, a subject on which he was singularly reticent; indeed, even his wife knew very little of his career previous to his settling in Baumborough, and it was the knowledge of his goddaughter's ignorance on the point that so whetted the old inquisitor's curiosity.

"Cultivate them and judge for yourself,"

rejoined Fossdyke brusquely, who, though a genial and tolerably good-tempered man, was wont to wax irritable under Mr. Totterdell's endless questions.

"Much doing in the office?" croaked the insufferable one.

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the solicitor. "Whatever may be doing in the office you surely know is not to be talked about. I shall go and look at the roses, Mary. Send and let me know when tea is in."

"It's very odd," remarked Mr. Totterdell, as Fossdyke stepped through the window, "but that is just what Miss Hyde went to do half-an-hour ago. Bad-tempered man your husband, my dear; bad-mannered too, rather," and the old gentleman sunk back in his chair with a benevolent smile on his countenance.

"He's not bad-tempered, godfather," rejoined Mrs. Fossdyke, firing up, and by no means as yet prepared to hear her husband found fault

with by any one but herself. "He can't bear being questioned, and you always irritate him by doing so."

"But, God bless me, how's conversation to be carried on without you ask questions?" rejoined Mr. Totterdell. "I thought he would have been delighted to tell us all about his theatrical life. I dare say he was something in a theatre."

"He was nothing of the kind, and it's downright wicked of you to suggest such a thing," cried Mrs. Fossdyke, indignantly.

John Fossdyke made his way amidst the flower-beds to the further side of the trimly-kept turf, where the grass ceased to be studded with the gay masses of colour, and ran down green and velvety towards a prettily-planned rosary, the denizens of which were now in all the glory of their summer bloom. In their midst a tall, dark-haired maiden, her hands cased in gardening gauntlets and armed with a large pair of scissors, was busy, snipping off

the faded blooms and casting them into a small basket at her feet.

"Hard at work again, tending your favourites, Bessie?" said the lawyer, as he advanced.

"Yes," returned the girl as she welcomed him with a smile, "they are worth taking care of this year. Did you ever see a more magnificent show than they make?—but you are home early to-day."

"There was little business to be done, but old Totterdell cross-examined me out of the house, so here I am. How my wife can endure that garrulous old nuisance I can't imagine. He ought to leave her a good bit of money, and not be long before he does it, I'm sure. Does he ever bother you, Bessie?"

"Yes; he embarrasses me at times. He wants to know so very much about my antecedents; but I usually escape on the plea of seeing about some household duty, and Mrs. Fossdyke is very good, she generally acquiesces and covers my retreat."

"Quite right; whatever you do make no confidant of him. My wife never troubles you in this wise?" inquired the lawyer, burying his hands in his pockets and casting a keen look at the girl.

"Never; Mrs. Fossdyke after the first has never questioned me about my home. But is it not time for tea?"

"I suppose so; and here comes Robert to tell us," and the pair sauntered slowly back to the drawing-room windows.

There was nothing much in this conversation, and yet if Mrs. Fossdyke had heard it she would have decidedly thought there was something in her godfather's suspicions after all. There was no sign of the slightest flirtation between the two, but the few foregoing sentences did rather point to an understanding of some sort between Fossdyke and Miss Hyde. His calling her Bessie was nothing: both he and his wife had commenced doing that before she had been six months under their roof, and

made no disguise that they were very fond of her, and regarded her more in the light of a niece than a dependant. Still it was not difficult to gather from those few words which passed between them in the rosary that John Fossdyke knew more of Miss Hyde's antecedents than that young lady had thought fit to confide to his wife.

And it may here be at once stated, in justice to a very charming girl, that Bessie was no impostor, and that her statement was in the main correct. She had been brought up by her aunt, and had got on very well with her cousins, until she arrived at the age of seventeen, and commenced to mingle in such society as her aunt, the widow of a well-to-do partner in a large silk and millinery establishment at the West End of London, had arrived at. Then her superior attractions and attainments dwarfed the goods her two cousins had to display, and it was the old story of Cinderella and her sisters. They made home uncomfort-

able to her, and she sought to leave it. She had a skeleton of her own in the closet—but there's few of us have not—likely if discovered to prove detrimental to obtaining such a situation as she wished to obtain. It was no great harm, but society has its prejudices, and no country on the face of creation is so miserably cant-ridden as England. She knew John Fossdyke, and consulted him. His answer was prompt and decisive: he knew all about that skeleton.

"Say simply that you were brought up by your aunt, Mrs. Lewisham, and are tired of home. Say nothing about your other relatives, and, above all, never hint that you have any previous knowledge of me, and I will find you a comfortable home in my own house. My wife is a good woman, and will be kind to you, but if she once suspects I have any previous knowledge of you she will want to know the whole particulars, will never rest till she does, and then, poor thing, she has her

prejudices, and, Bessie, I doubt whether she would tolerate you at Dyke."

At first the girl flamed fiercely up at this, but gradually John Fossdyke made her comprehend that, let her seek a situation where she might, it was imperative that skeleton should be kept out of sight.

"It is prejudice and sheer nonsense, child, of course, but we cannot convince people of that. They will not want to see what you are, but will at once decline your application. You may just as well be mute about it in my house as another," and at last Bessie consented, and at the end of two years was fain to confess Dyke was more a home to her than any other place. The Fossdykes treated her precisely as if she was a near relative, and being a handsome, lively, attractive girl, Baumborough generally made a great deal of her. At the time this story commences the Fossdykes very rarely got an invitation in which Miss Hyde was not included.

"Come and pour out the tea, Bessie dear," exclaimed Mrs. Fossdyke, as the girl stepped through the window. "We are quite ready for it."

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting, but there was so much snipping to be done I forgot how late it was getting."

"Anything new this morning in"—Baumborough, Mr. Totterdell was about to ask, but John Fossdyke's darkened face checked him, and turning to Bessie, he concluded his question with "in the rosary?"

"Yes, caterpillars," growled the lawyer.

Bessie bit her lips to control her laughter. Totterdell beamed benevolently, as if it was something even to learn that; while Mrs. Fossdyke frowned meaningly at her husband.

A few minutes later, and Mr. Totterdell rose to take his departure, not influenced in the slightest degree by the undisguised irritability of the master of the house, but simply that no further question occurred to him, indeed

his last, if completed according to his original intention, was a mere repetition. He shook hands affectionately all round, and then rolled out of the room with all the assured manner of a favoured visitor.

"Your godfather, Mary, is getting more unbearable every day," remarked John Fossdyke snappishly, as the door closed behind the old gentleman.

"He is somewhat trying I admit, but we can't well close our door to him; besides, some of these days he will leave something very comfortable behind him; and I don't know how it is, John, but we always seem to be in want of money, considerable though your income must be."

John Fossdyke uttered an impatient pshaw. Even to the wife of his bosom he was extremely reticent about his affairs, but she did know that she brought him a nice bit of money, and that he held the appointment of town clerk, which carried a very handsome salary with it,

then surely his business as a solicitor must be tolerably profitable; yet she knew from practical experience that he always parted with money most grudgingly, and was wont to be querulous even over the household expenses, an eccentric trait this in John Fossdyke's character, men of his genial temperament being usually free-handed, unless compelled to be otherwise from circumstances, and that could hardly be his case.

"By the way, John," said Mrs. Fossdyke, after a slight pause, "godfather told me he had been asked to come forward as a candidate for the municipal council."

"He!" exclaimed her husband. "I trust he won't think of such a thing. He's very unfitted for it. We have a great deal too many fussy, interfering fools there as it is. Besides, it is rather *infra dig* in a man of his position. Mind you impress that upon him."

"I feel sure I couldn't. It was the height of his ambition to achieve that distinction in

London, though he never succeeded. I assure you he is quite keen about it; besides, he has nothing to do, and it will amuse him."

"You won't find him more untractable than some of the others, Mr. Fossdyke," remarked Miss Hyde, "and you know you contrive to have your own way pretty much with the council."

"Nevertheless," he replied decidedly, "I don't want Totterdell there. Remember, Mary, if you can choke him off it, do. You also, Bessie, dissuade him if you have an opportunity. As for me, I shall endeavour to prevent his election."

"Lor'! John, it surely can't matter much to you," exclaimed Mrs. Fossdyke.

"Please do what I ask you. It may be a small matter; but, believe me, I have my reasons for not wishing to see Mr. Totterdell on the council."

CHAPTER II.

PERILS OF THE PARKS.

THE Syringa Music Hall in the City Road was a place of mark known not only to Clerkenwell and Islington, but occasionally visited by adventurous spirits from the West End, whose insatiable thirst to see the last thing in "great and glorious comics," or eminent acrobats, led them to penetrate to distant suburbs. The Syringa had been established about ten years, but in its earlier days had been only a modest concert-room, under the name of Moffat's, where harmony and refreshments were nightly dispensed. Whether Moffat was unequal to the times, failed to discern that mystic problem, "what the public

wanted," or whether Moffat lacked capital, it is impossible to say, but it is certain that Moffat did not flourish. He reduced his vocalists' salaries, whereby the music went from bad to worse ; the quality of his liquors fell off, and his customers also in like proportion ; in short, after sustaining the struggle for five years Moffat was glad to avert bankruptcy by disposing of the whole concern, including the remainder of his lease, to Mr. James Foxborough.

James Foxborough was a man of a very different stamp from the late proprietor. He was a go-a-head, energetic man, with evident command of capital. He knocked the old concert-room down, got possession of an adjoining house or two, and proceeded to build a commodious modern music-hall in its place, which he christened the Syringa. Whereas Moffat's had been comparatively unknown, except to the initiated, gaudy-coloured posters and extensive advertising proclaimed

the birth of the Syringa; star artists were engaged, a capital entertainment organized, the catering carefully looked to, and in less than three months the new music-hall was drawing crowded houses.

Mr. Foxborough might be said to be in the profession. He had married Miss Nydia Willoughby, the celebrated serio-comic vocalist, some twenty years ago, and in the beginning of his career had been chiefly indebted to that lady's earnings for his support; but of late years he had made money, chiefly it was supposed by travelling about the country with theatrical companies. He was an admitted shrewd judge of such things, and was, moreover, presumed to be considerably assisted therein by his wife. Mrs. Foxborough was wont to say, "I don't pretend to be a judge of either the play or the acting, but I know when there's money in a piece, and it is by no means the best plays that bring in the most money." In which assertion the lady was in

all probability right. At all events she managed the Syringa, while her husband was away on his numerous theatrical tours, exceedingly well, was very popular with her company, and sure to note those who "drew" and those who failed to do so; and though she knew well it was her business to get rid of these latter unfortunates as quickly as possible, yet the kind-hearted manageress, when aware that employment was a very serious object for them, on account of the narrowness of their means, would allow them at times to hang on some weeks after their engagement had expired, sooner than turn them adrift with nothing to do.

It was not often that Miss Nydia Willoughby appeared on the stage herself now-a-days. It was not that her voice was gone at all, far from it; perhaps it was as good as ever it had been, the result of not being unduly worked. If her figure was a little fuller and more matronly than in her younger days, she

was still a tall, handsome woman, verging on forty it might be, but with not a thread of silver in the rich chestnut hair, while the dark blue eyes flashed as brightly and archly as when they had riddled the heart of Jim Foxborough years ago; but Miss Willoughby thought it judicious not to give the frequenters of the Syringa too much of herself. She always got an immense reception when she did sing, which she dearly loved, for she was clever in her line and very popular with the public, and she had sense enough to know that if she was continually in the programme her welcome could hardly be expected to be so enthusiastic. She was a brave, plucky woman, who had had a hard struggle with the world in her younger days, and had battled it out, neither flinching nor complaining. Now things were easy for her, and she had leisure to enjoy life, and was never so happy as when she had her vagrant husband at home for a little between his tours.

Mrs. Foxborough dearly loved her husband and Nid. Nid was their only daughter, a sweetly pretty girl of sixteen, with her mother's chestnut hair and deep blue eyes, but with no promise of ever attaining her mother's stature. She was a bright, piquant little thing, with rather irregular features, but with a charming smile and most beautiful teeth. She had been highly educated, especially in music, for money had been tolerably plentiful ever since Nid had been of age to require masters, indeed the hard times of her parents' early career had been over before Nid was old enough to understand such things. She had a dim recollection of living in somewhat poky lodgings, compared with the pretty cottage standing in its own garden on the north-east side of the Regent's Park which they now occupied, but she could only just call to mind the time when her mother had no brougham of her own, but had to go about in cabs. The little lady, indeed, had

been brought up, if not in luxury, at all events in easy circumstances, and had acquired a somewhat contemptuous estimate of the value of money.

She was seated now, coiled up in a big easy-chair, in the drawing-room of the cottage, talking in animated fashion and with very flushed face to her mother.

"Yes, mamma, quite an adventure, I assure you. I was just entering the Park at the upper end, one of the side gates not far from the Zoological Gardens, you know, when a rough-looking man accosted me, and asked me to give him something. I glanced round in hopes of seeing some one, but, as far as I could see, there was nobody in sight. I hurried on, but he easily kept alongside of me, and I suppose it quickly dawned upon him also that he had got me all to himself. Suddenly he changed his tone, and exclaimed gruffly, 'If young women like you ain't larnt to be charitable it's about time they wos taught. Do you

know, miss, it's the tiptoppedest of all the virtues—leastways that's what the chaplain taught us in Millbank, so tip us that purse I see in your hand—quick, or I'll twist your blessed little head off.' Oh, mamma, I could have dropped, and mechanically held out my purse to him. 'This is a somewhat hasty conwersion,' he continued, as he pocketed it, 'but a well-educated young woman like you don't require to be reminded that "He who giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord," and so off with that necklace and those bracelets, and look sharp, for if I have to help you I shall, perhaps, turn out a roughish lady's-maid.' This so frightened me, mamma, my hands trembled to that extent that I could not undo the clasp of the necklet. The man got impatient and suddenly seized hold of me and wrenched it from my neck. Up to this I had been paralyzed with fear, but now I screamed in downright earnest. 'Stow that,' exclaimed the man fiercely, 'or I'll strangle you. Come,

off with the bangles, quick, or I shall have to assist you again.' I unclasped one bracelet, and then my legs fairly failed to sustain me, and I sank half fainting to the ground. The ruffian uttered a savage oath, and advanced towards me. Suddenly I heard a quick step on the grass; a man with a white hat dashed at my assailant, who had barely time to confront the new-comer. There was a quick interchange of blows. I saw my footpad acquaintance drop as if shot, and then I fainted."

"My darling, you must never go out again in that way by yourself," said Mrs. Foxborough, as she came across from her own seat to fondle the little chestnut head in the armchair.

"Nobody ever was rude to me in the park before, mamma, and you know I have been there by myself over and over again."

"Yes, dear, but this shows it is insufficiently policed. When your papa comes back we must get him to see the authorities about it.

It is monstrous that a young lady living near the Regent's Park should not be able to walk in it unattended. But let me hear the end of your adventure, Nid, as I have got you here safe and sound I can afford to listen to it."

"Well, when I came to, I found the gentleman with the white hat supporting me, and dabbing my face with a wet handkerchief, which he kept damping from a watering-pot held by a park-keeper. I came round pretty quick then, mamma, as you may imagine. If finding herself in a strange gentleman's arms, while her face is being dabbed in a most uncomfortable and manlike fashion, with a park-keeper superintending the operation, isn't enough to bring any girl to, I don't know what is. Anyhow, I gave a gulp or two, got on my legs, shaking as they were, and asked for some water to drink. He of the white hat and the park-keeper looked helplessly at each other for a moment or two—it was obvious I

couldn't drink out of the watering-pot, and then my preserver started the park-keeper off for a jug and a tumbler. I felt so damp that I half suspect they had used the watering-pot and treated me as if I were a geranium while I was unconscious.

"'I am afraid you have been terribly frightened,' he said quietly, 'but I trust are not hurt. I was unluckily a little late in coming to your assistance, though I assure you I came as soon as I heard your screams, and as quickly as I could—any one naturally would. Has the ruffian robbed you of anything? I found the bracelet on the grass, but you may have lost more.'

"'He has got my purse and my necklet,' I stammered, 'but don't, please, don't trouble. I can't thank you now, I am too nervous, but you have been very good—and—and I'm very much obliged.' It was tame, mamma, I know, but I really was all abroad, and could not do the thing prettily.

"'I'm sorry about the purse, and also that the scoundrel has got away, but though I knocked him down very clean,' rejoined my hero, 'he was on his legs and making marvellously good use of them in a twinkling. I thought of giving chase for a moment, but I couldn't leave you here insensible.'

"'It would have been very inhuman if you had,' I answered with a gulp, for I could hardly repress a slight tendency to hysterics."

"I should think not, darling," said her mother, softly, as she bent over the girl, fondling her.

"'The scoundrel will probably get off,' continued my friend, 'and you will probably never see his face again. But there is one consolation for you—had he been apprehended you would have had to appear against him at the police court, and that is not very nice for a young lady.'

"'I would rather lose ten purses,' I replied, hastily.

"'That depends a little on what is in them,' rejoined my new friend, laughing. 'But are you well enough to think of going home yet? Ah, here comes the park-keeper with the water.'

"Well, I drank some water, and he escorted me to the outside of the park, and walked with me till we met a cab. Then he put me into it, asked where he should tell the man to drive to, hoped I should soon recover from my fright, and lifted his hat in farewell. He was very nice, mamma."

"And I suppose very good-looking, Nid—the heroes of little romances like yours always are," replied her mother, laughing.

"Well, that is just what I don't think he is. I can't say I ever had a really good look at him. I was so frightened, and it was so awkward, you know, but I should call him a tall, red-headed man. He was thoughtful, too, to the last, for he checked the cabman a minute just as I was going off, and leaning forward said, 'Do not think me obtrusive,

but remember you have lost your purse; can I be of any further use?' Of course I thanked him and said no."

"I suppose he is a young man?" said Mrs. Foxborough, interrogatively.

"I hardly know—not very young, certainly; but, mamma, the more I think about it, the more convinced I am he is ugly."

"Ah, well, my dear, I don't suppose we shall see him again, though I own I *should* like to thank him for his kindness to my little girl," said Mrs. Foxborough, as she stroked the girl's chestnut locks.

"Perhaps not," replied Nid; but in her own mind she felt pretty certain that she should see her red-haired, white-hatted acquaintance before long. And the girl was correct in her surmise, for the very next morning the trim parlour-maid brought in a card, on which was inscribed "Mr. Herbert Morant, 6, Morpeth Terrace."

"Please, ma'am, the gentleman wants to

know if you will see him, as he has recovered Miss Nydia's necklace which the thief stole yesterday."

"Certainly; show him in, Ellen, and let Miss Nydia know he's here," and Mrs. Foxborough, with no little curiosity, awaited the appearance of the hero of yesterday's adventure.

He speedily made his appearance, a tall, gentlemanly-looking man, with hair, though not glaringly red, still of a most decidedly warm-coloured tint, clean-shaved all but a trim moustache, a quiet mobile face, with a pair of bold keen eyes that met your own without a blink or a droop in them.

"Mrs. Foxborough, I presume," he said, with an easy smile. "It was my good fortune yesterday to render your daughter some slight service, and though I should hardly have ventured to intrude upon you on such grounds, yet it is incumbent on me to restore this to her" (here he produced the necklet), "and I

could not resist the temptation of doing so in person in order that I might inquire if she is really none the worse for the rascally attack made upon her."

"It is very kind of you to take so much trouble," rejoined Mrs. Foxborough, "and the more so because it enables me to thank you and express my gratitude for your protection of my daughter. I do thank you from the bottom of my heart," continued the lady, extending her hand; "but for you there is no saying how far that brute's ill-treatment of her might have been carried; and she is very, very dear to me, Mr. Morant, as you will understand when you know us better."

"I don't think I need see much of you to understand that," said the young man, with a frank smile, for though he might not be young, from Nid's point of view, he lacked a year or two of thirty. "I ought to tell you, Mrs. Foxborough, who and what I am; but that is just what is rather difficult to convey

to you. It is much easier to tell you what I'm not. I am neither barrister, doctor, soldier, sailor, in short, I am nothing. I am that anomaly known as a gentleman of independent means, which might be translated in this wise—I have sufficient money to dispense with working for my living, and yet not enough to do what I want. Then why don't I work, you will of course ask, like every one else; to which I reply, I am just about to begin. I have been about to begin now," he added, ruefully, "about six years, but somehow I don't seem to get any nearer to it."

Mrs. Foxborough could not help laughing. "An extraordinarily frank, open-minded young gentleman, this," she thought; and yet this guileless young man was even now practising a slight deception on her. The necklet which he had called to restore he had picked up at the same time as the bracelet, but he had been so struck with Nid's beauty that he had quietly put it in his pocket so that it

might serve as an excuse for calling upon that young lady.

"Forgive me," he said, after a slight pause, "but I am haunted with the idea that we have met before."

"I think not," she replied, "although it is very likely that you have seen me. I am a professional, you know, and that you have heard Miss Nydia Willoughby sing is very possible—that is my stage name."

"Of course; how very dull of me! I have heard you with great pleasure many times, but it did not, as you may suppose, occur to me to connect Miss Willoughby with Mrs. Foxborough, and so I was at fault."

"My husband is the proprietor of the Syringa, Mr. Morant, and as he has to be a good deal away conducting country companies, I am usually manageress. But here comes Nydia to thank you in her own proper person."

Very pretty the girl looked as she once more

blushingly expressed her gratitude. "Ah, Mr. Morant," she said, "I am so glad you have come to see us. Mamma can say for me all I am too foolish to say for myself. I am sure she has thanked you properly for coming to my rescue yesterday."

Mr. Herbert Morant was as self-possessed a young gentleman as there was about town, but even he was a little taken aback by the expression of Nid's gratitude; there was a tremour in her voice, and the tears stood in her eyes as she gave him her hand and uttered the above speech. The girl's nervous system had received a shock from the fright, and, as is often the case, she felt it more the day following the occurrence than at the time. She had told her mother her rescuer was not good-looking; but he was her hero all the same, though an ugly one. Her girlish imagination had magnified the exploit considerably. It may be no great feat to knock a cowardly scoundrel down, but a woman feels great

gratitude to the man who does that for her in her hour of need. To an athlete like Morant, who had been in his college Eight, been one of the best racquet players in the University, and had always enjoyed the reputation of being very smart with the gloves, it appeared a very small matter; but Nid viewed it in a very different light.

"You are making much of a trifle," he rejoined gaily at last. "You don't know what relief it is catching a fellow to knock down occasionally—an impudent rough, or something of that kind—quite an outlet to the suppressed energy of my nature. I am afraid I shall recover no more of your properties, and that you must be content to suffer the loss of your purse."

