

MR. COSWAY AND THE LANDLADY.

I.

THE guests would have enjoyed their visit to Sir Peter's country house--but for Mr. Cosway. And to make matters worse, it was not Mr. Cosway but the guests who were to blame. They repeated the old story of Adam and Eve, on a larger scale. The women were the first sinners; and the men were demoralized by the women.

Mr. Cosway's bitterest enemy could not have denied that he was a handsome, well-bred, unassuming man. No mystery of any sort attached to him. He had adopted the Navy as a profession--had grown weary of it after a few years' service--and now lived on the moderate income left to him, after the death of his parents. Out of this unpromising material the lively imaginations of the women built up a romance. The men only noticed that Mr. Cosway was rather silent and thoughtful; that he was not ready with his laugh; and that he had a fancy for taking long walks by himself. Harmless peculiarities, surely? And yet, they excited the curiosity of the women as signs of a mystery in Mr. Cosway's past life, in which some beloved object unknown must have played a chief part.

As a matter of course, the influence of the sex was tried, under every indirect and delicate form of approach, to induce Mr. Cosway to open his heart, and tell the tale of his sorrows. With perfect courtesy, he baffled curiosity, and kept his supposed secret to himself. The most beautiful girl in the house was ready to offer herself and her fortune as consolations, if this impenetrable bachelor would only have taken her into his confidence. He smiled sadly, and changed the subject.

Defeated so far, the women accepted the next alternative.

One of the guests staying in the house was Mr. Cosway's intimate friend--formerly his brother-officer on board ship. This gentleman was now subjected to the delicately directed system of investigation which had failed with his friend. With unruffled composure he referred the ladies, one after another, to Mr. Cosway. His name was Stone. The ladies decided that his nature was worthy of his name.

The last resource left to our fair friends was to rouse the dormant interest of the men, and to trust to the confidential intercourse of the smoking-room for the enlightenment which they had failed to obtain by other means.

In the accomplishment of this purpose, the degree of success which rewarded their efforts was due to a favoring state of affairs in the house. The shooting was not good for much; the billiard-table was under repair; and there were but two really skilled whist-players among the guests. In the atmosphere of dullness thus engendered, the men not only caught the infection of the women's curiosity, but were even ready to listen to the gossip of the servants' hall, repeated to their mistresses by the ladies' maids. The result of such an essentially debased state of feeling as this was not slow in declaring itself. But for a lucky accident, Mr. Cosway would have discovered to what extremities of ill-bred curiosity idleness and folly can lead persons holding the position of ladies and gentlemen, when he joined the company at breakfast on the next morning.

The newspapers came in before the guests had risen from the table. Sir Peter handed one of them to the lady who sat on his right hand.

She first looked, it is needless to say, at the list of births, deaths, and marriages; and then she turned to the general news--the fires, accidents, fashionable departures, and so on. In a few minutes, she indignantly dropped the newspaper in her lap.

"Here is another unfortunate man," she exclaimed, "sacrificed to the stupidity of women! If I had been in his place, I would have used my knowledge of swimming to save myself, and would have left the women to go to the bottom of the river as they deserved!"

"A boat accident, I suppose?" said Sir Peter.

"Oh yes--the old story. A gentleman takes two ladies out in a boat. After a while they get fidgety, and feel an idiotic impulse to change places. The boat upsets as usual; the poor dear man tries to save them--and is drowned along with them for his pains. Shameful! shameful!"

"Are the names mentioned?"

"Yes. They are all strangers to me; I speak on principle." Asserting herself in those words, the indignant lady handed the newspaper to Mr. Cosway, who happened to sit next to her. "When you were in the navy," she continued, "I dare say your life was put in jeopardy by taking women in boats. Read it yourself, and let it be a warning to you for the future."

Mr. Cosway looked at the narrative of the accident--and revealed the

romantic mystery of his life by a burst of devout exclamation, expressed in the words:

"Thank God, my wife's drowned!"

II.

To declare that Sir Peter and his guests were all struck speechless, by discovering in this way that Mr. Cosway was a married man, is to say very little. The general impression appeared to be that he was mad. His neighbors at the table all drew back from him, with the one exception of his friend. Mr. Stone looked at the newspaper: pressed Mr. Cosway's hand in silent sympathy--and addressed himself to his host.

"Permit me to make my friend's apologies," he said, "until he is composed enough to act for himself. The circumstances are so extraordinary that I venture to think they excuse him. Will you allow us to speak to you privately?"

Sir Peter, with more apologies addressed to his visitors, opened the door which communicated with his study. Mr. Stone took Mr. Cosway's arm, and led him out of the room. He noticed no one, spoke to no one--he moved mechanically, like a man walking in his sleep.

After an unendurable interval of nearly an hour's duration, Sir Peter returned alone to the breakfast-room. Mr. Cosway and Mr. Stone had already taken their departure for London, with their host's entire approval.

