KARMA

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Karma

A Novel

By

A. P. Sinnett.

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KARMA.

CHAPTER I.

EN ROUTE TO THE CASTLE.

"IT's Mrs. Miller's party, though it's the Baron's castle, I assure you, Mrs. Vaughan. She has full authority to issue invitations."

The speaker was a slightly-built, well-dressed man of about fifty, with a fair moustache, light-coloured clothes, and a buoyant, airy manner. The scene of the conversation was the pleasant garden of the Hotel du Nord at Cologne, and the group engaged in it, three ladies and the Captain—Captain Miller, R.N.

"I do not understand," he went on, "what right Mrs. Miller has to be giving parties in another fellow's castle; but my experience of married life is, that a husband's business is to obey orders and ask no questions."

"Don't be too stupid, Jem,"—this remark naturally coming from Mrs. Miller. "This once you know as much about the matter as I do myself. Baron Friedrich said, when the arrangement was made in London months ago, that the party must have a lady at the head of it, and that I was to be the lady. That's all the mystery there is in the affair. I would have no hesitation in asking any friends I thought likely to be congenial, even if they were only friends of my own; but as regards you

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and Miss Vaughan, it goes without saying that the Baron will be delighted to have you."

"I'm sure it will be charming, Mrs. Miller, and I hope mamma will decide for us to go; but do tell me all about it yourself. We have only had the general idea as yet from Captain Miller."

"Jem ought to have been able to have explained the whole arrangement properly, Miss Vaughan, but he never will take trouble enough to make anything clear, and so he is always misleading people—"

"She doesn't know yet whether I've told it right or wrong," the Captain put in, *sotto voce*, addressing the elder lady, and apparently enjoying his ill-usage.

"At all events, I'm putting the thing in a charitable light; for if you do take trouble, and yet make mistakes all the same, so much the worse for you."

Jem being thus non-suited, Mrs. Miller went on in reply to Miss Vaughan,—

"Baron Friedrich had been telling me about the castle at Heiligenfels, which he has had put into thorough repair inside, so that it is a charming country-house to live in, while it still looks like a regular Rhine ruin from the outside—at all events, unless you look close with a telescope; and he asked me whether it wouldn't be a good idea to have a party of people to stay there in the autumn. I applauded the notion; and then we agreed that the party, to be really enjoyable, ought to consist of people who had shown some intelligent leaning towards inquiry into psychic matters. That's how the arrangement grew up."

"To have the Baron helpless," said Miss Vaughan, "in his own house, and make him tell one all sorts of things that he never would do more than half explain in London—that would be delightful."

"I want the time to be profitably spent by all of us," Mrs. Miller continued. "We'll have serious reading as a foundation for first-rate talk. What is there in the month of August, I should like to know, that ought to make people put away their books, and shut up their minds, and do nothing but gape at mountains and waterfalls?"

"But with me, Mrs. Miller, the autumn is my great time for reading and study. There is absolutely no opportunity of opening a book during the London season. I do all my reading down in Devonshire."

"Ah, well, everybody does not live in such a fashionable whirl as Miss Lucy Vaughan. But what I say is right either way. If you can't be sensible in the season, it's all the more reason why you should be in the autumn."

"Everybody knows," said the Captain, "that Miss Vaughan is sensible all the year round. Don't let her put it that way, Miss Vaughan; you're not her husband."

"Miss Vaughan is sensible enough to understand what I mean even if *you're* not, Jem. So just be quiet for a little, please, and let me speak."

"Well, Lucy at least may be content, as she is complimented on both sides," said her mother, Mrs. Vaughan, the elder lady of the group, with a little air of waving off further comments on "Jem." "So you were asked by the Baron, I understand, Mrs. Miller, to organize his party on the principle you suggested, and have done so accordingly."

"Quite so, Mrs. Vaughan, and, mind, I am not representing it as especially a fashionable party, though they are all people you might meet in London any day."

"But indeed, if there is a question which never rises in my mind about people, it is the question whether or not they are fashionable. The attraction for me in your invitation, Mrs. Miller, I frankly confess, always recognizing that which lies in your own pleasant society, is centred in the Baron himself. I am more than interested in him."

"The Baron is perfect, of course, and he has not a thought in this matter, I assure you, beyond realizing my wishes in all respects. I have mapped out all the plans, and have had quantities of all the books we shall want sent on to Heiligenfels, and Sir John Hexton is going to send a steam-launch for excursions on the river."

"But, my dear Mrs. Miller, have you recruited Sir John Hexton for one of your intellectual party?"

"Oh, well, perhaps I'll convert him in time, but he is a connection of the Baron's, you know—his brother-in-law, and I think it was the Baron wanted him asked. Claude Merland is one more of my selections. He's coming, and his friend Annerly, as clever as he is ugly to look at, poor creature, and my niece Marian Blane, and Mrs. Lakesby. Have you ever met Mrs. Lakesby?"

"No, but as a friend either of Baron Friedrich, or of yours, I am sure I should meet her with pleasure."

It had been almost settled before the little conversation recorded that Mrs. Vaughan would accept the invitation to the castle; and, before the two couples separated to make ready for the *table-d'hôte*, Mrs. Miller had the great satisfaction of receiving a definite promise that she and her daughter would come.

"For you know, Jem," said the energetic lady—"the Admiral," as she was sometimes called by her intimates, in recognition of her authority over the captain—when they had gone up to their room together, "I don't mean that I aim especially at having this party talked about; but still, if it is talked about, the Vaughans will give it a *cachet*. It is quite providential that their house in Devonshire should be in the builders' hands after that fire. They hardly ever come abroad in the autumn. They have great parties of their own at Seabury Hill. I tell you I should never have had the impudence to ask Mrs. Vaughan to Heiligenfels if it had not been for this odd coincidence of their coming to the Rhine of their own accord."

"Invitations you give in the Baron's name, Milly," said the Captain, lifting his good-tempered face out of a basin of water, and blowing the drops out of his moustache, "do honour—where the dickens is the towel—do honour to whoever receives them, no matter who they are. And if I were you, Milly, I think I would keep him as much as possible in the foreground of this business, and not let anybody forget, you know, that, after all—"

"Why, good gracious, Jem, if there is a human being I reverence and honour, it is Baron Friedrich. And I know very well that Mrs. Vaughan is not coming out of her way to pay a visit to Captain and Mrs. Miller. I'm honouring him when I show myself proud of having the management of his party. Don't be afraid of my making a fool of myself or disgracing the flag."

The Captain's face was dry by this time, and he was in a position to make a demonstration of confidence in his superior officer appropriate to her sex and attractions; for "the Admiral" was about a dozen years the Captain's junior, with bright brown hair and eyes, a trim neat figure finished off with hands she could afford to make prominent use of in argument, and feet that never feared the consequences of a short skirt.

Meanwhile Miss Vaughan had gone with her mother to the little saloon attached to the rooms selected for them, for their night's rest at Cologne.

"Did you know Baron von Mondstern had English connections, mamma?" asked the young lady. "I always thought he dropped from the clouds without any one having the privilege of claiming kin with him."

"Lady Hexton was of German birth, I know, though I don't remember having heard she was his sister. He is so remarkable a man himself, however, that one's attention is concentrated on him. And there is no mystery about his origin to excite curiosity on that score. He is the last of his family left living, but Count Blumenthal"—naming a famous German *diplomate*—"knows all about his people, and has known him at intervals from boyhood."

"And yet one can't understand him altogether."

"One can't understand him at all. He has all the qualities that make men shine in society, and yet he very rarely emerges from what seems a life of almost complete seclusion. Then you cannot account for this by supposing him a misanthrope or unsound in mind, for he is the most genial, cheerful, and sympathetic friend when he does appear in society—"

"And is simply a god-like creature to look at," added Lucy, with frank enthusiasm.

"I think he is the best linguist I know," said Mrs. Vaughan, reflectively. "In all the languages that I know anything of he seems quite equally at home."

"But, mamma, the oddest thing about him is that you may say anything in the world to him without drawing him on. You know what I mean?"

"My dear Lucy, I know what you mean much too well. I think it would be better if you made fewer experiments in drawing people on."

"Only a little, little way, mamma dear. It's so easy to drive them off, and you never can tell what people are like without giving them little opportunities, and seeing what use they make of them. But it is of no use to give Baron Friedrich opportunities"—and the girl shook her beautiful head and sighed with the utmost simplicity. Lucy Vaughan, it should be explained, was a tall and stately beauty, with large blue eyes and sunny hair, an animated mouth, in a perfect Cupid's bow, and a joyous exuberance of manner.

"It's a little odd," said Mrs. Vaughan, following her own thoughts rather than paying attention to her daughter's touching lament, "that he should have put his house in Mrs. Miller's hands. He might have found so many people, one would have thought."

"But if everybody is to read and talk about psychic mysteries, mamma, Mrs. Miller is, at all events, the right person to be hostess. She will hardly ever talk of anything else."

"But the gossip about musical-boxes, and flowers, and so forth, that Mrs. Miller is fond of, lies such immeasurable leagues below the Baron's level." Then in a lighter tone, "So you have been giving him opportunities, my dear, have you, and all in vain? I don't think you choose a suitable opening for a display of your powers. Would it be indiscreet to ask you for further details?"

"My dear mamma, there has never been time for details. He has always dragged some third person into the conversation directly it bade fair to be in the least degree interesting. At Lady Minterville's, up the river, I actually asked him to row me in a boat, and yet he managed matters so as to turn me over to Lord Millborough."

"And I'm sure you ought to have been satisfied."

"I don't think Lord Millborough was, considering the temper I was in."

"My dear Lucy" (with a shade of more serious annoyance), "it is a pity that you should ever let yourself be put out of temper; and I'm sure I should have regretted it, especially if I had known of it then."

Miss Vaughan carefully examined the pendulum of the clock on the mantelpiece, against which she was leaning, for some appreciable interval, holding a glove she had just taken off by the tips of its fingers in her teeth. Then she waved the glove about a little, and let it drop into her hand, and said with a smile breaking over features which were never used to wear a grave expression for long,—

"Well, perhaps it shall be as you wish, mamma, but you know I always reserve my right to be a Sister of Mercy!"

CHAPTER II.

THE "ADMIRAL" HOISTS HER FLAG.

Baron Friedrich was not at the castle himself when Captain and Mrs. Miller reached it, but this was no infraction of the programme. He had previously explained that he would be obliged to visit a distant part of Germany for a few days about the time fixed for the commencement of the autumn party; but that he wished Mrs. Miller to take command of the house in his absence, and receive the guests, all the more decisively in the character of *chatelaine*, with no one her right to dispute.

"I shall be but one more guest when I arrive, please to remember, dear madam," he wrote in a note that was handed to Mrs. Miller by the German major-domo on her arrival; "the servants quite understand that you are mistress, and that I am under great obligations to you, in that you enable me to have all the pleasure and none of the trouble incidental to a restoration to the uses of civilized society of the old Heiligenfelsen Schloss. The little room I reserve for my own occupation when I return is its only Bluebeard's chamber for you. Survey the rest at your leisure and allot the apartments at your pleasure."

"Which is the Baron's room?" asked Mrs. Miller, promptly, on reading the note, the sunny morning they arrived by carriage from the nearest station of the railway from Cologne, about four miles distant. She and the Captain, it may be explained, were not accompanied by the Vaughans, who had come to the Rhine in deference to Miss Lucy's desire to visit certain places along its banks, and proposed to see these first, finishing their little tour at the restored castle.

"Poor old Bluebeard!" laughed the Captain, "what an insight he had into female character."

"You ridiculous Jem! How can I allot the rooms if I don't know which is to be left for the Baron? I did not say I wanted to see the room. I asked which it was."

It appeared, however, that the Baron's room was high up a turret-staircase, and the inspection of the castle, by the suggestion of Franz, the butler, was undertaken in a more systematic way. In the restorations the general plan of the original building had been kept to as closely as possible, and the principal entrance gate led into an outer courtyard, now cheerfully laid out as a flower-garden ; and to the left, out of this, another archway led to the inner courtyard, from which three entrances gave access to the interior of the building. Of course the whole structure was perched on the top of a hill overlooking the river, and the jagged edges of its upper walls were carefully left to preserve the outlines time and decay had bestowed on them. There was no need to fear that the crumbling of the battlements had extended to the foundations. The lower parts of the castle were too solidly put together to be any less able than when first erected, to support the floors and roof of an inhabited building.

The outer gate being at the back, or on the landward face of the edifice, the entrance to the right of the inner courtyard as you went in led through an outer vestibule to the grand hall of the castle, overlooking the Rhine. In former days, indeed, though the hall faced the Rhine, it can hardly be said to have overlooked it, for the long narrow windows high up in the wall commanded no convenient view of the scenery. Probably this offered little to interest the old robber-knights who came back from Palestine, whitewashed of all their sins past, present, and to come, gaily prepared to spend the rest of their days at Heiligenfels, waylaying the commerce of the Rhine, and cutting their neighbours' throats as opportunities offered. But the architect of the restoration had cunningly cut down these windows to the level of the hall floor ; and, throwing them into one another, had converted them, below, into a series of glass doors, which led out on to a terrace—a completely modern invention—from which a magnificent panorama of the winding stream, and the distant hills beyond and on either hand, was commanded. In the hall itself some suits of armour, with authentic histories connecting them with ancestors of the Mondstern family, had been set up on either side of the fireplace opposite the principal windows ; and lance in hand, the butt resting on the ground, they stood erect as sentinels beside the broad stone hearth, that modern taste had decorated—in view of the small likelihood that it would be required to glow with burning logs in August—with delicate glass screens, inlaid with flowers and ferns.

This principal hall had been fitted up as the drawing-room of the modernized castle, and a communication through two or three small rooms in the corner of the building led round to another large hall in the next face of the quadrangle, looking up the river, which had been devoted to the uses of a *salle-à-manger*. Abundant accommodation for guests had been secured on the upper floor, and, in two or three cases, turrets afforded a third story, while the broad roof of the grand hall and stone terraces around the battlements promised charming opportunities for *al fresco* enjoyments on warm summer evenings. An awning covering a portion of this upper promenade, in the angle formed by the battlements, and the principal turret at the corner of the building at the upper end of the river face, provided moreover for the occupation of this part of the roof even during the day while the sun might be shining.

Throughout, the castle had been furnished with all the appliances of comfort that modern upholstery could yield. The bedrooms, for the most part, were cheerfully papered, or panelled with light-coloured fabrics, and fitted up with light wood furniture. In other cases the German taste for deep-toned hangings and dark walnut had been allowed to prevail; but, on the whole, the effect of the interior was that of an English country-house, embellished with a great quantity of mediæval treasures—arms, pictures, and carving, but not sacrificing its primary purpose—that of providing its inmates with the luxuries of their own era—to any fanatical pursuit of unities.

"The ruin will suffice for a fellow of simple tastes like me," said the Captain, after the tour of the house had been accomplished. "That octagon room in the main tower, with the conservatory so nicely hitched on to the rock outside, is just the place I could imagine myself smoking a cigarette in, with very tolerable comfort."

"Don't you flatter yourself, Jem my boy," replied the Admiral, calmly; "that octagon room is going to be my lady's bower. We'll find you a roomy dungeon somewhere underground, that you can have for a sulkery all to yourself."

"Cool and quiet and shady. That's not half a bad idea of yours, Milly. A fellow would be all to himself, and out of the way of the women. Why shouldn't one fit up a dungeon with a reading-lamp and an easy chair? With a latch-key in his pocket, what more would a fellow want?"

"You're always thinking of your own comforts, Jem. Do try now and be unselfish for a moment and help me choose my private room. Because I shall receive people in the octagon room, so I must have some place where I can't be disturbed when I want to write letters."

"By all means let's choose you all the rooms you'll want, because if you're not comfortable you won't leave me in peace in my dungeon."

An arrangement was ultimately discovered by which Miss Blane, Mrs. Miller's niece, could have a room adjoining one that appeared well suited in all respects for Mrs. Miller's study, and had the further advantage of opening out of her bed-room. This plan rendered it necessary that the Captain's dressing room should be at a little distance; but he pointed out that it was a capital little den in itself, and that he could go backwards and forwards in a dressing-gown and slippers in a way he particularly liked.

"It makes a fellow seem so independent when he *is* in his own quarters."

"I wouldn't allow it for a moment if I didn't know you would be perfectly comfortable so, Jem," Mrs. Miller assured him; and thus the afternoon was joyously spent in the distribution of the abundant territory at her disposal; servants following the queen-regent of the castle with cards on which the names of the expected guests had been already written, and affixing these to the various doors as Mrs. Miller gave out her decisions.

The first representatives of the expected party arrived in time for dinner that evening, in the persons of two young men whom Captain Miller espied from the battlements (where he had gone up to test a conviction he had formed in favour of battlements as a place to smoke cigarettes on) walking up the lower convolutions of the road up to the castle.

"Milly, dear," he announced, having descended to the octagon room for the purpose, "Claude Merland and Annerly are coming up the road."

"Very well, Jem, you can go and receive them in the outer courtyard, and bring them to see me here; and bring them in through the dining-hall and the library; I would like to show Merland the grand hall myself." Mrs. Miller was already quite at home at the castle, and the octagon room was comfortably littered with books, writing materials, and work-baskets; for, though its new mistress preferred to occupy herself in the intervals of conversation with books and pens rather than with needles of any sort, she liked to have some rather showy wool-work or crochet *en evidence* wherever she took up her abode. Mrs. Miller's pug, moreover, in a basket with pink silk linings, was also by this time settled in a corner of a window-seat, thoughtfully allotted to him on account of the good view it commanded of the passing Rhine steamers. Neptune, Mrs. Miller would sometimes explain, always liked to see the panorama of life. It diverted his thoughts from himself and assisted digestion.

Claude Merland, whom the sunny-tempered Captain walked some little distance down the road to meet, was a young fellow of five or six and twenty, well-made, fair-haired, good-looking, and well-dressed, and well endowed intellectually, as a single glance would show an observer of quick perception. Evidently it was on the level of their higher qualities that he and his friend George Annerly were linked together. Annerly was weakly-built, and moved with the awkward gait of a man whose limbs are not exactly alike. A large head and a shock of black hair were ill-matched with his slight frame, and much physical suffering of various kinds had left its traces on his complexion, which was sallow, and on the expression of his eyes and mouth, the lines round which were deeper than they should have been for his age, which was but just thirty. He and Merland had grown to be friends at Cambridge. His five years' seniority, coupled with intellectual gifts far above the average level, had readily invested him in Merland's eyes with attributes that fascinated the younger man's imagination, and evoked his readily kindled enthusiasm. Annerly's means had, to begin with, been of the smallest, and his birth of the humblest; and his career at the University had only been rendered possible by help of a sizarship. But he drew in the mental stimulants around him as a sponge sucks up water, and took high honours that carried with them a fellowship. Merland took a delight in the University triumphs of his friend, in which his interest in his own achievements was almost obliterated.

Annerly left the University two years before Merland, and went to London to lay siege to the strongholds of the press.

There Merland afterwards renewed his acquaintance, finding him but little elated by the very fair success he had achieved, not merely in journalism but even in general literature. But Annerly gave no explanation of the deeper gloom that had settled on his spirits, beyond referring it to the general misery that must always be the lot of a man blighted in physique.

"What possible happiness in life can ever be the portion of a poor crippled wretch like myself?" he would say, in this or some other form of words always recurring to the same deep-seated resentment at his fate. "Your friendship, Merland, is a good thing I should deplore to lose, more profoundly than words can express, but it would be affectation to pretend that even your friendship can fill up all the aspirations of my nature. I don't see how it is possible that existence can ever be anything for me but a burden I would gladly lay down."

Merland would sometimes feel something like contrition on account of his straight limbs and strong muscles, his faultless digestion, and clean healthy skin. "I wish we could strike an average, old chap," he would say, "and share alike."

"I verily believe you do, Claude, and it is a good thing for us both that we can't, for there's that in me that would poison my share and yours too. Some men come into the world accursed, and I'm one of them. Let that stand as a fact that can't be altered or palliated, that I can see, by any reasoning about the inscrutable ways of Providence. Some people would tell me I shall find my reward if I am meek and submissive in another state of existence, and they don't see the ghastly want of logic in that vapid consolation. If their theory could be worked out it would amount to this: that I am to get advantages in Heaven denied to you, for example. What justice would there be in that? Apart from the probability that you, ten to one, will lead a life far better entitling you to heavenly happiness than I shall, and assuming that we are both equally meritorious, then the arrangement suggested would simply turn the tables, and make you the victim of injustice; for your superior lot, in this short finite life, cannot compensate you for getting an inferior fate through all eternity; added to which, directly you talk about degrees of happiness in Heaven, you assume the existence of evil—from which one person relatively suffers there as on earth, and upsets the whole hypothesis that Heaven rests on. There is *no* solution for a fate like mine in terms of human comprehension. It is theoretically possible that we may all eventually get above the level of those terms, and recognize justice in what at present seems injustice; but what I protest against is the pretence that my fate, and that of other wretched beings, wretched perhaps in different ways, can be accounted for as justified by any set of ideas that a man's brain can envolve. No!" in answer to certain remarks from his companion, "I'm not irreligious, as I comprehend the expression, and *I* would not even call myself agnostic. I do not rebel against the unknown Divine justice—that may transcend human understanding, but when I say my fate is an unjust one, I am using a word that has a specific meaning, in terms of the human intellect, and along those lines my fate is unjust, and my rebellion against it, logical and inevitable. My indignation is as natural a consequence of my condition as my limp is a consequence of my short leg; and if a sugar-and-water comforter tells me I ought not to be indignant, he says as stupid a thing as if he says I ought not to limp."

"What do you mean by not even agnostic?"

"I mean that no one is justified yet in saying that anything can't be known. When we talk about the capacities of the human understanding, why are we bound to assume that those capacities will not develop sooner or latter in wholly unforeseen ways? We can think out many problems now that less civilized men would have deemed quite insoluble. Our successors may go ahead of us. Some of us yet living may push ahead. I have always felt a strong conviction that such an advance must take place one day, and that the attempted distinction between the knowable and the unknowable rests on quite a false assumption."

The two friends had plentiful opportunities for speculative conversation of this nature, for soon after Merland left Cambridge they went round the world together. Merland was supposed to be going to the bar eventually, but was circumstanced in life so favourably that he could afford to regard a profession as a refuge from idleness, to be taken up at leisure. The only son of a widowed mother, he was the heir apparent of a handsome competence bequeathed by the mercantile successes of his father; and had meanwhile more than enough for his wants as a young bachelor, with few costly tastes and middle station, by reason of a moderate collateral fortune that had come to him from his mother's side of the family on reaching his majority. He had obtained, with almost greater facility than he had anticipated, Annerly's consent to the *Weltreise* arrangement, the cost of which it was obvious from the first, if it were undertaken at all, would have to be defrayed chiefly by the richer man. Annerly's fellowship money was bestowed chiefly on aged parents, who, unfortunate even in their humble walk of life, would have been reduced to deplorable shifts but for his help; and, though he was rapidly conquering a position in which he might rely on a fair income from his pen, he had no accumulated reserves to fall back on for the purposes of a prolonged and expensive tour.

"Your plan tempts me more than I can tell you, Claude," Annerly avowed, when it was set before him with frank simplicity by the younger man.

"My mother altogether approves, old chap," Merland had been able to say, "and I have brought you a note from her. We were debating whether it would be nicest for me to speak to you about it or for her to, so I've compromised matters by bringing you a letter."

"I'm a beast of a companion for you, Claude," said Annerly, bitterly.

"All right, old chap. Call yourself any names you like so long as you agree to come. The dad, you know, can have your fellowship money while you're away, so nobody suffers, or I know you wouldn't move."

"I've tried every other sort of ignominy except being dependent on another man for my food. It would be a mistake, perhaps, to leave any experience of that sort unexplored."

"That idea won't float, Geordie, because you know exactly as well as I do that if you were bear-leading any young fellow who was a stranger, you would expect pay as well as expenses. It's only because we're friends that I can get you to come on easy terms."

"While, for such a competent bear-leader as I, the general public would, of course, bid wildly. But it is not so much bear-leading as monkey-leading that we have to talk about, and if we go, I shall not be the leader of the party."

Argument of this sort was clearly not intended to be final against the scheme, and the journey was taken. The queerly assorted companions, as careless observers thought them, went round with the sun—across America first, then by Japan and China to India, and so home by the usual route. Merland had a perfect healthy, care-free boy's boundless capacity for enjoyment, and drew his companion to all the places of amusement in all the towns they visited; and with Annerly an infinite thirst for information, knowledge, new experience of any and every sort, gave him a zest for all they undertook, which, but for his inextinguishable energy, might have failed him at this period. For the year just passed, as he confided at last to Merland, had involved him in adventures which hurt him very badly.

"It's altogether monstrous and absurd, of course," he freely declared; "but I suppose all of us desire most keenly whatever good things in this life we are least fitted to obtain. I need not tell you how far I conceive myself suited to excite a woman's love, and yet I have been wise and prudent enough to invest all my prospects of happiness on the hundred-to-one chance against me in that direction."

"But I don't see how the idea's ridiculous at all. There are hundreds and thousands of the best women in the world who think nothing at all about a man's looks—who think altogether of souls and scarcely at all of bodies. And after all, confound it, Annerly, you talk sometimes as if you were a monstrosity instead of—"

"—merely a very ugly, *chetif*, badly-made fragment of humanity. I can make all the excuses for myself that can be made. The bad health I have suffered from does not make me loathsome in any way; the limp I am troubled with is only just noticeable, and does not prevent me from walking to any extent. But a very grievous mistake was made, as far as I am concerned, at all events, when I was suffered to live at all. Whether they are more or less objectionable than I think them, my physical attributes don't fit my aspirations, and the result is torment."

Annerly told his story by degrees; not, he explained, because he found any relief in talking it over, but because he did not want to have mysteries from his friend. Oddly enough, it was with an actress that he had fallen in love.

Touched, perhaps, by the piquancy of being adored by an entirely new sort of lover, who was invested with importance moreover in the beginning—as a dramatic critic, writing in an influential paper, and carried away, when intimate with him, by the wild force of his *grande passion*, Miss Miriam Seaford had come a great deal nearer giving him a return of genuine love than might have been expected. But their actual marriage could only have been possible—if carried out under the influence of feeling alone—in plain disregard of worldly considerations.

Annerly was a lover of whose society Miss Seaford never wearied, but whose relationship to her she could never account for to her friends; and there were blood relations in her case to whom the matter had to be explained, for her career as an actress had been rather a matter of choice than of necessity.

If Annerly had been rich, an attachment to him, even though springing from the highest motives, really could have been justified in the sight of others by an appeal to those of a lower order, which friends, in such cases, always respect. But he was quite the reverse of rich; and his prospects in life, especially when he became engaged to Miss Seaford, were altogether speculative. The engagement, as Annerly regarded it, though the lady may never have fully felt it to be that, dragged on for some months; and then one day, when Annerly went to see his inamorata, he found vacant lodgings and a letter.

"You love me so truly," she wrote, "that you will want to spare me pain, and this, for me, is the least painful way of ending our day dream."

She had slipped off on a professional engagement in the provinces, arranged by her friends, who had wished to shield her from the consequences of what they regarded as her infatuation.

"It was awfully cruel," Merland said.

"No; she was quite in the right. What would my professions of love for her have been worth if I had not been willing to spare her pain at my own cost? Perhaps she did not estimate the full intensity of the torture I should go through. Perhaps she did not realize one-hundredth part of it. But what does that matter? I would have burnt off a limb for her sake; but the sacrifices we have to make are never the exact sacrifices we would have chosen to make."

Wherever the friends went Merland's joyous and sunny temperament and pleasant looks made them welcome; and, if Annerly would not in the first instance perhaps have been so cordially received, he would often be hardly the least regretted of the two when they left. For in society his mind was too active to be quenched by the sub-consciousness of his own trouble, and he never brought this needlessly *en evidence* by posing as a gloomy Byronic victim.

At Calcutta, where the travellers stayed a month, he made some warm friends, though going about less than the more generally popular Merland, who plunged eagerly into all the amusements of the place, including lawn-tennis and dancing, from which Annerly held naturally aloof, and was thus caught up in a larger whirl of party-going. Here it was that the two friends first met Mrs. Milly Miller and her faithful Captain, then holding a naval appointment on shore under the Government of India. And Mrs. Milly annexed Annerly very soon after they were acquainted.

"I don't care about looks," she explained to him in the most straightforward manner. "I care about men for their minds. I'd much rather talk to you than to your friend, though *he's* worth forty average subalterns. Some ladies like the subalterns best, but I never fell in with the fashion about boys. I'll dance with them as much as they like, and then I'll come back and talk to you."

Annerly winced a little at this undisguised allusion to his physique, but drifted with the stream of events, and, since Mrs. Miller chose to claim a good deal of his time and attention, cheerfully gave it her accordingly, and, as he readily admitted afterwards, had much to be grateful to Mrs. Miller for, in his turn, on the whole account. He passed more time at her house while at Calcutta than anywhere else, met many pleasant and intelligent people there, and gladly undertook to renew the acquaintance in London when the Millers should return home. Naturally, Mrs. Miller talked to him a good deal of a subject always uppermost in her mind.

"It is not the slightest use," she told him, "for people to sneer at me for believing in spiritualism. I don't believe—I *know*, and I only pity the ignorance of people who don't. When I was at home last I made up my mind to get to the bottom of the matter, and I went to all the mediums I could hear of, and had all I could get to my house, and a queer lot they were, all round. Now I don't say I didn't see any cheating. I saw a lot of cheating, but I saw a good deal more besides; and, though you may show me half-a-dozen forged bank-notes, that doesn't prove there are no such things as good ones. I've had tables move about under my own eyes in the light, when nobody was touching them—in my own room, too, you'll understand. I've put down a musical-box of my own on my dressing-table in one room; I've gone straight into another room and shut the door, and that box has been brought to me five minutes afterwards without the door ever being opened. What does it matter that we were in the dark? It was in the light when I left my box in my bedroom, in a room by myself, and came away. Anybody must be a donkey who does not see that it makes no difference to me that the room into which it was afterwards brought was dark or light. It came in an abnormal way, and that is all I want to prove."

"That sort of thing generally," Annerly admitted, "is as well authenticated in the books on the subject as the existence of the Nile lakes, for example, which, after all, only a few of us have actually seen with our own eyes."

"But people won't read the books. That's what I find so exasperating. They persist in remaining ignorant, and they give themselves airs of superiority to people who have taken the trouble to learn. Now I took all the trouble to get my evidence first-hand, that I might be able to meet what people constantly say if you give them an opening, 'What have you seen with your own eyes?' I've seen with my own eyes pretty well all there is to see, and yet the sceptics can't or won't see that, in face of that, in talking to me they haven't a leg to stand on."

"Dear Mrs. Miller, you are too kind to the sceptics in taking all the pains you do to convert them."

"Kind to them? Jem says I'm rude, so I suspect I hit the happy mean. But one mustn't be selfish. If I've come to know a good deal more than most of the people I meet here, I can't help doing my little best to lift them up out of the darkness they live in. I sat next to Sir William Maccruthers," mentioning a magnate of Calcutta society, "the other evening, and he said he thought I had been wasting my time over a pitiful delusion. So I just put him through his facings. I made him confess that he had never read a book on the subject, and had never been to a *séance*, and yet he asserted that what was written could not be true, and what people saw at *séances* must be imposture. Then I told him I'd talk to him again about the matter if he ever acquired a right to have an opinion."

"Depend upon it he will go on to the end of the chapter without having such a right, but having a very decided opinion, nevertheless. Even granting that you have got an important new truth to impart, there are plenty of people in the world who don't want to trouble themselves about it. Why try to make them?"

"Because nobody ought to hide his light under a bushel. If you found out a new truth in chemistry, you'd be ashamed of yourself if you did not publish it."

"But I should not concern myself with the people who did not read my book after I had published it."

"But you wouldn't stand having people meet you in society and telling you you hadn't made your discovery. Let a man tell me he doesn't care to have dealings with disembodied spirits and I only pity him; but let him tell me I've never had any such dealings, and—well, I pity him worse, and it isn't my fault if I don't make him feel it."

"You're a determined propagandist, Mrs. Miller; and your temperament, after all, is the one that moves the world."

CHAPTER III.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PARTY.

Captain Miller faithfully obeyed orders in regard to the circuitous route by which he introduced the guests to his wife's presence, and she in due turn did the honours of the more interesting portions of the castle.

"You two are favoured, you will observe," she said when all together they had wandered over the still interesting ins and outs of the curious old building and came eventually to the apartments assigned to Merland and Annerly, "by having rooms one on each side of the winding staircase that leads up to the Baron's turret."

"Our Bluebeard's chamber," said Captain Miller. "She's dying to go up and rummage there, but hasn't ventured yet."

"Jem is trying hard to goad me into doing so, but has not succeeded. The staircase only leads to the Baron's apartments, and, unless I am obliged to go up to see that they have been properly got ready for him, I shall certainly not be tempted to go from mere curiosity."

"Didn't you understand," said Annerly some time afterwards, to Merland when, their luggage having duly arrived, and their dinner toilets having been made, he sought his friend before going down, "didn't you understand Mrs. Miller to say that Baron von Mondstern had not returned to the castle?"

"Certainly; he was not expected for two or three days."

"I fancy he has come sooner than he was expected, then. For just now, in passing the turret-stairs, I saw a man turning round the upper landing. What is the Baron like?"

Merland had met Baron Friedrich in London society the previous season, but Annerly had not, and was at present at Heiligenfels on Mrs. Miller's invitation.

"A tall man with light brown hair and beard, and a pleasant look. An awfully good-looking, imposing sort of person."

"That's the man I saw or think I saw," said Annerly, with some hesitation. "It was only for a moment as he turned the corner."

"So our host has come back," said Merland to Mrs. Miller when they met in the grand hall.

"Our host! the Baron! What do you mean? He is not coming back for two or three days."

"But Annerly saw him going up to his room."

"I'm not at all sure," said Annerly with a puzzled air. "I thought I saw a man going up the stairs, but it was getting dusk, and perhaps I was mistaken."

"Can he have come back suddenly and gone up to dress? Ring and ask the butler, Jem."

The butler was quite sure that no one had come to the castle since the two gentlemen, least of all his master.

"You must have been having a little nap before getting ready for dinner, Mr. Annerly," said Mrs. Miller.

"Now, if it had been the Baron's grandfather you saw, Annerly," said Captain Jem, "Mrs. Miller would have been sure you'd seen a spirit, and you'd have got great *kudos*. But it doesn't help us along at all for you only to see the Baron."

"What nonsense you talk, Jem. Why, first of all, Mr. Annerly doesn't know the Baron yet. How could he tell if he did see him? I suppose he saw his servant going up the stairs."

"At all events," said Annerly, "I jumped to a hasty conclusion."

"Now, if you were clairvoyant," said Mrs. Miller;—"but *are* you clairvoyant?"

"Certainly not," Annerly replied, always eager to disclaim distinguished attributes of any sort.

"If you had been, you might have seen something prophetic. But I suspect we must wait for that till Mrs. Lakesby comes."

"Who is Mrs. Lakesby?" Merland asked.

"A very wonderful person, I believe, but I barely know her. The Baron introduced her to me at a party in London a week ago, and said if I could persuade her to come here she would be a great acquisition for our psychic circle."

"By-the-bye, Merland," said Captain Jem, "you must not talk about our spiritualistic party as we used in town when it was first started. We got into harmony with the latest fashions before we had done, and we're going to be a psychic team."

"Jem, you have a very bad habit of talking about these things in a tone that would make any person who didn't know you think you were scoffing and turning the whole thing into ridicule. It doesn't matter before Merland and Annerly"—in the warmth of conversation Mrs. Miller would sometimes drop the 'Mr.'s' of her intimate friends—"but I do hope you will not keep that sort of thing up before doubtful people."

"My dear Milly, you always forget that your circus wouldn't be complete without a clown."

"Dear old Jem," said Merland, putting his arm through the Captain's as they all stood together at the window, looking out into the twilight over the Rhine, "he's an awfully bad lot still, I see, Mrs. Miller. You haven't been keeping him up to the mark since we were all together in India, I'm afraid."

"Jem will be only too well off presently, anyhow, when the castle gets full of women and girls; and he'll indemnify himself, I don't doubt, for any plain truths I tell him. But you want to know something about Mrs. Lakesby. I don't know her much myself yet, but I know a good deal of her; and she really *is* a clairvoyante, I believe. Something altogether out of the common way in that line."

"Never see's anything nearer than the middle of next week," said the Captain in a stage-whisper to Merland.

"She is very reserved about her accomplishments," said Mrs.

Miller, without designing to notice the aside, "and has only been in the habit of exercising her gifts for a very few intimate friends. It is a great mercy for us that she has been willing to come."

"What does she do?" asked Merland; "does she look about the world clairvoyantly, and tell people what is going on in distant places?"

"—ssh!" said the Captain in another stage-whisper of an awe-stricken tone; "—ssh! You're talking about *Mrs. Lakesby*, my dear fellow. You must not speak of her in that irreverent way."

"What's wrong? I thought clairvoyants were people who could see—"

"Through deal boards, of course; so they can, but they mustn't. It's *infra dig.*"

"Mrs. Lakesby, as far as I can make out," said Mrs. Miller, "sees great spirits who teach her all sorts of things, exalted philosophy and so forth, and she passes this on to her friends. That's the sort of clairvoyance she practises, not mere stupid looking about into other people's rooms, like the tricks you read about of the professional clairvoyants. But, all the same, I suspect if you take her the right way, and catch the right moment, you will get the most interesting results with her, sometimes. All sensitives are very difficult people to handle, whether they are ladies and gentlemen, or paid mediums."

"But," said Annerly, "if one could be reasonably sure that she was in communication with great spirits, and learning anything resembling exalted philosophy, one would a great deal rather hear about that, than about what might be going on in another room."

"Of course—for one's self," said Mrs. Miller; "but one must have phenomena to break the heads of the sceptics with. Supposing I go to Professor Maxbur and tell him Mrs. Lakesby's spirits have told us so and so? What does he think? Why, he merely laughs at me. But if I can tell him that Mrs. Lakesby found a page in a book, clairvoyantly, that I asked her to find, for instance, and read what was on it without opening the book, he can't laugh at that, or, if he does, he's a fool."

"I'm afraied I look at these matters in a more selfish way than you do, Mrs. Miller," Annerly replied. "If I got upon a really good trail that seemed to lead me to a higher knowledge, I should be inclined to follow it on, wherever it might lead, and I don't think it would ever occur to me to turn back and try to get anybody else to come along too."

"Well, that's not my way, and I don't pretend to think that's the right way. Let's share and share alike; if we any of us get any light, don't let us hide it; if we get proofs, let us take them to the cleverest men of the age and *drive* them into the right path of investigation."

"But look here, Mrs. Miller," Merland put in; "what Annerly calls selfishness isn't anything of the sort, really. Now suppose that that fellow there himself"—indicating his friend—"who is a great mathematical swell, as you know, hits upon some new method that no one else had ever thought of before. He's got to worry it out a good while by himself before he can get his ideas into shape to put before anybody else. While he's on the hunt he can't stop to think about explaining what he's after."

"But when he's found out his new method he gives it out to the world as a matter of course; or else who on earth is the better for it?"

"Sooner or latter of course; but I can quite see that the first thing to do is to worry out your new idea."

"Here's a really good test-question for us all to fight about," put in the Captain. "We must ask every man as he comes whether he'll go in for the secret system, or for doing everything above board."

The castle began to fill next day, and Captain Miller had many opportunities of putting his test-question, which evoked more desultory conversation than direct declarations of principle.

"Marian is coming after all with the Massiltons," Mrs. Miller had announced to her husband in the morning, when some letters arrived by an early post. "You had better go down to Schönort and meet them; they will be here by the same train we came by."

"But who makes the fourth? That Professor is always happy with a girl to talk to; but how has Lady Emily been provided for?"

"Lady Emily, you may be sure, Jem, is quite able to provide for herself. She doesn't say in her note whether any one else is coming with them. Marian was to have come with her brother round by Bärenburg and down by the boat to Schlessig, but they seem to have changed their plans."

"Willy will be here in the course of the morning if he keeps to the boat idea. We must keep a bright look-out from the battlements for him."

And Captain Jem, accompanied by Merland, took up his post accordingly after breakfast under the awning on the castle-roof, from which he had spied the approach of the first guests the previous afternoon. Mrs. Miller had letters to write; and Annerly, also, remained in his own quarters.

"Bring your luggage and come along, Claude," the Captain said, picking up his own "luggage," from which he was rarely parted—a box of Turkish tobacco, with a bundle of cigarette-papers, and a match-box, attached by elastic threads to the lid.

"My luggage is more portable, Jem." Captain Miller was a man whom his friends fell readily into a way of calling by his familiar name, and one, moreover, who was somehow everybody's contemporary, so that difference of years between him and younger men was apt to be obliterated. "I've got it concealed about my person. Lead on."

"The Rhine-boat will land Willy Blane over at that village on the other side—Schlessig they call it. Then he'll have to come across in a little boat, and when we make him out we'll swoop down upon him, as the Baron's mediæval forefathers used to be down on their prey, I daresay, after watching up here for a good fat cargo-boat. It's a queer thing, when you think of it, what a rascally lot they were, those same old forefathers, and what a den of thieves this place here must have been. And now there's the last of the Barons—our Friedrich—just as good an imitation of a saint, I fancy, as this period can produce, besides a prince of good fellows all ways; and as for the castle—here are two superior people sitting on the roof, smoking their tobacco, and watching to welcome their friends. We've been born into a better time than we might have dropped on, Claude, if we'd accidentally looked in on this world a few hundred years sooner."

"Some of us have got good treatment anyway; '*that's* so,' as they say in America. But I wouldn't dwell on that idea in poor old Annerly's hearing. He doesn't find the world such a nice place."

"Poor old chap!" Captain Jem was about twenty years

Annerly's senior as actual age would have decided, but had no sense of using the phrase inappropriately. "It's a pity he looks on the gloomy side of things so much. The world as a place to live in, if he would look at it in that way, is just the same place for him, that it is for you and me; and a better place, it seems to me, than it used to be. Some things are very hard for him, but then look what a genius he is. He's bound to get on tremendously whenever he makes up his mind to try really."

"It wouldn't make him happy, I'm afraid, if he did. He's a first-rate companion; endlessly full of thought and conversation, and yet so modest and sympathetic—more interested about your affairs than his own. But he gets miserable always as soon as he thinks in anyway about himself."

"Some woman ought to take him in hand."

"He looks on himself as cut off from all that sort of thing."

"Don't you believe it. There are women in the world to suit every sort of chap. If he does something in the world to make himself famous, heaps of women would care nothing about his size—it's all a question of confidence. Look at that Professor who's coming here to-day. He's older than I am, but he makes love to every pretty girl he comes near, and has them all at his beck and call."

"But that's all mere sport for them, because he's married already."

"It can't lead to anything with them of course, because of Lady Emily; but, if there wasn't a Lady Emily in the case, Massilton would not find his years much in his way."

"It must be rather rough on her, meanwhile."

"They're both very tolerant; I don't understand them altogether. She's young and very fashionable, and that ought to suit him, but I don't think they step together quite."

They chatted on for some time longer, and then sighted the expected steamer.

"That ought to be Blane's boat coming round the turn in the river."

In due course a small boat was observed to put off from the Schlessig landing-place, and then the Captain and Merland set off down the hill.

"Willy Blane is a cousin of my wife's, though she gives his sister brevet-rank as her niece; a very studious sort of fellow, always up to his eyes in books, but A 1 all the way through. If

I was in any sort of trouble I should go to Willy Blane for help just as a matter of course."

The man they met at the little landing-stage below the castle was about five-and-thirty, shaven all but the moustache, which remained dark while his hair was almost all turned to the silvery-grey which sometimes improves rather than impairs the good looks of men who show no other signs of age. Of medium height, however, and rather carelessly dressed, with a slouching way of holding himself, Blane made no claim whatever to be noticed on the score of his physique. A hearty greeting with Captain Jem, condensed into the simplest British language, an introduction to Merland of the sternly British type, and a few instructions to the boatman about the luggage, and then the three men took the footpath up the hill. Mrs. Miller was duly inquired after by the new-comer.

"Milly is bearing up very nicely, thanks, old man, against her usual good health and prosperity."

"And the cares of her important party."

"Which are borne chiefly by the Baron's butler. Milly has the honour and glory of it."

"And that may prove very considerable. I am not easily tempted out to country houses of any kind, but this party is one I should have been very sorry not to have been privileged to join."

"The party is privileged to have you join it, old man; I'm sure the Baron thinks so."

"That's a very nice way of putting it, of course; but I entertain an opinion about Baron von Mondstern which makes me quite sure *nobody* can confer favours on *him* by being his guest, not to speak of insignificant people like myself. I have no very clear impression as to what the Baron aims at in having organised this party, but I have a strong feeling that we ought to be all the better and the wiser for it."

"How was it Marian did not come with you?"

"She wished at the last moment to travel with the Massiltons. I do not presume to control her decisions in these matters, always supposing they are reasonable, which of course they always are."

"Is anybody else travelling with the Massiltons, do you know?"

"Sir John Hexton, I believe."

Oh! I see. Yes, of course."

But Blane was too much interested in the intellectual aspect of the Heiligenfels party to dwell on details of this kind.

"I do not think," he said, "that Baron von Mondstern can have set this party on foot without having something more than a mere social entertainment in view. His nature seems to me so elevated that he could not concern himself, for their own sake, with common-place amusements and pastimes."

"I never met a man who impressed me so much as he did," Merland said. "We got talking, when I was introduced to him, about German philosophy, and I felt afterwards as if I had never before realised the spirit, and the tendencies, and the progressive coherence of the whole, in all that system of thought. Later on he referred to our conversation in a note I had from him in so graceful a way, asking me to come here this autumn to renew it more at leisure, as if it had interested *him*, when of course he had simply been giving me ideas."

"It was much the same in my own case," Blane said, "with appropriate differences. I have no doubt myself, that, in some school of mysticism to which he belongs, the Baron has acquired a great deal more real knowledge concerning some great spiritual mysteries that most people only speculate about, than he has yet communicated to any of his friends. I cannot help thinking that we who have been fortunate enough to come within the compass of his present hospitality are likely to come also within the range of more important information than he thought fit to convey to any of his friends in London. It is just the same way with Professor Massilton. He was telling me quite recently that he couldn't put his finger on any distinctly new idea that he had gathered from the Baron, but he has been immensely impressed by him, and Massilton is not a man to be hurriedly enthusiastic about any one. He has powers of discernment and penetration that always make me feel, when I am talking with him, as if I were plodding and panting after him with labour and difficulty."

"Nothing very wrong with your wind at all events, Willy," said the Captain, "if you can talk like that going up this hill."

Blane at once reproached himself for monopolizing the conversation, which passed for a time on to a lighter range of topics, but reverted soon afterwards to Professor Massilton.

"I do not know any man," Blane said, "who could be regarded more certainly as a tower of strength in any movement with which he might be concerned. And I know that Massilton himself does not for a moment regard this gathering as a mere party of pleasure."

"No doubt about it," admitted the Captain. "He's a man of tremendous ability."

"He has ability and energy both combined in the highest degree; wide culture and a facility for absorbing fresh information from all sides at once, digesting it and incorporating it with everything else he knows, which distinguishes him from all other men of ability that I ever met. If you were to throw me a dozen balls at once I might perhaps catch one, but if you were to throw them to Massilton he would catch them all, so to speak. The fact that Massilton is of this party is one of the indications to me that Baron von Mondstern has some serious objects in view."

Merland gave Annerly a very favourable report of the new arrival when they got back to the castle.

"A delightful fellow to be with. Unassuming to quite a comical extent, and wholly given over evidently to spiritual ideas. One can't help having an immense respect for a fellow like that. He's very well off, I understand. Has means of his own, that make him quite independent of any profession, and yet devotes himself altogether to a literary and intellectual life. That's a better thing to do, Annerly, isn't it, than merely larking about and amusing one's self?"

"The higher life is certainly the best. That is merely another way of putting it; the question most men worry themselves with, is, whether it is the happiest."

"Meeting Blane has somehow made me feel as if it would be, inevitably; because a man who had once thoroughly seen his way into it could not be happy in any other and lower sort of life."

Annerly answered at once, but rather with the air of a man who had already thought the matter out, than as if merely throwing off a hasty theory of the moment,—

"I do not think a man who wants happiness would do wisely to pursue it consciously along the paths of what one may call the higher life, that is, a life of purely intellectual activity, aiming at some exalted purpose. Directly he is conscious of making a choice for the sake of happiness he will ensure himself unhappiness in the sacrifice of the ordinary human means of happiness, supposing them to be within his reach."

Merland lighted a cigar and reflected for a while, arriving then at another stage of the problem.

"That would cut both ways, because, if a man chose the lower road in the conscious pursuit of happiness, he would be sure to be disgusted with himself all the while, and consequently unhappy."

"Yes, if his road were on a very low level."

"I feel rather as if I were beckoned along the high level, Annerly, and as if that were the really most enjoyable road to travel, too."

"I think you will travel it, Claude, and that it will suit you. I mean to try and travel it, though I don't think it will suit me. But then I don't think any road would."

CHAPTER IV.

PROFESSOR MASSILTON.

THE dinner party that evening at the castle was already on a fairly considerable scale. The arrival of the Massilton contingent in the course of the afternoon brought up the total number to nine; while the Professor and Lady Emily Massilton were both people who, in different ways, imposed a certain importance on the gathering, out of proportion to the mere accession of numbers. The Professor was a tall man, with a large vigorous frame that corresponded with the inexhaustible energy of his character. He shaved all but his big tawny moustache in the modern fashion, and the natural light colour of this made the streaks of grey hardly noticeable. His complexion was clear and rather florid, his manner blithe and joyous, his laugh prompt and contagious, and his humour free and effervescent. By virtue of the force with which he was endowed he dominated any assembly in which he took part, and swept others along in the current of his exuberant good spirits and always definite purpose. He was more than well off in the world, having a considerable income from a fortune which imposed no territorial duties on its possessor, and this may have contributed to account for his marriage *en seconde noces*, a few years after the death of his first wife, with Lady Emily, who was quite without other endowments than those inherent in her plump, attractive little person. Her title, derived from a noble family more richly furnished with representatives than acres, gave an additional charm, of course, to her personal graces, and no matrimonial problem seemed less in need of explanation than that which was presented by her union with the rich and irresistible Professor. They had been married at the period with which we are concerned, for seven or eight years. The Professor met her first at a foreign embassy, where she was living with a distinguished brother in the diplomatic service. She suffered herself, willingly enough, to be swept away into the swift stream of his rapidly-kindled affections; too confidently assuming that an enamoured husband would merely be one more guarantee that her affairs thenceforward, as for the most part they had been previously, would be arranged to suit her inclination.

The Professor proved enamoured certainly, but he also was quite unused to the notion that the current of his life could possibly be diverted from the direction in which he destined it to move. Lady Emily found pleasure in fashionable life, relieved by the excitements of Continental diplomacy. The Professor, a little weighed down in his first marriage by a wife who, with many plain, good qualities, had not been capable of shining in society, now desired to establish a house which should be the social head-quarters of the intellectual life of the university to which he belonged. General society, for him, was interesting only so far as it was cover frequented by agreeable women. In it he had secured Lady Emily. If she could have remained, as a wife, what he had found her as a partner in flirtation, he would have been perfectly content. But marriage Lady Emily could only regard as a game of give and take. For absorption in her husband's life, for adaptation to his tastes, she had no aptitude. When divergence of interest comes in at the matrimonial door, love is driven out at the window even more promptly than by poverty. For once in his life the Professor was defeated. The plan of his marriage could not be realised. You may take a horse to the water and so on. You may take a lady to a university town, but you cannot make her lead its society if she won't. Lady Emily was a good deal away. The Professor established a batchelor *pied-à-terre* in London, and sought once more in general society for the distractions he had quite honestly intended to concentrate once for all when he married. Lady Emily was aware that it behoved her to be careful, but she *was* careful; and it would sometimes happen, as in the case before us, that Professor and Lady Emily Massilton accepted an invitation together.

They all arrived at the castle in capital spirits. There was a long driving-road up the Heiligenberg—as the whole hill was called—winding by a very long circuit up to within a hundred or hundred and fifty feet of the castle-gateway, but in coming from the station in the open carriage Captain Miller had engaged, they passed one of the footpaths leading up by a more direct route. A finger-post showed that it led to Heiligenfels, and the Professor impetuously called a halt.

"Stop, Miller! Let's walk up. Those two horses can't pull us up this mountain. Who'll come too?" And the Professor, opening the door of the landau, swung himself out without waiting for the steps, and then rattled them open. "Who's coming? Come along, Miss Blane," and the girl jumped out with the help of the Professor's hand, without waiting for a second invitation.

"Good-bye; we'll tell Mrs. Miller you're coming," said Lady Emily. "I'm about as likely to scramble up those rocks as to drag the carriage, and you must stop, Sir John, to take care of me. Now there'll be a place for you in here, Captain Miller." (The Captain had been on the box hitherto, beside the driver.)

"It isn't a nice path, Professor," said the Captain, falling in with this arrangement after a few moments' hesitation.

"Get along with you!" cried the Professor. "We're two able-bodied people, Miss Blane and I, and could get up the Matterhorn if we liked. Wouldn't you enjoy a scramble, Miss Blane, after all that sitting in the train?"

Miss Blane joyfully agreed. She was a slightly-made graceful girl about ten years younger than her brother, with dark hair and large dark eyes, a slightly southern tinge in her complexion, a regular oval face, but with features a little too heavy, if criticised in an unsympathetic feminine spirit, though the general effect was one that men were usually ready to admire.

The Professor sprang forward into the woods with a merry light-hearted "whoop," calling on Miss Blane that he would show her the way, and they were lost to sight almost before the carriage was again in motion. The path only justified the Captain's disparaging remark in having a few rocky places up which the Professor considered that the young lady required a great deal of help, and one or two wet ones, that he carried her across to save her shoes, with no more hesitation than if she had been a child. He had a free, unembarrassed manner in little emergencies of that sort which drove all difficulties before it, and a fatherly way with girls, too, that gave him privileges younger men might have been too timid to claim.

"Why, you're such a featherweight, I could have won you easily if I'd been the knight in the German story that had to carry his lady-love to the hill-top;" and suiting the action to the word he ran with her a few steps up the path after it had crossed one of the wet places, and sat her down on a big stone. He had been telling good stories and making jokes in the train all the way from Cologne, and Miss Blane had never spent a more delightful morning.

In the evening at dinner, however, he flung himself with no less ardour into the consideration of the plans which lay before Mrs. Miller's friends. Some reference had been made to literary stores Mrs. Miller had accumulated.

"I will look into any books that I have not read," said the Professor, "and read them if I find them in the least degree worth reading. But first I believe I have read all that are worth reading on psychic inquiry of all sorts, or, if not, at any rate I have read good representative books in every branch of the subject. Now, with all respect to Mrs. Miller's cargo of literature, I am not going to waste my time in poring over the writings of men who do not know more than I do myself."

"I'm conscious of knowing so little myself," said Blane, "that a book must be a bad book indeed if I can't learn something from it, but I quite agree with the Professor that we ought to do more than read."

"Certainly," put in Lady Emily; "if we do nothing else, we might be a little dull."

"We can always talk over what we read," suggested Mrs. Miller.

"My dear lady," said the Professor, "we have got to break fresh ground. We have got to take some step worthy of this interesting occasion and of this enchanting old castle, worthy also of our distinguished hostess and of our yet absent host."

"I cordially endorse that," said Blane.

"And with all due respect to every one present I do not think that any of us round this table can give any other one any help at all worth speaking of towards enlarging his comprehension of the great psychic mysteries we are all dabbling in at the edges. We want a pilot, who knows the strange waters better than we do ourselves, to show us the way about them. Now who is to be our pilot?"

"I do not think we are likely," said Blane, "to have much doubt on that score."

"Blane evidently sees the matter in the same light that I do. The only pilot we can think of engaging for this trip is our dear friend the Baron. What we have to do, it seems to me, is to put the matter in that light before him as soon as he comes. I do not definitely know how far the Baron's researches in psychic or mystic or occult sciences, call them whatever you like, may have carried him; but I am quite sure, or at all events I believe at present, with great confidence, that he has somehow and somewhere got behind some secrets of Nature that remain insoluble enigmas for most of us. In a variety of ways we have come to be aware that the door is not so closely shut against us in regard to inquiries transcending the purely physical relations of molecules with one another, as the last generation of physical inquirers seem to have imagined—"

"But look at the way they still go on," began Mrs. Miller, but the Professor, spreading both hands a little above the table, stopped her with a genial and cheery smile.

"Pardon me, my dear lady, for one moment more. I have merely so far drawn your attention to the general state of the facts, as I apprehend them. I want to point out, while these considerations are still before you, how they ought to guide us in dealing with subjects we have been practically invited here to consider. Now our assemblage here will have had no meaning or purpose in it at all, unless it furnishes us with a new clue to the inquiries of the kind I have referred to. Therefore, I think we are entitled to go to the Baron when he arrives here and say that, over and above the delightful hospitality he is showing us, we have divined that he has some information of real moment to impart to us—that we do not want to lose any time that may be so precious as that we spend here—and that we beg him therefore to be open and explicit with us at once, instead of leaving us to wander about blindly in futile reading or equally futile conversation. Now I will ask Mr. Blane to say whether I have expressed views with which he concurs."

"Really—" Blane began to protest on being thus directly appealed to, "my views on all these subjects are so shadowy."

"My dear fellow," interrupted the Professor, "we can none of us have any other but shadowy views of the *subject* at large, but we may have clear views of what we are going to do next in connection with its study."

"Quite true, and you have given the most satisfactory expression to the views on that point that no doubt we all hold. I would only venture to qualify what you say, by suggesting that we should not, as it were, too precipitately take our host by the throat and demand his knowledge or his life."

"We might let him have some lunch first," said Captain Miller, "or some dinner if he turns up late in the day."

"I will undertake," said the Professor, "if I give expression to our wishes in this matter, that all reasonable concessions of that kind shall be made. I am only anxious that we shall not squander our time in the beginning of this session of ours as if we were a House of Commons, and find ourselves with none at the end, when we have settled down to real work."

Lady Emily, sitting between Captain Miller and Mr. Merland, began to talk to her right-hand neighbour, Merland, at this point; and Mrs. Miller broke loose from the restraint the Professor had imposed on the table for a time, and expounded some of her own opinions to Sir John Hexton; so the conversation became confused.

CHAPTER V.

A VISIT TO THE DUNGEONS.

THE evening was fine and warm enough after dinner for walking about in the open air, and the smokers of the party went up to the roof of the castle, at Captain Jem's suggestion, to enjoy their cigars, and the refreshing air, and the moonlight view of the river, all at once. Others established themselves in the grand hall—the regular drawing-room of the modernised building—or organised little bands of exploration about the mysterious corridors, staircases, and towers, made all the more exciting and interesting by the night-time and the darkness, but partially relieved by the lights they carried. Annerly and Merland escorted Miss Blane about in one such expedition, carrying chamber-candles.

"We're going to look at the dungeons, Mrs. Miller," the young lady explained, as they got up to leave the drawing-room.

"You silly girl! you'll be frightened. What unwholesome curiosity at this time in the evening."

"The ghosts won't attack us three abreast," said Merland, as they went round the corner rooms, and back through the dining-hall again, where the servants were still clearing away the last of the dinner-things. From the butler they got candles, and passed on through other corner rooms and passages to the landward side of the building. The floor, on a level with the dining-hall in this part of the castle, had been restored, like the rest of the place, but was not monopolised by one great room, like so much of the space in the other two sides, being partly given over to the servants' and other offices. The lower floor, however—for the rock on which the castle stood sloped away on this side, so that there was room here for a lower floor—was unsuited to modern habitation, and was only partly made available for store-rooms. From one of these, a steep stone stair wound down to lower regions again. The pitchy darkness into which these stairs disappeared did not look inviting, and Miss Blane declared her thirst for knowledge in that direction already satisfied.

"What demons they must have been!" she said with a shudder. "Imagine driving an unfortunate prisoner down there and locking him up somewhere below in that horrid darkness. I never thought of that before about such places, but of course they must have been pitch-dark at night. It isn't likely they gave the prisoners night-lights."