"We dine what no doubt you will call very early, Mr. Morant. It was a necessity of my vocation at one time, and has now become habit with me. If you will take us as you find us, we shall be very glad if you will join

us and accompany us to the Syringa afterwards. I must go there to-night to keep my eye on things."

The genial, off-hand manner in which the invitation was given would have impelled most men to accept it, and Herbert Morant closed at once with the offer. Mrs. Foxborough had no reason to mistrust her *ménage*, nor could any one reasonably have complained of the neat little dinner her cook served up. Mr. Morant, at all events, was perfectly satisfied with this the immediate result of his adventure. His hostess could be excessively pleasant when she liked, and upon this occasion it pleased her to be so. Not only was she under some obligation to the young man, but his quiet, easy assurance, without a particle of either swagger or affectation, amused her. Herbert Morant, indeed, with his perfectly unconscious manner, could perpetrate in society without giving offence what would have been deemed impertinence in another. This, though

in some measure the result of manner at first, was to some extent a matter of calculation now. He was licensed in his own set to do cool things, and he did them. Society as usual, when two or three of its leaders have accepted eccentricities from any one, followed suit, and it was "only Herbert Morant's way" was the conventional explanation of anything that gentleman might choose to do. He was careful not to abuse the privilege he had somehow acquired, and if he did cool things he took care they should never be offensive. In fact, he was a very popular man, and his table in Morpeth Terrace was usually pretty well covered with cards of invitation. The talking at dinner was chiefly done by Mrs. Foxborough and her guest. She was a quiet, clever woman, and though she knew but little of his world, she contrived that the conversation should turn mostly in that direction. She was much more *au fait* of what was going on in London generally than most of her class,

whose knowledge and interest are usually confined exclusively to the doings of the profession in its various branches. He was candour itself. He made no secret of his position in any way; he owned that his means were very moderate, that he was a great fool not to follow a profession or business of some sort, but said gravely that he never could quite make up his mind whether to make profit out of people's litigious tempers, their ailments, their spiritual necessities, or their credulity. The result was that he had embarked in no calling whatever, and was still considering how to make that fortune which he declared would require no consideration about spending.

"Now what do you think, Mrs. Foxborough? What should you recommend me to turn my ever-wandering attention to? I've implicit belief in myself in any capacity, and that, as a rule, usually insures the belief of the public."

"Upon my word, I cannot say," laughed the lady. "In my case I only know belief in

oneself is by no means so readily reciprocated by the public, otherwise there are ladies I have met with who would occupy a very different position on the stage, oh! yes, and men too. Vanity is no specialty of our sex."

"No, I quite agree with you there. A woman is apt to be vain of her appearance, but, bless you, there's no end to *our* conceits. Our good looks, our talents, accomplishments, meaning a capacity for lawn tennis and valsing. I know one man who is vain about his collars, and another who piques himself on his boots. Oh! no, Mrs. Foxborough, you can't give us points about that."

"I am glad you admit it, for, honestly, in my profession I declare there is not a pin to choose about vanity between the sexes, nor about jealousy neither."

"Yes," rejoined Morant, "I have always understood theatrical people were very sensitive to criticism on their efforts, but it has never been my good fortune to encounter them

before to-night," and here he bent his head laughingly to his hostess. "Do you mean to enter the profession, Miss Foxborough?"

"Oh! that is still in the same category as your own start in life, Mr. Morant—not yet decided."

"Nid can do just as she likes," interposed her mother. "She has no need to go on the stage, as I had, nor is she ever likely to have; but if she does, I insist on the legitimate theatre, my dear. I'll not have you in the music-hall business. I was glad to take an opening where I could, and when my chance of an engagement for a regular theatre came, found that I could command a much higher salary where I was. We can always find an opening for you if you wish to try the boards, and then, dear child, you can give it up if you don't like it. And now, Mr. Morant, we will leave you to your coffee and cigarette for ten minutes, while we get our hats on, and then it will be time to go down to the Syringa

Come, Nid," and the two ladies left the room.

"Well," muttered Mr. Morant, as he lazily inhaled his cigarette, "I have been some years making up my mind with regard to a profession, but it strikes me that the stage is about my form. Deuced nice little dinner. I'd like to be insured champagne as good all the year round, and, by Jove, what a charming woman the mother is; and as for the daughter, she is simply lovely. Bless my soul, if knocking down roughs is going to lead to this sort of thing only once in six times, I'll go into the business heavily. It is so easy, so simple—a brute of that sort, when you once get in a real straight one, has always had enough — he's always a cur. Upon my soul, I think Nid Foxborough is the sweetest girl I ever set eyes on. Rather fun this going down to the Syringa protected by authorities," and here his meditations were cut short by the opening of the door, and an intimation from the parlour-maid

that the brougham was at the door. He threw the fragment of his cigarette into the empty grate, and proceeding to the hall, found the ladies, hatted and shawled, awaiting him. Trust I haven't hurried you," exclaimed Mrs. Foxborough, "but you must bear in mind that it is business with me. I shall send you to my box when we get there, and leave you and Nid to amuse each other while I am engaged in my own room with various people."

Now, though Mr. Morant knew the Syringa very well by name, he had never been there. He had heard it mentioned at times by some of the fastest of his acquaintance, young men who were perpetually ransacking the town in pursuit of novelty, as a fine music-hall, but he had expected to see a very much rougher place, and was quite unprepared for the gorgeously decorated and spacious theatre the place really was, for the Syringa rejoiced in a large stage and elaborate scenery, and as nearly enacted stage plays as it dared to do; indeed, Mr.

Foxborough had for the last twelve months been thinking seriously about applying for a license and turning it into a *bonâ fide* theatre. But then, as his wife urged, there was a risk about this — the place was a very paying, thriving concern as it was; turn it into a theatre, and it might cease to be so, and nobody knew better the marvellous uncertainty that characterizes matters theatrical than Jim Foxborough.

Seated in an extremely well-fitted stage-box, looking lazily on at a ballet, as well mounted as could be seen at any West-end theatre, and *tête-à-tête* with his pretty companion, Herbert Morant felt that he had indeed fallen on his legs, and that his interposition in favour of injured innocence was bountifully rewarded. "If those knights of the Round Table got half such payment in kind, Miss Foxborough, as you and your mother have bestowed upon me this evening, I don't give them much credit for riding up and down to right wronged maidens."

"I suppose the damsels they rescued ministered to their wants," replied Nid, "though perhaps they did not comprise cigarettes and music-halls."

"Hush, Miss Foxborough; you must not speak lightly of the laureate."

"Oh dear! Who commenced, I should like to know? Yesterday when I was frightened I could have given you my glove to wear in your helm—that is, hat—if you had asked for it."

"And suppose I asked for it now?"

"Oh, you wouldn't; look, it has eight buttons," rejoined Nid in a tone of mock pathos that augured well for her success on the stage.

"Oh, and you don't bestow gloves on your champions with over two. Is that so?"

Nid nodded. "Queen Guinevere and her ladies, I believe, only bestowed mittens, and those woollen ones. I don't believe much in those old chivalry myths."

"What a shocking little pagan you are," replied Morant, laughing. "Your opinions would be scouted in society, where we believe in old pictures, old furniture, old books, old china, in short, everything that savours of antiquity. Have you a fancy for going on the stage?"

"Yes, I should like to test my abilities in that way. What ambitious girl, brought up as I have been, would not? I don't mean in this sort of theatre; but where does a woman find the world so immediately at her feet as a successful actress? The sovereignty of the queen of the stage is, according to the little I know, more gratifying to the vanity of a woman than that of the real queens of the world."

Herbert Morant stared amazed. How could this child of sixteen have arrived at this worldly knowledge?

At last he said,

"These, Miss Foxborough, are not your

own thoughts. You are quoting your mother, surely."

"No! but you are right, those are not my own ideas; they are my father's. I have heard him talk on the subject so often I am scarcé likely to forget his arguments. Still, though I know it would please him to see me a great success on the stage, yet I know I can do just as I like about it."

"And you mean to try it?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. Of course, I have been to a great extent trained for it. A pity so much good instruction should be thrown away, don't you think so?" said Nid, with an interrogative upraising of her pretty brows.

"It is not for me to advise, but it struck me, Mrs. Foxborough did not much favour the idea," replied Morant; "but surely there is somebody bowing to you," and he called Nid's attention to a gentleman in the stalls, who was evidently striving to attract her attention.

"Mr. Cudemore," said the girl quietly, as she acknowledged his bow, "he is a friend of papa's. I don't quite know what he is, but either a theatrical agent or provincial manager, or something of that kind."

A dark, slight, wiry man, with a decidedly Jewish cast of countenance, Mr. Cudemore was somewhat striking-looking, and that was probably the reason why he had attracted Morant's attention. It was not that he was remarkably ugly, far from it—he was rather the reverse; but the keen, dark eyes, the slightly curved nose, and the thin compressed lips, gave a cruel, hawk-like expression to his countenance. He showed very white, regular teeth when he smiled, and he was both lavish of smiles, and amazingly silky in manner, but a physiognomist would have suspected a touch of the tiger under all this purring, and been quite prepared to find him cruel, rapacious, and vindictive, and they would have been right. Clever and unscrupulous, he lived upon

the weaknesses of his fellow-creatures, and had derived much profit from theatrical speculations. His plan was to advance money to people desirous of opening theatres; he would accommodate rising actors or dramatists, but the borrowers invariably found the bond carried terrible interest, and that Cudemore exacted it to the uttermost farthing, while as a rule he took very good care to protect himself against much possibility of loss. In short, the man, though he usually termed himself a theatrical agent, was in reality a theatrical money-lender, and many a successful artist had groaned for some years under the lien Mr. Cudemore held over his salary, obtained before he had made a name, and when money was hard to come by, as it is usually in our early days, let our calling be what it may. A man this destined to have much influence on the lives of the pair now looking so nonchalantly at him from that stage-box at the Syringa.

However, Herbert Morant troubled himself but little about Mr. Cudemore just then. Turning to his companion, "Do you come here very often?" he asked.

"No; nor does mamma either. She only comes about twice a week, except when she is in the bill: then she comes every night, and I come very often. I like to hear her sing, and I love to see the reception she gets. She is a great favourite, Mr. Morant."

"I know she is, for though I never was here before, I have heard her elsewhere. What a very fine hall it is!"

"Is it not? and it's all papa's doing," rejoined Nid, with some little justifiable pride.

At this moment Mrs. Foxborough entered the box.

"Well, Mr. Morant, I trust you have been fairly amused. These trapeze people are clever, are they not? As soon as they are finished I think, Nid, we will be off. I should like to get away before the crowd

comes out, and the brougham is at the stage door.

"I am quite ready, mamma," replied the girl, rising.

"Come, then. Good night, Mr. Morant."

But Herbert Morant insisted on seeing the ladies to their carriage, and when they shook hands Mrs. Foxborough said they should always be glad to see him at Tapton Cottage, and Nid smiled an endorsement of the invitation.

CHAPTER III.

THE BAUMBOROUGH PARLIAMENT.

THERE were days lang syne when the Municipal Council of Baumborough had droned and dozed and wrangled over paving and lighting rates, but such debating as that had been long relegated to the past, and discussion now was as lively, acrimonious, and personal as it is apt to be at St. Stephen's. The member for Pickleton Ward would express his opinion of "the little job"; the member for the Stannagate was seeking to impose upon the Council in terms more forcible than polite. The member for the Stannagate might have no motive of the kind in the matter he wished to carry, but

the member for Pickleton Ward had determined to denounce it as a job, as giving more scope for that fiery and scathing eloquence which he was conscious of possessing. Local politics ran high in Baumborough, and its citizens, marching with the times, had of late years found their tongues, and were enamoured of the sound of their own sweet voices. Some of the seniors were wont to recall times when there was considerably less verbiage about their proceedings, and considerably more business got through at a sitting, and to hint that all these formalities had come into vogue with the present Town Clerk; for there was no denying now that the Baumborough Municipal Council imitated the great Legislative Council of the nation as closely as might be, and members were constantly moving and dividing over amendments, and indulging in vituperation and motions for adjournment, and, in fact, shewed a happy appetite for the science of obstruction

as invented by their betters, most creditable to their intelligence. Whatever they might have done in former days, nobody could say proposed changes or improvements were not amply ventilated now; the erection of an additional lamp-post or a new pump constituting quite sufficient matter for floods of speechifying and much patriotic invective.

That such a scheme as the building of a theatre should occasion much commotion and stormy debate amid an excitable body like the Town Council of Baumborough may easily be imagined; not a city father of the lot but had much to say both for or against the affair, and seemed most determinedly bent, too, upon saying it; and the less he knew of the subject the more he seemed to have to say. The Parliament was about equally divided concerning it. While the member for the Stannagate pronounced that it would afford much intellectual pleasure to the inhabitants of Baumborough and its neighbour-

hood, besides being a steady, if modest, augmentation of revenue, the member for Pickleton Ward denounced the whole thing as the most bare-faced, flagrant piece of jobbery that had occurred within his memory. It was not wanted, it could never be made to pay, it would require an additional rate, and a very heavy rate too, to sustain this white elephant that some weak-minded members had been gulled into giving their support to. The day on which the decision was to be finally arrived at had at last come, and it was known that both parties meant to put forth all their strength, and it was announced that Mr. Stanger, the member for Pickleton Ward, would come out uncommonly strong, and deliver a regular flagellation to the unfortunate Brocklebank, the member for the Stannagate, the leading supporter of the scheme; for in his position as Town Clerk, John Fossdyke took care never to lead the movement of which he was the inspiration;

he pulled the strings, had much to say to the ultimate vote, spoke sparingly, and gave the leader he selected his brief on these occasions; but he kept himself far more in the background than his real power and position warranted. The consequence of this was that the majority of the Council had no idea of how very much he had to say to the decisions they came to.

Mr. Fossdyke was there to-day, calmly prepared for the battle. He had his plans and estimates all ready to lay before the Council; had conferred long and earnestly with Mr. Brocklebank, whom he had selected to bring the scheme forward; and, as he told his friend Doctor Ingleby, was determined to carry his point.

"I am not quite clear that Baumborough wants a theatre," rejoined the doctor; "and I don't suppose Baumborough can tell till it's got one. It's the old story of Sam Slick. People can get along without a clock who've

never had one, but let them once get used to having one in the house, and they can't do without it. Of course I shall back you, but it will be a close fight."

"It will be a fight, but I shall win, and if I don't win this time I shall fight it over and over again until I do succeed," said Mr. Fossdyke.

The meeting commenced, and the Town Clerk, having briefly observed that he had procured the plan and estimates for the building in accordance with the directions given him by the Council at their last meeting, placed them on the table and sat down. In an instant Mr. Brocklebank was on his feet, and commenced a flowery speech, in which all the cut-and-dried arguments in favour of the stage were recapitulated —"how it held the mirror of truth and nature up to mankind, and in depicting the consequences of yielding to unbridled passions it preached as impressive a warning as could

be delivered from the pulpit; how it afforded elevated and intellectual amusement, which tended to make men, ay, and women too, better and wiser; how that in thus interesting the lower classes you were weaning them from the public-houses, and awaking them, if he might be allowed to say so, to a higher intelligence. Should a town like Baumborough, the rapid increase of which was one of the many marvels of our great and glorious country, be the only town of similar population without a Thespian Temple? Gentlemen," continued the orator, warming to his work, "the theatre has been a prominent feature in all great civilizations. Any Roman town of the slightest importance boasted its theatre. *Panem et circenses* was the universal cry of that turbulent capital—that grand people, gentlemen, holding that the intellectual food of the play-house was as necessary as the very staple of life itself. (Hear, hear, and cheers from the Brocklebank

faction, mingled with an ironical 'Oh, oh,' from Mr. Stanger.) Commercially, there can be no doubt about its being a great success. Mr. Fossdyke proposes that we should borrow six thousand pounds on the security of our rates, with which to erect and decorate the building, and the estimate, as you see, is well inside that. The corner of the Market-place, which he has selected as a site, is already the property of the town. We shall have no difficulty in borrowing the sum at a trifle over four per cent., or, I am assured, in letting the theatre at a rent that will return us six per cent. for our money. If at the expiration of three years the theatre is the great success which I have no doubt it will be, we may look forward to raising the rent, or undertaking the concern ourselves; in the first case, it may be safely assumed we shall turn ten per cent. on our capital, and in the latter, that is, if we elect to take the thing into our own hands, twenty. The arguments I

have laid before you, gentlemen, are in my opinion conclusive as an improvement to the town, as a vehicle of culture, or as a mere commercial speculation, it is incumbent on Baumborough to have a theatre" (an audible bosh! from Mr. Stanger); "and in conclusion, I might add that nobody is more likely to be extensively benefited by it than the member for Pickleton Ward, the elevation of whose English is much to be desired."

"I said bosh, sir," exclaimed Mr. Stanger, springing angrily to his feet. "I believe that to be a good dictionary word, and eminently descriptive of the farrago of nonsense to which we have just listened."

Cries of "Order" and "gutter English" from Mr. Brocklebank.

"Mr. Mayor," continued the now thoroughly exasperated Stanger, "I venture to request the attention of the honourable gentlemen present for a few minutes while I expose the tissue of lies" (cries of "Order, order"),

"I mean to say, sir, fallacies that the member for Stannagate has just spoken. To begin with, he talks the usual 'bosh'—I repeat 'bosh'; it may be gutter English, but it is tolerably well understood English—about the elevation of the masses, culture, &c. But, sir, a theatre means simply a show that will pay; and a manager that knows his work gives the public what pulls 'em in and draws their money. As for preaching an impressive lesson, an improving lesson, I have always been given to understand the play of 'Jack Sheppard' induced many youths to take up burglary as a trade." ("Monstrous, ridiculous, absurd," from Mr. Brocklebank.) "If ridiculous, why did the Lord Chamberlain prohibit the piece? Answer me that!" and Mr. Stanger brought his fist down on the table with a vehemence that made the inkstands dance. "I believe 'George Barnwell' had no salutary effect, and that 'Dick Turpin' was demoralizing" ("Pooh, a mere circus piece," from the

Brocklebank faction); "and who, I ask, gentlemen, is to guarantee this theatre won't be a circus? Drury Lane has been a circus," and once more the inkstands jigged in response to Mr. Stanger's fist. "Commercially, I tell you, the whole affair is a sham. The town can't support a theatre, and it will never return the bare interest on the original debt, let alone a profit. And now, gentlemen, I come to the windiest part of this very windy gentleman's speech. He has favoured us with some classical reminiscences. I had not the good fortune of a university education, which he doubtless had." (Ironical cheers from the Stanger party, who were well aware the member for Stannagate got his education at Baumborough Grammar School.) "I can't quote Latin like my gifted friend, but am free to confess that, as far as I recollect, the old Roman mob war-cry he quoted might be freely translated prog and circuses. Gentlemen, do you contemplate

keeping your poor in idleness and running this theatre for their amusement, or do you not? If you don't I move, as an amendment to the motion of the member for Stannagate, that it be consigned to the like obscurity from which its proposer sprung."

Shouts of "Order, order," "Go on," "Hooray," and excuses, &c.

"Mr. Mayor," stuttered Brocklebank, purple with wrath, and rising to his feet, "I protest——"

"Spoke, spoke, divide, divide," chorussed the meeting generally.

"Mr. Mayor," suddenly exclaimed Dr. Ingleby, in those quiet, resonant, even tones, to which the turbulent meeting were well accustomed, "divested of acrimony and embellishments, this question seems to me to be in a nutshell—first, does Baumborough require a theatre, or does it not? In my humble opinion, it ought to have one. Secondly, can the Municipal Council supply

that requirement? to which again I answer decidedly. I fancy the concern will always return a fair interest for our outlay, and we don't look to more on improvements;" and here the doctor dropped quietly back into his seat.

"I have only one word to add," observed John Fossdyke, rising in his turn, "and that is to thoroughly endorse all my friend Dr. Ingleby has said, with this slight addenda, that I firmly believe it will be speedily found to prove a most paying investment."

"Might I ask, sir," inquired Mr. Totterdell (he had carried his point and achieved a seat on the Council), "whether Mr. Fossdyke has any previous experience of theatrical matters to warrant our belief in his opinion?"

The Town Clerk's brow darkened, but he remained mute to the appeal.

"The question seems to me out of order," said the Mayor, "unless Mr. Fossdyke wishes to explain himself upon that point."

"I never give explanation to impertinent curiosity," rejoined the Town Clerk, curtly.

"I think, gentlemen, the sooner we come to a decision the better," said the Mayor; "there seems to be a bitterness imported into the question which I am at a loss to account for."

A good stock speech this of the Mayor's, and one which he had occasion to deliver on most occasions, inasmuch as discussion in the parliament of Baumborough meant, to its councillors generally, the releasing of much bile and personality, and the present meeting would have been characterized by its members as lively, but kept well within the bounds of decorum; and now came the decision—a close thing, as Dr. Ingleby had predicted, but the Brocklebank party were successful, and the building of a theatre was carried.

Very jubilant looked John Fossdyke as he rose in response to the Mayor's invitation to enter into the details of how he proposed to

raise the funds for the carrying out of his new hobby, for that this was a hobby of the Town Clerk's was well known to every man in the room. Men are wont to look exultant when they carry their point, and yet there are often times when defeat would profit them more. Victory has wrecked many a throne and many a ministry; it is not sometimes till the battle is over that we find out what success has cost us, and the sight of the bill makes men ofttimes curse the hour they threw themselves into the fray. Triumphant is John Fossdyke just now, but he little dreams how speedily his account will be submitted to him for settlement.

He rises jauntily, and explains that for a prosperous town like Baumborough, with no liabilities worth mentioning, to borrow money on its rates at very moderate interest is the simplest and easiest of financial operations. He himself can, without difficulty, in the course of a few days, find people who will

gladly advance the money required at four, or, at the outside, four and a half per cent.; indeed, he observes, the sole delay about the business will be occasioned—and here John Fossdyke favours the meeting with a jocular smile—in the haggling over the interest. "In short, gentlemen, it will probably take a few days for us to argue out a matter of £30 or so, and I think you may depend upon my attending carefully to your interests."

"But, Mr. Mayor, I would respectfully ask to submit one question to the meeting," bleated Mr. Totterdell. "I see by the half-yearly reports we have a sum of £5,400 lying at mortgage at four and a-half per cent. on those new buildings connected with the railway. Would it not be more advisable to call that in than to borrow money?"

"Yes, Mr. Totterdell, that is quite a subject for the consideration of the meeting. Perhaps it *would* be better to invest that money in a theatre than to raise money for the purpose."