"It is left to my discretion," Sir Peter proceeded, "to repeat to you what I have heard in my study. I will do so, on one condition--that you all consider yourselves bound in honor not to mention the true names and the real places, when you tell the story to others."

Subject to this wise reservation, the narrative is here repeated by one of the company. Considering how he may perform his task to the best advantage, he finds that the events which preceded and followed Mr. Cosway's disastrous marriage resolve themselves into certain well-marked divisions. Adopting this arrangement, he proceeds to relate:

The First Epoch in Mr. Cosway's Life.

The sailing of her Majesty's ship Albicore was deferred by the severe illness of the captain. A gentleman not possessed of political influence might, after the doctor's unpromising report of him, have been superseded by another commanding officer. In the present case, the Lords of the Admiralty showed themselves to be models of patience and sympathy. They kept the vessel in

port, waiting the captain's recovery.

Among the unimportant junior officers, not wanted on board under these circumstances, and favored accordingly by obtaining leave to wait for orders on shore, were two young men, aged respectively twenty-two and twenty-three years, and known by the names of Cosway and Stone. The scene which now introduces them opens at a famous seaport on the south coast of England, and discloses the two young gentlemen at dinner in a private room at their inn.

"I think that last bottle of champagne was corked," Cosway remarked. "Let's try another. You're nearest the bell, Stone. Ring."

Stone rang, under protest. He was the elder of the two by a year, and he set an example of discretion.

"I am afraid we are running up a terrible bill," he said. "We have been here more than three weeks--"

"And we have denied ourselves nothing," Cosway added. "We have lived like princes. Another bottle of champagne, waiter. We have our riding-horses, and our carriage, and the best box at the theater, and such cigars as London itself could not produce. I call that making the most of life. Try the new bottle. Glorious drink, isn't it? Why doesn't my father have champagne at the family dinner-table?"

"Is your father a rich man, Cosway?"

"I should say not. He didn't give me anything like the money I expected, when I said good-by--and I rather think he warned me solemnly, at parting, to take the greatest care of it.' There's not a farthing more for you,' he said, 'till your ship returns from her South American station.' Your father is a clergyman, Stone."

"Well, and what of that?"

"And some clergymen are rich."

"My father is not one of them, Cosway."

"Then let us say no more about him. Help yourself, and pass the bottle."

Instead of adopting this suggestion, Stone rose with a very grave face, and

once more rang the bell. "Ask the landlady to step up," he said, when the waiter appeared.

"What do you want with the landlady?" Cosway inquired.

"I want the bill."

The landlady--otherwise Mrs. Pounce--entered the room. She was short, and old, and fat, and painted, and a widow. Students of character, as revealed in the face, would have discovered malice and cunning in her bright black eyes, and a bitter vindictive temper in the lines about her thin red lips. Incapable of such subtleties of analysis as these, the two young officers differed widely, nevertheless, in their opinions of Mrs. Pounce. Cosway's reckless sense of humor delighted in pretending to be in love with her. Stone took a dislike to her from the first. When his friend asked for the reason, he made a strangely obscure answer. "Do you remember that morning in the wood when you killed the snake?" he said. "I took a dislike to the snake." Cosway made no further inquiries.

"Well, my young heroes," said Mrs. Pounce (always loud, always cheerful, and always familiar with her guests), "what do you want with me now?"

"Take a glass of champagne, my darling," said Cosway; "and let me try if I can get my arm round your waist. That's all I want with you."

The landlady passed this over without notice. Though she had spoken to both of them, her cunning little eyes rested on Stone from the moment when she appeared in the room. She knew by instinct the man who disliked her--and she waited deliberately for Stone to reply.

"We have been here some time," he said, "and we shall be obliged, ma'am, if you will let us have our bill."

Mrs. Pounce lifted her eyebrows with an expression of innocent surprise.

"Has the captain got well, and must you go on board to-night?" she asked.

"Nothing of the sort!" Cosway interposed. "We have no news of the captain, and we are going to the theater to-night."

"But," persisted Stone, "we want, if you please, to have the bill."

"Certainly, sir," said Mrs. Pounce, with a sudden assumption of respect.

"But we are very busy downstairs, and we hope you will not press us for it to-night?"

"Of course not!" cried Cosway.

Mrs. Pounce instantly left the room, without waiting for any further remark from Cosway's friend.

"I wish we had gone to some other house," said Stone. "You mark my words--that woman means to cheat us."

Cosway expressed his dissent from this opinion in the most amiable manner. He filled his friend's glass, and begged him not to say ill-natured things of Mrs. Pounce.

But Stone's usually smooth temper seemed to be ruffled; he insisted on his own view. "She's impudent and inquisitive, if she is not downright dishonest," he said. "What right had she to ask you where we lived when we were at home; and what our Christian names were; and which of us was oldest, you or I? Oh, yes--it's all very well to say she only showed a flattering interest in us! I suppose she showed a flattering interest in my affairs, when I awoke a little earlier than usual, and caught her in my bedroom with my pocketbook in her hand. Do you believe she was going to lock it up for safety's sake? She knows how much money we have got as well as we know it ourselves. Every half-penny we have will be in her pocket tomorrow. And a good thing, too--we shall be obliged to leave the house."