"In the night and in the day time too," said Annerly, "in some cases. I've seen dungeons in some of these old places about Germany that have been simply dry wells, and not very dry always 'at that,' as the Americans say. And then the upper floor of the same tower, when there are such places below ground, you will sometimes find to have been the lord of the castle's bedroom. That's about the grimmest touch of all, because the uppermost man in that case must have had such a vivid consciousness of the horrible fate of the man he was keeping undermost."

"I wonder if any unfortunate woman was ever thrust down there," said Miss Blane.

"I think it is of this castle in a book of Rhine legends I read," Annerly answered, "that they tell a story about a gräfin, whose name I forget, who beguiled her sister into an underground dungeon to keep her out of the way of a knight she was in love with herself. She thought the knight would be unfaithful to her if he saw the sister, who was more beautiful. But there were some other complications, and the knight suddenly carried her off one evening. She was quite willing to go, but she would have liked to release her sister first. But there was no time, and it was a little matter she did not like to mention to her new husband, so she said nothing—"

"Ugh! The horror of it!" said Miss Blane.

"Suppose we give the story a happy ending," said Annerly. "The father knight going down to the dungeons to lock up some ordinary prisoners in the way of business finds the beautiful damsel and rescues her, and the other knight's first wife dies young of remorse, and he marries the more beautiful sister, *en secondes noces*, difficulties about deceased wives' sisters not having arisen in those days."

"But that was not the true end to the story, I'm sure, by the way you stopped."

"The other end might suit to-morrow morning and the sunlight better."

"I want to be treated honestly and not like a child. It makes my blood run cold, but I must have the truth."

"Well, the happy sister, if there is much room to choose between the two, the one who married the knight, did die young —so says the legend; but it was only then that the ugly story came out, partly by confession on her death-bed and partly that her ghost haunted a certain dungeon and moaned there so frightfully that the people of the castle had to get a posse of priests to exorcise the place, and then they found the bones and some ornaments that had belonged to the other sister down away in the dungeon."

"What a ghastly story! But I'm sure it was some other dungeon miles away from Heiligenfels."

"I remember it said that there was a cross set up in the dungeon where the bones were found. Shall we go down and see if there is a cross to be found down there?"

"We'll think about that to-morrow, thank you," said Miss Blane. "I should be glad to be sure there is no cross there, but I can wait patiently."

"No need to wait long," said Annerly, "I'll soon find out that much for you;" and, candle in hand, he began to go down the stone stairs.

"Good gracious, Mr. Annerly, don't do anything so foolish."

"It's all right," said Annerly; "Mr. Merland will take care of you for a few minutes."

"What nerves he must have. It would send me crazy if I tried to go down there alone now."

"Annerly hasn't any sense of fear about that sort of thing—I've noticed that once or twice before," Merland said. "When we were travelling in Egypt, and had camped out to be near the Pyramids at daybreak, our friend there was seized with the whim that he would spend the night alone, inside, and he did so, though the Arabs would not venture into any of the inner chambers after nightfall for a fortune."

"I think that sort of thing wants more bravery than going into battle."

"A different kind of pluck, anyway. Lots of fellows would face the chance of being shot with perfect coolness who would be horribly uncomfortable alone at night in a pyramid. And, indeed, I think the moral pluck that makes a man quite ready to face what people call the supernatural is the higher sort of the two, and includes the other. Annerly, of course, is not big and strong, and there are lots of things that men have got the Victoria Cross for—things he couldn't do. But take anything within the limits of his physical powers, like going to screw the powder-bags on to the Cashmere Gate at Delhi, for instance, and I would back Annerly to do a thing of that sort against anybody."

"What a distance down that dreadful place must be! What can have become of him? You can't hear him or see the light at all."

"A candle doesn't carry far in such deep darkness. But it must be a long flight of steps by the time we did hear him. If I have to go in search of him you'll have to go up to brighter regions, Miss Blane."

"Wouldn't it be best to call somebody, it's getting very creepy here?"

"Give him a bit longer." Merland drew near to the edge of the black gulf, and, after waiting and listening a little while, called down, though in a somewhat subdued voice, for fear of raising an alarm above. "Are you all right, old man?"

No answer came that time, and Miss Blane was beginning to be more nervous than she liked to own, when Merland cried to her that he heard a step below. After a little while longer Annerly's slightly uneven tread on the stair was definitely recognisable, and then he answered Merland,—

"Yes, this is the old original Annerly, I'm sorry to say, quite unchanged." Then, emerging from the darkness at last, "There are lots of holes and corners down there; but in one of them, at all events, I can guarantee the existence of a stone cross, Miss Blane."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," said the young lady. "Now let's go back at once. We've been poking about here quite long enough. I'm glad I'm not to sleep in this wing of the castle, anyhow."

"Did you see anything uncanny down there, Geordie?" asked Merland.

Annerly did not answer at the moment. He looked surprised and startled, but after a brief pause he said,—

"Down there? No, certainly not. Besides, I'm not good at seeing uncanny things. People who see strange things must always learn to see in the dark uncommonly well first, or they may jump to hasty conclusions."

"But do you mean," said Miss Blane, as they got up the stairs from the store-room into the more modernised floor above, "that you ever think you see things that are not natural?

"Natural? Well, if I thought I saw anything, I should think it was natural—even if I saw what people call a ghost. A thing may not be out of the course of Nature even if it is very unusual. But one may have an impression that one sees something, and there may be nothing to see all the while. An impression of that sort is neither natural nor supernatural, it seems to me. It is nothing at all. It lies altogether within one's own fancy."

Miss Blane, however, was more inclined to get back to the well-lighted drawing-room just then than to follow up metaphysical conversation. Mrs. Miller called out with surprise when they got back,—

"My dear child, what a colour you've turned! What on earth have you been about?"

"We've been down among the dungeons, and talking all manner of horrors. Do I look pale? How absurd of me!"

"Have a glass of seltzer-water, Miss Blane," said Merland, "with just the least flavour of something refreshing in it."

"Or tea," proposed Mrs. Miller. "Here's tea still quite hot on that side-table, waiting for the return of the smokers."

Of course the explorers were minutely questioned as to all they had done.

Then the Professor and others returned from the castle-roof, loud in praise of moonlight effects on the river. Lady Emily, who had a Continental taste for cards, had a preliminary skirmish with Sir John Hexton at *écarté*, and then pressed Mr. Blane and Captain Miller into her service to make up a rubber. Miss Blane had recovered her usual good spirits under the influence of the Professor, who devoted himself to her restoration when he heard what had occurred, and insisted on a course of cat's-cradle as the proper remedy under the circumstances. Nothing would dissuade him from this; and Lady Emily's suggestion, as an amendment, that they should send for a horse-collar for him to grin through instead, did not turn him for a moment from his resolute demand for string.

"Perhaps the horse-collar would be more amusing for others, my dear; I do not deny that for a moment. But the cat's-cradle will be more beneficial to Miss Blane, and we have to consider her just now, after all she has gone through. We'll go to a distant corner, Miss Blane, where we shall not disturb the whist-players."

The short evening was waning away, and the time that had been talked of for a general dispersion was close at hand, when Annerly contrived to say a few words, unheard by others, to Mrs. Miller.

"Would you mind coming into the library for a minute, Mrs. Miller? I want to say something to you."

Under cover of getting him a book, Mrs. Miller, much mystified, took Annerly off in the required direction.

"I've had an odd impression this evening, Mrs. Miller," he explained. "I've been unwilling to speak of it; but I can't feel justified in not doing so. It may be all nonsense; and perhaps you will be able to show that it is. But to see if it is, I must ask you a question, if you don't mind."

"Certainly."

"Is the bedroom you have allotted to Miss Blane a room hung with a sort of white and red flowered chintz, or some such stuff, with a red carpet?"

"Yes."

"And does the bed stand in a corner of the room, with a writing-table near it, and a fireplace in this way, on the left-hand side?"

"Yes. Did you see the room when you were going over the castle yesterday? It's on the upper floor, in the dining-room wing."

"It's very curious. No; I have not seen the room—not in the ordinary way at least. But—you know you asked me yesterday, Mrs. Miller, if I was clairvoyant. I should never venture to claim any such faculty on the strength of the few odd impressions I have sometimes had; but just this evening, while we were downstairs, Miss Blane said something about being glad her room was a long way off the dungeon-tower; and at that moment I had a sudden flash as it were of perception, that I cannot easily describe, of just such a room as you now say is really hers; and of some serious accident happening to her there. If another person was not so closely concerned with this impression, you may imagine how little likely it is that I should have spoken of it. It is very disagreeable to me to do so—I am so very slow always to attach weight to impressions of this sort; but I have been thinking it over ever since, and I have come to the conclusion that I would tell you how the matter stands. If you think that without alarming Miss Blane you can put her to sleep in some other room, there would be no great harm done, and if we get no clue to my impression the worst of the matter will be that I shall seem to have been a great donkey."

"What is to be done? All her things are there and unpacked of course. But I wouldn't like to go against a warning of that sort. Shall we consult anybody—the Professor, for instance?"

"I should greatly prefer you did not, if you can find any excuse for moving Miss Blane."

"I tell you what I can do—I can get Jem to sleep in his dressing-room, and insist upon her spending the night with me after she has been frightened with your stories in the dungeons."

"Admirably thought of! Then what's to be done to-morrow? It's such a vague kind of warning. I tell you I'm ashamed of saying this to you, and yet I should be more ashamed of remaining silent. We have talked over all these subjects sufficiently to be familiar with the fact that warnings of this kind do sometimes prove to have been important. That consciousness may of course make one all the more liable to be a prey to delusions and fancies; but still in this case I seem to have had a correct perception of what the room is like, and I have certainly never been in the room —"

"We can't disregard it, Mr. Annerly, that's clear; but won't it be best to speak of it to some of the people? It will be such a wonderful thing if it does really turn out that we are keeping Miss Blane out of the way of some danger."

"I would so much rather keep the matter to ourselves for the present."

"Well, you must decide that of course."

When they went back to the drawing-room the cat's-cradle was over, and the Professor, feeling Miss Blane's pulse, declared her quite convalescent. But Mrs. Miller found her in no way reluctant to fall in with the arrangement she then suggested; which Captain Jem, as soon as he realised that he was to incur a little discomfort for the sake of some one else, warmly seconded and approved of. He declared that a night in a dressing-room by himself, where he could smoke cigarettes in bed, was the one luxury he enjoyed above all others.

CHAPTER VI.

CONVICTED OF CLAIRVOYANCE.

SOME of the party assembled for breakfast in the dining-hall next morning, though the meal was not fixed for a general muster at any given hour. Annerly wore a hang-dog and dejected look. Miss Blane was bright and cheerful. Mrs.

Miller a little disconcerted, the failure of any disturbance during the night that might have justified her precautions having left her inclined to resent the "warning." The Professor, always an early riser, had been already out in the woods, and these four breakfasted together.

"I took one of your books up to bed with me last night, Mrs. Miller—one I had not read before," mentioning its title, "and I read it."

"Goodness, Professor Massilton! Why, it would take you days."

"If you don't believe me, you can examine me in the book. I do not mean that I read every word, but I read fast, and I will undertake to say that I missed no idea the book contains. Well, by the time you have got out all the ideas it contains, and have reduced them to their simplest terms, they just amount to this and nothing more: 'Be virtuous and you will be happy.' Now what is the use of preaching a new religion to tell us that? So far as the rule is true it is a very old rule, but I think it is open to grave criticism. It is not the fact that all the people who are virtuous are happy, and still less is it the case that happiness bears any quantitative relation to virtue. I, for instance, am not desperately wicked, but I am immensely happier than I have any right to be on the strength of my virtue. And certainly there are hundreds and thousands of people much better than I, much more virtuous, who are much less happy. Virtue may have something to do with happiness for some people, but it is not the principal factor in the matter for most."

"That would be a dangerous maxim to preach at all events."

"Dangerous as regards the multitude, who were chiefly thought of evidently when the early maxims of morality were first set on foot. But if people engaged in investigating spiritual science over the heads of early religious generalities addressed to the multitude, cannot work out something fresher than that, it is of no use to address the world on the subject of their discoveries. They have discovered nothing if they only discover what we knew before; and if they merely re-discover an old generalisation that is inaccurate when closely looked into, they have discovered less than nothing. They have betrayed the fact that they are not on new lines of investigation at all."

"I don't agree with you, Professor Massilton," said Mrs. Miller, gallantly standing to her guns on behalf of a favourite author. "Spiritualists may find out that the most exalted spirits repeat some of the established religious doctrines, but they give it us with a great deal more detail and explanation than we had before."

"My dear Mrs. Miller, when you pick what they say to pieces, you find that the explanation is a mock explanation, and the detail, mere cloudiness of periphrasis. Explanation would really be this: the exhibition to our minds of the forces at work by means of which virtue operates to produce happiness. No one yet, however, has the glimmering of an idea of what that force is, even supposing it is really operative, which the experience of life all around us, I maintain, does not go to prove, but quite the reverse."

"The experience of life may not be enough to prove it. The spirits may be able to give us the experience of another life too, and then they say it is proved."

"If they were to say it, we should have ground for disbelieving them. Do you mean to tell me that any respectable, well-disposed spirit can remain indifferent to the misery of people it loves on earth? While if it, or he, or she—one does not know what pronoun to give a spirit—suffers in spirit-life from events here over which its own virtues or vices have no influence whatever, how can you make it out that the spirit's happiness is the consequences of virtue?"

Miss Blane made a diversion in the conversation shortly after this by declaring that she thought it ought to be a rule at the castle to have no metaphysics talked before lunch. This set the Professor off on another tack. Captain Miller dropped in presently with Merland, who had been out for a stroll with him, and then some plans were made for the morning, which included a walk. Miss Blane went to prepare for this.

Mrs. Miller found an opportunity of asking Mr. Annerly, aside, if he had been having any more impressions. Annerly was apologetic and miserable.

"I have had another impression—yes, Mrs. Miller, a very strong one—namely, that I made a fool of myself last night, and gave you and others a great deal of most unnecessary trouble."

Mrs. Miller began to speak of the question raised the previous evening—whether any attempt should be made to re-arrange rooms, or whether the warning might now be disregarded, when Miss Blane returned—without having waited to get ready for her walk.

"Oh, Mrs. Miller, there's a lot of the ceiling fallen down in my room. It's lying right across my bed. It's lucky—"

"What!" Mrs. Miller almost screamed, "there!"

Of course there was a general expression of concern, and interest, and satisfaction at Miss Blane's escape.

"But you don't any of you understand," cried Mrs. Miller; "it's the most wonderful thing that ever was known."

Annerly looked almost more unhappy at the disclosure which Mrs. Miller had now launched herself on than he had been before, but Mrs. Miller was far too excited to check her explanations.

"Mr. Annerly foresaw it, clairvoyantly foresaw it, and warned me last night, and that was why I made Miss Blane sleep in my room."

It was now the turn of the others, of course, to demand explanations; and the whole transaction was exhaustively reviewed in all its bearings. The Professor severely rebuked the persons concerned for having kept the warning secret the previous evening.

"Here are we, a body of people of competent judgment and credibility in various ways, assembled here for the express purpose of examining into the mysteries of psychic phenomena. At the very outset of our undertaking an incident happens of first-rate importance as a fact to investigate; and yet those of our number into whose hands the evidence which gives it importance is thrown, bottle that evidence up and hide it away in the secret recesses of their own consciousness. How are we to get on if we proceed upon such a plan as that?"

"But in telling me last night," Mrs. Miller pleaded, "Mr. Annerly fully recorded the impression he had received."

"For the purpose of making our experience of use to others he recorded it very imperfectly. For people who happen to know you personally, and who happen to have an opportunity of asking you questions about what has just taken place, there is evidence obtainable, I do not deny; but for the information outside our immediate circle, the occurrence as it stands now is nearly useless. Strangers will say they do not know after all what Mr. Annerly really said to you. After the event it is announced that he foretold it. Why, people will ask, was there no written note kept of what he really said overnight? Here is a most interesting manifestation of prophetic clairvoyance lost to the world for want of a little ordinary, reasonable forethought in verifying it at first."

"Then what do you say we ought to have done, Professor Massilton? If Mr. Annerly had blurted out just what he saw, he would have frightened Miss Blane out of her senses."

"My dear Mrs. Miller, who asserted that he should have told Miss Blane? He should, in my humble opinion, have written a brief memorandum of what he saw, which four or five of us could have witnessed. And then, of course, we could have taken one precaution which, as events have fallen out, has been entirely overlooked. We could have examined the room to which his vision related last night. As it is, we shall be asked, if we ever tell this story, whether we have certain knowledge that the plaster from the ceiling had not already fallen last night at the time the warning was received."

"Well, but Miss Blane went into her room to get some things last night. Nothing had fallen then, Marian, had it?"

"I don't think so," said Miss Blane. "I am sure I must have noticed—"

"Of course," said the Professor; "I don't for a moment believe, myself, that anything had fallen then, but we have not got positive evidence to go to the public with that it had not."

"Now my impression has been justified," Annerly put in, "we can see that it might have been worth while to have done all you say. But it would have seemed to be giving so much trouble for nothing at the time. And if nothing had taken place afterwards, you would all have been very much disgusted with me. It is not as if I had previously had any experience to justify me in asking you to treat my impressions as important."

"Well, Mr. Annerly," said Mrs. Miller, "it's quite evident *now*, at all events, that you are clairvoyant. And, by the way, that gives some new interest to what you saw yesterday."

"Good heavens!" said the Professor, "have you been seeing anything else that has been kept secret?"

The indignation and impetuosity of the question raised a general laugh.

"Poor Mr. Annerly," said Blane, "we are treating him as if he were a culprit instead of the hero of this incident. And, meanwhile, I think we have forgotten to say one thing, which I, at all events, feel very strongly, that my sister and I are very sincerely grateful to him for having saved her, by the very wonderful faculty he possesses, from what must certainly have been a very alarming and serious accident."

"Indeed," Miss Blane added, "I am very grateful."

"That goes without saying," the Professor went on: "or at all events it is very fitly and properly said. But an immense interest attaches to what has occurred, apart from personal feeling. And do not let us lose sight of general principles in our private interests. What is this other vision of yours, to which Mrs. Miller refers?"

"Really it is almost too slight to speak of, and can have no value as a test of any sort," Annerly declared. "Besides, there is nothing to be verified. I thought I saw Baron von Mondstern on the stairs near the room I occupy; but I was mistaken, for he had not returned to the castle."

The Professor sighed, as over weaknesses of human nature, that had to be endured, but were very grievous. He argued with extreme gentleness that, since Mr. Annerly had been discovered to possess an abnormal faculty, it would be a culpable disregard of their plain duty as students of psychic mysteries to treat any manifestations of it with indifference. He insisted on recording a *procès verbal* of the impression Annerly had had about seeing the Baron, in order to ascertain later from the Baron himself what he had been doing and where he had been at the time. He also drew up a statement embodying all that had occurred in connection with the fall of the ceiling, viewed the apartment, all the guests who were present, taking part in this ceremony; and he exacted from Annerly a solemn promise that he would communicate any further impressions of an abnormal nature that he might receive, either to himself or to three or four other persons, if there might be any reason for withholding them from him, at the time of their reception. Annerly found himself the subject of so much brooding watchfulness during the remainder of the day that his naturally retiring and modest temperament was put to a severe strain. It was very pleasant to him, however, to find himself drawn into a stroll in the woods in the afternoon with Miss Blane and her brother, and treated—without any further reference being made to debts of gratitude—with affectionate friendliness that gave him an unusual feeling of contentment. He was not really unfamiliar with the outward fact that people sometimes seemed to like his society and conversation; but he was always disposed to attribute this to any imaginable circumstance that was unflattering to himself rather than to personal merit. In the present case, on the other hand, he had an undercurrent of consciousness that he really had done a service to the girl he was with, which both she and her brother appreciated. This overcame his habitual shyness for the moment, and made him enjoy his walk in a way which in turn reacted to brighten his severe demeanour, though the views of life he expressed were still of a sombre cast.

"It seems to me," he observed *à propos* to some disparaging remarks Blane had brought to bear on the ordinary routine of pleasure-seeking, "that the enjoyment to be found in society turns entirely on the temperament you take into it. Let a man *be* happy, having the conditions of such a state fulfilled for him in his private relationships, and every incident of life, every conversation he may carry on, every fresh acquaintanceship he makes, is but a stirring of his inner consciousness that he is so. On the opposite hypothesis the stirring of consciousness involved in going about amongst people is apt to be little more than a stimulus to pain. Everything seems intrinsically repulsive or contemptible because of the reflex light in which it is viewed."

"I think I like going about in society because it is amusing to watch people's ways," Miss Blane put in.

"If—which the gods avert—you were personally unhappy you would find them only bore you."

"If one was ill or poor or in grief about people who had died, you mean."

"Every man and woman, except a few circumstanced in an abnormal way, has very special relations, sooner or later, with some other one woman or man. That I take to be generally the key-note of each person's life; and, as far as happiness is concerned, I fancy, pretty nearly everything depends on that key-note. Troubles in life, having nothing to do with it, may be severe, but in most cases are evanescent. With a man it can only be a woman who will finally ruin his life, or give it, subject to the manifold perils of existence, a predominant tint of happiness."

"Perhaps I take too gloomy a view of things," said Blane. "But my amendment to what you say would be, that, while a woman may very easily make a man miserable, she cannot very easily make him happy, or keep him for very long even contented."

"Willy, what a horrible misanthrope you are!"

"The sun may shine," suggested Annerly, "on a barren or a beautiful landscape, but the best looks sullen without it, the worst under its influence is, in a measure, cheerful. I merely contend that the one main relationship of each person's life determines the state of the weather for him or her, psychologically speaking. The scenery, whether it is grand or humble, is another matter, but, to enjoy any sort, fine weather is a *sine quâ non.*'

"The weathercock, certainly, is a symbol one may associate with the female character."

"Don't insult Mr. Annerly's beautiful theory, Willy."

"It is the fault of all metaphors that they are sure to leak somewhere," Annerly said. "But after all the weathercock is a masculine bird, wholly dependent for his attitude on atmospheric conditions—so he may help my argument perhaps after all."

"I should not have thought"—later on in the day Mrs. Miller said to Miss Blane, who had been telling her something of what they had been talking about and their walk—"that our talented clairvoyant had been so romantic. Your influence must have stirred up these sudden emotions, my dear."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BARON'S ARRIVAL.

MEANWHILE a new interest was imparted to the castle gathering, in the course of the afternoon, by the Baron's arrival.

As the guests were mostly out of doors or in their own rooms when he came, he was only received by the old butler, and went up to his own rooms, accompanied by a boy about eleven years of age, whom he brought with him, both having walked up the hill from the station, leaving their luggage to follow by the road. Mrs. Miller was in the castle, it appeared, so he sent down word that he would wait on her if she could receive him, and presently went to her in the octagon boudoir.

Baron Friedrich von Mondstern had remained, by the death of an elder brother, as he was entering manhood, the sole inheritor of the fairly considerable possessions of the old Saxon family to which he belonged. He had passed (outwardly, at all events) a very quiet, uneventful, and studious life, interrupted, after he became his own master entirely, by considerable absences abroad, but otherwise spent chiefly at Heidelberg, the university where he graduated, or at one of the two or three old family-houses he possessed in different parts of Germany. The season just preceding the autumn party at Heiligenfels was the first he had spent in London—so far, at any rate, as making acquaintances freely or going about in society was concerned—but the new friends he had then made were eager in trying to persuade him that it might not be the last.

The Baron was far from setting up as a brilliant conversationalist, and still less did he win favour as a spirited *viveur*. In some undefinable way he won hearts in a greater degree than he dazzled society in general. With quick and tender sympathies he would talk with his friends rather of things that interested them, than of subjects identified with himself. His birth and position in the world secured him ready acceptance wherever he went; his personal qualities ensured him cordiality wherever he stayed. A very finished linguist, he was equally at home in the three leading languages of Europe; and his literary culture betrayed a range of acquirements which dwarfed into relative insignificance his faculty of speaking English and French as fluently as his own tongue. But these would crop up by degrees, merely in the intimacy of friendship, and would rarely appear on the surface of his general conversation, which despised none of the common topics of the hour, and would only be distinguished from the talk of intelligent people around him by a shade more fertility of illustration and collateral information than was usually met with. He was too uncompromisingly good-natured to be very witty, but a perennial flow of cheerfulness and good temper on his part made him a bright and lively companion, and few people who came to know him with the least degree of intimacy could resist the impulse to talk to him more or less confidentially about their personal affairs. As these, after all, interest most of us in a greater degree than any other topic, a person who speaks of them to a sympathetic listener, invested on general grounds with claims to respect, will always find such conversation profoundly attractive, and tending to set off the listener in a very amiable light.

The Baron, in such cases, too. would be much more than a listener—a wise and keen-sighted counsellor; and the rooms where he established himself in Clarges Street came to be invested afterwards in the memory of a good many of the friends he made during his London season, with the interest attaching to scenes associated with some fresh departure in life.

Certainly his passage through London society had not been entirely unmarked by disappointments and regrets. The Baron was about forty years old, unmarried, well off and well placed, as already described; rather above the middle height, though delicately made, and with a general aspect that was something more than striking and attractive. With very large clear blue eyes and light brown beard, a moustache that but slightly fringed his upper lip without concealing the lines of a firmly-set, but in no way sternly-drawn, mouth, with brown hair a shade or two darker than the beard, and a look of intellectual power combined with sweetness of disposition in his face generally, it could hardly happen that Baron Friedrich, as his friends generally called him, should move about in society without exciting, here and there, day-dreams and projects incompatible with his steadfast celibacy. But his manner, whether with girls, or with skilled matrons more daring and unscrupulous in the use of their deadly weapons, was never betrayed even under the most provocative circumstances into special earnestness. At all events, no fair combatant who attempted any such encounter, could ever complain that she had been worsted by unfair fence. The Baron might, here and there, be praised with sarcastic emphasis, as a man with great command over his feelings; but he had never been accused of attempting to assume the mastery over those of any lady.

Rarely speaking of himself, and still less inclined to revile fate, he nevertheless would sometimes acknowledge a serious grief—the death of his sister, younger than himself by many years, who had married an Englishman, the Sir John Hexton already slightly mentioned as one of the guests at Heiligenfels.

Her marriage and death had taken place during one of his absences abroad. Her only child, Reginald Hexton, now grown to be the boy mentioned above, was a child of four or five years when she died. Baron Friedrich, returning to Europe almost immediately afterwards, proposed to take charge of him and bring him up in Germany. Sir John was well pleased to have the boy taken off his hands, but would agree to no final arrangement as regards his education. His son and heir ought to prepare for his ultimate destiny, he thought, by going through the orthodox routine of an English public school and university. That question was waived for the time, however; and for the few years of childhood, Reginald went with his uncle to a country-house near Dresden.

"This is my nephew, Mrs. Miller, of whom I think you have heard," the Baron said, introducing the boy. "Sir John is out just now, they tell me."

"He does credit to your side of the family," said Mrs. Miller with her usual directness. "What eyes he's got! Your eyes, Baron, only brown instead of blue. He's more like you than Sir John."

"Yes, in some respects he is like what my sister was in life;" and then the Baron asked whether Mrs. Miller had found the castle in all respects properly garrisoned and prepared for her reception, and as to the comfort of her journey from London, and so forth. She, of course, poured out a full history of all that had taken place since her arrival, of the distribution of the guests, and of the arrangements in reference to the few who were still expected.

"The Vaughans! Yes, of course," said the Baron, thoughtfully, "that was inevitable."

"Inevitable! Why, would you rather not have had them? I thought they would be such very nice people to have."

"The nicest imaginable. Do not divine a regret on my part or a reproach in the use of the word. I am delighted that it should be they. And our young friend Merland is enjoying life, I hope, as much as ever."

"I'm sure he ought to be with such a nice girl as Marian Blane for him to play with. I haven't any matronly scruples in leaving them together, because no harm can come of it, whatever comes of it."

"The perilous pastime of match-making has attractions for you, I see, but, as you say, no harm can come of it in this case. Ah, here is the Professor—" as the door opened to admit the guest named. "I need not say how glad I am to find you safely installed here."

"I heard you had come, and could not put off the pleasure of greeting you," and so on. After a very little talk on the surface of things the Professor went straight to the leading idea that had taken possession of his mind.

"I have been talking with some of our friends here, Baron, and I find that, like myself, several of them have been looking back with peculiar and special interest, in connection with yourself, on conversations held with you about mysteries of Nature, which lie outside the domain of physical investigation. Now a strange thing happened here last evening, and I want to know whether you can help us to a better comprehension of it. The thing has occurred here in your house, and is in the line of problems that you have evidently studied." Then the Professor related the incident of which Annerly had been the hero.

"I have known other people before," the Baron said, "with the faculty of receiving impressions of that sort. I think you will find that, when public attention is turned to the subject more generally, people will accept the existence of such faculties as a natural fact, and study them in all their manifestations."

"That is exactly what I want to do now. Here is a case within our own experience. A bird in the hand, for scientific purposes, is not only worth two in the bush, it is worth twenty thousand, or any number you like, out of reach. But the first thing one should do with every subject of scientific examination is to repeat the experiment that produces the phenomenon to be examined. As this thing has occurred, it is useless for the advance of knowledge, except so far as it may have awakened our attention. Related to any stranger, it would hardly impress his mind at all. He would distrust the precision of Annerly's statement last evening to Mrs. Miller, he would attribute the removal of Miss Blane from the place of danger to accidental coincidence."

"I don't see," Mrs. Miller objected, "why anybody should disbelieve me when I say what Mr. Annerly told me."

"A scientific fact must rest upon something more tangible than a statement as to what one person may have said to another on a certain occasion," the Professor replied. "Personally, I believe what you say—"

"Thank you kindly," said Mrs. Miller, satirically.

"It *is* a great compliment," declared the Professor, "because many people are very inaccurate; but I cannot transfer my confidence to any one who may not have the pleasure of knowing you. What we must have, before we begin to investigate the laws which may govern such curious flashes of clairvoyance—to accept the common word—as I myself believe that Mr. Annerly exhibited in this case, is some manifestation of that law that we can reproduce at our pleasure. Now can you help us to *that*, my dear Baron, do you think?"

The boy, Reginald Hexton, who had been seated on a corner of the low divan in front of the window overlooking the Rhine, all this while, but whose attention had been closely given to the conversation, and not to the view, glanced at the Baron as this was said, and slightly smiled. The Professor was very observant and picked up the little sign.

"Your young friend there evidently thinks you can," he said to the Baron.

"Let me present my young friend—my nephew, Reginald Hexton. I daresay in many ways he has an exaggerated confidence in his uncle's capacity. But the difficulty which always confronts me when I have been thinking of that point is, that the conditions of any psychic experiments must necessarily be so subtle that they are very hard to catch. Now in the case that has just taken place it is evident that the nervous system of both persons concerned—Miss Blane and Mr. Annerly—were somewhat abnormally excited by the visit to the dungeons. Then Miss Blane's imagination pictures herself alone at night; and if, as people are now arguing, thought is a force which can sometimes produce a direct effect on the mind of another person, her mental picture of her bedroom, which naturally rises in her mind, may have impinged upon Mr. Annerly's mind when that was in a special condition of receptivity. We have still got, of course, to make other conjectures as to how he is enabled to foresee a peril by which the scene so presented to him is menaced; but, apart from that, it would plainly be very difficult to get up the special conditions of nervous excitement, at will, in people you want to experiment upon."

The conversation went on for some while longer without leading to any special result. Questioned by the Professor about what he had been doing at the time Annerly thought he saw him on the stairs, the Baron identified the time as one at which he had been travelling in a railway carriage at a considerable distance from Heiligenfels.

"But I may fairly add, I think, if the impression strikes you as having any interest in connection with the subject, that I was, if my memory serves me rightly, thinking of our party here at the time."

"The importance of that," said the Professor, "would turn upon the possibility of reproducing that effect as an experiment. If any process of thinking on your part could again provoke in Mr. Annerly's mind the impression of seeing you when you were at a distance, that would be just an experiment of the sort we were talking of. What you can do in the way of projecting such impressions, probably others could do also—not necessarily every one, but some others. By degrees we should discover some such other persons by experiment, and then we might get on the track of an inquiry worth pursuing."

"We can see about making such experiments," the Baron said; "but meanwhile I may tell you that it is quite possible you will find an even better subject for them in our friend Mrs. Lakesby, who is coming here. From what I know of her, I think I may venture to promise you that you will find her both able and willing to give you proof that she can see more in the world than physical eyesight shows most of us."

The Baron's statement about Mrs. Lakesby was interrupted by the arrival of Sir John Hexton, who had been strolling in the neighbouring wood with Lady Emily. Sir John had not much to say to his young son.

"Not tired of Germany yet, Reggy?" he asked the boy.

"Not since Uncle Friedrich came back."

"Ah, well! Germany's a good country, but England's a better, I think you'll find in the long run. What do you think, Professor?"

"I think they're both good countries, and wherever I am shall seem better for me—especially Heiligenfels."

"Well, Reggy there will be better able to judge when he knows both," said his father.

"And what school do you fancy, Reggy?" said the Professor, the conversation thus having been turned on the boy; "Eton, or Rugby, or Harrow? I suppose a young swell like you will patronise one of them?"

"I don't know," said the boy; "I haven't seen any of them."

"I went to Eton," said Sir John, "and so did my father before me."

"Your counsels might be very valuable in this matter, Professor," said the Baron; "but Sir John would probably like to go into the question with you more at leisure some day."

The Professor declared that he would be very ready to discuss the matter, and went on to explain some general principles in regard to the selection of schools for boys, which the world at large failed as a rule to apply. The exposition was illustrated by an unusually full and exact knowledge of the characteristics of the great English schools; but after a time Mrs. Miller suggested that they should all go and have tea on the terrace, and the movement thither turned the conversation into other channels.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CURIOUS MANIFESTATION.

By degrees most other members of the party dropped in from afternoon walks or other private occupations. Annerly was the only person who had to be presented to the Baron. When he came on to the terrace with the Blanes on his return from his walk, there was a revival of interest in the incident with which he had been connected. Mrs. Miller's reference to this covered a moment's surprise and suppressed excitement on Annerly's part.

"Would you have known me?" asked the Baron, unheard by the others, as they stood for a few moments a little apart.

"Anywhere," replied Annerly.

"Then say nothing about it. The incident only concerns yourself."

Sir John Hexton, meanwhile, had exchanged some glances of silent meaning with Lady Emily when the feat of clairvoyance was referred to.

"I hope Mr. Annerly will give a look to my ceiling to-night, Mrs. Miller," he said. "Perhaps the castle will be coming to pieces generally, and I should like to be forewarned."

"Don't be afraid. It seems that the room Miss Blane was in, had a lot of shavings take fire in it while the castle was being repaired. I've been asking about how the accident can have happened, and Franz says it must have been through the plaster drying irregularly, owing to this fire, that it got cracked. There were no fires elsewhere."

"All right, Mrs. Miller; then I won't be afraid, even if Mr. Annerly does foresee that my ceiling is coming down."

"I hear you, Sir John," said Mrs. Miller, acknowledging the implied distrust of the clairvoyant achievement; "I'll talk to you some other time when I've nothing better to do. It's a pity, at your age, that you shouldn't know better,"

Blane was appealed to by the Professor, shortly after this, to say how the majority of educated men in London would take it, supposing they wrote a letter to the *Times* detailing the fact under notice; the signatures of persons as well known as some of themselves being a guarantee, at all events, that the statement would be made in good faith.

"I don't think my opinion on the matter is worth much," Blane muttered, to begin with; "but I should think that one-half of our readers would merely laugh at us, and the other half would say we must have had very little psychic experience to be greatly moved by so very natural an occurrence."

"At any rate," said the Baron, "I think if there is any writing to the *Times* to be done, it might be better to wait and see whether incidents still better worth notice than this may not offer themselves during our stay here."

Blane and the Professor exchanged glances.

"I shall wait," said the Professor, "with all the greater confidence now that you have made the suggestion."

"But as an independent view of the matter, and not supposing that we are any of us thinking at present of writing to the *Times*," the Baron went on, "I should not be disposed to think that any great interest would be excited in England by any statement, however well authenticated, of any occurrence of an bnormal character, which was not associated with the discovery of a new principle in Nature that fully accounted for it. A new fact by itself is nothing in the estimation of scientific observers of Nature, unless it is either in the direct line of their own habitual studies, in which case they may be disposed to take it up, and investigate it themselves, or on the other hand unless it comes to them ready investigated, and explaining its own laws."

"There could not be a new fact," said the Professor, "in the shape of any natural phenomenon, which would not fall within the range of some department of science."

"I am not sure that I agree with you there. Indeed I think I could draw your attention to a fact that cannot very easily be classified, and yet, small thing as it is, may nevertheless suggest the necessity of opening out a new line of inquiry in Nature before it can thoroughly be accounted for."

"What fact are you referring to?"

"You may never have encountered it, as it has to do with a somewhat unusual state of that powerful, but in most cases inactive, galvanic battery, which a human body in one of its aspects may be said to constitute."

"No doubt when you say that," said the Professor, "you attach some definite meaning to your words, but I would observe in passing that they do not convey any meaning to my mind. That unmanifested electricity exists in human flesh and bones, as in all other kinds of matter, I fully recognise, but that condition of things does not carry with it the attributes of a galvanic battery."

"And how would you define the essential attributes of such an instrument apart from all structural details?"

"A galvanic battery, whatever else it may or may not be, is an apparatus for rendering electric effects perceptible to the senses. With your battery you can at any time you please provoke a sensible current, and whatever electricity may lurk in my body, I cannot throw it out in a way that the senses of another person, or an electrometer, can register."

"I believe you could if you knew how; and I say that because I know of some effects, which I think we must recognise as electrical in their character, that can be thrown off in just the way, say, from the human body."

"Of course you can charge a properly insulated human body with electricity, and take off the charge afterwards."

"Quite so; but, independently of that, you can get electrical effects from it sometimes. For example, you know the feeling of taking a spark with your knuckle from the conductor of an electrical machine. Now, kindly put your knuckle to the tip of my finger."

The Baron leaned his arm, as he spoke, on the table near where they were both sitting, and put forward the middle finger of his hand. The Professor did as he was requested with a puzzled smile on his face, and withdrew his hand before it had quite touched the Baron's finger, with a look of surprise. Except Blane and Annerly, who had been standing by while the conversation just noted had been going on, the other people present were scattered about the terrace in groups, and did not see the little experiment.

"That is very curious," said the Professor; "certainly I had the sensation of taking a slight spark from your finger, and even heard it."

"I heard it also," said Blane.

"The effect can easily be made much more audible," said the Baron, "if the current is thrown against a glass in this way."

A water-jug and goblets had been put upon the terrace-table, together with the afternoon tea-things, and the Baron drew one of the glasses towards him.

"Look at this, all of you," said the Professor to the company generally. "Here is something very interesting."

With more or less promptitude the others drew round the table.

"Our previous conversation," said the Baron, "gives the experiment its meaning." As he spoke he pointed with his finger to the glass, and moved his hand slowly towards it till the tip of his finger was within three or four inches of it. Then the glass emitted a clear ringing sound, as if it had been gently struck with the edge of a knife.

"This is a new line for you to take up, Friedrich," said Sir John; "you must give us a regular performance some evening. That was uncommonly well done. I haven't a notion of how you did it."

The Professor, who had observed the operation just accomplished very narrowly, and with an expression of graver attention than he had worn when the previous experiment had been first suggested, looked up at the baronet sharply.

"My dear Sir John," he said, "I don't suppose we any of us know 'how it's done,' but the notion you appear to have on the subject, from what you say, differs very widely from mine."

"And from mine," said Blane.

The Baron quietly, with an amused and kindly look, watched Sir John, who answered, a little nettled at the tone of reproof in which he had been addressed,—

"Why, what is the matter? I thought we were all called up to see the trick. Why shouldn't I applaud if I think it's a good one? I should like to see it again."

"I don't mind showing it to you once more," said the Baron, with perfect good humour. With varying expressions on their faces the assembled spectators assumed attentive attitudes. Very deliberately the Baron repeated the experiment, with the same result as before. Sir John picked up the glass immediately afterwards and examined it with great care. Blane exchanged looks with the Professor. Mrs. Miller turned round, first to one and then to another of her neighbours.

"Well," she said, addressing Merland, who was next to her, "isn't that one of the most wonderful things you ever saw?"

"That's what I say," declared Sir John; "that's equal to Maskelyne and Cook."

"For shame, Sir John, to talk about Maskelyne and Cook, indeed," said Mrs. Miller.

"But why am I to be ashamed?" asked Sir John in sincere astonishment. "I may be stupider than the rest of you, but I can't, for the life of me, see how he makes the glass ring."

"That's right, Hexton," said the Baron, good-humouredly, getting up and moving away from the table; "don't be faced out of your principles till you see good reason to abandon them."

The Professor spoke a little stiffly.

"I don't think Sir John Hexton realized that we were not engaged in playing at conjuring-tricks, but talking seriously of peculiar and unusual manifestations of natural forces, in reference to which the suggestion that the Baron was imposing on us by a trick, even if it were not inappropriate to the circumstances, could only be less injurious to ourselves than to him."

"Not a conjuring trick? Why, what was it then?"

"I hope I may be better able to answer that hereafter than I am now. Meanwhile, I can only await any explanation the Baron may be able to give us."

A smile of dubious meaning gradually broke on Sir John's face.

"Oh, I see. Then this was another performance in the line of Mr. Annerly's prophetic warning. We are getting on to very delicate ground."

Sir John turned away, and strolled to the opposite end of the terrace with Lady Emily, who had paid very slight attention to the experiment with the goblet. The Baron, as though to put an end to conversation which had introduced a faint element of discord into the midst of the company, spoke to Annerly on the subject of an article by him in one of the recent reviews, and drew him away in another direction; and, following the dispersive impulse, the Professor suggested to Blane that they should smoke a cigar on the upper balcony, and they went off together.

"Now this is getting serious," said the Professor, as they sat down in the temporary privacy of this retreat.

"I am very glad you have given me an opportunity of talking to you alone. For the first time we may now be able to learn more about the peculiar faculties which Baron von Mondstern has somehow acquired."

"Let us compare notes a little, because we have both met our host before now, and have both talked to him about the psychic problems in which we take an interest. Have you ever seen him exhibit any abnormal powers of any sort before to-day?"

"Never. I have refrained from asking him direct questions as to whether, in the course of any psychic study he has pursued, he has acquired any abnormal powers; for his own exquisite courtesy claims corresponding consideration on the part of his friends. But he has indicated to me that he would not be able to answer such questions, even if they were put; that is to say, that psychic powers, as distinguished from psychic knowledge, can only be acquired at the hands of persons who invariably exact strict secrecy from pupils whom they teach, not merely in regard to the specific secrets imparted, but also as to the bare fact that any secrets have been imparted."

"But, in the present case, our friend has openly displayed a faculty that I can only interpret as an abnormal power of the very kind you speak of."

"This makes the incident so surprising and important. It would seem as if, in some way, he were under a dispensation in regard to the reserve he usually exercises about such things. And yet too brusque an assumption that this is the case might embarrass him. I felt just now that the situation was a very delicate one."

"Delicate ground, as that oaf, Sir John, put it with a very different meaning."

"But at the same time, so direct a manifestation as that of just now may be meant as a plain invitation to us to inquire further. It *must* be so meant, if you come to think of it. The thing takes place at the outset of our visit here. What he did was done quite spontaneously on his part; it would be ridiculous on our own part to be over-timid about cross-examining so willing a witness."

"But, first of all, what *was* done?"

The Professor looked puzzled.

"You don't lean to Sir John's hypothesis?"

"By no means; but what was the true nature of the manifestation we have just observed? I am always slow and tedious in conveying my meaning, and I greatly envy your lucid precision, but—"

"My dear fellow," said the Professor, "you always mean something, at all events, and that makes a reasonable listener patient. The true nature of the manifestation we have just seen is the whole problem before us, it seems to me."

"But that true nature may be sought for in either of two directions. The sound on the glass is a physical effect. Now does that ensue simply from an abnormal physical property inhering in Baron von Mondstern's body, or is it an effort of will—which would be a psychic cause, translated into terms of physical causation, so to speak, by some process which, in that case, would be the very key-note of all occult mysteries?"

"Can the Baron, you mean, be a human sort of electric eel, capable of generating charges, and throwing them off when he pleases; but even then, if he does so when he pleases, the element of will comes into play."

"So it does when I move my hand. At some point in the train of causation the desire to move it—which is a psychic impulse—is translated to the physical plane. But the electric eel, in giving out shocks, does no more than actuate physical mechanism in a similar way. Supposing the Baron (apologising to him for the supposition, which I am not at all supposed to hold) were, as you put it, a human sort of electric eel; then the problem he presents to us would be a physical problem for physiologists, and not a psychic problem for us. On the other hand, if the Baron is not differently constituted physically from other men, then he possesses the faculty of translating a psychic impulse into terms of physical causation in some different way than by brain action or nerve centres; and what he does, offers us a true psychic problem of the kind that we are concerned with."

The Professor listened acutely while Blane spoke, but answered without the least hesitation,—

"That's what it is, assuredly. The Baron is not the man to attach importance to a mere physical monstrosity, and that is what an electric gland in a man would be. We know, moreover, that he is deeply engrossed with psychic inquiry, and has put this experiment before us as a psychic phenomenon. And we want no more than our own common sense to diagnose it. In a vague and unsatisfactory way a great many mesmeric and other experiments have shown some sort of affinity existing between the force, whatever it may be that is employed in such cases, and the subtlest form of electricity. It is on the strength of that affinity that people have called the psychic force, whatever it is, in some of its manifestations, 'animal magnetism,' a very bad name I have always thought, because the use of it entangles and confuses two very different trains of thought and sets of observations. However, with the new light the Baron's experiment has let in on the subject, it may turn out that the name is not such a bad one after all. Calling the psychic force, which we all possess in some degree probably, though only a few of us have yet learned the art of directing it, by the name I speak of —animal magnetism—then what the Baron has done is to turn that amorphous variety of the force, which is within the control of the will, into the ordinary variety known in laboratories. There is your true psychic problem for you—How does he do it?"

"I think you are right," said Blane. "The other hypothesis need only be considered to be put aside."

"And what I don't see at present," went on the Professor, "is any good reason why we should not ask the Baron how he does it in a straightforward way, though I would prefer to ask the question when we are not such a large party as we were just now."

No such opportunity as the Professor desired offered itself to him that afternoon or evening. The Baron, it appeared, had ultimately invited Annerly to his own private study to show him some books on which their conversation turned; and was not seen again before dinner. At dinner the conversation was disjointed, and a little constrained, when it occasionally became general. After dinner there was music, Miss Blane being gifted with a beautiful voice, and Annerly having been betrayed by Merland as qualified "to do anything with a piano," so that he was made to play her accompaniments.

"I never knew he played," Mrs. Miller said to Merland.

"It never came out while we were in India, I suppose, but he really does play splendidly, only he hates to do it before people. It isn't swagger with him, you know; it is simply that he hates putting himself forward. It is real torment to him to make him play pieces in company, but he can play no end of Beethoven and Wagner and that sort of thing, really."

Miss Blane meanwhile had thanked him for an accompaniment that she had been able to lean upon comfortably. "I don't think I ever found anybody before to accompany me like that the first time."

"It was easy," said Annerly, with nervous self-disparagement; "you sing as if you liked it."

From this point of departure they were soon deep in a musical talk. Annerly admitted that he had played a great deal at Cambridge—his one great recreation there, though he never practised. However, he was drawn into illustrating the conversation with some fragments which inspired Miss Blane with respect for his musical acquirements, and drawn then, even less willingly into some criticism of her singing, which emphasised this feeling still more.

"I see it is a question of getting lessons from you, Mr. Annerly, while we are here," she said, "if you will be kind enough to give them."

The Baron meanwhile had been making himself agreeable after dinner to Lady Emily, and had even remained by her side, talking to her and to Sir John Hexton, who joined them, until the evening was half gone. There was talk of a rubber, into the service of which Lady Emily sought to beguile her host. This he evaded, but merely on the ground that he never played, and interested himself in getting up her game, which was eventually completed by Blane and Mrs. Miller. Early in the proceedings the Professor had endeavoured to draw him off without success, and then, rather nettled at finding no opening for the serious inquiries he wished to put, took refuge in the library, and buried himself in a novel. The rubber over, Captain Miller came in search of him, and said that the Baron and some of the other men were going up to smoke, but he declared himself too deeply engrossed with his book to leave it just then, and eventually went to his own room without seeking any further society.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HIGHER LIFE.

In another part of the castle, meanwhile, Annerly and Merland had been exchanging ideas before parting for the night.

"How excited you look to-night, old man," Merland had said as they were shaking hands in the corrider in front of Annerly's room; "the singing or the beautiful songstress has stirred you up a bit."

"Well, come in a moment and I'll tell you. It isn't so much the music, though Miss Blane has real talent and feeling for music, that has stirred me up,"—this was added, of course, after they had gone into the room and shut the door, and after Merland was established in the arm-chair, while Annerly kept standing or moving about restlessly—"it is the Baron—the talk I had with him this afternoon—that is on my mind."

"And what was that about?"

"Strangely—very strangely as between you and me—there are portions of that conversation that I must not describe to you. I should not yesterday have been able to imagine myself having any concealments from you; and, now that the Baron has told me something that I am not at liberty to repeat to any one, it seems to me more nearly approaching the usual entire confidence that there is between us for me to tell you at once that this is so, rather than keep you in ignorance of the fact that I am keeping back something from you."

"My dear fellow, don't imagine for a moment that I shall be such an ass as to be hurt at the Baron telling you secrets you mustn't repeat. I'm delighted to hear what you say. It shows that the Baron appreciates you, and, as I have a boundless admiration for him, I am heartily glad that he does."

"Thanks, your nature wouldn't hold a mean feeling, even if somebody else invented it for you. But happily I can tell you —you in particular, I mean, not anybody else—a good deal of what passed. The Baron has certainly penetrated deeper mysteries than we have ever given him credit for having fathomed—"

"That business with the glass to-day shows that he has—for one thing."

"But I can only give you a faint idea of the immensely elevated character of the mysteries I am referring to, as compared to that affair. He did allude to that, but with such pitiful scorn—and yet not in a bitter way, but as illustrating truths of such a humble sort, compared to others of which he wanted to give me a glimpse. Summing up what I wanted to say to you, the revelation made to me, as far as I can repeat it, is this:—At the first glance it would seem that people who are beginning to suspect in these days that there is such a thing as a psychic side to nature, and who feel attracted to inquire into many things which other people hitherto have distrusted, may be governed by a love of knowledge as praiseworthy as that which impels other people to study physical science or history. Well; that view of the matter is a total misconception of the whole thing. The pursuit of psychic knowledge, merely for its own sake, as knowledge to be turned to any account that may seem useful, like any other sort of knowledge, is foredoomed to failure. Not to entire failure, but that line of inquiry is a *cul de sac*. A man who treads it, and keeps to it alone, must come to grief sooner or later. The true psychic knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil, which is held back for a time from man, but is not held back for ever. It is attainable in this life to an extent I never before dreamed possible. That is what the Baron has convinced me of, and that is what I am at liberty to assure you of as my conviction—if I may say so—without making you distrust my judgment altogether; I will add my suddenly developed certainty. Psychic knowledge, occult science, call it what you will, is the most stupendous acquirement of man after he has fully come into possession of his reason. The fact that it expands our comprehension of the physical nature round us, though it is calculated to do this to an extraordinary extent, is as nothing compared to the fact that it expands our comprehension of ourselves; of that which is within, above, superior to us, use what form of words you like, always remembering that they have a miserable trick of materialising and localising spiritual ideas, which is an accident accruing from their ordinary use, and not their proper psychic sense."

Merland listened, almost more impressed by the fervour of Annerly's manner than by the words he used.

"You are putting into definite language what I think I have vaguely felt to be the case all along; but then the question is, How are we to set about the study of psychic mysteries of the more elevated sort? All philosophy in a way tends towards the analysis of good and evil; but one knows quite well a man may spend his life in philosophical reading and thinking, and yet at the end be merely the better off for having a somewhat finer appreciation of metaphysical subtleties than his neighbours; and the only new departure that psychic science seems to make, appears to me in the direction of understanding new forces in nature, rather than in that of enlarging ethical and religious conceptions."

"That is just the point. The psychic inquiry which has to do with the outer facts of psychic phenomena, is the *cul de sac* I speak of. If we really want to progress with the true psychic inquiry, that is to say, to obtain real knowledge of spiritual things, of our own ultimate destinies, and the scheme of human evolution in its highest sense, we must start on a different plan altogether. These very mysteries concerning natural laws not yet explored, which are too high above the head of the commonplace materialist for him to realise that there are such mysteries even, are too far below the region of thought in which the real psychic student must travel, for him to pay attention to them. An aspiration towards spiritual development sufficiently intense to become a real force in a man's nature conducive to true enlightenment, must be in the direction of absolute good, of absolute knowledge, which is higher than knowledge of detail. Words, at all events in my hands, as yet seem very weak instruments to convey the idea I dimly apprehend. But, oddly enough, this highest psychic doctrine seems to carry us back to some of the most elementary doctrines of ordinary religion, though at the same time under its influence these become illuminated with an inner meaning they never possessed before."

"I'm immensely impressed by what you say, but I don't see what it immediately leads to; though I'm sure, from the way you speak, that you do. You would not have been so much impressed unless you had discovered something more than the old doctrine that the pursuit of good, which is, doing the right thing the best way you know how, is better than the things of this world."

"One acquiesced in that theory blindly, at first; occult study or psychic science is calculated to show us how it works, so to speak. All that the religions of the world, so far, have laid down on authority, the enlarged wisdom of man, developed along the psychic path, may enable him to reconstruct out of his own consciousness with clear and certain confidence—casting aside, with no less confidence, the incrustations of error which have gathered round the central truths. To acquire this psychic knowledge is the moral coming of age of humanity, and with its help we may begin a religious life of quite a new kind. Let me try and make this idea quite plain. What is it that makes so many of the best men stand aside from what is ordinarily called religion, refusing to have any dealings with any of its forms and customs? Surely it is that they cannot stoop to the intellectual ignominy of bowing down before the obvious strain of human error that runs through them all. There is always a something, or some group of conceptions in their own minds, that they reverence; but to profess reverence for prevailing religious tenets, and, still more, to practise religious ceremonial, is to effect an intellectual submission to human teachers whom they may clearly see to be their intellectual inferiors. That revolts their sense of the fitness of things, though they may not always want to assert what dull-witted people, failing to understand their position, would rebuke as intellectual pride and foolishly regard as a sin against the principles of religion, which prescribe a child-like attitude of mind in approaching what they would, perhaps, call the throne of God, and what others might call the consideration of the absolute. The pulpit of the Reverend John Smith is not the throne of God and his sermon is not the absolute; that is what the earlier type of religious people forget. The priest, in all his aspects, is to humanity what the nursery governess is to the single human creature. It is perfectly right that the child should respect the nursery governess: there is a period in his life when she can teach him. And there is no reason why he should ever look back upon her otherwise than with kindly feelings if he is not kept under her instruction too long; but there comes a period in life when he must have other teaching as well."

"All that is admirable; the theory of the whole position is perfect; but as regards the application: Where is the other teaching to be got, and who are the teachers? There may be wiser moral teachers in the world than our clergy; but still people will say they are but other sorts of clergy if we go to them for religious instruction."

"That is the point. Man, on coming to maturity, does not want teachers; he has that within himself which, developed properly, enables him to acquire real knowledge of religious truth, of good and evil, of the absolute verities of nature at the fountain-head of knowledge, for himself. The process of developing this inner power of discerning the truth is psychic science. For the purposes of such development one may need guides, instructors, masters if you like, but the teaching of psychic science is not that such and such a doctrine is to be accepted on authority, however exalted; but that such and such a course of training will awaken dormant faculties by means of which truth in that direction can be perceived by a man for himself. The notion is dazzling at first. It is not information that psychic science offers in regard to any problem the psychic student may grapple with; it is, if I may coin a paradoxical phrase, omniscience *ad hoc;* knowledge in reference to the matter in question of the sort which, if conceived as extending to all matters, would be omniscience."

"But where are the guides—the instructors?"

"It seems absurd to answer as I must, and yet I know that it is not absurd, if you will trust me: that is what every man who wants their help must find out for himself. But let us not talk to-night of even the first stumbling-block in the way. It is the broad idea I have been endeavouring to convey to you, more, I think, than anything else that has been told to me, that has filled my whole mind with a new light to-day.

"We have been labouring after knowledge, as it seems to me, hitherto under the impression that it is to be obtained by more thinking, more study, more collected evidence along the old lines —that is to say, with the help of the old faculties, by means of the Human Understanding that Locke wrote about. Now I realise that, for the acquisition of the higher knowledge, it is a higher sort of understanding that is needed; and that this higher sort is attainable—not by the mere extra polish of the old understanding, but by taking a new departure. This is the meaning of the sign held out to men, so to speak, by the abnormal manifestations of various kinds that have turned the attention of so many thinking men at the present day into the paths of psychic study, though few of them, I fancy, realise, as yet, where those paths are destined to lead them. Take the simple and beautiful experiment of thought transference. It is proved by a thousand experiments that ideas, words, pictures can be conveyed to the perception of sensitives by channels of communication, which are not those of the senses. *À quoi bon?* asks the crass materialist. Have we not got eyes to see such things still more clearly? It is the hint conveyed, not the thing done, which is of supreme importance. If the human perception, contrary to earlier philosophies, turns out to be accessible to other impressions than those of the senses, the barriers of what has hitherto been the 'Unknowable' are broken down. And there is no 'if' in the matter; that much has been demonstrated. The barriers are down. The human understanding stands possessed of the order of release from its prison. All we have to do is to take advantage of our freedom, and, as the world is wide compared to a prison, so is the knowledge stretching out before the psychic understanding, vast compared to that which has been acquired by the teaching of the senses. The exhilaration of the idea is so great to me, that, whatever practical difficulties may be in the way of a man seeking to take advantage of the freedom offered, I can only feel that they shall go down before my determination to cross them."

CHAPTER X.

THE BEAUTIFUL MISS VAUGHAN.

Merland awoke next morning with a sense of some great event having happened. The consciousness of having taken a new departure in life, which Annerly had exhibited the previous evening so forcibly, had passed to a certain extent into his own mind; and he felt the pleasant inspiration of a new interest, which presented itself to him as altogether sunny and attractive. The course before him leading to the inner citadel of those psychic mysteries, which had latterly fascinated his imagination, was not quite plainly marked out, but Annerly evidently saw his way, and Merland was long used to following his lead in study. That this vigorous companion was always pushing on ahead, and clearing the paths they trod together, was merely one of the fortunate circumstances of his life, which he habitually enjoyed without thinking much about it. As he looked out from his elevated window over the windings of the green river and the wooded slopes of its picturesque banks, the inner working of Nature's laws seemed just ready to disclose itself to him: he felt as though already on the shore of the older knowledge, and on the point of embarking in the vessel which Annerly had discovered, on the unknown waters stretching beyond. The voyage invited him rather as a species of intellectual yachting, than as perilous or disagreeable navigation. And in better spirits if possible than usual, ready as ever to give out pleasure to others, as an emanation from his bright and happy temperament, and at the same time to draw it in from the current of life around him, as the plants take nourishment from the air, he came down to breakfast, where Captain Jem was regaling himself already on a frugal cup of tea and a slice of toast. The Captain was not a man who breakfasted lightly because he had dined heavily overnight, but on the contrary was content with little, because his habits were so utterly frugal at all times that he had unconsciously habituated himself to live on less food than his fellow-creatures generally required.

"Dear old Jem," said Merland, "what an anchorite you are! Why don't you peg into that cold pie a bit?"

"I would if I wanted to, you bet. But I'm a sybarite in my own way. I should never get the pleasure I do out of tea and brown-bread toast if I was always wiring into game-pies and *filets de bœuf.* But do you eat what comes in your way," pushing the pie in front of him, "and don't encourage yourself in being an epicure like me."

"I say, but how comes it you are so frightfully hungry that you haven't been able to wait for anybody this morning, but have begun gorging on toast all by yourself?"

"The Admiral's despatches, Claude, leave me no time to waste. I've got to go to Barenburg to meet the Vaughans. They've written to say they are coming down by the first boat I must be off out of this in half an hour. Come too!"