Again did John Fossdyke's brow darken as, with some little irritation palpable in his tones, he replied that notice had to be given about the calling in of mortgages, and that implied time. It was impossible that money could be available for some months, and he trusted now the theatre was decided upon, that it would be built and open ere that. He was an advocate for carrying things out at once, and not being a year before a resolution was acted on. Now all this was nothing to the member for Pickleton Ward; but Mr. Stanger, always restless and irritable under defeat, thought he saw some possibility of annoying his opponents, at all events John Fossdyke, by advocating Mr. Totterdell's proposal. He was on his legs in an instant.

"If," he said, "a mortgage requires notice to call in, a theatre requires time to build, nor is it customary to pay the contractor till the contract is completed. The contractor may demand an advance on work done, no

doubt, but our credit is good enough with the local banks for such short accommodation as that implies. I most emphatically support Mr. Totterdell's suggestion, and beg that he will make a motion to that effect."

"Would Mr. Totterdell make a motion?" Would he not—or half-a-dozen of them at the slightest encouragement. He got rosy red with excitement; he fussed and plumed himself like the elderly turkey-cock he was, and he gobble, gobble, gobbled, and clucked as he got up to put his first resolution to the Council. This was the dream of his life, and he felt at last he was a factor in the government of his country. Baumborough might rejoice in a caucus some day, and he be the manipulator of it. Who could tell? In the mean time no neophyte at St. Stephen's, whose maiden speech had the approbation of the Prime Minister, could have felt more thoroughly devoted to the man who had fully recognized his ability. Henceforth Mr.

Totterdell was bound to the wheels of Mr. Stanger's chariot, and would throw in his lot with that gentleman.

There was much desultory discussion about Mr. Totterdell's motion; and although, as far as he dared put himself forward, John Fossdyke strongly opposed it, neither Brocklebank nor his friends could see the slightest objection to such an arrangement, and it was consequently carried by a considerable majority. There were two men who walked away from the meeting of the Baumborough parliament that day who had both carried their points, and who were both destined speedily to regret such triumph. The one exulted much in his victory; the other was already conscious that it was Quatre Bras before Waterloo. Mr. Totterdell was jubilant over the success of his motion; but John Fossdyke wished grimly he had never advocated the building of a theatre in Baumborough.

CHAPTER IV.

"MONEY NEVER WAS SCARCER."

Mrs. Foxborough was sitting quietly in her drawing-room chatting with Nid, about a week after the latter's adventure in the Regent's Park, when a cab pulled up with a sharp jerk at the door, speedily followed by a sonorous application of the knocker. Mrs. Foxborough started. "That's your father, Nid!" she exclaimed; and dashing out of the room, found herself immediately enfolded in the arms of a dark, stalwart, florid-complexioned man, who kissed her with unmistakable warmth.

"Nid, darling," he continued, releasing his wife to embrace his daughter. "No need to

ask how you are, child. You look more blooming and bonny every time I come back."

"You have no business to go away, papa," pouted Nid. "You can't imagine what ailments I suffer from in your absence."

"I have business, that's just what takes me away," laughed James Foxborough; "but I suppose, my dear, you can give me something to eat, for I am outrageously hungry."

"Of course; just go and sit down and talk to Nid for a few minutes, and I'll see about it at once. You shan't have long to wait."

That James Foxborough should appear suddenly and without warning in his home occasioned no surprise; it was his way, he hated letter-writing, was a very bad correspondent, and seldom gave intimation of his return till his hand was on the knocker. Even his wife was often in complete ignorance of his whereabouts for weeks. She was used to it, and though she occasionally declared she might as well have married a ship captain,

never worried her spouse about his shortcomings in the epistolary way. By the expiration of Nid's narrative of her misadventure, and how Sir Lancelot had come to her rescue, a story which seemed to interest her father considerably, Mrs. Foxborough announced that refreshments were ready for the traveller, and the three adjourned to the dining-room.

"And has he called since to inquire after the distressed damsel whom he succoured?"

"Indeed, he has," replied Mrs. Foxborough, "half-a-dozen times, and we have got quite to like him. Nid, who was in a great state of mind at first that her hero should not be up to her standard of masculine beauty, has got reconciled to his red hair at last, I believe."

"It isn't very red you know, mamma," said the girl, "and I declare he's not half bad-looking."

"Morant, Herbert Morant. I've a hazy

idea I know something about some Morants. I must ask."

"Don't flatter yourself that you are going to discover he is heir to a large fortune, because he says he's not; and though I'm sure he's awfully clever, he don't seem quite to know how to turn his abilities to account," continued Nid. "It is embarrassing, that, you know, papa; I really should not know myself whether to embark in tragedy or comedy."

"Tragedy, child, with your figure," cried her father, laughing.

"I won't be laughed at," cried the girl, with a petulant shrug of her shoulders. "I'm not so very small as all that, and I'm not done growing yet—I presume I'm big enough for Juliet, any way."

"Never mind, darling, it will be time enough to think of that a year or two hence. Have you seen or heard anything of Cudemore lately, Nydia? I want to see him if he is in town."

"Yes; he was at the Syringa about three weeks since, and has called here twice since. Once we were out, and once we saw him. I don't care much about him myself, Jim; but, of course, I know he is a business friend of yours, and therefore I am always civil; still I don't want him hanging round here."

"I shouldn't think he's very likely to trouble you in that way," replied Foxborough.

"I don't know," replied his wife, significantly.

"He really is a nuisance, papa; and Mr. Morant, who met him the last time he was here, denounced him as an awful—an awful, what was it? Oh, yes, I know—cad."

"Well, it is necessary that I should see him on a little matter of business. In the mean while, how is the Syringa doing?"

"Very well indeed. I don't say we haven't done better, but we can't complain. I'll just get the books and run over them with you. The receipts are well ahead of the outgoings."

"If you two are going to talk business, I shall run away till you have done," cried Nid.

"Do, my dear," replied her mother. "We shan't be very long, but your father and I must have a business talk, and perhaps the sooner it's over the better. You don't want Cudemore to find you money, do you?" she inquired, anxiously, as Nid left the room.

"That's just it," replied her husband.

"Oh, dear, James! You know what a terrible price he always makes us pay for it. I was in hopes now we were at last clear, that we should never have to go to him again. Besides, look at the books, there's a real good balance at the bank. Leave me £500 to go on with, and you can take the rest. I must have something in hand in case of a bad time at the Syringa—the salary list is so large."

"It's not near enough, Nydia; I want a good deal more than that."

"Why, surely you can't have had such a disastrous campaign as that. I don't know where you've been exactly; I never do know, but——"

"Tut, tut," he interrupted, "this is a different thing altogether. I am suddenly called upon to find money for a speculation I embarked in some years ago.

"But raise it somewhere else, Jim. I have particular reasons for wishing you not to get deep in Cudemore's books just now."

"Why particularly just now?" with a look of no little surprise. "It's bad any time, I grant you; but why worse now?"

"Because, you see, Nid is fast becoming a woman, and I feel pretty sure that Mr. Cudemore admires her."

"Why, she's a mere child yet, and as for Cudemore, he's old enough to be her father," exclaimed Foxborough, in utter bewilderment.

"Nid wants only a few days of seventeen,

and Mr. Cudemore, though much older than her, is only some five or six-and-thirty after all. I don't think he would consider himself a bit too old to marry her."

"I don't suppose such an idea has ever entered his head. You women always think that the world is in a conspiracy to rob you of your daughters as soon as they become marriageable."

"We are better judges than you, Jim, believe me," retorted Mrs. Foxborough, smiling. "You men never suspect a wedding, though the whole preliminaries go on under your nose, until you're asked to the breakfast. Once more, I say, I am very sorry that you must have recourse to Mr. Cudemore, but if you must there's no use saying anything more about it."

"You're a sensible woman, Nydia; and I'd take your advice in a minute if I could, but I must have the money at once, and I do not see my way as to finding it without

Cudemore's help. He'll advance it, I dare say, on the security of the Syringa, though no doubt I shall have to pay stiffish interest."

Mrs. Foxborough sighed. It was not quite two years ago since they had cleared off the last mortgage on the Syringa, and the music-hall had at last become to them a really lucrative property. Previously they had had to be content with scarce a moiety of the actual profits, Mr. Cudemore and one or two others sharing very considerably in the success of the enterprise. It seemed a pity, Mrs. Foxborough thought, not to keep so flourishing a concern in their own hands, and though she was fain to admit that the capital which had enabled them to build and open the Syringa had been acquired by these country speculations of her husband, yet she did wish he would abandon them now, live quietly at home with her, and devote his whole energies to the management of the music-hall. True, she could and did rule that establishment

most successfully herself, but she wished to have her husband always with her. These enforced separations were all very well when they were battling with this world in their early days, but now they had established a a business that would keep them comfortably, and enable them to provide for Nid; what more did they want? She was tired of this perpetual grass widowhood; what reason now was there for its continuance? All this did Mrs. Foxborough urge, by no means for the first time, on her husband; but he replied that it was not so easy to withdraw from some of the speculations he had embarked in as she imagined.

"I am engaged, Nydia, in other things than country theatrical companies; and though, darling, I would like nothing better than to do as you say, and have done with them all, it is just now as impossible as it is to do without having recourse to Cudemore."

"I can only say once more, Jim, I'm

awfully sorry; but you know best. How long am I to have you with me this time?"

"Very few days, I am sorry to say. Don't look so disappointed. I shall settle down and become the most humdrum of husbands before long, I dare say."

"Have you two done all your sums?" laughed Nid, as she entered the room. "When mamma gets to her books, as she calls those awful-looking ledgers, I always run away. Do you know she threatened to teach me housekeeping the other day, and I felt just as I did before I fell sick of the measles."

"It is a thing you will most likely find the want of some day," replied her mother.

"Oh no! oh no! if *he* is not rich enough to keep a housekeeper *he'll* have to do the books himself," said Nid. "I can't add up, and I know they cheat me dreadfully in my change at the shops."

"Under which circumstances," observed

her father, "unless *he* happens to be wealthy I shall send him about his business."

"That responsibility would rest with me, sir," replied Nid, with a mock courtesy. "Your posing, as the tyrannical and despotic father, would make even the elephants at the Zoological over the way trumpet with indignation."

At this moment there was a sharp knock at the door.

"A little late for a visitor," exclaimed Mrs. Foxborough. "I wonder who it is?"

"Nonsense," said Nid, "it is Mr. Morant, of course; and placing herself at the door, she threw herself into a theatrical attitude, and as it opened exclaimed, melodramatically, "Papa, my preserver!"

If ever a young lady looked a little nonplussed it was Nid, as Mr. Cudemore quietly entered the room, and bowing low in answer to her exclamation, rejoined, "Delighted, I am sure, to hear it, Miss Foxborough, although

quite unaware I had been so fortunate. How do do, Foxborough," he continued, turning to the manager, and bowing to his wife. "I heard incidentally at the Syringa that you were back, and came up just to shake hands with you."

Mr. Cudemore had an astonishing knack of hearing things incidentally.

"Ah! I had no idea they even knew of my arrival, but any way you are just the man I want to see. Tell them, Nydia, to put the tray in my den, and when you have said 'How do you do' to the ladies we will adjourn there for a cigar."

That under these circumstances Mr. Cudemore's respects to the ladies was a thing speedily accomplished may be readily conceived, and in something like ten minutes he and his host were seated in a snug room at the back of the house, employed in the congenial task of selecting a cigar from one or two open boxes.

"These if you like 'em pretty full-flavoured,

but try those small pale fellows if you like 'em mild, and now what will you take to drink. There's the usual triumv'rate, brandy, gin, and whisky, and seltzer behind you. Help yourself."

"Where have you been? Did you do pretty well on tour?" inquired Mr. Cudemore, as he lit a cigar.

"Never mind that; I want to talk to you about something else."

"Money?" asked Cudemore, with a slight elevation of the eyebrows. "Ah!" he continued, in answer to the other's nod of assent, "I thought so. When people want a quiet talk with me it's always on that topic. Money never was scarcer than it is just now."

"That, according to my experience, is its normal state," replied Foxborough quietly, "more especially whenever I want to borrow any."

"Do you want much," inquired the money-lender, languidly, for Mr. Cudemore was not at all of the old conventional type, but rather

affected the languid man of fashion, though his dark eyes watched his companion with a glance keen as a hawk.

"Yes, a good bit. I want £6000."

"That'll take some finding. What do you want it for?"

"That's my affair, and no business of the lender. The security is."

"Ah, yes, the security, what about that?" said Cudemore, softly.

"Well, the same as before—the Syringa—the plant there is worth the money pretty well, and then there's the building, with, as you know, a pretty long lease to run, as they gave me a fresh one when I undertook to erect the present house. However, you know all about it; you've had it in pledge before."

"Yes; but not for quite so heavy a sum, my friend."

"No; but you were not the sole mortgagee then. You will be this time. There's no lien whatever on the Hall."

"If that's the case, I'll see what I can do," replied Cudemore slowly. "You don't want this money immediately, I suppose?"

"Well, no, not quite; in a month or six weeks will do."

"Very good; I'll see about it; but you'll have to pay more than five per cent. I don't think the security will be considered quite good enough to do it at conventional prices."

"It should be. The security's good enough, and you know it," returned the manager.

"It may be, but people are whimmy on these points, and I doubt finding a client except at a tempting price. You might die or go broke, and then there might be a difficulty about getting a good man to carry on the concern; and where's the interest to come from if the Syringa shuts up?"

"They could always foreclose and recover their capital," retorted Foxborough.

"Oh, I don't know, nothing is so fluctuating in value as theatrical property. How-

ever, I'll do the best I can for you. No, nothing more, thank you ; it's time I was off. Good night," and Mr. Cudemore took his departure.

"A point or two in my game," muttered that worthy, as he strolled homewards. "I wonder what Jim Foxborough wants with £6000."

CHAPTER V.

THE CRICKET MATCH.

MR. TOTTERDELL, having achieved, if not quite the object of his ambition, yet a provincial imitation of it, felt that it behoved him to be busy. Was he not the elect of the Town Council of Baumborough, and had not the eminent Mr. Stanger approved of his maiden effort at legislation? New brooms are proverbial for their investigation of nooks and corners. Mr. Totterdell was an idle man, and, it may be remembered, possessed with an insatiable spirit of curiosity concerning his neighbours, assiduously inquiring into the working of local rates; and the financial affairs of the Town Council enabled him to pick up

information in a manner that might almost bear comparison with Dame Eleanor Spearing in Hood's famous 'Tale of a Trumpet.' The man was fast becoming a positive plague to Baumborough.

Nothing, perhaps, puzzled Mr. Totterdell more at the time than John Fossdyke's extraordinary indifference to the erection of the theatre. He had been the chief promoter of the scheme; he had taken a prominent part in carrying it through the Town Council, and now he seemed utterly indifferent as to its completion. He took no interest in its building, for it was by this time begun, and was progressing rapidly. He never went near it, and if appealed to and reminded of his professed knowledge of things theatrical, replied, "I know nothing of the construction of theatres; such things are best left to the architect." He had no doubt it would be an improvement thoroughly appreciated by Baumborough when they got it; in the mean

time the unfortunate contractor was suffering quite sufficient impediment and annoyance already from the interference of fussy busybodies without his becoming an additional clog on his endeavours; and with this parting shot at Mr. Totterdell, who had gradually attained the position of his *bête noir*, the Town Clerk closed further discussion.

John Fossdyke was by no means the only man who began to regret the election of Mr. Totterdell to the Town Council. Baumborough was probably no whit more corrupt than its neighbours, nor even than that great windy Town Council of the nation which it so assiduously copied; but, as every one knows, there is considerable give and take in all such assemblies, and an amicable understanding "that you wink at my little job and I wink at yours" is the unwritten law of all parliaments, local or national. But what was to be done with a man who, instead of promoting schemes of his own, spent his whole time in stripping

the drapery off those of his fellows? Promote what you may, and it immediately becomes your business to demonstrate to the public that it will fill their pockets, that it will, if it succeeds, undoubtedly fill yours is an incident that it would be egotism to dwell upon. Mr. Totterdell, in his laudable desire for information and the doing of his duty as a Town Councillor, was always exposing this particular phase of his brethren's legislation; not intentionally, but nothing can lead to such mischief sooner than fatuous questioning in these matters. Even Mr. Stanger had been led, in a moment of exasperation at some unexpected side-light being suddenly cast upon some pet project of his own, to stigmatize Mr. Totterdell as "a mere malignant interrogator that had lately crept into their midst." Still, though abandoned of the great Stanger, Mr. Totterdell was not without a small following. There are always some people left out in the cold at all distributions of the loaves and fishes, and

these are keenly alive to criticism of their more fortunate brethren.

"It is a most extraordinary thing, Mary, that your husband should run away in this manner," said Mr. Totterdell, comfortably ensconced in his pet easy-chair in his god-daughter's drawing-room at Dyke. "This theatre was his own pet hobby, and now, instead of stopping to look after it, he goes off nobody knows where. I have to do everything; the architect is very pig-headed, and will insist upon having his own way. Fossdyke knows I don't understand everything about theatres, and yet he leaves everything to me. They are all alike, the whole Council, even Stanger gets abusive the minute one tries to make oneself useful; called me a malignant something or other yesterday because I asked a question connected with the paving and lighting rate. He's a director of the Gas Company, you know, and I thought was just the man to tell me."

"Rumour says the Gas Company have got a preposterously high contract, and are making a very good thing out of the lighting of Baumborough," said Miss Hyde, who was present, and appeared to possess a considerable sense of the ludicrous.

"And how was I to get at that fact without inquiring? How does one get at any fact without using one's tongue?" rejoined Mr. Totterdell, testily. "Providence gave us tongues for the purpose of asking questions. I suppose you will admit that?"

"Well, I never heard that laid down as their special feature in our organization," rejoined Bessie, laughing, "though I'll admit that is a use some of us are apt to principally put them to."

"You may depend upon it, when you become a public man," and Mr. Totterdell rolled this out in unctuous tones, as if the eyes of Europe were upon him, "there is nothing like looking into things. Now there's your husband, Mary

a good man of business, no doubt, but he was about to make the mistake of levying an extra rate to pay for this theatre till I pointed out how much better it would be to use the money we had out at mortgage."

"I dont think my husband quite agreed with you on that point," rejoined Mrs. Fossdyke. "He said something about the imprudence of trespassing on your reserve fund."

This was rather a mild way of putting John Fossdyke's comments on Mr. Totterdell's proposal. He had stigmatized that gentleman to his wife as a doddering, inquisitive, fussy, mischief-making old idiot.

"Fiddle-de-dee, I am quite as much a business man as John; but this is just what it is—no sooner do the Town Council find they have got a hard-working, business man among them, than they leave him to pull the whole coach. Nobody ever comes near this theatre but me. I've half a mind to

resign, and be pestered with it no longer," and Mr. Totterdell looked round at the two ladies a little inquisitively to see how they received this mendacious statement.

He would no more have voluntarily resigned his seat in the Council than his life, and had a dim suspicion that his hearers were perfectly aware of that fact.

At this moment the door opened, and the footman announced "Mr. Soames, ma'am!"

"Now what on earth can that young brewer want here again?" ejaculated Mr. Totterdell.

Mrs. Fossdyke cast a mischievous glance at Bessie and burst out laughing, somewhat to the discomposure of the young lady, who coloured, bit her lips, and made a slight deprecatory motion of her hand as Philip Soames entered the room. A tall, dark, good-looking young fellow, and upon this occasion attired in flannels and white shoes, Phil looked the picture of a young athlete,

and at boating, cricket, or lawn-tennis Phil Soames could hold his own very fairly. He had gone through the usual course of the offspring of the plutocracy now-a-days, been sent to Eton to make acquaintance with the sprouting nobility, graduated at Cambridge, and finally, after some one or two continental excursions, been called upon to take his place in the firm. There was not an atom of nonsense about Phil Soames; he and his got their living by beer, and the young one had never had any false shame about the mash-tub. There was a university story about Phil, often quoted in his favour.

It was at some late supper-party, of which the majority of the company were of the aristocratic order, when some eldest scion of a ducal family rather twitted him with his father's avocation.

"All right, Skendleby," he rejoined, laughing, "bear in mind the world grows more democratic daily, and it is quite possible the

time will come when it can do without dukes, but there's no fear of its trying to get on without brewers. Hops, sir, will be to the fore when strawberry leaves are considerably at a discount."

If Phil Soames' path in life had been left entirely to his own discretion it was odds he had elected otherwise, but he was a shrewd, sensible young man, and when it was put plainly to him that he ought to prepare to take his father's place in the very thriving concern the brewery was, Phil at once responded to the call, and went in with a will, as he said, to learn his trade.

"I have come, Mrs. Fossdyke, to persuade you to honour the cricket-field with your presence, to remind you and Miss Hyde that Baumborough has been bearded by Bunbury, that we shall have a band playing all the afternoon, and tea properly set forth at the canonical hour. All Baumborough ladies are bound to share our triumph, or weep o'er

our defeat. Don't you think so, Miss Hyde?"

"I think we are bound to crown you with bays if triumphant, which in these days means applaud till our gloves split. But if beaten, Monsieur, don't come to us for pity; and," she continued, speaking, "I'll not believe such a thing could be. Don't you remember your grand victory over the Bunbury men last year? Well, we are coming down to see you play another such innings, are we not, Mrs. Fossdyke?"

"Yes, Bessie, I think if Mr. Soames will give us some tea as he promises, it will be a very pleasant way of passing the afternoon."

Phil Soames murmured a grateful assent, which was undoubtedly genuine. The recalling of our former triumphs by a pretty woman is one of the most insidious forms of feminine flattery, and one which, accompanied by a triumphant smile, as if they participated in the glory of the day, invariably knocks over

the male creature. It ought to be held unlawful, and deemed as unfair as shooting a hare on its seat. So it was settled that the whole party should come and take tea on the cricket-ground, and witness, it was to be hoped, the triumph of the Baumborough eleven, under the captaincy of Phil Soames, having extorted which promise that young gentleman took his departure.

Mrs. Fossdyke had for some time noticed Mr. Soames' growing admiration for Bessie, and, to say the truth, was very well satisfied with it, and had encouraged it unostentatiously not a little. She had come to regard the girl almost as her own daughter, as also had her husband. Who had they to leave their money to but her, for neither of them had any near relatives, nor did they care much about the few they had. Mrs. Fossdyke thought it would be a very suitable match, and though she could not but foresee it was quite possible the Soameses might not like

it, yet she fancied Phil was a young man likely to insist on his own way in a point of this kind. She gave the young man credit for plenty of determination and strength of character, and in this she did him only justice. The point she had so far overlooked was, that Bessie was not Miss Fossdyke but Miss Hyde, and it was her godfather's perpetual vague inquisitiveness as to "where did she come from" that first made her remember that question would naturally be asked by the Soames family in the event of any engagement between Phil and Bessie.