Even this cogent reasoning failed in provoking Cosway to reply. He took Stone's hat, and handed it with the utmost politeness to his foreboding friend. "There's only one remedy for such a state of mind as yours," he said. "Come to the theater."

At ten o'clock the next morning Cosway found himself alone at the breakfast-table. He was informed that Mr. Stone had gone out for a little walk, and would be back directly. Seating himself at the table, he perceived an envelope on his plate, which evidently inclosed the bill. He took up the envelope, considered a little, and put it back again unopened. At the same moment Stone burst into the room in a high state of excitement.

"News that will astonish you!" he cried. "The captain arrived yesterday evening. His doctors say that the sea-voyage will complete his recovery. The ship sails to-day--and we are ordered to report ourselves on board in an hour's time. Where's the bill?"

Cosway pointed to it. Stone took it out of the envelope.

It covered two sides of a prodigiously long sheet of paper. The sum total was brightly decorated with lines in red ink. Stone looked at the total, and passed it in silence to Cosway. For once, even Cosway was prostrated. In dreadful stillness the two young men produced their pocketbooks; added up their joint stores of money, and compared the result with the bill. Their united resources amounted to a little more than one-third of their debt to the landlady of the inn.

The only alternative that presented itself was to send for Mrs. Pounce; to state the circumstances plainly; and to propose a compromise on the grand commercial basis of credit.

Mrs. Pounce presented herself superbly dressed in walking costume. Was she going out; or had she just returned to the inn? Not a word escaped her; she waited gravely to hear what the gentlemen wanted. Cosway, presuming on his position as favorite, produced the contents of the two pocketbooks and revealed the melancholy truth.

"There is all the money we have," he concluded. "We hope you will not object to receive the balance in a bill at three months."

Mrs. Pounce answered with a stern composure of voice and manner entirely new in the experience of Cosway and Stone.

"I have paid ready money, gentlemen, for the hire of your horses and carriages," she said; "here are the receipts from the livery stables to vouch for me; I never accept bills unless I am quite sure beforehand that they will be honored. I defy you to find an overcharge in the account now rendered; and I expect you to pay it before you leave my house."

Stone looked at his watch.

"In three-quarters of an hour," he said, "we must be on board."

Mrs. Pounce entirely agreed with him. "And if you are not on board," she remarked "you will be tried by court-martial, and dismissed the service with your characters ruined for life."

"My dear creature, we haven't time to send home, and we know nobody in the town," pleaded Cosway. "For God's sake take our watches and jewelry,

and our luggage--and let us go."

"I am not a pawnbroker," said the inflexible lady. "You must either pay your lawful debt to me in honest money, or--"

She paused and looked at Cosway. Her fat face brightened--she smiled graciously for the first time.

Cosway stared at her in unconcealed perplexity. He helplessly repeated her last words. "We must either pay the bill," he said, "or what?"

"Or," answered Mrs. Pounce, "one of you must marry ME."

Was she joking? Was she intoxicated? Was she out of her senses? Neither of the three; she was in perfect possession of herself; her explanation was a model of lucid and convincing arrangement of facts.

"My position here has its drawbacks," she began. "I am a lone widow; I am known to have an excellent business, and to have saved money. The result is that I am pestered to death by a set of needy vagabonds who want to marry me. In this position, I am exposed to slanders and insults. Even if I didn't know that the men were after my money, there is not one of them whom I would venture to marry. He might turn out a tyrant and beat me; or a drunkard, and disgrace me; or a betting man, and ruin me. What I want, you see, for my own peace and protection, is to be able to declare myself married, and to produce the proof in the shape of a certificate. A born gentleman, with a character to lose, and so much younger in years than myself that he wouldn't think of living with me--there is the sort of husband who suits my book! I'm a reasonable woman, gentlemen. I would undertake to part with my husband at the church door--never to attempt to see him or write to him afterward--and only to show my certificate when necessary, without giving any explanations. Your secret would be quite safe in my keeping. I don't care a straw for either of you, so long as you answer my purpose. What do you say to paying my bill (one or the other of you) in this way? I am ready dressed for the altar; and the clergyman has notice at the church. My preference is for Mr. Cosway," proceeded this terrible woman with the cruelest irony, "because he has been so particular in his attentions toward me. The license (which I provided on the chance a fortnight since) is made out in his name. Such is my weakness for Mr. Cosway. But that don't matter if Mr. Stone would like to take his place. He can hail by his friend's name. Oh, yes, he can! I have consulted my lawyer. So long as the bride and bridegroom agree to it, they may be married in any name they like, and it stands good. Look at your watch again, Mr. Stone. The church is in the next

street. By my calculation, you have just got five minutes to decide. I'm a punctual woman, my little dears; and I will be back to the moment."