In this way it came to pass that Merland had a good hour and a half of the beautiful Lucy Vaughan's society all to himself before her arrival at the castle, as Captain Jem devoted himself altogether, from the moment they joined the steamer at Barenburg, to the service of the elder lady. Miss Vaughan amused herself with a small sketch-book in taking hurried notes of the river views as they went by. Merland threw himself with enthusiasm into the minor duties associated with the undertaking, supplying the artist with ready-dipped brushes, holding the water-bottle and moist-colour box, and suggesting forgotten details as the progress of the boat distorted or obliterated the view of each "instantaneous colourgraph" in turn. Above all, he basked the whole time in the glowing loveliness of his fair companion's animated face, serving up the local legends for her benefit, with rich additions to the meagre outlines in the guidebooks. Of course he gave her, amongst the number, the legend of the Heiligenfels dungeon, as told by Annerly on the occasion of the now famous evening visit paid to that place by Miss Blane, and also an account of all that afterwards came of it. Miss Vaughan gave the whole story her rapt attention. It was just the kind of thing, she declared, that would naturally happen in Baron Friedrich's castle.

"I do hope we shall have some more exciting events of that kind while we are there."

"We have had more already," Merland explained, going on to describe the incident with the glass on the previous day.

"Why, it's an enchanted castle, altogether. I never, in my life, was so interested in anything before."

First-rate opportunities for instantaneous colourgraphs were neglected, as questions and explanations succeeded. Without attempting to reproduce the whole of the new view of psychic study that Annerly had put before him the previous night, Merland drew upon it sufficiently to dignify and ennoble the account he gave of the proper aims and objects of such study.

Miss Vaughan's enthusiastic temperament readily took fire. Merland hardly knew whether he was most impressed by the ardour of her character as exhibited in the course of her conversation, her bright intelligence, her sympathy with the happy-hearted zeal for new knowledge along the strange path now apparently opening out before them, or by her great and glowing beauty, manifested not merely in the rich colouring of her complexion and her deep-blue eyes, but in the general magnificence of her physique; for Miss Vaughan, as already mentioned, was a girl of stately proportions, whose charms struck the hearts of men attuned to them as with a lightning flash. She did not require to be seen several times in order to be appreciated—as may be the case with some women whose fascinations are of a different order. Hers were of the kind that burst upon spectators in full splendour all at once.

And their influence on Merland was perhaps all the greater from the fact that the young man did not understand the situation all at once, having, so far, gone through life without having been seriously in love.

A very susceptible temperament recognises its own wounds the moment they are inflicted; but in the conviction, born of experience, that it may be wounded many times again in fresh places, has a certain sub-consciousness all the while that few such wounds are likely to bleed for ever.

Merland, however, reached the castle in the beautiful Lucy's company dazzled and delighted; but merely, for the moment, overwhelmed with the feeling that she was indeed a magnificent creature, without referring this fact to his own personality in any way.

The Baron was waiting to receive the Vaughans at the outer gate of the castle when they got up, and Lucy gaily complimented him on the great improvement in his manners wrought by the influence of his ancestral air.

"In London, you know, you ran away from me always as if I had the plague, but here you actually meet me half-way. Baron Friedrich has got quite tame, mamma"—to her mother a few steps behind—"a child might play with him."

"Heiligenfels surrenders to you, Miss Vaughan, without making terms, and I am here at the gate to announce my submission."

"I'll consider what shall be your fate at leisure, and meanwhile you shall show me over the fortress I have so gallantly conquered from the turrets to the dungeons. It looks the most perfectly enchanting place I ever saw, not to say enchanted."

Baron Friedrich had no need to reply with more than a kindly smile. Mrs. Vaughan was gracefully expressing the confidence in his invariable courtesy which had induced her to accept Mrs. Miller's invitation, and withdrew his attention from Lucy by taking his arm and passing with him across the courtyards to the main entrance. Few women embodied more emphatic claims to be treated with the highest consideration on all hands than Mrs. Vaughan. Even her brilliant daughter would rarely fail to render her the respect due to her quiet dignity as a *grande dame*, however gaily this might be modernised in its outward expression. Lucy fell now into the background between Merland and Captain Jem. There were flower-beds in the outer courtyard, to be appreciated as they went along, and points of view from the low battlements, the terraces along which were easily approached by flights of open steps; and through the openings between the battlements, in one place, they passed into a large conservatory built outside the old walls on a convenient lump of rock, and commanding a grand view down the Rhine, with the Siebengebirge far off in the distance. Here they disturbed the studious seclusion of another visitor ensconced in a cane arm-chair, and pondering deeply over a book on his knees—the boy Reginald Hexton. He got up as they came into the conservatory and greeted the Captain with the easy confidence of a man of the world rather than the awkwardness of a boy, though with a quiet simplicity of manner that robbed his self-possession of all flavour of juvenile presumption. Greatly struck by his appearance, Lucy immediately exacted further information, had him presented to her, and asked him what he was reading.

"I am studying it rather than reading it," he said, putting it into her outstretched hand.

"Why, it's an unknown tongue. What characters are those?"

"Sanscrit."

"You've begun deep learning very soon in life," she said. "Can you read Sanscrit?"

"A little, and my uncle explains it to me sometimes."

"And do you like that better than play?"

"I never think of play when I am trying to understand that book."

"What book is it?"

"It's an Eastern poem—the Bhagavat Gîta."

"Is it pretty?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it that way, but it's very interesting—what I can understand of it."

Miss Vaughan declared afterwards that her breath was taken away to that extent, by finding a boy in jackets reading Sanscrit for his own pleasure, that she was unable to carry on the conversation further. They completed their tour of the points of view, and ultimately joined the rest of the party on the terrace, Merland more absorbed than ever in the views he obtained the while of his fair companion.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BARON'S EXPLANATION.

Baron Friedrich found an opportunity during the day of removing from Professor Massilton's mind the impression that he had purposely avoided a conversation with him the previous evening. He spoke of the regret with which he had felt bound, as a host, to put Sir John Hexton at his ease again, after the little incident of the afternoon, which had brought him into a momentarily disagreeable position.

"If he did feel," said the Professor, "that Blane and I snubbed him, it is to be hoped that he felt also, on reflection that he deserved a snubbing."

"Ah, well," said the Baron, "if it comes to that, we all doubtless deserve what happens to us, whatever it may be, but that hardly relieves us of the duty of softening the disagreeables of life for one another as much as possible."

The Professor was always ready to take up any statement involving a general principle.

"You make a very large admission when you say that, Baron," he answered. "It amounts to saying that the wretched must always have been the sinful, which would be a hard doctrine to apply to much of the suffering in the world."

"A doctrine of course which would be transparently absurd if we assumed that the suffering we see is a consequence of sin committed in the *same life.* But may it not be reasonable if we proceed on the hypothesis that every man is reborn on earth again and again under conditions which are the logical result of the life he leads each time?"

"Ah!" said Blane, who was with them, the conversation taking place in the library in the afternoon; "re-incarnation is undoubtedly the clue to a great many of the mysteries of life; and many advanced thinkers are coming, I think, to recognise it as their only possible solution. But the world at large wants better proof of it than its mere logical necessity."

"The world at large," said the Baron, "will probably have to do without that proof for some time longer, but the advanced thinkers may very easily find the inferences you speak of strengthened till they become absolute convictions on the subject. Re-incarnation must eventually be recognised by men whose open minds desire the truth, as the crown and complement of evolution already recognised in physiology."

"You mean," said the Professor, "that the inequalities of welfare will then be supplied with a moral justification,—that every man is born to a fate, roughly speaking, which he has earned for himself in his last life."

"You have said it for me with a precision which shows that your own thinking has already tended in that direction."

"All thinking men, I fancy," said the Professor, "embrace nearly all that can be thought on such subjects in the range of their conjectures. I shall be very glad to follow out the idea with you further some time, but for the moment we have some more immediately practical matters in hand. A new fact in Nature is more fascinating to me than even a new speculation in metaphysics; and I readily confess that my catalogue of Nature's facts does not furnish me with an explanation of the control you apparently exercise over some electrical phenomena of an unusual kind, if the effects you produced yesterday may be treated as electrical phenomena."

"My dear Professor," said the Baron, "your remark implies a question which I shall meet with the utmost frankness. I have been made acquainted with some facts of Nature that are not yet generally known, but I have been taught some part of what I know in this direction, under pledges of secrecy which preclude me from explaining certain things to you as fully as it would have been my delight to have done if I had been entirely free from such restrictions. In casual talk I had with you in London I shrank from even saying this much, because it can only be in the leisure of prolonged conversation with you, that I can hope to make my position in this respect seem otherwise than absurd and irrational. And I am anxious that it should, on the contrary, seem intelligible and reasonable."

"A promise is a promise, of course; and no one who knows you would expect you to treat one lightly. But it does seem incomprehensible, on the face of things, that any man who has made a discovery in natural science should exact a promise of secrecy in expounding it, grudging his fellow-creatures their share of the knowledge thus committed to his unworthy custody."

"A very natural view of the matter; but one that I hope to show you reason to modify. That little experiment we tried yesterday involved a very small result, but a principle may be applied in more ways than one. We made a glass ring yesterday; suppose we augment the force then employed in one more experiment to-day, and see what happens. Will you choose one of those panes of glass in the window there, and I will deal with it in the same way that I influenced the goblet yesterday—only with more vehemence."

The Professor indicated one of the panes of glass, and the Baron remained for a few moments as if in deep thought. Then he lifted his hand and made a gesture in the direction of the window, and the pane of glass selected was shattered as if a bullet had been fired through it.

"That force could be turned," said the Baron, "as easily against a man's body as against a window-pane. And it could be directed—I will not say as easily—but it could be directed from almost any, at all events from very considerable, distances. Those who were good enough to entrust me with a comprehension of it would not trust me with the right to make the secret of it public for anybody to handle it as his interests or passions might suggest."

Both Blane and the Professor sat silent for a while. Even the Professor, who was not easily overcome by emotion, was too startled to comment at once on what had happened.

The Baron spoke again, indeed, before they had either of them uttered a word.

"If you will permit me to suggest," he said, "I think it would be better, even though we have been doubtful about the good taste of too much secrecy, to say nothing of this incident to our other friends here at present. It is not quite without a certain sacrifice of an energy that can only be stored by degrees, that efforts of this sort can be made. My effort will not have been thrown away if it has induced you to think that there may be more good sense than was apparent at first in the policy of keeping some sorts of knowledge secret. But, on the other hand, I cannot repeat it frequently to satisfy the thirst for witnessing unusual effects of that sort, without a sacrifice quite out of harmony with the purpose in view."

"I shall respect your wish in the matter," said Blane, "without hesitation."

"Certainly," said the Professor; "you are quite entitled to put a seal of confidence on any communication you make, whether by words or acts. As for the question we had before us—whether it is wise, on the whole, to keep back knowledge from mankind for fear it might be misused—that may still be open to consideration. You have employed a cogent argument in favour of reticence—that I admit. But whether mankind might not be the better in the long run for taking the new knowledge with all its dangers, is disputable still. Its very misuse, for a time, might have a great educational effect on the race eventually."

"If the occult forces, those which are hidden from mere physical research, carried with them nothing worse than the power of mischief I have shown you, the question might, as you say, be disputable; but they are manifold and very dangerous, believe me. My friends, this will not be the only conversation we shall have on these topics, and I know, both that I have reasons to put before you which are forcible, and that your minds are of the order which cannot but accept the force of reason. For my part I recognize to the full the profound good sense of the strict provisions under which I have been permitted to acquire the faculties, such as they are, which I possess; but those provisions have been just so far relaxed in my case, for a time, that I am enabled to show you practically that such faculties exist. It is with a purpose in view that this relaxation has been conceded. What I have just done, the exhibition of an occult faculty, is, in itself, an act, subject as a rule to the severest prohibitions."

"Pardon me," said the Professor; "prohibitions emanating from what authority?"

"The collective will of the persons who possess these faculties, and enable others, one by one, as they are duly qualified, to acquire them. All of us who in any degree aspire to graduate in the higher mysteries of occult science come under the operation of rules which represent that collective will. And, as I was saying, one such rule is, that the art of manipulating the occult forces of Nature is never to be employed for the purposes of boastful display or to gratify empty curiosity."

"In no case could you have been guilty of the one, nor we of the other.

"Perhaps not, relatively to the grosser application of the phrases. But to do even what I have just done, for the mere sake of pointing an argument, however serious, would be obnoxious to the rule I speak of. That has been put, to a certain extent, at my discretion, because I have been privileged to undertake a very special task. It is desirable—more desirable than I can say in a few words to-day—that the brilliant scientific intellect of the European world should be leavened to a greater extent than it is leavened at present by a sense of the value, as regards the interest of mankind and the progress of knowledge, which attaches to the cultivation—of what is hardly cultivated at present in the West at all—of spiritual science. Now how is that result to be brought about?"

"There is no doubt whatever," said the Professor, "that you can bring the result about. After what you have shown us to-day, you can assemble a body of scientific men at any time in London and convince them in five minutes that spiritual science —if it is by such means that you exercise these extraordinary powers—is something exceedingly well worth studying."

"But if I took that course I should bring about a result very unlike the one desired. It is *not* desirable that spiritual science should be studied for the sake of the control over physical nature that it may give rise to, but because in itself it is a higher pursuit than any which have to do merely with the material plane. The reach and scope of the occult sciences is so immeasurably greater than those of physical research, that, though they incidentally enlarge our comprehension of physical nature, their real importance has to do with the light they throw on our moral and spiritual life, and with the influence that their study must have on the progress of our future development and lives, both physical and spiritual. It would degrade spiritual science to an extent quite revolting to its devotees, if it were pursued to any considerable extent for the sake of its lower victories on the material plane. And yet in its narrowest aspect, as a sublime sort of physical science, it must be recognised in the European world before it will begin to influence the hearts and morals of mankind to any great degree. Here is the dilemma in which I am placed in endeavouring to accomplish my task. We must show our own generation first of all, by evidence of a kind they will accept, that we really do know something, and then, having secured their attention, we shall be better able to direct it upwards. But in doing this we run the risk of merely glorifying and stimulating tendencies, which must in the end, by intensifying their materialism, lead men downward."

"But surely the course you have just taken with me is one which cannot but be successful with any group of influential men you wish to deal with it. If you once show them that you undeniably possess faculties of a very wonderful order, they will be ready enough to listen to whatever you want to say about the method by which those faculties are acquired."

"Well; all I can say at present is, that such a course of action as that you suggest is not within the scope of the discretion I enjoy. There may be such a thing as effecting a revolution in thought too violently. It may be that in spite of this consideration the course you propose would be a good one and would not turn out too violent in its results. But anyhow, it is outside the general instructions under which I am operating, and cannot be undertaken. What I am at liberty to do is to pick out a few men who may be qualified to get a hearing from the cultivated world on the subject, and enlist their sympathies if possible in the work I have in hand. To do this it is obvious that some credentials must be exhibited to show the broad fact that students of occult science have a message to impart, and this is how it comes that to a very limited degree the rules that would otherwise have restrained me have been relaxed."

CHAPTER XII.

A FRESH DEVELOPMENT.

The life of the castle went on for a few days after the Vaughans' arrival without any remarkable events of a kind to affect the entire party. The Baron divided his time among the different interests his guests represented; sometimes joining an excursion to some neighbouring place of attraction on the river, sometimes going for a walk in the woods with Blane and the Professor, sometimes spending a part of the day in his little private study, on which occasions more than once he asked Annerly to join him. Mrs. Vaughan, moreover, sometimes secured his companionship for conversations apart from the general society of the castle, and other combinations were struck out each morning and afternoon, in a manner which forbade the fear that any of the guests would find the proceedings monotonous.

For Merland there was little fear indeed that the time would hang heavily on hand. A new interest had entered into his life which suddenly expanded with a new glory, as a great flower might all at once bloom into radiance. Lucy Vaughan's glowing beauty was the sunshine that had wrought this momentous change. He was too much dazzled to be conscious of making love to her with any set purpose, and the perfect simplicity of his attitude towards her disarmed the girl of the weapon she might otherwise have instinctively employed to ward off a more accomplished attack. He talked with her almost entirely of the vivid interests that had been awakened by the abnormal events of the past few days, and the conversations that had taken place between himself and Annerly. With no one else could she talk of these things so frankly or so fully. In their several ways most of the other guests were preoccupied. For private conversation with the Baron himself, few opportunities fell in her way. In the temporary separation into couples which sometimes broke up larger groups where these were formed for excursions about the neighbourhood, her mother usually secured him for her own share ; and Lucy found herself less disconcerted at this arrangement than she would have expected, had she foreseen it. For with her, as with most of the other guests, expectation had somehow been raised in connection with the present visit, and she had come to the castle in the hope of enjoying a closer intimacy with its master than she had been able to form during the whirl of the London season. Her interest in the strange attributes vaguely reputed to belong to him was in no way lessened ; but she was conscious of learning more of these at second-hand from Merland than she would have been able to extract from the Baron himself. And she did not stop to consider how far her delight in hearing of the wonderful possibilities stretching out before students of the occult sciences was enhanced by discussing them with an enthusiast whose ardour was blended with an enthusiastic admiration for herself, colouring all his own speculations with the aspects of the new knowledge as they seemed especially to affect her.

And in dealing with her Merland was checked by no feeling that he was talking down to a lower intellectual level than his own. The young man poured out all he knew for her entertainment and instruction, and confided to her in the fullest measure the plans and hopes connected with the new discoveries they all seemed on the brink of making, that had been stirring in his imagination at the moment he made her acquaintance.

Annerly, it will be remembered, had put a very exalted complexion upon the objects of occult study in the course of the sketch he had given his friend of his first important interview with Baron Friedrich. Merland modified this more than he was aware of, at the time, in transferring it to the visions he conjured up in conversation with Miss Vaughan; but neither he nor she perceived the touch of earthly passion infused into its lofty spirituality, as he pictured a progress towards higher ideals than young men generally form. These he unconsciously developed so as to render them compatible with the glowing happiness of ordinary love. Lucy Vaughan was only struck with the great elevation of his aspirations above those which the common pleasure-seekers she usually lived amongst, were governed by.

Women are generally readier than most men to recognise the beauty of elevated aims in life; and, gay young lady of fashion though Miss Vaughan was, her higher instincts, only exercised though they had been so far in commonplace country charities and kindly interest in the poor about her mother's property, were easily roused to inspire to her, for the time being at least, with far stronger motives of action than the ambitions of a worldly life.

"It is an old-standing joke between my mother and me," she said, "that I mean to be a sister of mercy some day. Of course one should not aim at doing good for that reason, but I really believe I should be happier trying to do good, than amusing myself all my life in the usual routine we go through.'

They were talking alone together, sitting on a rock over looking the river, one sunny afternoon. There had been a picnic-lunch to a ruin a mile or so down the river, and after the entertainment a slight dispersion of the *convives.* Lucy had floated into the attraction of Merland's strong wish to draw her off with himself, and they had strolled a little way along the crest of the hill on which the old ruin stood, and had now come to rest in a little patch of shade, with the river below them and no listeners within earshot.

"I hope it will never be more than a joke," Merland answered, "because there may evidently be a higher and nobler destiny before you than the best work that any one person could do in that way. For you to be a sister of mercy would be like the commander of an army setting to work to dig in the trenches. With such power as you will always have to sway others it would be terrible waste of moral energy for you to spend it as merely so much motive force behind your own one pair of hands."

"And who is going to invest me with this wonderful power, and what shape is it to take?"

"You are born to wield it and have it already. The wish to please you *must* be a strong motive of action for all you live amongst; and, if you are best pleased by evoking good and noble impulses in the people round you, you are more influential living with people in your own rank of life, than if you descend into a lower level to do humble works of charity yourself. Why do you suppose you have all the advantages of station in the world, as well as those of your own nature, which show you the beauty of the higher life, except that you should serve as a guide and beacon for others? All your brilliant qualities would simply be thrown away in the mere personal service of the poor and the sick. Any woman with a kindly heart and a gentle touch could do as much for them as you could. But your moral influence in the society you properly belong to, pressing always in the direction of great ideals of conduct, might produce quite incalculable results."

"But in society all thoughts about grand ideas and doing good get swamped and overwhelmed in the petty selfish affairs of the hour. It is the rarest thing in the world to meet a man for instance who cares to talk about any of the things I have been talking of with you."

"And may not that be because there are so few women like yourself to talk of them? And, if so, is not that the greater reason why the very few men there are should not take their purifying influence away? In the Indian poem that Edwin Arnold has translated do you not remember how the heroine extorts a miracle from Yama the god of death, and gets back the soul of her husband by the mere charm of her conversation on great and noble themes. She does not beg the favour, but she evokes so much enthusiasm on Yama's part, by her eloquent "praise of good," that he yields her the favours spontaneously. What influence over others in that way could any man ever have compared with that which a woman like yourself might exert?"

"Supposing she had the eloquence, which women as a rule do not have."

"But which she might acquire if she made that in the first instance her own object. And then there is magic merely in the sympathy of some women, which is an immense stimulus to all who are privileged to feel it. For myself, to begin with, I have infinite cause to be grateful to you for the inspiration it has been to me to talk out some of these subjects with you during these few days. The great advantage of knowing you has come to me just at the right moment, when the vague and floating purpose of a life, that had no definite aim till recently, had just been brought to a focus. If your influence, which could not be but a strong one, had worked against the desire for superior knowledge and spiritual culture of the highest sort, that has suddenly developed in my mind, I might have been driven back into the lower channels of some more commonplace career; but your sympathy and appreciative encouragement have exactly imparted the impulse that has converted my sudden inclination into a fixed purpose. I might meet with frivolous or worldly-minded people now who would scoff or sneer, and that would disturb me about as much as the dust in the air unsettles this hill. I see the right path clearly, and I shall never be persuaded that it is the wrong one, when I remember how clearly you saw it too."

It was not in Lucy's feminine human nature to be quite insensible to the influence of this incense, burnt before her as it was with such honest enthusiasm by the good-looking, earnest young fellow at her side, with upturned face aglow with pure reverence for her, and lighted up by the sunshine of her presence. Lucy Vaughan's three years' experience of the world, gathered, as it had been, at the focus of its most vivid life, made her older in some respects than Merland, though the young man had the start of her by a certain space of time as regards mere physical existence. She was not ready to catch at admiration, having always found enough of it and to spare around her on all sides. She had, on the contrary, acquired the habit of rather warding off the advances of young men than leading them on. But Merland's admiration was expressed with such self-forgetfulness that there was nothing in it to ward off; and it was admiration moreover, along new lines, answering to an inner chord in the girl's nature that had vibrated in secret, so far, or at all events under repression; as Mrs. Vaughan did not by any means encourage the sister-of-mercy notion which had hitherto been Lucy's only defined aspiration in the direction of the more exalted ideals she vaguely yearned after. In this way it came to pass that she permitted the incense now offered up, to ascend unchecked, and inhaled its fragrance not without pleasure.

To such conversations, however, there can be only one end. Merland would never have had the audacity to bring his own personality into their discussions if he had fully realised at the time all that was implied in making love to Miss Vaughan. Beyond knowing that she was a young lady of very good social position, and that her mother was spoken of by Mrs. Miller with great deference, he was quite unaware of any special circumstances about her. But in truth the young lady was unexceptionally favoured by fortune and all its pleasantest concomitants. Though her father had borne no title, his ancestry and relationships had linked his family with more than one noble house. Her mother had been an heiress in her turn, and her property had been settled in the female line, which the beautiful Lucy alone represented. The family floated through life, in fact, on a wave of abundant prosperity; and scarcely any marriage Lucy could have made in the highest London society could have been a *mesalliance* for the bridegroom, whatever his rank. Of all this, however, Merland was happily unsuspicious. He only knew that Miss Vaughan had entered into his life, and, privileged as he had become to gain, at least, her sympathetic friendship, the thought of a future from which, at the end of a transitory autumn country-house party, she should disappear, was a foretaste of blank misery, even in the midst of the delight he enjoyed in her society for the time.

The overwhelming strength of his new emotions kept him silent about them with the one friend to whom he would naturally have confided any fresh impressions; and Annerly was too much absorbed himself by the interest of the visions of a different kind presented to his own imagination, to be very observant of his friend. He conversed frequently and fully with Merland, but their talk was altogether concentrated on the topics he had been engaged upon with the Baron. Unconsciously in this way he was feeding his friend's passion, for Merland was thus supplied with floods of new ideas connected with the loftier purposes of psychic development that lent a daily augmented vigour to the expositions he in his turn presented to Miss Vaughan.

These expositions culminated in that inevitable declaration just referred to, at the close of a delirious week. If Merland had been an older philosopher he would have felt that the halcyon days he was enjoying were too good to last. But he had been left undisturbed to secure large portions of Miss Vaughan's society, day after day, by reason of various events that distracted the attention of the others.

One of these was the arrival of Mrs. Lakesby, of whose expected coming the Baron had spoken on the afternoon of his own appearance on the scene. There had been some conversation about her in the drawing-room the previous evening.

"She has that abnormal sense," the Baron explained in answer to a question from Mrs. Miller, "which is generally called clairvoyance. I should say it has rarely happened that any one, not initiated in special and artificial methods of developing that sense, has been born with it in a greater measure."

"Then the next question," said the Professor, "is how far she is likely to be willing to demonstrate the possession of these gifts for the service of intelligent inquiry. I find as a rule that when people are reputed to be endowed with any sort of psychic faculty their first impulse seems always to be to hide the fact from every one to whom it is specially worth while to show it."

Mrs. Miller declared that she always persevered with people whom she knew to have any abnormal faculties till she found out what they really were. It was all a question of having patience.

Captain Jem murmured in a low voice to Blane, near whom he was sitting, that he had known the other people lose their little stock of patience in the course of the proceedings; but Mrs. Miller caught the sense of some comment having been made by the Captain on her remark, and added that she had been specially trained, it was true, herself in patience and long-suffering by having been married to Jem. This momentary clash of light weapons moved the Professor—whose nervously active temperament rarely allowed him to pass over anything said in his neighbourhood without dealing with it in some way or other—to suggest, that for Mrs. Miller to thoroughly appreciate Jem she ought to change husbands for a time with Lady Emily. Then the Baron went on about Mrs. Lakesby.

"You see many people who find themselves the subject of any strange experience, that ordinary knowledge will not help others to account for, get so much laughed at first in the world when they mention it, that they acquire the habit of reticence in such matters. But Mrs. Lakesby will not be timid in this respect with us I think, because she will find a ready and sympathetic credit for what she has to tell us here no doubt; though my good brother-in-law Sir John does think us all demented, I am sure, for prying after the possibility of uncanny mysteries in the world."

Mrs. Lakesby had come abroad with friends bound for Switzerland, and left them when within a few hours' easy journey of Heiligenfels. She joined in the castle-party in the afternoon, when a good many of the guests were assembled on the terrace in honour of the five o'clock tea, which Mrs. Miller generally dispensed there. She was a little woman, bright and attractive though no longer in her first youth, a widow of many years' standing, with brown wavy hair and large blue eyes, very quiet and demure in manner as a rule, with features not regular enough to be admired in detail, but producing a pleasant *ensemble;* a thoroughly wholesome, nice little woman, ready to like and be liked by the people she might be living with—a person who could not but excite interest and attention in any group she entered. She was a stranger on her arrival to all but the Baron. He brought her on to the terrace, and introduced her to Mrs. Miller and one or two of the others, and every one who had the opportunity of doing so without violating good taste by too obtrusive a show of interest did all that could be done to make her feel at once at home and welcome. She noticed this after a little talk on the trifling topics of the surface.

"Yes, the view is lovely; and the old castle has a lovely feeling about it just now because you are all so kindly disposed towards the new guest."

"The Baron," said Mrs. Vaughan, "makes us all so happy here, we should be monsters indeed if we were not in a placable mood."

"It's more than that, or at all events, if the Baron has succeeded in making you happy here, you mean to make me so too, I can feel very strongly."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Miller, "you generally tell at the first moment whether people are going to like you or not?"

"Pardon me," put in the Professor, "I am sure Mrs. Lakesby has never yet met anybody who did not like her, so she can have no experience of what that feeling is like."

"Well then," answered Mrs. Miller, always ready for a fence, "she may know when she is not going to like people herself. You'd better be careful, Professor."

"I don't think I'm in much danger of not liking people here," said Mrs. Lakesby with a reassuring smile.

"But it always interests me," said the Professor, "to find out how far feelings of that sort are derived from some really external cause, or are just the inner impulse of the moment depending on one's own state of health and spirits. Of course, you will understand that I am asking for information, and not in any distrustful way—but do you ever take pains to check the first impressions you get by later observation?"

"Oh, well, that is almost too simple a feeling to want checking. One seems to know the general state of people's mind about oneself as certainly as you know their features when you look at them. But I have been checking those sort of feelings by noticing them come true all my life."

"'One' is an expression of very variable meaning, Mrs. Lakesby. You may be able to get correct impressions of what other people are thinking and feeling, but most people are limited to observing how they look and talk."

"Well, I know some people are more sensitive than others to impressions of that sort, but it's all a question of degree, very likely. Most people, probably, are more sensitive in that way than they are aware of."

"I quite agree with you," said the Baron.

"And I will not presume to disagree for a moment," said the Professor; "but, whenever I am conscious of having such impressions myself, they invariably turn out wrong; so, if it is all a question of degree, there is a zero point on the scale at which I am firmly established. But never mind that; it is more interesting to talk of people who find their impressions come true. I shall hope to hear more from you about that some day at your leisure."

"I do not doubt," said the Baron, "that Mrs. Lakesby will be able to convince you that she can rely on impressions; but, when the faculties that have to do with these are very wide awake, they get so highly sensitive about more difficult subjects of perception that they lose the habit of seeking proofs of their own accuracy. We all leave off spelling our words when we have learned to read."

"But with each fresh child we must begin to spell again," said the Professor. "Now I am a fresh child, Mrs. Lakesby, an unsophisticated, untaught creature; but eager to learn. I hope you will give me some simple lessons in this matter, suited to a beginner. Do the impressions you speak of, for instance, convey merely a general feeling? or do they reveal any precise intention in other people's minds?"

"In my case, they do that certainly, at times. But it is not a thing one likes to do—to read other people's thoughts too much. I don't think it's fair."

"The faculty is so unusual," said the Professor, "that I certainly never thought of it as a question of morals. But at least, if people willingly offer their minds for your inspection, then it is all right?"

"Yes, it's all right then."

The Professor remained silent, and, as he had been carrying on the talk for the last few minutes, this made a little pause, which was broken in a few moments by a laugh from Mrs. Lakesby.

"Well, there's no clairvoyance in that; but it's pretty evident that you would like me to try on you."

"Just so. But that, you say, was an ordinary inference."

"Of course. I was not near enough to you to read your thought, really."

"But since it has come under discussion I will admit that it was my thought; though I should deeply regret to be regarded by you as unfortunate. Whenever you may be disposed for such an experiment I shall be more than ready."

Mrs. Lakesby put no difficulties in the way, and the Professor's experiment was soon arranged. Mrs. Lakesby had begged that it should be one of the ladies present whose thought she should read; and, Mrs. Vaughan having been selected, the Professor went away to write a question on a piece of paper. He came back with it folded up. Mrs. Lakesby pulled a chair close to Mrs. Vaughan's, and put her face down on that lady's shoulder, so that their heads were close together.

"One must be so very affectionate for this purpose," she said, "that it's nicer to read ladies' thoughts than gentlemen's."

"I don't think it would be disagreeable—at all events," said the Professor, "for the gentlemen."

"What a beautiful park!" said Mrs. Lakesby, nestling closer to Mrs. Vaughan.

"Why, what do you mean? We haven't begun."

"No, I know you haven't given Mrs. Vaughan your question, but I caught sight of such a lovely house, in her mind, a house with curved steps leading up to a stained-glass door, and a lawn in front with a lake beyond, and such a pretty boat-house to the left there, with three or four boats at anchor on the water, and big trees on the right. And there's a lot of scaffolding up against the house at one end and building going on. Oh, I see there's been a fire. Why, some of the walls are all black."

"Why, she's describing my house in Devonshire exactly," said Mrs. Vaughan.

"But never mind that," said Mrs. Lakesby; "I'm quite ready for your question, Professor Massilton."

"But this is most interesting. Do you see any further detail about the house in Devonshire?"

"Why, if I went on looking I could tell you details till to-morrow, of course."

"Well, tell me," said Mrs. Vaughan, "something about my own particular room in which I generally sit in the morning."

"Wait a moment—where is it?—oh, yes, now I see. A bow-window with a writing-table in it What a pretty table—all inlaid-work and ivory. And there are book-shelves there, to the left, and another window opposite them. There are quantities of ornaments and things about, and pictures, and easy-chairs. I don't wonder you live a good deal in that room."

"Is that right, Mrs. Vaughan?" asked the Professor.

"Wonderfully, marvellously right—except, indeed, for one thing you said, which is only worth noticing as wrong because of the extraordinary accuracy of your description generally. As you stand at the writing-table in the bow-window, looking out, the bookshelves would be to your right and the window to the left."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Mrs. Lakesby; "I did not stop to reverse things for you. In clairvoyant-sight one generally sees things in that way, the wrong way about as in a looking-glass. I dare say I got a wrong impression of the lawn, just now, in that way."

"Yes, I noticed that you said the boat-house was to the left instead of to the right as you look from the terrace."

"It is a point," the Professor said, "that one would like to go into later; but the mere fact that distant places can be seen this way at all is so immense a fact that we must try to get at its elementary explanations first before going into minutiæ."

"But what question do you want to ask?" said Mrs. Lakesby; "because it is just possible that Mrs. Vaughan may get tired of nursing me in this way after a time."

Mrs. Vaughan gave light and graceful assurances to the contrary, but then the Professor, carrying out the arrangement that had previously been agreed upon, unfolded the paper he had written, and handed it to her, Mrs. Lakesby's back being towards him, and her face buried in the light shawl on Mrs. Vaughan's shoulder. Mrs. Vaughan silently read the paper and remained looking at it. Almost as quickly as if it had been before her own eyes, Mrs. Lakesby became aware of its substance, and gaily replied,—

"I should rather think so. 'Is clairvoyance possible?' The strange thing for people who have the double sight is that other people can sometimes fail to see the things so seen." She lifted her head when she had thus given the contents of the paper, and laughed again as the others pressed round to look at the paper, and asked, "Is that right?"

"It seems so funny that so simple a thing should be a wonder," she explained.

"A simple thing," said Blane, "for the few who enjoy your gifts perhaps; but so boundlessly astonishing a thing in itself, from the point of view of the enormous majority without them, that they will not even be persuaded the world holds anything so wonderful."

"I wish Lucy had been here to see that," Mrs. Vaughan said to Mrs. Miller. "She would have been so profoundly interested. Where is she?"

"I haven't seen her since lunch. Most of our young people are wandering about the woods, I think."

"Ah well! but after all," said Mrs. Lakesby, "I did not expect to be looked upon as a prodigy *here!*"

"But why," said the Professor, "should you have supposed us likely to be so exceptionally stupid as not to be struck by such faculties as yours, which you must know to be very rare?"

"I mean—" with an arch, inquiring look at the Baron, "that you might perhaps have been interested in other things before now, rather than in my little faculties."

The Baron quietly smiled, and shook his head. "There cannot be any subjects," he said, "which would eclipse the interest of your clairvoyance for the Professor, I am sure, Mrs. Lakesby."

"At all events," the Professor put in, "it will be a privilege that I appreciate more than I can say if you will let me study the subject of your clairvoyance. Are there any difficulties in the way of repeating such experiments as that we have just had?"

"I could generally read a simple question like that you wrote, in so clear a mind as Mrs. Vaughan's. But I would not always see other places as plainly as I saw her house. My sight is very good to-day. And Mrs. Vaughan read that paper so strongly, if you know what I mean. The words marched quite vividly, as it were, through her mind. It would not follow that everybody would take them so plainly, but most people might, with so short a question as that. However, that sort of physical clairvoyance, like seeing the house, and so on, can't be relied on. I get very bright flashes of it now and then, but I do not care about that so much."

The Professor looked as if he were going to remonstrate, but Blane put in a word.

"This is profoundly interesting, Mrs. Lakesby. Would you explain that more fully? What sort of clairvoyance do you mean that you do care about?"

"I like best to see my friends," she answered, with some shade of hesitation. "I do not quite know how far you are prepared for what I mean, but I think I have friends you know who have passed from this to another sort of life."

"I understand," Blane replied, "and I am not unprepared. But I can understand, also, that the subject may be one you do not like to talk of too freely."

The conversation was interrupted here by the arrival of Mr. Annerly. The Baron spoke to him the moment he appeared on the terrace.

"Let me present you," he said, "to Mrs. Lakesby."

Mrs. Lakesby gazed at him intently as she shook hands, and then turned her large, open eyes, with an inquiring look, at the Baron. But he did not take any notice of the look, and the general talk went on for a while. Then, eventually, Mrs. Miller went off with Mrs. Lakesby to show her her room, and the party scattered. The Professor announced his intention of going to write letters between then and dinner, but put his arm through Blane's and walked up and down the terrace, talking for a little while longer.

"Now, old fellow, how does what we have just seen strike you?"

"Certainly as more than the finest feat of clairvoyance I ever saw—almost finer than any I have heard of."

"The sort of thing, in fact, one reads about but does not often see. Quite so; but what has suddenly struck me forcibly is, that we have got no case for argument with outsiders about it."

"It is only one experiment, certainly, but as far as it went that arrangement of yours with the paper was most definite and distinct."

"It was. And we who saw it carried out know with practical certainty that the question was read by Mrs. Lakesby with a *bonâ fide* exercise of the abnormal gift she possesses. But, thinking what could be suggested by the incredulous outsider, who would merely read about the incident, supposing we were to tell the story, I saw at once what would be said? Mrs. Lakesby's ear was less than a foot away from Mrs. Vaughan's lips when she looked at the paper. People would say, of course, that she read the question articulately, though not aloud; and that Mrs. Lakesby, with a fine sense of hearing, was enabled to catch the words. Or they would say Mrs. Vaughan played into her hands for the fun of the thing, and to take a rise out of you and me."

"The criticism would be absurd, really, because we were close by and saw that this was not done."

"The criticism would involve conjectures which we know would be idiotic. And it would rest on the silly assumption that we were too silly to be trusted as witnesses. But, when you come to think of it, that assumption, silly as it is, is the whole bulwark of defence within which the incredulous majority entrenches itself. Scores and hundreds of highly intelligent and highly competent observers have written, I suppose, scores *of* hundreds of books and statements of various kinds recording their observations about psychic phenomena of all sorts. And yet there still is an incredulous majority of people who can afford to go about saying they do not believe a word so said. It is very odd, when you come to think of it, that this is possible; it is such a stupid position for otherwise intelligent people to take up, but to the present time the majority support one another in incredulity, which is a plain defiance of evidence and facts, and there you are. We may give them some more evidence and facts, and they will not be moved an inch from their comical pride in their own ridiculous position. They will not believe us, or, if they do not think we are lying, they will think we are probably gabies who can't see whether we are or are not imposed upon."

"Well, with the opportunities we have now, it seems to me," Blane answered, "that we ought to be able to arrange experiments that shall make that charge, at all events, self-evidently absurd. It is our business, since we are more than likely to be questioned closely hereafter about all that is taking place now, to foresee the questions which may be asked, and provide against them beforehand."

"There are great difficulties in our way," said the Professor, thoughtfully, "if we aim at really producing an effect on current thought. We may very easily succeed in nothing but in getting laughed at for our pains."

"We have opportunities, at all events, that are on a level with our difficulties," Blane urged in reply; "and for my part, for the sake of the knowledge we seem in a fair way of gaining, I would be content to be laughed at by the world at large. Indeed, that seems quite too trivial a penalty to be talked of, as set against the knowledge we are likely to acquire."

"We are likely to acquire knowledge that certain very grand knowledge exists in other people's keeping. I am not yet inclined to believe that we shall gain much beyond that knowledge concerning knowledge."

"It is a step to have so much," Blane said, as the Professor loosed his arm and prepared to go indoors; "a step leagues in advance of the state of mind which preceded it."

CHAPTER XIII.

CONTRASTED VISIONS.

MISS VAUGHAN threw herself with ardour into the new avenues of inquiry which Mrs. Lakesby's acquaintance opened out before her. She learned that evening at dinner what had passed in the afternoon; and could do nothing, either at table or afterwards in the drawing-room, but watch the clairvoyante, who, for that matter, betrayed no eccentricities of any kind in her conversation or manner, was bright and talkative about all current topics, endowed with a quick sense of humour, and able to put things in a pleasant way herself.

"But you must let me say one thing," Miss Vaughan declared, having seized on a place beside Mrs. Lakesby on a sofa, when the ladies had left the dining-hall. "It does seem so wonderful to think of what you are, and hear you talking away of commonplace things like anybody else."

"I should have a dull life of it if I couldn't laugh and talk like other people. I don't enjoy life the less for seeing more about me than other people see as a rule. What do you think I like to be doing, best of anything in the world?"

"Using your wonderful gifts, of course."

"Not a bit of it—dancing."

"What an idea! Why, who is there worthy to dance with you?"

"Worthy! Well, I own I'm particular about my partners, because it's such agony to be dragged round the room as if it was a ploughed field. But you may depend on it I don't talk about clairvoyance with my partners. More than half the people I know have no notion at all that there's anything queer about me. And then what I like next best to dancing is—what do you think?"

"I'm sure you're going to say something commonplace that anybody can do."

"Everybody can't do this particular thing nearly as well as I can. I mean swimming. I am passionately fond of swimming, and I looked at that lovely, clear green river down there to-day with a positive longing to plunge into it."

"Swimming! If you had told me, now, you liked flying, I should not have been a bit surprised, and should merely have begged you to let me see you on the wing."

"One doesn't want wings for the only sort of flying that I know anything about."

"What sort is that?"

"Well, you know, some people who write about clairvoyants call them 'flying souls.'"

"And is that right? Do they really fly about in their souls—whatever that may be like?"

"I suppose they do, sometimes. But you should ask the Baron about what it is they really do. He knows a great deal more about it than I do."

"I will; but just now I have got you to ask—and I am sure you can tell me more than I shall be able to take in: Do you fly about in your soul?"

"Most certainly I get about the world out of the body sometimes; but I can't exactly tell you how I do it; and it isn't flying in the literal sense of the word. But when I want to, and can lie down somewhere safe and comfortable by myself, I can ooze out somehow, by making a kind of an effort I can hardly describe, and then, once in the astral form, one can go anywhere by merely *willing* to."

"Good heavens! But how do you get back again?"

"It is not always pleasant, the getting back. Sometimes when I am out I think I will not go back at all. It is much pleasanter to be free and light, and enjoying yourself. But one always does come back; they always tell you to, and then you must."

"Who tell you to?"

"Well, the friends you go to see in the spirit-world—or the other people you meet there."

"It's the most delightfully bewildering thing I ever heard of."

"Don't you think I must be crazy?"

"I never talked to anybody who seemed less so, though you talk of such wonderful things."

"I rattle on this way with you because, if you are a friend of Baron von Mondstern's, and asked here to his house, it is to be presumed you will understand me."

"I am reverentially interested in all this sort of thing, but frightfully ignorant. I don't even know why you speak of the Baron like that, though I am prepared to believe anything about him that's magnificent and thrilling. I don't know why, but I feel almost too much in awe of him to cross-question him about himself. Can you explain him to me?"

"I can't explain him to myself, but I know he's a great occultist; and I'm quite sure anything I can do he can do too, and a great deal more besides."

"Can he go about out of his body then, too?"

"Why, of course he can. I knew him out of his body long before I ever knew him in it."

"What? Do you mean that you met him first flying about in the air like yourself?"

"Well, on the astral plane at all events—you don't think much about the air when you are out of the body. It's another state of existence you pass into. But I can see people on the astral plane without being out of the body at all, for that matter myself."

"I want to ask a hundred questions at once—but could ordinary people be taught to get out of their bodies? Could I?"

"Ask the Baron. I only know what I can do myself. I can't teach anybody anything."

It chanced that while they were talking the gentlemen, or most of them, with the Baron among the number, came into the drawing-room. With the impulsiveness of her nature, and her face glowing more than usual with the sudden excitement of her idea, Miss Vaughan sprang up, and, with hands clasped in eagerness, took Mrs. Lakesby's suggestion *au pied de la lettre.*

"Oh, Baron von Mondstern, *will* you teach me to get out of my body?"

Mrs. Vaughan looked up amazed.

"My dear Lucy, what on earth do you mean?"

The Professor, of course, seized the opportunity for a compliment.

"Why should you be discontented, Miss Vaughan, of all people in creation, with the one you have got?"

"I'm utterly serious, I assure you," the young lady pleaded. "Mrs. Lakesby can get out of her body and go anywhere she likes. Why cannot I?"

"Perhaps, Miss Vaughan," said the Baron with his usual kindly smile, "you sometimes do without being aware of it. But happily for your friends you always wake in the morning safely established in your usual conditions again."

"Don't put me off in that way. *Will* you teach me? I'm sure you can."

"Let us sit down and talk," said the Baron. "You have heard something, I gather, from Mrs. Lakesby. Will you tell us what that is, to begin with?"

This led to a long and general conversation in which all that Mrs. Lakesby had said to Miss Vaughan was repeated, and made the subject of much searching inquiry from many of the others. Miss Vaughan clung to her point, however, and it was with almost pathetic eagerness that she appealed to the Baron again to know if she could acquire the experience of which Mrs. Lakesby spoke.

"Practically you cannot, Miss Vaughan," the Baron said, "any more than you can acquire the clairvoyant faculty Mrs. Lakesby possesses, of which you saw an illustration this afternoon. Theoretically, every human being can acquire the art of getting out of the body, eventually, but the training for those not born with peculiar natural gifts is long and trying, —so much so, that, believe me, you must put the idea aside,— just as it would be wise for a person without any musical gifts to put aside an unreasonable ambition to sing like Miss Blane here, or play like Mr. Annerly. But we can all come to understand a little more than most of us know at present about what is possible for some human beings, and indeed for a very considerable number qualified to go through the ordeals that bar the way. If we understand that *rightly* we shall be much the better—in more ways than one."

"I am sure," said Miss Vaughan, "what you say is right and wise. You know all about it and I know nothing; but tell us, will you not, more fully what you mean by the ordeals that bar the way.'

"You believe me when I hint that they are impassable; still you want to see if you think you could pass them? Well, I will try to show you some. These faculties of the spirit, if I may use language just to explain what I mean for the moment, though perhaps I should use other words if you had studied these things more—these faculties of the spirit can only be trained artificially by the repression of all the faculties which are concerned with the material life and material enjoyment. That is the true meaning of the ascetic life, which has often been practised blindly, and consequently without important results—and still more often criticized blindly. There may be no absolute merit in denying yourself everything which makes life pleasant, but when most of us talk of life, we mean the life of the body. If you want to develop the life of the spirit you quench all the life of the body, which can be quenched without interfering too much with its mere physical vitality. If you quenched that too you would die, and your effort would fail that way; but instead of living to enjoy the pleasantness of life, in which case your true inner vitality is absorbed by the body, you must live for the development of the spirit alone. We need not talk now of all that that means; but you will see that to care not at all for the pleasures of ordinary life, to banish them out of your scheme of existence altogether, and to learn so to banish them quite without regret, is the first thing you have to do—the first step in the direction of acquiring the faculties of the spirit, if you have not got them by Nature."

"I care nothing for the things of this world!" cried Miss Vaughan, impetuously, with an animated gesture of both hands, that, by a comical contrast with her words, threw sparkles of light about from the rings on her fingers, and waved a perfume of scent on the air from the handkerchief she held.

"I do," said Mrs. Lakesby; "it seems a very nice world, I think, while one is in it."

"While one is in it," said the Professor, repeating the phrase; "what a lordly superiority that remark shows to us poor mortals who only know one sort of world."

"I'd give up the world to-morrow," said Mrs. Miller, "if I were sure of getting something better. But I'm not so sure that it's worth while to give up everything that's pleasant merely to be able to float about in space without a body."

The Professor put in a word again.

"Then we are not to understand that you yourself are obliged to make any choice in the matter? You are so privileged a creature that you have the blessings of both states."

"I only know," she answered, "that the things we are talking about are natural to me. I certainly never went through any training to get such powers as I possess."

"I daresay," said Mrs. Miller, "that it's all right, really, but it doesn't seem fair on the surface."

"It would seem fair, perhaps," suggested the Baron, "if we could look back on the whole process Mrs. Lakesby has gone through. We are in the midst of mysteries that can only be explained by other mysteries. If we none of us led more than one physical life the apparent injustice of all differences of well-being would be real injustice. But the clue to the fairness of Nature, which I take to be quite perfect, really, is that we lead more than one life; and, though we do not carry recollection from one to the other, we carry the accumulated results of our efforts and acts, whatever they may be, from one to the other. You may depend upon it that, if Mrs. Lakesby is now enjoying psychic faculties far in advance of those which are commonly found among the people of her generation, she has worked for them in a former state of existence."

"Then we common people," said the Professor, "have been the idle boys of former generations."

"Or perhaps," said the Baron, "we may not all have been to good schools."

"That idea," Blane put in, "suggests a very practical inference. If we make efforts to attain a high degree of spiritual development in this life, they will not be thrown away altogether, even if they are not at once crowned with success. They will tell on our next incarnation."

"Exactly," replied Baron Friedrich. "That appears to me to be one of the finest and most important lessons of psychic science. No effort is thrown away—no act in this life is without its infinite consequences; just as no force can be exerted in the material world which is not subject, in some way or other, to the great law of conservation. A full appreciation of this truth in all its bearings constitutes a recognition of the supremely important principle recognized in some Oriental philosophers as Karma. The law of Karma is the law of the conservation of energy on the moral and spiritual planes of nature."

It was by a mutual impulse, the following day, that Merland and Miss Vaughan took advantage of the easy freedom of the castle-life to compare their impressions of the previous evening. Their constant intercourse during the week had associated Merland more and more in Miss Vaughan's imagination with that vivid enthusiasm for psychic mysteries that the general influence of Heiligenfels had developed. From the height of her present aspirations she looked down on the commonplace interests of life as on a lower existence. She had not stopped to consider how far the upper level, on which her emotions now moved, was attractive by reason of its congenial companionship.

"They talk about giving up the pleasures of the world as of a great sacrifice," she said to Merland, after a long talk over the explanations that had been given of Mrs. Lakesby's abnormal privileges. "They would be as nothing to me compared to the splendid feeling of gaining powers of insight into the spiritual world. Wouldn't you give up anything for that?"

"I have quite made up my mind," Merland answered, "as you know, to put all ordinary worldly pursuits aside for the sake of following up this grand idea to the end. And if anything could have confirmed me more than ever in that view of things it would be the obviously reasonable explanation the Baron gave last night, about the way all effort must produce its effect—if not in this life then in the next."

They had found seclusion in the conservatory built outside the outer courtyard, in which Miss Vaughan, on her first arrival, had found young Reginald Hexton reading Sanscrit. They were leaning on the sill of an open window looking over the river.

"It's quite symbolical, so to speak," said Miss Vaughan, "that our eyes should have been opened to the insignificance of ordinary life and its ambitions up in this lofty eyrie, looking down on the common world below. How far beneath us that village there on the river's bank seems to be. There are people there planning about their amusements and their business, and struggling with one another for petty objects, that only give pleasure for a few years. And, as we look down on them from this height, so do I look down on the kind of life from which I emerged when we came abroad and up here."

"Do you think you will continue to feel about it as you do now when you go back into the life you have left?"

"I would rather not go back into it at all, but I am quite sure that I shall never be of it again, even if I am in it. The Baron cannot believe that a young lady he has known in the midst of a London season, steeped to the lips in frivolities of all sorts, can renounce that for the sake of spiritual development; but he shall see that it is possible."

It was no sudden inspiration or unfamiliar thought that set Merland's heart thumping, as he thought almost audibly, when the bearing of this declaration of hers on his own irresistible desire flashed upon him. More than once before he had been on the point of telling her that his enthusiasm for the idea they so constantly discussed was blended now inextricably with her own; and that the higher life itself would be desolate of beauty unless it could be shared with her. But the sweet present had always been too delicious to be imperilled by the sudden assertion of a claim that it should last for always. Prudence at last gave way. She was too lovely in her enthusiasm, which lighted up and glorified a face that was beautiful even in repose, for a lover to be silent longer; and as she stood erect, with one uplifted hand resting on the edge of the open window-sash above her head, and the other—the one nearest to Merland, as he stood beside her—stretched out as she pointed to the village below, she was too splendid a creature to be talked to in measured tones any more.

"Miss Vaughan,—"

The deep changed tone of his voice as he pronounced her name gave, as it were, an electric shock to their relationship. The time of self-restraint was over for Merland—for her there was a sudden rush of bewilderment. The situation had not struck her before in that light. It was the unconscious operation of her worldly experience that had blinded her to the possibility that Merland would turn into a lover with definite proposals to put before her. There were other candidates in the field she knew, but they were in the world of fashion—left behind during this Continental holiday. One she knew to be her mother's pet candidate—none were especially glorified in her own fancy. This business of being made love to was very familiar to her, but had not been productive of much pleasure for her. On the contrary, more annoyances than delights had attended it so far, as it gave rise to a slightly strained feeling sometimes between her mother and herself. The choice before her had been, whether she should be a countess or a sister of mercy; and, though she was content to float joyously along the stream of life when not pressed for an immediate decision, the details attending the process of entering either walk of life repelled her whenever she faced them at close quarters. To marry a man of the plain middle class! This was an entirely new idea, and as she turned her face round to Merland at the sound of her name, with that electric thrill in the tone of it, and fixed her large eyes open wider than ever on her companion, the idea was one that was altogether too puzzling to be dealt with at once. She was only conscious vaguely that Merland was somehow transfigured. She had never stopped to criticize him in her mind before. She looked at him now as if for the first time. She saw that a light flush had covered the upper part of his face; she was aware that he was handsomely made, broad-shouldered though slight; that his eyes radiated a fire that gave her a nervous thrill, and with parted lips in wonder she could not but listen to what he had to say.

"Miss Vaughan, we have both chosen the same path in life. Can we tread it together?" As he spoke—slowly, though with passion—he put his left hand under hers that had been stretched out pointing to the village, and clasped it over with his right. She did not impulsively draw it away. "I am putting my whole heart and life's happiness into the question. I have never loved another woman and I never shall. I shall worship you always whether it pleases you to give me ineffable blessings or to decree that my life shall end, as far as all joy of it for me will be concerned, here to-day."

She drew her hand slowly and gently away while he spoke, though not as if in resentment, and held it, with closed fingers, on her bosom. Merland went on,—

"I could not but speak—I love you so wildly. I have thought of nothing else but that. I might not have dared to speak to you in this way if it had not been for your thought of giving up all worldly ambitions. And now I don't presume to think that I can help you to lead the other sort of life; but since your choice seems just to bring the infinite glory of your companionship within my reach, or to make it less of madness than it would be otherwise for me to ask for this, I can't but tell you that I am altogether yours to take or throw aside—like this flower," he suddenly added, picking a bit of stephanotis blossom that happened to be growing within reach. It seemed to offer him a means of getting an answer from her that should not require spoken words for the moment, and so be easier to give, and he held the flower out bending before her, and longing to kneel, but shrinking from any word or gesture that should be flavoured with theatrical effect.

"You've taken me by surprise," she said. "I ought to have known, but I never thought—"

Her undecided attitude upset the young man's self-control altogether.

"Lucy!" he murmured, in a deeper voice than ever, "you glory of the world, come what may, let me live with the thought of having kissed you." He embraced her as he spoke, and passionately kissed her lips in an instant; and then, dropping on one knee by an impulse of adoration as strong as that which had inspired the kiss, he held towards her the flower, still in his left hand, and waited for her answer, looking up in her face with a glow of devotion that no further words could have heightened,—

"Lucy!"

It was another voice that spoke the word, not his, Mrs. Vaughan's. An unkind fate will contrive these surprises sometimes. She had entered the conservatory with the Baron, not in time to see the kiss but with the tableau full in view. She had come innocent of all thought of espionage. She had simply sought the first excuse that offered to claim the Baron's arm after breakfast, and strolling about the battlements had come at the critical moment into the conservatory—both she and her partner.

Merland rose to his feet—not hurriedly. In the spasm of misery that crossed his feelings, as he realized the interruption, he felt inclined to ignore even that, and get his answer in face of all the world. But this was an impulse that passed away as it was formed. It merely operated to make him proudly defiant of all pretence of concealment, and so rise deliberately and face about, looking with gravity and head erect at the enemy—how could he feel that she would be anything but that?

Mrs. Vaughan was a lady of very finished tact and self-possession. She made no impulsive remark beyond the sudden utterance of her daughter's name. There was a pause of, perhaps, ten seconds. Then she said,—

"I did not know you were here, Lucy, my dear; but, since you are, may I beg you to come with me a moment. I was wanting to ask you a question."

Lucy, moving as in a dream, crossed the conservatory to her mother's side and quietly followed her out on to the battlements. The Baron remained behind. As Lucy vanished from their sight a heavy weight, as of lead, settled down upon the young man's heart, and the desperate need of getting his answer rushed upon him as with sudden fury. He was already weighing in his mind the question whether he should dash out in pursuit of mother and daughter together—when the Baron spoke. In a grave, mellifluous voice, the mere sound of which seemed strangely soothing, he said,—

"Wise men never obtrude counsel, but kindly natures may, at least, sometimes offer it to a brother."

Merland gazed at him for a few moments very respectfully, but not knowing what reply to make. Then, in a grating voice, he simply said,—

"She had not had time to answer."

"She will have time," said the Baron; "sit down." There were two or three light iron chairs about, one of them a low-folding, easy chair, to which the Baron motioned Merland. "If she comes back I will leave you. For the moment you can only wait."

"What a tormenting interruption!"

"Most exasperating for you." The Baron was gravely sympathetic. To third persons, sometimes, there is a flavour of comicality in a situation like that in which Merland had been surprised, but no trace of amusement in the Baron's manner betrayed the smallest indication on his part to treat the young man's embarassment with levity. Both remained silent for a little while.

"If I only knew what to do next," Merland said at last.

"To do nothing is often the hardest trial of all, but that may be the very essence of patience, which is a form of wisdom sometimes. But I will not try to soothe you with platitudes, only with sympathy in your present acute, though I hope but temporary, distress."

"I would have bowed to *her* decision without murmuring, whatever it had been, but it is hard that a third person should intervene. I can't be submissive to an answer constrained or tampered with."

The young man leaned his head back with knitted brows against the high back of the chair, and closed his eyes. The Baron slightly smiled for the first time, a kindly gentle smile, with no touch of satire or scorn in it, and leaning forward towards Merland waved his right hand slowly across his face. The young man was unconscious of the movement, his eyes remaining closed. He had leaned back in the chair with the feeling of seeking in intense and concentrated thought for light in his dilemma; and with a sense of embittered resentment against Mrs. Vaughan, whose influence with her daughter, he instinctively realized, would not be on his side. But across the storm of anxiety on this point in his mind there came up so vividly, as he shut out the sight of outer objects, a sense of the intoxicating loveliness of the beautiful creature to whom he had just declared his passion, that the weight at his heart seemed stirred and changed to a yearning that was mingled with delight. He merged his whole being, as it were, in that emotion. He was dimly aware of intentionally remaining quite still lest movement should disturb this mental contemplation, and then all conscious effort to retain his thoughts so fixed, was lost in the feeling of intense emotion that gathered and gathered at his heart; and then, suddenly bursting as it were through some invisible barrier in his way, he had the vivid sense of waking into consciousness.

It was near the river he was standing, and yet not at any familiar place, on a little platform, as it were, of grass and flowers, with some rocks close by. From behind these came a path, along which he somehow knew that a figure had approached, who now was engaged in conversation with him; though he was too much dazed by the suddenness of the change to think connectedly or remember what was said. The man talking to him was dressed in long white robes; his face was dark in colour, as if of a Spanish complexion; a short crisp beard and moustache ornamented without concealing the chin and mouth; all the features were strangely perfect in shape and outline; the eyes very large and expressive; the brown-black hair turned back from the forehead in very heavy masses, and surmounted by a soft easily-fitting woollen cap edged with brown fur. The general look of the face denoted a benevolent sadness.