She questioned the girl, who adhered to her original story that she had been brought up by her aunt, and that when she grew up she had found that home uncomfortable. When questioned about her parents, Bessie grew strangely reticent. She believed her father was dead, and declined to say anything about her mother; further than she had a mother alive, Mrs. Fossdyke could elicit nothing.

Thanks to her godfather's insatiable curiosity, Mrs. Fossdyke found herself for the first time in her life face to face with a mystery—nay, more, as she dwelt upon the fact she pictured herself surrounded by mystery. The situation had its charm; to a woman who had so far led a humdrum life there was an astonishing salt given to existence by the very idea. Her imagination speedily supposed an occult connection between her husband's continual absences and Bessie Hyde—John had introduced her into the house. Was Bessie his daughter by a former wife or, more possibly, still living mistress? The girl admitted she had a mother alive, but declared that she had never known her father, and believed him to be dead. This staggered Mrs. Fossdyke. She was a clear-headed, good, plain, common-sense woman. She might not be clever, but was better calculated to get on in this world than many that are. She reflected that she had always found Bessie Hyde eminently truthful,

and the girl never wavered nor hesitated in her account of her father. About her mother she refused to talk, and as to what station in life she might be in, Mrs. Fossdyke could learn nothing. Still, though after turning it over carefully in her own mind the good lady discarded this first solution of the riddle, the question yet remained as to where did she come from, and what was the business that occasioned these mysterious absences of her husband, and there was little fear that these problems were likely to escape her mind while Mr. Totterdell remained a constant visitor at Dyke.

The Baumborough cricket ground was a pretty sight this afternoon, thronged as it was with the townspeople and neighbourhood. It was very different from the great annual picnics at Lord's, on the occasions of the University or Public School matches. Most of the ladies here knew something of the game, had relatives or friends engaged in it, for

Baumborough was situated in the hop counties, in which cricket had its birth, and is at this present more understanded of the people than it is in the north. Was it not a Maid of Kent who invented round-hand bowling in accordance with the dictates of nature, unfavourable in women, to the underhand method, and laudably desirous of curbing the conceit of her brothers? There were four marquees at one end of the ground. Two of these were dedicated to the club and their guests, and the other two were open to the public; but all four seemed flowing with milk and honey. Two bands alternately rattled off gay, lively music, the one that of the Channelshire Yeomanry from Canterton, the other that of "The Baumborough Own."

"I'm alluding, of course, to the local volunteers," as the old burlesque song says.

It was altogether a very pretty sight when Mrs. Fossdyke and Bessie, accompanied by Mr. Totterdell, made their appearance upon

the ground. It was an annual match, and whether Baumborough or Bunbury were the better men was a subject of considerable interest to the dwellers therein. This year the first trial of strength had taken place at Bunbury, and, after a fiercely-contested game, had terminated in favour of the home team. That Baumborough should be keen to wipe off this defeat was but natural, and Baumborough could urge with justice that she had not been enabled to exhibit her real strength in the first contest. Mr. Soames had been prevented playing, for instance, in consequence of a strained wrist, and both as a bat and wicket-keeper he was an irreplaceable loss to his side. Bunbury had just been disposed of as Mrs. Fossdyke and her companions arrived upon the ground, for a stubborn and somewhat unexpectedly protracted second innings, leaving their adversaries 153 to win. It was not a disheartening score altogether, but it was one that took a good deal of putting together

among county elevens. Baumborough had begun so well, had got rid of two or three of their adversaries' best men at such a comparatively cheap rate, that they had felt rather astounded at the stand made by the tail of the Bunbury team. It is so at times, a good bat or two get set, and rather beat the bowling, and the last wickets knock up runs in an almost unaccountable fashion. But now it is Baumborough's turn, and Phil Soames sends to the wickets Tom Dumps, the most imperturbable sticker, and a Mr. Herring, a careful bat, one who can hit a bit when he gets fairly in. As for the redoubtable Dumps, he has been known to pass an afternoon at the wicket without adding twenty runs to the score. He is the sort of bat bowlers despise and hate. He never takes liberties, never goes out of his ground, and never hits; he guards his stumps, and now and again pokes one successfully away for a single; but he is nevertheless a very useful man at the start, always difficult to get

rid of, and calculated to weary the attack of the enemy. Dogged, passive resistance is wont to aggravate, and inert defence to be the most exasperating of opposition, and the adversaries of Baumborough were always no little pleased to get rid of Tom Dumps.

"We learn from Horace, Homer sometimes nods," and upon this occasion the renowned Dumps was also caught napping, for before he had blocked, played, or poked some half-score balls, one ran up his bat, and dropped an easy catch into the hands of point. There was no slight dismay in the Baumborough camp at this unexpected casualty, but when Mr. Herring speedily followed suit, and also succumbed to the enemy's bowling, Phil Soames saw that demoralization was fast setting in amongst his followers. They were beginning to apprehend there must be something more than met the eye in the Bunbury bowling; and in cricket, as in war, the establishment of a funk is fatal. Soames was equal to the

occasion. He saw, like a great commander, that the time had come when it behoved him to place himself in front of the battle, and, with a few courteous words of apology, established Mrs. Fossdyke and Bessie in the ladies' tent, and seizing his bat, went forth to do or die for Baumborough.

Phil Soames's arrival at the wicket threw quite a new aspect on the game. He played a few balls easily, but quietly, just to get his eye in, and then he began to hit freely. His partner acquired confidence from the way his captain "slipped into" the bowling, and runs came fast; and when Phil had to mourn his companion's departure, the aspect of the game was entirely changed. The telegraph board showed 68 runs for three wickets, and the Baumborough Captain's record was "35 not out." Further, his men had recovered confidence, and stood up to their adversaries' attack with plenty of reliance on themselves.

Mr. Totterdell meanwhile was making

himself a most insufferable nuisance in the tent. It is not easy to explain cricket to any one who does not understand it, and that was just Mr. Totterdell's position. He wanted to know why a man was out? why one man went in before another? He wanted to know all about the financial state of the club, for ever since his memorable hit about raising the money for the theatre, Mr. Totterdell imagined he had much genius for finances, and panted to reform all existing institutions in Baumborough on this head; had, indeed, been particularly anxious in respect to the calling in of that mortgage he had suggested to the Municipal Council, but the clerks in John Fossdyke's office declined to give him any information in the absence of their principal, while two or three cronies to whom he mentioned it opined that the Town Clerk was best left to do the town's business. Gradually people steal away from Mr. Totterdell's vicinity. Those who, in their good nature, had attempted to

appease his thirst for knowledge, felt aghast at the incubus they had saddled themselves with, and, execrating their weakness, passed over to the other side the marquee, or out into the sunshine. Mrs. Fossdyke alone remains near her godfather.

The game is getting now highly exciting; after a well-played and most useful innings to his side, a good many of whom he has seen succumb during his stay at the wickets, Phil Soames fell a victim to a smart bit of fielding of the Bunbury men while rashly endeavouring to steal a somewhat risky run. Quite an ovation meets him as he walks back to the marquee, which the seventy-four to his name on the telegraph board thoroughly justifies. Baumborough have now fifteen runs to get, and three wickets still to be disposed of.

"Pray accept our congratulations, Mr. Soames," exclaimed Bessie Hyde, with a radiant smile, as she extended her hand.

"You came nobly to the rescue at a time when things were looking very sad for us. We shall beat them now, don't you think so?"

"We can only hope so. It will probably be a very close thing. We have only one man we can rely on much for the runs left; but have you had some tea?"

"Oh dear, yes; I have been well taken care of, thank you."

"Then come for a stroll with me. Now the sun is low, it is pleasanter outside than in the tent."

They accordingly stepped forth amongst the throng that were promenading about this end of the cricket-field, and Soames had to stop more than once to receive congratulations from his enthusiastic fellow-townsmen on his successful innings.

"Let us get a little out of the crowd, Miss Hyde. I am no doubt as conceited as most people, but I am ashamed to be complimented any more before you. I expect

you to laugh at me. As if no fellow ever put up seventy runs before."

"Ah," laughed Bessie, "I am afraid the vanity peeps out in that very speech. It is not so much that you got seventy-four runs, but that you got them for Baumborough when she needed them sorely."

"I stand properly rebuked," he replied, with an amused smile. "What a terrible analyzer of human motives you are. I feel almost afraid of you. Don't you find it rather trying seeing so much of Mr. Totterdell? I declare I never call at Dyke without finding him, and if he makes himself half as unpleasant there as he does in other places, you must have a hard time of it. I can't think how Fossdyke stands it. I don't wonder he is a good deal away."

"I am afraid Mr. Totterdell is doing unwittingly a great deal of mischief at Dyke," replied the girl, gravely.

"How so?"

"Mr. Fossdyke dislikes him, to begin with; in the next place, he is always inquiring into Mr. Fossdyke's affairs, and Mr. Fossdyke naturally resents that. Most men would."

"Certainly; but I don't see he is doing much mischief in that. He is committing an impertinence," said Phil, "for which John Fossdyke is just the man to snub him handsomely."

"No, but he has infected Mrs. Fossdyke with his own ungovernable curiosity, and she now has taken to questioning her husband about his business affairs. I assure you Mr. Totterdell has made Dyke so uncomfortable that I am very much afraid I must leave it."

"You leave Dyke—nonsense, Miss Hyde—why how can this affect you?"

"That I cannot tell you, but it does."

They walked on for some little time in silence. Phil Soames was under no delusion with regard to his feelings for Bessie. He

knew that he loved her frankly and honestly, and had quite made up his mind to marry her if he could. If he had not as yet asked her to be his wife it was from no uncertainty of purpose on his part, but simply because he was afraid what her answer might be. She liked him well enough, no doubt, danced a good deal with him, and was always well content to have him assigned as her cavalier at dinner-party or picnic, but he'd a shrewd suspicion Miss Hyde would look for rather more in a partner for life than a partner in a ball-room or at lawn tennis. It must be borne in mind that Baumborough was not aware of Miss Hyde's exact position at Dyke. They looked upon her as a niece or some relation of Mr. Fossdyke, now recognized as his adopted daughter, and accepted her as such. Baumborough, no doubt, in the first instance, had regarded Bessie as "a poor relative," and rather a dependant, but the way she had always been treated by the

Fossdykes had speedily made them adopt the other view. Neither the Town Clerk nor his wife had ever announced Bessie's exact status in their house, but had left Baumborough to draw its own deductions, and Baumborough was certainly justified by appearances in the conclusion it had come to; but of course the result was that Miss Hyde was regarded as a young lady who would probably bring her husband a good bit of money, not perhaps at the time, but in years to come. A pretty girl with these prospects is not wont to want wooers, and therefore Bessie stood in a very different position in Phil Soames's eyes to what she held in reality. He doubted whether he had made sufficient progress in the girl's good graces to risk asking her to be his wife, and thought a premature avowal of his love might be fatal to his hopes. His remark, when he did open his lips, was by no means of a sentimental character.

"The confounded old idiot," he muttered, half aloud.

"You mean Mr. Totterdell, I presume," said Bessie. "He certainly is not discreet, and things went on more pleasantly at Dyke before his arrival in Baumborough, undoubtedly."

"Why on earth does not John Fossdyke kick him out of the house," asked Phil.

"He could hardly shut the door in the face of his wife's godfather; and you might as well hint to a rhinoceros that he was not wanted as to Mr. Totterdell."

"I'd make him understand it, though, if I were Fossdyke; but never mind him. Why must you go?"

"I have told you that Dyke has become so uncomfortable; I cannot tell you more."

"When do you mean going?" asked Phil, persistently.

"Oh, I can't say exactly; besides, it really

can't concern you, Mr. Soames," replied Miss Hyde, somewhat coquettishly.

"You know very well it concerns me very deeply; you know, Bessie."

"Stop," interrupted the girl. "I declare we have forgotten all about the cricket. What does that cheer mean? Is that victory for Baumborough?"

Phil glanced for a moment at the telegraph board.

"Yes," he replied, "we have won by two wickets. But never mind that just now. I have something to say to you, something that I have wanted to say to you for some time."

"No, not now, please. I really must go and look after Mrs. Fossdyke," exclaimed Bessie, hurriedly; and she turned abruptly to walk in the direction of the tents, but almost immediately felt her wrist clasped gently, but firmly.

"I have gone too far, or not far enough,"

said Phil, in low tones. "You must hear me out now, Bessie."

They had gained in their stroll the opposite side of the cricket-ground to the marquees, and that, never much patronized by the lookers-on, was now entirely deserted.

"Stay one moment," said the girl, quietly, releasing her wrist, and fronting him; "listen to me before you speak. You think I am a relative of Mr. Fossdyke, and his adopted daughter, probably heiress to his property. Is it not so?"

He bowed his head in assent.

"I am nothing of the kind; I am no relation to him whatever. I am Mrs. Fossdyke's paid companion, at a salary of eighty pounds a year, though she has never allowed me to realize the position. Now, Mr. Soames, perhaps you will take me across the ground to *my mistress*," and the girl drew herself up defiantly.

"Yes, when I have said what I have got

to say. What you have told me astonishes me somewhat, but surely, Bessie, you don't think so meanly of me as to think it could make the slightest difference. You know I love you. Bessie, will you be my wife?" and as he finished he once more possessed himself of her hand.

She dropped her eyes, and for a few minutes he could see the colour come and go in her cheeks, and once she essayed vainly to speak. He could not understand her emotion, and when she at length found her voice, it came hard and mechanically, and she spoke like one repeating a lesson.

"I thank you deeply for the honour you have done me, but I cannot marry you, Mr. Soames."

"Why not?" he asked curtly, and in his excitement he crushed the hand he held almost savagely in his own. She uttered a slight cry and he released her. "Is it that you cannot love me?"

"No," she replied, as her voice shook and the tears gathered in her eyes, "it is not that. I could love you. God help me, I do love you, Philip, but I cannot be your wife."

"But why not? You own you love me. In a worldly point of view I am well able to take care of you, and honestly hope to win the consent of the Fossdykes as well as your friends to our marriage. I love you for your own sweet self. What reason can there be that you should send me away miserable?"

"I cannot tell you. I only know that I can never marry any one until he knows all about me; and I have not the courage to tell my story to you."

"Bessie, my darling, this is sheer nonsense. That you can have done anything in your young life that is bitter shame to you I'll not believe. You are shrinking from a phantom horror of your own imagining."

"No, indeed I am not. Please, please,

Philip, take me across to Mrs. Fossdyke. See, people are beginning to leave the ground."

"Upon one condition, that you promise to tell me why you cannot marry me within the next three days."

"No, I cannot promise that, indeed I cannot."

"Well, will you promise me this, not to give me my answer decidedly till the expiration of that time?"

Bessie hesitated for a minute or so, and then replied,—

"Yes, if you wish it; but it is not fair to you. I feel I shall only have to repeat that I can never be your wife, Philip."

She said the last words slowly and almost mournfully, and seemed to linger in almost caressing manner over the utterance of her lover's name.

"Bessie, if you love me truly, I'll not believe that you will give me the same answer three days hence."

She only shook her head sadly as they quickened their steps towards the now well-nigh deserted marquees.

"Why, my dear Bessie, I thought you were lost," exclaimed Mrs. Fossdyke; "I have sent messengers in all directions in search of you. We can take credit for one thing, Mr. Soames, we really are pretty well the last to withdraw from the field."

"Very kind of you to come and so crown our hard-won victory, Mrs. Fossdyke," said Phil hastily, in order to cover his fair companion's confusion, but the young lady knew better than to compromise herself by making any excuses.

"Now, what on earth could that young brewer have had to say to Miss Hyde all this time," muttered Mr. Totterdell. "I never found him talkative myself."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. CUDEMORE AT HOME.

MR. CUDEMORE occupied a small house in Spring Gardens, the ground floor of which he had turned into offices. On the first he had a dining-room, opening into a larger apartment, fitted up as half smoking-room, half library, while above he had his bed-room and dressing-room. He is lounging at the window of this nondescript apartment on the first floor this afternoon, engaged in earnest conversation with a slight, fashionably-dressed man, who seems more interested in the flower in his button-hole than Mr. Cudemore's discourse. Only he looked so indifferent he might have been deemed one of Mr. Cude-

more's clients; but people who are engaged in borrowing money seem usually more absorbed in the business in hand. Mr. Sturton was the well-known Bond-street tailor, who had found it expedient to do no little business with Mr. Cudemore. Sometimes he wanted that gentleman's opinion about bills he had received in the course of legitimate business; sometimes he wanted to get some he considered doubtful discounted, and Cudemore could very often get that done at a considerable sacrifice among his brethren, who will at times speculate in such commodities, if they can pick them up at a low rate, on the chance of their coming in some day, when more legitimate traders decline to have anything to say to such paper. Further, Mr. Sturton at times advanced money to his customers through the medium of Cudemore. He never affected to do such a thing himself, but when he had every reason to believe they were men of

substance, would say, if they confided their troubles to him, that he believed Mr. Cudemore, of Spring Gardens, was a liberal gentleman in that line.

Professing amongst his friends the most democratic opinions, Mr. Sturton had a sneaking regard for his aristocratic patrons, and measured a marquis with an unctuous admiration most edifying to witness. He further affected a languid interest in the turf, about which he knew nothing, and cared less; but he thought it the proper thing to do, and one of his aspirations was to be as fashionable as his customers. It was of him that the following anecdote was narrated:—

Lady R., well known over the Leicestershire grass country, once entered his shop, accompanied by her liege lord, to give an order.

"I think I had the pleasure of seeing your ladyship at the opera last night," remarked Mr. Sturton, in his most dulcet tones.

"Good gracious, Dick! what does the man mean?" exclaimed the sporting countess. "Please tell him I've come to order a habit."

Poor Mr. Sturton, he perhaps never was more completely extinguished, and his talk waxed more fiercely Radical than ever; and though numbering many members of the House of Lords on his books, yet he vehemently demanded the extinction of the Hereditary Chamber.

"The security is excellent, I can vouch for. However, of course I'll make that all clear to you. I have got so much money out just now that I can't quite manage this business alone, and I am particularly anxious to help Foxborough."

"Why?" lisped Mr. Sturton.

He might affect a languid, lisping manner, but he was quite as keen a man of business as the money-lender.

"Well, it don't matter to you. I want

you to find half this money at ten per cent.—not quite such interest as we have had, but then the security's better, and I'll buy you out again at the end of six months."

"I should rather like to know your object in being particularly anxious to help Foxborough. That he is a friend, and that you rather like him, is, you know, as well as I do, no argument in money-lending, which trade consists in obtaining the highest possible interest at the lowest possible risk."

"You needn't teach me my business," returned Cudemore; "I'm not quite a fool in it, as you must admit by this time. I have my reason for wishing to have some hold over James Foxborough. I could fancy your finding money for Lady Jane or Lord Augustus with a similar view. What would that be to me? Nothing. What concerns me is, is it safe and good enough to risk coin in. I tell you—nay, have shown you

—this is; what more do you want? If it isn't good enough for you, it will be, no doubt, for somebody else," and Mr. Cudemore threw himself back into his chair, as a man whose argument is spent.

"Now it is no use going on like that," rejoined the other, in his usual languid fashion. "Of course I am curious to know your special interest in making this loan; but there is no necessity I should. Show me the security, is all I say, and I'll find my share of the money. I suppose that's sufficient," and Mr. Sturton looked with keen glance at his companion. He had no wish to quarrel with the meney-lender, had many excellent reasons indeed for not doing so. Now what about the bill of young Morant's—is that good? I suppose you have made inquiries?"

"Yes, that's good enough. I fancy we might go a little further with him if he wants it. What is it for?"

"Part payment of his account. He was

hard up for ready money, a common complaint among my customers, as you know."

"Men don't quite expect to pay your prices, Sturton, and not get credit. Like the betting-ring, if you've only capital your business is sure to be profitable in the long run."

"Yes; only, like the book-makers, our bad debts beat us at times," retorted Mr. Sturton, a little sharply. "However, I suppose we have nothing more to talk about. You'll want this money pretty soon?" he observed, as he rose to depart.

"At once. Jim Foxborough is coming here to see me almost immediately about it. I told them to show him into the office if you had not left."

"Well, I am off now. You can depend on me for the coin in the course of two or three days. Adoo!" and with this Mr. Sturton leisurely disappeared from the apartment.

"Now for Foxborough, I must impose terms upon him that won't be exactly in the bond; but when a man wants money badly he's apt to assent to a good deal he wouldn't otherwise. Six thousand pounds, too, is not quite so easy to borrow, even when your security is pretty good. I wonder what he wants it for: he always has been a close man about his affairs, bar the Syringa, and that I was too much in to be kept in the dark about," soliloquized the money-lender. "He may have hit upon something of the same sort down at Birmingham or Leeds, promising to turn out as good a spec. as the Syringa. Crafty beggar, don't mean to have me in it this time, and perhaps he's about right," and Cudemore indulged in a dry chuckle, as he reflected over the money he had made out of the Syringa. What with advancing a few hundreds on loan at usurious interest, and taking a share in the venture, which it afterwards cost Foxborough

a pretty penny to get back into his own hands, Cudemore had done uncommonly well over that business.

A tap at the door, and the money-lender's clerk announced that Mr. Foxborough was in the office.

"Show him up in five minutes, Cooper," rejoined Mr. Cudemore, as usual.

Mr. Cudemore's system was peculiar. His offices consisted of three rooms communicating. The outer and smaller one was tenanted by the office boy, the second served for the two clerks, the younger of whom was, though, a boy of preternatural acuteness; while the inner sanctuary was reserved for the money-lender himself. A second door enabled him, if he pleased, to leave the room, and gain the stairs leading to the rooms overhead. If he was in the office the visitor was requested to wait in the clerk's room; if not, he was ushered into Mr. Cudemore's sanctum, and left to wait there. All known clients

were after a little delay shown up to the first floor, but the unknown were invariably interviewed to commence with in the office, the money-lender descending from above for that purpose, "like a hawk upon a wild duck," as an imaginative victim once described it, if he did not happen to be in his own private den. The five minutes' wait was often very much prolonged with a new or a shaky client, especially with a new one. "It don't do to have 'em thinking I sit here dying to lend money," argued that gentleman; "the sooner they understand the difficulty of borrowing it, the sooner they get reconciled to forty per cent., and acquire a taste for rare wines, fancy pictures, and other things that accompany the last agonies." Except with very big fish be in no hurry to strike, was the money-lender's maxim, and he was doing a pretty thriving trade.

"Mr. Foxborough, sir," said the clerk, once more opening the door, and that

gentleman entered the room, to which this was by no means his first visit.

Mr. Cudemore shook hands cordially with his visitor, and immediately proffered a cigar and a glass of amontillado.

"Unless you prefer a brandy and seltzer," he added, thoughtfully. "Your business looks like coming all right, but we must have a talk over it; you see you want it so quickly."