She opened the door, paused, and returned to the room.

"I ought to have mentioned," she resumed, "that I shall make you a present of the bill, receipted, on the conclusion of the ceremony. You will be taken to the ship in my own boat, with all your money in your pockets, and a hamper of good things for the mess. After that I wash my hands of you. You may go to the devil your own way."

With this parting benediction, she left them.

Caught in the landlady's trap, the two victims looked at each other in expressive silence. Without time enough to take legal advice; without friends on shore; without any claim on officers of their own standing in the ship, the prospect before them was literally limited to Marriage or Ruin. Stone made a proposal worthy of a hero.

"One of us must marry her," he said; "I'm ready to toss up for it."

Cosway matched him in generosity. "No," he answered. "It was I who brought you here; and I who led you into these infernal expenses. I ought to pay the penalty--and I will."

Before Stone could remonstrate, the five minutes expired. Punctual Mrs. Pounce appeared again in the doorway.

"Well?" she inquired, "which is it to be--Cosway, or Stone?"

Cosway advanced as reckless as ever, and offered his arm.

"Now then, Fatsides," he said, "come and be married!"

In five-and-twenty minutes more, Mrs. Pounce had become Mrs. Cosway; and the two officers were on their way to the ship.

The Second Epoch in Mr. Cosway's Life.

Four years elapsed before the Albicore returned to the port from which she had sailed.

In that interval, the death of Cosway's parents had taken place. The lawyer

who had managed his affairs, during his absence from England, wrote to inform him that his inheritance from his late father's "estate" was eight hundred a year. His mother only possessed a life interest in her fortune; she had left her jewels to her son, and that was all.

Cosway's experience of the life of a naval officer on foreign stations (without political influence to hasten his promotion) had thoroughly disappointed him. He decided on retiring from the service when the ship was "paid off." In the meantime, to the astonishment of his comrades, he seemed to be in no hurry to make use of the leave granted him to go on shore. The faithful Stone was the only man on board who knew that he was afraid of meeting his "wife." This good friend volunteered to go to the inn, and make the necessary investigation with all needful prudence. "Four years is a long time, at her age," he said. "Many things may happen in four years."

An hour later, Stone returned to the ship, and sent a written message on board, addressed to his brother-officer, in these words: "Pack up your things at once, and join me on shore."

"What news?" asked the anxious husband.

Stone looked significantly at the idlers on the landing-place. "Wait," he said, "till we are by ourselves."

"Where are we going?"

"To the railway station."

They got into an empty carriage; and Stone at once relieved his friend of all further suspense.

"Nobody is acquainted with the secret of your marriage, but our two selves," he began quietly. "I don't think, Cosway, you need go into mourning."

"You don't mean to say she's dead!"

"I have seen a letter (written by her own lawyer) which announces her death," Stone replied. "It was so short that I believe I can repeat it word for word: 'Dear Sir--I have received information of the death of my client. Please address your next and last payment, on account of the lease and goodwill of the inn, to the executors of the late Mrs. Cosway.' There, that is the letter. 'Dear Sir' means the present proprietor of the inn. He told me your wife's previous history in two words. After carrying on the business with her

customary intelligence for more than three years, her health failed, and she went to London to consult a physician. There she remained under the doctor's care. The next event was the appearance of an agent, instructed to sell the business in consequence of the landlady's declining health. Add the death at a later time--and there is the beginning and the end of the story. Fortune owed you a good turn, Cosway--and Fortune has paid the debt. Accept my best congratulations."

Arrived in London, Stone went on at once to his relations in the North. Cosway proceeded to the office of the family lawyer (Mr. Atherton), who had taken care of his interests in his absence. His father and Mr. Atherton had been schoolfellows and old friends. He was affectionately received, and was invited to pay a visit the next day to the lawyer's villa at Richmond.

"You will be near enough to London to attend to your business at the Admiralty," said Mr. Atherton, "and you will meet a visitor at my house, who is one of the most charming girls in England--the only daughter of the great Mr. Restall. Good heavens! have you never heard of him? My dear sir, he's one of the partners in the famous firm of Benshaw, Restall, and Benshaw."

Cosway was wise enough to accept this last piece of information as quite conclusive. The next day, Mrs. Atherton presented him to the charming Miss Restall; and Mrs. Atherton's young married daughter (who had been his playfellow when they were children) whispered to him, half in jest, half in earnest: "Make the best use of your time; she isn't engaged yet."

Cosway shuddered inwardly at the bare idea of a second marriage. Was Miss Restall the sort of woman to restore his confidence?