"Yes," the dignified stranger said, as if answering some question of his own, the exact wording of which he did not remember, "you are out of the body."

"Out of the body," Merland repeated, vaguely; not as in any doubt of the assurance, but, as it were, confirming the fact to himself.

"It is better on that mountain top," said the stranger, pointing across the river to a wooded hill at a little distance. "Let us go. Reach towards it with me."

And Merland realized that his guardian was already on in advance of him; that the platform of grass and the river were far below them; that he was floating in space, at a great height, and yet in perfect security. In another moment they were standing together at the place that had been indicated—in the midst of pine-woods at the top of a hill.

He could not afterwards remember the conversation that passed here. He only remembered the feeling with which he stood beside the guardian figure among the trees—a feeling of no heat or cold, of no wind or hard ground beneath his feet—but of being wrapped or bathed in a strange unfamiliar sensation that was unutterably pleasurable, and yet quite unlike the explicit pleasure of any definite sense. This sensation was mingled with a feeling of intensely affectionate reverence for the companion by his side. He was unaware of time passing; it never struck him that it was necessary for him to say anything to express his thoughts. He stood under the trees, and felt the emotions described, gazing at the wonderful face before him. At last the figure said,—

"I must go now."

Merland remembered putting out his hand and saying earnestly,—

"I thank you very deeply for having come."

The guardian figure smiled kindly, without taking Merland's hand.

"I must not; but I wish you well. I wish you very well—good-bye."

He passed through the trees for a few steps, and then, just before disappearing among them, turned to wave his hand in a friendly sign of parting. As he was then concealed from view the vision was altogether clouded. Merland had no definite recollection of how he left the mountain top. He only felt himself falling from a height—though not with any sense of peril in the fall—swooping downward, rather as a bird might swoop, and then—he started up, broad awake, in the low chair in the conservatory. The Baron had gone, and he was alone.

The new sensation he had just passed through left their traces upon his waking consciousness so strongly, that, as he came to himself, perceiving that he had just waked up from a sleep, his first feeling was one of acute disappointment at the notion that what he had just experienced was only a dream. But reflection qualified that idea, as he gathered his wits fully about him. The passionate anxiety of his position in respect to Lucy Vaughan quickly reasserted itself. The notion that he had fallen asleep in the ordinary way, in the midst of the tearing emotions he had been going through that morning, was absurd. How long had he been in the conservatory? Looking at his watch he was bewildered to find that several hours had passed. It was the late afternoon. He started up with a sudden anxiety to know had he in some way lost Lucy during this strange trance. Could she have been back to the conservatory, possibly while he had been sleeping? Or had he missed some chance he might have had of getting to speak with her again if he had been more on the alert? He hurried to the door. There he met the boy, Reginald Hexton, who held out to him a note. It was in the Baron's handwriting, though without address or signature—a mere folded scrap of paper.

"Trust one," it said, "who also wishes you well—who wishes you very well—that it is better for you both, in any event, that the young lady should have gone away for the present without your seeing her again. She and her mother have left the castle."

"They've gone!" Merland said in dismay, and partly questioning Reginald.

"Do you mean the Vaughans? They went an hour ago."

Merland went back into the conservatory and again sat down to think. The contents of the note before him gave him, for that matter, still new subject for thought. The Baron used the identical phrase about wishing him well—wishing him very well—that had been uttered by the wonderful figure of his vision. If anything had been needed, beyond his own inner conviction, to assure him that this had been a reality, here was—if not a proof, at all events a strong suggestion to that effect. But the glory, even of the vision, was eclipsed for the time by the agony of knowing that she was gone. Was that miserable catastrophe the end of his dream? "Oh, Lucy, Lucy!" If he did break down, to some extent, at all events the young man was alone, and he had just learned that there is no more poignant mental suffering endurable by human creatures in this imprisoned existence of the flesh, than the vain, vain longing, the passionate yearning, for a lost and irrecoverable love.

CHAPTER XIV.

A QUIET EVENING.

The Professor had now clearly come to the conclusion that the phenomena subject to the observation of the party at Heiligenfels were worthy of systematic record, and of presentation in some shape or other to the world. Blane was equally of opinion that this should be done, but somewhat less hopeful concerning the likelihood that any statements they were in a position to make, would command any more respectful attention than had been given to a great variety of previous writings on similar subjects which had been practically still-born.

"The way these things are put has a great deal to do," the Professor urged, "with the way they are accepted. There have not been many narratives of abnormal experience that have been guaranteed by the weight of so much good evidence in corroboration of them as we shall be able to bring forward."

"As far," Blane pointed out, "as that transaction with the Baron in the library was concerned, we have only your story and mine. Popular incredulity is quite robust enough to reject these as insufficient to establish so stupendous a fact as that disclosed."

"My dear fellow, I don't regard that incident by itself as constituting our case. That is merely the *prima facie* case which determines us to investigate."

The Professor's programme, he went on to explain, was to organize two or three striking and crucial experiments showing that the volition of a man was capable of throwing off a force productive of physical effects at a distance. An immense revolution in scientific thought ought, he conceived, to attend the discovery and demonstration of this fact, which for him and Blane, after what they had seen, could not but be regarded as a fact, though it was still one of which they had no glimmering of an explanation. Then it would remain to be seen whether the Baron would not agree to the disclosure, of some part at all events, of the law at work, so that they might be enabled to present their discovery to the world in a way which would conciliate a scientific audience.

"It is no use to have something to tell," said the Professor; "you must have something to show, to secure the kind of interest I should like to secure—something, however slight, that can be reproduced as an experiment as often as we please."

Suggested to the Baron, however, this last feature in the plan met with very little encouragement.

"It is not within the scope of my instructions, as you would put it in official English," he said, "and it is no use arguing the matter with me. You may be right, or you may be overlooking some consequences that would ensue in the long run from the course you propose, and involve more harm than good. What I can do, I need hardly say I will do, because it is by my desire and suggestion that we are all assembled here to talk over these things. But I shall merely at present be able to demonstrate for you, and not to explain."

"Even that will be interesting, deeply interesting, my dear Baron. Don't suppose I undervalue your demonstration; but in the matter of advancing human knowledge the demonstration alone will never be held—outside the limits of our own circle—to be conclusive as regards the fact. No matter what precautions we take some ingenious donkey will come after us and suggest that we have not definitely recorded that our eyes were open at the time of the occurrence—or that we did not begin by getting medical certificates of our sanity."

"No doubt; but at least I have enabled you to fortify your own evidence by that of several others. You are not alone at the castle."

In this way it came to be arranged that the Baron should again perform an experiment analogous to that by means of which he had broken the pane of glass in the library window, and also do something to produce, within narrow limits, susceptible of exact observation, some physical effects of a more enduring kind than those associated with a simple display of force. The general ideas of the experiments were left to Blane and the Professor to arrange.

Blane proposed to ask Annerly to join this preliminary conference. Neither he nor the Professor were aware of the nature of the conversations that had already passed between Annerly and the Baron; but Blane had developed a very kindly feeling for his new acquaintance, and was disposed to bring him into confidential relationship, in this matter, with the interesting investigation in hand.

"I haven't a word to say against Annerly," said the Professor; but no help is wanted in arranging the programme of our operations."

"An extra head may save us from some oversight," Blane suggested; but the matter was dropped for the moment.

However, Mrs. Lakesby happened to come on the scene just then—they were talking in the afternoon of the day on which the incidents last recounted had taken place, and were out on the terrace alone, the Baron having gone in. The Professor was always ready to give a gallant turn to any situation, so he put a new construction on Blane's last words.

"Very well then; if an extra head is wanted here is one that I am sure is able to furnish sound counsel in all emergencies, on Mrs. Lakesby's shoulders."

"Mrs. Lakesby," replied that lady, "knows her place, as the servants say, too well to give advice to Professor Massilton. But if you would care to know what I saw as I came towards you that may be the answer to something."

"How do you mean what you saw?"

"I'm always getting flashes of that sort—impressions—it is difficult to describe them; pictures in the astral light some people call them. They show things that have happened sometimes connected with the people who bring them up, or things that are going to happen sometimes."

"That mystery," said Blane, "about the prediction of events, leads us straight up to some exasperating metaphysical questions."

"But for the present let us keep to the facts," said the Professor. "You say, Mrs. Lakesby, that you saw some picture of this sort as you came up to us. What was it?"

"I saw you two, and several other people—I can't tell you exactly who—in a wood, and something exciting was going on, though I can't precisely say what."

"In a wood?" repeated the Professor, thoughtfully; "there is an idea in that at any rate. It might be better to arrange the experiment out of doors rather than in the house. What do you think?" turning to Blane. "It might leave less room for objections afterwards."

The point under consideration was then explained to Mrs.

Lakesby, and she gave a confident opinion that they would arrange their experiment out of doors, according to the impression she obtained.

"But the question is not to be taken out of our hands by any fixed destiny," said the Professor; we will do just what we think right and fitting and best to do. We don't yet know, and nobody can yet know, what plan we shall settle on."

"I'm sure you'll settle on some plan with a wood in it," said Mrs. Lakesby.

The Professor protested against prejudging the question that way, but the more they talked the matter over, the more reasonable it seemed to have the principal experiment out of doors, so that no suspicion could, at any time, attach to the room in which it might otherwise take place. The conversation naturally brought them back, more than once, to Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyant impressions about people.

"Have you had any other impressions since you have been here?" the Professor asked—"of the kind like that just mentioned?"

"Why, of course I have," said Mrs. Lakesby. "I am always seeing something or other or some spirit or other about people. It keeps me amused when nothing else is going on."

"Keeps you amused! How can you treat such an extraordinary condition of things so lightly?"

"What is there in it to go into hysterics about? It's all just as natural to me as the trees and flowers."

"But, for the sake of others, to advance knowledge, you ought to detail and record your impressions, and check them by discussing them with the persons concerned."

"And get myself shut up in a lunatic asylum before I was a year older. I chatter a good deal too much as it is I think, though I never do more than answer questions, and only half of them. I haven't gone through life till I'm a middle-aged widow without learning a few lessons, Professor Massilton."

"On the contrary, you are still too young and giddy to know better," replied the Professor, patting Mrs. Lakesby's shoulder, in his easy, fatherly manner. When you grow older you will get more serious. But now, will you kindly let me know if you have ever seen anything in connection with myself?"

"Don't expect me to tell tales out of school. If I chance to see more of my friends' private affairs this way than I have any business to know about, I am, at least, discreet enough to hold my tongue."

"But this is too tantalising to be borne! What have you seen about my private affairs?"

"I'll tell you some day if you want to know; when we are quite alone."

Blane instantly begged pardon for being *de trop*, and was moving off.

"Don't go far away, old fellow. I'll get my crimes revealed to me in a few minutes, and then you can come back. Now what have you found out about me? Pray tell me, Mrs. Lakesby?"

"I *never* try to find out anything about people. You don't know how dishonourable I think that would be. It would be taking a mean advantage."

"But you have seen something without trying to find out. You really will oblige me immensely by telling me what it is."

"Well, I've seen a woman about you sometimes. Not a spirit—nobody who's dead; somebody that your thought calls up the picture of, I suppose."

"That doesn't sound alarming."

"I did not say it was. She's a young woman, and handsome; tall, with broad brow, and brown hair rippled on each side; large dark eyes, and I seem to see her in a kind of dark-blue silk dress."

The Professor looked more serious a little. Speaking slowly and reflectively he said,—

"Yes, that might be some one I know. The description certainly tallies."

"She doesn't look at you as if she was grateful to you for anything," Mrs. Lakesby added, with an upward glance in the Professor's face. "She looks rather reproachful."

The Professor said nothing in reply to this at first, then with some hesitation,—

"That is strange. Has she said anything?"

"I tell you she is not a spirit that can talk to me. She is merely a picture drawn out of your mind; but I have got an impression about her name."

"What then?"

"I should think it was Miriam. There now," as the Professor visibly started, and changed colour. "Am I right to try not to find out about people's private affairs? I tell you, I try to avoid doing so."

"It certainly is startling. I do not conceive that I have anything to reproach myself with—not seriously, in regard to the lady you mention—I may have acted foolishly—"

"Well, don't confess yourself to me," said Mrs. Lakesby, "I'm merely answering your questions; and yet there is one thing that puzzles me, and I should like to know about. But no—I'll stick to my rule. It's no business of mine, and I won't have it."

"But can you tell me more? You interest me intensely on all grounds. As a psychological problem the thing is most remarkable. Where is the lady now? Can you tell me that?"

"I don't know. I haven't any impression in the matter."

"Can you find out?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. If you've got a piece of her hair I suppose I could, unless too many people have been fingering it."

"I haven't here at any rate. But, Mrs. Lakesby—though, as I told you, my conscience is quite clear in this matter—I do not pretend to deny that I would rather not have this example of your powers generally discussed—"

Mrs. Lakesby laughed. "Don't be alarmed. I said that I've learned some lessons, and I try not to make mischief. I'm not sure if I've been wise to mention the matter at all, even to you."

Blane was called back after this, and the Professor said that Mrs. Lakesby had, by reference to some private affairs of his own, given him a very striking proof of her clairvoyant insight. Then the matter was put aside.

The hurried departure of the Vaughans was greatly deplored by the other guests that evening, but explained by Mrs. Miller in perfect good faith, as owing to letters which had recalled Mrs. Vaughan to London on urgent family business. Merland was an absentee from the dinner-table on pretence of indisposition, and no fresh incidents took place in reference to psychic investigation. After dinner Miss Blane sang a little, Annerly as usual playing her accompaniments. Whist occupied some of the others; the Professor, even, contrary to his usual inclination, joining the rubber, as if moved by a desire to show attention to his wife. Mrs. Miller was reading, and the Baron slipped away. Mrs. Lakesby and Blane were talking on a distant sofa, and the musicians gradually drifted into deep discussions of their art, illustrated by bits of sonatas and fugues that came forth from under Annerly's fingers. With their common musical tastes as a link, and the pleasant conditions of the castle-party to provide people inclined to be together with abundant opportunities, Annerly and Miss Blane had been a good deal drawn together during the past week. Nothing was further from Annerly's imaginings in connection with this intimacy than any thought of ingratiating himself specially with the girl. He had not only no confidence in his own ability to please women, but an exaggerated and nervous conviction that this must always be impossible for him. He would, moreover, for reasons connected with the views of life he was now forming under the Baron's influence, have been peculiarly reluctant to run the risk of reviving in his own nature emotions of the sort that had already cost him so much; so his intercourse with Miss Blane had been of the most guileless and straightforward kind. But he had insensibly grown intimate with her; she was attractive and sympathetic, and he was, perhaps, more indebted to her than he was altogether aware of, for a general sense of relief he had experienced of late from smouldering remedies of a painfnl flavour. She began to tell him something this evening, in the pauses of their playing, about her family.

"Willy and I are alone in the world, except for cousins, of which we have great crowds. My grandfather's was a large family—a great many girls who married about all over the country, and we generally cruise amongst their houses in the autumn, but Willy made everything give way to this visit. My mother died when I was quite little—you may have heard—and my father three or four years ago. It would have been sad indeed for me if it had not been for Willy, but he makes up for a great deal. I don't think anybody else in the world is so good as he is—so unselfish, and so sweet-tempered, and so good to me."

"I can see that he is all that—a beautiful nature I most fully recognize—though in that matter of being good to you I dare say virtue is its own reward."

"Ah well! brothers generally find sisters more trouble than they're worth on the whole. Perhaps you haven't got any sisters to judge by?"

Annerly was so little prone to speaking about himself that Miss Blane had no exact knowledge of his family circumstances, though they had been gossiping so much together. At the implied question Annerly's brow darkened a little.

"I've been living away from my family since my boyhood. I have a sister, but she is married, older than myself, and I rarely see her."

As an inner consciousness of the very different stations in life, of the girl he was talking to and the sister of whom he spoke, surged up in his mind, the irritating sense that so often possessed him, of being a sort of impostor in the society he was now living with, asserted itself very strongly.

"I don't properly belong to your world, Miss Blane," he said; "my people are in a very humble way of life. My friend Merland has dragged me into society, where I have no business to be."

"What an idea! Why, you are a distinguished man. Anybody must be proud to have you for a guest."

"If you knew what mockery that sounds—though I know you mean it kindly. The world of letters is Bohemian enough to welcome any man who can claim its attention in any way, but that does not apply to the world of fashion to which you belong."

"How Willy would writhe at the thought. Ask him if he considers himself a man of fashion."

"Well, it does not matter; but in the rare cases when I happen to grow in the least degree intimate with people above me in station, I shrink from feeling an impostor, and so am driven to speak of myself, though to do that is almost as disagreeable. Pray let us talk of something else."

A proposal to "talk of something else" is not often the surest way of changing the subject. Miss Blane was silent for a little while, Annerly's fingers straying over the keys, and then she said,—

"I think it would be better that you should talk about yourself till you do not find it painful any more. It's only a morbid fancy you have got."

"There is no aspect in which the subject can be otherwise than repulsive."

"Hundreds of people you never see find no subject more interesting—when they talk about your books, which is one aspect of you surely."

"Reflections of my mind do not constitute my personality—or even an aspect of it. I'm a creature under a curse, which anybody can see for himself."

"What extravagant nonsense you are talking!"

"— and I'm likely to feel the curse least heavily the less I obtrude myself on my fellow-creatures."

"I think you have been brooding over some fancies of your own, Mr. Annerly, till you have got into a very unhealthy and nervous state of mind. Who was it—some great wit who prided himself on being ugly—who said he only wanted ten minutes' start of the handsomest man living when he was talking to a woman?"

"Marian, dear," said Mrs. Miller from her arm-chair—suddenly desirous of proving to the public generally that she was not asleep, "do sing something more. That was very sweet, the last thing."

"The last thing was a fugue of Bach's, and I didn't sing it. Mr. Annerly played it."

The interruption, however, changed the subject at last, and their conversation did not fall back into the previous groove.

CHAPTER XV.

AN EXCITING NIGHT.

When a separation for the night took place, Annerly went to Merland's room to see how he was getting on, unsuspicious so far of any extraordinary incidents affecting him. He found Merland sitting idle in an arm-chair, without books or papers in his hand, and something in his dejected attitude struck Annerly at once.

"Halloa, old man! Aren't you feeling any better?"

"You don't know what the matter is, Geordie. Sit down and I'll tell you. I'm half crazy."

The story took some time to tell, in a jerky disjointed way, mingled with explanations of the beautiful programme Merland had constructed in his own mind in reference to the continued study of the higher occultism with the glorious life-long companionship of Miss Vaughan to gild and glorify the undertaking. Annerly was deeply disturbed at what he heard.

"My dear fellow, I am more distressed than I can tell you. Either way you must meet with disappointment. If you marry Miss Vaughan—"

"Oh, marry Miss Vaughan. I tell you I'm a ridiculous lunatic. She's miles above my reach. I had an instinctive dread of that all the while, but I was too much dazzled to think rationally. Now that her mother has swept her off this way in horror and dismay at the bare idea of my presumption, I can see how it is."

"There I don't follow you. You're a gentleman and well enough off to make a home for any girl who cared for you—"

"With a girl of that sort it is not a question of a home. I can see that now—I have thought it all out. It's sure to be rank and some great position her friends want for *her*. I haven't a chance of her; and yet it may be the intensity of my own feelings that blinded me, but I can't help thinking I should have had a chance of her if there had been only herself to deal with. She did not say 'No,' and she had had time to say that much if she had meant to—unless, indeed, she was just simply too much paralyzed by my audacity to speak."

"But, my dear Claude, that is not what I am wanting to discuss. The important point is that you have altogether misconceived the kind of effort which would be calculated to win you the real crown of occult knowledge, if you have supposed that you could play fast and loose with the thing in this way. I am greatly to blame, I fear, for not having made the position clearer to you at first, but you have never shown any inclination to fall in love this way. It did not occur to me that you would do that. You can't outstrip your natural development and make yourself a true mystic, with the wonderful faculties and knowledge we see the Baron to possess, without giving yourself up to that effort altogether. If you get married and go in for that sort of life you cut yourself off altogether from the other."

Merland gazed at him with knitted brows.

"But why should that be with such a marriage as I was dreaming of. The dream is pretty effectually over for that matter, but she would have had no taste for a common-place worldly career of pleasure. She was just as keen upon the whole subject as I am. If what I thought of had been possible we should have helped one another."

"My dear fellow, the notion is altogether wild—I do assure you. I have learned enough to know that much. The pursuit of occult wisdom is only to be undertaken by a man who, to begin with, makes a total renunciation of every sort of happiness in this life. You might dabble at the very edge of the sea—with a wife to share your amusement, but you could never launch out into deep water if you had somebody else to hold up. But the metaphor is incomplete. Look at what you are aiming at—if you take up the occult life seriously. You are trying to secure a spiritual triumph, stupendously greater than any which naturally belongs to an ordinary good life. An absolutely single-minded devotion to that one idea is a *sine qua non*. Happiness along the ordinary channels of happiness in this life would necessarily be fatal to your progress. The links which would bind you to a happy life on the physical plane would be just those which would most certainly hold you back from any upward mounting on the other plane. To renounce all thought of woman's love is absolutely the first step to take on the path you talked of treading, and that I mean to tread if I can, easy for me, perhaps you will say, to renounce what I could never dream of attaining,—but with you the case is different, very different indeed as I see now."

"I haven't told you all that occurred to me to-day," Merland said, after a pause. "I've been so upset by what I have told you about, that the other thing has dwelt less in my thoughts than it would have done otherwise." And then he described the vision he had had, while unconscious of other surroundings, in the conservatory.

Annerly was deeply affected by this.

"I tell you you've been privileged indeed, Merland, to have had this experience and at such a critical moment too."

"Ordinary people if I told them would simply say I had fallen asleep and had been dreaming. But I know the difference between what I went through and the most vivid dream I ever had in my life. Besides, it would be absurd to talk of my falling asleep at such a time."

"Of course it would be. The Baron's presence alone would settle the question, moreover. He threw you of course into a mesmeric trance in which you had this wonderful experience. I wonder who it was you saw when you were out of the body? The Baron would tell you, perhaps. But the point of the whole thing is in the manifest meaning of the vision. My dear Claude, its meaning was that you should see your two roads before you. There lies the choice—which will you follow: worldly happiness with Miss Vaughan and an ordinary life ending in the manifold perils of nature that I do not pretend yet fully to realize, or the sublime attainment of that higher spiritual life of which you had a brief glimpse? Still less do I realize all that *it* means, but I realize enough to feel its immeasurable superiority to any other sort possible for mortal man."

Merland sat silent for a time.

"I see the force of what you say," he declared at last. "But I only feel the collapse of my hopes about Miss Vaughan."

"Claude, there is no man living, I think, who can better understand such feelings than I. In a very different way I have known what that sort of collapse means, but I can say truly now that I would not restore my own happiness in this life even if I could. It is not happiness I am in pursuit of, but a sublime sort of exaltation, that a man would be base not to choose in preference to happiness, it seems to me."

Their talk went on for some time longer in a vague and desultory way, when they finally separated. Annerly discovered much food for reflection, in its bearings on his own position, in what had passed. He found himself more affected than he had realized at the time by the few significant words Miss Blane had spoken at the piano. He was far indeed from the vanity of supposing that he had made an impression on her which would be likely to pave the way for more intimate relations if he followed it up; but still, in embracing, as he had, the prospect of a life to be altogether devoted to spiritual enlightenment, how far had he been acting under the sting of the great disappointment he had felt so keenly? Supposing an ordinarily happy life should present itself to him as a possibility, say by reason of an attachment between such a girl as Miss Blane and himself, would he unhesitatingly make the choice he had been so earnestly prescribing to Merland? The talk with Merland had stirred old emotions that had long been under repression;

and the sight of Merland's inability to feel the exhilaration of the vision he had been favoured with, in presence of his overmastering passion, set him wondering how far he himself would be steadfast in adhering to the path in life he had resolved to tread, if he should again be put in the way of a similar temptation. Was human nature so weak that the prospect of rising above the limitations of its normal existence, and of anticipating by ages the slow advancement to a higher sort of life—which he had recently learned to recognize as the natural process of human evolution, was only attractive as a *pis aller* for men who failed to accomplish the usual destiny of their kind, and to make brief heavens on earth for themselves, suited to the transitory lives they spent there? He got so indignant with himself on the strength of the suspicions he directed against the trustworthiness of his own resolution, that he envied Merland the opportunity he had acquired of making a sensational renunciation of woman's love, with the cup almost at his lips, in favour of a systematic pursuit of spiritual development.

The resolution to merge all other aspirations in an effort to penetrate occult mysteries had grown up in Annerly's mind by degrees, but had not been set forth at any stage of its growth in formal or explicit language. It occurred to him now that the Baron had never, during any of their conversations, suggested or recommended the adoption of any such formal resolution on his part, but that it might be a good thing to cross a Rubicon in the matter, as it were, even though the boundary between the old life and the new, should only be drawn in his own imagination, and the pledge he would take only be guarded by his own inner consciousness. The notion that Merland would now be drawn back into the routine of a commonplace existence by the Circean charms of a girl, made him angry and indignant the more he brooded over it. The incident should, at all events, be a warning to himself. He would then and there put up between himself and the possibility of any similar weakness so much of a barrier as a resolution or vow very formally recorded could establish.

He sat down to his writing-table, to put his mental determination very definitely on paper.

"Come up-stairs."

"What?"

He spoke the last word aloud, so startled was he by—not the *sound* of the others, for he was alone in his room; and in uttering his own word "what" he realized, by the difference of its effect upon his ear, that the other words had not been uttered aloud. But where had he got them from? They came across the field of his imagination, engaged with the thoughts just described, with an intensity that made them feel quite unlike a thought of his own. What did the impression mean? Was it really from an external source—itself a manifestation of the strange powers in the midst of which they were all living at Heiligenfels? Upstairs could only mean the Baron's rooms in the turret above. Had the Baron been calling him by some occult agency? The experience had not come to him before. The inclination to go up and see, began to assert itself very strongly—and yet, how absurd and unruly of him to disturb the Baron if there should turn out to be no ground for the impression he had felt. The Baron had left the drawing-room very early that evening, and had not been seen again. He might have been tired, and have gone to bed hours ago. Annerly almost vanquished his inclination to explore the mystery under the influence of common-sense and reluctance to make a fool of himself; but then came the reflection that he might after all be making a greater fool of himself if he neglected a summons of an abnormal kind, behind which there possibly lay revelations of interest. He wavered for some minutes and then felt that at all risks he must ascertain whether the call he had heard had been an empty fancy or reality.

It was past one o'clock, and he looked about as he came out into the corridor, shading a candle with his hand, vaguely wondering if any strange phantoms wandering about the castle at that hour might be found to have something to do with the impulse that drew him out of his room.

Everything was quiet, and the turret-stairs quite dark. He went slowly up, looking cautiously about, and came to the narrow landing at the top. There was only one door here, that of the outer room of the two the Baron occupied, and this was shut. He could see no light beneath it and hear no sound. *Was* he making a fool of himself? and ought he not to go back? To knock and disturb his host at that time of night, all for nothing but to offer a ridiculous explanation, would be a course of action he would feel ashamed of, and he waited, listening attentively. No sound from within. He still wavered as to whether he should not go quietly back again; but, following finally to the end the impulse that had made him come, he knocked with his knuckles at the door.

"Come in," said the Baron, in the most natural and matter-of-course tone, and Annerly opened the door. Stepping on to the threshold with an excited, ghost-hunting expression on his face, and holding his candle at some distance in front of him, he found his host standing with his back to the writing-table, leaning against its edge, wearing a loose, brown velvet jacket, that he had substituted for his evening coat, but otherwise still dressed as he had been downstairs. A shaded lamp on the table and a good deal of written paper showed how he had been spending his evening, but at the moment Annerly entered he was doing nothing, facing the door with his hands in his pockets. His first words relieved Annerly from the necessity of giving awkward explanations of his appearance.

"Well done, my friend! Common sense is a splendid thing —in its place—but sometimes confidence in intuition is better."

"Then it *was* you who called to me! But how did you do it?"

The Baron smiled pleasantly.

"Anyhow, I don't seem surprised to see you, do I? And, since you are here, I have the opportunity of saying some things which it just occurred to me I should like to say to you."

Annerly had come in and closed the door, and put down his candle.

"My acts to-morrow," the Baron went on, "are likely to seem to you somewhat at variance with language I have used in talking with you."

"In that case," replied Annerly, "I should trust the language you have used to me, and leave the acts to interpret themselves later."

"Thanks! You would be right to do so. But I distrust your confidence so little that I do not care to test it. I must, for motives which seem adequate on the whole, do what is one of the most disagreeable things a true student of occult science can have to do—make an exhibition of occult power to impress the imagination of people who are not pursuing occult development with the highest spiritual ends in view. But it is my conviction that the good to be derived from the departure from our usual rule will outweigh the advantages. What I do will not militate against the appeal I have made to you to keep your attention fixed upon the advancement of your own spiritual evolution, in all pursuit of occult science, in preference to dwelling on the fascinations attaching to the exercise of any abnormal powers."

Annerly assured the Baron that his aspirations were altogether in the direction of knowledge and interior enlightenment, in preference to the manifestation of strange forces on the physical plane of nature. They had some further conversation on these points, and then the Baron said,—

"Well, I will not detain you any longer; I would only say this one thing more: Don't, at present, fetter your own action by any vows, even in the privacy of your own chamber. Vows are but artificial props for a weak resolution, and, if that is not strong enough to carry a man all through the difficulties he may have to face in connection with occult study, it may sometimes be better it should give way in the beginning rather than in the end. Besides," he added, in a lighter tone, "it's theatrical; and, as I'm going to be horribly theatrical myself to-morrow, I am naturally sensitive about that failing in others."

The practical assurance which these words gave Annerly, that the Baron must have been actually aware of the intention he had formed shortly before in the room below, was the most impressive evidence he had yet received of his extraordinary psychic gifts.

"Of course I will follow your advice," Annerly replied; "but that strikes me as a more wonderful example of clairvoyant perception than any I have ever heard of."

"For most men, so far, the imprisonment in flesh is so close still, that they forget how much more 'natural' it is really in one sense of the term, to be free of that confinement. Our thoughts are less our own exclusive property than is often vainly supposed, and those which are on the plane of another man's sympathies may readily become perceptible to that other —sometimes. Happily, in most cases, natural conditions sift the thought which *ought* to have liberty of passage to some other person from those which he has no business to concern himself with. True psychic clairvoyance is not so indiscreet as people failing to appreciate its laws correctly might imagine."

"And would it be possible to give me any clue to a comprehension of those laws?"

"Hardly, indeed; for all psychic faculties are rather states of being than acquired arts. The longer you remain in your present attitude of mind about these things the more you will pass into those states of being which involve the comprehension of these faculties and their exercise. The honest truth is that nobody can, so to speak, explain them in terms of the intellect, because they have not got to do with the intellect; and that is why modern culture, which is altogether on the intellectual plane, is so offended with psychic faculties and won't have anything to do with them. However, I do think myself it is time their existence was recognised even on the intellectual plane, and my little efforts with some of our friends below, are experiments to see how far that recognition can be secured even though it may still be impossible to teach people to accomplish psychic results with physical faculties."

"I'm profoundly indebted to you," Annerly said, "for the help and guidance you are giving me."

"We are all in debt to one another in a tangled sort of way," said the Baron, "which will grow clearer to us as we get on."

"Meanwhile," said Annerly, "those of us in the rear are naturally impatient to get on."

"You can't hurry a natural process. I have given you some hints already about the pure and simple life which an occult student must lead. Watch and wait. There is nothing more to be said at present; or if I said anything more to you just at this crisis it would be negative rather than positive. Perhaps the less interest you take in the theatrical or sensational aspects of occult powers the better—I am told that people who mean to be great singers do more good by practising scales at home than by going to the opera to hear other singers. But that is a suggestion of no great consequence."

"Good-night, then," Annerly said, as the time for him to withdraw had evidently come; "I shall certainly try to follow all your suggestions—the least as well as the greatest."

"Good-night and pleasant dreams."

Annerly returned to his room with emotions a good deal exalted by the incidents of the night, and as he moved about the room getting ready for bed his eyes fell upon the paper he had set before him on the writing-table when he had been about to record his resolutions. The words "I hereby" stood at the head of the paper which he had left blank in other respects when he went upstairs. Following these two words, three others now stood written, as if in blue pencil, and in the Baron's hand;—the words "Watch and wait."

Here was one more marvel to crown the experience he had just received of the Baron's clairvoyant insight into the working of his own mind. How had these words been inscribed on the paper? Who could have entered the room in the middle of the night to write them? The question only crossed his mind to be dismissed with ignominy. "It is what any stranger would ask," he thought to himself; "and how low-minded and stupid the hypothesis seems by the light of the knowledge of him I possess already."

Underneath the blue-pencil words Annerly himself wrote, "So be it," and the date, and then folding up the paper put it carefully away.

CHAPTER XVI.

OCCULT POWER IN EXCELSIS.

It was settled in the course of the following morning, that the whole party should go out into the woods together, under the leadership, in the beginning, of Professor Massilton; that they should ultimately stop at a place to be indicated by some one else, and that the character of the manifestations of occult power the Baron should be invited to concede should then be determined.

The general programme of the day had been the subject of careful thought and discussion between the Professor and Blane. They endeavoured to forecast all the objections that might ultimately be raised by critics who might distrust their narration of what might occur, and it appeared best that the scene of the experiment should be selected in such a way, that several persons should have a voice in the matter, obliterating, as far as might be possible, the chance that any one could afterwards raise a doubt whether the proceedings, whatever they might be, had been the subject of prearrangement.

"It is not what I would have liked," the Professor had said to Blane. "It's not a scientific method of dealing with a new discovery, but we must make the best of the opportunities we have. I would rather be able to *show* the smallest manifestation of psychic force under control of one amongst us, who would put it completely at the service of science, than merely report having seen the most stupendous manifestation. But, even as it is, our report cannot be pooh-poohed; and it must have a great effect upon thought if not upon knowledge."

Blane, as usual, took rather a gloomier view.

"It is a very difficult thing," he urged, "to get thought out of its usual grooves;" but he was none the less keen upon making the most of the present opportunity.

The departure of the Vaughans had reduced the party at the castle to eleven in number, but, counting his flock as they were getting ready to start, Professor Massilton could only make out nine—"The Baron, the Millers, three; Hexton, Blane, Merland, six; Miss Blane, seven; my wife, eight; Reginald, nine; Mrs. Lakesby, ten. Who is it missing? Why it's Annerly. Merland, my good fellow, go and call your friend. Tell him we're all starting."

"Good gracious!" said Lady Emily, in alarm.

"What is the matter?" said Mrs. Miller.

"Why, don't you see? I never noticed it before. Mr. Annerly would make eleven, and the Vaughans two more. We were thirteen at dinner the night before last."

"Oh, Jem!" said Mrs. Miller to her husband, who was standing near, "how thoughtless of you not to have noticed that. You might have dined out somewhere. I don't mind myself, but some people are so nervous."

"I don't pretend to be heroic about sitting down thirteen," Lady Emily confessed.

The mischief had been done, however, and there was no help for it now, though poor Mrs. Miller felt acutely that a stain had fallen on her character as hostess. She walked on, in company with Sir John Hexton, who comforted her with the assurance that since the Vaughans had gone the thing need not happen again.

"It's a stupid thing to mind, of course, but when a disagreeable idea of that sort is started people do mind. That's the worst of all the superstitions you're so fond of, Mrs. Miller; you set people off their balance."

Mrs. Miller had the courage of her opinions at all times and seasons, and the unlucky number was presently forgotten in the renewal of some oft-fought questions.

Some of the party moved on ahead, and the Professor, though rather impatient at having to go on without being sure that all his witnesses were present, was obliged to move forward to the head of the procession, lest there should be any straggling in a wrong direction.

"Do let everybody understand they have simply got to follow my lead," he explained.

"I'll wait for the others," Mrs. Lakesby promised, "and bring them on."

But Merland presently returned, saying that Annerly did not mean to come. He had some writing to do that he could not put off.

"The Professor was so set upon everybody being present that he won't be pleased," Mrs. Lakesby remarked; "never mind: you and I will walk on, Mr. Merland. It's a pity your friend should miss the performances."

"That's just what he doesn't think. I hadn't time to have the thing out with him; but he wouldn't come, I think, just because there is going to be some sort of performance. He takes a very exalted view of occult science—I daresay he's right. I don't feel bent upon going myself."

"You're not feeling well, or you're out of spirits about something; but I don't feel anxious about you, you've got such a bright future."

"Me?" said Merland, with a slightly scornful emphasis.

"I often feel about people whether there's a cloud over their future or whether it's all bright, and I don't see any clouds on your path."

"Then, Mrs. Lakesby, though no one admires your wonderful gifts more than I do, I'm afraid even you may sometimes make a mistake."

"Goodness! I make hundreds, I daresay, and I'm sure I never recommend anybody to trust what I say—but you remember what I tell you all the same. Now your friend Mr. Annerly gives me the impression of being a man with a good many clouds about his path. But he's very interesting. I like him immensely. You've known him very intimately for a long time, haven't you?"

"Ever since I first went to college, and you're quite right to like him. He's a splendid fellow in more ways than one."

"Tell me," said Mrs. Lakesby, "about one thing. I've got a queer fancy sometimes about him: a name comes into my head occasionally, in connection with him, the name 'Miriam.' Is there anybody of that name belonging to him?"

"Yes indeed, Mrs. Lakesby, don't mention the name to him. He's so nervous about that matter that he hates to have it referred to. But who told you about her?"

"Don't I say it's only a fancy of mine. Nobody told me, but I think of the name when I see him. Who was she, if it isn't a secret?"

"That's curious. I see what you mean now. I fancied you meant you had heard some one mention the name. Miriam was the name of a girl he fell tremendously in love with. She threw him over, and he was awfully cut up about it."

"How strange!" said Mrs. Lakesby. "However, it's no business of mine."

Turned upon the topic, Merland told his companion what he knew of the story. Soon after the Professor, who had halted the head of his column at an open space a little distance in the wood, came back to hurry up his rearguard.

"It's quite the most exasperating apathy that could be imagined," he declared, when he heard of Annerly's defection. "Incomprehensible in so intelligent a man, and positively wrong in my opinion considering the interests concerned."

The Professor was even inclined to send back an imperative and urgent summons to Annerly, but some of the others objected, with a feeling that this would keep them all waiting.

"There are a lot of us present as it is, Professor Massilton," Mrs. Miller urged. "Who could be such fools as to suppose we are all in a conspiracy to deceive one another? What is one person more or less? Let's go on."

"Let's go on by all means," said Sir John. "No doubt it will be Mr. Annerly's loss." Sir John spoke cheerily, intending to be very civil to the programme of the day, but as often happened he was unlucky enough not to suit the Professor's taste exactly.

"If a juryman is absent from a jury, a court of law does not content itself with saying it is the juryman's loss. But I suppose there is no help for it now."

"Then let's be moving."

"Very well; and now, Hexton, will you be good enough for a while to take the lead?"

"Me?"

"You!"

"But I don't know where you want to go."

"That's precisely the reason why I ask you to take the lead. I want to get to some place quite by chance. You'll all see why in the end."

On these conditions the pilgrims resumed their journey, with joking and laughter.

"There's a grievous want of earnestness about some of our friends, Baron," said the Professor; "they don't understand what we are really about, and they will wonder later on that they could have treated this day's work with any sort of levity.'

"It's the spirit of the age. There's a ripple of laughter, a fringe of froth, round the edge of every great idea amongst us now, as there must be round every sea and lake, but it does not affect the deep water in the middle, though it hurts some sensibilities. In former times men explored nature's mysteries in a more reverential spirit, and that will come again; but for the present our generation has forgotten that there are mysteries to explore. If the few of us who have kept touch with them were too timid, now, in confronting the world's frivolous laughter, we should be responsible for denying it the opportunity of recovering its reverential spirit. I mind no laughter in these matters unless it is poisoned with malice, and, when it is so poisoned, it must itself take so terrible a spiritual revenge on its authors that the displeasure one may be tempted to feel ought rather to be pity."

"That is hardly a practical policy, though. Crime of all sorts may be supposed to bring remorse, but that is no reason for not punishing it. Offensive ridicule, directed against first discoverers of unfamiliar facts, is a moral crime, retarding the growth of knowledge and causing undeserved distress. I would always make its authors feel the weight of my contempt to the uttermost."

"I did not make myself quite clear. The feeling you express is most natural and creditable, if you will allow me to say so, within the limits of your purely intellectual observation of it.

But there is another point of view. How can I illustrate my meaning? Suppose you see a man fall into the rapids above Niagara, through quarrelling with a companion, and stepping back to hit him. It was wrong of him to be quarrelsome; but you don't think so much of that when you see him fall into the rapids, and when you know what they lead to. Now it is just that way with the spiritual forces a man sets in motion against himself by putting himself in the wrong current of nature. If this life were all, then indeed there would be no Niagara to dread; but men must live again, whether they expect to or not; mankind, as a whole, must improve spiritually; and the units who oppose themselves to that improvement will have a terribly hard time of it. Here's another illustration. A man travelling *with the wind*, in a balloon, may not be conscious of any inconvenience, no matter how fast he is going; but let him throw out an anchor and try to resist the current. The way he will be blown about may tear his balloon to shreds. This all has to do with the law of nature, not very clearly appreciated anywhere in the world at large, as yet, but referred to, at any rate, in some Eastern philosophies as Karma. Every man is the product of his past lives. The forces set in operation during these impel his immortal part into the channels of evolution in which he travels, and even the accident of birth is only a consequence in disguise."

The Professor considered the view just put forward to be interesting as a theory of ethics, but did not manifest any wish to follow it up at the time. Presently he called out to Merland, then walking a little in advance, and the young man stopped.

"Now any time you like, within the next two or three minutes, will you call a halt? Then, considering that I began to direct our route, and that Hexton then took command, and that you intervened finally, I don't see how anybody can wisely say we have come to a particular place by prearrangement."

The hill sloped away rather gently from Heiligenfels in th direction they had been taking, and several paths diverged in various directions through the woods by which it was covered. In this way, though their wanderings had been irregular, they had never plunged outright into the thickets; and in the course of a little while they came to a comparatively open space, and here Merland proposed to stop.

"I don't understand what sort of place you want, Professor. Will this do?"

"My good fellow, I want any place that is selected by the operation of absolute chance. Of course this will do—one place will do as well as another. Now, I will explain what I propose, which is this—" (Everybody had now assembled within hearing.)—"We here to-day are placed in a very important position, and in a very unusual position. We have got the opportunity of having the existence of certain laws of Nature not yet generally understood, plainly proved to us. I know of my own knowledge already that Baron Von Mondstern is enabled to emit from his own hand a certain force the exact nature of which I do not understand, but the effects of which, I know, may be very considerable. He has undertaken to show us that this is the fact, on the present occasion, because it is necessary that my testimony as to what may take place, should be supported by that of several other persons, in order to command general belief, opposed, as it will probably be, to general experience."

Mrs. Lakesby, speaking in a low tone to Merland while the Professor was giving this explanation, said,—

"Do you see those two men dressed in white under the big fir-tree there?"

"No; what do you mean?"

"They look to me so natural, I thought they might be real flesh and blood—"

"Mrs. Lakesby," said the Professor, "if you would very kindly give me your attention for a few moments; we are about to undertake a very serious responsibility, and do let us all understand what we are about."

Mrs. Lakesby, thus called to order, made a little *moue*, begged pardon, and assumed a demure look varied with occasional sidelong glances at Merland, and with wandering looks about her at the big fir-tree and in other directions.

"I will now ask Mr. Blane to select any one of the trees near which we are standing. We have been brought to this spot, you will observe, without any intervention on his part, so that, in choosing one of the trees within our present neighbourhood, everybody can see that he is unable to choose any tree that can have been previously thought of by him, or any one else. Please, Blane, will you point out any one of the trees we see from where we are standing."

Mr. Blane looked round. A fir-tree—most of the wood was made of that growth—about thirty feet high, a moderate-sized tree, but standing a little clear of its neighbours, very straight and erect, was pointed out by Blane. It was easily identified by reference to a large moss-covered stone at its base.

Mrs. Lakesby whispered to Merland—

"They've gone over to it."

"Who?"

"The two men in white. What lovely magnetism!—"

"What do you mean?"

"Now," said the Professor in a decided voice and a glance at Mrs. Lakesby, which was sufficient to call her to order, "we come to the most important matter of all."

This was a general call to order, as there had been some stir among the whole party when Blane made his selection, and some joking inquiry whether there was any forbidden fruit on that particular fir that made him fancy it.

"Please let us all be serious for a little while. Now what I venture to suggest, Baron, is, that, in any way you find convenient or think fit, the force which you control may be directed by you, from a little distance, against that tree, in such a way as to produce some marked result. It is impossible for me, in the limited state of my knowledge on the subject, to make a more definite request; but it is best to put the matter in that way because this will leave you complete liberty to operate in any way you think most effective."

The Baron gravely bowed and moved a little away from the group, though remaining at about the same radial distance from the tree, which was about thirty or forty feet from them all.

Mrs. Lakesby again spoke in a low tone to Merland,—

"They are coming towards here—the two men—now they stand on each side of him."

For the rest of the party, however, the Baron appeared to be standing quite alone. He slowly lifted up both hands above his head, and, remaining in that attitude for a few seconds, swept them forward with a commanding gesture towards the tree. As though a thunderbolt had fallen from the clear blue sky the tree bent before the influence, whatever it was, that had been poured out against it; and then, with a mighty tearing crash, broke a few feet above the roots, and fell heavily to the ground. A cry of surprise and excitement broke from the assembled spectators. The Professor gazed with silent intensity at the fallen tree, and then at the author of its fall. Mrs. Miller frankly screamed. Lady Emily shrank, with a sort of terror, from the front of the group, where she had been standing, and sat down trembling on a stone. Sir John emitted an ejaculation that was something between an oath and a pious appeal. Every one was strongly, and most of them visibly, affected—Mrs. Lakesby least of all, and Merland not painfully at all, but as though with a strange tremor of exhilaration.

The Baron did not immediately return to his guests. He moved again a little further away from them, as if plunged in thought.

Except for a few disjointed exclamations, the party of spectators remained silent, looking at one another and at the Baron. Presently he turned round and came back to them rather slowly, with the usual sweet and gentle look in his eyes, but with sadness rather than triumph in the general expression of his face. His guests received him with involuntary marks of respect, the Professor gravely bowing, but no one venturing to be the first to speak. The incident they had witnessed had, for the moment, paralyzed their thoughts. The Baron spoke first himself.

"I have broken more than a tree for you; I have broken a rule—not without sanction, it is true, from those who have the right to control me, but on my own responsibility none the less. Let us hope that the good results to be gathered from my transgression may vindicate it at last."

"My expectations," said the Professor, "are so much more than realized that I am mentally overwhelmed for the present, I do not shrink from confessing."

"Whatever I can do," Blane said, "towards promoting the good results, it will be my pride and pleasure to do; but, beyond that, I hope you will dispose of my services always; and, as a matter of course, in any way you think fit."

"Shouldn't we all like," Captain Miller suggested, "to keep some mementoes of that tree?"

The Professor was meekly acquiescent and had no amendment to make to the proposal this time—nothing better to suggest.

"Jem, take care!" cried Mrs. Miller, as the Captain moved over towards the tree. "Baron, is it safe?"

The question relieved the tension of feeling all round by exciting some laughter.

"The tree may be safe," Lady Emily said under cover of this to Sir John, "but your extraordinary brother-in-law may not be so altogether. I'm not sure I like to be with people who can hurl thunderbolts in that fashion."

"I don't know what to make of it," said the Baronet; "his poor sister was an ordinary human being."

"I shan't sleep at night," said Lady Emily; "I don't like it. I must get away from here. Where does that sort of power come from, Sir John? I do not profess to be specially a religious woman—it might be better for me if I were; but at any rate I don't like compacts with— Well, you know what I mean."

"By George! That's a startling idea. Do you think it's that? 'Pon my life, it looks very like it."

"*This* is no conjuring, at all events, and I don't suppose any one would want to make us believe the power comes from on high."

Sir John revolved the alarming suggestion in his mind, and the more he thought of it the more glaring appeared the evidence that linked the achievement just witnessed with Satanic agency.

There was some dispersion and movement of the group now. Most of them went up to the fallen tree to tear off pieces of the wood as trophies. Merland remained close to Mrs. Lakesby, interested in what she had said about the figures which she had clairvoyantly seen, and asking her questions about them from time to time. They had disappeared from her sight shortly after. But now she said,—

"Oh! Do you see Reginald?"

"Yes. What's he doing over there among the trees by himself?"

"He's not by himself. He's talking to one of the men who has come back. Why, he can see him then He's clairvoyant!"

"That throws light on more than one thing about him. He has not been brought up by his uncle for nothing."

"How quiet he's been about it! He does not chatter and tell everybody what he sees, like me. Well done, Master Reginald. You've read me a lesson without knowing it."

"But I'm sure I hope you won't imitate him in that respect. Why should you deny your friends the satisfaction of hearing about what you see? It would be a sin to hide such talents as yours under a bushel," Merland protested, slightly confusing his biblical allusions in the general disturbance of mind from which both he and others of the party in the wood were suffering in different ways.

"The Baron does not talk much as a rule about what he can do, does he?"

"But the Baron has shown us to-day, if anybody ever did, that such powers are not to be hidden."

"I don't understand it, I confess. I don't see what he means by it. It isn't like him to show off in that way."

"We're greatly favoured."

"I can't particularly see why you should be."

"Don't be so down upon us as all that."

"I don't mean to be rude—I'm only puzzled."

The Baron left the Professor at this point of their conversation and came up to them. The sense of awe he had excited operated on their demeanour as if they were all courtiers and he a king moving amongst them: but though Mrs. Lakesby and Merland—Merland especially—betrayed a reverential feeling in their manner, he seemed anxious to win them back to their more usual attitudes of mind.

"Which do you think, Merland, is the finer thing to do: to destroy a poor innocent tree, or to waken a human soul to a consciousness—if only for a short time—of its higher attributes?"

Merland looked at him for a moment without realizing the bearing of the remark, and then perceived its application to his own experience of the previous day with a sudden rush of emotion. That which had been done for him alone, to show him the path in life he ought to tread, to reconcile him as it were to the great disappointment he had been subject to on the plane, so to speak, of his worldly aspirations, had perhaps been a greater achievement than the tremendous display of that afternoon.

"I beg your pardon," he said very respectfully; "I suppose I am too strange to all these experiences to appreciate them properly. But I think that the thing I have seen to-day will only make me appreciate what you refer to the more."

"Tell me who they were, Baron, do!" said Mrs. Lakesby, leaving the remarks just made unnoticed, as something that evidently did not concern her.

The Baron smiled, not pretending to misunderstand the allusion.

"Your eyes are sharp, Mrs. Lakesby, and what they show you you are entitled to know, but more than that it may be that I am not entitled to tell. Besides, what does it matter? You can guess of whom they were?"

"I wonder whether Reginald would tell me?"

The Baron gently shook his head.

"I fear," he said, "you know too much as it is. But, if so, use that knowledge discreetly for the boy's good—which means, do not use it at all."

It was some time before they all straggled back to the castle. It was in Blane's company that the Baron returned.

"Of course, I need not tell you," he said, "that the power of doing mischief, even in a very sensational way, is *not* the end I sought in devoting my life to occult study, nor the bait I would hold out to others. You will see that, but for many of our companions in this generation, you can only get a hearing on the strength of credentials they understand; and it is just possible that the sacrifice of our tree may startle some people who hear of it into realizing that there is more in their own human nature to respect and reverence than they are aware of, and so lead them up to the pursuit, for its own sake, of the spiritual development which physical evidence even, properly considered, may show them to be a grave reality.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PARTIAL DISPERSION.

The Professor had no opportunity of liberating his soul in regard to Annerly's heinous conduct in stopping away from the performance of the afternoon, till they were all assembling for dinner. As he came into the drawing-room he found Annerly and Mrs. Miller there before him, and, as he was speaking, Sir John Hexton entered the room.

"There you are at last, Annerly. Well, my dear fellow, I should be more indignant at you for depriving us of your company this afternoon if I were not so sorry for you on your own account. I suppose you have heard, by this time, what you lost?"

"I have heard what took place, but—I—well, I thought it best to stay away, though I daresay you may think it very strange of me."

The Professor's curiosity was roused by Annerly's hesitation.

"But then, had you any sort of motive for not going with us? I thought it was merely a fit of apathy on your part, or that you felt lazy, and disinclined for a walk."

"I can hardly explain—I had some views on the subject which you might not concur with altogether. I should be the last man living to criticize the Baron's acts, but experiments of the kind you had to-day are not what interest me most—or, perhaps I should say, what I think it best to follow up most earnestly."

Sir John Hexton listened intently. He did not quite realize what Annerly meant, but he put a construction on the words uttered, that chimed in with his own growing opinions.

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, Mr. Annerly. I was afraid I was almost singular in my opinion here, but I don't know that I approve of experiments of that sort either."

"What on earth—" The Professor looked from one to another, puzzled.

Annerly did not stop to consider exactly what the Baronet meant. He was only vexed with himself for being drawn into half-explanations that could not but be misleading.

"Pray don't think I presume to disapprove as regards others. I do not disapprove in any sense. I merely meant to indicate a purely personal disinclination on my own part to join in experiments—"

"I wish I had had your foresight, Mr. Annerly," said Sir John.

The entry of the Baron and of some of the others at this point turned the conversation, and soon afterwards dinner was announced. A certain air of constraint hung over the party, and *the* topic of the day was hardly touched upon. The events of the afternoon, in fact, had left very different impressions on the different spectators. The feeling of disturbance and alarm which Lady Emily Massilton had expressed at the time, augmented during the evening, and she privately informed the Professor that she was not inclined to prolong her stay at the castle.

"I do not think it would be right to stay," she declared.

The Professor never disguised the amusement he felt—at all events he never failed to exhibit slight symptoms of amusement —when Lady Emily advanced an ethical motive for any of her arrangements.

"That of course settles the question," he said. "If it is a point of conscience with you there is no more to be said. But, since important business is likely to keep me here for some time longer, what course do you propose to take?"

"I hadn't thought yet because I did not know you were so far gone as all that. But, even if I am forced to travel alone through your absorption in these more than questionable affairs, I would rather do that than stay on here now."

"Quite so: but I have such a craving always to understand definitely what people mean. When you speak of these more than questionable affairs I am in the dark, I am sorry to say, as to what you intend to convey."

"You may affect to be so, but I cannot think a man of your intelligence can be so really. While the little things that took place here were such as one could suppose either conjuring or mystification of some kind, it was not necessary to take a serious view of them; but after to-day the case is different."

"Different? Well, to be accurate the experiment of to-day is not different except as regards scale from some others we have had; but if you think it different what then? What is the question you put in your own mind, and apparently answer in some way, when you say the affair is more than questionable?"

"It is obvious, though you choose to ignore it. The thing done to-day was no trick, it was miraculous, and the power that did it cannot have come from any but a bad source."

"The Devil!" The Professor ejaculated the word, not in its capacity as an oath, but as an acknowledgment that he had at last taken Lady Emily's meaning. His amusement was no longer feigned, and—penetrated with a sense of comicality, though this did not provoke open laughter as there was no one by to appreciate the joke with him—he sat down on a low chair and slightly rocked himself to and fro in silent ecstasy. The conversation was going on in Lady Emily's room after the general dispersion for the night had taken place. She had requested the Professor to come to her for a few minutes, as she had something to say to him.

"You may laugh, but, though I never pretend to be a specially religious woman, I do not choose to follow you to the opposite extreme. I do not want to stop here any longer under the circumstances, and I wanted to know first of all whether you would leave this place with me, as we came here together."

"Certainly I will not leave this place at present."

"Then have I your permission to telegraph to Brussels and join my brother George there, if he is able to receive me?"

Lady Emily was never more loftily dignified than when she formally asked the Professor's leave for any such withdrawal into the bosom of her family as that now proposed. The Professor politely intimated his concurrence, and rose to go. Lady Emily, however, had been nettled by his treatment of her theory about the origin of the occurrence in the wood, and could not refrain from a parting shot.

"You will not find I am the only person here to take the view of this matter that I do, though for the moment you are so content in your own scorn of it."

"I don't think scorn is the word; it is only amusement. The idea is very amusing; but—er—is our party here to suffer any other losses that you know of on the strength of this idea?"

"I do not think it probable that Sir John Hexton will wish either to stay here any longer or to leave his son any longer in Baron von Mondstern's care."

"Ah!" The Professor paused for a little, but, after a few moments' reflection took his leave, without asking any further questions.

But the information just given him struck him as highly important. He had not been paying very much attention to Reginald Hexton, but it suddenly occurred to him as something monstrous that the boy's fate should be decided by an exercise of his father's authority in obedience to so stupid an impulse of feeling as that which Lady Emily had betrayed. He felt sure that the Baron would not want the boy to be taken from him. He conceived the notion that it might be well to give him a warning of what was in contemplation without loss of time. He had only parted from the Baron ten minutes previously, so he thought there would be no indiscretion in seeking him out. Perhaps the Professor, whose thirst for information was now raging more fiercely than ever, was unconsciously moved to some extent by an inclination to pay the Baron a nocturnal visit in his own room. Mere curiosity would not have justified this, but to tell him about Sir John Hexton's intention would be to render him a service.

The Professor made his way at once to the Baron's study in the turret. He had entered the room—the Baron's voice having bidden him come in—before he was struck by the notion that offering help, as it were, in his own affairs to a man with the Baron's attributes, might be rather a nonsensical thing to do, from one point of view.

"I am not used," he said, frankly, "to thinking myself a fool, but it just occurs to me that I may have come on a fool's errand. I came, at any rate, with the intention of doing you a service, but you may know already all I have to tell you."

"Sit down and receive my thanks in any case. What was the kind intention you had formed about me?"

The Professor described the impression which, as he had gathered from his wife, was Sir John Hexton's idea about the alliance which enabled the Baron to perform the feat they had witnessed, and his intention in reference to the boy.

"I feared something of the kind. It is deeply to be regretted."

"But I imagine you will have your own ways and means of arranging things as you please—as you think right."

The Baron sadly smiled and shook his head.

"You do not quite realize as yet the way certain rules govern the exercise of occult power. It would be quite out of the question to talk of employing any unusual measures to put a constraint upon Sir John Hexton's acts in this matter."

"Doesn't that seem rather fanatical. You would not do him any harm, of course; but if, as I can fully realize, it is much better for the boy to be with you than with him, why not *oblige* him in some way to consent?"

"There is nothing more impossible for me."

"But surely pressure of some kind could be put—"

"With an ease you can hardly imagine. Sir John could even be inspired with the wish to leave his son here, and would be quite unaware of the fact that he had been psychologized so as to wish this; but to produce that effect on him would be to commit a disastrous mistake, to do a very wrong thing. I am only at liberty to employ ordinary means to save Reginald from what would certainly be for him the terrible misfortune of being set in the midst of the corruption of a great English school."

"Well, I only wish I could psychologize Sir John for you. I'd run all the risks, cheerfully."

The Baron put this suggestion gently aside with a smile and a movement of the hand.

"But you can very likely help me greatly in the matter," he said, "by using your natural influence with Sir John. Reginald's education is far too advanced really to make him suit any school he could be sent to; and yet it may not have been carried on along the usual lines in a way that would simply enable him to take a high place in an ordinary school at once. Perhaps you could ascertain that yourself, by conversation with the boy, by sounding his knowledge and capacity a little, and then report to Sir John accordingly."

"All right; but it does seem ignominious to try and accomplish the result required by persuading Hexton. He's not altogether a fool, as ordinary people go, but he would be the hopeless slave of a prejudice once formed."

"It's very grievous, indeed, and I am deeply distressed about it; but we must do the best we can, and for any help in this matter you will render me I shall be deeply obliged."

"It does seem so odd to hear *you* talk in that way when you *could*, no doubt, have your own way so easily."

"We can talk over the ethics of the matter more at leisure. But about practical measures, as you sometimes say. I wonder whether Annerly might not be able to get us out of this dilemma."

"I can't understand Annerly," said the Professor; "it would be too absurd to suppose him affected by the same notion that Sir John has taken up, and yet some words of a vague nature that he uttered just before dinner would actually seem to imply that."

The Baron laughed.