"Getting the money to go into a speculation a month after the chance has gone by is not of much use," rejoined Jim Foxborough, sententiously.

"Ah, it's so urgent as that, is it? You must think it a very good thing to be so sweet upon it?"

"Perhaps I do. It looks like it, or I shouldn't be so anxious to borrow money for it. It'll pay me pretty well, I fancy, but remember what it may be is no business of yours, nor have I any intention of telling you."

"Well, as you say, it is no business of mine further than that natural curiosity about our fellows' concerns that becomes a habit of my trade. You might want a few thousands more, you see, my dear friend," and Mr. Cudemore looked inquiringly at his visitor. "We might even find that, if one knew what it was for—"

"Never fear, I shan't come to you for them, even if I should. You might not think the security good enough, you know. When can I have this money?"

"Oh, in a few days, if we can arrange one other trifling matter," rejoined Mr. Cudemore, slowly. "The fact is," he continued, and assuming an air of *bonhommie*, which did not sit particularly well upon him, "I am getting on, Foxborough, although I can still claim to be a young man."

The proprietor of the Syringa nodded.

"It is getting time, in short, that I settled down; in fact, married."

"Well, fire away," rejoined Foxborough, "I'm not your guardian. You don't want my consent, nor, d—n me, I should think, any one else's."

"Excuse me, but you can't marry a girl in this country without her consent, at all events."

"No, providing she's twenty-one; except, I'm told, in fashionable circles, and the higher bred they are the less, I hear, they have to say to it. However, Cudemore, I don't suppose you have set your affections on——

"'A nobleman's daughter—a lady of rank!'"

sang Mr. Foxborough, ribaldly chanting a well-known music-hall song of the day.

"I'm talking to you in earnest," said the money-lender sternly; "and the sooner you understand that the better it will be for both of us."

Foxborough immediately assumed a more decorous manner. The idea of Cudemore's marriage had rather tickled him, but he now

remembered men didn't like to be joked on the point, and that "ridiculing the noblest feelings of our nature," was always an admittedly good text to go into a passion upon and use strong and fervid oratory.

"I beg your pardon, Cudemore," he exclaimed, "but the old fox that has lost his tail must have his joke at the young one who persists in entering the trap. I sincerely trust you will be happy, and allow me to be one of the wedding party."

He had utterly forgotten his wife's warning on this point, had, in fact, deemed it so ridiculous that he had no more idea of what Cudemore was driving at than the veriest stranger could have had.

"Your absence could be scarcely spared on the occasion," replied the money-lender a little huskily, for he recognized that his visitor had as yet no idea of what he meant. "I want your interest with Miss Foxborough in my

behalf, and your permission to make her my wife."

"You want to marry Nid? Why, she's a child. Preposterous! impossible! absurd!"

"I don't see anything absurd about it," replied Mr. Cudemore tartly; for even money-lenders when smitten of the tender passion are as sensitive as other men. "Many girls marry young, and as for disparity of age, the fifteen years between us is no more than exists in hundreds of cases, and very often there is a great deal more!"

"Why, the child's only fifteen or so," exclaimed Jim Foxborough in all honesty, for that Nid was grown up nearly and turned of seventeen had escaped his notice, as it has that of many another father immersed in business which took him much from home.

"She's in her eighteenth year, I have her mother's word for it, and I'm in my thirty-fourth," rejoined Mr. Cudemore.

"Shouldn't have fancied you'd ever see

thirty-eight again," retorted Mr. Foxborough, with undue discretion, for the money-lender might have been anything between thirty and forty almost.

"It is just possible I may find the arrangement of the loan not to be managed if we can't come to some terms on this matter," returned Cudemore, grimly.

"And by G-d, sir!" exclaimed Foxborough, "if you think Nid is to be thrown in as a bonus on the transaction you very much mistake me. I'd sooner bust up and go to prison than consent to such an iniquitous agreement. I'll not pretend but that this money is of great moment to me," he continued, mastering his passion; "that the speculation I want it for is—is a thing, in fact, it is of urgent necessity; but it is possible, no doubt, to raise the funds elsewhere, and I tell you again, sooner than trade my daughter away as if she was a slave-girl I'll do without it altogether."

Mr. Cudemore might be a little ruffled, but the training of his profession had demonstrated to him long ago the absurdity of losing his temper. He could not, therefore, fail to mark the incoherence of Jim Foxborough's speech. To quarrel with him was the last thing he intended. He had set his heart, as men of his age do at times, on marrying a scarcely emancipated school-girl. A rupture with her father was not likely to assist his wishes, and moreover, this proposed loan was a safe, comfortable ten per cent. investment, with sundry legal charges of which Mr. Cudemore might count upon appropriating the lion's share, for he had qualified as a solicitor, though he never practised out of his own special business.

"I don't see," he said at length, "that you have any call to get violent because I want to marry your daughter. Miss Foxborough is a sweet, pretty girl, and good, I believe, as she's pretty. She's grown up, though you mayn't see it; will have plenty of sweethearts before

long, no doubt, and that I should want to be first in the field was mere common prudence on my part. I can give her a real good home. She may have her carriage, and need have no occasion to cut things fine in either her milliners' bills or her housekeeping. I don't know, as far as position goes, there's much to choose between you and me. I don't want to marry her against her inclination. I only want your good wishes for my success, that's all."

Jim Foxborough knew very well that was not a bit what the money-lender had meant, but it sounded all very plausible put in this manner, and then again he was in somewhat urgent need of this money.

"I cannot say I wish it," he replied, after a few moments' consideration. "I don't think her mother wishes it, and I don't believe the child herself has ever thought about it. I don't think you are a suitable husband for Nid. Hear me out," he continued, seeing the

other was about to interrupt him. "I know you've got money, and can give her a good home and all that, but still I doubt her being happy with you. You've no tastes in common."

"Excuse me, Miss Foxborough's tastes are artistic, so are mine."

The proprietor of the Syringa stared for a moment in sheer amazement at the audacious speaker. At last he rejoined drily:

"Well, I should hardly have thought them so. I have no intention of interfering with Nid's choice when she is old enough to know her own mind. At present I undoubtedly don't consider her so. It will be time enough to talk about this a year or two hence, if you still wish it. Now, about the money?" and Foxborough threw himself back, and strove to affect an indifference to Cudemore's reply, which no man endeavouring to borrow money ever successfully achieved.

The money-lender felt he had failed signally

in his scheme so far, but he was much too shrewd not to see that to come to a rupture with Foxborough was certainly not the way to improve his chance of marrying Foxborough's daughter. It was his interest to find the money from every point of view, and the pursuit of his own interests Mr. Cudemore never neglected. Naturally, he replied the money should be forthcoming.

CHAPTER VII.

"NID'S ADVICE."

HERBERT MORANT has suddenly awakened to the fact that he has made a confounded fool of himself. The fact dawned upon him as he lay in bed sipping his matutinal cup of tea one summer morning in Morpeth Terrace, and was brought home to his intelligence by the perusal of sundry blue-looking epistles that had just arrived, and which all contained more or less urgent appeals for money, the culminating shock being a polite intimation from Mr. Sturton that his bill at ninety days' sight for £100 would fall due on the following day, and he trusted would be duly met at the expiration of the ordinary three days' grace.

Mr. Morant had been cursed, as he himself said, "with a small independence, just enough to induce a man to do nothing, and not quite enough to live upon." He was not particularly extravagant, but he did what his associates did, and that among young men, in the heyday of youth, with excellent spirits and unimpaired digestion, meant a good deal. He assisted at most that was going on in town, and do it as you will, that runs into money. The consequence was, he was always spending more than he had. This had already twice necessitated dips into his limited capital, followed, of course, by a corresponding reduction of income, and it was now becoming clear to him that a third call upon his principal was imminent. It was disgusting very, just too as he had begun to think how nice it would be to settle down and marry Nid Foxborough.

"This must be looked into and put a stop to at once," he exclaimed, as he sprang out of bed and into his bath, and for the next few

minutes there might have been heard a wondrous splashing and sluicing, mixed with muttered objurgations and sublime resolutions.

"Cursed fool, life chucked away, give it up, make a clean slate of it, suppose there'll be enough left to buy bread and cheese; I'll take up a trade, by the Lord, and stick to it; must have the pull any way, you can't spend money while you are trying to make it."

It has been before pointed out that Mr. Herbert Morant was somewhat eccentric, and that, moreover, his slight eccentricities were not only tolerated, but contributed no little to his popularity. If there was one person with whom Herbert Morant was a special favourite, it was Mrs. Marriott, the housekeeper of the chambers in Morpeth Terrace, in a set of which Morant had resided ever since he left the university some five or six years ago. She regarded him as quite the pick of all her gentlemen, chiefly perhaps because out of the

half-dozen or so tenants none ever bantered her as Herbert Morant did.

His toilet completed, he rang the bell for breakfast, and told the servant who brought it he wished to speak to Mrs. Marriott at her earliest convenience, and that lady's advent speedily followed.

"Ah! good morning, Mrs. Marriott," he exclaimed, "I have sent for you to say that we are once more on the verge of a crisis—financial crisis, of course. I have experienced more than one since I have enjoyed the comfort of being under your charge."

"Lor', sir, I'm sure I hope it isn't very bad," rejoined the housekeeper, who had rather vague notions of what Mr. Morant called his crises.

"Mrs. Marriott, I must request no feminine frivolity," said Herbert, impressively. "I have instructed you in your duties during crises; I presume you haven't forgotten them —the strictest economy, mind. I can afford

nothing that costs ready money, except washing and candles. It's a mercy I can do without coals this warm weather. Your book, mind, must be absolutely an affair to be settled in Queen's heads——"

"And with regard to other things, sir, I suppose they're to go on as usual?"

"Quite so, Mrs. Marriott. Anything that goes down in a book you will obtain as usual. We must not disturb the mysterious currents of trade, nor derange any fellow-creature's system of double entry. You understand, Mrs. Marriott?"

"Yes," replied the housekeeper, laughing; "but you know, sir, it makes no real difference. You said yourself last time it all came to the same thing at the end of the quarter."

"You don't understand these things, Marriott. I am acting on the soundest financial principles. When there is a run upon bullion the Bank of England always raises the rate

of discount, which is tantamount to declining to part with ready money except under severe pressure. That's the principle; we must exist, like the snipes, this quarter on lengthy bills. Also remember I am never at home, or laid up with confluent smallpox. Great men like editors, and gentlemen in difficulties, are always hard to interview. Were you ever in gaol, Mrs. Marriott?"

"Lord, sir, what a question?" said the housekeeper, rather indignantly.

"Pooh! I don't mean as a victim; I mean as a consoler."

"Well, sir, I don't know whoever could have told you, but when Marriott got into difficulties and was 'took,' I used sometimes to go and see him," whispered the widow. "I sometimes think that it was his anxieties that killed him."

Perhaps they had, for the deceased Marriott's, a retired butler who had gravitated

into the public line, chief anxiety latterly had been the attainment of as much brandy and water as possible.

"Mrs. Marriott, when they have cast me into a dungeon with gyves upon my wrists, I shall expect you to visit me as somebody in history, whose name I don't precisely recollect, used to visit somebody else whose patronymic at this minute I can't exactly remember."

With which Christy Minstrel jest Mr. Morant dismissed his housekeeper, and lighting a cigar, sat down to reflect upon his position. He had had his joke with Mrs. Marriott, but there was some method in his madness. The housekeeper did not understand a good deal of his chaff, but she thoroughly comprehended the main drift of it, to wit, that money was scarce, and that lunches and dinners in chambers when ordered were to be based on economical principles. Still, this sort of saving is not

much use to a man in a big money scrape, and as a rule men never live so well as just before bankruptcy. I think it is in Disraeli's 'Young Duke' that the Marquis and his wife, having tried economy for a year and found it a failure, once more announce expense as no object. The saving seemed so utterly inadequate to the effacement of the difficulties as not to be worth going on with. Herbert Morant was no fool, and was quite as well aware of this as that continued reckless living only increased them. What was he to do?—as for paying his debts there would be little difficulty about that, but it involved further sacrifice of capital, and this would be to leave him with a very shrunken income. A man who had failed to make both ends meet on five hundred a year was hardly likely to get along on little more than half that sum.

There could be no doubt about it, he must do something. If it had not been for

Nid it is odds he would have decided on emigration—realizing his capital, and trying his luck in Australia or New Zealand; but he could not make up his mind to lose all hope of winning Nid for his wife. His visits had been frequent to the cottage by the Regent's Park of late; and though he saw but little of the master of the house, Mrs. Foxborough always received him quite graciously, and Nid with the sunniest of smiles. She tyrannized over him in the prettiest way, was always giving him petty commissions, such as procuring her a song, some flowers, a new book, or else "the correct version of a little bit of theatrical gossip," and Herbert Morant kissed his silken chain of servitude metaphorically, and exulted that he was bound to the wheels of the child enchantress's chariot. He wished to marry this girl, and had fair reason to suppose that neither she herself nor her mother would be averse to such a proposal on his part—true, she was very young,

only sweet seventeen, but girls have been "wooed and married and a'" at that age many times. Now, what was he to do? If he had embarked in any profession when he first came to London, and stuck to it, he would have now been probably making an income that, joined to what he had of his own, would have enabled him to offer any girl a modest home. He had made a fool of himself, but it was no use tearing his hair over that; the question was, what was he to set his hand to? At twenty-eight a man can hardly be said not to have a career still before him.

He smoked on, and still the problem seemed no nearer of solution.

"Confound it," he exclaimed, "dear old Phil Soames used to say at Cambridge—'A man with average ability and education, if he has only energy, can always get his living. Don't you believe he can't—it's only want of determination that prevents him.

He goes about asking for something to do, instead of telling people what he wants to do, and asking them to give him a start.' Hang it—what is it I want to do? and I can only answer vaguely something to get a living out of. Dear old Phil, I wonder where he is now. He used to talk so plucky about getting his living, but I fancy his bread was pretty well buttered all the same, and he has not had much occasion to trouble himself on that score. Heigho, I don't get on with this cursed conundrum—How I'm to make a respectable living—it's the toughest double acrostic ever was tackled. I think I'll go up to the cottage and talk it over with Mrs. Foxborough. She's a shrewd, practical woman."

Arrived at the cottage, he was shown into the pretty drawing-room, which he found tenanted by Nid only.

"Mamma's out," she said, as she greeted him with a smile, "so you will have to put up with me for the present."

"That is a fate most men would resign themselves to with much satisfaction; but I do want to see your mother all the same."

"Nothing easier; you will only have to wait a little. I don't suppose it will be very long before she is in. It has one drawback, for you will be expected to entertain me."

"I can't say I feel much like entertaining anybody; the fact is, I have got into a scrape, Nid."

"I am awfully sorry; but do—do you think you ought to call me Nid?" asked the girl, with a demure hesitation irresistibly coquettish.

"Certainly; doesn't everybody who knows you really well call you Nid? Didn't your godfathers and godmothers on your baptism give you this name?" replied Morant.

"No, sir; they did not. I was christened Nydia Foxborough; but what are these?"

she continued, as Herbert extracted from his pockets a small parcel and an envelope.

"That is the broken fan you gave me, I hope now duly repaired; and that is the box for Covent Garden next Friday. Your mother promised to take you if I succeeded in getting a box, and I triumphed."

"Oh, how good of you! Ah, yes, Mr. Morant, I think I must be Nid to you."

"You mercenary little lady! was there ever such a case of bribery seen, I wonder?"

"Don't laugh at me—how dare you! What girl in her teens wouldn't overlook being called by her Christian name in a man who brought her an opera box? But what is the scrape you have got into?—nothing very bad, is it?"

"No; I have only been spending more money than I ought."

"Why get this opera box, then? It is very kind of you, but surely it is only spending more money again."

If Nid had never known what it was to

want money, she was not used to lavish expenditure either. Her mother was an excellent manager, and made their income go a long way while living comfortably, but Nid was not unaccustomed to hear the expression, "they couldn't afford it."

"Oh, that makes no difference, and it will give you a pleasure, and I should never count loss much in that case. It isn't the money part of the scrape. I can pay my way out of that; but the thing is I must really get to work and do something for my living."

"Surely, there's no great hardship in that," rejoined the girl, who was wont to see most, both of the women and men, with whom she came in contact earn their bread, and who looked forward to doing it herself in another year or two.

"No, certainly not; but you will hardly believe it, Nid, that, great hulking fellow as I am, upon my word I don't know how to set about it. There was a dear old friend of mine

who used always to say that any man with tolerable brains, a fair education, and energy, could earn a decent living."

"Would you think it very presumptuous in me if I offered you advice?" said Nid, timidly.

"No. What is it?"

"I think if I were you I would consult that friend."

"Eureka! You don't know what that is, but it's equivalent to the very thing in this case. What a clever little girl it is! Look here, Nid, I'll follow your advice, and you shall keep my secret. It would be very sweet to think that I owed my start in life to you, darling."

"Mr. Morant!"

"Well, I allow I hadn't the right to call you that yet; but I hope to have some of these days. Ask your mother if I may come to your box at Covent Garden on Friday. I shall not wait to see her now—I found such a shrewd adviser in her place."

"Come and dine with us, and escort us properly. The brougham has a back seat, and I'll see mamma sends you an invitation."

"Thanks; that will be delightful. Good-bye, and God bless you, darling," added Herbert as he shook hands, and this time Nid only laughed as she held up a chiding fore-finger.

If there was not an engagement between these young people, they had, at all events, arrived at a tacit understanding.

CHAPTER VIII.

"DISCORD AT DYKE."

"IT is all very well, John, but it is not fair to keep your wife in total ignorance of everything," exclaimed Mrs. Fossdyke upon the evening of her husband's return, as they sat in the drawing-room at Dyke, indulging in a *tête-à-tête* after Miss Hyde, pleading a bad headache, had retired to bed. "You go away, I don't know where, and refuse to tell me anything about your proceedings when you return."

"You know very well, Mary, I never discuss business subjects with you, nor very much with any one else. I have played my hand alone all my life."

"But remember it was my money gave you your first real start in life, and I do trust——"

"You're entitled to remind me of it for the remainder of my existence. Listen to what I say. I never did, and never mean to, talk over my affairs with you. I got you to understand that once, and you were quite content, and never troubled your head. We were excellent friends in those days. Now that meddling mischief-monger, old Totterdell, has poisoned your understanding, and you're simply an incarnation of suspicion. The doddering old idiot has been to my office while I was away, questioning my clerks about some of my business. You don't suppose I mean to stand that. Of course my people were much too well trained to tell him anything; but the next time he comes here I shall tell him to go, and if he can't take that as a hint—and he is not good at taking hints—I shall kick him down the front door-steps and see if he comprehends that."

"John, you couldn't! My godfather! How dare you talk so? He is an old man, too, recollect. All Baumborough would cry shame on you."

"Don't you believe it! Totterdell has made himself so obnoxious of late from his perpetual inquisitiveness and gossiping that I think Baumborough is more likely to express astonishment I hadn't done it long before; but he is, as you say, an old man, and therefore safe from anything of that sort. Still, mark me, I'll have him about Dyke no more, and the sooner you make that clear to his understanding the better. If you don't, I shall, and it will be probably a little more coarsely conveyed to him."

"I'll not have my relatives debarred my house," retorted Mrs. Fossdyke, with a stamp of her foot, and an angry toss of her head; "more mine than yours, I've little doubt, if we could only look into how it was paid for."

"I'm not going to argue with an angry woman."

"I never was calmer in my life," screamed Mrs. Fossdyke. "If there is any loss of temper it is on your side, I'm sorry to say, John. Talk about kicking relatives down the front door-steps, indeed!"

"He is not a relative, and I've told you I'm not going to kick him."

"I detest nagging, it's unmanly. Now perhaps, Mr. Fossdyke, you will explain to me all about Miss Hyde."

"I've told you already that there is nothing to explain further than has been explained. Bessie can go whence she came if it is your wish, in fact, no doubt will if, prompted by your imbecile godfather, you make things unpleasant to her."

"I don't; it is you who make things unpleasant by half-confidences and abuse of my relations." And Mrs. Fossdyke sniffed defiantly.

"As I told you before, he is not a relation."

"Oh, no, perhaps not in the eye of the law; but I should hope there are moral principles which guide us in reference to the ties of kinship."

"If you'd some moral principles that guided you in the paths of common sense, Mary, it would be a comfort," retorted John Fossdyke, angrily.

"I may be a fool—quite as big a fool as my unfortunate godfather; but I'm not an idiot either, John," retorted Mrs. Fossdyke, now perfectly white with anger. "Again I ask you, who is Miss Hyde?"

And now it began to dawn upon John Fossdyke that he was likely to get the worst of this quarrel, for he was very fond indeed of Bessie, loving her as his own daughter, which she was not, whatever suspicions might have arisen in the brain of Town Councillor Totterdell or the wife of his bosom; but he foresaw that Mrs. Fossdyke's jealousy was aroused

concerning the girl, and that it would probably overwhelm the regard in which she had held her. The calling her ostentatiously Miss Hyde, instead of the more endearing Bessie, was significant of the brewing of the tempest, and in his heart the Town Clerk muttered maledictions against Totterdell the inquisitive, heavy, if low.

"Well, Mr. Fossdyke," resumed the lady, lighting her bed-room candle, with no little parade, "I ask you once more, Who is Miss Hyde?"

"You had better ask her, Mary?"

"Oh, you needn't think I haven't done that, but she declines to tell me anything about herself; says her father is dead, that her mother is still alive, but she refused to say anything further. You can tell me something about her mother, I make very little doubt."

"Go to bed, woman," rejoined her husband, sternly. "You little know what you are

talking about. If ever you gain the knowledge you crave, it may be the worse for you. Go to bed, I say, and check the scurrilous tongue of you."

For a few moments Mrs. Fossdyke was awed by her husband's manner, then recovering herself, she exclaimed, "It is quite evident you do know all about her. I have only to say I must refuse to tolerate a young person whose antecedents are involved in such questionable mystery any longer under my roof."

"It isn't your roof," thundered John Fossdyke, now thoroughly aroused, "and it is for me to say who shall shelter beneath it. I begin to comprehend how men are incensed to raise their hand against a woman, and how a century ago a country squire might have recourse to the stirrup-leather."

The lady became aware of a look in the face of her lord she had never seen before, and though a high-spirited woman, she shrank

before it, and retired without even hurling that Parthian gibe so loved of her sex.