She was small and slim and dark--a graceful, well-bred, brightly intelligent person, with a voice exquisitely sweet and winning in tone. Her ears, hands, and feet were objects to worship; and she had an attraction, irresistibly rare among the women of the present time--the attraction of a perfectly natural smile. Before Cosway had been an hour in the house, she discovered that his long term of service on foreign stations had furnished him with subjects of conversation which favorably contrasted with the commonplace gossip addressed to her by other men. Cosway at once became a favorite, as Othello became a favorite in his day.

The ladies of the household all rejoiced in the young officer's success, with the exception of Miss Restall's companion (supposed to hold the place of her lost mother, at a large salary), one Mrs. Margery.

Too cautious to commit herself in words, this lady expressed doubt and disapprobation by her looks. She had white hair, iron-gray eyebrows, and protuberant eyes; her looks were unusually expressive. One evening, she caught poor Mr. Atherton alone, and consulted him confidentially on the subject of Mr. Cosway's income. This was the first warning which opened the eyes of the good lawyer to the nature of the "friendship" already established between his two guests. He knew Miss Restall's illustrious father well, and he feared that it might soon be his disagreeable duty to bring Cosway's visit to an end.

On a certain Saturday afternoon, while Mr. Atherton was still considering how he could most kindly and delicately suggest to Cosway that it was time to say good-by, an empty carriage arrived at the villa. A note from Mr. Restall was delivered to Mrs. Atherton, thanking her with perfect politeness for her kindness to his daughter. "Circumstances," he added, "rendered it necessary that Miss Restall should return home that afternoon."

The "circumstances" were supposed to refer to a garden-party to be given by Mr. Restall in the ensuing week. But why was his daughter wanted at home before the day of the party?

The ladies of the family, still devoted to Cosway's interests, entertained no doubt that Mrs. Margery had privately communicated with Mr. Restall, and that the appearance of the carriage was the natural result. Mrs. Atherton's married daughter did all that could be done: she got rid of Mrs. Margery for one minute, and so arranged it that Cosway and Miss Restall took leave of each other in her own sitting-room.

When the young lady appeared in the hall she had drawn her veil down. Cosway escaped to the road and saw the last of the carriage as it drove away. In a little more than a fortnight his horror of a second marriage had become one of the dead and buried emotions of his nature. He stayed at the villa until Monday morning, as an act of gratitude to his good friends, and then accompanied Mr. Atherton to London. Business at the Admiralty was the excuse. It imposed on nobody. He was evidently on his way to Miss Restall.

"Leave your business in my hands," said the lawyer, on the journey to town, "and go and amuse yourself on the Continent. I can't blame you for falling in love with Miss Restall; I ought to have foreseen the danger, and waited till she had left us before I invited you to my house. But I may at least warn you to carry the matter no further. If you had eight thousand instead of eight hundred a year, Mr. Restall would think it an act of presumption on your

part to aspire to his daughter's hand, unless you had a title to throw into the bargain. Look at it in the true light, my dear boy; and one of these days you will thank me for speaking plainly."

Cosway promised to "look at it in the true light."

The result, from his point of view, led him into a change of residence. He left his hotel and took a lodging in the nearest bystreet to Mr. Restall's palace at Kensington.

On the same evening he applied (with the confidence due to a previous arrangement) for a letter at the neighboring post-office, addressed to E. C.--the initials of Edwin Cosway. "Pray be careful," Miss Restall wrote; "I have tried to get you a card for our garden party. But that hateful creature, Margery, has evidently spoken to my father; I am not trusted with any invitation cards. Bear it patiently, dear, as I do, and let me hear if you have succeeded in finding a lodging near us."

Not submitting to this first disappointment very patiently, Cosway sent his reply to the post-office, addressed to A. R.--the initials of Adela Restall. The next day the impatient lover applied for another letter. It was waiting for him, but it was not directed in Adela's handwriting. Had their correspondence been discovered? He opened the letter in the street; and read, with amazement, these lines:

"Dear Mr. Cosway, my heart sympathizes with two faithful lovers, in spite of my age and my duty. I inclose an invitation to the party tomorrow. Pray don't betray me, and don't pay too marked attention to Adela. Discretion is easy. There will be twelve hundred guests. Your friend, in spite of appearances, Louisa Margery."

How infamously they had all misjudged this excellent woman! Cosway went to the party a grateful, as well as a happy man. The first persons known to him, whom he discovered among the crowd of strangers, were the Athertons. They looked, as well they might, astonished to see him. Fidelity to Mrs. Margery forbade him to enter into any explanations. Where was that best and truest friend? With some difficulty he succeeded in finding her. Was there any impropriety in seizing her hand and cordially pressing it? The result of this expression of gratitude was, to say the least of it, perplexing.

Mrs. Margery behaved like the Athertons! She looked astonished to see him and she put precisely the same question: "How did you get here?" Cosway could only conclude that she was joking. "Who should know that, dear lady,

better than yourself?" he rejoined. "I don't understand you," Mrs. Margery answered, sharply. After a moment's reflection, Cosway hit on another solution of the mystery. Visitors were near them; and Mrs. Margery had made her own private use of one of Mr. Restall's invitation cards. She might have serious reasons for pushing caution to its last extreme. Cosway looked at her significantly. "The least I can do is not to be indiscreet," he whispered--and left her.