"You are quite right to acquit Annerly of thinking me in league with the Devil. But what was said?"

The Professor explained, as far as he could, and the odd way in which the Baronet had evidently imagined Annerly to be on his side.

"That innocent misapprehension of his may render us a service. Pray do not disturb it. I really think Annerly *may* help us, and I will ask him."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DEPRESSING JOURNEY.

Mrs. Miller was unable to make out what possessed all the people—as she frankly expressed it—next day. She sent up in the morning to the Baron, asking him would he do her the favour to come and speak with her a few minutes in the octagon room, if he was not too busy, and then she declared her bewilderment.

"What are they all rushing away for? Mrs. Vaughan surprised me a little at the time she went, it seemed so strangely sudden; and now Lady Emily is unable to stay another day, she is so urgently wanted by her brother in the Embassy at Brussels; and Sir John Hexton has urgent affairs, too, which recall him to England; and now, to my amazement, Mr. Annerly has just been to say he must be going too. What is the matter with them all?"

"You may be quite sure of this, Mrs. Miller, that they are none of them going away on account of any failure on your part to be a perfectly gracious and agreeable hostess. Such events as we had yesterday are unsettling to people's minds, in different ways. I am not surprised."

"But Annerly? It's too stupid, really, of Sir John; I did think he would be more teachable; but still, there he is, you know. If he thinks you have sold yourself to the Devil, all one can say is, he has been born a couple of hundred years too late. I suppose that's why he wants to be off, and Lady

Emily too, for that matter; but Annerly puzzles me altogether. Do you know, Baron, he expressed himself so oddly last evening, just before dinner, that if I did not know him so well I should really be shaken about him. What do you think? *He* can't have got any absurd notion in his head, can he?"

"Dear Mrs. Miller, do not be uneasy about Annerly. I have seen him this morning, and I assure you his devotion to the subjects which interest us is quite as keen as ever. The coincidence may seem strange to you, but I am sure, in wishing to leave us so hurriedly he is governed by motives which are quite unlike those which may render Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton disinclined to stay. In all probability we shall see him back before very long, for the rest of our party I think you will find very faithful to us for some time to come. And don't you think, though we shall have been reduced in our numbers, we shall still be a very pleasant little party?"

"But do you know about Mr. Annerly taking Reginald away? Is that by your leave?"

"Yes; I heard of the arrangement only an hour ago; and, in truth, my leave is not required; for Reginald, having rejoined his father here, is under his authority, clearly. But I don't disapprove of the plan settled upon. An ordinary public school in England would be a place for which Reginald is quite unfit; but Mr. Annerly will be able to put him in the care of a private tutor near Cambridge, where he will escape some evils that might otherwise befall him. I would rather have had the boy with me a while longer, but there are some points to be gained by the plan now fixed upon;—at any rate, it is an acceptable compromise, and I am truly glad it has been agreed to by Sir John. I should be sorry if any delay endangered it."

Annerly had fallen in obediently rather than cheerfully with the plan in which he had been required to play a part. It was a wrench for him to leave the castle just then; it was with an effort that he undertook the care of Reginald, and his establishment at a private tutor's. He had seen but little of the boy, and was not, as some men are, naturally prone to take pleasure in boys' society. Never self-assertive or caring to take a lead among people he was with, he preferred always to be with companions to whom he could somehow look up, rather than with those who might be expected to look up to him. But he would have done anything rather than make difficulties about the first request put to him by the Baron, and he even accomplished the painfully-uncongenial task of volunteering to advise Sir John about the education of his own son.

To his great surprise he found this advice, which he would *not* have been surprised to find himself snubbed for offering, very quickly assented to. Sir John had a certain sense of duty to his son, and a distinct wish to withdraw him from the Baron's charge, but he was far from being moved by a personal desire for the boy's society. It would have been a disturbance of sundry plans of his if he had himself been obliged to take Reginald back to England and see about putting him to school. To get all this trouble suddenly lifted off his shoulders, in a thoroughly creditable way, and extricate the boy from the possible uncanny control of his uncle, without too seriously offending that too-powerful uncle, seemed, to him, a master-stroke of policy.

"My dear Mr. Annerly, I don't know how to thank you. You can arrange this matter ten times better than I could myself, and it will save me a lot of trouble. There's no one here but yourself I should have felt like trusting the boy to just now, but with you the case is different. I know you feel as I do about some things. I don't want to discuss them in detail here, and it is quite enough that we understand each other."

Annerly was in the dark as to the meaning of this, but it was not his business to raise difficulties between himself and the Baronet. He had only feared that it would be impossible to smooth away those which probably existed. According to his instructions he said that he wished to start for England immediately, and the hurry of his departure again chimed in with Sir John's views. In this way he would be enabled to see Lady Emily as far as Brussels without infringing the *convenances* by travelling with her quite alone. She meant to leave the castle that day, and they could all go together.

His task thus proved plain sailing for Annerly; but still he did not like it. He did not like aristocratic society, orthodox society, or boys' society; and he was sent away with all those three conditions in very forcible operation. He was aspiring to take a plunge into a new life, of an exciting and mysterious sort; he would have been prepared for heroic ordeals; he would have welcomed privations, or perils of a romantic sort; but he was merely called upon to incur some familiar disagreeables, and transact a tiresome piece of business in every-day life. As a struggling young man with a first-rate degree, teaching, in some way, would have been his natural path in life on leaving the university, but he had always declared he would sweep crossings rather; and he had forced his way, with no small trouble at first, through the outworks of professional journalism into a position of reasonable success and of fair literary credit. Now he found himself, only for a brief space it was true, but still for a moment, caretaker of a boy and patronized by a baronet. There was something chilling in this being the first incident of his apprenticeship to mystic study. He railed at himself internally for the ill-temper he felt, but still he felt ill-tempered.

It was a mercy at all events, he reflected, as they four—Sir John and Lady Emily, Reginald and himself—sat in the railway-carriage, on their way to Cologne, that he had not been invited to take charge of Reginald's education altogether. He felt it his duty to try and get into some conversation with his young charge; but the boy was depressed and reserved; very gentle and polite, but as awkward at making conversation on his side as Annerly himself, and the effort languished. Lady Emily and Sir John were in fairly good spirits in the opposite corners.

Lady Emily was generally exhilarated for a time on parting company with the Professor, and on this occasion she was parting from him under conditions which especially suited her. She had some confidences, moreover, to convey to her companion, which interested them both very deeply. Annerly made no attempt to understand what they were talking about; but he would have been quite unable to make out even if he had tried, as the scattered remarks which reached him referred to various letters which she gave Sir John to read.

"Isn't that enough to go upon?" she asked aloud, after some of these had been perused.

"It ought to be enough ten times over," Sir John replied.

But this meant nothing in particular, and the more important part of the conversation was carried on in a low voice, under cover of the rattle of the train. Annerly, however, was no more desirous than able to hear what they were saying. Only once was his attention involuntarily arrested. He heard or thought he heard Sir John pronounce the name "Miriam Seaford,"—a magic sound in his ears. Had it perhaps merely been some name, something like that which excited the vibrations of his own memory? What possible connection could there be between *her* and the conversation of two such people as Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton. His own restless imagination had deceived his outer senses, he told himself; and yet, though the name had never grown to be a strange sound in his own inner hearing, the pronunciation of it, or even what seemed the pronunciation of it, by another person, jarred some fibres of sentiment not yet, it would seem, quite extinct. Conversation of a sustained kind with Reginald proving impracticable, his thoughts went slipping back along the train of associations thus aroused.

It is unhealthy work, but still who does not at times let the creative faculty within him paint fair pictures of what might have been? Things of course were better as they were. For occult study, and the rapid development of the higher spiritual faculties, he might be fitted—for woman's love he had certainly not been destined (though Miss Blane had been good enough to try and make him think otherwise). Still (to while away the hours on this tiresome journey) was it not curious to think how soon the lower practical difficulties, that seemed to make the realization of his love-dream at the time impossible, would have been dissipated had she put her hand in his and trusted to him altogether? She had not been fit for poverty—that he knew; but if she had dared it for his sake she would never, as a matter of fact, have had to face it. And she would have dared it if she had not been tampered with, he thought. Pleasant things said in long past, but not forgotten, interviews came back to his memory. It was in no way her fault. The only thing that was not bitter, in the thought of all that gone by, was that she was never to blame; except perhaps for a certain weakness. Bah! why think of it at all? But, then, why not? Surely the unhappiness that had come to him out of that whole episode could no way be increased. Why cheat himself by pretending to think that he could shut the recollection of it all out of his thoughts? He had even a certain measure of success in literature and the world—hardly trying for it, hardly caring for it—and that had come to pass in about four years only. How would four years have affected her beauty and her sweetness? She would be just the same now that he had known her.

He did not dwell much on the fact that she had since linked her life altogether with that of another man. That merely emphasized a condition of things he had regarded as quite final in any case. The man was a mere name to him, and hardly that; for he never thought of the name, and sometimes went near forgetting it. She might have gone to another planet for all the thought he had of ever seeing her again. But what a strangely different thing life would have been if that had been realized that was only dreamed about! He could remember the short time in his life when he had been happy. What a singular sensation that had been, how finally and entirely obliterated from existence since! It had been clearly a sort of accident which had led him astray out of a life of which the destinies for some unfathomable reason were altogether gloomy into a state that might be normal to other men, but was ruled off from the possibilities of development he was subject to. The wise thing to do was not to expect anything resembling happiness for one instant. Different people had different aims in life. If he clearly recognized that he had no expectation of happiness that would perhaps be the best way of rendering unhappiness best bearable.

So occult development was a *pis aller* for him if he treated the matter honestly. It was rather contemptible that things should be so. Were they really so? If he should see Miriam Seaford waiting for him at the next station, willing and able to be all his fancy had painted, and to take up their lives where they had been abruptly severed, would he deliberately get out and join her and send back word to the Baron that he had changed his mind about devoting himself to occult study? Perhaps it was impossible to say what he *would* do in the absence of the opportunity of really making a choice. Perhaps he was doing himself injustice. Of course there was no doubt about the superiority, in the scale of Nature, of the man who devoted himself to perfecting his spiritual growth, a matter affecting his destinies for incalculable æons to come, as compared with one who accepted happiness instead, in one earth-life for a score or two of years. On the other hand might there not be time enough, in eternity, for spiritual evolution, even if a man postponed all efforts in that direction for the present, and floated along the natural current of evolution, which the occult student sought so marvellously to hasten? Well, anyhow, the time had gone by when it would be necessary for him to pray not to be led into temptation.

They got to Cologne in the evening and dined there in the refreshment-room, and then distributed themselves in appropriate compartments of a sleeping-car for the night-journey to Brussels. Wrapped in his own thoughts, which cut him off entirely from all real companionship with his fellow-travellers, Annerly was glad to be rescued by the conditions of the night-journey from the pretence of behaving sociably. Of course he felt a deep dejection of spirits after all the brooding reflections of the afternoon; and he went through some revulsion of feeling as he lay down in his berth resenting his folly in cultivating unwholesome fancies. What a crisis that day's thinking, however, might be in his destiny, if the abnormal faculties the Baron exercised and amidst which he lived,—for he had often implied that other unknown superiors exercised such faculties and powers unseen in a far greater degree than he himself,—what a grand internal cure might be wrought in his, Annerly's, nature, if something exhilarating and inspiring, helping to confirm and strengthen his enthusiasm for the occult life, could happen to him that night. If his inner spirit could be released for a time as Merland's had been, to feel the glory of the superior spiritual existence as freed from the trammels that fettered the soul in its physical prison! In his room the night he was called by the Baron he had had evidence showing him that the Baron *might* become aware of writing which he should produce in privacy. Clairvoyant perception once operating might as well follow him in the flying train as in the seclusion of his own room at the castle. It was possible that he could call the Baron's attention by writing something then and there. He fumbled about for his pocket-book in the coat hanging up within reach, and, tearing off the blank page of a letter, waited for the first moment of steadiness in the train as it stopped at a station to write. Then he put down a few words—an appeal to the Baron for a sign—and put the paper under his pillow.

A night in a sleeping-car is seldom spent in an unbroken span of sleep. Annerly was half-awake and half-asleep the greater part of the night, thinking in the conscious intervals of the paper under his pillow; alive as time wore on to the fact that nothing special had occurred to him subjectively, but refraining from the examination of the paper; that, he thought, should at any rate wait for the morning. It was at a very early hour in the morning that the train reached Brussels; and among his earliest preparations for leaving it Annerly took out his experimental note, glancing eagerly to see if any words in blue-pencil handwriting had appeared across it this time. Not a word or a mark—the paper was just as he had prepared it. With a feeling half of disappointment, half of contempt, for his own too confident hopefulness of the previous evening, he crumpled up and threw the note out of the window.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN OLD LOVE.

It would have been possible for those of the travelling-party, bound for England, to have gone at once to Calais, but Sir John explained that he would take this opportunity of looking in on Lord George at the Embassy, and would beg Annerly, if he did not mind, to join him in waiting one day at Brussels. There was a lot to see in the place, he said. Annerly had never been there, and would enjoy a look round at the old town and the picture-galleries. He would see Lady Emily to her destination, and join Annerly and Reginald at the hotel. Annerly fell in with the arrangement apathetically. He did not particularly care to see Brussels, but he was not in any special hurry to get on, except for a vague desire to have done with his present task as soon as possible; so he and the boy went to the hotel the Baronet directed them to as the best, and the other two drove to the Embassy. It was still so early that Annerly, established in his own quarters, having seen that Reginald was comfortably provided for, lay down and slept for awhile, then made a deliberate toilet and came down to the hall of the hotel about ten. He was aware of a strange feeling of torpor and apathy, afterwards he conceived that his sense of oppression might have been a kind of presentiment, but for the moment he only recognized it as an even more pronounced indifference to everything than was usual to him, though that sensation was but too usual. In the hall the *concierge* gave him a note that had been sent by Sir John. The Baronet explained that Lord

George had put him up at the Embassy, that he hoped Annerly would amuse himself the best way he could, and go on with Reginald the following day without waiting for him. He might come or he might not.

It was all one to Annerly. He did not trouble himself to criticize the Baronet's arrangements by a passing thought. As a matter of duty he went for a walk with Reginald along the boulevard after they had had breakfast, and then to the pictures, at which he gazed phlegmatically. In the afternoon he looked wearily over the papers in the hotel reading-room, undertook in reply to inquiries from the head-waiter to dine at the *table-d'hôte*, and then took refuge in his room again. He had not often spent so vapid and purposeless a day, but its *ennui* was all in the task he had accepted, like the *ennui* of the railway journey. He and Reginald rendezvoused in the hall at the appointed time, or a few minutes after, for he was a little late in commencing the slight change of dress appropriate to a hotel dinner, and they went together into the *salle-à-manger*. The waiters motioned them to the two seats reserved for them at one of the long tables, the other seats being already occupied on both sides. His face was turned towards Reginald, on his left, as they sat down; to take an interest in the passing travellers, who might be his fellow-guests at the hotel, was about the last thought that would have occurred to him, and he had looked at no one individually as they had walked up the room. Lethargically, as he unfolded his napkin, he turned towards the lady on his right, who looked half round at him—she had recognized him ten seconds sooner than he knew who it was; and then, dashed against his consciousness like a great wave of the sea against a rock, came the perception that he was sitting next to Miriam Seaford.

There was nothing said for some little while by either of them. The lady seemed to shrink a little from her neighbour, and the expression of her handsome features betrayed a shock of feeling on her part, though its precise nature could not exactly be read. She was beautiful—not in the brilliant style of Miss Lucy Vaughan; her complexion was very lightly tinted, but its texture very delicate and smooth; her hair grew rather low down on her forehead, giving a Grecian, Clytie-like contour to the head; and the light-brown hair rippled away on either side and swept round to the back in some fashion of her own that suited her, and that she kept to, regardless of more prevailing methods of arrangement. The eyes were of a very perfect violet; the mouth attractive rather by reason of its rich expressive outline than praiseworthy for small proportions; and the parted lips, as Annerly gazed at her, drew in a deep breath which made her broad bosom heave perceptibly, even beneath the high, black silk dress she wore. She had always been fond of wearing black, against which the delicate tints of her neck would gleam with fascinating lustre.

Annerly interpreted her look as one in which displeasure predominated. The light clatter of the dinner-table was already established; he spoke to her in a low voice, under cover of this, quite unheard by the others,—

"This meeting is quite accidental. Shall I leave you?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, stiffly.

Was she with her husband? Annerly wondered presently in his own mind, with a chilly feeling of resentment against the unknown man asserting itself in his breast, almost for the first time. He looked at the person sitting beyond her. It was no husband, at all events—a lady—one much older than herself, slight, dark, pleasant-looking—quite unconscious, so far, that her companion had found an old acquaintance—engaged, then, in a careful study of the *menu*, propped before her against a wine-glass, and in the leisurely consumption of her soup.

A busy waiter presented Annerly with the wine-card.

"No, thanks," he said; "I will drink water."

The lady of the *menu* looked up and motioned to the waiter for the card.

"What wine will you have, Mirry darling? You've been tired to-day—will you have some—"

"No thanks," interposed the younger lady, hurriedly; "none to-day."

The other lady seemed distressed and urgent.

"Please, dear aunt, I would rather not."

"Aunt," she had said. Ah! he knew of an aunt there had been—a *bête-noire* of his in old times. All her relations had been *bête-noirs* then—but he had never seen her.

The storm of feeling he had been affected by, at the first instant of recognition, was subsiding a little now. He began to eat the soup set before him, and to try and think collectedly what was the right and best course to pursue—whether to make some excuse to Reginald, get up quietly and go away, or to try and enter into conversation as an old friend, calmly and courteously ignoring the past. He felt he would rather, before leaving her, let her know that he bore her no malice and harboured no resentment against her. Still, it was difficult to say anything which should disguise the deep springs of infinite tenderness for her that welled up as of old at the sight of her, and flooded his whole soul as he sat beside her. She remained silent, paler than before, and had answered one or two insignificant remarks of her aunt almost in monosyllables. At last, disregarding all thought of framing a course of policy towards her, he said what was in his heart about her—one set of ideas on the subject, that is to say—very simply.

"I should like you to know that I hope very earnestly you have been well and happy since I last saw you."

A look of something like surprise crossed her face, and a contraction of the brows, as though it were an effort to speak.

"Thank you. I have been very well."

The conversation did not progress rapidly. After a further pause, Annerly said—as the conversation of the other people near them rose a little, and made a shield for his few private words,—

"No one can hope more sincerely than I that you may always be able to say that in all senses."

So far, her own brief fragments of speech had been uttered with a cold, almost repellent tone, but in answer to his last remark she said, more gently,—

"You are very generous. I am glad to hear what you say."

"I do not claim to be that; but I should shrink from being thought capable, by you, of having any other feeling about you than what I have expressed."

A great change was imported into their conversation by her next words, though they were as meagre as those which had already passed. It was she who asked him a question this time.

"Have *you* just come abroad?"

There was nothing in the question. It might have been put to him if they had really met at that *table-d'hôte* for the first time. But it indicated a willingness to talk.

"At this moment I am just going back. I have been staying with friends on the Rhine. I have been travelling a great deal—round the world, and so forth."

He was wondering, while he spoke, at the thought that she was not Miriam Seaford any more. To him she was never thought of by any other name. And yet by this time that name would have grown quite strange in her ears. He pronounced to himself the name that must properly be hers now. He had no inclination to pronounce it aloud. She must be travelling with her aunt, and no one else at this moment, surely? Otherwise the husband, had he been with her, would have been at the *table-d'hôte* unless he were ill, perhaps. Annerly wanted very much to know what were the general outlines of her life. She must have left the stage, because he knew that for long past her name had not appeared in any theatrical announcements. But was she living in England or abroad?—was she the wife of a rich man, or how was she circumstanced?

"Are you beginning a tour," he asked, "or ending one?"

"Not exactly either. But my aunt and I have been staying at places abroad for some weeks past."

He did not pay so much attention to the *banalités* they were exchanging as to the sound of her voice, and the special peculiarities and turns in her pronunciation, little minute individualities of manner, which he had dwelt upon so fondly of old, and remembered now as they reappeared in the few sentences she let fall. What a strange, bewildering sensation to be near her again, and yet, with an invisible wall between them, to be talking to her, and yet measuring out meaningless morsels of speech, and holding back the floods of emotion, explanation, inquiry he would have discharged upon her if he had been free to do this without fear of offending her, without being deterred by the general ignorance of her adventures since they had parted, which he was oppressed by.

The long intervals, during which they said nothing, continued to intervene between the few questions and answers they exchanged. It seemed equally impossible to go on with trifling conversation, or to venture on any serious topics. Eventually he said,—

"Whatever you can conveniently tell me about your life these last three years would interest me very much. I have had as nearly as possible no opportunity of hearing anything about you."

"I left the stage altogether about a year and a half ago. I have been living latterly with my aunt."

It was not a very complete narrative, but there was enough in it to be puzzling. Perhaps she merely suppressed direct reference to her marriage to avoid putting things in a painful way to him. But what had become of the husband?

"You left the stage I suppose," he said, "when—you married?"

Colour gathered in her cheeks at the word, and her brows drew together. With a recurrence to the more chilling manner in which she had spoken at first she said, curtly,—

"I never married."

"What!"

The revelation did not make any material difference to him. They had not parted because of her marriage. The division between them had been quite definitely established before that had, as he believed, taken place; but still it involved a new revulsion of feeling to learn that all the reflections on that subject that had passed through his mind, from time to time, had been groundless—that he had somehow been picturing her wrongly in his mind all this while.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I have been misinformed."

In some respects the state of things just disclosed made the position more embarrassing than ever. A married woman, she would not have imagined that in addressing her now he could be seeking to renew their old relations. Still Miriam Seaford as she had been, he would seem merely importunate—a creature deficient in delicacy of feeling, who would not keep out of her path, though she had plainly intimated her wish that he would. He had again a strong desire to clear himself by explanation; but these jerky bits of conversation, liable to be overheard, would not lend themselves to more confidential talk.

"I am on my way to England," he said presently, as the serving of the dinner drew towards its close, "and I leave Brussels by the Calais train in the morning about eight. I should like to say a few words to you before going, which I cannot say quite conveniently here, and if I might be allowed to join you in the hall or salon after dinner for a few minutes I should be grateful."

She hesitated a little before replying, and then said simply,—

"Very well."

Shortly after they all rose from the table, and the large crowd of guests dispersed in various directions. Miss Seaford put her arm through her aunt's, and passed on with her in advance. Annerly purposely lingered behind a little. He divined that she would want to give Miss Jameson—he at last recalled the aunt's name not without difficulty—some explanations; and he sat down at the table again, trifling with the nuts and raisins of the somewhat meagre dessert, to give himself an excuse for waiting a little while longer in the *salle-à-manger*. He frankly apologized to Reginald for neglecting him during dinner.

"I knew the lady I have been talking to years ago, Reginald," he said; "I have been a stupid companion for you, but I could not help it."

"It is very kind of you to travel with me," the boy said. "I am sure it is I that ought to apologize for being a burden on you."

As usual, Reginald was decades older, as far as his language went, than his actual age. Annerly was touched by the quiet unselfishness which took no heed of his gloomy temper during the day, and his entire distraction during the dinner, through which Reginald had sat without exchanging a word with any one.

"Thank you for putting the thing so nicely, but if I am morose and a bad companion, that is as our friends here would say *plus forte que moi*. I am sorry, but I can't explain at present. Now would you mind waiting for me anywhere about—say in the reading-room—for awhile? Then, perhaps, we can take a turn on the boulevards later. Just for the moment I have again something that I must say to those ladies."

"I will wait for a little in the reading-room, and then go to my own room if you do not come to fetch me. Pray, Mr. Annerly, don't put yourself out for me. I am really grateful to you, and would not trouble you more than I can help. Perhaps you will be longer with your friends than you think."

The boy's voice dropped a little as he said this, and there was a touch of sadness in his tone, a sort of wistful flavour which Annerly interpreted, and was much touched by, as meaning that he shrank from the neglect he anticipated, though politely proposing to leave his temporary guardian full liberty of action. Annerly put his hand, with a more affectionate feeling than he had developed towards the boy before, on Reginald's shoulder as they walked out of the dining-room immediately after this, and thanked him, while adding that they would have their stroll on the boulevards all the same in a very little while.

In the hall of the hotel were sofas, where the guests sat about after dinner, as well as in the public rooms. Annerly looked about here for the two ladies, at first in vain, but presently he saw the elder standing where a turn of the great staircase concealed a further corner from view. He advanced in this direction, and then she moved away across the hall in another direction, towards the reading-room. Coming to the place she had occupied he then saw Miss Seaford seated alone on a *causeuse* concealed by the staircase in a nook that was thus screened from general observation.

"It is very kind of you," he said, as he came up, "to grant me this opportunity. I had no expectation of the privilege of speaking to you alone."

"There is no reason why you should not do so—if you wish to. I am only surprised that you should care to speak to me at all."

"If I could have said to you three years ago what I want to say now I should, I think, perhaps have felt the pain of losing you a little less acutely; but I may be self-deceived in that. I only mean that I have often wished very much I could have said this, which simply is—that I quite recognize your ample right to cancel the too-sweet promises you once half let me think you made to me. But I would rather have surrendered my claims on you, such as they were, at your frankly-expressed demand, than have been as it seemed not quite trusted by you to be ready to make a sacrifice on your behalf. My love for you would have been very base and selfish if I had been capable of making it hard for you to get rid of my claims when you wished them to be given up. Of course, it would not have made the pain of the sacrifice itself any less, but it might have been something to feel sure that you knew I had loved you truly enough to have made it, by my own act, at your bidding."

Miss Seaford made as if she would speak.

"I think—" she began, but her lips were not quite under control, and she got out a handkerchief instead.

"I think it was by a kind of mistake in the working of my destiny that my ill-starred life was entangled for a little while with yours. I only wonder that you ever permitted it to be for a time so entangled; unless, indeed, it had to be that I was to endure some suffering that could hardly have accrued to me in any other way. But I only indulge in this repining that you may understand just how the thing stands in all its bearings. Then, perhaps, some thoughts that have rankled with me will be at rest henceforth."

"I should have thought," she said, "that you would have wanted to kill me if you suffered like that."

He could smile at the extravagance, as he sat beside her—gently putting the idea aside with a gesture.

"If you see what I mean altogether, you will do me the justice, in looking back, now, to know that I never harboured in my heart one thought on the low level of anger against you. I was—well, no matter what I felt. Of course, in losing you, I lost all that gave life any value for me, but that was no fault of yours. Why should you have bestowed yourself upon me if you did not choose to do so? My love for you imposed no duty upon you. It was my hard fate, no fault of yours, that it could not lead to what I had extravagantly expected—or hoped for; I think now, looking back, I can hardly ever have really expected it. I have never, never blamed you, Miriam, neither then nor since—"

She made an impatient little movement of her foot, though her head remained bent down and she did not speak, putting her handkerchief to her eyes silently every now and then.

"I know," he went on, "that it could not matter to you if I had presumed to blame you, but for my own sake I have wanted you to know that that was not so."

"You don't understand me," she said then, getting command of her voice with some little difficulty, but speaking plainly when the effort had been made; "I think you had great reason to blame me; to hate me for treating you as I did, and I can't understand why you didn't."

"That view of the matter hardly needs an answer from me; and I am sure you never suspected me of not loving you, though you may have thought of me as perhaps reproachful, when I was not so really. So little was that the case that when I heard of you as married I may honestly say that my most earnest wish was that you might be happy in that condition. I did not love you the less. Life without you was not the less prolonged desolation, but I did hope that for you it might be brighter than it possibly could be for myself. And I am unable to understand now how I was misled. I had a letter when I was in China from Walter Maxley, whom you may just perhaps remember, definitely telling me that he had met you travelling in Switzerland with your husband. It is unaccountable that he should have mistaken some one else for you, and have written to me about such a matter as if he were certain."

She had lifted her head to look at him with a feeling of either tenderness or commiseration when she last spoke, but now again bent down her head. He did not see the colour in her face, but her voice was constrained.

"He was mistaken at all events. I was never married."

"It is strange: but it was not the imagined marriage that put us asunder; and even the discovery of the mistake does not justify me in staying with you any longer now. It has been a relief to me—for the moment it seems so at any rate, even if to-morrow I may think that old wounds have been but needlessly reopened—to have met you again, and to have had out this explanation. I will say good-bye now, and if I could ensure your happiness from this time forth—by any act of mine—" (he had almost formed a more impassioned sentence, but cancelled it as it rose to his lips lest it should sound too much like an implied entreaty)—"then you would certainly be happy."

He rose slowly from the seat beside her, and put out his hand. It could not but be that she saw it, but she made no motion of her own to meet it. So quick was he to imagine himself regarded with aversion that he drew back his hand, and, again murmuring "Good-bye," was about to leave her, when she looked up and motioned to him to sit down again.

"Stay, there is no hurry. Will you not sit down again? There are things I should wish to say to you."

Annerly sat down. He did not consider the situation in any deliberate way at all, but he was conscious of delight in being near her for a little while longer, though the blessing was but to be evanescent.

"Did you think I wanted you to go away without shaking hands?"

"I had no right at any rate to press you to do so if you did not want. Surely a woman may choose who shall be her friends, and those not chosen have no right to complain."

"I could have no better friend than you; and I never had anything against you—but it seemed to me before we parted that you would insist on being a great deal more than a friend or nothing."

"Very likely I should have tried hard to be more. Of course you were right to act as you did. It was the only way, except, as I say, that I should have appreciated, and I would certainly have justified, more trust at parting."

"Perhaps I was cruel, through not understanding you properly; though I ought to have understood you. I think I did really. I suppose I was cruel through being cowardly, and not wanting a parting scene. There is no help for it all now. But after all this time, and the changes, and things that must have happened, it is different. I can tell you how sorry I am to think I gave you so much pain, and you will forgive me. But I know that you have done that all along."

"Indeed I have; or, rather, I would never allow, in my own heart even, that there was anything to forgive. I quite entirely consider you were right. I was asking altogether too much of you—too great a sacrifice in more ways than one. But if you do not mind me going on talking I will show you all my thoughts about you very willingly."

"I want—now everything of the old sort, you know, between us is over, and so long past—that I may not lose sight of you again altogether. I don't know yet exactly myself what I want, but I have been feeling very sorry for having hurt you so much. If it is any relief for you to talk to me, and hear me say this—then I am very glad we met."

"Relief! Well, yes, it is that in a way—more and less. It is for the moment something like happiness to sit beside you again, free to say what is in my heart about you—though, as I say, it will not be that to-morrow altogether. You see it is no news for you that my love for you was very deep, and that is merely another way of saying that it was necessarily very lasting. Since I may make the state of the case clear to you, I need not hesitate to tell the simple truth—don't be afraid that I shall trouble you or be importunate; but, of course, there has never been a moment from when we parted last till now when I have loved you any less than I always did in the old time."

"Oh, Mr. Annerly, don't say or think such things. It's a kind of madness with you. There's no reason for it. I'm not in the least worthy of being put on a pedestal like that—you wouldn't if you knew."

"A kind of madness? Well, I am not mad in any other way that I know of; but in this respect I think I have had experience that shows I am incurable."

"Perhaps we ought to part—even now altogether."

"That I should say depends upon whether I can be of any service to you. It will be something like a relief, may be, to me if you keep up so much communication with me as may enable me to feel sure you can always apply to me if you need me in any way."

"But which way is it best for you? I do not want to be spoiling your life more than I can help—"

Annerly almost laughed.

"You must not think of that," he said; "it is really not worth while—my life has been quite irretrievably spoilt in the way you mean already. Not through your fault, through my own vain presumption in thinking I could chain you to it."

"Would it not be best for you," she asked, after a few moments' pause, turning her head round and looking him full in the face, "to be quite cured of loving me once for all?"

"Undoubtedly, far, far best; quite immeasurably the best thing for me."

The answer seemed not quite what she had expected, and she looked puzzled for a few moments. Then she said,—

"I see what you mean: you mean it would be impossible."

"Unhappily, yes."

"Perhaps if you knew the real Miriam Seaford, instead of the ideal you may have got in your own fancy, it would not be so impossible."

"This is the vainest fancy of all."

"At all events, I know what would be best for you—what you yourself even acknowledge would be best."

Annerly saw she had some reserved meaning behind her words in her own mind, but attached no great weight to this. He only suspected the words in one bearing they might have.

"I hope you do not misunderstand me. You will talk of extravagant hypotheses, and so you force me to refer to others. Evidently it would be best, in one sense, for any man to be cured of loving a woman who does not want his love—but such a best as that is a forlorn alternative only; no more than that. Never mind me, however, except that the best thing you can do for me, practically, is to let me see you and do what I can for you from time to time, if any such opportunities arise."

"Wouldn't it be a kind of torture for you if you still care for me like that?"

"A lesser kind, I think, than some other sorts I know of. Remember this, Miriam—at least I beg your pardon—it is strange to me to call you anything else, but I will try."

She only shook her head sadly, neither resenting nor encouraging the use of the name; and Annerly went on.

"What I was saying was this, that you would do wisely, I think, and certainly most kindly to me, in taking facts for granted. My love for you is an immovable fact, and anything done on the supposition that it may be movable can only give pain and trouble. But it need not be a disturbing fact for you in any way. You may quite trust my self-control. I know it is the fashion for lovers to say that they must be lovers or nothing. That position seems to me not dignified but merely selfish. As I can't be your lover I would assuredly rather be your friend than a stranger."

There was something in this declaration that touched her again. She was never quick or impetuous in her movements or words. But she slowly looked round to him again, as he sat beside her, with something of the old affectionate expression he used to awaken in her eyes.

"You are very good to me," she said; "of course I might have known you would be."

She put her hand out to him as she spoke, and he clasped it earnestly for a few moments, and bent his head over it slightly.

"I wish it had not been so, for your sake," she added; "but now—I would rather talk no more, just at present. We shall be returning to England in a very few days. Will you give me an address to which I can write to you?"

Annerly gave her a card bearing the address of his chambers in London.

"I shall be away at Cambridge for a few days, but will take care that my letters are forwarded. Probably I shall be back there myself as soon as you are in town. And you? I should be glad to know where to inquire after you."

Miss Seaford gave him her aunt's address.

"But I will write to you; I will indeed. Good-bye."

She put out her hand, this time spontaneously, and left it in his as long as he chose to hold it—a few seconds longer than would have been necessary for a formal parting—and she looked up at him as he said good-bye with something like the old look he remembered so well. Then Annerly went upstairs to his room to be alone for a while and review the strange incidents of the evening.

So then this was the measure of his resolution about pursuing a life of monastic spirituality. He had come again within sight of Miriam Seaford, and his heart was throbbing with as much wild passion of love for her as though the last three years had been annihilated. He had not been even offered the temptation of a return to the old relationship with her. He was not called on to weigh the alternative of happiness with her as his wife against the further developments that might follow adherence to the programme pointed out to him by the Baron. He was simply put in her presence and everything else was forgotten. Or was it that just because he had *not* contemplated any resumption of old relations with her he had drifted without resistance into the conversation that had taken place? How would the bare renewal of acquaintance with her—the futile pain he would suffer in being frequently reminded of the happiness he might have enjoyed with her if she had regarded him differently—interfere with the progress of whatever might be possible for him in the path of occult development? His thoughts were not very connected; he hardly strove to render them so. The situation made no claim on him for any immediate decision. To have seen her again and poured out loving words in her ear; to have held her hand in his—if only that—once more; to have won her back again to the extent of gaining friendly words from her, and kindly looks and indications of a readiness on her part to renew some sort of intercourse in the future—all this was simply like convalescence after distressing illness, like ease after pain, or rest and comfort and security after shipwreck. It was a state of things to be dreamily enjoyed rather than criticized. It crossed his mind to notice, as a striking fact, emphasizing the bitterness of the past, that this barren consolation of having simply talked with her a little again should be a consolation, although it conveyed no promise of any joy in the future whatever. He was no more in a position to possess himself of that, which he knew too surely to be the only source of happiness possible for him in this life, than he had been yesterday; and yet he had crossed a gulf since then, and the world wore a new aspect. It was certainly not logical, and perhaps it was idiotic of him to feel any sense of relief in consequence of what had passed; but surely, he said to himself, he had gone through enough to warrant him in welcoming any sense of relief, however indefensible in reason.

After awhile he went downstairs again to seek out Reginald, but the boy had acted as he promised, and had left the reading-room, relieving Annerly of all further duties on his account that evening.

In the morning they were both up early to catch the Calais express. They met in the hall, where Annerly looked round, thinking to himself how the features of the place would be impressed for life upon his memory; and he was crossing it to go to the *salle-à-manger* for their breakfast when the *concierge* came up to him with a note.

"The lady sent this down last night, sir, to be given to you before you started this morning."

The mere sight of the familiar handwriting, on which his eyes had not rested for so long, gave him a renewed thrill of emotion—all the more that the pink paper on which it was written and the appearance of the envelope and its little monogram were teeming with associations for him. He had accumulated a large store of these pink notes at one time, and he had carried them about with him on his travels with Merland, done up in a packet, with the only portrait of her that he ever possessed. But he had never been so frivolous in his mourning for her as to reread them. He wanted no artificial stimulus to refresh his memories of the past; and he only unfastened the packet once to bid a final farewell to its contents, one day, when he buried it in the Atlantic Ocean on his return to England from his trip round the world. He had a vague feeling, at the time, that he might be able to turn a new page, and would be wisest to put these useless mementoes of the old one out of sight, once for all. It had not been a very successful manœuvre, he sometimes thought afterwards, but at all events he had not seen the old handwriting from that day till this, when the burly *concierge* of the Brussels hotel handed him a specimen of it once again, a specimen that might have taken its place in the old series, and that even bore the old scent; for Miriam Seaford had a trick of individualizing her habits in all respects, and always used the same note-paper and the same scent, just as she always did up her hair in the same way, and kept as far as fashion would allow to some individualized fancies in her dress.

The note was brief and merely said,—

"DEAR MR. ANNERLY,—

"My aunt bids me say that she will be happy to see you, if you like to call on us after Wednesday next. I am living with her now. But I will write to you before then as I promised.

"Yours sincerely,
"MIRIAM SEAFORD."

CHAPTER XX.

RESTORED.

ANNERLY was a vigorous and clear-headed politician, a journalist distinguished by a keen and incisive style, and withal a man whose external appearance was not calculated to mark him out as a prey to sentimental imaginings. But there had not been many consecutive hours since his first acquaintance with Miriam Seaford when her image had been altogether absent from his thoughts. His love for her had coloured the whole fabric of his mind. It might be employed on this or that pursuit, but its underlying sensations would be derived from the inarticulate current of longing for her that was always flowing through it. This was now swollen to a torrent again; and during the few days that he spent in the fulfilment of his mission about Reginald, it obliterated all other trains of reflection.

With dinning sound my ears are rife,
My tremulous tongue faltereth;
I drink the cup of a costly death
Brimmed with delicious draughts of warmest life.

The lines would, over and over again, sing their passionate music in his heart. The little poem "Eleanore" had been one he had always associated in his own fancy with Miriam Seaford so closely that it had become, in the later years, replete with emotions too distressing to be needlessly stirred. He had shunned the verses ever since, as he had shunned looking at the old pink notes. But now the colour of all such associations was changed; and the verses came to the front again in his imagination, especially the last two, which seemed peculiarly appropriate to the strange undefined revival of the past, which had suddenly come about.

What did Miriam mean by the attitude she was taking up? What did he himself desire? The conversation at the hotel might, perhaps, be set down altogether to the surprise of the moment; to her regret for having given him so much pain in the past; to an impression that she might have formed during their separation, and might have wished to verify, that perhaps he had now recovered from his wound. But the talk they had had would have shown her that he still loved her as much as ever, and yet she suggested that he should again come and see her—not to perform any specific service for her, but in a general way to resume intercourse. It might be, indeed, to drink the cup of a costly death that he would obey her summons, but he did not pretend to himself that there was any hesitation in his own mind as to whether he would go. Was the whole catastrophe of his life, that seemed so final and irrevocable, going after all to be redressed? Was he going to enter on a life of happiness? The conviction that every possibility of that sort was quite out of the question in his case had been settled in his belief so long, that the new contingency now presented to him was bewildering. And yet why should it not be realized—since Miriam, after all, seemed leaning once more towards accepting him as her lover?

Very little passed between Annerly and his companion on their journey to London. They had both lost the feeling of being awkward in not talking much. Reginald was always contented to sink into a book, and he had brought two or three with him, which took him off Annerly's hands in the train. Moreover, Annerly had developed a very kindly feeling towards him, in connection with his beautifully simple self-obliteration of the previous evening, and the few words that were exchanged had friendly impulses behind them. He even came to be interested in Reginald in a somewhat new way, because he realized, during their journey together, that the quiet self-possession and intellectual advancement the boy exhibited had probably some more subtle explanation than he had at first suspected. They had been talking a little of the programme which was now marked out for Reginald's education; and Annerly had been thinking in his own mind that perhaps the seclusion of the boy from the rough companionship of others might weaken his masculine fibre, even though special teaching, adapted to his peculiarly precocious mind, might yield larger results in that way. He had asked Reginald whether he did not regret losing the games and amusements of a big school.

"I don't care about that sort of thing, and they seem to waste so much time at schools, from what I hear. I must learn to read Greek and Latin thoroughly well, but I hope to get back to my uncle again when that is done—so the sooner it is done the better."

"Don't you mean to live in England when you grow up?"

"I don't know. I haven't any plans. Something or other will seem the best thing to do when the time comes, I suppose."

While they were talking Reginald had held down the book he was reading with his thumb in the place and the fingers outside, and Annerly noticed that the nail of one of these fingers was somewhat distorted as if it had met with an accident.

"Have you hurt your hand?" he asked.

Reginald looked at his finger, following the direction of Annerly's glance, and laughed.

"That's a very old hurt. It happened more than a year ago."

"What did you contrive to do to yourself?"

"Well, it was a piece of stupidity of mine that my uncle didn't approve of at all," said Reginald, but in a tone that showed that the disapproval had not borne heavily on his conscience. Annerly asked what was the joke.

"Well; I'd been reading a good deal about the Indian fakirs and yogis, who show their tremendous will-power by bearing pain. So I thought there might be some great wonder to learn about that way, and I thought I'd try. I managed to tear off one of my finger-nails—"

"What!" cried Annerly in amazement, "you mean you did it on purpose?"

"Yes; it was very difficult to manage, but I did, just as my uncle came rushing in to stop me. He put on the nail again, and bound my finger up. Of course no ordinary doctor could have made it grow again at all, and even he did not make it grow quite straight."

Annerly sat looking at the boy in silent wonder. Having been pressed with questions he had told his story very simply —he had not even brought it out in a spirit of boasting. And this was the boy that he had been thinking might be in need of a little Eton or Rugby "roughing" to strengthen his masculine fibre! It was borne in on his understanding very forcibly that in some way Reginald must be other than what he seemed—no mere commonplace son of Sir John Hexton's, forced prematurely in his mental development, by living with the Baron.

"I'm glad I heard that queer story," he said. "I am the less likely to misunderstand you—and may be the better able to look after this business of the private tutor for you. I feel as if I ought to apologize for having talked to you sometimes—as if you were a boy!"

"So I am a boy," said Reginald, laughing; "but you know in a general way what my uncle is, and anybody who wants to be like him has got to begin young I believe."

"There's food for a great deal of reflection in that," said Annerly.

"I don't mean that those who begin young are the only ones. Others may be better qualified, and begin later."

It struck Annerly that his present state of mind was not an illustration of his own especially superior qualifications in that line; and that it was perhaps a somewhat quixotic notion that had recently been leading him to think the path of occult progress one he might be able to tread. But the nature of the obstacles in his way precluded him altogether from discussing them with Reginald, and after a little while they both resumed their reading.

The journey was a doubly impressive one for Annerly, for he had a vivid sense of the contrast between all he knew of Reginald—of the strange destinies probably in store for him, of the scenes in which they had both recently been taking a part, and on the other hand of the dull ignorance concerning all these mysteries on the part of the people they sat among in railway-carriages and on the steamboat and in hotels. Then, beyond this, he was moved by the suppressed under-current of strong personal excitement due to the revolution that had taken place in his own most private affairs.

He had no accommodation to offer Reginald at his chambers, so they spent one night at a London hotel, and went on the following morning to Cambridge, where Annerly instantly set about the inquiry with which he was charged. His acquaintances in Cambridge were many. He had always remained deeply attached to the scene of his first successful struggle from the lower intellectual life in which he had been born, up into the more exhilarating mental atmosphere of cultivated society, and he had maintained the habit of frequently returning to the university, to resume his cap and gown for awhile, to attend dinners in hall and chapel services, and to exercise the various privileges of his fellowship. A couple of days enabled him to find a suitable home for Reginald; and, bidding him good-bye with a hearty goodwill established between them, that the earlier experiences of their journey had scarcely seemed to promise, he went back to London on the third, and as he entered his own room his eyes were gladdened by the sight of a pink note lying on the centre table. Eagerly opening it, he read as follows,—

"DEAR MR. ANNERLY,—

"I am true to my promise this time—will you say for a wonder? I am going to write a letter that may lead to pain and unhappiness for both of us, or to the reverse—who knows? But I must warn you not to be too much elated, at any rate, by what I am going to say first.

"I really did not think that your love for me would have remained so strong, and I don't think now you are to be at all congratulated on being so faithful; for I don't think it is in me to love anybody in a way that would at all correspond to the sort of love you have for me. But I am writing to tell you that if you like to resume the old relations there used to be between us I am willing that things should be so. It would be nonsense for me to seem to doubt whether you wish this after what passed between us at Brussels, but I may be preparing a great humiliation for myself in saying this, for you have much to learn about me before you must answer this.

"For one thing, your friend was mistaken when he told you

I was married, but there was a time when I wished to be, and believed that I was going to be. I shall not tell you all about this myself—I shall leave my aunt to do that for me. But, though I dare say you will be very glad to hear what I have just told you—that you may now have me for your wife if you wish it—it remains to be seen whether you will wish it, after you have seen and talked with her.

"Entre deux amants il y a toujours un qui aime et un que se laisse aimer. I am but offering you *me laisser aimer* again, and if you decline, then, at least, it will have been that you are cured of your love for me, and I shall not have to think of myself any more as having ruined your life for always.

"You can go and see my aunt to-morrow afternoon. I shall not be at home myself; and your impatience to see me—if you are impatient still—must wait a little longer. About that you will hear from my aunt.

"I do not think till then, anyhow, that I need hesitate to call myself

"Yours affectionately,
"MIRIAM SEAFORD."

"Miriam, Miriam, my darling!" was the first comment that Annerly made on the letter, as he leaned forward in his easy-chair, stretching out his arms to the vision of his beloved that rose before his mind's eye. And yet the veiled significance of her explanation was not lost upon him. "Some one has betrayed her," he thought. "The fool—the fool."

There was a tinge of pain perceptible amid the delirium of his own joy at the thought which his imagination quickly grasped. This story of Maxley's, of how she had been seen "travelling with her husband"—there could hardly be much doubt, after what she now wrote, as to how the mistake arose. And she could not bring herself to write details—*that* she had left to her aunt.

He did not want details. They belonged to a horrible nightmare-time that might now be put away and obliterated. Had she *loved* the other man? There was true pain in that conjecture. But surely there could have been no love of the sort that would be abiding. There would certainly be many people who would condemn him for not condemning her, in the face of what he now learned, for not at once "plucking her image from his heart,"—as he scornfully phrased the idea. But how little such criticism, he thought, would take account of such love as his for Miriam! He loved *her;* not what other people might think about her. If she had done this or that which she ought not to have done, she was none the less herself. To pass through life without her was the sum of all misery; to pass through life with her would be, if not absolute happiness—for experience could only show what new possibilities of suffering his later destiny might hold—at all events, the only condition of things which made happiness possible.

How little conventional moralists—who would find his too easy forgiveness of her sin, discreditable—how little they would understand the only thing which really did make him—not hesitate to accept her offer, for he knew, in his heart, that he could not pretend to hesitate for one fraction of a second—but feel some touch of shame in embracing it, as he did, without hesitation. He was cutting himself off, within a few days after he had been wishing to bind himself to it by vows, from the life of occult study and development, the marvellous avenues of which had been half-opened before him by his intercourse with the Baron, and across the threshold of which he might almost be said to have passed. He did remember, as he sat with Miriam's letter in his hand, how the Baron had said to him that evening in the chamber—better not bind yourself by vows, even uttered in private; it would be better to give up soon, rather than late, if your resolution is likely not to be strong enough to carry you all the way. He was acting upon that advice but too promptly. He was indeed giving up soon. He was to try the very thing he had so unjustly scorned poor Merland for aiming at. He was going to make a little paradise on earth for himself for a few years, and to turn away from the path which led to the far grander heaven he had dimly discerned as connected with the elevation of his soul to a higher spiritual level altogether—one on which the single individual loves of our own stage of development would be, in some mysterious way, not deadened but superseded.

It was very sad that human nature was weak, but with him, at least, love for Miriam was strong. Wise, wise friend the Baron had been—could he have been prophetically wise?—in warning him against the formal enunciation of vows which it might have been humiliating to break, and which it would have been useless folly to have kept—in view of the feeling with which his whole soul was now flooded. He would have to write to the Baron and tell him what had occurred, and to Merland too. But first he had to write a report of his operations in Reginald's interest at Cambridge. He could do that without touching the other matter, and keep his confession waiting till all was definitely settled again between Miriam and himself.

The day was a tedious one to pass. "I might have been with you at this moment, my own love," he thought, "if you had not been distrustful of me even now." But this reflection was not overwhelming. The delay did not threaten to be protracted. Perhaps by next evening he would be with her. Slowly the time wore by. He did some work. The distraction of happiness is unfavourable to work, but less so than the distraction of misery, which he had long been trained to resist.

He went out in the evening, and dined at a literary club he had lately been enabled to join. Most of the usual frequenters were away on autumn travels, but the small party that was left found him strangely good company. He had been respected in a way hitherto for what he had done, but had not been found a cheerful *convive.* This evening he talked and laughed and talked like the rest. Some one remarked that he was deucedly improved since he had joined the Vasile Club.

At the earliest reasonable hour next day he knocked at Miss Jameson's door. The lady lived in the neighbourhood of the Regent's Park, in a suite of rooms which Annerly found to be a modest "flat," but comfortable and pleasantly furnished.

Miss Jameson was at home, and he found her alone when he was shown into her little drawing-room.

"You got a letter from Miriam, I suppose, Mr. Annerly?" she said, after a few nervous greetings.

"Yes. I have come to see you, Miss Jameson. I suppose she is not herself at home?"

"No, she is out—in fact she has gone into the country."

"The country! Has she gone far—or for long?"

"Well, no—I will tell you about that afterwards—if you wish to know."

"Miss Jameson, before you go further let me assure you that nothing you can say to me—*nothing*, whatever it may be—will make me cease to wish to know where Miss Seaford is, or cease to wish to go to her wherever she may be—if that is not contrary to her wish. I do not know definitely what it is you have to tell me; but it may help you to speak freely if I say at the outset that it *cannot* alter the abiding wish of my life—to have Miriam Seaford for my wife."

Miss Jameson gazed at him earnestly.

"She said that would be so; but I wasn't sure. And she would go away all the same. She's a strange girl, you know. Nothing will ever move her from whatever she chooses to do."

"She's all the world to me, Miss Jameson, as of course you know. I had acquiesced in the surrender of my hopes about her till the other day, and had no thought of proposing to restore the old engagement between us. I would never have importuned her, but now I am free again to tell her how eagerly I resume it. There are some preliminary explanations to pass between us, I understand. Shall we not get them over?"

"I'm sure I want to get them over," said Miss Jameson, piteously, "but it is so hard. Dear Miriam was very, very foolish, and of course she was very wrong."

The devoted aunt's lips quivered as she launched herself thus on her task. Then the handkerchief had to come into play, and for a little while longer the explanations were again postponed.

"Mr. Annerly, I'm sure you love Miriam truly. I haven't known you, but I've heard about you. But, indeed, I don't think you love her more than I do, and it nearly killed me when she made this terrible mistake. Oh, it's too hard to make me go over the story."

"But I do not want you to. Do understand, I want to hear as little of this dreadful episode as possible. I understand it, I believe, already quite sufficiently. I am not anxious to hear another syllable."

"Miriam insisted that I should tell you the plain truth, that there could be no possibility of misunderstanding afterwards. Of course we thought she actually had been married to the man privately, but she was misled about this. It is all over now, and her own father will not have anything to say to her. He's a very good man, but very unbending. He always hated her going on the stage."

"Wretch! Does he hope to be forgiven his own sins?"

"Ah well, it does not make much difference you know, because for a long time Miriam has been either independent, or has been with me. I haven't a great income, but I have enough to give my own Miriam a home; and you're better off yourself now than you were, Mr. Annerly, ain't you?"

The unselfishness of the inquiry was so perfect that it was cleared of every trace of offence. Annerly reassured Miss Jameson on this point, and asked when it was intended that he should see Miriam.

"You're to go down to her at Purfleet. There is a farm-house there, where the woman is an old nurse of hers; and she sometimes goes there when she wants quiet and country-air for a few days. But I haven't told you all you must know yet. There must be nothing left for her to tell. It is very terrible for all of us, Mr. Annerly, but we haven't got to the end of it yet. There may be divorce proceedings."

"How do you mean?"

"The horrid man was married before, it turns out, and his wife has found it out. It was about that matter that we were in Brussels, to try and prevent the affair being made public."

Vague impressions of a very painful nature began to cloud Annerly's mind.

"In Brussels." It suddenly crossed Annerly's recollection that he had heard the name Miriam Seaford pass between Lady Emily and Sir John Hexton in the railway-carriage on the journey to Cologne. "Who then is the man?" he asked. He had been conscious before of a wish to avoid knowing this, but the question forced itself from him now.

"We knew him by another name at first; but he is really called, it seems, Professor Massilton."

The name fell upon Annerly like a blow on the head with a sort of stunning effect. The tale told him had never seemed fully to penetrate his sensibilities till then. As a frightful episode of the past, now happily over, he could have driven it from his thoughts to a great extent. As a shadowy horror, not to be associated with names or places, it was swept away by the tornado of his passion. But now it was not only emphasized by having names assigned to it but suddenly illuminated with the most terrible precision by his own familiarity with all the persons concerned. He gave vent to an incoherent ejaculation.

"What is the matter?"

"I know him."

They both felt, without stopping to analyze the reason why, that the situation was somehow made a great deal worse in this way; and Miss Jameson began softly crying again, while Annerly sat motionless for a while gazing fixedly at the opposite wall.

"I ought not to have told you where she was till we had got over all this," said Miss Jameson.

Annerly, for an instant, failed to catch the point of her remark. Then he recovered himself and rose, as it were, from the shock of the revelation just made.

"Miss Jameson, I told you that nothing you could say would affect my feeling for her. The shock of what I have learned is distressing for various reasons; but I tell you again *nothing* can change my love for Miriam. It must always be a part of myself—whether a source of joy or of sorrow. I am glad to have had this revelation over before seeing Miriam; but now, when can I go to her?"

"Mr. Annerly, I *do* think you will be able to make her happy when this horrible business is over. I'll tell you how to find her." And then Miss Jameson gave him exact directions, the time of a train he would be able to catch that afternoon, and showed him, on a map, how he should go when he reached his destination. There was no immediate hurry, and he stayed talking with Miss Jameson for some time longer. There was a bond of union between them in the *culte* to which they were both devoted.

It was a lovely summer evening when he got out of the train, between six and seven, at Purfleet, and took a field-path after walking a little way along the road. The impression that had been created on his mind, at first, by the mention of the Professor's name had given way as he approached the place where he was to find his love waiting once more to restore herself to his arms, to the intoxication of that one idea. There might be trouble and anxiety arising out of all this dreadful business in the future, but what of that? If Miriam was to be his, that fact would be to his life as the sun to the world. There might be clouds, but still it would be day—while, if the sun were away, though the sky should be clear it would be night. And the dawn of this day, for him, would be the dawn of a polar summer—after so long a night that the blessed sunshine seemed a remote experience of another existence.

"Heavens! what I have gone through!" he thought. "Are the years of this long pain over, and the weeks, and the days? and now it is a question of minutes when life is to begin again."

A nervous anxiety possessed him. Would not some accident happen to the train to defeat his expectations?—would not some dreadful mistake turn out to have been made by her aunt in the directions she had given him? It would surely not happen that for him, with his long-established theory that his life was cursed, the cream and final glory of such long longed-for happiness was really waiting him among these lanes? He hurried on and came to the stile Miss Jameson had spoken of, after which the path led through a little coppice—a few light trees at the end of a field. He had crossed it and was amongst them, and then—there was a low seat in view in the shade of the trees, a little to the right; and in a plain, grey dress, with a glow of ruby ribbons and white lace at the neck, she was waiting for him. The black night had given way and the day was shining in full glory once again.

"Oh, Miriam! Miriam, my darling!"

He sat beside her, and put his arms round her, not with any sudden gesture, but as though her restoration to him were a solemn act that had to be accomplished reverently, and drew down her lustrous head upon his shoulder. She had taken off her hat, and the warm evening light shone upon the wavy masses of her shining hair, and on the beautiful brown-pink tints of her complexion. She resigned herself to his embrace with a willing smile, though with a shadow that was half sadness, half contrition, crossing its expression, and let him take at leisure the kisses he had been starving for so long.

"You see I expected you," she said. "Is not that trusting to your love, indeed, at last?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW OPENING.

A few days were spent very quietly at Heiligenfels after the partial break-up of the party on the departure of Lady Emily and the others who went away with her. But the Baron's suggestion to Mrs. Miller—that they would remain a very pleasant little party still, in spite of the defections—was amply vindicated. Mrs. Miller, for her own part, was more than compensated for the reduced gaiety of the house, by the opportunities she now enjoyed of becoming more intimately acquainted with Mrs. Lakesby. Blane and the Professor were steadily occupied with certain literary work they had taken in hand in connection with the psychic experiences they had recently acquired; and for all of them the awe that had at first overwhelmed them in the wood, when the great manifestation had been made of the Baron's abnormal powers, had given place to a sense of exhilaration at being in close and friendly relations with so extraordinary a person. There was more in the Baron's visible attributes to evoke affection on the part of people round him, than to excite mere wonder. Merland was the only member of the party who was not quite in his usual spirits; but his temperament was elastic, and the influences of the castle were of a kind to emphasize very strongly his interest in occult matters, which had roots of its own in his nature quite independent of his recent exaltation of feeling in regard to Miss Vaughan. The contracted group, moreover, was knit together more closely than the larger gathering had been previously, and they dropped at once into the habit of assembling in full force at breakfast, as well as at dinner, finding no *ennui* or sameness attaching to conversations constantly brightened by the fragmentary explanations the Baron would now frequently venture upon concerning the mysteries of the sciences or pursuits to which his life had been devoted.

And in a different way it was scarcely less interesting for them to obtain from Mrs. Lakesby the daily assurance, which her faculties enabled her to supply, that, on a different plane of Nature so to speak, they were constantly in presence, without having been previously aware of this, of beings in a different state of existence from themselves. It was in the direction of observations having to do with that other plane of existence that Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyance was most frequently exercised.

"There's no interest," she pointed out to the Professor, "in poking about among other people's rooms and houses in your astral body; and it's not always a nice thing to do. It's taking a mean advantage of them. But my friends on the other side of the hedge are always glad for me to go to them, and I am glad for them to come to me."

"Too glad," said the Baron, "sometimes, Mrs. Lakesby, perhaps."

"Now, don't be too strict with me, Baron."

"I am only anxious that you should not be too cruel to yourself."

"Now, you two superior people," said the Professor, "are talking in enigmas. If we got this all unravelled, humbler mortals might learn something."

They were talking one evening after dinner, the pleasant effect on the air of the warm summer day just past, enabling them to sit out on the terrace, where the light incense of their cigars and cigarettes floated away towards the river.

"The question," answered the Baron, "about which Mrs. Lakesby and I are not quite in accord—"

"Poor Mrs. Lakesby!" said that lady, interrupting. "I object to have the case stated in so crushing a way as that."

"I'm no Pope, that people must be wrong if they disagree with me; and it is quite as likely our friends will agree with you as with me if they realize the problem—though, of course, I think I am right."