John Fossdyke knew that this was but a barren victory. He might decree what he pleased, yet if his wife chose she could easily make Bessie's further residence at Dyke impossible. Not only as mistress of the house could she make Bessie's position intolerable, but if she suddenly discountenanced her, and said markedly that Miss Hyde was a *protégée* of her husband's, and lived with them not because she (Mrs. Fossdyke) wished it, but because Mr. Fossdyke ordered it, there would be a pretty wagging of tongues in Baumborough, and Bessie was like to have little character left, poor girl, before many weeks were over. He could picture it all—Bessie's astonishment at the first rebuff, her agony at finding herself shunned by those who once made so much of her, while Mrs. Fossdyke posed as a cross between an outraged woman and a Christian martyr, and finally the Town

Clerk cursed the wife of his bosom as he thought of what she might be capable in her wrath.

And yet she was by no means a bad-hearted woman, nor yet a bad-tempered one; a little wearing it may be at times on the subject of her family and the dower she had brought her husband; her present unhealthy state of mind had been brought about slowly but entirely by Mr. Totterdell. His inquisitiveness and conjectures had first sown suspicion in her mind. She had gradually brooded over things, stimulated all the time by her godfather's perpetual questions and speculations, till she had constructed a very pretty little romance for herself, to wit, that Bessie Hyde was John Fossdyke's illegitimate child, and that her mother was still living somewhere under his protection. No wonder the good lady's temper grew a little crisp at her assumed discovery. That Miss Hyde seemed dull and out of spirits John Fossdyke

thought only natural. She had welcomed him warmly, but somewhat sadly, on his arrival, and had, as beforesaid, pleaded headache and retired early. That Mrs. Fossdyke had commenced making Dyke impossible to her was evident to the Town Clerk, but in this he did his wife injustice; further than severe cross-examination as to her birth and parents Bessie had no cause to complain. The mistress of Dyke kept all her wrath for her husband.

But Bessie had her troubles. She had promised to give Philip Soames an answer to that question he had asked in the cricket-field in three days. The three days had elapsed and the answer had been given, and Bessie was sore at heart she had given it. She had told him that she could not be his wife without telling him her secret, and she had told him she could not make up her mind to do that. Philip had pleaded his best, and the girl loved him very dearly.

"Listen, my darling," he had said, "I'll

not believe that you ever committed any ill; only tell me that you come to me with no stain upon your name, and that no one can point the finger of scorn at you, and I'll ask for no more. Keep this terrible bugbear to yourself as long as you list, and one day we shall laugh at it together, believe me."

But Bessie had hung her head and declined to give the desired assurance, and Philip Soames had taken her in his arms, pressed his lips solemnly on her brow, and walked sadly away into the night; and Bessie had gone up to her room, had a great cry, and wondered if she could have felt more miserable if she had confided that woeful secret to her lover. He might have declined to take her, as, indeed, she had compelled him to do now; but he would have pitied her, and Bessie felt proudly that, think what he might, her story would never have passed Philip Soames's lips. Then she thought she would consult Mr. Fossdyke when he came back. Why had he

not been at home, that she might have consulted him during those three days? It was too late now. Like the sped arrow, the word spoken never comes back, and she had said Philip Soames nay, and received his farewell kiss. She must leave Dyke, she thought. She could not endure to meet her lover constantly, and he knowing there was a story of shame connected with her. She would feel now as if all Baumborough knew it. While the altercation was going on in the drawing-room between John Fossdyke and his wife, Bessie had in the quiet of her chamber made up her mind as to what she would do. She would confide to Mr. Fossdyke all that had passed between her and Philip Soames, and then she would quit Dyke and look out for another situation. That she should ever be as happy as she had been at Dyke was not likely, but she would prefer anything to going back to live with her aunt. Thanks to John Fossdyke's liberality, she had money in hand

to maintain herself easily for the next few months, and surely before that time expired she would have found something to do.

Now the Town Clerk was just as desirous of a private conference with Bessie as she was with him, and after breakfast the next morning he, perfectly regardless of his wife's snort of indignation at the proposal, said quietly,

"Come into the garden for ten minutes, Bessie; I have something to say to you."

"And I to you, Mr. Fossdyke," replied the girl, as she stepped out of the window on to the pleasaunce.

"Which of us shall commence?" asked the Town Clerk, as, having gained the rosery, they seated themselves on a bench.

"I think I had better listen to you first," replied Miss Hyde.

"Very good. What I have got to say is soon said. You will believe me when I tell you how sincerely sorry I am to have to say

it, but I see no alternative. I think, Bessie, you must leave Dyke. Mrs. Fossdyke has been so worked upon by that miserable old fool Totterdell, that she has constructed a mystery in her mind about you which makes your further stay here impossible for me. What the exact maggot she has in her brain may be I don't really know, but from her present temper I fancy you also would find remaining with her equally impracticable. Has she been making things unpleasant to you as yet?"

"No, indeed; further than that she has manifested great curiosity about my antecedents," replied Bessie, hanging her head, "she has been kind as ever."

"And now what is it that you have got to say to me?" asked John Fossdyke.

"That for a reason of my own I also think it is best I should leave Dyke. Mr. Fossdyke," continued the girl earnestly, while the blood surged to her temples, "you know

all about me, and I only know how good you have been to me. Since you have been away Mr. Soames has asked me to marry him."

"My dear child, I am delighted to hear it. He's not only a good match from a worldly point of view, but there's not a finer, more straightforward young fellow anywhere within hail of Baumborough; any girl might be proud to have won his love."

"But—but," replied Bessie, as the tears gathered in her eyes, "you know I could not say yes."

"Good heaven! girl, you don't mean to say you have said no to the best *parti* in the neighbourhood?"

"How could I do otherwise, unless I had the courage to tell him my luckless history? You know, Mr. Fossdyke, I could not do that."

"I am not at all clear about that. You have been twitted with your birth by an acidulated puritanical aunt, from the moment

you grew old enough to understand it. I also have recommended you to keep silence on the subject, and pointed out that it would be always against your getting any such situation; not, I trust, as you hold here, but as you meant seeking when I suggested your coming to us, and then your sweet cousins, no doubt, were always casting it in your teeth. Now, answer me these two questions, How much did you tell Philip Soames?—for of course you told him something—and do you think he loves you in genuine earnest?"

"I told him," replied Bessie, "my real position here; that I was neither relation nor adopted daughter of yours, whatever Baumborough might think, but simply Mrs. Fossdyke's paid companion."

"Ha! and what did he say to that?"

"That it made no difference; that he was ready to take me for myself; but I told him that it could never be."

"There, Bessie, my dear, I don't quite agree with you. If you like Philip Soames well enough, I think it will be. I don't imagine your antecedents will, from my knowledge of his character, have much weight with him. You are quite right, he must know your whole story first; and if—as I believe he will—he again asks you to marry him, your fate will be in your own hands. It will be my business to let Soames know your secret."

"I really am tired of all this mystery," exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Fossdyke, who, attended by Mr. Totterdell, had advanced noiselessly over the soft turf, and caught her husband's concluding words. "If there is a secret connected with Miss Hyde, then I claim to be informed of it at once. I should fancy I am a much more proper person to be entrusted with it than Mr. Soames."

As for Mr. Totterdell, his face depicted

the most lively curiosity, while his ears were evidently literally agape for intelligence.

"Who did he say she was, Mary?" he asked breathlessly, glancing at Bessie.

But John Fossdyke rose in his wrath, with that look on his face that his wife had never witnessed till the previous night.

"Who Miss Hyde is matters little to you, as from this time I trust you will abstain from ever darkening my door-step again; your mischievous tongue and insatiable curiosity have already caused plenty of unpleasantness in Baumborough. You occupy yourself prying into my private affairs, and I tolerate that from no man. Go, and let me see no more of you at Dyke."

"Yes, sir, I shall go," retorted Mr. Totterdell, "and I shall not return; but if you think, John Fossdyke, your losing your temper is going to stop people talking, you are very much mistaken. I assure you all Baumborough are wanting to know who

Miss Hyde is," and with this parting salvo the old gentleman took his departure.

"As for you, Mary," continued John Fossdyke, sternly, "you need trouble yourself no more about secrets or mysteries. Bessie will leave us in about a week. I have just arranged it with her," and so saying, he turned abruptly and walked back to the house.

As for Mrs. Fossdyke, instead of, as might have been expected, pouring forth the vials of her wrath upon Miss Hyde's head, she sat down upon the bench and indulged in a good cry at the idea of her departure; even going so far in her penitence, as to admit that had it not been for her godfather, she would never even have dreamt of there being any mystery about Bessie.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHAT A TEASE YOU ARE, HERBERT."

When Mrs. Foxborough heard her daughter's account of Herbert Morant's visit, she looked somewhat serious. Nid had not told all the particulars of that visit, and her mother knew very well that she had not. Mrs. Foxborough quite understood, from the way the girl told her story, that there had been definite love-passages between her and Herbert Morant, and Mrs. Foxborough now asked herself whether it had been wise on her part, not merely to allow, but to encourage the intimacy between them. She in her own heart was decidedly averse to Nid's appearing on the stage. What she desired for her daughter

was that she should marry a gentleman in easy circumstances, and never have anything to do with the profession. She would have scorned the idea of endeavouring to entrap Herbert Morant; in her eyes Nid was good enough for any scion of the peerage, but she liked the young fellow, she thought Nid also had a penchant that way. And, well, if they should happen to fancy one another, Morant was just the son-in-law she should welcome with much satisfaction. But this account of his impecuniosity was a startling surprise for Mrs. Foxborough. She had no idea but what Morant was a man in easy circumstances. A rich man, no; but a man who could take very good care of her child if she gave her into his hands. Mrs. Foxborough thought now, if Nid married him, the girl would have to begin at once to take her share of bringing grist to the mill; and then Mrs. Foxborough had grim reminiscences of many a case in her own experience in which

the wife had made the income, while the husband contented himself with spending three-fourths of it. She was much too clever a woman to say anything to Nid, but she bitterly regretted that she had allowed Morant to attain so intimate a footing in the house. As for her erratic lord and master, he was once more off on one of his country tours; but even had he not been, it is doubtful whether Mrs. Foxborough would have deemed this quite a case for consulting him about.

She yielded, of course, to Nid's petition, and allowed that young lady to send off a note of invitation to dinner for Friday night, but she puzzled her brain meanwhile no little as to how she should manage to place Herbert Morant on that distant footing that she was now extremely desirous to see him upon. She was worldly and vigilant, as keenly alive to a detrimental match as any Belgravian mother, when it came to the disposal of her treasure.

Of no gentle birth herself, she had mixed enough in fair society to attain refined manners and to appreciate them. That Nid should marry a *bonâ fide* gentleman was an article of faith with her; but then he must undoubtedly have enough money to support a wife. Morant had answered all these qualifications, she thought, and now he had unexpectedly broken down in a very essential one. And while we scheme and plot in our little way, the gods give another shake to the kaleidoscope we call life, which produces quite a fresh arrangement of the pieces, and produces corresponding perplexity in our minds as to what is the goal we are desirous of arriving at.

Herbert Morant, meanwhile, was simply delighted with the so far success of Nid's idea, and sanguine after his manner as to the result. Philip Soames had not only answered his letter, but answered it in the most satisfactory way.

"Not only," he said, "do I still stick to my old theory that there's work to be had by any man with average brains and energy, but I can find it for you. Come down and stay with me for a fortnight, and talk it over. I shall be delighted to see you, old man, if nothing else comes of it; but if you are really in earnest something else will. Given you're good to put your neck into the collar, I'll guarantee you're earning your corn. Anyway, come and hear what I have to say. It's a dullish place, no doubt, but it's all new to you. I'll do you decently, and, bar finding fault with the malt, you can please yourself on all points. Sneering at our *brose* is insulting the family scutcheon, and you'll run the risk of being mashed in one of our own tubs. We bear with no deriding of beer in our stronghold. Once more, my dear Herbert, I say come; if you're half the man you were at Cambridge, I'll show you an opening which may be a good deal what you choose to make it.

"Ever yours,

"Phil Soames.

"*Mallington House, Baumborough.*"

Mr. Morant was jubilant over this letter. He was not only bored with the tread-mill of fashion up which his feet incessantly trod, but in his love for Nid he had an incentive for work such as he had long required. He felt too that he had it in him. He had worked hard enough at times in the getting up of all sorts of amusements, such as balls, private theatricals, cricket-matches, picnics, &c.—why should he not expend all this energy in something remunerative? Yes, office hours would, of course, at first come irksome. It would be a deuce of a bore getting up at half-past eight, or thereabouts, and going to bed at midnight would no doubt have a humdrum flavour about it to start with. But there were some of his acquaintances in the Guards who he knew had often to meet terribly early engagements, and yet these things never seemed to disturb the equanimity of those light-hearted warriors amid the small hours. He supposed it was easy to educate yourself, and to get along upon

about four hours' sleep. We are all creatures of habit, and lying in bed till twelve is simply chronic indolence. No, in the future, like "Young Phillip, the falconer," of the old ballad, he meant to be "up with the dawn," and then he burst out laughing as he thought of young Dimsdale's rendering of the old saw the night before last at a late supper party—

> "Early to bed and early to rise
> Shows a man can be a fool if he tries."

Mr. Morant arrived in excellent time at Tapton Cottage; but if he had counted upon the chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Nid he was mistaken, for he found Mrs. Foxborough alone in the drawing-room when he entered. That lady welcomed him warmly, thanked him for sending the box, and murmuring something about dinner being ready directly, motioned him to a seat.

"I am going to bid you good-bye for a bit after to-night, Mrs. Foxborough," said Herbert. "I am going into the country."

"Ah, for some shooting," rejoined his hostess. "I don't know much about such things, but is not this the month you commence to kill partridges?"

"No, I am going away with far higher views than mere amusement," rejoined Morant, in somewhat grandiloquent fashion. He had a misty idea that there was something heroic in earning his own living. "I am going into the country to discuss my future career with an old friend."

"I am sure I wish you every success most heartily, Mr. Morant. I fancy you will do well in whatever you set your hand to. I was sorry to hear from Nid that it had become necessary, not but that I think it all for your good. Still, I am afraid it means that you have lost money in some way, which is always rather disheartening."

"No, Mrs. Foxborough; I have lost no money, but I have spent it. You see before

you a reformed character, bubbling over with virtuous resolutions."

"Let me see him quick," cried Nid, as she advanced into the room, "before he has bubbled over and there is no virtuous resolution left."

"Nid, my darling!" said her mother, reprovingly.

"You are right, Miss Foxborough; 'methinks he doth protest too much.' Nevertheless, my fair confederate, your advice has been taken, the oracle has spoken. I am going to rise in future at half-past eight, to retire to bed early; in fact, to become a regular business man and leading citizen."

"And what is to be the business, and where?" asked Nid, as they walked in to dinner.

"Upon my honour, I don't know, but it must be immensely facilitated by early rising; don't you think so, Mrs. Foxborough? Let me manage that chicken for you. I assure

you I spent this morning in the study of alarum clocks. I never yet slept with one of those fiendish instruments of torture in the room. It must be a perfect acoustic shower-bath when it goes off."

"But mind, you will have to get up when it calls you, and not behave like that bad-tempered man at Cambridge you told me about who only threw his boots at them, and broke twenty-seven one term," laughed Nid.

"Ah! poor Tom Rawlinson. I am afraid I am a little like him. He was always going to begin reading, but he got plucked for his 'smalls,' and faded away from academic groves in spite of all his resolutions and mechanical contrivances."

"Ah, Mr. Morant, but you are not going to share the fate of Mr. Rawlinson, and be what do you call it? I don't know what it means in the least, but presume it means failure in some shape," exclaimed Mrs. Foxborough. "Here's success to the new undertaking,

whatever it be, and best wishes." And so saying, the hostess raised her glass to her lips with a cheery smile. "And now, Nid, run and get your cloak, and tell Ellen to bring me mine; the brougham will be round directly."

No sooner had her daughter left the room than Mrs. Foxborough, with her accustomed frankness, came to the point.

"You are going away, Mr. Morant," she said, "and have no sincerer well-wisher than I am. When you come back I must ask you to visit us rather more sparingly. You doubtless mean nothing, but you pay my little girl a good deal of attention. She has seen nothing of the world as yet, and I don't want the child made a fool of. Girls of her age, especially with her somewhat romantic temperament, are quite apt to mistake good-natured courtesy for something more, and I do you the justice to think you would wish that no more than I should."

"If I pay your daughter attention, Mrs. Foxborough, it is with the deliberate intent of

winning her for my wife if I can ; so pray don't think of my visiting here in any other sense. If I have said nothing to you as yet, well, I am not quite sure that I have made progress enough with Nid to justify my doing so."

These lovers, these lovers—can they ever be relied on to tell the exact truth ? To each other, of course not, for the glamour of their passion colours all their speech ; they mean it at the time, but it rarely lasts for all time. Herbert Morant was hardly speaking to the best of his belief when he professed to doubt his progress with Nid.

" We won't discuss that for the present, Mr. Morant. By your own confession you cannot afford to marry as yet, and therefore it would be hardly fair on so young a girl as Nid to hamper her with an engagement. Don't get angry at the word hamper—I use it advisedly. You can both well afford to wait ; and though I don't want you to come too often, pray don't think you are 'boycotted.' Succeed in your

new career, and show me you can maintain a wife, and if Nid can make up her mind you will have no enemy in me. Now, Mr. Morant, we understand each other, and there's my hand."

Herbert pressed his hostess's hand and uttered some incoherent words of gratitude, in the midst of which the door opened, and in walked the subject of their conversation.

"Really, Mr. Morant, if it wasn't with mamma, who can do no wrong, I should say I had interrupted a love scene," exclaimed Nid.

"I am not at all sure you haven't," rejoined her mother, laughing; "but quick, Ellen, give me my cloak; it is high time we were off."

"What were you and mamma having such a confabulation about?" asked Nid, between the acts of the Trovatore.

"Shall I tell you? She was giving her

consent to my marriage whenever I had acquired sufficient means to maintain a wife."

Nid coloured, and became absorbed in contemplation of the house, sweeping it with her glasses as if in anxious search of some much-valued acquaintance.

"The trouble will be getting some one else's consent afterwards," continued Herbert. "Do you think I have any chance, Nid?"

"How should I know?" rejoined the girl pettishly over her shoulder. She knew very well what he meant. She regarded herself as tacitly engaged to him, but yet she was a little flustered at the idea of being asked to marry him in downright plain English. She was very young, bear in mind.

"Who should know better, darling? I don't want to ask your mother this, Nid. Have I a chance?"

Still no answer, and Miss Foxborough apparently more intent upon seeking that valued acquaintance than ever.

"You won't see me again for some time, dearest. Say, at least, you shall be glad to see me back."

Suddenly Nid dropped her opera glasses, a little hand stole into Morant's, and a murmured "What a tease you are, Herbert," fell upon his ear.

It was not a very direct answer to his question, but he seemed quite content, and till the fall of the curtain Mrs. Foxborough was, sad to say, left entirely to her own meditations.

CHAPTER X.

THE OPENING OF THE BAUMBOROUGH THEATRE.

Mr. Fossdyke speedily found that his prognostications were fulfilled. Mr. Totterdell, formerly exasperating merely from fatuous curiosity, had now become actively malignant. He trotted about giving a somewhat garbled account of the way he had been turned out of Dyke, "merely because I expressed, what all Baumborough expresses, some wish to know who Miss Hyde really is:" and then Mr. Totterdell went on to insinuate that if there was not something wrong there would surely be no reason to make a mystery about her. He hoped his poor god-daughter, when she did discover the truth, might find it

still possible to get on with her husband. He wished to insinuate nothing, but the skeleton in the cupboard was almost certain to be discovered sooner or later, and want of perfect confidence between man and wife had been productive of domestic unhappiness from time out of mind.

Only din things sufficiently into people's heads, and they will end by believing anything. They always argue that there must be some truth in it; it may not be all true, but there is foundation of some sort for the story, and before a week was passed there were not wanting those in Baumborough who looked askew at Miss Hyde. Moreover, Totterdell's pertinacious inquiries into the financial affairs of the Council, attributable chiefly to his irritation at having been sharply snubbed in Fossdyke's office, began to beget a slight distrust of the Town Clerk. Once more it was buzzed about that the tradespeople had always trouble in getting their

money from John Fossdyke, and a vague suspicion was abroad that he was in monetary difficulties. True, his friends argued that it was impossible; look at the emoluments he held, his business was pretty good, he had got money with his wife, and some of the farmers around Baumborough quite guffawed at the idea when it reached their ears. "Lawyer Fossdyke want money! Why, that bangs all, he's always some to lend, man, to any one with decent security." Still, spite of all this, there were some members of the Municipal Council who held it would not be an injudicious thing to take strict stock of their affairs, to look into their investments as well as their books.

John Fossdyke met all this not altogether without annoyance, but certainly with unblenching front. His accounts, he said, were ready for the Town Council whenever they chose to demand them, and he should be happy to tender ample explanation on any

point that might not seem perfectly clear to them; but he was not going to submit to cross-examination by a fussy busybody simply because he happened to be elected to the Corporation—an individual, moreover, whose scandalous tongue had compelled him to close his doors against him. If John Fossdyke was not having altogether a rosy time, neither was Mr. Totterdell. Both the Town Clerk and Miss Hyde were popular in Baumborough, and a very large portion of the community took their parts with considerable vehemence. Mr. Totterdell, on the contrary, was very much the reverse; and even those who for one motive or another ranged themselves on his side, manifested no little contempt for their mischief-making leader. Another thing, too, that had been a veritable staggerer for Mr. Totterdell, was the sudden defection of his god-daughter. That gentleman, the afternoon he left Dyke, white with indignation at being morally

kicked out of the house, flattered himself that Mrs. Fossdyke would take up the cudgels in his behalf, and deafen all Baumborough with the story of her wrongs. Mary Fossdyke did nothing of the kind; she might abuse or find fault with her husband herself, but, like many another woman, she had no idea of allowing any one else that privilege in her presence. Then again, she was honestly a little penitent about Bessie, and the idea of her going made the good lady very unhappy. She took the girl about with her everywhere, and made more of Miss Hyde publicly than ever. Some few might look askance, but Mrs. Fossdyke carried too many guns for this outside circle. She was of the very cream of Baumborough society, and not to be cowed by Mr. Totterdell's adherents. Indeed, that gentleman would very willingly have dropped the whole business of inquiry into the books of the Town Clerk if he

could, but he had associates who insisted upon his seeing the thing out. Men who start agitations or popular cries can never estimate where the craze may carry them, and when Mr. Totterdell in his petulance allowed himself to indulge in inuendo against John Fossdyke he little dreamt what would come of it.