He turned into a side walk; and there he met Adela at last!

It seemed like a fatality. She looked astonished; and she said: "How did you get here?" No intrusive visitors were within hearing, this time. "My dear!" Cosway remonstrated, "Mrs. Margery must have told you, when she sent me my invitation." Adela turned pale. "Mrs. Margery?" she repeated. "Mrs. Margery has said nothing to me; Mrs. Margery detests you. We must have this cleared up. No; not now--I must attend to our guests. Expect a letter; and, for heaven's sake, Edwin, keep out of my father's way. One of our visitors whom he particularly wished to see has sent an excuse--and he is dreadfully angry about it."

She left him before Cosway could explain that he and Mr. Restall had thus far never seen each other.

He wandered away toward the extremity of the grounds, troubled by vague suspicions; hurt at Adela's cold reception of him. Entering a shrubbery, which seemed intended to screen the grounds, at this point, from a lane outside, he suddenly discovered a pretty little summer-house among the trees. A stout gentleman, of mature years, was seated alone in this retreat. He looked up with a frown. Cosway apologized for disturbing him, and entered into conversation as an act of politeness.

"A brilliant assembly to-day, sir."

The stout gentleman replied by an inarticulate sound--something between a grunt and a cough.

"And a splendid house and grounds," Cosway continued.

The stout gentleman repeated the inarticulate sound.

Cosway began to feel amused. Was this curious old man deaf and dumb?

"Excuse my entering into conversation," he persisted. "I feel like a stranger

here. There are so many people whom I don't know."

The stout gentleman suddenly burst into speech. Cosway had touched a sympathetic fiber at last.

"There are a good many people here whom I don't know," he said, gruffly. "You are one of them. What's your name?"

"My name is Cosway, sir. What's yours?"

The stout gentleman rose with fury in his looks. He burst out with an oath; and added the in tolerable question, already three times repeated by others: "How did you get here?" The tone was even more offensive than the oath. "Your age protects you, sir," said Cosway, with the loftiest composure. "I'm sorry I gave my name to so rude a person."

"Rude?" shouted the old gentleman. "You want my name in return, I suppose? You young puppy, you shall have it! My name is Restall."

He turned his back and walked off. Cosway took the only course now open to him. He returned to his lodgings.

The next day no letter reached him from Adela. He went to the postoffice. No letter was there. The day wore on to evening--and, with the evening, there appeared a woman who was a stranger to him. She looked like a servant; and she was the bearer of a mysterious message.

"Please be at the garden-door that opens on the lane, at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Knock three times at the door--and then say 'Adela.' Some one who wishes you well will be alone in the shrubbery, and will let you in. No, sir! I am not to take anything; and I am not to say a word more." She spoke--and vanished.

Cosway was punctual to his appointment. He knocked three times; he pronounced Miss Restall's Christian name. Nothing happened. He waited a while, and tried again. This time Adela's voice answered strangely from the shrubbery in tones of surprise: "Edwin, is it really you?"

"Did you expect any one else?" Cosway asked. "My darling, your message said ten o'clock--and here I am."

The door was suddenly unlocked.

"I sent no message," said Adela, as they confronted each other on the threshold.

In the silence of utter bewilderment they went together into the summer-house. At Adela's request, Cosway repeated the message that he had received, and described the woman who had delivered it. The description applied to no person known to Miss Restall. "Mrs. Margery never sent you the invitation; and I repeat, I never sent you the message. This meeting has been arranged by some one who knows that I always walk in the shrubbery after breakfast. There is some underhand work going on--"

Still mentally in search of the enemy who had betrayed them, she checked herself, and considered a little. "Is it possible--?" she began, and paused again. Her eyes filled with tears. "My mind is so completely upset," she said, "that I can't think clearly of anything. Oh, Edwin, we have had a happy dream, and it has come to an end. My father knows more than we think for. Some friends of ours are going abroad tomorrow--and I am to go with them. Nothing I can say has the least effect upon my father. He means to part us forever--and this is his cruel way of doing it!"

She put her arm round Cosway's neck and lovingly laid her head on his shoulder. With tenderest kisses they reiterated their vows of eternal fidelity until their voices faltered and failed them. Cosway filled up the pause by the only useful suggestion which it was now in his power to make--he proposed an elopement.

Adela received this bold solution of the difficulty in which they were placed exactly as thousands of other young ladies have received similar proposals before her time, and after.