"I'm sure," Mrs. Miller put in, "that Mrs. Lakesby would not deny that, only she wants to see the folly of it for herself, like young girls first going out into society."

"Dear ladies," pleaded the Professor, "if we could deal with this matter one at a time would it not be better? Suppose the Baron has the first innings."

Mrs. Lakesby assumed her demurest good-school-girl air, and Mrs. Miller only satirized the Professor by turning to Jem, who had not opened his lips for some time except to emit cigarette smoke, and told him not to speak again till he was spoken to.

"The difficulty," said the Baron, "has to do with understanding rightly what is the nature of the entities Mrs. Lakesby perceives by the help of her beautiful clairvoyant sight. There is nothing in nature more delusive than the phenomena of that border-land of spiritual life that we get into when we first cross the frontier of physical phenomena. We may seem there to encounter living beings whom we may be apt to mistake for spirits of a more or less angelic order, when they are really no more than shades of former human beings, whose nobler aspect, so to speak, is turned away from us, and imperceptible even to the higher clairvoyant sense, which perceives what may be called their astral aspect."

Mrs. Lakesby broke into a little laugh.

"I beg your pardon, Baron," she said, "I was not laughing at what you said, but at something said by an 'astral shade, there standing near the Professor."

By this time they had all grown to be familiar with the fact that Mrs. Lakesby constantly perceived *dramatis personæ* on the scene who were not apparent to ordinary spectators, and were not startled when she announced this or that spectral presence, and the ideas or remarks it would convey to her.

"What did he say?" asked Blane.

"It isn't a he. It is a she; a nice-looking old lady, with silvery hair coming long down each side of her face, and rather a large nose. What?—listening for a moment to some inaudible statement by the invisible visitor. Oh! she says her boy Arthur ought to know who she is."

"Why, that is a description of my mother," said the Professor.

"That's who she is. And she made me laugh by saying what the Baron said just now was stuff o' nonsense."

"When did she die?" Mrs. Miller asked of the Professor.

"Wait a moment," said Mrs. Lakesby; "she'll tell us herself. Eh?—" Again after a little pause she broke out laughing. "She is an old lady with a character, it seems. She says—'Tell her she's a good deal more dead herself than I am.' And then—what? eh? She says she left our stupid earth-life when Margaret's last child was born. Who's Margaret?"

"A married sister of mine," said the Professor. "That is quite right. It's about ten years since my mother died."

"Would you ask her," suggested the Baron, "to tell us something about the occupations of her present existence."

"She does not seem to hear you," said Mrs. Lakesby. "Am I to ask her that?"

"Yes."

After a short pause, during which Mrs. Lakesby did not speak aloud, she said—

"She says that she's very happy; but she cannot stop to talk any longer now. Some other time she'll come and tell us more. Now she must be going. She says there's somebody here makes her uncomfortable."

"Perhaps that may be myself," said the Baron. "Let me leave you for a few minutes. Since you are having this conversation it will be as well for you to follow it out a little further."

The Baron went in through the open glass-door into the dining-hall, and crossed to the library at the other end, into which room he passed and shut the door.

"Will you ask her," said the Professor, "if she has any special communication to make to me, that she has come here to-night?"

"She seems puzzled rather. No; she says she has nothing special to say. She is often about you without your knowing it. She was always proud of you, she says—you were her favourite child. Eh?—what?—Yes; she says there is something she wants to say. The only truth about the spirit-life is to be found in occult study. That's funny. It does not quite square with what she said just now, when she called the Baron's remarks 'stuff o' nonsense.'"

"It's all a great mystery," she says; "but we shall all find it out some day, when we join her world. She's going now. I don't see her any more."

Almost immediately afterwards they heard the library-door open. The Baron crossed the dining-hall, carrying a piece of paper in his hand. A few words were written on it—the ink still wet. He handed it to the Professor.

"Was not that what she said while I was away?"

The paper bore the words that Mrs. Lakesby had just repeated: "The only truth about the spirit-life is to be found in occult study." It was handed round and looked at with much interest.

"Why, how on earth," asked Mrs. Miller, "did you know what she said?"

"I merely knew what she would say because I took the liberty of suggesting the words to her—from where I sat in the other room, I mean. The distance was not very great for a thought to traverse. The incident illustrates what we were talking about a little while ago—the deceptiveness of appearances on what occult writers generally call the astral plane—the border-land of the spiritual world immediately in contact with the physical world. At one moment you see an inhabitant announcing, in very definite language, that a certain set of ideas is all nonsense, and the next that they are the only truth. What are we to make of that?"

"I don't know," said the Professor; "it is very puzzling."

"I think it harmonizes with what we may find out in other ways about the processes of human evolution which go on after the death of the physical body. The true growth of the real Ego is into a plane of consciousness superior to that which Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyant sight penetrates; and in exact proportion to the extent that growth has proceeded, the faculties and thinking power of the entity on the astral plane are weakened till at last they fade out altogether. That which Mrs. Lakesby just now saw was, in a certain sense, the soul of your mother most likely; but it was the soul minus all its higher faculties—or, more correctly, an astral body but half illuminated by the soul which is gradually passing away from it into a higher state of existence. The faculties which still animate it are not conscious of the loss of their nobler companions: but meanwhile, to any one who really appreciates the position, there is something very distressing in the notion of dealing with an entity in that condition, as if it were a true soul—of treating it with the tenderness due to the real Ego of a departed friend."

"It's very interesting all the same," urged the Professor.

"That's right, Professor," said Mrs Lakesby; "put in a word for poor little me."

"It cannot keep up its interest for very long, it seems to me, when we fully realize what it is we are talking with. But, apart from that, you must remember that when I have humbly ventured to suggest to Mrs. Lakesby that she should indulge but sparingly in conversation with astral spectres, I go upon other grounds. In doing that, Mrs. Lakesby, to begin with, may retard the spiritual progress of the real Ego by dragging back his attention to the earthly existence he has quitted, and she may lay herself open to influences from the astral world that may prey upon her unexpectedly."

"It's a golden rule, my dear," said Mrs. Lakesby, in a stage-aside, to Mrs. Miller, "when you're being scolded never defend yourself. It only brings on fresh trouble."

The Professor intervened with the fatherly manner in which he sometimes wrapped up his compliments to ladies.

"Mrs. Lakesby will never grow up. She'll remain a child to the end of the chapter, but so sweet a child that nobody will complain."

"I haven't the least doubt," Blane interposed, "that the Baron speaks from knowledge, and the principle he lays down must be sound. But I would like to ask one thing—I don't ask it in any ribald spirit of mockery, but sincerely for information. If a person with clairvoyant gifts is debasing them, as we have sometimes agreed, by employing them in what Mrs. Lakesby calls poking about other people's rooms and houses,—and if she is running risks herself, and perhaps doing wrong in employing them on the phenomena of the astral world,—what is she to do with them?"

Some of them laughed at the apparent dilemma, as the Baron did himself, but Mrs. Lakesby affected dismay.

"Oh, save me from my friends! You meant well, Mr. Blane, but now I'm going to catch it you see!"

The Baron shook his head. "She'd be a very difficult person to find fault with—Mrs. Lakesby would be—for everybody's sympathies would be with her, whatever the case might be. But, happily, I am not called upon to attempt anything so presumptuous. I would merely explain that there is a third course, though no one can be blamed for not taking it if they do not feel strongly moved to do so. There is the service of the great cause and of the great work I humbly represent in your eyes, to which any persons abnormally gifted with psychic faculties from birth, may, with peculiar propriety, devote themselves. The rewards of that service are seldom to be gathered in this life, but they are great nevertheless. On the other hand, the service itself is apt to be very arduous and unattractive in the beginning, and, even for a long while, to grow more and more arduous as time goes on."

"What is the difference, may I inquire, sir?" Merland asked, "between the career open to a person with psychic gifts, in connection with the occult life, and that which may lie before one who has no gifts, merely ardour and devotion to the cause?"

There was no room to doubt the personal bearing of Merland's question. His inclination to enter himself, so far as that could be done, as a candidate for occult instruction had been augmenting rather than declining during the last few days. While love for Miss Vaughan gilded the prospect the avenues of occult study seemed as enticing as they were ennobling. Now, indeed, the situation was changed. No sun would shine on the young man's path in whatever direction he might seek it, but if the catastrophe in the conservatory had destroyed his hope of happiness in ordinary life, at least it left him sadly free to plunge into the only refuge he could see open before him. And the darkly romantic aspect of the occult life as it sometimes presented itself to his imagination, made it an appropriate destiny for a man who felt that he had staked more than is generally risked on a declaration of love. Perhaps other young men have sometimes viewed their declarations in that light also. Anyhow Merland measured the severity of his fall by the merits of Lucy Vaughan, and these were naturally exalted in his eyes to a very high degree.

Nothing had been heard at the castle from Miss Vaughan or her mother since they left it. A faint hope had lingered in Merland's mind for a little while, that perhaps the post would bring him a communication on the subject of the question that had remained unanswered. If only she would write to explain in a sympathetic way that the thing could not be, that would be something. But no. His proposal had been a piece of impertinent extravagance, and had been treated as such very properly. No one at the castle had any exact knowledge on the subject, and Merland was shy about asking questions that would have been too suggestive; but Mrs. Miller had let fall the remark once, in speaking of Miss Vaughan, that some one had said she was going to marry Lord Millborough.

"If I had known it sooner," Merland thought to himself, "I might not have made such a fool of myself; but thrown with her as I was, I should not have loved her the less, so it would have been the same in the long run."

When he asked the question set down above, as to how far a person without psychic gifts to start with could get on in the occult life, the Baron looked at him with a kindly expression for a few seconds without speaking, and then said,—

"One should never persuade a neophyte to enter on the path. One must not make the career seem pleasant or easy; but it is a stout and pure heart only that is wanted for success, not psychic gifts at first. They may not so much help their possessor as render him or her more useful to others. And the privilege of being useful is a grand one, quite apart from reward. Then you must remember that ordinary thinking has not yet been sufficiently penetrated with the idea about successive incarnations to let people get on the right train of thought in such matters. You cannot estimate your position in reference to the occult life aright unless you know something of your previous incarnations."

"But, good heavens!" cried the Professor, jumping at this hint, "do I understand you that we can anyhow get at information about our previous incarnations? Why, it would be of all other information that could be obtained, the most pricelessly interesting"

"Why so?" said the Baron, gravely—almost reproachfully. "Except for the purpose I referred to, I am not sure if knowledge about one's previous incarnations could have any other effect than that of feeding personal vanity, and so doing one the worst possible service. It is to escape from interest in self that the student of occult mysteries should, above all things, address himself."

"Well, but really, that morality is of a very high—almost an impracticably high—order. We are human creatures, and the constant shiver of doubt about the future that so many of us have, is just because we cannot remember the past. Now if we could be enabled to do that—"

"I, for one," said Blane, "should not want to exercise the privilege. I quite see the force of the Baron's remarks, except that I would go further and say, that the escape from self would be the most delightful emancipation that could be imagined. To forget my present life, I think, would be more tempting than to remember previous ones."

A good deal of animated controversy in which the Baron took but a trifling part arose over this point. At last Merland tried to bring the conversation back to the point from which it had suddenly diverged.

"You will remember, Baron, it was a question of mine that set them all on this subject. Now, if knowing something about my past would help me to find out, or you to tell me, what my own chances would be as an occult student—is there any way of finding out about it?"

"Well," said the Baron, all voices being stilled at once as his tone and manner seemed encouraging, "there might be ways of getting at some inklings about it; and that answer may, perhaps, meet another point that Mr. Blane raised a little while ago, as to what might be done with clairvoyance directed neither to physical objects at a distance, nor to the delusive appearances of the astral plane. Perhaps Mrs. Lakesby might be able to discern some pictures in the astral light for us that would prove interesting in regard to this matter of past incarnations that some of us have had something to do with."

"We are constantly happening on new surprises," the Professor said. "It appears, Mrs. Lakesby, that there is a whole realm of nature open to your observation, that as yet you have told us nothing about."

Mrs. Lakesby covered her face with her hands in mock despair. "Poor, poor, Mrs. Lakesby!" she said, commiserating her own fate, "pile all the blame on her first, of course, but kindly explain for her future guidance what on earth you are talking about."

"Will somebody," said the Professor, administer nourishment to her through a quill, and restore her strength? My dear child, we are to blame for forgetting that there was a mystery we had not asked you to solve. We are all gratitude for past favours and equally so for those to come. But this being premised, tell us the state of the case. Can you by the exercise of clairvoyance perceive the circumstances of people's former lives?"

"No, of course not!" cried the lady.

The Baron sat by with an amused smile. The Professor looked with perplexity at Blane.

"But, my dear Agatha," said Mrs. Miller—for in the intimacy that was growing up between them a use of Christian names was creeping in—"the Baron has distinctly referred us to you for information, so you must rub your eyes and look again."

"Why don't you ask the Baron what he means; I can't tell you, for I haven't the least idea myself."

"May we recur to you, then?" asked the Professor of their host.

"Even if Mrs. Lakesby," he answered, "is not fully conscious of all the uses to which her faculties can be applied, that need hardly surprise any of us. But I did not intend to convey the notion that any clairvoyant search into the past would enable her to give any person, now living, a complete and connected narrative of his past lives. A very exalted kind of insight would be required to achieve that result. But I think I could suggest to her ways and means of obtaining, at any rate, some glimpses of the past that would be sufficient to interest you very much if you are content in the matter to seek, in this inquiry, some comprehension of the Karmic principle in operation, rather than the gratification of a mere personal curiosity."

"I am sure," Blane murmured, "I have no personal curiosity about myself—a most uninteresting topic."

"I have a great deal of personal curiosity," said the Professor, cheerily and frankly, "but I am quite ready to put that altogether aside. All fresh knowledge is delightful, and I should certainly be the last person to be indifferent to an opportunity for studying Karma merely because it was not an opportunity for studying something else. Chalk out our line of inquiry, dear Baron Friedrich, and trust to us to follow it the best way we know how."

"It is only, it seems to me," replied the Baron, "for the sake of discerning the way in which Karma operates that such an effort as that I have suggested appears desirable, or even justifiable. You see, the law of Karma is almost the leading law of human evolution—if one can be allowed to give precedence to one over another of the beautiful harmonies of nature. Every man is perpetually working out old Karma, and developing fresh. This is merely a technical way of saying that every man is the product of the influences, aspirations, thoughts, efforts, and so on, that have moulded his character in the past, and is, in turn—by the direction in which he allows his energies to operate—moulding that which will be his own character in the future. But, while the principle stated in that way seems to be little more than a commonplace, it rises into wholly different importance when we resolutely apply it to the whole series of human lives which constitute an individuality—a true human Ego—apart from the transitory circumstances of particular years.

"People often say nobody can alter their character very much; what he is born with he must make the best of, and his moral responsibility greatly varies accordingly—and so forth. They forget—or rather their speculation is not brightened by the illuminating truth to which occult science introduces us—that every one has an immensely long succession of opportunities for modifying his character; and that the point at which he leaves off in the one life, is the point at which he takes up those opportunities in the next. A great interval of time, as we measure time here, may have elapsed between the end of the one life and the beginning of the next; but that does not in the least degree interfere with the unity of the life process. That interval is very far indeed from being a blank period. It is filled with a life of its own, far more vivid, and for the most part, happily, more enjoyable, in an exalted sense, than the physical periods of life. But for our present purpose we need not pay attention to that, except to recognize that it explains what would otherwise be a mystery—the obliteration from the mind before each fresh life begins, of all precise recollection concerning the outward circumstances of the last physical life. The spiritual existence which intervenes between each physical life has the effect of summing up the whole body of experiences—effort, aspiration, and so on—of the one life into so much formed character with which the Ego starts on his next."

"But, Baron Friedrich," said Mrs. Miller, "I thought your Karma was your reward or punishment in the next life for what you did—good or bad—in this?"

"And so it is; not a reward or punishment that can possibly be wrongly adjusted by reason of being served out as such. It is a perfectly inevitable series of consequences. Your Karma determines the state of life into which you will be born, as well as your character."

"Then," suggested Blane, "I should be inclined to fear that your Karma goes very far towards determining what your Karma itself will be at the end of each life; for, given a character and a set of circumstances, and I suppose, to an omniscient eye, the result would be inevitable?"

"To an omniscient eye, yes. I suppose one would have to recognize that; but then I doubt if the discussion we are now carrying on is on what may be called the plane of omniscience. We should not help ourselves much by going off here into a survey of the old conflict between free-will and necessity. We have a very distinct consciousness of free-will in the choice between good and evil at every step through life; and we need not confuse our sense of that freedom by going into the highest metaphysics of the problem."

"But the problem has a practical bearing," said the Professor, "as well as a metaphysical aspect. It often strikes me that the limits of our power to choose between different courses in life are very narrow, apart altogether from the metaphysical argument. There you are, with your character, whatever it may be, inherited from your parents, or got at somehow, established as a very commanding impulse in your nature. And the circumstances in which you are placed, are there also with no choice of yours. How can a man help following the bent of his nature? If he is of a scrupulous, cautious habit of mind, that is his nature; and in splitting hairs as he goes along he is but following its bent. On the other hand, if he is a very warm-blooded impulsive sort of animal, with strong feelings, there you are again. He never remembers to think at the critical moments, but acts first and thinks afterwards, and that is *his* bent."

"That, my dear Professor, if you will allow me," said the Baron, "is his Karma. Of course, it is a very difficult thing to escape from its influence—in one sense impossible, but Karma is a growing force, and our free-will does enable us to modify its growth; and your bent, depend upon it, in the next life, will be either still more defined in its present direction, or inclining in a different direction according to whether in this you yield to it without resistance or press against its influence."

"But, Baron Friedrich," said Mrs. Miller, "how are you to get rewarded or punished merely by developing a bent? Your bent might be worse than ever; but if you had been ill and poor and badly used in the last life, and were well and comfortable, and made much of next time, you would have got a reward."

"Well," answered the Baron, "let us work this out a little. What do you call the fate that determines whether you are born rich or poor, healthy or ill, clever or stupid, and so on?"

"How do you mean? I suppose that is all the accident of birth?"

"But suppose the accident of birth is no accident at all, but just an inevitable result of causes, attractions, affinities, set up by an Ego, during his last life, which impel him, when he is ripe for rebirth, to that incarnation which is best fitted to give them physical expression. What do you call the accident of birth looked at from the point of view of that hypothesis?"

"Ah!" murmured Blane, "Karma: I see the principle. It covers everything."

"Pretty nearly," said the Baron. "Fully appreciated it would no doubt be found to cover a great many of the most painful riddles of the earth, and the whole vast series of inequalities in well-being that sometimes puzzle us."

"I tell you what," said the Professor after a little pause; "there are aspects of that doctrine in which it does not strike me as very moral in its bearing. It would be apt to make people rather pitiless towards suffering. They would tell a beggar to be off, and be ashamed of himself for having had such an infamous Karma in his last life."

"Do you think that would be the effect," asked the Baron, significantly, "if such people realized that being rough and pitiless to suffering might be one of the elements in Karma which would bring such suffering on themselves next time?"

The objection and the answer both in turn seemed so forcible that they all laughed.

"The Baron had you there, Professor," said Mrs. Miller. "You'll be afraid to let a beggar pass within sight in future without rushing after him to give him sixpence."

"Dear lady," retorted the Professor, "your otherwise perfect sex will rarely keep to abstractions. My Karma is altogether too bad to be worth mending or thinking about; so never mind that."

"There is a striking inference to be drawn from this, is there not?" suggested Blane; "that the act of relieving suffering contracts the domain of suffering both here and hereafter, both as regards the recipient of relief and the agent in conferring relief; while cruelty and callousness to suffering augments it in both directions."

"Just so," said the Baron; "and we need only supplement that reflection, I think, in one way. We must not think of the rewards of good Karma as concentrated too much on material things. The opportunities of spiritual development, which a poor and even a sorrowful man may enjoy in any given life, may benefit him in the long-run so greatly as to have outweighed the evil of transitory sorrows; and a good Karma may thus sometimes have produced a life the mere outward troubles of which we should sometimes be apt, if we were hasty, to set down to bad Karma. *Vice versâ*, also, the bad Karma may temporarily disguise its effect in physical prosperity that may bring great suffering in its train in the long run, by furnishing the possessor with so many more opportunities of emphasizing what the Professor might call an evil bent."

"It would be an intricate problem then," suggested the Professor, "but still a possible problem, to work back from the circumstances of a man's life, *plus* his character, and determine what must have been the nature of his last incarnation."

"A supremely intricate problem, certainly, for any one who could not enjoy such help as Mrs. Lakesby, perhaps, might give."

"Oh, good gracious!" ejaculated the lady named, who had been following the conversation with the closest interest, but started in apprehension at being thus suddenly brought back into its focus.

"This promises to be most interesting, I see now," cried the Professor. "Mrs. Lakesby's clairvoyance in some way may be directed to check the conclusions we form as we proceed with the examination of any Karma we take up for analysis."

"Now then," said Mrs. Miller, "who offers himself for vivisection? I offer Jem."

"Jem is likely to have pressing business in Schlessig," said Captain Miller; "besides, there's nothing to analyze in Jem. He hasn't got any Karma yet. A very much more interesting subject, I'm sure, would be found in the Professor."

"*Place aux dames*," said the Professor. "Perhaps Mrs. Lakesby would tell us something about her own past lives, and then we might find out what sort of Karma produces psychic gifts."

Mrs. Lakesby gave a little shriek at the proposal.

"Cut up myself for your edification. Thank you kindly for the idea, but, if I am to wield the knife, though I do not at present know in the least how that is to be done, I don't think it will be employed upon myself. I don't know much about the matter yet, but I know that much."

"This is false modesty, dear lady," said the Professor, "I assure you. I have no objection to be investigated myself—nor I am sure would Blane have, as far as he is concerned."

"I don't think," the Baron interrupted, "that we need carry on the discussion on these lines, because I don't think we should begin by trying to lay bare the characteristics of any one among us. Would it not be better, suppose we can manage this, to get from Mrs. Lakesby certain glimpses of past scenes in which some of us or of our friends not actually here at this moment may have played a part, and then endeavour to interpret these, to trace, as far as we can, the natural progress of persons with such and such characteristics, and then to see whether we can discern the old Karma working afresh in modern conditions?"

Every one present was of course more than ready to follow a programme distinctly suggested by the Baron, and the comments on this proposal were merely directed to the clear comprehension of the line to be followed. It was arranged that Mrs. Lakesby should recline at ease on a small sofa that was brought out on to the terrace from the drawing-room; and, though the evening was not at all cold, the Baron expressed a wish that a warm shawl should be thrown over her.

"I'm going like a lamb to the sacrifice; but I haven't a notion," said Mrs. Lakesby, while she was being carefully tended on all sides, and caressed by Mrs. Miller, "what I'm expected to do. I don't believe I shall see anything at all. I never was so dull before. Since the Professor's mother went away I haven't seen a creature."

"The calm way she ignores us is charming," remarked the Professor. "Plain mortals in the flesh don't count."

"If you do see anything," said the Baron, "you can tell them. For myself I want to go away if you will allow me when I have once set you to work."

This announcement took every one by surprise, but no objection was raised, as every one felt instinctively that the Baron's withdrawal would in some mysterious way be associated with whatever it might be that was going to happen.

"When Mrs. Lakesby begins to see," the Baron went on, "she may become very much absorbed in the interest of her visions, and I think it will be better then that only one person among you should address her questions relating to these. I daresay you will all agree to let the Professor do this, but there is no reason why you should not quietly suggest questions to him."

A few words of acquiescence were uttered in reply by Blane and Mrs. Miller, and the Baron said good-night in case he might not see them again that evening, and went away.

CHAPTER XXII.

PICTURES IN THE ASTRAL LIGHT.

A HUSH of expectancy settled over the whole party, and for a little while nothing was said. The Professor had taken a low chair beside Mrs. Lakesby's sofa—the others had all resumed or replaced their seats after the general movement incidental to the Baron's departure; and the darkness of the night—now that a shaded lamp which had been standing on the terrace-table had been taken into the drawing-room—gave a touch of solemnity to the preparations. It was not very dark, as a crescent moon was shining in the sky, though concealed from the terrace by the main body of the castle, and the stars were bright. Enough light to make the terrace itself and all the persons upon it plainly visible came from the windows of the drawing-room; but the broad expanse of the heavens before

Mrs. Lakesby, as she lay with her face looking outward over the river, and her back to the house, seemed a kind of proscenium before which they were all seated.

"Will she see her visions in the sky, do you suppose?" Mrs. Miller whispered to Blane, who was sitting next to her.

"She isn't in quarantine yet," said the clairvoyant herself, in her natural voice, "at all events. If anything begins to happen I'll let you know; but I'm sure I need not be sent to Coventry while I'm feeling just my ordinary self as I do now."

"Still," said the Professor, "it may be that you had better compose yourself, and be quiet for the present."

Scattered fragments of conversation of this kind went on for some little while, Mrs. Lakesby protesting from time to time against the notion of being expected to do something without knowing what she was to do, and the Professor pacifying her by soothing words, of which she was rather disposed to make fun.

"Miss Blane," she said, after one little pause, after letting her head fall back on the sofa-cushion, and speaking in a low, broken kind of voice. "Couldn't you—would you perhaps sing something?"

"Sing?" repeated Miss Blane dubiously, wondering whether music for some mysterious reason was required by Mrs. Lakesby to promote her expected ecstasy. "Sing?" to Mrs. Miller. "What does she want me to sing, I wonder?"

"I think," murmured Mrs. Lakesby from the sofa, "I should feel better," with a deep sigh, "if you gave us—'Champagne Charlie!'"—starting up at the last words with a merry laugh.

"Oh! child, child!" remonstrated the Professor, "will you never be serious? For a moment you took us in completely. We give you all honour and glory for the victory, but—"

"Hush!" interrupted Mrs. Lakesby, in quite another tone, but still sitting up on her sofa, and looking eagerly forward. "Look there; why surely you must all see that."

She pointed out over the balustrade of the terrace, towards the top of a tree, which, standing as it did on much lower ground than the castle—the hall falling away steeply on that side—was about on a level with the pavement on which they sat. A silvery column of vapour, and yet something which as they watched seemed instinct with a movement of its own, and to grow more into the likeness of a human form, floated over, or just rested as a cloud-wreath may rest on a hill, on the topmost twigs of the tree. All present were equally able to see it; the distance at which the ethereal figure stood was about twenty or thirty yards. Presently it leaned forward, and floating across the short intervening space settled, swaying very slightly from side to side as though stirred by a faint breeze, upon the furthest end of the balustrade of the terrace itself. As the party happened to be grouped Mrs. Lakesby was thus between the figure and the group, for they were collected at the left end of the terrace, looking outward, and the figure appeared at the extreme right end. That it was distinctly human in shape and gesture was all that they could recognize. The form was too misty and spectral to exhibit features that could be plainly identified; but Mrs. Lakesby gazed intently without speaking, and then slowly lay back on her cushions. The figure advanced slowly towards the group along the edge of the balustrade, but grew fainter and fainter as it approached, and vanished from view altogether when about at right angles to the position occupied by Mrs. Lakesby.

"Yes, I'll come," she said, rolling her head a little from side to side on the sofa-cushions as though seeking the most comfortable position. She spoke in a calm, measured voice, slowly at first, but more firmly and easily as she went on. "Are we going a long way? Oh, that we are, I can tell you. Why, this is another country; it's a warm country this is, isn't it? I haven't been here before, have I? What a lot of ruins there are about." After a little pause, "Oh, I say, what a curious effect that is—I like to see that. Why should I say what I see? You can see it too. Very well; I will if you like. What looked like ruins awhile ago seem finished buildings now. This is the street of a town, and there seem to be a quantity of people all about—so queerly dressed; some few in long white robes all folded about them and some in short tunics with bare legs. There goes a man carried in a chair by several others, and men walk in front with some thick-shaped weapon carried leaning against their shoulders. Where does he go?—the man in the chair you mean? He's been put down at a house-door. There are a lot of attendants about. It's misty to me for a moment. Oh, now I can see inside the house where he was put down, a great big wandering place with a lot of rooms, all on one floor. I see such a lot of pillars; oh, and there's the man who was in the chair, with several others. They are all lolling on sofas round a table. Why, they are eating and drinking. Goodness, what a quantity of food—dishes and dishes of it coming in, and quantities of attendants. What lazy wretches to be lying down eating like that, with their great bare feet stretched out on the sofas behind them. What's that you say? How are the sofas arranged? Why there are three of them round three sides of the table, and the fourth side is towards the door, where the dishes keep coming in."

"Good Heavens!" said the Professor softly, as Mrs. Lakesby paused in her description. "Why, she's describing a Roman banquet."

"They keep on drinking, drinking," resumed the clairvoyant. "Why, it's perfectly shocking. What? If they want to ask me questions, I suppose they can."

"Doesn't that refer to us," Blane whispered to the Professor, "about asking questions?"

"Perhaps it does." He paused for a moment, and then in a low tone said, "How many guests are there?"

"Eh! How many on the sofas? Seven or eight only, and dinner enough for a hundred. What gluttonous creatures! But that's a fine young fellow sitting up in his place now, and holding up a glass, or if it isn't a glass, something he's drinking out of. How funny! I seem to see them drinking and waving their cups, but I don't hear anything."

"What is the young man like that you noticed?" asked the Professor.

"He's got short, curly, black hair, and a swarthy complexion, but he's very handsome. I've got a notion that he knows it too. How happy he seems, and contented, and all the others seem fond of him."

"Is that the man you saw come in the chair?"

"No; the man who was in the chair is sitting there at the corner, at least lolling on his elbow on cushions like the rest. He's reading something now that somebody has brought him. How reverential the attendants seem. What? They are slaves, are they? I thought slaves were black. These people are not black."

"What is the man at the corner like?"

"He's much older. He looks rather grim. He isn't so nice as that young fellow. But he gives people orders when they come to him. Everybody seems to know what he's got to do when the man at the corner speaks to him. There's the young fellow calling for more wine. It's really too bad. Why, what are they doing now? How stupid! Great men like them, they are putting wreaths of flowers on their heads. Slaves have just brought these in."

"What is the name of the young man?" asked the Professor.

"I don't know. *He* could tell you, I suppose, if he liked."

"Who do you mean by 'he'?"

"The one who is with me. I couldn't have come here if he hadn't brought me. They're walking about now, some of them. There's my handsome young fellow. How tall he is, and what a sunny, commanding look in his face! Flaccus? What, is that his name? Yes, that's Flaccus, I suppose. And the other, the one at the corner, what's his name? Septimus, Septimus—what? Septimus Manlius? I don't care about their names, but I should like to know more about that young fellow—he interests me."

"Can you ask your companion to tell you more about him?"

"This is not his house," said the clairvoyant slowly, after a little pause. "He's a guest here. Why, what is there happening? I can't see them plainly. Everything seems in a muddle. Oh, that's it, is it?—Very well!"

She was silent for a few moments, and the Professor asked,—

"Can you tell us what has been happening?"

"*He* is taking me to see the young man at home. We are travelling some little distance. But I don't see anything plainly yet. Oh, this is the country, but I'm not to mind about that. There he is again. This hasn't anything to do with the dinner I saw. It's either a long time after it or a long time before it. That doesn't matter, it's the same young man; Flaccus, yes, that's his name. He's in a garden, and there's a woman with him. She's a handsome woman, too, and oh, isn't she fond of him! How she hangs about his neck! she must be his wife, I suppose, if this is his house. He seems fond of her too. He kisses her and looks happy. But she seems to want him to do something that he won't. Oh, I see! He's going away somewhere, and she wants him to stay. He's saying good-bye. He lifts her right up—how strong he is!—and carries her over there to a seat under that tree, and just gives her a kiss, while she is in his arms, as if she were a baby, and puts her down, and now he's off. And there she is, crying so, poor thing, as if her heart would break. Oh, I say! He must be hard-hearted for all that he is so handsome and pleasant."

"Where has he gone," asked the Professor presently, as Mrs. Lakesby remained silent, though still with her eyes shut, and plunged more deeply than ever in the ecstatic trance, the reflection of which shone as it were in the eager look of her face.

"I don't know. That picture is passed. *He* says I shall see him again, somewhere else, directly."

Another pause ensued, during which the group round Mrs. Lakesby's sofa remained watchful and spell-bound. The freedom and spontaneity with which the clairvoyant had thrown off her descriptions of the scenes she witnessed had given them a truthful reality for her audience that made the situation impressive for them in the highest degree. The course of their recent experience at Heiligenfels would have broken down, and swept away distrust or suspicion of a psychological mystery even in witnesses less well-prepared for such phenomena than the party now assembled. As things stood, and practically guaranteed as Mrs. Lakesby's vision was by the previous sanction of the Baron, whose stupendous power on the physical plane of occult science, which they had all seen displayed, had established an almost boundless faith in him generally in all their minds,—no one present had any shadow of distrust of the communications made to them. It was with a thrill of awe, rather than incredulity, that they realized the nature of the current of perception on which she was launched. That her vision was actually recalling scenes enacted in ancient Rome, and bringing back the visible presence of actors who had played a part in them, perhaps nearly two thousand years before, was a conviction, tremendous and astounding though it might be, which was forced upon them irresistibly. They all sat silent and almost motionless, waiting for the next revelation—leaning forward and gazing intently in the dim light at Mrs. Lakesby's upturned face; while the great expanse of the sky, faintly luminous with the slight moonlight and glittering with the un-changing stars, seemed an emblem of immobility in the midst of change,—of the persistence in nature which the undying pictures in the astral light that the clairvoyant was being enabled to perceive, illustrated in another way.

"It's cool and grand and quiet here—it's a sort of library," said Mrs. Lakesby. "Oh, there he is again, our friend Flaccus! He's sitting beside an old man, listening to him so intently. I like him better so than any other way I've seen him. I wonder who the old man is. Flam—what? I don't understand. But I like him. That's a beautiful face he has; so grave and serene and good. He puts his hand on Flaccus's head and Flaccus almost kneels down before him. He seems quite to love the young man; and you would never think, to look at him now, that he is the same we saw drinking at the dinner. And yet he shakes his head sadly, and Flaccus seems sorry, very sorry. I wonder what's the matter. He's a great friend of the old man's, is he? Yes, I can see that for myself. Flam, flamen de —— I don't understand."

"Is he the Flamen Dialis?" suggested the Professor.

"That's it; yes, Flamen Dialis," repeated Mrs. Lakesby, the physical organs of articulation catching more readily an unfamiliar word pronounced on the physical plane than on the other, where her higher faculties were moving. "Oh, I see!" she added, after a short pause, "that explains it."

There was something rather tantalizing for the modern audience listening to Mrs. Lakesby's physical voice, in the nature of the conversation she was carrying on. Almost continuously, as she was speaking, her words were all addressed to her invisible companion. Of the castle party for whose benefit, really, she was making her astral excursion—she seemed unconscious, except that the questions asked of the Professor at once penetrated her higher faculties as ideas which evoked a response. The nature of the arrangement had now made itself apparent to her audience; and her last words showed that she had received from her astral companion some explanation of why the Flamen and Flaccus were friends, which satisfied her but remained unreported to them.

"Won't you say what you have heard about the friendship of these two men?" asked the Professor.

"*He* says the Flamen is related to Flaccus, and that Flaccus is almost his pupil in occultism. The Flamen knows a great deal of occult science—is very far advanced indeed—and is doing all he rightly can to induce his nephew to give up his life of pleasure and be altogether an occultist. Flaccus can't do this, but he loves the Flamen and is a great deal with him, and he would like to join him altogether and go with him to a place abroad they are talking about. And Flaccus has got a friend who comes in now; there they are, all three together. The whole thing is getting much plainer to me than it was at first. I seem as if I could answer any questions about them, as I know all about them, and only have to think of anything about them to get on the track of it."

"What does Flaccus's friend look like?" asked the Professor.

"He's a humble friend, I should say; not a rich, powerful man like Flaccus. He's almost poorly dressed, and short and ugly. But he's good. He's got a beautiful aura. By-the-bye, I did not notice that before. I don't so much like the aura round Flaccus. But Flaccus seems to like the little man too. He's quite lame; one foot must have had a bad accident. Oh! now I understand. I seemed to feel it all in a flash—almost to see it happening a long time ago. The little man—what? Fa—Fa—what—Fabian is it? Very well. Fabian and Flaccus were friends when they were boys; and Fabian saved Flaccus's life when some building was falling down, by rushing in to him. There must have been a little shock of earthquake. I fancy people were running about frightened, and out into the open air; but Fabian ran in to help Flaccus, and did help him out. Flaccus had been ill, and was in bed. But Fabian got his own foot crushed in the scramble." After a little pause: "He's not a bit sorry for it; he admires Flaccus so, and is almost glad to think he suffered to save him. The Flamen is kind to him; but somehow he seems to like Flaccus best—What? Oh, that's it, is it?"

The stream of explanation was again checked, till the Professor set it going once more by asking why the Flamen preferred Flaccus.

"He knows he could if he would be a great student of occult science; and the other couldn't yet, even if he tried. Besides, the other has suffered so much; he has had such a hard life all round—poor and friendless and ill-used. He's just a dependent, is he, Fabian, a freed man—very well. Anyhow, he's so gentle, and kind, and unselfish. He must have his reward first. His turn will come. I wonder how he's to be rewarded, poor fellow! The Flamen lends him books: that's what he's come for now—to get one promised to him; for he's studying all he can. It's harder work for him to learn than for Flaccus. What a queer book the Flamen gives him. It isn't a book; it's a roll of paper—a manuscript, I suppose. Very well!"

There was a long pause here. Nothing bad been said to afford a clue on which a question could be hung; so the listeners waited patiently in perfect silence. All the while she was speaking, indeed, they were trained in patience, as the sentences did not flow forth in a uniform stream. They would be a good deal spaced out, as it were, by pauses, during which the ideas they afterwards expressed seemed to have been taken in. At last Mrs. Lakesby said,—

"There's Flaccus. Why this is another place. I haven't been here before. It's just beside the water—a kind of seaside place. And Flaccus is standing by the water, near a beautiful big boat. It's all silk and cushions inside; how nice. Now he's helping a young woman into the boat; and now he gets in too, after her. Isn't she a beauty? What a lovely arm! Oh, I say! but this isn't the other young woman! Flaccus seems to love this one the best. How contented he looks, lying there in the boat with his head in her lap and his arms round her. No, don't take me away yet. I like to watch them. Enough? No, it isn't nearly enough. I *don't want* to go back—to *that thing* in the distance there. Indeed—I—I—I won't—no, no!"

With confused, vague, and inarticulate protests at the restoration of her absent soul to her body, Mrs. Lakesby subsided for a brief interval into silence, then coughed two or three times and recovered her normal senses—sitting up on the sofa and looking about her for a few moments without speaking.

"That's over, is it not? She has come to herself again," said Mrs. Miller, "has she not?"

"Is your vision quite over?" asked the Professor.

"I am trying to fix it," said Mrs. Lakesby absently. And then, after awhile, "Have I been talking to you all the time?"

"Yes; you have been giving us a most profoundly interesting account of all you have seen."

"I lost consciousness on this plane altogether," she said. "What have I told you about?"

"You have been describing ancient Roman times, and telling us about Flaccus and Fabian, and others."

"Ancient Roman times? Oh, ah! now I understand. I never tried to fix it in that way. I was merely conscious of what I saw. Where's the Baron?"

"He has not come back since he went away before you went off in a different manner."

"Isn't it getting a little cold? Let us go in."

They all went into the drawing-room, dazzled for awhile by the lamps after their long sojourn in the partial darkness outside, and moved vaguely about, bewildered by the strangeness of the experience they had been having.

"Who's who?" asked the Professor at length; "can you interpret what you have told us, Mrs. Lakesby?"

"I haven't even thought of it in that light," she said. "It was so interesting. I would like to have seen more. I can remember that I did not want to come back, but I was made to."

"Yes; you evidently resisted, and protested aloud; but who was it made you?"

"The companion I was with."

"And who was he?"

"Ah, that's the question. One of them it must have been; a high, powerful one, I suspect."

"One of who?"

"One of those the Baron belongs to. It was one of those"—looking round and speaking especially to Merland—"that I saw in the wood."

"Saw in the wood?" said the Professor; "what do you mean?"

"I saw two figures beside the Baron—figures on the astral plane that the rest of you did not see—when the tree went down. I told Mr. Merland about it at the time."

The Professor gave symptoms of suppressed despair.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Lakesby. It is simply awful that you will bottle up these priceless observations till they come out in this way by the merest accident."

The protest, which was one of a kind the Professor had so frequently had occasion to make before, excited some merriment, and restored a more familiar tone to the conversation, so far under the exalting influence, to a certain extent, of the long clairvoyant trance.

"I didn't bottle it up, Professor," said Mrs. Lakesby, pleading for forgiveness; "didn't I mention it to Mr. Merland?"

"But why not to all of us?"

"I remember now. You yourself made us all keep quiet while you explained what was to be done. It was then I saw the two figures."

"Oh, that's capital," cried Mrs. Miller; "I recollect, you ordered us all to hold our tongues. I remember passing on the order to Jem."

"But, Merland, my good fellow, why didn't you—? But no matter." The Professor waived all further discussion of criminality in the case, and merely cross-examined Mrs. Lakesby as to what she had seen.

"Coupled with the fact that one of these mysterious beings was your spiritual guide this evening, Mrs. Lakesby," he said, when the incident had been thoroughly explored, "the whole observation is one of exceedingly great interest. It throws light upon some things the Baron may be not fully at liberty to explain to us himself."

Then the conversation reverted to the scenes of which their clairvoyant had just been a witness. It was clear that the pictures shown to Mrs. Lakesby had not been taken at random from the vast store-house of Nature to which they belonged. The persons who had passed across them, or some, or at least one of them, must have been former incarnations of some or one of the people then present at Heiligenfels, or of their friends. The leading figure of the visions, Flaccus, was evidently the person to whom their attention should first be turned.

"Who of us feels as if he had been your riotous hero, Mrs. Lakesby, I wonder?" the Professor asked. "If it's you, Blane, you've greatly mended your manners since the old days, at all events."

"I do not think the smallest tie could connect me with such a magnificent personage as Flaccus," said Blane, meeting the suggestion with the most unequivocal repudiation. "If Mrs. Lakesby introduces us another evening to some entirely insignificant person, with no history whatever in the remote past, I might possibly claim him for my astral ancestor; but Flaccus is certainly not me."

"There are aspects of the character which I could read into my own," said the Professor, with perfect frankness; "but again, other aspects that seem to me quite incompatible."

"Can the heartless reprobate be Jem?" inquired Mrs. Miller.

"As regards good looks," said the Captain, "there might be a something to identify us, but I'm afraid I'm fallen off very much as a *bon vivant*."

"I tell you," said Mrs. Lakesby, "you won't easily match Flaccus for good looks."

"Listen to his latest victim," cried the Professor. "Here's altogether an unexampled case of a lady becoming suddenly attached to a man seventeen or eighteen centuries older than herself. We, none of us, need despair after this on account of suffering from *anno domini*."

"Is it quite necessary," inquired Blane, "that Flaccus should now be a *man* at all? As I understand the matter, sex is by no means invariable throughout successive incarnations, and does not belong in any true sense to the spiritual individuality at all. Shall we perhaps be right in seeking Flaccus among the ladies whom we know?"

"Goodness!" cried Mrs. Miller, "think of Miss Vaughan, for example, as Flaccus. She's good-looking enough, at any rate."

"What a very ghastly notion," Merland could not help saying.

"I don't say it is so. I was merely applying Mr. Blane's idea."

"It's a strained hypothesis," said the Professor, "that it seems to me we are not called upon to entertain with more obvious ones before us. For example, we need not necessarily go out of this room in search of our man. How about Merland for the man we are in search of?"

There was silence for a little while, every one considering the suggestion. Merland had certainly been subdued rather for the last few days, but, on the whole, his was a sunny, joyous, and a social temperament, and, without being extraordinary for physical beauty, he was an exceedingly good-looking young Englishman of a manly and healthful type.

"Very true!" said Blane; "I do not know that Merland is altogether to be congratulated, but certainly there are features in the description that would correspond."

"I don't think," said Captain Miller, "that Flaccus *deserves* to be Merland."

"Jem," said the Professor thoughtfully, "that's a very sound and sensible remark of yours. We're on the wrong tack in this matter. Flaccus, in his present incarnation, must be paying penalties. We have been looking out for correspondences when we ought to have been in search of contrasts."

It was borne strongly in on Merland's mind, as the Professor spoke, that he was beginning to pay penalties, and that the trouble on which he had just entered was likely to be a very large and comprehensive penalty. It was a point he could not explain, however, and he threw out what he was conscious of as an inadequate suggestion on the subject, though in harmony with the inner working of his thought.

"Flaccus, at all events, if he had been converted into me," he said, "would have fallen a long way from his high estate. It may be that *that* would constitute a penalty."

"It wouldn't do, my dear fellow—it wouldn't do," said the Professor. "We've got a man about whom we know some salient things. Of course I do not make any great fuss about the young lady in the boat. A young Roman nobleman would not be very straitlaced about such friendships as that, even if he had got a wife at home. But I take it, the lady in the boat is symbolical. She has been shown to us for a purpose. There were probably other ladies yet, if all the truth were known. And the wife at home, you will remember, was left crying bitterly. Flaccus evidently had a great deal on his conscience, or, as it sat very lightly on his conscience while he was alive, let us say on his Karma, and that has got to be paid for heavily. We should not be doing at all right in looking out for a specially handsome, happy, or prosperous man now, to be himself *redivivus*—quite the contrary, an exactly opposite sort of man is wanted."

"Annerly!" said Captain Miller.

The suggestion flashed upon them all as a shock, and yet as a revelation.

"Jem, you are inspired this evening," said Mrs. Miller. "What's the matter with you?"

The Professor remained with his features rigid for some moments, and on mature examination found the Captain's idea very good.

"I had worked out the problem as an abstraction," he said, "but had not applied my own reasoning. You are quite right.

If Flaccus is any one of the party lately assembled here, he must be Annerly."

"Has Annerly," asked Blane, "been specially unhappy about women, does anybody know?"

"Yes, certainly," said Merland; "it's a matter he does not like talking about, but he has had a great disappointment in that way."

"That's marvellously exact," said the Professor, "and most instructive."

The talk on the subject, for some time, was general and variegated.

"Poor Flaccus!" said Mrs. Lakesby. "I'm sure I like Mr. Annerly most cordially, and yet one can see he is not a happy man."

"But still," urged Blane, "there are the grand qualities in the man working on. He has forfeited his handsome appearance and his opportunities of happiness, but in the midst of suffering he is still his higher self. The friend and occult pupil of the Flamen is assuredly the foremost of us all to profit by the opportunities of occult study we have all enjoyed here. I suspect the Baron would recognize the Flamen's pupil in Annerly very clearly."

"It is simply a process of purification," said the Professor, "that he is going through. The Annerly we know may be passing through much suffering, but in connection with transitory things. He has the burden of a poor physique, but that is for the one life only. He has been denied happiness in love, but who can say if that is not a blessing in disguise? I daresay happiness in love, if the truth were known, is sometimes a curse in disguise. It is easy to understand that Annerly, today, may be on a higher rung of the evolutionary ladder than when he was crowned with roses and drinking too much Falernian."

"If Mr. Annerly had known what he was about," said Mrs. Miller, "he wouldn't even have put himself in the way of getting hurt in a love affair. He's bound to be unlucky now, I suppose, in everything of that sort."

"Is there anybody else, I wonder, that we could identify?" said the Professor.

"There was one other person named, if that might be a clue," Blane pointed out; "Flaccus's generous and devoted friend. If the rule of contrasts will apply here, as well as in the other case, we ought to identify him in the person of some one with a very bright and prosperous present."

The same idea may have occurred to more than one of them at the same time, but it was Mrs. Lakesby who impulsively gave it expression. Merland was standing up, one hand resting on the arm of a sofa on which Mrs. Lakesby had taken a seat. The light of a lamp close by shone full upon his pleasant, good-looking face and tall, graceful figure, set off to the best advantage in the evening-dress he wore. Throwing herself round and resting both hands clasped over his upon the arm of the sofa, Mrs. Lakesby looked up in his face with a bright smile, as it were, of recognition, and cried aloud,—

"Fabian!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VOICE FROM ABOVE.

At breakfast next morning the Baron no sooner made his appearance than he was besieged by questions relative to the events of the previous evening; and to the conjectures that had arisen out of them.

"It will perhaps seem rather absurd to you," he said, in reply to some especially searching inquiry from Mrs. Miller, "but I can't give you any positive information in the matter. I may be able to help you, indirectly, to some means of forming conclusions, but at least you must dot your *i's* and cross your *t's* for yourself. All of us, who are more or less deeply pledged to occult pursuits, become involved in a network of may and may not, the motives of which are not often quite unintelligible to outsiders."

"All right!" said the Professor; "when we know where the wall is set up which bars progress in any particular direction it is easy to act accordingly. But I daresay some general questions may be permissible about the operation of Karmic laws?"

"More than permissible: welcome."

"Very well then. How are we to look at a certain question of probabilities? Take a number of contemporary persons belonging to a very remote period,—say, ancient Roman times,—isn't it a very unlikely thing that they should again be contemporaries at a very much later time? Because the forces which keep them suspended, as it were, in spiritual existence for one or two thousand years, would all have to be exactly equal to drop them down again on earth at the same moment, and that does not recommend itself to the mind as likely."

"But suppose the contemporariness of your hypothetical group the first time was itself not quite a matter of chance? If a number of human individualities had been drawn together by some tie of association before, the same attractions might assert themselves again. Attractions of that kind even might be a thousand times more potent in the spiritual world indeed, as conducing to a nearly simultaneous re-incarnation than on this earth, once the individualities were imprisoned in flesh again."

"Very good. Then it is not to be put aside as an extravagant hypothesis, that several people now living and knowing one another might have lived and known one another before."

"Anything rather than an extravagant hypothesis,—especially when you superadd this consideration: that supposing A, B, and C were living together at a remote period, A might be so long a time in a spiritual state after that life, as to give B and C, supposing them to have weaker spiritual affinities, time for an intermediate physical life, and for an ultimate second return to earth in company with A."

Letters which were brought in now interrupted the conversation for awhile.

"Have you heard from our friend Annerly this morning?" the Baron inquired presently of Merland, after reading some of his own letters.

"Indeed I have," said the young man. "I've heard the most surprising news I've heard for a long time past."

"It looks as if we should not see him back again at Heiligenfels just at present."

"Why, what's happened?" asked Mrs. Miller.

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry for his sake," Merland answered; "but I suppose one must be glad for him, because he is so much to himself. He's fallen in with that young lady he was engaged to before, and it's all made up between them again. He's going to be married to her now, in a very short time."

"Hullo!" cried the Professor.

Ejaculations of wonder passed round the table.

"I say," remarked Captain Jem, "there's something got wrong with the laws of Karma."

"Or perhaps with our application of them" said Blane.

"Oh, goodness!" said Mrs. Lakesby, "have we got to go hunting for Flaccus all over again?"

"Mr. Annerly was such a perfect fit," Mrs. Miller urged. "There may be some mistake. Had you heard about this also, Baron?"

"Yes: that was what made me ask if Mr. Merland had heard."

"Claude," said Mrs. Miller to Merland, "you'd better write to him and warn him not to think of it. It can't turn out for his good."

"I'd like to ask the Baron—" Blane began, but then checked himself, and added, "No: I beg his pardon. I do not think the inquiry would be justifiable."

A laugh was raised at the caution showed.

"We'd all like to ask the Baron quantities of questions," said the Professor; "that goes without saying."

"I think you are all most wonderfully courteous, discreet, and forbearing," said the Baron.

"We may not be such beasts as we look, Baron," said the Professor, "while we should be worse if we were not careful of the embarrassments you may be placed in by trying to help us."

"At all events," Blane went on, "we may be overrating the necessity—arising out of past circumstances in the life of Flaccus—for supposing that he must be unhappy throughout his present life. He may have worked off his Karma by this time, and be fairly entitled to a free discharge from its effects."

"It's amusing to hear you people talk of your friend's past sins so confidently," said Mrs. Lakesby. "After all, it's only a guess that Mr. Annerly is Flaccus."

"If he's going to be happy, after all," said Mrs. Miller, "I'm sure he can't be Flaccus at all. Remember how he made that poor thing cry."

"Mrs. Miller," protested the Professor, "your otherwise perfect sex will make violent assumptions. First, I would point out that we really do not know why the lady in the garden was crying. It is quite an assumption that Flaccus was to blame."

"Just like a man's reasoning," said Mrs. Miller; "so mean! But go on."

"Secondly, and what is more important, you assume that because a man says he is going to get married, he must necessarily be going to be happy. That is about the most violent assumption you could indulge in."

"For shame!" cried Mrs. Lakesby. "He's got a chance that way of being happy if he behaves himself."

"Who can tell us anything about the lady?" said Mrs. Miller. "What sort of person is she? Do you know her, Mr. Merland? What's her name?"

"I don't know her," Merland answered, with some hesitation; "and, beyond her name, I can't tell you much about her. Her name is Miriam Seaford."

The Professor was a strong man in all respects, not to be betrayed by a sudden excitement into any display of nervousness. But, with his coffee-cup half-way to his lips, he paused, as Merland uttered the words, and gazed across the table at him with set and rigid features. He slowly set his cup down again, but did not speak.

"Never heard the name before," said Mrs. Miller. "Is she well connected?"

"No. I don't think she's much what one could call well connected; but there were no bounds to Annerly's affection for her. It will make quite a new man of him being all right with her again."

"It seems to cast a bad omen over his nuptials," Blane said, "to have this feeling about him. Under the circumstances I should say it would be wisest on our part to say nothing to him about our experiences of last night, with all the conjectures arising out of them; that may be quite wrong indeed. I think we should not lose sight of that possibility."

"Most certainly," said the Professor; "nothing should be said to Annerly about last night. But I can't think our conjecture wrong. The correspondences are too close in many ways. The gravest question would be whether—" Just then his eye happened to meet Mrs. Lakesby's, and he remembered the little incident that had passed between them some time previously, when he had pressed her to tell him what she had clairvoyantly perceived about him, and when she had said she had seen the astral reflection near him of a woman, whom she named. Mrs. Lakesby evidently remembered the incident too, for she was looking at the Professor rather steadily.

"—'m," he said, pausing, "it is very difficult to know what to suggest. The circumstances are so peculiar."

"Fabian ought to know best," said Mrs. Miller; "at all events he has known his friend a long time. How many thousand years is it?"

"Don't you feel very much ashamed sometimes, Miss Blane," said Captain Miller reflectively, "of all the trouble you women cause in the world, one way and another? Look at poor Flaccus; and he isn't out of it yet."

"Who do you call the world, pray?" said Mrs. Miller. "Listen to the selfishness of the tyrants."

But the Professor, whose good spirits generally rendered him prompt to take up any light-hearted challenge of this sort, was silent and grave, and the diversion proved a *cul-de-sac.*

The Professor retained, in the course of the subsequent conversation, his conviction that the identity of the Roman hero had been rightly placed, but the satisfaction of some of the others on this point was not so decided. Merland, especially, did not take, with entire cordiality, to the Fabian idea.

The argument on which it was based—that he represented a good man, enjoying in a very happy estate the fruit of past good deeds—seemed faulty in his judgment. The ladies were inclined to pet him on the strength of his bygone virtues, and this, somehow, rather went against the grain. Still, he was too thoroughly good friends with them all there to be seriously annoyed. He only protested that things were not always what they seemed, and that if they were making him out to be Fabian because of ideas they had formed about what he, Merland, was in actual life, the whole theory would fall to the ground, supposing them to be wrong in their estimate of him.

"We must wait for further enlightenment," he urged; and it was generally felt that the whole situation might very desirably be illuminated a little more.

The Baron raised no objection when an inquiry was made of him at dinner whether he thought Mrs Lakesby would be fit to travel again that evening.

During the day the Professor had taken counsel with no one concerning any special circumstances connected, in his own mind, with the name that had been assigned to Annerly's intended bride. He had been less conversational than usual, and had even gone out in the afternoon for some exercise by himself. The morning he and Blane had spent in compiling a complete record, as far as their memory enabled them to do so, of the descriptions that had been given the preceding evening by Mrs. Lakesby when in her trance; and this had been further amplified by consultation with the other witnesses and by reference to Mrs. Lakesby, who was here and there enabled to fill up details and give little additional points from her own recollections of what she had seen. The day, in this way, had not been idle or ill-spent, and the sense of exhilaration attaching to the feeling of having thus cleared up the work before him, restored the Professor himself to something like his usual frame of mind in the evening. He was never a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve, and whatever resolutions he formed on the subject of Miss Seaford's engagement, he kept locked up in his own breast.

Only a few words had passed between himself and Mrs. Lakesby in the course of the afternoon on the subject of the name she had once pronounced.

"Do you remember, Mrs. Lakesby," the Professor had asked, taking an opportunity when he could speak to her unheard by the others, "having once told me that you saw a figure, or an astral reflection of the figure, of a woman near me?"

"I remember," she answered, "and I remember the name I told you I was impressed by; but I don't know any more, and I don't want to know anything more. Don't talk to me about it unless you wish me to know more, for you don't know what you may not bring up unintentionally.

The Professor acquiesced in his most straightforward manner.

"I knew she was somehow connected with Mr. Annerly, because I had seen the same figure near him. That puzzled me at the time, and I was going to ask some question about it then; but it struck me as being no business of mine so I let the matter alone."

The Professor was quite willing to let the matter drop, so nothing more was said about it; and he was rather relieved than otherwise at finding that Mrs. Lakesby did not desire to pursue the topic. So the day passed, and in the evening at dinner the inquiry was made as to whether the clairvoyant would probably be fit for travel.

"I should have thought," said the lady herself, "that Mrs. Lakesby might have been consulted on the point"—she had a trick in this way of referring to herself by name in the third person. But there was no acrimony in her objection, for all the party at the castle were her devoted admirers and enthusiastic friends, and she fully recognized this.

"We wouldn't have you go on any account, dear Agatha," said Mrs. Miller, "unless we were sure it was good and safe for you."

"Safe for me! Why, I'm wandering about somewhere, I can tell you, many more nights than I stay quietly at home in bed. And other people wander too, sometimes, who don't remember it afterwards."

"Any one among us, do you mean?" asked Blane, who was sitting next to her.

"Yes." She laughed a little, and was half-reluctant to make her statement more explicit. "There's nothing in it, really."

"Perhaps not," said the Professor soothingly; "but we take an interest sometimes, even in things that may be nothing to you."

"Oh, now, I'm sure you'll scold me again for not telling you sooner! How silly of me to mention it at all."

"I call all here to witness that I am the meanest and humblest of your subjects. I could no more presume to find fault—"

"Well then, it was you I've seen out of the body at night, two or three times."

"Me!"

"You were fast asleep in the astral body, as much as in the physical body at the time, I suppose; but you were as real to me one way as the other."

"But where did you see me? I don't understand now."

"In my room, of course. I woke up, feeling there was something near me, and there you were, standing dazed and fast asleep by the stove. You'd come floating in through the wall, in a most unbusiness-like manner; for you went back that way when I put my will against you, instead of out of the window naturally—like any one used to going about in the astral."

"But this is really most extraordinary," said the Professor. "My dear Mrs. Lakesby, how is it possible that you should have noticed this and—"

"There! I call all here to witness if I'm not being scolded again."

"—and have so graciously and kindly remembered to tell us," said the Professor, giving his sentence a different turn from that first intended. "We thank your Majesty most humbly and gratefully. But if only at the time you had seen fit to wake me, in the astral body, so that I might have had the invaluable experience of finding myself conscious in that condition, my gratitude, personally, would have been even greater."

"I wouldn't have done that for the world. You might have been unable to get back again, and I couldn't have helped you. You might never have got back at all."

"The whole subject is so mysterious that I can't give an opinion, of course; but I authorize you most completely to run any risk there may be another time, and wake me up if you can."

Mrs. Lakesby declined to undertake any such commission, and the Baron, appealed to, was rather of opinion that she exercised a wise discretion in the matter. After a good deal of miscellaneous conversation on the subject of such unconscious wandering away from the body by the people who were not clairvoyant, in the proper sense of the word, the original question came to the surface again. It was somewhat cooler that evening than it had been the last, and the Baron thought it quite unnecessary that they should sit out on the terrace. It would be all the better, indeed, for Mrs. Lakesby that she should remain indoors. If she were not disturbed by too great a glare of light in her face—that was all that mattered. It was arranged that they should sit that evening in the drawing-room.