Very angry and very sad was Philip Soames when these rumours first reached his ears. They came to him, as might be expected, in exaggerated shape. He heard that Miss Hyde had turned out to be John Fossdyke's illegitimate daughter, that there had been a tremendous scene at Dyke upon Mrs. Fossdyke's making the discovery, she having been all along under the delusion that the young lady was her husband's niece, that there had been a terrible quarrel, which had been temporarily patched up, the Town Clerk and his wife having agreed to keep their differences at all events to themselves, that

Mrs. Fossdyke was going about everywhere with Miss Hyde just to throw dust in people's eyes, but she had stipulated Miss Hyde should be sent away at the end of the month. Further, that the Town Clerk was said to be in money difficulties, and the Municipal Council would probably deprive him of his appointment.

Phil Soames was a sensible young man, and did not take all he heard for gospel, but he could not but recall his last interview with Bessie, and wonder to himself was this her secret. It was quite possible she might view the stain upon her birth in such exaggerated fashion as to deem it a bar to entering a respectable family as a daughter. It was hard to believe that a bright, handsome, straightforward girl such as Bessie Hyde could have any shameful story of her own to tell; but that she might have been brought up to consider her illegitimacy placed her under a ban was easy of understanding. Phil Soames went

grimly about his work in a manner very different from his wont; he stuck to it, if anything, more pertinaciously than ever, but the spring seemed out of him. He laboured more like a machine, very different from the gay, light-hearted manner that was habitual to him. His love for Bessie Hyde was no passing fancy, and Mr. Philip Soames was very tenacious about what he took in hand, be it what it might. But he felt powerless in this instance. He could not discover what he had to combat; unless he could prevail upon Miss Hyde to tell him her story, he was helpless.

Mr. Fossdyke, too, after his absence from home, found so many things that required his attention that he was deeply immersed in business, and so never found time somehow to see Phil Soames and confide to him Bessie's history. The girl constantly wondered whether he had done so, but, as may be easily understood, was shy of reminding him of their conversation. As for Mrs. Fossdyke, she had

studiously avoided all reference to delicate subjects since the scene in the rosary, and though her husband not only recognized, but had told her so, how well she had done her wifely duty in confronting all the scandal Mr. Totterdell had set rolling, yet he had been no more communicative to her than to Phil Soame ; so that relations in the Dyke family still lacked confidence and cordiality all round in great measure. One thing specially noticeable, as many remembered afterwards, was, that John Fossdyke seemed out of spirits, and somewhat irritable, all the time. And yet one of the schemes he had set his heart on had arrived at maturity, for the Baumborough Theatre was a thing accomplished, and the opening night, under the patronage of the Mayor and Municipal Council, announced in gigantic posters all through the length and breadth of the town. If Baumborough had doubted whether it wanted a theatre at one time, it had no sort of uncertainty but that

was one of its requirements now — in fact, Baumborough was all agog for the eventful evening, and quite marvelled how it had managed to endure life so long without a dramatic temple. Everybody was going, not only the upper social stratum, but all the tradespeople and the shopmen had announced their intention of being present. A lessee of substance had been procured, and he had made satisfactory arrangements with an excellent provincial company to take Baumborough in their tour, and the theatre was accordingly announced to open with a Robertsonian comedy.

It was curiously illustrative of the old axiom, that he who bears the brunt of the battle does not always get the credit of winning the fight, for the bigger half of Baumborough were under a hazy impression that the erection of the theatre was due chiefly to the unflagging exertions of Mr. Totterdell. It was true he told every one so, and there is no doubt if you

persistently tell people a consistent story of yourself, the majority will in the end believe you. He had been the bane of the contractor's life, with his endless questions and impossible suggestions, for he had been perpetually in and out all the time the building was in hand, while John Fossdyke, without whom the thing never would have come to pass, had seldom gone near it. Mr. Totterdell was now buzzing about like a hilarious bluebottle, rubbing his hands and saying he had devoted a good deal of time to it, to say nothing of taking a good deal of trouble; but he did think—yes, he might venture to say—Baumborough would pronounce it a very bright, pretty little house when they saw it. And people believed this old impostor, who in reality had vexed the souls of those entrusted with the work, and even in some cases slightly hindered it.

But the evening came, and the Market-Place of Baumborough resounded with the rattle of wheels; vehicles of all descriptions rolled over

its stones, private carriages from round about and the suburbs of the town, hack flies hired from the principal inns, even the hotel omnibuses were in requisition, and the ladies of Baumborough, in silk and satin, flounce and furbelow, thronged into the stalls and boxes. It was a full house—stalls, pit, dress circle, upper boxes, and gallery were crowded, and during the overture Baumborough had plenty to do in admiring the really pretty little theatre it had acquired, and in exchanging salutes. The Mayor was there with all his family, beaming in all the glory of a stage box. The Town Council generally were scattered about, including not only Mr. Totterdell, more than ever convinced that this gaily-lighted festive amphitheatre was all his creation, but even Stanger, its whilom fierce opponent; but Stanger, the representative of Pickleton Ward, was a sound, practical man, who said he combated theories, but always accepted accomplished facts.

John Fossdyke, with his wife and Miss Hyde, were there in the stage box opposite the Mayor's. Mr. Philip Soames was there, moodily meditating whether it would be out of place to go round between the acts and say "how do you do" to Mrs. Fossdyke. Several of the clergy were there, who, without being engaged in that incongruous absurdity, "the Stage and Church Guild," could see no harm in the innocent amusement the English stage as a rule affords. There are plenty of extremists of all creeds in these days, alas! who, by their puritanical dogmas, are teaching men rapidly to profess no creed at all, and cannot be made to see the harm done to all religion by their rabid intolerance.

The curtain rises on that old favourite play, "Ours," and the audience greet the garden scene at once with a good-humoured burst of applause. A play that always goes, if played, and yet makes us sometimes wonder why it should, the grand effect of the second act

culminating in a lady making a pudding in the third. It certainly was Mrs. Bancroft who was the original compounder of that pudding, and that goes for a good deal. Her business has become, of course, traditional. The piece went as well as ever, the company were capable, and the audience were delighted. Seated next to Mr. Totterdell was a dark-complexioned gentleman, attired in the orthodox sables, who exercised that gentleman immensely. He was apparently a stranger, at all events Mr. Totterdell had never seen him before, and any enigma of this kind had the mysterious fascination that double acrostics have upon some people.

"Monstrous pretty little theatre," remarked the stranger at the end of the first act. "I suppose all your leading notables are here to-night—the Mayor that, I presume, judging by his chain of office, and, God bless me"—and here the stranger suddenly paused, and looking rapidly round in another direction than the

stage, inquired who that gentleman was in an upper box.

"That, sir, is a brother member of mine on the Municipal Council, Mr. Brocklebank, perhaps, next to myself, the chief promoter of the theatre you have done me the honour to admire. It cost me a good deal of time and trouble; there were prejudices to be overcome, but to-night's triumph repays me for all. My name, sir, is Totterdell—a name you will find tolerably well known in Baumborough. May I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name! Ah, yes! my name! My name is Viator, and I am staying in the neighbourhood."

"Vyater—a very singular name; sounds as if you were of foreign extraction."

"Yes, of what is designated nomad Italian origin, I fancy. But who is that gentleman in the O. P. stage box?"

"Might I ask what you mean by that?" inquired Totterdell.

"Why, you told me you mainly got up the theatre, so I naturally supposed you understood theatrical slang. The O. P. side means opposite the prompt side, and the prompter is always on the stage left."

"Ah, you mean in the box opposite the Mayor,—that is John Fossdyke, our Town Clerk. A bumptious, bad-tempered man, that I intend to have turned out of the place before long. He don't know his place," continued Totterdell, with increasing acerbity. "He does not seem to understand, sir, that he is the servant of the Council, and when servants don't comprehend their situations we discharge them;" and when Mr. Totterdell got so earnest in his language, a reproving hush ran round the adjacent pit and stalls, for the curtain had just risen on the second act.

"John Fossdyke," said the stranger, in a low tone; "would you mind spelling it for me?"

Mr. Totterdell, in a much subdued voice, at once complied with the request.

"Grand dramatic effect that," observed the stranger, as the curtain fell on the measured tramp of the soldiery on their way to the East, at the conclusion of the second act. "Mr. Fossdyke been settled long in Baumborough?"

"Gracious, yes, many years; but what makes you interested about that?"

"Can hardly say that," replied the stranger, with much nonchalance. "I have some idea I knew a Fossdyke somewhat early in life. Bless you, I can't even recollect where. School with him, perhaps. Can't say where I met him, exactly; not that I mean to say that your Baumborough Fossdyke is my Fossdyke. Not even sure whether mine was a Fossdyke or a Mossdyke. Met him on business, perhaps."

"Just so; quite likely. What did you say your business was, Mr. Vyater?" inquired Mr. Totterdell, eagerly.

"I don't know that I said anything about my business," answered the other, with an amused smile.

"You seem to know a good deal about theatricals. Are you connected with the profession in any way?"

"Well, I might be, and then again I might be connected with coals," rejoined the stranger, laughing. "Yes, I do know a little about theatricals; considering I dabble in them a good deal, I ought to. You've gratified my curiosity, so I'll gratify yours. My business here was to see your new theatre and calculate whether I could get anything out of it on some future occasion."

"And you're much gratified, of course?" remarked Totterdell, pompously.

"Hum! If I've seen 'Ours' once I should think I've seen it thirty times. It's done well here, but I've seen it done better. You've a big house to-night; but if you're a fisherman you'll understand what I mean when I

say this is the first cast of the net in a new swim. It's a chance whether you will catch as many fish again. No, I've reckoned you up; you're worth a fifty-pound note, for a two days' spec, might run to a little more."

"Nonsense, sir; why I look forward to a regular theatre, open nearly all the year round."

"Bosh," responded the stranger, blandly, if not politely. "Your lessee's no such fool as that; he knows if he tried that game the shutters would be up for good after the first year. Stock companies, as a rule, my good sir, are amongst the institutions of the past."

Bosh! to a Town Councillor! Mr. Totterdell felt this was revolutionary, an upheaval of things, prophetic of woe to the nation. The word bosh might possibly be used by one Town Councillor to another. The great Stanger, indeed, upon one memorable occasion, had recourse to the somewhat

offensive word, but it was not to be permitted of the outside public. However, before he could clothe the rebuke that rose to his lips in words of sufficient severity, the curtain rose upon the third act.

"Now, my friend," said the unabashed stranger, "you'll understand there's a good deal in the making of a pudding. If it wasn't cleverly compounded this act wouldn't pull through."

Philip Soames, after a stern argument with himself, had at last determined that common politeness required he should go round and pay his respects to Mrs. Fossdyke. After chatting a bit with that lady and her husband, he lingered a little at the back of the box with Miss Hyde.

"Am I to take your answer of the other day as final, Bessie?" he whispered.

"I am afraid so, Philip," she replied, softly. "Unless, indeed,—but that, I fancy, is unlikely."

"Unless what?" he asked, brusquely.

"Unless Mr. Fossdyke speaks to you about me. If he should you will at all events know why I feel I am bound, in justice to yourself, Philip, to say no when I would gladly say yes. I make no secret that I love you, but I cannot marry you."

"Mr. Fossdyke speak to me!" he replied. "What about? Is it likely?"

"No; I don't know; I should think not. Please don't ask me anything more, Philip."

"I won't now, nor will I till I have had a talk with Mr. Fossdyke; if he does not speak to me I mean to speak to him, Bessie. Good night," and, having pressed her hand warmly, Philip Soames withdrew to witness the third act of "Ours."

John Fossdyke looked gloomily on at this, as indeed he had at the whole representation. Considering how energetic he had been about promoting the erection of the building, it was singular how little interest he took in

the play. He never left his box, and said but little to either his wife or Bessie; but gazed at the stage in a moody, pre-occupied fashion, as a man might who was there from a sense of duty, but who, far from being either interested or amused, was scarce conscious of the pageant passing before his eyes. More than once the stranger eyed him keenly, and at last said in a low voice—

"I suppose Mr. Foss—Fossdyke thinks from his official position that he's bound to attend when the Mayor and Council patronize the show, or else he gives me the idea of rather disapproving of theatricals, or at all events being somewhat bored with them."

"There you make a mistake," returned Totterdell. "He was one of the advocates of the scheme, but he turned out a bit of a humbug."

"How so?"

"Why, he said he understood a good deal about theatricals, but the minute the thing

was in hand and fairly began, he never came near the place. No, sir, the whole superintending of the building was left to me, and a pretty life I led the contractors I can tell you."

In justice to Mr. Totterdell, it must be admitted that the contractors would have subscribed to this opinion.

"Oh, they want looking after, those fellows," rejoined the stranger, carelessly. "Fossdyke any family? Is that his daughter, for instance, in the box with him?"

"No, that's Miss Hyde; a mystery, no one in Baumborough knows who she is, and when I say she isn't his daughter she may be for all I know. I don't say she is, but she may be. She may be anybody, indeed."

"Quite so. Nice-looking girl, anyhow," replied the stranger.

"She's a very flippant young woman," retorted Totterdell, quickly, who had his suspicions that Bessie sometimes rather laughed

at him. "Lor'!" he continued, "it quite makes one shiver," as the simulated whistle of the wild Crimean snowstorm from the stage smote upon their ear, and Sergeant Brown enters the hut accompanied by a rush of snowflakes.

"Great effect from a well-toned whistle and a winnowing machine at the wing, isn't it? So they don't know who Miss Hyde is, eh?"

"No. You seem to take rather an interest in Fossdyke's family, Mr. Vyater. By-the-bye, how do you spell your name?"

"Depends upon what branch of the family you belong to," rejoined the stranger. "As a speller I'm always variable; it isn't my strong point."

"And you are stopping?" asked Mr. Totterdell.

"Bless you, I hope not. I'm like an eight days' clock, I never stop unless I'm run down. I'm always on the move, here, there, and

everywhere. 'I'm always on the move, sir,' as the old song says."

Mr. Totterdell said no more; it had suddenly occurred to him that this stranger was as flippant as Miss Hyde, and no more disposed to give an account of himself. Mr. Totterdell distrusted people who were not prepared to unfold their lives and pursuits, at all events so far as he was concerned, and he both feared and reprobated that favourite pastime of the present day called "chaff." He was conscious of much inability to take part in that amusement, and that when cast amongst it he was like the blind man in the game of blind man's buff, the recipient of many tweeks, buffets, and pinches, and with no recollection of having caught any one.

The comedy came to a conclusion amidst tumultuous applause, all the performers were "called," and then came a pause before the after-piece, during which the Mayor and a few of the leading citizens went behind the scenes

to congratulate the manager. It was not to be supposed that fussy, pompous Mr. Totterdell, who had finally convinced himself that he was the founder of the Theatre Royal, Baumborough, would neglect this ceremony. But although he had haunted the building during its growth, Mr. Totterdell was a novice behind the scenes. He lost his way, got his toes trod on by carpenters and scene-shifters, and finally was brought up "all standing" in speechless astonishment at coming across the flippant stranger engaged in conversation with a lady whom he at once recognized as the portrayer of "Mary Netley" in the comedy.

"If you are looking for the manager's room it's there to the left. Here, one of you fellows, just show this gentleman to Mr. Sampson's room, will you, please," said the stranger airily.

"Who is he? Who the devil is he?" muttered Totterdell, as he followed his guide. "I'll ask Sampson; he's sure to know."

But in that Mr. Totterdell was mistaken,

the manager had a somewhat numerous levee, and consequently but little time to give to any one individual. He could naturally give no answer as to who a man was whom he didn't see, and had very insufficient time to have described to him. Mr. Totterdell emerged from Mr. Sampson's sanctum no whit the wiser, only to find the stranger still discoursing volubly with some other members of the company, and the old gentleman's curiosity began to attain white heat concerning whom he might be.

John Fossdyke had not been amongst those who had "gone round" to congratulate Mr. Sampson, and to drink success to the Baumborough Theatre, for the champagne corks were flying in the manager's room ; that wine, as is well known, being rather a specialty of all theatrical enterprises. The Town Clerk certainly justified the stranger's criticism, and looked as if, though some sense of duty constrained him to be there, his thoughts were

miles away. He looked round the house very little, and gazed at the stage in a dreamy, abstracted manner that attracted his wife's attention. She could not understand her restless energetic husband in this absent and apathetic state, and at last said to him, "Are you ill, John? If so, perhaps we had better go home at once."

"No, nothing is the matter. I have a bit of a headache, but I will see it out. We must, Mary; the carriage won't turn up till the performance is over, remember."

In the mean time the stranger had once more resumed his seat at Mr. Totterdell's side, and that gentleman determined once more to try a little cross-examination.

"You seem tolerably at home behind the scenes, sir," he remarked.

"Yes," rejoined the other, carelessly, "the back of the floats is no novelty to me; but," he continued, laughing, "considering you built the theatre, it struck me you weren't

very good at finding your way about, you seemed regularly dumbfoozled."

Mr. Totterdell swelled like an outraged turkey-cock. Was this the way to address a Town Councillor? And he had given the stranger clearly to understand that he held that dignified office. He did not exactly know what dumbfoozled might mean, but nobody could regard the being told they looked dumbfoozled as complimentary.

"Well, I can't afford to see this farce out, good though it is," and as he spoke, the stranger rose, drew a silk muffler out of the pocket of his overcoat, which had been hanging over the back of his stall, and as he did so, a piece of paper, evidently drawn out with the muffler, fluttered to the ground. Mr. Totterdell was fascinated; his eyes had caught the fall of the paper; could he but obtain it he would very likely get at what he was so anxious to know, namely, who the stranger was. It was a blank envelope, that

much Mr. Totterdell could see already. The stranger was most provokingly deliberate about muffling his throat and getting into his overcoat; but at last, all unconscious of his loss, he bade Mr. Totterdell a courteous good night and left the theatre. Mr. Totterdell waited a few minutes to be quite sure of his departure, gazed furtively around to see if he was observed,—no, all eyes were on the stage,—and then pounced upon the envelope. It was open and unaddressed; and from the interior Mr. Totterdell extracted a theatrical bill. It was the programme of the Syringa Music-Hall; lessee, Mr. Foxborough; and once again Mr. Totterdell felt that the acquisition of knowledge of our fellows is sometimes an arduous and difficult pursuit.

But the curtain comes down at last amidst a storm of applause, in response to which it again rises, and "God save the Queen" is sung by the whole company. This was hardly a success, the orchestra and the

leading lady who took the solos not being altogether in accord about the key, while the company generally seemed each to have their own version of the National Anthem, and adhere to it with contemptuous disregard of their companions. Still, as the audience made their way to their respective homes, they agreed that the Baumborough Theatre was a great success. Mr. Totterdell only felt discontented. The mysterious stranger weighed upon his mind. Who the deuce was he? The music-hall bill that Mr. Totterdell had so eagerly pounced upon even that gentleman was fain to confess told nothing; people of all classes went to such places of amusement, and though Mr. Totterdell had never heard of the particular hall in question, he made no doubt it was much of a muchness with other places of the kind. No, there was nothing to be made out of that, yet Mr. Totterdell literally yearned to know who the stranger might be.

Breakfast at Dyke was at an early hour, and the post-bag generally arrived in the middle of that meal. John Fossdyke opened it as usual next morning, and distributed the letters, and then began leisurely to run through his own. Suddenly an ejaculation escaped him, and it was plain to Bessie and Mrs. Fossdyke, who looked towards him at the half cry, that the letter he was reading moved him terribly. For a moment his face blanched to his very lips and his mouth quivered—the hand that held the letter shook, and Mrs. Fossdyke, springing from her chair, exclaimed, "Good heavens! John, what is the matter?"

The Town Clerk mastered himself by a supreme effort, and rejoined in husky tones, "Nothing, Mary, nothing now; please don't fidget."

"But you have heard bad news of some sort?"

"Yes, I have heard bad news. Now, do

sit down, and don't make a fuss. I must go over to Bunbury this afternoon, and may not be back, in fact, shall probably not get back to-night."

"But, John, it is only an hour's rail to Bunbury; surely you can get through your business and come home by the last train. You look so ill, I shall feel dreadfully uneasy if you don't come back."

Miss Hyde looked anxious, although she forbore to speak.

"No, I don't think it likely I shall be able to get back to-night. Tell Robert to put up a few things in my bag and bring it down to the office. Good-bye, Mary, good-bye, Bessie;" and John Fossdyke kissed his wife with unusual gravity, and went his way.

CHAPTER XI.

"A DINNER ÁT THE HOPBINE."

Bunbury was a pretty, old-fashioned little town, distant some thirty miles from Baumborough, with which it had direct communication by rail. Bunbury rather turned up its nose at Baumborough, although double its size, as an essentially modern production, for Bunbury had been the resort of the cream of society a hundred years ago, when Baumborough, albeit in existence, was of very small account. Bunbury lay in a hole, but boasted a Spa, a delightful old-world promenade fringed with trees, and shops under shady arcades, and assembly rooms, which enjoyed a prestige of the past.

Inhabitants of Bunbury who accosted you told you of all sorts of royalties and celebrities who had disported themselves in minuet and country dance upon those boards, while the pump-room had in its day enjoyed a celebrity only second to Bath. It was a delicious, dreamy old town for an overworked man to come to; the quaint old red-brick houses and that delightful drowsy old promenade, with its benches, whereon to sit and listen to the everlasting German band, a good one be it understood, was just the perfection of utter indolence. The country all round, too, was charming with its luxuriance of wood interspersed by occasional glorious patches of moorland, and made Bunbury a place much in vogue with London men who wanted a few days' rest, for it was no great distance from the metropolis, and the communication easy.

Bunbury, built in a hole, or perhaps I should say at the foot of a hill, had gradually spread up the ascent, the sides of which were now

studded with villas and hotels, and it is with one of these last we have now to do. The "Hopbine" had been one of the very first hostelries built, as the townspeople would say, "up hill." It was an old-fashioned house, and though with a capital name, and very good quiet country connection, was completely eclipsed by its more magnificent neighbours. Still its habitués were wont to assert that there was a good deal more comfort to be got out of the unpretentious Hopbine than out of its more gorgeous competitors, and that old Joe Marlinson had better stuff in his cellars than any one else in Bunbury. The landlord was a bit of a character. He had a fairish sum of money laid by, at all events enough to make him independent, and though courteous ever to his regular customers, or to any one he reckoned a gentleman, he could be unmistakeably awkward to those who did not come up to what he considered the Hopbine standard, for the old man was fussily convinced that the

Hopbine was the leading inn in Bunbury, and that no real gentry ever went to those new-fangled hotels. Joe Marlinson, who looked like a respectable old butler in appearance, and dressed in a somewhat bygone fashion, still held to the venerable term inn, and alluded to "those hotels" with undisguised contempt. The Hopbine paid its way doubtless, but worked as it was under Joe Marlinson's rule, it was a house no man could get much of a living out of. Old Marlinson worked it more for pleasure than profit, and were you not a gentleman in his practised eyes, he would as soon be rid of you as not. He didn't care so much about what a customer spent as what he was—he was always saying the old house should never lose caste in his day. It had never entertained any but quality, and it never should while he lived. It always had been the inn of the country gentlemen round Bunbury, and he wasn't going to keep a house for riff-raff.