She first said positively No. Cosway persisted. She began to cry, and asked if he had no respect for her. Cosway declared that his respect was equal to any sacrifice except the sacrifice of parting with her forever. He could, and would, if she preferred it, die for her, but while he was alive he must refuse to give her up. Upon this she shifted her ground. Did he expect her to go away with him alone? Certainly not. Her maid could go with her, or, if her maid was not to be trusted, he would apply to his landlady, and engage "a respectable elderly person" to attend on her until the day of their marriage. Would she have some mercy on him, and just consider it? No: she was afraid to consider it. Did she prefer misery for the rest of her life? Never mind his happiness: it was her happiness only that he had in his mind. Traveling with unsympathetic people; absent from England, no one could say for how long; married, when she did return, to some rich man whom she

hated--would she, could she, contemplate that prospect? She contemplated it through tears; she contemplated it to an accompaniment of sighs, kisses, and protestations--she trembled, hesitated, gave way. At an appointed hour of the coming night, when her father would be in the smoking-room, and Mrs. Margery would be in bed, Cosway was to knock at the door in the lane once more; leaving time to make all the necessary arrangements in the interval.

The one pressing necessity, under these circumstances, was to guard against the possibility of betrayal and surprise. Cosway discreetly alluded to the unsolved mysteries of the invitation and the message. "Have you taken anybody into our confidence?" he asked.

Adela answered with some embarrassment. "Only one person," She said-- "dear Miss Benshaw."

"Who is Miss Benshaw?"

"Don't you really know, Edwin? She is richer even than papa--she has inherited from her late brother one half-share in the great business in the City. Miss Benshaw is the lady who disappointed papa by not coming to the garden-party. You remember, dear, how happy we were when we were together at Mr. Atherton's? I was very miserable when they took me away. Miss Benshaw happened to call the next day and she noticed it. 'My dear,' she said (Miss Benshaw is quite an elderly lady now), 'I am an old maid, who has missed the happiness of her life, through not having had a friend to guide and advise her when she was young. Are you suffering as I once suffered?' She spoke so nicely--and I was so wretched--that I really couldn't help it. I opened my heart to her."

Cosway looked grave. "Are you sure she is to be trusted?" he asked.

"Perfectly sure."

"Perhaps, my love, she has spoken about us (not meaning any harm) to some friend of hers? Old ladies are so fond of gossip. It's just possible--don't you think so?"

Adela hung her head.

"I have thought it just possible myself," she admitted. "There is plenty of time to call on her to-day. I will set our doubts at rest before Miss Benshaw goes out for her afternoon drive."

On that understanding they parted.

Toward evening Cosway's arrangements for the elopement were completed. He was eating his solitary dinner when a note was brought to him. It had been left at the door by a messenger. The man had gone away without waiting for an answer. The note ran thus:

"Miss Benshaw presents her compliments to Mr. Cosway, and will be obliged if he can call on her at nine o'clock this evening, on business which concerns himself."

This invitation was evidently the result of Adela's visit earlier in the day. Cosway presented himself at the house, troubled by natural emotions of anxiety and suspense. His reception was not of a nature to compose him. He was shown into a darkened room. The one lamp on the table was turned down low, and the little light thus given was still further obscured by a shade. The corners of the room were in almost absolute darkness.

A voice out of one of the corners addressed him in a whisper:

"I must beg you to excuse the darkened room. I am suffering from a severe cold. My eyes are inflamed, and my throat is so bad that I can only speak in a whisper. Sit down, sir. I have got news for you."

"Not bad news, I hope, ma'am?" Cosway ventured to inquire.

"The worst possible news," said the whispering voice. "You have an enemy striking at you in the dark."

Cosway asked who it was, and received no answer. He varied the form of inquiry, and asked why the unnamed person struck at him in the dark. The experiment succeeded; he obtained a reply.

"It is reported to me," said Miss Benshaw, "that the person thinks it necessary to give you a lesson, and takes a spiteful pleasure in doing it as mischievously as possible. The person, as I happen to know, sent you your invitation to the party, and made the appointment which took you to the door in the lane. Wait a little, sir; I have not done yet. The person has put it into Mr. Restall's head to send his daughter abroad tomorrow."

Cosway attempted to make her speak more plainly.

"Is this wretch a man or a woman?" he said.

Miss Benshaw proceeded without noticing the interruption.

"You needn't be afraid, Mr. Cosway; Miss Restall will not leave England. Your enemy is all-powerful. Your enemy's object could only be to provoke you into planning an elopement--and, your arrangements once completed, to inform Mr. Restall, and to part you and Miss Adela quite as effectually as if you were at opposite ends of the world. Oh, you will undoubtedly be parted! Spiteful, isn't it? And, what is worse, the mischief is as good as done already."

Cosway rose from his chair.

"Do you wish for any further explanation?" asked Miss Benshaw.

"One thing more," he replied. "Does Adela know of this?"

"No," said Miss Benshaw; "it is left to you to tell her."

There was a moment of silence. Cosway looked at the lamp. Once roused, as usual with men of his character, his temper was not to be trifled with.

"Miss Benshaw," he said, "I dare say you think me a fool; but I can draw my own conclusion, for all that. You are my enemy."