"But there isn't any sort of hurry," Mrs. Lakesby urged; "you can all go and have your cigars and coffee at leisure. In an hour is time enough for us to begin."

"Cigars and coffee!" said Blane. "How can we think of contemptible creature-comforts in the midst of the experiences we are having here. I'm sure, in the future, when we look back on this ever-to-be-memorable visit, we shall despise ourselves for having stooped even to spend time in eating or sleep."

"But since we have been eating," said Mrs. Lakesby, "I think I'd rather wait a little first before I go to ancient Rome again."

"There's good sense in that, I'm sure," said Captain Miller; "particularly considering the stupendous dinner you've been having."

Mrs. Lakesby's habits at table were of the very soberest and simplest, as she ate but very slightly of the plainest food, and never drank wine, so the Captain's little joke required no comment, and the gentlemen went upstairs to the smoking-room. Then, towards the latter end of the evening, the Baron went on to his own turret chamber, sending messages of farewell to the ladies, and then the Professor and the rest descended to the drawing-room with a few very simple instructions as to how they were to proceed. Mrs. Lakesby was to be made comfortable on a sofa, and warmly covered up. That was all that mattered. The light was to be subdued, and then they could wait to see what happened.

A very short time elapsed after these arrangements were made when Mrs. Lakesby, who showed no inclination that evening to tease the rest by making fun of the situation, betrayed to the now experienced observation of her friends that her attention was attracted by some abnormal appearance. Her large eyes were fixed steadily on a picture hanging against the wall she faced, and the others instinctively watched it too.

"That's odd," said Mrs. Lakesby. "I'm not gone away in the least. No one has come to fetch me—but still I'm beginning to see things."

"What sort of things?"

"A kind of a room, with books about, and an old man reading. I seem to feel as if the room were not strange, but I don't know where it is."

"Does this hinge on to what you saw last night—is the room like the Flamen's library?"

"Good gracious, no! not in the least. This is quite a modern sort of a room—though a bit old-fashioned; and the books are printed books like ours. What's the old man got to do with us, I wonder? It's no time ago at all, to speak of, I'm sure—only a few years. The old man has got a dressing-gown on, and a velvet cap, and slippers. Now he looks up, and I can see his face. How very old he is to be sure—a hundred at least. Ah! now I begin to understand a little more. Some one is showing me signs to explain who the old man is. I wonder who it is doing this! I can't see any one but the old man."

"What do you mean by signs?"

The Professor had, as before, taken up the *rôle* of questioner.

"I see cabalistic signs over his head. He is a great student of the occult sciences—the old man is evidently. Now he is showing me books that the old man has written—three, four, five of them. I wish I knew who it was doing this."

Then she laughed a little.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Why he made the leaves of one of the books flutter over, and they are all blank. I suppose he means there is not much to be learned from them. But now he shows a crown for a moment over the old man's head. What does that mean?"

"What a singular way of conveying information."

"Now the old man leans his head forward on his arms over the table. Is he asleep or dying? All the books and the room are fading away; but I still see the old man's figure—all sunk together somehow. I'm sure it means that he is dead. There's the crown still hovering over him, brighter than ever. Goodness! how strange. Now it's all gone."

The clairvoyant looked round at her companions, still quite in possession of her usual faculties.

"What does all that mean?" she said wondering. "Just as the old man's figure grew indistinct the crown seemed to settle down on him for a moment; and through it, as it were, there floated up the small figure of a child, that floated right up and disappeared."

"That's a highly symbolical vision," remarked Blane, "with a great deal of meaning, I suspect. It clearly emphasizes the rebirth of the old man; but the bare idea of such a rebirth is not new to us. It evidently means that there is something very special attaching to the rebirth of the old man. But we don't know who he is. Are we intended to find an identity for him amongst some of the people we know?"

"There is no clue, that I can see," said the Professor. "An old man who has been a student of the occult science, and is born again, is not much to go by. We have no hint about character."

The problem was discussed in its various bearings for some time without leading to any very definite result, and, the conversation having become general, no one noticed that Mrs. Lakesby had leaned back again on her sofa, in the position in which she had first been established, and from which she had sat up to look at her vision. Suddenly interrupting Mrs. Miller, who was speaking at the moment, she said, in a full loud voice, though in rather deeper tones than she generally used,—

"Listen!"

The injunction silenced the conversation, and with a thrill of interest they all looked at their clairvoyant, who again presented the appearance of the previous evening, and lay with her eyes closed, apparently in a deep sleep. The authoritative command to "listen" set them straining their ears to catch some distant sound or voice, but in a few seconds Mrs. Lakesby spoke again, still in the somewhat unusual voice in which she had begun.

"There are two among you here who may do good service, if they will, to their fellow-men, and to the cause of truth, and the spread of that knowledge which the world needs so urgently to save it from spiritual death—"

Captain Miller, who had quietly provided himself with paper and pencil to take notes of the descriptions Mrs. Lakesby had been expected to give, began to scribble a record of the strange speech thus commenced. It was spoken so slowly and emphatically that he was able to take down its sense completely, and almost the exact words.

"Only if they were,—what they are not,—would they be able fully to realize why they have been chosen to have this opportunity of doing a grand work; for in their hearts they may know of failings that will seem to disqualify them to some extent from playing the part now offered to them, in awakening other men, better qualified by purity of life and spirituality of nature, as the world judges such things, to enter on the life of sacrifice, and self-denial, and suffering, which leads to the only triumph that is real, and the only reward that wise men should care for, and the only happiness that is not illusory. It is the law of Karma which you are all trying to comprehend, which invests them with the privilege of holding up the lamp to show their companions the right path amidst the obscurities of physical knowledge, amidst the entanglements of the unreal and the transitory impressions of sense. One of those of whom I especially speak—for all here present, in varying degrees, may take a part in the work to be done—will shortly have to undergo some humiliations in the sight of the world. It is a penalty he will have to pay for indulgences that have been enjoyed and laws of the physical life that he has set at nought. But no pictures that can be shown to this woman, will explain the nature of the Karma, which gives him the right to emerge, if he will, from the slough of lower affinities on to the higher plane of existence to which he partly belongs, by helping others to reach that plane with him. He says he is curious to know the facts of his bygone personal history. Some he may be enabled to collect, but the most important are those which have to do with his own intellectual growth, which no outward facts he may now look back upon will illuminate. For several incarnations in the past his spiritual aspirations, borne downward by worldly ambitions, have masked themselves in intellectual growth. For, remember, that what you call great mental faculties are faculties of spirit deeply buried in matter disguised in their application, in their almost exclusive application to the purposes of the most unreal, that is to say the most evanescent, plane of natural manifestation,—that which to the blinded eyesight of the flesh appears the only one. This man's Ego may be likened to one of your rivers which bore their way underground, and which sometimes fail altogether to re-emerge into the light of day in one complete stream,—but streams like these may burst forth afresh altogether in the sunlight. The humiliation in store for him that I spoke of just now may be likened to the turbid impurities of a torrent breaking from the mountains, that may settle and leave the stream clear as it proceeds. But, dropping the metaphor, his own spiritual future will depend upon the spirit in which he meets this crisis in his life, and on the use he makes of the great opportunity now within his reach. Some suffering there must be,—there must always be suffering where there has been wrong, where there has been ignorance, where there has been selfishness, where there has been effort made to gather in and jealously consume happiness, instead of effort to expand and pour it out for the good of others;—but suffering of that sort is only to be conquered by endurance: the law of Karma may be hard to study, but it is still harder to cheat."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERIES OF KARMA.

Spell-bound, though in a very different way from that of the previous evening, the audience round the sofa listened with rapt attention, and with a strange sense of awe. For, though the lips that spoke the words they heard were those of their familiar friend, the whole style and flavour of the address was so utterly unlike her own mode of expression that the perception of a different personality speaking in some way through her, was borne in on their minds quite irresistibly. The previous evening her own phrases and idioms had been preserved all the while. It had been Mrs. Lakesby speaking, though Mrs. Lakesby in a clairvoyant trance. But now there was no Mrs. Lakesby left in the case at all, except as far as the body which lay on the sofa was concerned. The soul animating it had apparently been quite metamorphosed. And this change had a singularly weird effect.

She had paused for some half-minute after the words last set down. Then she went on, perfect silence having been maintained in the interval by her listeners:—

"I do not beat about the bush in saying this, for the man is strong and able to hear truth, though hitherto in more than one incarnation he has been using that strength to command others rather than to school himself. As this woman said last night, those he has spoken to, have known what they had to do; but he has forgotten to speak to himself, so he has not known. And there is another man among you who has let opportunities pass by him more than once before this time, and has stood by dreaming while they floated out of his reach. Will he seize this one? Blane, my friend, you have never seriously sinned against any human being but yourself, but this is not the first time I have come to you, though it may be the first time you can at this moment remember, and I have found you always fit but never ready. But good Karma is patient, and it waits for you still, but it can only give you chances. Command over others has as little attraction for you now as the last time, when you dreamed away one physical existence in the blameless negation of a monastery, or as when before then, in the vortex of that physical life which has so many correspondences with this in which you all are now immersed, you lived amidst the pitch and were not defiled. But one may even be too fastidious in regard to defilement down in that seething cauldron of life you call the world. Fix your will upon the essence and not the show of things, and do not fear to stand beside whatsoever can truly serve humanity, which is your cause, and mine, and that of all of us, even though you seem to share the stains upon his hands and garments. The stream of your intellectual growth has never gone underground; its spiritual quality is scarcely masked at all, or only so far as may be necessary for its expression on that plane of existence, but there has come a time when it should no longer run to waste.

"I have nearly done; for I must do no more than hint, suggest, awaken thought, and leave with you all in your several degrees the duty of action, the choice of means. The genius of your age is boring down when it might soar upward; it is wearing itself out against the hard rock when it might expand into splendid growths of a superior race, if its forces were trained into the right direction. Many efforts are being made to guide its evolution into the true path of progress. The sooner this is done the better for individuals concerned, even though the final result must come about sooner or later—the sooner, then the less suffering. For ignorance of nature is the source of all suffering, and there is no ignorance so fatal, so disastrous, as knowledge of only one side. Work to obliterate that ignorance. Struggle, and if necessary suffer, to minimize suffering; and learn to apply the most occult truth of all enshrouded in that occult science which fascinates so many minds, which it fails to penetrate,—that the highest knowledge must be sought in the highest self-abnegation, in the highest spiritual philanthropy.

"And now, since I see that the very faithful pencil of my good secretary yonder has fairly well recorded this poor homily of mine, I will ask him to bring his notes over, and put them under this woman's hand a moment, and I will affix my mark, which at any rate will have some meaning for your friend the Baron, and may usefully be known by you—so long as you take care not to let that little morsel of phantasmagorial knowledge on the physical plane grow useless by too wide a dissemination."

Just as neither the Professor nor Blane, when they had been especially addressed during this strange speech, had uttered any words in reply, so Captain Miller took the reference to himself in silence; but as soon as he had finished writing the last words he brought the last piece of the paper on which he had been writing, and stood, rather uncertain how to act, beside the sofa, on which Mrs. Lakesby lay still in a profound trance. Blane hastily got a book, to put under the paper for her to write upon, and Captain Miller tried to put the pencil between her fingers, as they lay upon the rug which had been thrown over her body. With a vague and awkward movement she pushed this aside, and let her hand fall open on the paper. It rested there for a few moments, and then, as she drew it away, they all saw that a peculiar hieroglyphic or monogram, as though written with blue pencil, had appeared on the spot her hand had covered.

She drew her hand slowly up to her face, and rubbed it across her eyes and forehead, then rolled her head on the pillow from side to side; and then, turning over on her side altogether, was troubled with a short fit of coughing, out of which she emerged her own usual self, remarking that it was too bad, altogether.

"What is too bad, dear?" asked Mrs. Miller, kneeling down beside her with the kind of adoring impulse so apt to assert itself among beholders towards a person in whom psychic gifts of a high order exhibit themselves.

"To be hustled off like that in the middle of watching them at play. What's the use of taking me all that way if I'm not to stop and see something?"

Her remarks were so up in the air and unconnected with what had been going on that Blane and the Professor could only look at one another in bewilderment.

"My dearest Agatha," said Mrs. Miller, "what on earth do you mean?"

"Why, Flaccus and his friends were having a game at ball together. It was such fun to see them. Didn't I tell you about that?"

"Why no, of course not; you have simply been speaking to us or some one else—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you," said the Professor, "but we can tell Mrs. Lakesby all she said afterwards. First let us hear what she now remembers. It is most important to secure all that before it escapes from her recollection."

"I simply was called by the same one that took me away last night, and was getting some more visions of the same sort. I never thought of you, of course, at the time, but didn't I talk to you about them like last night? Didn't you ask me questions?"

"Your faculties have been duplicated in some extraordinary manner," said the Professor; "we will tell you all about that directly, but meanwhile do please now go over all you saw. What did you see first?"

"I saw that old man of the chair, that you said to-day must have been a Consul. He was standing in the midst of a large party of people, women as well as men, all handsomely dressed, and he was talking to one of the women, a young woman, quite a girl, paying her compliments and making her laugh, and yet I could see by his aura that he was sad and angry at heart. I have got a notion that the young woman was a bride and that the party was a marriage-party. Then a young man joined them and treated the Consul in a very deferential manner, but drew away the woman after a little while, and then the vision faded, and I saw a number of young men, with very little on, playing ball in a big, empty room. There was Flaccus among the number, and he seemed to be enjoying himself greatly; but, just as I was beginning to ask who the others were, my companion hustled me away without ceremony, merely saying, I remember, 'Can't stop any longer now. Master's going.' What on earth did he mean by 'Master's going'?"

At another time, perhaps—since the Professor had been so plainly identified, in the mysterious speech that had just been delivered, with the Consul of Mrs. Lakesby's Roman visions—there might have been some disposition among his friends to banter him about having been given, even in his former incarnation, to paying compliments to the ladies. This was a trait of his modern character asserting itself in a former life as well. But the solemnity of the address they had received left its impression on their feelings, and the opening for badinage was disregarded.

The course of events, as regarded her own trance, was related to Mrs. Lakesby, and the Captain's record of the words that had issued from her lips was read over to her. Of these she retained no trace of recollection whatever.

"How should she?" the Professor pointed out. "It is all intelligible enough now. We are familiar with the fact that her own soul leaves her body altogether under such circumstances as we have had to-night, and what has evidently occurred has been this: While her soul was far away in the custody of one of the extraordinary beings who are interesting themselves in our proceedings just now, her body was made the vehicle of an address to us from some other of them. His identity, even, will be apparent to the Baron, when we describe what has taken place, for we have got his signature."

"I wonder, is anything more going to happen to-night?" inquired Captain Miller.

"What we have had has not taken long," Blane remarked, "but it has been very suggestive."

"Very!" said the Professor, who began to walk up and down the room, profoundly revolving the situation in his own mind. "The smallest of these visions, I am persuaded, is thrown in our way for a purpose. Even so little a thing as that last about Flaccus in the sphæristerium—"

"In the what?" asked Mrs. Lakesby.

"You see the living reality, dear lady, and call it playing at ball. Dusty scholars find it a long name, but the same thing is meant. The parting glimpse of him afforded to us emphasizes the physical importance of the Karma he engendered during his Roman time, and that we know, with Annerly, has produced very decisive effects on his present incarnation. In my own case, physical Karma does not seem to have been specially operative. The Consul was an ordinary sort of man, apparently, in physique, and I am an ordinary sort of man. But there are points in what we have heard that to me are very suggestive."

"Oh, I was nearly forgetting," said Mrs. Lakesby; "it suddenly comes back to me."

"What was that?" asked the Professor keenly.

"It was not about you—it was Fabian."

"Oh, I do trust, Mrs. Lakesby," cried Merland, "that you saw Fabian, this time, at some good, downright mischief. I assure you you will not link him with my personality unless you did."

"Fabian," said Mrs. Lakesby, sitting up and looking at him earnestly, "you were not at any kind of mischief, I assure you.

Dear me, how vividly I remember it again now, though it was only just a picture."

"Oh, what was it?" said Mrs. Miller, as the clairvoyant paused.

"Poor Fabian!" Blane said. "Has he been detected in some new good deeds? I can understand that. Merland's delicacy of feeling is now rather put to the blush, but, at the same time, others of us will wish we had half his complaint."

"He was sitting by a girl's bedside reading to her or telling her something out of a book on his knees. But she was not a beautiful girl at all, almost a child, and very plain and withered-looking, very ill evidently. Fabian was holding her hand and talking to her; and she was looking at him so wistfully in spite of her ugliness and illness, the *thought* of her was quite beautiful. Her aura was so clear and good. But the room was a poor room; it was a miserable sort of scene altogether."

"Well, at all events," said Merland, "it's a mercy my patient was a girl. There seems a shade less of goodi-goodiness in my proceedings that way—if you will have it that it was I,—which I cannot feel to be the case at all."

"It's better to have been doing good among your fellow creatures, anyhow," said Blane, "than to have been a useless fool of a monk."

"Now, do not let us contemplate any of these problems," the Professor urged, "with personal feelings. They are all given to us for the sake of the knowledge they convey. And do you observe," he went on, addressing the company generally, as he continued to walk about the room, "what a large part in Karma is evidently played in all our cases—in all except Blane's case, as far as we know it yet—by our relations with women. What a determining force that seems to be."

"In a negative way my case bears out what you say," put in Blane, "for my Karma does not seem to have had much to do with women; while, also, with the colourless and useless life I have led—"

There was a general outbreak of laughter at this; the last words were uttered with so much grim sincerity, while the feeling all his friends entertained towards Blane was one of such strong affection, that there seemed something absurd in the abuse he was levelling against the nature of his own life.

"—What are you laughing at?"

"My dear Willy," said Mrs. Miller, who gave Blane brevet-rank as her cousin occasionally, "if there is such a thing as a universal favourite, who is not entitled to talk in a misanthropical way—"

"I am not misanthropical; I am merely recording facts. I may be a fool for my pains, perhaps, but as a fact women have not been the main interest of my life; of course I do not assert that it has had any main interest—" this provoked a reversal of friendly jeers, but Blane got to the end of his explanation none the less—"and it would seem that I am the only person whose Karma has not been associated with women, as far as we know."

"Blane's argument," said the Professor, "is perfectly sound and important. Let us be serious about all this. It is far too interesting for chaff."

"But seriously," said Merland, "there are flaws in the argument which associates Fabian's personality with mine. I won't be affected about the matter, but will speak of it as if a third person were concerned. I am represented as having been a very good person in my last incarnation, and therefore as now being very fortunately circumstanced; and no doubt you assume that happy destinies are awaiting me in connection with women to match my reputed merit in regard to the sick child and so forth. Now I would not make the statement I am going to make if it were not for the importance of our studies in this matter, but you must believe me when I assure you that all conjectures of that sort will necessarily prove wrong. I would rather not go into details; but I assure you that my future, though fair in some of its aspects, does not lie before me as likely to be a happy one at all, and most assuredly it will not be made happy by any woman. If my fixed determination can control it it will be altogether concerned with a life-long devotion to occult science."

"Well," said the Professor, after a little interval, "no one should be called upon to lay bare, even for an analysis of this sort, incidents in his life which are of quite a private nature. But I confess for me the Fabian hypothesis is one I cannot reject in spite of what you say. Its incongruities may somehow explain themselves later. An entire stranger would not understand our position in this business at all. But we have all been led from one thing to another; and I feel just as sure that these visions of Mrs. Lakesby are regulated by some very powerful beings, with a definite purpose, as that she is not merely inventing them as she goes along, as any self-confident outsider, knowing nothing of our surroundings, might suggest. We have been told something now about four distinct lines of Karma, and three of them at all events—I think all four—are borne in on the understanding as harmonious with the obvious interpretations."

"But do you not forget," said Merland, "what we heard this morning about Annerly?"

"I do not forget that at all, but I trust to the Karmic indication more than to the appearance of his present engagement. I am sorry to feel that this engagement is not likely to turn out for his happiness or welfare."

The conversation was prolonged, on these lines, till a late hour, but no further manifestations of clairvoyance took place that night.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PROFESSOR IN TROUBLE.

Among the letters which arrived at the castle the following morning was a long-shaped packet for the Professor, in a blue envelope, addressed in a formal hand. He looked over its contents standing by the window, while those of the company who had already assembled were gathered in another part of the room, and, putting it away in his pocket, joined them for breakfast, and talked and joked in his usual manner. After breakfast, however, he sought a private conversation with the Baron, and, going with him into the library, announced that he had received news that morning which he thought it his duty to communicate to the Baron, as his host at Heiligenfels, without delay.

"Lady Emily Massilton," he said, "has instituted proceedings against me for divorce. Lady Emily, in fact, must have been conducting her proceedings, while still of the preparatory order, from under this roof; which appears to me to have been a departure from good taste—but that is a detail. First of all, does this information take you very much by surprise?"

"It gives me, perhaps," said the Baron, "more pain than surprise. I believed that something of the kind would have to be gone through."

"Of course you mean that by some occult channel of knowledge you got that impression?"

"Quite so."

"Well, about the case on its merits I shall be very glad to talk to you at length; but the duty before me for the moment appears clear. Once formally commenced, I suppose the fact that this suit has been set on foot may become public property any day. The society papers may be announcing it as we speak. It will be possible that people will form judgments in the matter unfavourable to me, and it may be embarrassing for you and your friends that I should be your guest any longer under these circumstances; and, deeply as I regret having to abandon the inquiries on which we are engaged, I propose to leave this house at once."

"Who of the party here, do you think, would resent your further stay?"

"First of all, the person best entitled to do so would be yourself."

"My dear Professor, though I have latterly been a visitor to your world, I am not of it. My judgments of men are not much governed by externals. To be quite candid, I daresay there has been much in your conduct—assuming that the attack now made upon you has some ground to go upon—that I should disapprove of; but that which is a shadow or a dream to others is a reality to me, and *vice versâ*. There is that in your Karma, I know, which entitles you and enables you to do great good in the world, by helping to disseminate knowledge, for which your own mind has been attuned. It has been my duty to arm you with the means of doing this. Personally, I deplore the bad Karma which, in your case, is mingled with the good; but that does not dispose me to throw aside my own task when it is but half done. Individually, as far as I am concerned, I would ask you to stay."

"I am glad to hear you say that, but it does not affect my view of the matter. Individually you may feel that, but, as regards others, I understand you to mean different feelings will prevail?"

That this might be the case the Baron could not deny. He asked for no confidence, but the Professor volunteered some in the course of their conversation—partly, as he explained, because he wanted the Baron's counsel on a matter connected indirectly with his own affairs. That the proceedings set on foot against him would turn partly upon certain adventures of his which, of course, he would not attempt to justify, was evident already, and the lady concerned with those adventures was the lady to whom Annerly had now engaged himself to be married. What was the Professor to do under these trying circumstances?

"Whether," he said, "it will excuse my conduct in your eyes to know that my own marriage has long proved a mere loveless mockery of a marriage, I do not know. That, of course, is my justification before my own conscience. I have legal liabilities, but no moral responsibilities in my own sight, towards Lady Emily."

"But how about the other lady?"

The Professor showed more emotion than he had yet betrayed; but after a brief pause he stated the case with his usual incisive vigour.

"I fell into temptation, and I succumbed. I truly loved Miriam Seaford. I would never have deserted her. I would have looked upon her as my real wife to the end. But I deceived her in one way—she did not know I was actually married. She was a strange creature—a mixture of passion and ambition. For conventional morals she cared nothing—for a place in society she cared a great deal; and when she realized that this was impossible of attainment through me, she left me."

"I am the worst adviser you could choose in such a matter. My life has been passed beyond the reach of the frenzied passions you refer to. It appears to me that Annerly should not be suffered to take any irrevocable step in ignorance of important facts bearing on it. But you must act in this matter on your own discretion, if you act at all."

"Of course," said the Professor, turning the subject shortly afterwards, "I need hardly say that my visit here has been a revelation. It has opened my eyes to new worlds. It will be no fault of mine, but my misfortune alone, if circumstances now thrust me outside the area of your work."

"I hope nothing of that kind need take place. In trying to bring you within that area I have not acted without the approval of those in whose wisdom I trust implicitly. Every attempt of this kind is liable to failure, but I should imagine that the higher part of your nature may assert itself after these trials are past, and triumph over the lower."

Some further talk ensued, and then before they separated the Baron asked that he might be relieved if possible of the duty of making explanations to their friends after the Professor had gone.

"Would you be reluctant to put your case, as far as our friends here are concerned, in Captain Miller's hands?"

"Captain Miller! Well, I'd rather have spoken to Blane. Captain Miller and I have been least intimate perhaps of any couple of people here."

"Captain Miller's nature seems to me true gold. You may not find him a specially lenient critic of any conduct you admit to be faulty; but Blane should, I think, be left to act in this matter in accordance with very deliberate thought. It is very important how he acts, and I hope he will resolve, for the sake of higher interests, to stand side by side with you as a witness to the truth—no matter how you are, for the moment, discredited before the world."

"Good Heavens!" said the Professor, "then *I* was the person Blane was warned not to shrink from, by the voice last night?"

Though he had been frank in acknowledging that blame might attach to him in connection with the disclosures that were threatened, the Professor experienced a shock at the notion that he would be smirched in this way to an extent that might render other men averse from being publicly associated with him. He and Blane had been laying many plans for joint action in literature and society for the purpose of spreading a comprehension of the new truths,—new as regarded their fellow-countrymen, their age and generation,—that had possessed their own minds. The Professor's notion in preparing to leave the castle at once had arisen rather from the thought that the ladies might consider themselves injured by his continued presence under the circumstances, than from apprehension that the morals of the men might be shocked.

"I should hope that Blane would hardly be disposed to throw my friendship over about this affair?" he said.

"You can't hope that more than I; but Blane must act deliberately, and not be caught in any hurried declaration of sympathy, before he understands what he is about. Believe me that will be best."

"I am not used, Baron," said the Professor, "to being guided by any other man's judgment, but yours is—"

"Worth very little in such a matter, and I do not ask you to go by it. It is rather a request that I make than an advice that I venture to tender."

"Either way will do for me."

When the Professor returned to the dining-hall, where they had breakfasted, he electrified Mrs. Miller with amazement, by announcing his immediate departure.

"Urgent private affairs, dear lady; you can't realize—or rather after all that has passed you can't fail to realize—how greatly I regret having to leave you just now. I saw that I must go when I read my letters this morning; but I thought I owed it to the Baron to explain some of my reasons. These have to do with business, and I won't trouble you ladies with them."

"Nothing of a disagreeable nature, I hope," said Mrs. Lakesby, who was still present, some of the others having already dispersed.

The Professor turned upon her a sharp, inquiring look

"I am almost tempted to ask you whether it is likely to end disagreeably?"

Mrs. Lakesby laughed. "I was not thinking of clairvoyant impressions, and I don't want to be a fortune-teller."

"But would you answer me a simple question, even though it seemed an odd one?"

"That depends on the question."

The Professor turned to Mrs. Miller. "Will you let me consult the oracle in your little room—I will not keep her five minutes?"

Mrs. Miller, curious, but not surprised, of course acquiesced. When the Professor and Mrs. Lakesby were together he took a small locket from his pocket.

"You will remember asking me if I had a lock of hair of that lady we spoke of. I have since then written home for a certain locket which I knew to contain it, and here it is. Now I want no longer to know where the lady is, but it would throw light upon some duties which lie before me if I knew the state of that lady's feelings in regard to myself. Can you give me a clue to them?"

As he spoke, he unfastened a small locket, and offered the piece of hair it contained to Mrs. Lakesby. She took it doubtfully and reluctantly.

"It is an odd question for a married man like you to be asking," she said.

"No doubt. If it is necessary you shall have full explanations as to why I ask it—you will know shortly in any case; but it would be more interesting to me if you would answer my question without inquiring further for the moment."

"I have an impression," said Mrs. Lakesby thoughtfully, as she fingered the hair, "that I am treading on very delicate ground. And nothing can be more uncertain than such ideas as this." She spoke, pausing between the sentences, but the Professor waited patiently, and she sat down, still holding the hair and knitting her brows. "You had better not act on anything I say. Oh! I see a small room, like a little drawing-room, and the same woman sitting at a little desk in front of the window. She's looking over letters; she's in some sort of trouble and perplexity. Ah! Here, take back the hair. I don't feel as if this sort of thing was right."

"But cannot you give me the clue I want? I am not seeking it for any bad motive, I assure you. A glimpse of the truth clear of all superficial deceptions would be invaluable to me, and might enable me to redress past mistakes."

"And suppose I make new mistakes? This sort of vision is the most uncertain thing."

"It is too late to ask me to distrust your vision. If you won't tell me, you won't; but for want of knowing the truth I may be enveloped, and others too, in sad misunderstanding."

"You will check what I tell you in other ways? You won't trust to it blindly?"

"Certainly not. It is a clue—a guiding thread in a labyrinth—that I require."

"I don't know how you are mixed up with that woman's affairs, but I should say—I should think that she loves you."

"Thanks, most sincerely. I shall know better what to do now, and may perhaps be able to avert much unhappiness."

"I hope I have not contributed to produce any?"

"That is impossible. Darkness and misunderstandings produce unhappiness, not light and truth-telling."

There was no thought of further occult work that evening at the castle. When Captain Jem, very grave and disturbed, came back from seeing off the Professor at the station, he reported the whole situation to Mrs. Miller, and she told the other ladies in separate confabulations. The Captain told Merland and Blane, and everybody knew all about the situation of affairs by dinner-time. At first discussed in shy allusions, by degrees the moral problems involved came to be more openly debated. The presence of the German servants was no embarrassment.

"Well," said Mrs. Miller, at length giving an opinion that was the first put forward explicitly, "I daresay he's been behaving very badly to the other woman; but Lady Emily's a cold-hearted cat, and I suspect she drove him to it."

"I should never attempt," Blane said, "to form an opinion about the morality of any other man's actions; and, as for married people, every married couple is an insoluble enigma for all outsiders. But I am deeply sorry this thing has occurred, for the sake of the work we were to have done together."

"He is very anxious about that," said the Captain; "he's hard hit in his pride, is our Professor, to think that his name may be a burden to carry, instead of a tower of strength, for any man he works with."

"We have got," Blane answered, "far enough into occultism in the course of this visit to feel that, in anything said to the world on the subject, a very elevated moral tone must be preserved. If the exponents of such teaching as we have to offer are open to reproach of a very commonplace kind, the world will have an easy retort to fling at us."

"The difficulty," said the Baron, "is always to unite perfect reprobation of sin with perfect charity towards the sinner."

"Of course," said Mrs. Miller, "it is a pity, a horrible pity, that we should be hampered in anything we have to put forward about occultism with an objectionable scandal of this sort."

"I am very far," replied the Baron, "from saying that it is a good thing we should be so hampered. But I can just imagine that some tasks should not be made too easy in the beginning. Some men and some ideas must be tried in the fire before they are ready for what they have to do."

"Isn't it rather soon for our new movement to be put through ordeals before it is fairly started even?"

"It may be the people associated with it, who are to go through the ordeals before even the movement begins. But, after all, that is a recondite hypothesis. The practical way to consider the thing seems to me this, that we should always look at the good points of the people we find ourselves thrown with as co-workers, if they certainly have good points, and put up with, or not think about, their failings."

"Baron!" said Blane, "the thing I am feeling chiefly, if you will allow me to say so, is that an outrage is offered, as it were, to your name, which is so profoundly respected by all who know you, that it should not be associated, at this crisis, with any other, tarnished by the breath of scandal."

"My dear friend, my poor name is of no consequence at all. I would gladly, if that were possible, come back amongst you in London next year to let it be of what service it might be to you in any work you try to undertake, for the sake of truth and humanity, but that unfortunately must not be."

This was not the first time that the Baron had indicated the probability of his early retirement to some unknown region; so that what he now said was no surprise to his hearers. He went on,—

"Where I am going, it matters inconceivably little whether men, in your world, hold my name lightly or in respect. Yours is of far greater practical consequence, and you must protect that by any means that seem fit to you."

They had all been examining the records of the previous evening's address too diligently to be oblivious of the direct bearing this had on the question in hand.

"As far as I can make it out," said Mrs. Miller stoutly, "we were all told plainly enough last night that we ought to stand by the Professor."

"The point at issue does not seem to me," said Blane, "to be personal in its nature. I should certainly be willing to stand by the Professor if he were wronged in any way. If public opinion comes, for instance, to treat the Professor unjustly, and we, knowing more about the true facts, see that, why, good Heavens! we should stand by him in face of any calumnious attack. But we don't yet know anything of the rights of the story to come out. It may prove that the Professor is to blame.

In that case we can't pretend to think he is not to blame. We should not help him by doing that, and we should merely forfeit whatever little influence or opportunity of usefulness we may have ourselves."

"I can't help," said Captain Miller, "going back to what we heard last night. This affair was evidently foreseen, and yet the warning was plain against being too much afraid of standing beside a man because people generally might be down upon him."

The conversation led to no very definite conclusions. Blane emphasized his repudiation of the idea that he could be supposed to shrink from incurring odium as such. The question was merely one of being sure of standing on the side of the right—and, as regards the work they proposed doing, of not running the risk of ruining a great undertaking by taking it on hand in an indiscreet way.

"Granted the Professor has great gifts that might be of the utmost service, has he other qualities which may render those gifts worse than useless? It is a question of fact; not of willingness on our part to incur more or less criticism or censure. Who cares for that? I'm sure I don't."

The Baron remained with their shrunken little party during the evening, but a certain depression of spirits had come over them. The loss of the Professor robbed them of the mainspring of their vitality. The energy and general overbearingness of his character had absorbed and obliterated the energies of the others while he had been with them. They seemed now left without compass or rudder.

"Jem," said Mrs. Miller, when the hostess of Heiligenfels and her mate were alone together at the end of the evening, "for the first time in his life Willie Blane is annoying me. He's too finikin."

"Take my advice, and trust to the Baron to manage Willie. That'll all come straight in time."

"In time! and what are we to do meanwhile? It seems to me the whole thing is over, and we've all collapsed. We'd better propose to clear out next."

"H'm!" murmured the Captain, as though reflecting to himself. "Weak-brained sort of chap, the Baron—to get a lot of people together into this business, that all crumple up as soon as trouble sets in."

"Who are you calling names? It isn't the Baron's fault."

"If his crew all desert the ship before he pays her off, it won't seem as though he'd made a very good choice when he first took them on board, will it?"

"Jem," said Mrs. Miller, gazing at him calmly for a few seconds, and perceiving the satire conveyed in his remark, "if you can't find anything to say except to turn your superior officer into ridicule, you'd better smoke."

"Oh! then I hadn't better go and tell the Baron we are thinking of clearing out?"

"If you propose anything of that sort again, Jem," said Mrs. Miller, "I'll divorce you!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MIRIAM'S LOVERS.

THE Professor had been right in assuming that news of the divorce proceeding instituted by his wife would filter into the papers in anticipation of the slow progress of legal ceremonies. Paragraphs began to make their appearance at once, and these were coupled with curious hints concerning odd circumstances under which the facts in preparation for submission to the proper tribunal had come to light. The Professor, it was announced, had been engaged lately in some insane attempt to revive the ancient practices of witchcraft; and his wife, long a sufferer from his cruelty and suspicious of his fidelity, had been driven by indignation at the blasphemous nature of this extraordinary enterprise to fly from the miserable hut in the Hartz Mountains, to which her husband had decoyed her, in order that she might be made the instrument of some of his incantations, and take refuge with friends. There she had been put on the scent of the information which was shortly to be laid before the courts. This statement was no sooner issued than it was declared by other paragraphs to be erroneous in some of its details. The Professor had not been concerned with any grovelling experiments with Macbeth cauldrons. If possible the situation seemed to be rather worse than this, for his wife when she joined him abroad—having quitted the protection of one of her noble relatives for this purpose—had found him established in a palace on the shores of a Swiss lake, the property of a wealthy Austrian Count. Over the mind of this half-witted being he had obtained extraordinary ascendency, and by his resources he had been enabled to organize a vast phantasmagorial display of apparently supernatural effects, the purpose of which was to blind the understanding of a number of persons he had gathered together, and lead them into the formation of a league for the cultivation of the black art on entirely new principles. In one form or another, the story, told of course in a guarded way, attracted a good deal of attention, as it provided an easy subject for lively journalists. "The new Chair of Witchcraft," "Biology and Broomsticks,"—in allusion to one of the ordinary branches of science with which Professor Massilton's name was associated,—"Divorce and Demonology," were a few of the titles which began to decorate the newspaper advertisement bills soon after the Professor's return to London. This certainly was not the way in which he had intended to launch the new ideas he had picked up at Heiligenfels on the attention of the reading public. He bought the newspapers which amused themselves with his affairs, and read them quietly at his chambers, hurt very little by the light sarcasms on his own intelligence with which they abounded, from the stings of which he was protected by the consciousness of superior knowledge, but still fretting a good deal at the thought that he would naturally be held responsible in the eyes of the friends with whom he had intended to co-operate, for all this premature splashing of inconsiderate folly he had so unintentionally provoked.

For the moment, however, he was far too wise in his generation to make any sign in reply to the jeering with which he was assailed. He did not regard the problems with which he had lately been concerned, as likely to be treated successfully by letters to the papers, so he left the jokers to wear the subject out at their own sweet will, and meanwhile addressed himself to a wholly different matter.

He was determined to see Miriam Seaford. Nearly a year had elapsed since he and she had parted. As he had told the Baron, that parting had been brought about by no wish of his. Certainly it had not left him oppressed with an overwhelming grief, but it had cut him deeply at the time. Miriam had thoroughly engaged his ardent affections. He had thrown himself into the romance of his attachment to her, with all the usual energy of his nature. Subject as their relations had been to rupture at any moment, their prolongation over a period of many months had never been tinged with a suspicion of satiety. He had been as much in love with her—a good deal more in love with her in fact—at the end of their *liason* than at the beginning. And he had pondered a good deal over the psychological problem she presented to his mind. That she had been in love with him he did not question for a moment. And the course of events had shown that considerations which would have restrained most women, had very little weight with her. There had never been any private marriage between them, as she had told her aunt, to soothe the distress her conduct occasioned. But still she had believed that a marriage would ultimately put their relations on a regular footing. The Professor had "paltered" with the truth, as he acknowledged to himself, but he had not been guilty, he argued in his own mind, of seduction, for two reasons. First, the essence of that offence he conceived to lie in subsequent desertion, and he never contemplated deserting Miriam for a moment. Secondly, he had not been manipulating false promises to overcome scruples on her own part. Miriam had had no scruples. She was a girl of altogether independent character, for whom conventional rules, as such, had no force whatever. Their compact had been set in the clear light of a mutual understanding from the first. He had framed ingenious theories, having to do with college fellowship rules and the terms under which he held certain appointments, as accounting for the fact which he most frankly declared all through—that he could not marry. Miriam had seemed to accept this condition of things. He had quite voluntarily made legal dispositions of property in her favour to insure her from the contingency of widowhood. But she had never availed herself of these after she left him, had returned to him the documents connected with them which had been put in her hands, and had obliterated them as far as her act could accomplish this. She must have relied on a legal marriage as the end of their relationship, the Professor persuaded himself; and when at last she came to learn the real state of the facts,—for deceptions of this kind can rarely be kept up for very long,—she must in some subtle way have found the position outraging to her self-respect on principles it was not easy to follow, seeing that her self-respect had endured the establishment of their peculiar relations.

Now the situation had changed. All the Professor's passion for her was kindled afresh at the idea that she was now about to pass into the lawful companionship of another man. And a view of duty in the matter was readily constructed in his mind in a way which harmonized with inclination. It would be wrong to let Annerly marry a woman with a past history of which he might be quite ignorant. He should know the truth—assuming that he had been kept in ignorance of this—though the Professor, knowing the fearless and uncompromising character of the lady concerned, did not believe it likely that she had withheld the truth. However, whichever way this might be, Annerly should be protected from marriage with a woman who did not love him, provided this engagement had merely been accepted by Miriam as a *pis-aller*. Nothing could be worse for him than that result, argued the Professor, his keen reasoning faculties failing this time to give him a picture of Annerly's state of mind, according to which alienation of his love was the only supreme misery, and association with her, on any terms, happiness—in varying degrees, perhaps, according to her feeling about him, but still, on any terms, happiness.

The Professor had never argued the matter with Miriam, either at the time she left him or by letter since. No line had ever passed between them. He was not a man to plead or entreat in such a case. Her position had been simple, "You have deceived me. I will have nothing more to do with you." His answer had been, "I kept back a fact from you, but I did not deceive you in essence. I always said it was impossible I could marry you, and I can't. I wish I could." "You deceived me," was the only reply. They had a chilly rather than a stormy scene at a hotel in Geneva. He argued, "I loved you:" she decided that "that was no excuse." She had travelled to London by herself, refusing his proffered escort peremptorily, and they had never met since. But now the situation was, or was about to be, materially changed. He certainly could not have courted the disgrace of the divorce proceedings; he could not have stooped to provide them adequate justification; and he was puzzled now to understand how Lady Emily would construct a charge of cruelty against him to fortify her other plea, and bear out the petition she was addressing to the court; though resolved, under the circumstances, to play into her hands in this matter; but now the disgrace of the divorce would have to be borne in any case. It would be minimized if it should be immediately succeeded by his marriage with the lady whose name, by his fault, would thus be dragged into a humiliating publicity; and he would be able to offer Miriam the fullest possible redress of the past deception of which she complained.

His plan of action was promptly arranged. To go to Miriam without explaining his proposal beforehand would be to court a rebuff. To write to her and await an answer would be to leave her open to other influences than his own. He would arrange that a letter explaining his position should be handed to her at a convenient opportunity when she was alone, and he would follow it up by appearing in her presence ten minutes later. The assistance of a private inquiry-agent would enable him to ascertain the few external circumstances he required to know. *Qui veut la fin* must submit to *les moyens*, he declared to himself, to conquer a certain sense of repugnance with which he engaged the services he required. He wrote, meanwhile, with his accustomed straightforward simplicity, the note to be despatched at the fitting moment.

"My dear Miriam,—For dear you must always be to me—when we last parted I told you I wished I could marry you. You would then have been willing to marry me; but I was unable. As circumstances are now falling out, I shall be able to marry you as soon as certain divorce proceedings, of which you may have heard, are concluded. I never change a clearly-defined desire, and the wish to marry you is as strong with me as ever. Should I persuade you to agree to it, I shall be eager to complete our union—so sadly interrupted—within the shortest period possible after the divorce is pronounced.

"I have heard that you are engaged to marry another man. If you love him and no longer love me, do so by all means. Your great good sense will assuredly, in that case, lead you to clear all possibility of future misunderstandings out of your path by frankness with him at the outset; and I would earnestly express a hope that all good things might be your portion, health and prosperity, and a love that should appreciate you through life.

"If you don't love him, and do still love me, for all our sakes—and foremost for your own dear sake—give up all thought of marrying him. It would be a terrible madness, productive inevitably of awful misery, foremost of all for him. Does it seem odd that I do not say foremost of all for me? My dear child, as *you know,* I am truthful and candid by nature, though once (as you will have it) I told you, or let you think I told you, a big solitary falsehood. In that matter I acted under a correspondingly big temptation, for I was bent on winning you. Well; I say now, that, if you marry a man without loving him, you will make him suffer in the long run so much that nobody can take precedence of him as a victim of that mistake.

"You will see, I think, that I am a reasonable person still, as you have always known me. You had better see me and talk this matter over—then there can be no misunderstandings between us at any rate. I shall present myself at your door very shortly after you get this letter, and I hope you will let me in.

"Ever yours faithfully,
"ARTHUR MASSILTON."

For Annerly, while all this was going on, the shadow of the impending divorce proceedings, in which he knew that Miriam's name must be so painfully mixed up, had lain but as a small cloud upon a distant horizon during a sunny day. He was never tired of telling Miriam how her presence near him again—the privilege of gazing in her face and sitting with his arms about her—was such bliss to him that any other thought except the all-pervading consciousness of that ecstasy, seemed suspended for the time. For a day or two after her restoration to him at Purfleet she had stayed on at her farmhouse and he had found quarters at an inn in the neighbourhood. He would not have lost much of her society if he had gone back to town by the last train and had returned by the first in the morning, but still he would have been sensible of losing some. He would have been watching the time in the evening, when he would rather have been drinking in the radiance of her beauty in total forgetfulness of all other facts in the world. And she was very gentle and submissive to his worship. That was her only demonstration. She surrendered herself to his tornado of tenderness.

"You have suffered for the want of me. I have been more cruel to you than I knew. Take your compensation."

She never withdrew herself from his embraces—except indeed once during the Purfleet time, when they were sitting in the little Enchanted Wood, as they came to call it—when the fire of his love had been playing on her heart in some way she may not have fully comprehended, and the dark rugged face of her lover, surmounted by its great shock of black hair, was lighted up by the gleam of almost poetic genius—the inspiration of his perfect devotion. For three days she had seen no one but him and the old farmer, her nurse's husband.

"Geordie," she said, "sit up—be still!"

There was a tone of surprise and indecision in her voice, and yet no displeasure—nothing to alarm even so sensitive a lover as Annerly, but still something that claimed explanation.

"What is the matter?"

"A curious sensation that was not in the new compact between us. I merely undertook to let you love me—wasn't that so?"

"To let me love, worship, adore you—to accept my unutterable devotion, my beautiful queen. That is all I claim."

"But it appears to me, Geordie, that I am getting fond of you."

The ebb and flow of love is a mystery of nature. Miriam felt the magnitude of Annerly's claim upon her—arising out of his suffering on her account—to be less oppressive in view of the possibility that, after all, she might come to be herself desirous of, as well as sacrificially willing to acquiesce in, a marriage between them.

"Now we'll go back to town," she declared. "The sweetest situation must come to an end sooner or later. Even you will get weary, even of me, if we stay here much longer, and then, perhaps, I might feel regret—which would never do."

She had fallen into adopting, half in joke, Annerly's frequently asserted theory, that the least evil that could befall her was greater than the greatest evil that could befall any one else.

"My queen," he would say, "it is a privilege to suffer for your sake. It is only suffering which does you no good, that should be unbearable for others."

So they returned together to Miss Jameson's little *ménage* at the close of the day. Annerly stayed the evening with them, during the greater part of which time the good aunt effaced herself, and spent some hours privately in her bedroom, praying tearfully, and hoping ardently, that now at last her beloved girl might find her path smooth and pleasant, and the haven she was approaching, one of rest and peace.

Miriam evaded the settlement of a day for the marriage. She promised to issue commands on the subject at no distant date, but said that the emotions she had lately gone through, had been rather tearing and bewildering. She would rather be made love to lazily and dreamily for a little while longer, before turning their romance into anything so commonplace as matrimony. Annerly would not have feared that the romance would suffer by any measures which could ensure its permanence, but he was not in a position to dispute Miriam's will in the matter; and thus the days passed, occupied by the happy lover in cheerful and unremitting industry during all such working hours as it was inconvenient or undesired by Miriam that he should spend with her.

From Heiligenfels he received frequent letters from Merland, telling him in general terms of the work going on there, and of the clairvoyant visions they were having with Mrs. Lakesby, though the account of these was left imperfect from motives Annerly naturally failed to interpret aright. It seemed to him that he was dropped out of the innermost confidence of the circle at the castle by reason of having fallen back into the ordinary aspirations of a life that sought happiness in the world, and he did not rebel against the justice of this treatment.

He was only grateful to Merland, as he explained, for any information that could be given to him in regard to what might be going on.

"From the occult point of view," he wrote, "I am a miserable backslider. But you have known enough of my state of mind, during the last few years, to understand that under the circumstances this is inevitable. I hope you will talk the matter over with the Baron sufficiently to be sure that he shares your comprehension of this. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse.* It is impossible for me to write to him in adequate explanation of my conduct without seeming to feel too apologetic. I could say what I believe to be the truth, that, as things have fallen out, I am destined to be a shield and protection for my beloved Miriam in her great need, that duty would suggest the abandonment by me—for the sake of playing this part—of any personal spiritual advantage I might gain in another path of life. But

I do not want to seem hypocritically charging to duty what my own overmastering desire would command me to do quite irrespective of duty. However we analyze it, since fate allows me to be Miriam Seaford's husband after all, I will not, for any consideration, leave the responsibilities of that trust to any other man. Put my case honestly to the Baron, but put it so that he may know how I recognize to the fullest extent the terrible magnitude of the loss I incur by foregoing what it seemed at one time might have been within my reach—the privilege of being his pupil, and of endeavouring to follow in his footsteps, as far as this unworthy personality of mine might have enabled me to go."

In reply to this, Annerly received a letter from the Baron himself.

"My Dear Annerly," the Baron wrote,

"I gather from our friend Merland that you would be glad, even in the midst of what seems your new-found happiness, to have an assurance from me that I recognize the irresistible force of the circumstances which have induced you to take certain steps you have lately taken. You would have been more or less than—the man you are, to have followed any other course. I believe you are willing to put down to weakness and passion your abandonment of the life of occult study you were so well inclined for—in some respects. But duty need not be ignored because it sometimes chimes in with inclination. If, as I understand, you could hardly have remained in the occult path without sacrificing interests of another person, that had come to be dependent on you, then I think you are quite justified in acting as you did. Happily you were bound by no vows, the infraction of which would have involved a feeling of humiliation, and perhaps worse consequences. I wrote above, what *seems* your new-found happiness, because, while making all possible allowance for your feelings, I do not pretend myself to regard any of the transitory delights which physical existence may afford, as more than shows and delusive appearances of happiness. They come to an end sooner or later, while nothing is regarded as true happiness, in the occult sense, except that which is enduring; and nothing in the nature of consciousness can be enduring unless it is seated in the higher principles of man's nature, which are but very little if at all concerned with the phenomena of earthly life as understood by our generation. I do not want to belittle or disparage the emotions which invest it for you with the attributes of reality. Don't regret the time we spent together. I do not, I assure you, for I know that, come what may, the seeds sown during that time have not been sown in vain. It is better to go a little way in a comprehension of your spiritual opportunities in the ultimate future than not to get any comprehension of them at all. And, though I would be no prophet of any coming evil, the chances and changes of life at *some* future time may lead you to feel that your studies at Heiligenfels after all were not altogether wasted."

It was not till later that Annerly noticed how the phraseology of this note, the kindly feeling of which was all that struck him on a first perusal, was suited to more than one contingency. For the moment he studied it with less attention than he might have given it had it come alone, by reason of the fact that the same post brought him another letter, sent on from the office of a weekly newspaper with which he was closely connected. This was as follows :—

"DEAR MR. ANNERLY,

"Though you did not see us I saw you to-day flash by in a hansom cab, as mamma and I were driving down Regent Street. We are in town for two or three days, on our way to Devonshire, after paying a country visit. I am most eager to hear what took place at Heiligenfels after we left. I am sure all kinds of interesting things must have happened. Do come and see me to-morrow. Come any time during the day that is convenient to you, in the morning, to lunch, or in the afternoon, but mind you come, and send me a telegram to say when I shall expect you.

"Yours sincerely,
"LUCY VAUGHAN."

"What does that mean?" Annerly asked himself. "Just what lies on the surface or something more? She would be interested in the occurrences at the castle, of course, but she might have repressed that curiosity if she had looked back on any of them with resentment."

He telegraphed to fix an hour in the rather late afternoon for going to Eaton Square in response to Miss Vaughan's summons, so that he might not neglect his appointment for that day with Miriam at an earlier hour, and then turned to work.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE INEVITABLE RESULT.

He found her when he went to her in the afternoon sitting in a low easy-chair, with a book in her lap. "Miss Seaford is in the drawing-room," the servant had said, retiring, after opening the outer door, to her own quarters, for he was already at home in the house, and did not, under the circumstances, require to be announced.

"My queen," he said, as he knelt down by her chair, doing affectionate homage to her on his entrance, "the echo of my old yearning for you during the long days when that was in vain, makes me almost tremble with anxiety every time I come to you, lest the blessed fact that you are waiting for me and expecting me, should somehow prove delusive."

"It is all one big delusion in one way," she said. "Why are you so infatuated about me, I wonder? It seems a kind of madness."

"Not a kind of madness, but perhaps a mystery. We know, from the ordinary point of view at any rate, so little about life, that we rarely seek to go behind the facts of any acquaintance between a man and the woman he is in love with, to find out the explanation of that state of things. But I have come to realize lately that two people may perhaps have known one another a great deal longer really in other states of existence than they are aware of when they meet in this."

During the days they had spent together in the country he had already told her a great deal of the new view of things in general he had obtained at Heiligenfels, and indeed had given her the fullest account of all the wonders that had transpired there up to the date of his departure.

"I don't like the notion of being all in the dark about what has taken place before. Supposing you and I have known each other in some former life, how can I tell how you behaved to me then? Perhaps," she cried, sitting up suddenly as though moved by a happy thought, "you may have treated me very badly before, and have justified me in my behaviour to you!"

"If we knew one another before," said Annerly, earnestly, "I am sure of one thing—that I loved you before. I don't think, indeed, it wants explanation, the fact that I love you now. The motive for that is quite sufficiently obvious, without going back behind this life; but if you don't think it sufficient you may assume that another lifetime spent in adoring you was concentrated in my nature to begin with."

"One should have been enough."

"But you would not wish that I had found it so."

"I don't know. I tell you, your love frightens me sometimes. It seems more than is natural. There is only one consolation, you know. It can't last like this if we get married."

"If! Won't you say when?"

"When we get married then. What's that line about man never being, but always expecting to be, blessed?"

"Man never is, but always to be blest."

"That's it. Well, in some upside-down kind of way, that idea might be applied to woman's marriage. It's always to be but it never is a blessed state of things for her."

"Oh, Miriam, my own, if you could only realize the extent to which I mean to make it a blessed state for you, so far as my unchangeable worship can make it so!"

"This is a blessed state, Geordie, except for horrors that may be impending over me. I am sure you are getting the very maximum of happiness it is possible to extract from my society; and, considering the angelic way Aunt Ellen eclipses herself for your benefit whenever you come, I don't know what more you can want."

"She is angelic. But I am insatiable. However, that does not require arguing. At my queen's own sweet pleasure there will come a time, let us hope, that I shall not be any more dependent on Aunt Ellen's goodness."

Annerly told her, soon after this, about the note he had had from Miss Vaughan and all that might lurk within it for Merland.

"I can't suppose that she would write to me, Merland's especial friend, if she did not mean something."

"And is Mr. Merland as badly hurt as you have been?"

"No one can compare his own feelings with another man's. He loved her most truly, no doubt; though latterly he was reconciling himself, it seemed to me from his letters, to the idea of following what we call the occult life, which involves the renunciation of all happiness of the ordinary sort for the sake of sublime spiritual exaltation to be ultimately attained through that sacrifice."

"That's the life you would have led if I had not crossed your path again."

"Probably."

"And don't you think, Geordie, looking at it in a really impartial way, that sublime spiritual exaltation might have been much better for you than—me?"

"You see what the election was that I made when the two opportunities were offered to me."

"I don't think I ever realized that fully before," she said reflectively; "that after all I have spoilt your life; even if I give you myself—as we have arranged—to get tired of at your leisure."

"Miriam, my darling, let us hope you will be graciously pleased not to talk like that any more. Have I failed to make you understand the extent to which I thirsted for you? Shall I begin the explanation all over again? I am never tired of it for my part."

But Miriam would not quit the subject, and questioned Annerly closely in regard to the expectations he had been led to form as to what it might have been possible for him to achieve if he had devoted his life entirely to becoming a follower and disciple of Baron von Mondstern. Annerly naturally rated at their lowest the possibilities that would have lain before him, but then she followed up the other lead suggested by Merland's position.

"Now supposing this young lady says she is ready to accept your friend, and supposing your friend comes to you for advice as to what he should do under the circumstances, what would you say?"

"My queen, it is always incumbent on every one to give every one else about to marry the well-known advice of *Punch*, because the people for whom it is inappropriate, will not take it."

"Will you please to give me a serious answer? Mr. Merland, I understand, has great respect for your advice and influence. You will not deal with him at random in such a matter?"

"Well, then, I should never seriously dream of doing more than putting the alternatives fairly before him. I would try to be sure he was not acting from an immature caprice in turning aside from that life, which, if a man can tread it with cheerful determination, may lead to something not necessarily a happier state than a happy life of the ordinary kind, but probably higher in the scale of nature. But, if I had reason to believe Merland's love for Miss Vaughan came at all within any range of comparison with mine for you, then I should counsel him to marry her if he has the chance."

"Ah, you say that to justify yourself."

"I say that because I have had certain experiences that I would not wish Merland to have."

It will be seen that Miriam's mood on this occasion was not exactly in harmony with that which had been stirred for a time in the "enchanted wood." She would not let go the idea that had just presented itself to her mind, that her lover would have had a superior career open to him if he had not elected to resume the interrupted course of his engagement to her.

"My Miriam!" Annerly at last urged in pathetic entreaty, "will you not consent to put me out of the question for a time, and think of yourself? As things have fallen out, are you not content for your own sake that you did cross my path again?"

She gave him her hand voluntarily at this appeal.

"I was very miserable, Geordie, I confess, and you comforted me. Well, let us hope it is all for the best, and—well, since you quite finally mean not to turn back, we may as well perhaps think about—the date when it is to be."

"When I hear you say that," Annerly murmured to her almost reverently, "you give me such intense delight that it seems as if I had never been truly happy until this moment."

Still the date was not actually fixed.

"I will think about it while you are away, and let you know this evening," she said, for it had been arranged that he should return again after dining in town.

When he went away, she sat still in the arm-chair beside the little writing-table in the window, thinking vaguely, unoccupied and listless. She was only roused from this reverie, after a considerable lapse of time, by the entrance of the servant with a letter for her—the Professor's letter.

She was not listless now. She sprang up and moved about the room in fierce excitement. She could not have told what the emotion was that possessed her. Her aunt came into the drawing-room, dressed for going out, but she kept herself in hand, and said nothing of the letter she was actually holding during the few minutes her aunt spoke to her. She was constitutionally reserved, and it would have been an effort for her, instead of a natural impulse, to have told even her aunt of the dilemma in which she was placed at that early moment of its development.

"I mean to go over and call on the Blenkinsops, darling. Would you like to come too, or would you rather rest quietly at home to-day?"

To Miss Jameson's constant tenderness Miriam was always assumed to be in need of rest and nursing.

"I'll stop at home, aunty dear," she said without hesitation.

Miss Jameson noticed that she was a little nervous, but put it down to the strain of her emotions, and bade her good-bye with affectionate kisses.

"Fate leaves me alone to receive him," Miriam said to herself.

She gave no orders to the servant. She let things drift. She heard a knock at the door, and the entrance of a visitor. An impulse not to be surprised in apparent agitation made her turn to the writing-table in the window, at which she sat down, beginning to push about some of the letters and papers before her, without thought of what they were, and it was in this position that the Professor first caught sight of her as he came into the room. It flashed upon him vividly that it was thus, at a little table before the window in a small sitting-room, that Mrs. Lakesby had seen her in the clairvoyant vision of her caught for a moment during his last morning at Heiligenfels, in the clairvoyant vision which had conveyed to Mrs. Lakesby the impression that the woman so seen, loved him.

"My dear child?" he said, with a commanding sort of tenderness as he came across to her. She stood up as he came in and turned round without speaking, with a frown upon her brows, leaning back against the table with one hand upon it behind her.

"It does me good to see you again," he went on. "Shake hands at all events. That's right," as she slowly lifted her hand to meet the one he held out, unhesitatingly. "I come to you with proposals you may not care to accept, but at all events you can't reproach me for making them, so we can talk them over like friends anyhow."

"You deceived me," she said. They were nearly the last words she had spoken to him at their parting, nearly a year ago. It was not with any set purpose that she opened the conversation this way. She had not intended to speak those words in particular, but they rose to her lips in obedience to what seemed the necessity that she should say something.

"My dear child," replied the Professor, almost laughing, "that was what you said to me before. Of course I did. The situation was too complicated to admit of entire candour at the outset. But I only deceived you in a detail; and I will tell you of one matter in which I defy you to say I deceived you. I never deceived you when I said I loved you; I never deceived you when I said I wished it had been in my power to marry you; and I stand here now to ask you if I did not tell truth in those principal things?"