One Saturday afternoon there arrived at the Hopbine a gentleman from London, who desired a bed-room and sitting-room from that day till Monday. Although he had engaged a sitting-room, he elected to dine in the coffee-room. Having finished his dinner, he desired the waiter to get him an evening paper, without thinking that this merely meant his seeing the first edition of the *Globe*, which he had read coming down in the train. When he became aware of his mistake, he exclaimed, "Pooh, waiter, I have seen this. Get me something else. Haven't you a local paper?"

The waiter produced the *Bunbury Chronicle*, after which the stranger proceeded to meditate and sip his coffee. At last he once more called the waiter and said, "I see there's a new theatre open at Baumborough on Monday, I suppose I can get back if I go to it?"

"Oh, yes, sir; train leaves Baumborough

at 11.40, arrives at Bunbury 12.35—just suits, sir."

"All right, then, let 'em know at the bar; I'll stay over Monday night. And now, where's the smoking-room?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but we haven't a regular smoke-room. You can smoke here, sir, after nine o'clock, and it only wants half an hour. Anything more, sir?"

"No; might prove a little too much for the establishment if I gave any more orders just now. I'll stroll outside with my cigar."

The gentleman of No. 11, for want of a better designation the Hopbine was compelled to christen him by the number of his room, led a quiet, inoffensive life all Sunday and Monday. He read, wrote, and smoked a good deal in his sitting-room, but as he received neither letters nor telegrams, the Hopbine remained in complete ignorance of No. 11's actual status in this world, which a little annoyed Mr. Marlinson. Still his

guest was quiet and inoffensive, giving himself neither airs nor the house trouble, and though Joe Marlinson's mind misgave him No. 11 was not a genuine gentleman, still he thought he might pass in these democratic days. On the Monday No. 11 dined early, and went to attend the Baumborough theatre. He returned that night, and the next morning gave notice in the bar that he should remain another day, ordered dinner for two in his own sitting-room, and said he expected a gentleman to dine with him, who might probably want a bed. That afternoon the gentleman arrived, and a good deal to the astonishment of the house, turned out to be Mr. Fossdyke, the well-known Town Clerk and solicitor of Baumborough. Mr. Fossdyke asked for No. 11 as Mr. Foxborough, and for the first time Joe Marlinson and his myrmidons became aware of No. 11's name.

The two gentlemen sat down to as good a dinner as the Hopbine could serve up, for

No. 11 had particularly remarked in ordering it that he would leave it chiefly to the cook, but let there be grouse, and let it be a good dinner. He had conferred with Mr. Marlinson on the subject of wines, and not a little ruffled that worthy's bristles by receiving his almost confidential mention of some very old port with a deprecating smile, and observing—

"A grand wine, no doubt, the wine of a past generation, who had time to nurse their gout when they got it—somewhat obsolete in these days of hurry and dyspepsia. No, my good friend, the driest champagne you have in the cellar for dinner and a good sound claret afterwards. That I think will do, and if you have any belief in your champagne, don't over ice it, mind."

Old Marlinson was not a little nettled by this cool customer. The offering to produce that treasured old port at all was, he considered, a piece of condescension on his part to a stranger, and that it should not have

been greatly appreciated ruffled the old man not a little. He had small opinion of men who neither drank old ale nor old port. A very antiquated landlord indeed was mine host of the Hopbine. He got out the required wines, and indignantly intended leaving their preparation and distribution to the head waiter, instead of bringing in the first bottle of port after dinner as was his custom; but upon seeing that Mr. Fossdyke was the guest, he changed his mind and resolved to have an eye on things. Mr. Fossdyke was a man of position and repute round the country-side. Not county family exactly, though Mr. Fossdyke through his wife claimed connection with more than one of them, but a bustling, energetic man much respected and looked up to. In short, old Joe Marlinson thought it by no means inconsistent with his dignity to just pay the compliment of pouring out a glass of wine to a man of Mr. Fossdyke's calibre.

It struck the waiter, and also the landlord,

who contrived to be in the room when Mr. Fossdyke arrived, that there was no great amount of geniality in the greeting of the two men, nor, good though the dinner was, did they seem to thaw under the influence of toothsome soup and side-dish, or sparkling wine. Their talk seemed somewhat constrained, and not of the gay, bordering on boisterous, nature that is apt to characterize the meeting of two old chums in a *tête-à-tête* dinner. Especially did it strike old Joe Marlinson that Mr. Fossdyke seemed out of spirits, and though he gulped down bumpers of champagne, his appetite seemed very indifferent. There was an irritability about him, too, which Marlinson, who knew him well, had never seen before. Dinner ended, the host with no little pomposity put a bottle of his best claret on the table and then withdrew. It was apparently approved, for another bottle and yet another followed, and it was on nearing the door with this last, in that stealthy

way characteristic of waiters, that Thomas, the official in question, caught Mr. Fossdyke's voice raised in anger, and as he entered the room heard the stranger reply in cold, rasping tones, "The game is in my hands, and those are my terms." The words struck him as rather peculiar, but presuming it to be some business dispute, he did not think very much of it. The *séance* between the two men was late; brandies and soda followed the claret, and though Mr. Fossdyke was not reputed a wine-bibber, he certainly was by no means abstemious this night.

The Hopbine was an early house, and Bunbury might certainly claim to be an early place. It was only here and there that the unhallowed click of the billiard balls could be heard even after eleven. Bunbury was Arcadian in its habits, blessed, doubtless, with all the petty spites and malice we shall recognize in that visionary land when we get there. At a few minutes after eleven,

Thomas the waiter inquired if No. 11 would require anything more before the bar closed, and being answered in the negative, wished the gentlemen good night, and was about to leave the room, when the stranger called him back, said that he must leave by the 8.30 train for London next morning, requested that his bill might be ready, and himself called accordingly — that is, a good hour before. Thomas carried out these orders, gave due notice in the bar, and having done that betook himself to bed.

Mr. Foxborough responded promptly to the chamber-maid's appeal next morning. He was ready in good time, swallowed a cup of tea, bolted an egg, paid his bill, including the preceding night's dinner, and departed to the station in the hotel omnibus, an institution which, much against his grain, Joe Marlinson had found himself compelled to adopt. Mr. Fossdyke was late next morning, very late; but though Marlinson knew the Town Clerk

very well it was the first time he had ever stayed at the Hopbine, and consequently they knew nothing of his habits. Upon the few occasions that John Fossdyke had slept in Bunbury he had stayed at the house of a friend, but it was rarely when business called him there that he did not manage to get back to Baumborough at night. Still, though he had given no orders, the head chambermaid thought she might take it on her own responsibility to knock at his door at ten, a late hour for Bunbury, but there was no reply; and that damsel, knowing from the depths of her experience that men sometimes were long sleeping off their wine, and having gathered from Thomas that No. 11's little dinner had been prolific in the matter of drink, troubled her head no more until about twelve, when she again tapped at the door. That is the discomfort of these semi-civilized districts; in our provincial hotels, as in America, they won't let you sleep. In London or Paris I don't

suppose they would disturb you for two or three days; they understand the cosmopolitan citizen in those places, who is very uncertain in his getting up and lying down. However, again that chambermaid met no response, and again she went away on the fidget. No uneasiness, bear in mind, with regard to the health of John Fossdyke, but she liked to see her rooms done by midday or thereabouts, and Mr. Fossdyke was upsetting the whole of her routine by his persistent slumbers. It is astonishing how interfering with their routine exasperates people, and that men should ever invite one to breakfast is cause of enmity in the minds of many; there are those, remember, who would always prefer attending a friend's funeral to his breakfast. The one is a final solemnity, the other capable of ghastly repetition. Those breakfasts of Rogers make one shiver to read about. A sarcasm with your French roll, and your cutlet served up in an epigram at your own expense.

But in the mean time we are forgetting John Fossdyke. Two o'clock came, and still the Town Clerk made no sign. That a man could slumber to that hour in the day was beside the Hopbine experience. The chambermaid knocked once more, and this time as a person having authority, who would not longer be denied; but still there was no response nor sound to be heard from within the chamber. The woman got uneasy, and resolved to acquaint her master. Mr. Marlinson opened his eyes wide when he heard of the state of things. He in particular, of specially early habits, could understand no man taking such prolonged and unnatural rest. Mr. Fossdyke might have had a fit; the chambermaid was instructed to batter the door once more, and, failing to get reply, to immediately report the same to Mr. Marlinson.

The woman did as she was bid, but speedily returned to say that she could get no answer whatever from Mr. Fossdyke's chamber, and

her face showed clearly that she feared something amiss. Old Marlinson himself thought the thing looked serious, and at once ascended the stairs, and after delivering himself of a storm of knocks, enough to have awakened the seven sleepers, without response, he turned the handle.

"It's no use, sir," said the chambermaid; "it's locked. I tried it myself before I came to you."

But the lock was only such as is on ordinary bedroom doors, there was no bolt, and at the instigation of his master the boots, with a vigorous kick or two, speedily burst it open. The blinds were drawn close, and the glimmer of daylight that penetrated the apartment did not at first permit eyes blinded with the full flood of sunlight to see what was within the room; but already a great awe fell upon them; and the unbroken stillness told them they were in the presence of a terrible tragedy. Quickly old Marlinson entered the room and

drew up the blind from the nearest window, and then a scream from the chambermaid broke the silence. Half-dressed under the window at the other side of the room lay John Fossdyke, a smile almost on his face, but with a quaint, old-fashioned dagger buried in his heart. A chair and the writing-table which stood in the window were both upset, but otherwise there was no sign of a severe struggle, neither was there much blood. The weapon, the obvious cause of death, had been left in the wound, and prevented any great effusion of blood. The shirt-front was a little stained, that was all.

For a few seconds old Joe Marlinson stood stupefied. Murder is happily not customary in hotels, and the present tragedy was quite outside the old man's experience. The boots, a practical man, was the first to recall him to a sense of the situation.

"I suppose, sir," he said, after raising the dead man's head for a moment, and then

becoming conscious of the inability of any one in this world to do aught for him, once more gently allowing it to rest upon the floor—"I had best fetch the police and send for a doctor."

"Fetch the police! Yes," repeated old Marlinson, rousing himself—"yes, and a doctor, and in the mean time close this room; and mind," he said, turning to the chambermaid, "nobody is to enter it. Draw a table, or something, across the door, as the lock is broke," and then the old gentleman went down to his snuggery and pondered what he should do next.

The result of his cogitations was that evening Dr. Ingleby received a telegram—

"Something very serious happened to Mr. Fossdyke; please come over by first train.

"From Joseph Marlinson, Hopbine Hotel, Bunbury."

CHAPTER XII.

SERGEANT SILAS USHER.

CHIEF-INSPECTOR THRESHER, head of the Bunbury police force, was a shrewd energetic officer, and no sooner was the intelligence of the murder at the Hopbine conveyed to him than he at once started for that hostelry. When he arrived he found Doctor Duncome, a good old-fashioned leading physician of the town, already in the room, with Joe Marlinson, the boots, William Gibbons, and Eliza Salter, the head chambermaid. Dr. Duncome's examination was short and conclusive; there could be no doubt but what Mr. Fossdyke was dead, and had been, in the doctor's opinion dead for some hours. He withdrew the

dagger gently from the breast, thereby occasioning some slight additional effusion of blood, and solemnly informed his auditors that, which no one of them had ever doubted, was the cause of death, and then handed the weapon over to the Inspector. It was a queer little Eastern dagger such as one might pick up easily in Cairo, Constantinople, Algiers, or, for the matter of that, even in London. The sort of weapon that tourists are rather given to purchase, turning them into drawing-room toys or paper-knives. "It has pierced the heart, so far as I can judge without the post mortem, which will of course follow, and that naturally would cause death almost instantaneously," continued the doctor, and there his part in the business for the present ended; but it was of course far otherwise with the Inspector.

He naturally had to hear whatever information the inmates of the house had to give, and was speedily in possession of the story of

Mr. Foxborough's arrival there on the Saturday, how he stayed on and went to the opening of the Baumborough Theatre on Monday, how the deceased gentleman arrived to dine with him on the Tuesday night, how high words had been heard to pass between them, and how early upon Wednesday morning Mr. Foxborough settled his bill and departed. Mr. Marlinson, the boots, and the chambermaid were unanimous in their opinion that No. 11 was the probable perpetrator of the crime; and as Inspector Thresher continued to sift all the evidence he could collect, he was fain to admit it was difficult to point with suspicion to any one else. A further examination of the dead man's chamber showed his watch and purse untouched on the dressing-table, nor did it seem likely that any property had been taken from his room. Plunder, then, clearly was not the motive of the murder. On the other hand, he had come over on purpose to meet this Mr. Foxborough. That there had

been little cordiality between them was borne witness to by both the landlord and waiter; in fact, in the opinion of both of those the manner of the two men towards each other had been markedly constrained, and very different from what might have been expected under the circumstances. Further, there were the high words which the waiter had heard, and the rather remarkable expression which Mr. Foxborough had made use of—"The game is in my hands, and those are my terms." And yet these words hardly justified the conclusion that their utterer would rise in the dead of the night and slay his guest. Another thing, too, that seemed to indicate John Fossdyke had been foully murdered was that the key of the room was gone. If it was a case of suicide the key would have been probably in the lock, but at all events would have been found within the room. The doctor had said that, as far as he could judge from the rapid examination of the body he had made, it was possible that Mr.

Fossdyke was self-murdered, though he did not for one moment believe such to be the case. Further questioning of the boots elicited the fact that Mr. Foxborough had taken a ticket for London. He, William Gibbons, the boots, had gone down with the omnibus to the station, as he constantly did, seen Mr. Foxborough into the train, and put his portmanteau into the carriage with him; it was a small portmanteau, such as gentlemen put up their things in for a few days' visit. It was the through morning train to town, patronized chiefly by the business men living at Bunbury, and stopped nowhere between that place and London.

Having further ascertained that Mr. Marlinson had telegraphed to Dr. Ingleby, at Baumborough, Inspector Thresher, after a little reflection, thought that the best thing he could do was to communicate in the same way with Scotland Yard, as the apprehension of Mr. Foxborough must undoubtedly devolve

upon the London police. By this time, as may be supposed, the news of the murder had spread through all Bunbury and created a profound sensation, for the Town Clerk was known to most of the leading citizens, more or less; and there is something thrilling when one we have known comes to a tragical ending in our midst. People congregated in knots on the promenade, and discussed the details of the murder as far as they had yet transpired in subdued voices, and those who could recall having seen the mysterious stranger were in great request and eagerly questioned. As for William Gibbons, he was quite overwhelmed with pints of ale and his own popularity. As a rule Bunbury was not wont to exhibit much solicitude about the thirst of William, but at present they seemed in a conspiracy to quench it if practicable, and it may be here remarked that William, when it came to sound ale, would have bothered a garden-engine on that score.

Joe Marlinson had turned remarkably sulky over the whole affair, refused to talk about it, and was evidently in high dudgeon that anybody should have had the presumption to commit such a terrible crime in an old well-established county-house like the Hopbine. Regret for poor John Fossdyke seemed to be submerged in the old man by the indignation occasioned by the tragedy having occurred at the Hopbine. Listening to his angry muttering one could almost believe that there were inns kept expressly in which to make away with one's fellow-creatures, and once again was reminded that from time immemorial the absurdly grotesque is running close alongside the saddest catastrophes. The evening brought two men to Bunbury, who arrived there from opposite directions. The first was Dr. Ingleby, who had heard the whole story of the murder of his old friend while waiting for the train upon Baumborough platform from Phil Soames, who in his turn had learnt it

from the guard who had come by the previous train from Bunbury, and who had charge of a retriever for that gentleman; the meeting of which animal indeed was the cause of Phil's presence at the station.

"I haven't time to think much about it," exclaimed Dr. Ingleby. "I must go on to the Hopbine, though I shall come back by the next train. From what you tell me my presence there is useless, and I shall be more wanted at Dyke. But, Phil, you must do something for me. Mrs. Fossdyke must not be left to learn these awful tidings by chance, and now the news is once in Baumborough, no one can say when it will reach her. You must go out to Dyke and break it. No pleasant task I'm setting you, my boy, but I've known you from a child, and I know you're true grit. I think, perhaps, if you broke it first to Miss Hyde it would be best. She's a steady, sensible girl that, and I have an idea would come out in an

emergency like this. Good-bye, and use your own discretion as to how, but mind, it must be told. Here's the train."

"Good-bye, and trust me to do my best, doctor," rejoined Phil; "though, God knows, it's a terrible task you've set me."

Arrived at Bunbury, Dr. Ingleby drove straight to the Hopbine, where he was cordially received by old Marlinson.

"Course I knew you'd come, doctor, and I dare say heard the awful news before you got here. It's dreadful to think of poor Lawyer Fossdyke being murdered at all, but that the infernal scoundrel should have the audacity to lure him to the Hopbine, of all places in the world, beats me. Ordered the best of everything in the house, too, and turned up his nose at my old port. I ought to have known he was no fit company for the Hopbine by that."

"Never mind that just now, Marlinson. I want to take a last look at my old friend,

and then I must hurry back to Baumborough. Remember, that those near and dear to him have to hear all about this, and it will be a dreadful blow to them. Poor Mrs. Fossdyke was wonderfully attached to her husband, and will feel it bitterly."

"Come this way, sir. I allow no one into the room, according with Mr. Thresher's orders. He lays a good deal of stress on the London men whom he expects down seeing it exactly as he found it," and taking a candle, Marlinson led the way.

The room was just as it had been when first burst into, with the exception that the dead man had been lifted from the floor, laid reverently upon the bed, and covered with a sheet. Dr. Ingleby drew back the cloth from over the face, and gazed sadly upon the features of his unfortunate friend, placed his fingers mechanically on the heart, and then peered down upon the small, clear cut through which a man's life had welled.

He knew John Fossdyke was dead; it was evident to his practised eye that stab had killed him. What motive could John Fossdyke's murderer have had?

"From what I'm told, you knew Mr. Fossdyke well, and can perhaps, therefore, clear up at once the first important fact in the case, Dr. Ingleby," said a voice at his elbow, which made him start, and then he became aware of two other figures in the room, and turned sharply to survey them. One he at once recognized as Inspector Thresher, chief of the Bunbury police force —the other, and it was he that had spoken, was a little wiry, grizzle-haired man, clean-shaved, and dressed in most ordinary fashion, with a pair of restless, bright hazel eyes, that seemed wandering in all directions.

"I'm Silas Usher, Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard," continued the little grey man, "and I'm in charge of this murder. I have heard the rough particulars

from my friend, Inspector Thresher, and must be back in town by the night train. I'm always open about what I'm driving at; odd that you'll say for a man of my profession, but I find nothing pays better. I tell people I want to know the way to Ramsgate say, having told them who I am. Well, this is the result, those who are straight, give me all the information they can, those who are not, imagine at once I want to go to Margate, and are, therefore, profuse also in their information with regard to the road to Ramsgate."

It is superfluous to observe that Sergeant Silas Usher by no means conducted his inquiries with this primitive simplicity. He was indeed one of the most astute officers in the force, having strongly pronounced that first great faculty of the detective policeman, rapid inductive reasoning.

"And what, Mr. Usher, is the question you wish to ask me?" inquired Dr. Ingleby.

"This, sir. I want you to see the dagger with which Mr. Fossdyke was slain, and tell me whether you recognize it as his.

"You see, sometimes," added Mr. Usher, "when we are called in this way the first thing to ascertain is whether there has been a murder committed at all. Lots of times when people are missing their friends rush to the conclusion they are murdered, and it very soon turns out they are all alive, though not doing exactly what they ought. In a case like this my experience tells me the first cry will be murder naturally; but there is a great probability of its being suicide. Still, what looks like clearing that question up is the weapon that caused death. I have seen it down at Thresher's place, and it is peculiar. I don't mean to say there never was another like it, but they would be decidedly rarely met with. Some of Mr. Fossdyke's relatives and friends must know if he owned such a dagger. If he did it may be fairly presumed

a case of suicide; if, on the other hand, no one ever saw such a weapon in his possession, it is fair to argue the other way, and presume it is murder, and the peculiarity of the weapon is a strong clue to the ultimate finding of the murderer."

"Well, I've not seen it yet," rejoined Dr. Ingleby.

"I know, sir," interrupted Mr. Usher, "but you will just look in at Thresher's place on the way to the train. Can't delay you two minutes, mere question whether you recognize that dagger as the property of the deceased or not. Of course your answer in the negative would not be final, but if some of his friends recognize it I should very much doubt there being any murder at all about the business."

Once more did Dr. Ingleby turn and look sorrowfully at the features of his energetic and somewhat combative friend, whose determination and fluent tongue would never

trouble men more; then gently drawing the sheet over the face, he announced himself in readiness to accompany Sergeant Usher to the police office. Upon being shown the dagger he at once said that he had never seen it before. He had been very intimate with the deceased, and had been a constant visitor to his house, but he had never set eyes upon the weapon in question. He was quite sure if he had ever seen it he couldn't have forgotten it.

"This Mr. Foxborough, may I ask if you ever saw or heard of him?"

"I not only never saw him, but have no recollection of ever hearing such a name in my life," replied Dr. Ingleby; "but it is fair to tell you that Mr. Fossdyke had business connections with many people of whom neither his family nor friends knew anything. He was a man reticent in business matters, as men of his profession are bound to be. Nobody employs a gabbling solicitor."

"Thank you, sir; that's all I want to know at present. Our people, whom I have informed by telegraph, will, what we call, reckon up all the Foxboroughs in London in the next forty-eight hours. I am taking up a tolerably accurate verbal picture of the one who was here, but the key to the whole thing, I fancy, is not to be found in Bunbury."

"Not to be found here," ejaculated Inspector Thresher; "why, you have got witnesses to identify, and all the rest, in the town. You've only got to find the man."

"That's just it, my good friend, and the clue to his whereabouts don't seem to be in Bunbury."

Dr. Ingleby looked hard at the speaker as he said quietly—

"I should have thought you would have traced him from this place most readily?"

"Perhaps you are right," replied Sergeant Usher; "but I'm a pig-headed sort of man, who can only reckon up matters my own

way. But it's time I was off to the station, and you also, sir."

The two accordingly made their way to the railway, and after the two policemen had seen Dr. Ingleby off to Baumborough, Inspector Thresher bade farewell to his professional brother as the up-train for London ran into the station.

"You'll be down again for the inquest, of course?" remarked Thresher, as he shook hands.

"Yes; but I tell you candidly I don't think we shall make much out of that; but there's no saying. Good-bye."

END OF VOL. I.