"It does not matter now which way it was, but if you had not wounded me by the deception I speak of, things might be different."

"My dear Miriam," said the Professor in his frankest manner, "I could not help myself. You would never have listened to me in the first instance if you had known then that I had been a married man. But don't harp any longer on that old string. Let us look to the future in a practical way, by the light of new circumstances that have arisen. Now do sit down quietly like the grandly sensible girl you are, and let us talk. No, don't you sit there. You take this easy-chair, and make yourself comfortable. I'll sit there—I like upright chairs. That's better. Now do answer me a plain straightforward question to begin with, and then I shall know how to deal with you. Have you fallen in love with our friend Annerly?"

"What right have you to ask me the question?" she cried impetuously.

The Professor put up one hand, waved it slightly as in deprecation of her tone, and in the gentlest and most explanatory way replied,—

"No right whatever. It isn't a question of right. We're just talking over certain things of great moment to you, and you know quite well that I have your welfare at heart in what I say. Everything is in your own hands to do exactly as you please—you are strong enough to take your own course. But there isn't any sort of reason why you should not listen to what I say and take it into consideration. You are thinking, I know, of marrying Annerly. Well, you will be equally able to do that, if you are resolved about it, after hearing why, in my opinion, it would be better for you to wait a little longer and marry me."

"Wait a little longer! Has anybody told you that I am in a hurry?"

"There is such a thing as acting precipitately, without being in a hurry in the sense of being eager."

The Professor betrayed no triumph, but he felt from the flavour of her retort that Mrs. Lakesby's impression was already half vindicated at all events. She did not love Annerly.

"You have taken me by surprise. I do not feel sure that I would have consented to see you at all if I had thought the matter over more at leisure."

There was a great contrast between her manner in talking to Professor Massilton and that which was usual to her with Annerly. With either she could not but be queenly and graceful; with neither was she nervous or timid. But with Annerly the grand slow movements of her neck and head, the dignity of her smile, so different from the seductive, inviting smile of coquetry, would have seemed, to any observer who could have compared her two moods, plainly associated with lethargy of the emotions. Now, in talking to the Professor, she was still proud and self-controlled, but her outward calm was produced by the exercise of a strong will, crushing down an internal excitement.

"I am sure you would have seen me, in any case," said the Professor; "for to have shrunk from that would have been a weakness, and you are never weak. You may tell me to be gone after listening to what I have got to say, because you will act as you please, but, even if you do that, I believe you will give me a reason for refusing my proposals, because to deny me that would be rude, and you are never rude."

Miriam was not moved to make any reply to this. She leaned back in her chair, and, as her head rested against the back with her face partly turned up, her clear grey eyes looked straight into her visitor's face, and she held her features in expressionless and statuesque repose, though her heightened colour—heightening her beauty—and her quickened breathing enabled her sagacious suitor to make allowances for her chilly bearing and the affected iciness of the tone in which she spoke. He himself sat beside the opposite corner of the writing-table with one arm resting on it, and his manner was easy and natural, his bearing frank, sunny, and cheerful as usual. The large proportions of the man—nowhere associated with the coarseness or clumsiness of shape that comes on so often in middle life—his perfect healthiness, that made him pleasant to look upon in a greater degree than better claims to be considered handsome might have rendered another man—all these attributes, uniting to produce an exhilarating emanation from his presence, were very apparent to Miriam as she steadily gazed at him while he spoke.

"I have not come to you before, because I had nothing fresh to say, and you made up your mind that our old relationship should end, but I come to you now because the complexion of affairs has changed. I committed a great act of folly in marrying Lady Emily, and I was powerless to undo it. Happily she is going to undo it for me. This will cost me a good deal of money, but it won't ruin me. It will cost you, my poor dear, and that is a great deal worse, a great deal of annoyance, but *that won't last.* Now, if we marry immediately we are able, a world prone to forgetfulness will hardly nourish any resentment against you. In a little while people will only remember vaguely that there was something funny about the Massiltons before they were married. If you marry Annerly the whole situation will look quite different. You will have nothing to live for but his affection, which may be very great. I don't doubt that it is very great. How could it be otherwise? But any woman who marries a man merely to oblige him, without ardently wishing it herself too, is preparing an awful future for him. For, I tell you, no woman living is strong enough to play, to the end, a part, in such a business as marriage. A love that you don't return may still be pleasant for you to receive for the moment, but it will be terribly irksome to you in the long run."

"And suppose I have given promises. Are they to count for nothing?"

"Promises are terrible things. I do not underrate them for an instant. But people may be released from promises, and no man worth the name would hold a woman against her will to a promise of the kind we are talking of."

Miriam was in rather a helpless position in the argument because she could not rebuke the Professor's appeal to her own interests as an appeal to selfishness. That would have been tantamount to admitting that her inclinations would deliver her into his hands. On the other hand she found it difficult to declare boldly her devotion to Annerly, and supreme inclination, above all things, to keep her newly-plighted troth. The conversation went on for a long time, as it had begun, fed by a few disjointed remarks from Miriam, from time to time, but supported mainly by the Professor, who expanded and amplified the theme of his letter with great ease, freedom, and eloquence. Of his own love for her he spoke as of a topic which it would be obtrusive on his part to press for the present.

"You know I love you," he pointed out; "you know I never wavered in that, never wished to interrupt our relations, which constituted a true marriage in all but legality. You know by my presence here to-day, without a word more said, that I love you still, so I won't dwell upon that."

It was a great strain upon Miriam's self-command to keep up an appearance of composure. Torn as she really was by conflicting feelings, it was inevitable that this should break down sooner or later. The incident which upset her equanimity, as things turned out, was a remark of the Professor's, which he almost threw off as a joke—

"Has it ever struck you that you took a mean advantage of me in running away and breaking off what I have so justly called our true marriage? You just left me in a pet and made me very miserable because I had no legal hold over you. If it had not been for my previous entanglements we should have been married like other people, but, as it happened that we could not be, you were free to break faith with me."

"Oh, how dare you put the fault on me like that after all I have gone through?"

Her lips quivered and her eyes filled, but still she maintained a little longer her attempt not to cry outright.

"My dear Miriam, I don't want to reproach you. I only ask you to look at the facts as they really stand in order that you may not reproach me undeservedly. I think you are taking a distorted view of the whole position. I was quite true to you in act and feeling, and never meant to be anything else. The more I think the thing over the less, it seems to me, I am to blame. For all the stuff of a quarrel that there was between us we ought to have made it up thoroughly in two days at the outside."

A vivid reminiscence of all the pain she might have saved herself if she had taken that view of the matter at the time swept over her consciousness, and with it the ghastly conviction that the new path she had chalked out for herself did not really allure her footsteps. The emotions that assailed her were almost written on her face as she looked wildly up to the ceiling.

"Now won't you think if it isn't time for us to be friends again? You used to be happy with me, Mirry darling, and I'm just as much in love with you as ever."

"Oh, you don't know what you are saying!" and now the breakdown finally came, and, turning round towards the back of the easy-chair, she buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed outright. The Professor came over and stood beside her chair, leaning on the back and very gently stroking her head.

"Poor darling! you must have been unhappy. Why did not you write and tell me so? I couldn't come to you without some sign after the way you left me. But now, just give me your hand and you need not say another word, and it will be all right again between us. I respect your free will so much, you see, that, till you give me a sign, I will not even touch you, to speak of."

"I tell you he will go mad. You don't know the way he loves me."

"And I tell you if you marry a man you don't, for your own sake, want to marry, no matter how he loves you, you will have gone mad. Such a reckless sacrifice is the most shocking thing I ever heard of. It would shock Annerly if he understood it."

"I do not pretend—" She did not finish the sentence in that way, but beginning it afresh, after a pause, "I treated him badly when I threw him over before; to do it again now is *impossible.*"

"What a pity Annerly is not here. If he heard you say that, and felt all that it covers, the whole problem would be solved."

"It would kill him."

"I am sure he would suffer, but I respect him too much to believe that he would not rather bear anything than hold you to a promise against your will, and wreck your happiness for life. If you don't love him—and that is clear—he must know it. But he may have most erroneously supposed that his was the only protection available for you; and then, loving you, he would of course marry you at any risk, hoping that it would be the best thing for you. Now look here, Mirry darling. Shall I explain matters to him, if it is too painful for you? You can see him afterwards, to be sure I have explained them right; but I know you will trust me to be honest in the matter, and I swear to you I will manage the matter in a way that shall be most tender and respectful to his feelings."

At first she would only declare that it would be better for her to die. But her victorious lover felt that her surrender could only be a question of time. On his side there were all the forces of her own desire, and the memories of the happy time they had spent together; all the prospects of future happiness, of a recovered position in the world. On the other, there was merely her terror at the thought of what her second desertion of him would mean for Annerly. The Professor accidentally touched a powerful note when he said, in the course of their talk,—

"I honestly believe that it will be better for Annerly in the long run not to marry, even though that means the loss of you. There may be great destinies in store for him along another path in life, which he is altogether fitted for, but for this disastrous passion for you."

"Oh, if he could only think so!" said Miriam.

"My dear, I don't propose that you should desert him, I merely say—let him understand the truth and judge for himself. I think better of him than you seem to; he will rather sacrifice himself than you, and in the long run he will realize that, even as regards himself, that sacrifice will be rewarded by triumphs of a wholly different sort from those he is aiming at now. Only don't let him hurry us all blindfold to destruction without knowing what he is about, and how the whole matter really stands. I will do nothing without your leave, but understand what I propose. I will write to him, if you do not positively forbid me, telling him the whole truth from myself. I will not say I am telling it as a message from you. I will merely tell him to refer to you, if he doubts me, for confirmation of the facts, and then leave him to act as a man of honour should. If he still resolves that you shall sacrifice yourself, then you will still be at liberty to do so."

A little later he said,—

"Now if you want all our lives to be wrecked on a fatal misunderstanding for want of courage to speak truth, you will refuse me your hand." He took her hand as he spoke—and she left it in his grasp.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DOUBLE DISAPPOINTMENT.

ANNERLY had been spending the latter part of the afternoon very pleasantly in the back drawing-room of the Vaughans' house in Eaton Square, supplied by the beautiful Lucy with tea, in fragile cups of extraordinary perfection, in the corner of a couch overshadowed by a magnificent palm-tree, which stood just within the drawing-room, against the open glass-doors leading into a large conservatory filled with tropic growths of luxuriant splendour. Lucy often declared that she never felt quite sure whether she was a sybarite or an ascetic, for she gathered so many nice things about her, but cared for them so little.

"What I care about now, Mr. Annerly," she said, "is to hear all that passed at Heiligenfels after we left—every single thing. I have not had a letter from any one there, and I want to be told everything."

Annerly went over the whole story in as much detail as possible, and day by day. Miss Vaughan asked questions, as he went along, about every one concerned, and her face flamed with excitement at the narrative of what had taken place in the wood.

"I wonder when I shall be able to see the Baron again! What is all the rest of society compared to him? And Mrs. Lakesby too. What a perfectly fascinating creature she is! One seems to be living in two worlds at once when she is with one."

Annerly cordially endorsed these praises.

"But about seeing the Baron again," he said, "I do not know when we shall any of us have an opportunity for that after the party at the castle breaks up, for he is going to disappear then into some retirement of his own, where none of us will be able to follow him."

"Good heavens, how horrible! But how long is he to be away?"

"I can't say. I hope he may return sooner or later, that some of us may see him again, but it looks very uncertain. I know he thinks that after having given such extraordinary exhibitions of the occult power he possesses, it would be impossible for him to live again in ordinary society as he did in London last season."

"Where's the impossibility?"

"Partly that his life would be one continuous resistance to importunity on the part of people who would beg for further displays of occult power—which, for various reasons, he would be precluded from giving; but in a greater degree, I think, because he wants to get the principles of occult philosophy considered on their own merits by the thinking world instead of being illuminated by the artificial excitement that fresh displays of occult power would bring about. I know he is fond of saying that what ought to be done now can better be done by such men as Blane and Professor Massilton"—the name was one which Annerly found rather hard to pronounce in a natural tone—"than by himself."

"But this is a shocking scandal about Professor Massilton."

"Of course it is. All that developed since I left the castle, and I hardly know how the Baron takes it. But I gather from Merland that, by some intricate reasoning, the Baron treats what seems the gross unfitness of such a man as the Professor, regarded as the exponent of a new quasi-religious philosophy, as all in the plan somehow. I do not pretend to interpret this."

"But what is the plan?"

"Books are to be written and some society formed for the propagation of the ideas the Baron has been communicating to us all."

"If books are to be written I suppose you have your share of the work to do?"

"I trust I may still have some share of it; but when I left Heiligenfels I was rather looking forward to a closer and more important course of study than seems possible for me now—other responsibilities have arisen since then to absorb my energies."

"Good Heavens! What can have drawn you away from such opportunities as that? At least, I beg your pardon, I have no business to ask you questions of that sort. Only it seems to me as if nothing could be interesting enough to draw one away from following up such an opening as you speak of."

"It's very simple, Miss Vaughan. There is only one force that could have been strong enough. But I have long been very deeply in love with a lady whom, till very recently, I had no hope of winning. Since then it has become possible for me to marry her, and I am about to do so."

Miss Vaughan looked puzzled and surprised.

"Why should that put an end to your friendship with the Baron? Does the lady object to your going on with occultism? Is she prejudiced?"

Annerly laughed. He was too happy to see any but the amusing side of the idea.

"No, she is not prejudiced at all. But occult science in its highest aspects is a very jealous mistress. A man must give himself up to that entirely and have no other ties in the world if he would succeed in that career."

As he spoke he noticed a shadow on Lucy's face, and it occurred to him that she might put a construction on his words which Merland would perhaps be very sorry to have her put. After a brief hesitation he added,—

"I hope that the change in my plans will only mean a change in the nature of my usefulness in this matter. I may not be able to retire into the kind of monastic seclusion that would be necessary for my own personal development—for the acquisition, in some small degree, of the faculties we have seen the Baron exercise,—but the study of occultism, the interpretation of the pursuit to the world, and the task of elucidating the truth for the benefit of others, will be open to me as much as ever. I am not at all sure but that I may be of more real service that way—that anybody may be—than by obtaining personal development for himself."

"Mrs. Lakesby has got wonderful powers and she has not gone into a monastery."

"She was born with them. But the truth is that 'powers' are not the objects at which a true student of occultism should aim. He should seek a comprehension of nature and the adaptation of his own nature to the highest development possible for him."

The conversation went on for some time longer in a vague and desultory manner. Then Miss Vaughan said,—

"Tell me, Mr. Annerly: suppose some one else you cared about was in doubt whether to be an occult monk or to lead an ordinary life in the world in the way he would most wish to, what would you advise him to do?"

She spoke gravely and earnestly, and Annerly was thrilled with admiration for the thought that he perceived working in her mind. But his chief anxiety was to be sure that nothing he said should rob Merland of the opening that might be developing before him.

"Miss Vaughan, my own act that I have told you of is the most eloquent answer I can give. I know this much, that if a man really loves a woman there is no misery possible for him so bad as having to give her up. I do not believe that he could ever do any good in the path such men as Baron von Mondstern tread, if he took to that as a *pis-aller* when the path he would have trodden should be closed to him. I would only warn such a friend as you imagine against falling victim to a caprice. A real love once formed would be a fact in his life that it would be useless and fatal to oppose."

But he could not translate these abstract theories into a direct application in the absence of any fuller declaration of her meaning from Miss Vaughan, and as he went on talking up the air about the whole subject he failed to revive the brightness and vivacity of his companion. In the beginning of their talk he felt sure she had intended to give him some specific message for Merland. Now he could not elicit this from her by any devices. He even talked of perhaps going back to Heiligenfels for a little while before returning to settle his own affairs. Could he take any messages from her to any of them there? She would have her best love given to Mrs. Lakesby, she said, and to Mrs. Miller too, of course; "and you must tell the Baron I shall die if—but no. He is too great to be talked to in any frivolous, nonsensical manner. It is hardly worth while for you to mention having seen me at all. We are going down to Devonshire to-morrow or next day. You will write to me if anything more of special interest takes place—won't you, Mr. Annerly?"

"Of course I will do anything you wish," Annerly said, now profoundly annoyed at the turn things had taken, and with himself.

"I like engaged men, Mr. Annerly; one can make such friends of them. Now mind, it is not a mere promise to be made to-day and forgotten to-morrow—this about writing to me. Write fully, will you, the day after to-morrow to Devonshire? Something is sure to have happened by that time. And when are you going over?"

"What? To Germany!"

"Yes."

"I had not fixed any definite day. I would have gone any day if there had been any special service to render you by doing so."

"How could that be?—what nonsense! But you will be in town for the next two or three days, in any case?"

"Certainly."

"That's all right. I have got your address, have I not? Is there any hurry for you to go! Well, it is so kind of you to have come, and I am so much obliged. By-the-bye, Mr. Annerly, I do hope you will be happy in your marriage."

He had already risen to go, and was saying good-bye, when she thus gave him her good wishes. The reference enabled him to make one more covert allusion to the subject he was most deeply engrossed with for the moment.

"Miss Vaughan, I believe I am going to be happy—happy as it has not seemed possible for me to dream of being for several years past; and though, of all at the castle, I perhaps had the best chance of acceptance by the Baron in more intimate relations than those any of us have yet had with him, the prospect I speak of fully reconciles me—more than reconciles me—to the loss of that chance. I do not think women realize, in all cases, what they may sometimes be to men."

Miss Vaughan looked at him full in the eyes, earnestly and thoughtfully, as he spoke. Annerly waited for her to answer, and she seemed to pause, as if to determine what she should say, but at last she smiled slightly, and held out her hand. "I do not wonder you have been successful, Mr. Annerly, you can plead eloquently," she said, and with that he had to take his departure.

Across the serenity of his own contentment a streak of really acute distress penetrated Annerly's feelings as he walked away. He had been guilty by his own clumsiness in some way of having checked Miss Vaughan's impulse in Merland's favour, which must have been the motive governing her in sending for him. It was a beautiful thought, evidently, which had disturbed her intention. She had been for the first time struck with the notion that the gift of her love would be a fatal gift for her lover; that a finer destiny might await him if he were not turned aside from the opportunity held out to him by the Baron. And she had drawn back at the very brink of a decisive step, leaving him, Annerly, quite powerless to restore her to her former state of mind,—to unsay the few words that had turned her aside from her spontaneous movement. Was he, who had reviled Merland for thinking of love in preference to the occult life, going not only to be a backslider himself in face of the supreme temptation, but the destroyer of his friend's happiness? Ought he to tell Merland all that had passed, perhaps unsettling his mind again for no purpose? or should he be guilty of hiding from him a state of facts which Merland would perhaps be indignant with him for hiding if he understood the situation? It was altogether very perplexing. He thought of writing quite frankly to Miss Vaughan, and pleading for Merland in his unconscious absence. After all she would not be surprised to hear that he knew what had passed in the conservatory. As this struck him, he wondered that he had not been more frank in the conversation that had just taken place. He felt deeply contrite and more distressed than at any moment since his reconciliation with Miriam.

It would be a relief to go and talk the matter over with her that evening. Her bright woman's wit might perhaps suggest a way out of the dilemma. He was too little inclined for casual conversation with acquaintances to visit his club, so he dined at a restaurant, and walked up to Miss Jameson's, so as to put through the time which had to elapse before he would be expected there for the evening. He would think no more of the perplexity about Miss Vaughan, he decided during his meal, till he could talk it over with Miriam. She should have the credit of suggesting the course to be taken to rescue his friend from the peril to which his, Annerly's, awkwardness had exposed him. It would all come right in the end. Out of what an awful entanglement had *his* affairs righted themselves at last. Prone by his recent thinking to attribute more importance than he used formerly to give them to hidden influence on the psychic plane, he began to speculate as to how far it would be reconcileable with occult science if he assumed that the abnormal intensity of his love for Miriam had been an efficient cause in bringing about the circumstances under which she had been restored to him. The theory would not cover all the facts; but he amused himself as he walked along by working it out as far as possible, and took pleasure in thinking how he would set it before Miriam with much fantastic detail in the course of their talks together that evening.

"Miss Seaford at home?" he muttered as a mere matter of form when the door was opened, as he stepped into the hall.

"Oh, if you please, sir," said the servant, "Miss Seaford has gone to bed with a very bad headache, and says would you kindly excuse her to-night?"

The check was unexpected. Annerly had told her that afternoon that he would be sensible of anxiety sometimes as he approached her door lest the happiness of finding her ready to receive him should be too intense to be real—but on this occasion the notion of being disappointed of seeing her had not crossed his mind. He felt a great chill at the heart as he stood hesitating on the door-mat.

"I am very sorry to hear she is not well. It is very sudden." The servant stood silent, and had no further remark to make. "Is Miss Jameson at home?"

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then replied with much emphasis, "No, sir, she's gone out for the evening."

There was nothing for Annerly to do under the circumstances but to go away.

"Tell Miss Seaford, if you please," he said, "how greatly

I regret to hear she is not well, and that I will call to inquire after her early to-morrow afternoon.

With that he went away, and Susan, the maid-servant, went in to Miss Jameson, who was in a very agitated state in the drawing-room, and reported the course she had taken.

"I thought, most likely, you wouldn't want to see nobody to-night, m'm, so I told Mr. Annerly you was out."

"Quite right, Susan," Miss Jameson answered; "I'm rather upset, and I do not want to see any one."

Neither Miss Jameson nor her niece had been confiding in Susan, but the elder lady had not Miriam's faculty of reserve, and her agitation had been very apparent in her little household.

With a sense of dejection and anxiety that he told himself over and over again was exaggerated and unjustifiable, Annerly made his way back to his chambers. The elasticity of spirits which had made the walk from town up to the Regent's Park a pleasure, had given place now to a lassitude which drove him to take refuge in a hansom, and the evening was all before him when he lit his lamp and sat down in his arm-chair with a book, the perusal of which, for that matter, invited him as little as any other occupation for the time that he could think of.

The rooms he inhabited were in a large house altogether built for chambers in the Adelphi region. His own little suite consisted simply of two: and, as he never took regular meals there, except the breakfast which was brought to him, under an arrangement with the porter, he had no other service available than that of the *femme de ménage*, who set his quarters to rights every morning. His outer door bore his name painted on it, and a little sliding panel to indicate whether the tenant was "out" or "in." He left this standing unaltered at "out" as he entered, not that any visitors were likely to disturb his solitude, but from a general impulse to shut himself up, and ward off the remotest chance of commonplace companionship.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CRISIS OF A LIFE.

There was a letter-box affixed to the outer door, and he had been at home about an hour or so, trying to shake off the depression he felt, arguing that sensitiveness of this kind to a momentary disappointment was idiotic and absurd, but failing to recover the elastic hopefulness of the last few days, when he heard a letter drop in. For some time he did not go in search of it. The circumstances were not such as could leave room for any letter from Miriam, and correspondence relating to any other matter could wait. He forgot that a letter had come, after a while. He sat down and tried to write, but the effort was distasteful and unproductive. Then he conceived the notion of writing to the Baron on the subject of the interview he had had with Miss Vaughan. That would perhaps be the best thing to do in that difficulty, and loyalty to his friend when he addressed himself to this task roused his energies. It would be necessary to describe the situation very fully to put the Baron in a position to decide whether the statement should be passed on to Merland or not, so a long letter was called for. He had been at work on this for some time, and the later hours of the evening had already come on, when there came a knock at his outer door. "Who on earth can that be?" he thought, conscious at the same moment of a strange sensation sweeping all over the surface of his body as it were, nothing that could distinctly be called apprehension or dread, but,—"Bah! what a nervous fool I am to-night," he thought; "what"s the matter with me? But what do I care who it is—I do not want to be disturbed." And then he remembered that his panel marked "out," and that any acquaintances who might have looked in at his rooms in passing, on the chance of finding him in, would notice that and go away. Letters could be put in the box, and parcels could be left with the porter. He turned to his writing again. And then,—the knock did not come again as at first, but in some way the sound of the knock seemed vividly repeated in his inner consciousness. It suddenly reminded him of the inner voice that had called him upstairs on the night when he visited the Baron in the turret-chamber.

"I'm upset and stupid to-night—I'd better go to bed," he thought; but now he was impelled to go and see if there was anybody outside. As he opened the inner door he noticed the letter, which had come some hours previously, in the letter-box. He took this out, though he did not stop to look at it for the moment, and then he opened the door.

A very well-known friend stood outside. Annerly started with pleasurable surprise.

"Baron von Mondstern!"

"An unexpected visitor, of course," said the Baron, with his gentle, sympathetic smile and kindly, mellow voice; "but not an unwelcome one, I trust, even at this late hour?"

"More welcome than any words can tell," Annerly replied with enthusiasm, as the Baron entered. He closed both doors and motioned his visitor to the easy-chair.

"Sit down there and tell me what good fortune has brought you. It never crossed my mind that you would be leaving Heiligenfels for the present."

Annerly was not disconcerted by the fact that the Baron had not offered to shake hands. The custom was one that he had often spoken of as inconvenient for any one very sensitive to so-called "magnetic" influences, and his friends at the castle had long ceased to associate his own peculiar modes of greeting, which did not generally include the touch of the hand, with any want of kindly feeling or courtesy on his part.

Annerly threw down his letter on the writing-table without looking at it, and turned round his writing-chair to face his visitor.

"Do you find the room too hot? At this time if you are in London, lamps in a room soon make it oppressive. I will open the window a little more."

"I do not care which way it is. I am not very sensitive to heat and cold."

When Annerly turned back from opening the window the Baron had removed the soft felt hat he wore on entering. The lamplight shone upon his rich brown hair and beard and broad clear forehead; and the deep-blue eyes which always caught the attention of any one who looked at him seemed to Annerly to exhale a soothing influence of some kind in a greater degree even than was usual.

"Now let us have a quiet talk," said the Baron; "there is a good deal to be said between us, for you are coming to a sort of crisis in your life."

Annerly, as he listened, felt that the disappointment of that evening in reference to Miriam had some association with the crisis. The shadow of a new separation from her lay already on his heart. The prospect of this was not in his mind yet as a definite conception, but he knew that the Baron had something to break to him. And yet for the moment he contemplated the new menace with a sort of unnatural composure, as if he were looking on at something happening to a third person.

"It is about Miriam?" he said.

"It is about her, certainly, and other things as well. You know, already, that a human life includes more than the physical facts occurring in one of its objective manifestations. At the castle, since you left, they have been busy with the investigation of this idea, as perhaps Merland has told you."

"In some general terms only. I have been thinking that, perhaps, they were getting on to discoveries which were not available to be shared with any one who, like myself, had fallen back into worldly interests."

"None of our friends at Heiligenfels are deeply initiated as yet. Nothing has taken place that need have been concealed from you, but part of it has been withheld from altogether sympathetic motives. They did not want to tell you about your past Karma because they thought it would disturb your present happiness, but the time has come when it is useless to be reticent any longer."

"My Karma! Has that been under examination?"

"Yes. If you have not been thinking out the problems of Karma a great deal, you would be surprised at the visions Mrs. Lakesby has obtained of a certain personality that has been identified as a previous objective manifestation of your own. The author of the Karma now governing your life—you yourself under different conditions—enjoyed life but too well. You shall eventually get such details as they have written down, but for the moment I need only tell you, in general terms, that you were endowed with extraordinary personal advantages which hurried you into much temptation, that you revelled in the love of several women, whose lives were thus partly wrecked through your fault, that the circumstances that have made the love of woman a sorrow to you in this incarnation, rather than a delight as formerly, were due to the inevitable reaction of the past.

Annerly only gave vent to a half-articulate ejaculation of interest. The Baron went on,—

"Your friends thought that their vision might have been delusive, because you had just announced the resumption of your engagement with the woman you love, and this seemed to discredit the past indication. They did not foresee that Karma might be so relentless as to involve you in a crisis of further suffering."

"In what way am I to lose her again?" Annerly asked, calmly, as if he were in some condition of psychic anæsthesia. He knew that he was under torture, but he did not seem to feel it for the moment.

"I'll tell you directly; but I'll tell you something else first. The visions they got from Mrs. Lakesby did not quite cover all the ground as regards yourself. They divined the nature of the bad Karma that has made you suffer, but they had no full view of the good Karma of a different kind which is latent in your nature; and for the sake of which, to be candid with you, I am drawn into such strong sympathy with you. For now I may tell you that the passionate love you feel for the lady you would wish to absorb into your life, is not itself an emotion which claims my sympathy; still less the more prosperous passions of your previous life. The man in you, who is my friend, has but, as I regard the matter, been temporarily obscured by the overgrowth of his lower nature during the Roman incarnation, and by its sad after-growth in this. Mrs. Lakesby's vision did not give your friends the complete clue to the comprehension of your character. Going back to a still earlier period they would have found you already developed to a very considerable extent as a student and devotee of Nature's mysteries, an unselfish enthusiast for the cause of spiritual knowledge, a lover of the higher principles in all humanity rather than of the lower principles in one representative thereof. That enthusiasm is all latent in your nature still, my friend; the knowledge you once possessed will, without very much difficulty, relatively to its magnitude, be recoverable; your consciousness may again be restored to the better self from which, for a time, it has been exiled."

"As usual," Annerly said, "your influence reasserts itself, and I feel another being when I am talking with you."

"It is merely that I comprehend and can stimulate your latent higher nature. The loftier emotions you refer to are from yourself as much as the stormy passions that have partly stifled them. At the best I can help you to realize what lies below the surface, and your old Karma fully entitles you to my help in this respect. And now, what I mean by the crisis in your life is this. You must conquer your lower nature on the plane of your lower nature, and the final suffering which is now about to exhaust your lower Karma must be honestly met when, so to speak, you are broad awake in the physical life. Just now you are not sensitive, as it were, to the love-pangs you have been experiencing."

"It seems to me as if we were talking about some one else. If, as I understand, I am to lose Miriam again, I should have thought I must have gone mad."

"You are entitled not to go mad this time. But all the same the feeling deadened in you for a moment will reassert itself. And now you may read your letter."

"What letter? This?" turning to the table, and taking up the letter he had brought in when the Baron came. "Does this bear on what you are saying?"

"You will see."

It was from Professor Massilton, and ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR ANNERLY,

"I am quite sure you are a man of honour, and no man of honour would take a mean advantage of a woman. So I am going to write what less straightforward people would think a very strange letter.

"We are both in love with Miriam Seaford. I should have been married to her before now if I had not been fettered by a miserable marriage, which is no marriage really. But our bond, under the circumstances, could only be a loose one. Under the impulse of certain impressions at the time, Miriam shook it off. I had to acquiesce, much to my regret. If you have ever thought of me as a seducer and a deserter you have totally misunderstood my position.

"Now I am going to be free of my old entanglement. I am thus enabled to offer Miriam regular marriage, and have hastened to do so.

"I find she has re-engaged herself to you. But I believe she has done this for your sake rather than for her own.

"Now if she prefers to marry you, with full liberty of choice in the matter, I, as an honourable man, am ready to bow to her decision. I am quite sure that you, an equally honourable man, will be quite ready to bow to her decision, if it is the other way.

"For the moment you hold her promise, and I do not suppose that she will break that promise, if you hold her to it; but you will not be the man I take you for if you force a woman to marry you against her inclination, by holding a promise given under different circumstances *in terrorem* over her conscience.

"I have seen her and have her permission to put the matter thus before you.

"All I propose is—let her have liberty of choice. A line from you, saying that, as far as you are concerned, she has that liberty of choice, is all I suggest.

"May the man she loves best be her husband, whoever has to suffer of us two. Will you join me in that wish?

"Ever yours truly,

"ARTHUR MASSILTON."

"As I said," went on the Baron, when Annerly had finished reading the letter, "you will have to conquer your lower nature on the plane to which it belongs. The situation will hurt you more to-morrow than it does to-night, when your consciousness is partly on a higher plane; but you will not forget the feelings of the higher plane, and they will help you to get the victory. And remember above all this—that you need not associate the idea of humiliation with suffering of this kind. You need not refer it to any other person. What you have to go through is the last spasm of your old Karma created by your own act. And now, I believe, your intuitions are so fully awakened that you will see, as clearly as I do, the rest of what I mean."

"Yes: you mean that recognition of the truth in this respect closes the operation of Karma, and is the escape from its torment. As long as the inevitable is resisted its effects are aggravated—thrown into manifestation."

"Just so. The crisis will be past when you can look back upon it in that spirit."

"But it is inconceivable that I can bear to lose Miriam again with this strange benumbed insensibility."

"Quite so; the insensibility is merely temporary, but it may help you to realize that the subsequent pain will be but temporary. And now again I ask you, why, in the absence of a higher consciousness, men cling to the torments of their Karma?"

"Because they fail to see that the pain itself is a function of the lower nature. The difficulty will be to realize, in such a case as mine, that it is of the lower, for love is not of that."

"Selfish love *is* of that—above all things it is of that. Not of the grossest animal nature—I do not mean that—but it is acquisitive—exclusive in its operation; the love that would embrace its object. Unselfish love merely seeks the happiness of the person loved—not his or her companionship."

"The only thing to know is with whom she will be happiest?"

"Ask her the question fairly, abide willingly by her answer, and you will have conquered. And now I must be going. I have come but to see you."

The Baron as he spoke did not rise to go, but he fixed his eyes intently on Annerly, who then felt for the first time that there was something abnormal about his presence.

"You have learned enough in conversation with me at Heiligenfels not to be too much surprised at meeting some of the queer experiences your occult studies have shown you to be possible. Do not fall into the mistake of supposing that this is not I who have been talking to you because presently you will be conscious of it no longer. The real *I* has been here, and the best token of my presence will be found in the thoughts with which you will be armed for the strife of your coming battle. The mere outward phantasmagoria on the plane of the physical sense is wanted no more."

Was it a mist that came over Annerly's eyes as the Baron spoke, or did the form that he had seen a corporeal reality a few moments previously, and with whom he had been conversing all this time, undergo some change? It was blurred and indistinct before him, though still in the easy-chair, where the Baron had been sitting—from which he had never moved. Annerly in his excitement leaned forward, gazing at the fading apparition. Sitting as he did, in his own writing-chair partly turned round, his face came down as he thus bent forward to the level of his left arm, stretched out upon the table. A sense of bewilderment overcame him,—a tumult of emotion that he could not interpret. The easy-chair was quite vacant now, there was no trace of his visitor left,—there was no trace of benumbed insensibility to pain in his heart. His whole nature seemed torn and throbbing in a passion of agony. His face was bowed upon the table, and his hand clutched an open letter, and, man as he was, his breast was bursting with convulsive sobs.

"What does it mean?" he almost shrieked aloud, as he sprang up into an upright position.

But in a silent and empty room there was no reply.

"Miriam, Miriam!" he moaned in despair, "have you driven me mad?"

But he remembered as he spoke that the Baron had said he was entitled not to go mad.

The capacity for suffering on the plane of his own personality had fully come back to him, but he had lost no sentence, no idea that had been uttered in the conversation just passed. He remembered even his own words. He remembered that a little while ago he had been talking of this letter and its contents with perfect composure. He remembered that he had said the question was with whom she would be happiest, and again he said so, "That shall be the only question; but oh, my Miriam, oh God, if it would suffice that I might merely die for you?"

CHAPTER XXX.

ANNERLY'S RETURN.

About a week later the little party at Heiligenfels were gathered in the evening on the terrace after dinner, their favourite resort, except on the rare occasions when cloudy weather during the day made the evenings chilly, and Blane had been reading aloud some chapters he had already written of a book he had in preparation on certain aspects of occult science. The anticipations Mrs. Miller had been expressing as to the great success this book ought to achieve, by reason of bringing rational explanations to bear upon some of the more familiar though quite uninterpreted phenomena of mesmerism and clairvoyance, had been received by the author with gloomy distrust, for he rarely took rose-coloured views of any enterprise depending on his own achievements.

"I am a raw student of these subjects, on which I am professing to teach the world. While I am putting these pages together I have the Baron to refer to for the elucidation of difficulties, and for the whole theory or doctrine on which they rest. Where shall we all be when we cannot turn to him for help any longer?"

"Happy thought," said Mrs. Miller: "suppose he takes a quiet country-house near London, and does not go away out of our reach at all."

"If," said the Baron, "you were to send a servant to Cologne, to do some business for you, would it be a happy thought on his part if he were to take lodgings over a wine-shop, and not come back?"

"It is not easy," said Captain Jem, "to think of you in the light of somebody else's servant, but it ought to be easy for us, I think, to look on you as knowing best what is the right thing to do. But then, ladies always know better than the people who know best."

"Will somebody please hit the person who spoke last?" said Mrs. Miller.

"Anything else to oblige you, Mrs. Miller," said Merland; "but he's too big and savage."

"If I'm really wanted again," said the Baron, "depend upon it I shall be sent. But, in truth, the work to be done in the world as a sequel to the beginnings that have been set on foot here must be done, if at all, by others and not by me. All healthy growth of the mind must develop from within, and the same holds good of great movements of thought in society at large. The penetrating insight into Nature which occult science affords is not a gift to be bestowed on great masses of people by external benevolence. It can only accrue to people by the cultivation of their faculties, and by attracting them into the right channels of thought and study. Now the nucleus of ardent students which we have constituted here is quite large enough to grow, and to provoke such a ferment of thought in society as may really lead to great results, if the time proves to be ripe."

"I think the time may be ripe," Blane said, "but perhaps not the nucleus you speak of. At least, I only speak for myself."

"I once knew a man in China," said Captain Miller, "who said he only knew one word of Chinese. But he had taken a fort with it."

"Let us have the details, Captain Jem," said the Baron; "I daresay there is a moral to your story."

"The word was 'wailo,' which means 'get out,' 'go to the devil'—a very popular sort of word in China. My friend had been taking a morning walk during our campaign on the Peiho, and stumbled quite by accident on a bit of a Chinese battery, open at the back and masked by trees. It would have been death to run, so he jumped in among the Chinamen and sang out 'Wailo!' They thought there was a regiment behind him and bolted like hares."

"But now please interpret your parable, Jem," said Mrs. Miller.

"Dear Mrs. Miller," said Blane, "I'll interpret it for you and cry *peccavi* at the same time. Whatever you know, whatever you can do, trust pluckily to it and do the best you can with it. Of course Jem is perfectly right. I should not have thought 'wailo' enough to say under the circumstances and should have let the Chinamen slaughter me."

"Jem will be the best captain of our nucleus after all," said Merland.

"Say the bo'sun," suggested the hero of the moment.

"If there was one person still amongst us," said Mrs. Miller, "who is among us no longer, there would never be much need of considering who should be captain."

"Meaning Professor Massilton," said Blane, a little coldly.

"Our masterful Consul," said Mrs. Lakesby.

"By-the-bye," said the Baron, "I got some papers from London to-day that I want to show you all. I brought them down before dinner."

He went back into the drawing-room for a moment and returned with two or three newspapers.

"The Philistines have fallen on the Professor already and have been enjoying themselves greatly at his expense."

The Baron then read aloud one of the most offensive of the articles that had been written on "Biology and Broomsticks." The pungency of its sarcasm was altogether at the Professor's expense. The audience on the terrace was indignant and irritated.

"The Professor," said the Baron, "is a well-known man, with a scientific reputation to make a good mark for scoffers. He, of course, must expect to bear the brunt of the first gush of contempt which ignorance and bigotry pours out against new ideas, whether they are altogether new, or only very old ones come round again."

"How will such a proud man as the Professor," Mrs. Lakesby suggested, "bear to be abused like that?"

"He bears it very coolly," said the Baron. "I had a letter from him about this very article and some others, in which he expresses, indeed, very acute annoyance, but not on his own account. I will read you a part of the letter"—taking a few letters from his pocket, from which he selected one. "He writes:—'I am chiefly annoyed about all this on account of all you people at Heiligenfels. I hoped to have been an element of strength in the work you have in hand, and I have merely brought a shower of brickbats at your heads. It is in that reflection that lies the mortification for myself. Personally, I have the hide of a rhinoceros in regard to all newspaper attacks. These things hurt some people. They simply do not hurt me I am not stoical; I merely don't mind. But others may not be like myself, and I fear especially that Blane, who is a very delicate-natured, sensitive fellow, may suffer pain at all this ribaldry in regard to a cause to which he is devoting himself. There is simply no help for it that I can see. Meanwhile I only hope I may serve as lightning-conductor to attract all this idiotic nonsense, and convey it harmlessly to oblivion.'"

"Well done, Professor," said Mrs. Miller. "As for the fool who wrote the article you have just read, I wish he was—"

"Able to appreciate his folly," interrupted the Baron. "We will not send out unholy wishes to breed in the astral light."

"I am grateful to him," said Blane.

"What on earth do you mean, Willy?"

"He has been the cause of the writing of that letter the Baron has just read. After all, it may be the Professor who will suffer from co-operation with us, more than our cause from association with him."

"I am glad you take that view of it," said the Baron, "because in the long-run I think that will be the case. Of course, the Professor would be still more useful to the cause of truth than he is likely to be, even if he were perfect in all respects; but for any man who can do good service I do not think we should hold aloof merely because he can't do better. After all, what we want to recommend to the world are certain ideas—not certain men. It may be a good thing that people should see that, if these are true, it does not in the least matter who utters them."

"What are you making a point at, Mrs. Lakesby?" asked Merland. "What do you see?"

All of them were used to the little signs of manner, the peculiar fixed look in the eyes, that betokened the perception of some appearance invisible to the rest by the clairvoyante.

"Nothing," she said. "I've got a feeling. Who is there coming here, Baron?" she asked.

"Are your nerves sensitive to an approaching presence? I should not be surprised if we had a visitor this evening—or rather a returning friend."

"Annerly," she said. "He's coming up the road to the castle."

There were exclamations of surprise and interest—not so much due to the fact that Mrs. Lakesby had scented his approach by means of her strange extra senses—for the guests at the castle had long grown used to taking abnormal manifestations of one kind and another very coolly—as at the return itself of their absent friend. In a general way the Baron had made them acquainted with the course of events, communicated to him, as they presumed, by letters from the person concerned. They knew that the engagement Annerly had formed had been broken off, that its rupture had involved some act of heroism on his part, and that the circumstances were altogether of a painful nature, so that it would be better to make no reference to the incident whenever they should see him again.

"I suppose," Mrs. Miller said, "that he will take up the occult life altogether now?"

"Probably," said the Baron; "and I may as well add that, while I believe Mrs. Lakesby's vision of a previous incarnation he has been through, to have been quite trustworthy, Annerly's natural affinities for occult study seem to me to point to some other probably still earlier incarnation in which he had already advanced a great way on the path. Unhappily it is easy to slip back at any time before the further shore of real knowledge is attained."

"I'm heartily glad we are to have Annerly with us again," his friend Merland said. "He and I have been so much together, and I know him so well, that of course I am very much attached to him, but I think you all took a liking to him in spite of his shy ways."

This was very warmly confirmed. But the Baron intimated that Annerly would not stay at the castle this time.

"I hope you will not think me too mysterious, but Annerly will be going to-morrow on a journey I have ventured to suggest to him. He merely stays with us for one night. If you like, Merland, you could come with us in the morning, for I mean to go with him part of the way."

The programme thus arranged, indicated so plainly that Annerly had taken, or was taking, some decisive step in the direction of devoting himself to the great pursuit, that his arrival shortly afterwards was invested with even keener interest than it would have excited otherwise. Old Franz came in person to announce to the Baron that Mr. Annerly had reached the castle, and had gone into the library.

"Ask him to join us here," said the Baron, and then Merland and Mrs. Miller went into the drawing-room to meet him. In this way they saw him first in the fully-lighted room, and were both startled by a strange and undefinable change that seemed to have come over his face in the short time he had been absent. He was aged in some way, and at the same time his manner had more confidence and dignity than it had been marked by formerly. He greeted his friends cheerfully, and Merland with great warmth of feeling, but he did not pretend to any gaiety of manner. On the other hand he betrayed no nervous embarrassment, though the situation—as they all knew that his adventures, while away, had been of a very stirring character—might have been a little awkward.

"Why didn't you come in time for dinner?" Mrs. Miller asked.

"I had many preparations to make before leaving London. I have come very early, really, rather than very late, for if I had not travelled straight through I should have only reached here to-morrow."

"Then you did not sleep at Cologne?"

"No."

There were further inquiries as to whether he had dined, and so forth, but he wanted nothing, and merely dropped into a vacant chair on the terrace as if he had never been away.

The Baron had not told the circle at the castle of any circumstances which connected Annerly's affairs with those of the other absentee; so Mrs. Miller asked presently, without being at all aware that she was treading on delicate ground, whether Annerly had seen the Professor in London.

"Yes," Annerly answered with composure, "only a day or two before I left."

"How does he take the infamous articles that are being written about him in the papers?"

"Very coolly, I think. He's a very strong man—the Professor. Besides, his private affairs engage his attention very closely just now."

There was a good deal more talk on this subject and on the probable authorship of the stories that had been put in circulation. Mrs. Miller had not at first realized where the responsibility for this almost certainly might be placed.

"How wicked and treacherous of him!" she cried, referring to Sir John Hexton.

"When a piece of mischief is done," said the Baron, "it is no consequence, except to himself, who has done it. A world that does not realize the operation of Karma is needlessly alarmed lest evil-doers will not be punished. Nobody can punish them so certainly as they do that for themselves."

"After they're dead? Well, I daresay you're right in theory, but I think it's a pity some people should have to wait."

"The greatest pity for them," said Annerly. "It is better to get disagreeable things over at once."

"And then, thousands of years hence, when Sir John Hexton may be doing penance for his sins in some other incarnation, I shan't be there to look on and say serve him right."

"Let us hope," said the Baron, "you will be better employed."

"—in doing penance for your own," added Captain Jem, pensively.

The conversation amongst the group at large kept, in this way, to the surface of things. It was not till Annerly and Merland were alone together in Annerly's room, when the general separation for the night had taken place, that any intimate explanations were given by Annerly concerning the past few days.

"I've gone through a great deal of experience since I saw you last, Claude, and it seems to me as if a great period of life rather than a few weeks had passed in the interim."

"Tell me as much as you can, old man, and no more than you like. I am sure you have had a frightful time."

"It is all in the day's work. I have been through a great crisis—a great operation in psychic surgery, and I am all the better for it, but a good deal sobered. I could laugh when I look back to the last time I was in this room, and imagined myself ready to enter on the occult life. I think I am ready now—to begin—but I am an entirely changed man. And that is the important thing to explain to you, Claude. The outer facts are not of so much importance. You know I met with Miriam Seaford again and got our old engagement renewed. I knew, in the bottom of my heart, all the while, that she had taken pity on me rather than anything else, but I was willing to get possession of her on those terms rather than on none. And that was the key to the understanding of the old nature, which I think I have dropped. I was very truly in love, but I had not mastered the A.B.C. of unselfishness in love."

"Good Heavens, Annerly, why you would have had yourself skinned for her at any time."

"Perhaps so, but I would not have willingly surrendered her to another man that she might be happier with him than she could be with me. The intense agony I used to experience in longing for her was all pure selfishness. It was not that I thought she was unhappy, I merely was so myself; and the contemplation of that fact made me miserable. I had got my consciousness in fact altogether seated in my own personality,—to put the thing in occult language. I was living in the lower principles of my nature, quite oblivious of the higher. Now under help and guidance I have succeeded in making the transfer. The wrench was something quite extraordinary. I have been in distress of mind before, but I never went through any pain to compare with that I was immersed in this time last week, and for a day or two longer."

"But how did the break-off happen then—if you can bear to speak of it?"

"It was Massilton she really wanted to marry,—our Professor. When I found this out the crisis began. When I was able to write and tell her that she was quite free as far as promises to me were concerned—it was determined as to its nature. When I could go to her, as I did before I left London, and bid her good-bye, composedly, as a friend not as a lover at all—it was over. She was the only person who showed emotion at our parting."

"But what was this more than a final culmination of the unselfishness which you have always shown in this matter, as it seems to me?"

"I should either have not acted as I did—or I should have unsettled my reason in doing so—if it had not been for the Baron's psychic influence. That is just as plain to me now as if it had held me up from falling over a precipice. The first evening he came to me—"

"How do you mean came to you? He has never been away from here."

"Never mind the mere occult science of the matter. The real man visited me if in a phantom body, and was as real to me, while with me, as if he had come over by train and steamboat. When I realize what occultism is as regards the training of the soul, the outer machinery of its working on the physical plane seems of no importance. The Baron came to me first this night last week, and he opened my eyes just before the crisis came on to the possibility of consciousness on the higher plane, from which the cravings of the lower do not seem to be of such omnipotent supremacy as they do on that level. Nothing he did saved me from one inevitable pang of suffering, but through this all I realized that it was right to suffer; that through embracing that suffering it could be annihilated, conquered, and put away in the background."

"But *have* you conquered it? Are you really through with it, and contented with the prospect before you?"

"I would not stoop now to examine into the matter. Do I suffer? Do I not suffer? What does it matter? That is not the thing to live for either way. The life I am passing through is worthless, unless I make it of supreme value by realizing its worthlessness. I am, I hope, on the road to do that. To wish to escape from suffering, and be peaceful, content, happy, is still to be living in the lower plane of personality. The higher self within me and that within you—far closer together than we realize while walled off from each other in these physical bodies—cannot suffer; at all events, not in the way we are talking of. To live up into that higher self is to achieve the transfer of consciousness I speak of. I know that sort of language is misty and comfortless, but I am sure you will catch my meaning."

"I realize your meaning quite fully. It seems to me, in my small way, I have gone through the change you speak of. I have no thought now of going back into any other life than this. Sooner or later the Baron—"

"My dear Claude, your Karma and mine, as you know, are two very different forces. One cloudy day does not spoil a summer, just as one delusive gleam of sunshine does not make a fine season. No two people have to achieve their purification in the same way. For some it may come through happiness and for others through suffering. Don't suppose that you must work out your redemption by the same means I have had to employ. I am no prophet; but still I say that our paths in life, even if they both tend upwards towards an elevation of consciousness unto that higher level of which I spoke, may lie through a very different sort of country."

"Why are you talking in such enigmas?"

"Because I have no knowledge which enables me to talk in any other way. But take no hasty resolutions of any kind for the present. Wait and see what happens—and now about to-morrow."

Annerly had already settled with the Baron the time at which they should start, which was to be early in the morning. He arranged the time at which Merland should join them, and then their talk drifted back to details of what had transpired since they parted. Merland filled up all the blanks of the information he had sent his friend by letter concerning the clairvoyant visions, and learned the full particulars of all that concerned the complication of Annerly's affairs with those of the Professor.

"Outside the infraction of certain moral laws—growing rather perhaps out of our marriage institutions, than having themselves an absolute existence—there has been nothing to blame in their conduct. The Professor never meant to be unfaithful to his engagements. The union between them was a genuine marriage in all but the name. But it is next to impossible to comment on other people's conduct. Except in glaring cases one should never try. The real hidden motives are undiscernible nearly always."

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE CONSERVATORY AGAIN.

NEXT morning the Baron and his two companions walked down the hill together, crossed the river in a small boat, and mingled with the little crowd of pleasure-seeking tourists on the steamboat pier at Schlessig. There they got one of the boats going up the Rhine, and went up a few stations to a place at which Annerly was going to take the train. Nothing had been said as to his destination, and Merland felt that it would be indiscreet to ask any questions.

They all had a frugal breakfast together at a riverside hotel, and then went to the station to see Annerly off. The talk during the whole of this time had been on abstract subjects. It was only as they stood together in the railway waiting-room, Annerly having got his ticket for some unknown place in his pocket, that Merland realized, with a blank, rather forlorn feeling, that he was losing his friend for a very indefinite period.

"It's hard to part with you, Geordie, in this final sort of way. We've been together, off and on, for a long while."

Annerly looked at the Baron, and the Baron at him, both with grave understanding in the eyes. Already there were common thoughts quick to arise between them, which no third person could readily follow. Then, after a little hesitation, and grasping Merland's hand, his friend said gently,—

"It won't be for long, Claude, in any case, and you shall certainly hear from me."

Merland felt the separation all the more for these few words, but nothing further was said on either side to show emotion. The noisy glass doors on to the platform were opened, the train announced, and, with a simple "Good-bye," Annerly went on with the other passengers, while Merland and the Baron strolled away back to the river.

"There goes Annerly," said Merland, as they caught sight of the train speeding on its way, at a turn of the road, "shooting away into a new life. Dear old boy! I hope it will be a brighter one for him, and a better than the one he is leaving. That has been a rough time on the whole."

"It has been a period of purification for him, of keen suffering through the effect of old Karma, compressed into narrow limits; but the progeny of the Flaccus they have told you of, have ceased to exist. The Annerly from whom you have just parted is the successor of a nobler and earlier self than that. If possible, I will procure a vision for our seeress which shall show you the earlier self of which I speak; but now I want to talk to you of another topic."

Merland felt that the motive with which the Baron had desired his company that morning was now to be made manifest, for hitherto there had been nothing that had passed, while the three had been together, which explained the purpose of their expedition.

"I want to talk to you, for a little, about yourself, for I know that you have not been without aspirations, which prompted you to court the trials which Annerly is about to confront. You, too, have felt the attraction towards the higher spiritual life that you vaguely appreciate, and one glimpse of which indeed, if I mistake not, you even enjoyed. Is not that so?"

"Certainly it is so," Merland answered, confidently. "The glimpse you speak of came to me at a moment of painful excitement, when I did not appreciate it as fully as I should now. I am more than ready to follow your lead into the pursuits in which you have conquered your own—if I may put it that way without disguise—your own exaltation above ordinary men."

"You are ready to give up hopes of ordinary earthly happiness for the chance of attaining, across much trial and suffering, the opportunity of benefiting your fellow-creatures on a higher plane of activity than that to which you properly belong."

"I don't want to put the matter in any way which seems to make out my aspirations nobler than they are. I do not at present understand how I should benefit anybody else by leading what we have come to call the occult life—by earning, if possible, exceptional knowledge and acquiring abnormal power. But I have got a clearly defined feeling that that is the best sort of life to lead, anyhow, and I wish to lead it. If it brings about opportunities of doing good to others I shall be very glad."

"You see," the Baron said, "that the situation is this: we must do everything of this sort with our eyes open. Suppose I could give you reason to believe that you are not driven into the occult life by the stress of any disappointment in this one really,—that the dearest desires you have formed in your heart might after all be realized, provided you made efforts to accomplish them,—while, on the other hand, if you forbore from doing that, that you might throw yourself into a career that might lead to a rapid evolution of your higher spiritual nature, but would certainly for the time being be one of self-denial and painful effort,—what choice would you make?"

Merland made no immediate reply because the Baron's language seemed so suggestive that the alternatives he set forth were not of a kind to be hastily dealt with.

"That is a complicated idea," he said. "Because—"

He found it difficult to state the case in an abstract form, but still shrank from changing the tone of the conversation.

"Well, the thing strikes me this way. If I myself am really the only person to be considered, I would rather constitute myself your pupil, if that is possible, than attempt to recover any sort of happiness of the kind I was aiming at before I understood your position, so far as I do, which is not much. But—"

"You are quite right to hesitate in the way you do. Our lives are rarely quite isolated from those of other human beings on our own plane. But I do not want to talk in enigmas. The case seems to me one in which you are not really entitled to put aside the duties of the plane in life to which you belong till you are quite sure that they do not link you with it decisively. Annerly had no such duties. On the contrary, the renunciation of the ties which chiefly bound him to the world had itself become the highest and only duty he owed the world. And I will tell you more: your Karma does not claim that you should quench your alliance with the world in suffering. Just as it would be very wrong of me to try and beguile any unqualified neophyte into the toilsome path of occult progress by holding a glittering bait before him, so it would be wrong for me to dissuade you from attempting whatever your strength may enable you to strive for. But I want you to realize that, as long as a smooth path leads up-hill the way you are going, no one is bound to get off it to walk in the stones and ruts at the side."

Still, without direct reference to the character of the worldly happiness Merland had been aiming at during the earlier part of his visit to the castle, the conversation went on interspersed with digressions on the general principles involved. They took a steamboat back to Schlessig, and recrossing the river strolled slowly up the hill. The Baron gave Merland gently to understand, that, while on the one hand his worldly Karma had certainly been of a kind which need not have entailed upon him any acute distress, he was also without the peculiar advantages arising from great spiritual progress accomplished in a former life which had asserted themselves powerfully in Annerly's case after the exhaustion of the influences bequeathed to his present life by the Roman incarnation of which they had heard something.

"All I would have you realize," the Baron said, "since a false analogy might otherwise have confused your judgment, is, that the circumstances under which it became a noble and heroic thing on Annerly's part to surrender his claims on the woman he loved so earnestly, have nothing to do in your case with a question you once asked—without getting an immediate answer."

"Baron," said Merland, not without agitation of feeling, "do you know something more about this matter than you have yet told me? I have seen through the blind conceit which made me put that very inappropriate question, and have long since submitted to the justice of the arrangement which kept back from me anything so unnecessary as an answer."

"My friend, it would be contrary to my habits and rather taking me out of my proper sphere if I played the part of love's messenger. And I have no message for you from Miss Vaughan—if you mean that; but I have got something to tell you about her. She and her mother are returning for a while to the castle."

"Coming back here!"

"Even so, and very shortly. They have been good enough to feel a strong desire to see a little more of me before I go away for what may be a long absence, and they only realized lately that I should not be able to return after this autumn to London; so, instead of going to their own house in Devonshire, they have decided once more to honour Heiligenfels."

"Baron," said Merland, some time after this as they approached the castle, "it is natural, very natural, that they should want to see you again, but after what has passed—except on one very extravagant supposition—it would be pleasanter for them both, perhaps, that they should not find me here. It may be, indeed, that they imagine I have already gone."

"It is a delicate and nice feeling on your part that suggests what you propose; but Mrs. Vaughan made no terms in arranging to come back, and I do not think you are called upon to shrink from meeting them. If you would rather indeed know how you stand in the graces of the lady you are most concerned with—"

The Baron hesitated as he spoke, and they came in under the outer archway leading into the first courtyard—the courtyard in the middle of which were flower-beds, and from the battlemented terrace of which there opened the door leading into the conservatory. Standing at this door they saw Captain Miller in his favourite morning-coat of brown velvet. It was a little past lunch-time.

"If in point of fact," said the Baron, as he greeted the Captain with a wave of the hand, and as they walked round the terrace to join him, "if you want at once to get an answer to the question which still awaits its reply—go in and ask for it."

He put his hand on Merland's shoulder as he spoke, turning him round towards the conservatory door, and then, slipping his arm into Captain Jem's, walked on, leaving the young man alone.

"Go in and ask for it."

With expectations raised to fever heat, and yet with a feeling that the glorious possibility was *im*possible, Merland entered. Standing by the same open window where he had seen her last, alone, and in the same grey dress she had worn that morning, above which glowed in her cheeks, as it were, the same magnificent flush, which the first surprise of his audacity had called forth, the beautiful Miss Vaughan was there before him. Had he met her again under any other circumstance his greeting would have been one of respectful reserve; but her look, her smile—a little shy and confused; the overwhelming significance of the whole situation, evoked an emotion in her lover's heart which swept away all thought of playing a part.

"Lucy," he cried in wild delight, springing forward; and, with passionate adoration seizing her hand, he knelt once more to kiss it.

"I have been slow in giving you an answer," she said; "but you know you took me by surprise. You offered me a flower, if I remember rightly."

He could never tell how it got there, but as she spoke he felt that something was slipped into his hand. In that castle of enchantment it was relatively a little thing to happen, but, by some wonderful play of the forces that were all around them there, a sprig of stephanotis had settled between his fingers.

"It is here!" he cried in astonishment, and Lucy took it.

For a little while the meaning of its acceptance blotted out between them all thought even of occult wonders.

"But did you know I was here? Did you come provided with that flower?" asked Lucy.

"No. Not till I saw the glorious sight of you did I know you were here."

"Look! There is a little curl of paper round it. See, there is writing on it."

They examined the morsel of paper, and the words it bore were: "With a friend's blessing on the betrothal."

"Oh Lucy! How is it possible you can have granted me the stupendous gift which all this signifies? When I made my desperate declaration I was simply blind to everything else but my overwhelming love and your supreme loveliness. I only learned later how monstrously unbefitting it was for me to speak to you in this way."

"I have often been made love to, Claude, but on thinking it over, this seemed to me the first time I had loved back."

THE END.

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