The only reply was a chuckling laugh. All voices can be more or less effectually disguised by a whisper but a laugh carries the revelation of its own identity with it. Cosway suddenly threw off the shade over the lamp and turned up the wick.

The light flooded the room, and showed him--His Wife.

The Third Epoch in Mr. Cosway's Life.

Three days had passed. Cosway sat alone in his lodging--pale and worn: the shadow already of his former self.

He had not seen Adela since the discovery. There was but one way in which he could venture to make the inevitable disclosure--he wrote to her; and Mr. Atherton's daughter took care that the letter should be received. Inquiries made afterward, by help of the same good friend, informed him that Miss Restall was suffering from illness.

The mistress of the house came in.

"Cheer up, sir," said the good woman. "There is better news of Miss Restall to-day."

He raised his head.

"Don't trifle with me!" he answered fretfully; "tell me exactly what the servant said."

The mistress repeated the words. Miss Restall had passed a quieter night, and had been able for a few hours to leave her room. He asked next if any reply to his letter had arrived. No reply had been received.

If Adela definitely abstained from writing to him, the conclusion would be too plain to be mistaken. She had given him up--and who could blame her?

There was a knock at the street-door. The mistress looked out.

"Here's Mr. Stone come back, sir!" she exclaimed joyfully--and hurried away to let him in.

Cosway never looked up when his friend appeared.

"I knew I should succeed," said Stone. "I have seen your wife."

"Don't speak of her," cried Cosway. "I should have murdered her when I saw her face, if I had not instantly left the house. I may be the death of the wretch yet, if you persist in speaking of her!"

Stone put his hand kindly on his friend's shoulder.

"Must I remind you that you owe something to your old comrade?" he asked. "I left my father and mother, the morning I got your letter--and my one thought has been to serve you. Reward me. Be a man, and hear what is your right and duty to know. After that, if you like, we will never refer to the woman again."

Cosway took his hand, in silent acknowledgment that he was right. They sat down together. Stone began.

"She is so entirely shameless," he said, "that I had no difficulty in getting her

to speak. And she so cordially hates you that she glories in her own falsehood and treachery."

"Of course, she lies," Cosway said bitterly, "when she calls herself Miss Benshaw?"

"No; she is really the daughter of the man who founded the great house in the City. With every advantage that wealth and position could give her the perverse creature married one of her father's clerks, who had been deservedly dismissed from his situation. From that moment her family discarded her. With the money procured by the sale of her jewels, her husband took the inn which we have such bitter cause to remember--and she managed the house after his death. So much for the past. Carry your mind on now to the time when our ship brought us back to England. At that date, the last surviving member of your wife's family--her elder brother--lay at the point of death. He had taken his father's place in the business, besides inheriting his father's fortune. After a happy married life he was left a widower, without children; and it became necessary that he should alter his will. He deferred performing his duty. It was only at the time of his last illness that he had dictated instructions for a new will, leaving his wealth (excepting certain legacies to old friends) to the hospitals of Great Britain and Ireland. His lawyer lost no time in carrying out the instructions. The new will was ready for signature (the old will having been destroyed by his own hand), when the doctors sent a message to say that their patient was insensible, and might die in that condition."

"Did the doctors prove to be right?"

"Perfectly right. Our wretched landlady, as next of kin, succeeded, not only to the fortune, but (under the deed of partnership) to her late brother's place in the firm: on the one easy condition of resuming the family name. She calls herself "Miss Benshaw." But as a matter of legal necessity she is set down in the deed as "Mrs. Cosway Benshaw." Her partners only now know that her husband is living, and that you are the Cosway whom she privately married. Will you take a little breathing time? or shall I go on, and get done with it?"

Cosway signed to him to go on.

"She doesn't in the least care," Stone proceeded, "for the exposure. 'I am the head partner,' she says 'and the rich one of the firm; they daren't turn their backs on Me.' You remember the information I received--in perfect good faith on his part--from the man who keeps the inn? The visit to the London

doctor, and the assertion of failing health, were adopted as the best means of plausibly severing the lady's connection (the great lady now!) with a calling so unworthy of her as the keeping of an inn. Her neighbors at the seaport were all deceived by the stratagem, with two exceptions. They were both men--vagabonds who had pertinaciously tried to delude her into marrying them in the days when she was a widow. They refused to believe in the doctor and the declining health; they had their own suspicion of the motives which had led to the sale of the inn, under very unfavorable circumstances; and they decided on going to London, inspired by the same base hope of making discoveries which might be turned into a means of extorting money."

"She escaped them, of course," said Cosway. "How?"

"By the help of her lawyer, who was not above accepting a handsome private fee. He wrote to the new landlord of the inn, falsely announcing his client's death, in the letter which I repeated to you in the railway carriage on our journey to London. Other precautions were taken to keep up the deception, on which it is needless to dwell. Your natural conclusion that you were free to pay your addresses to Miss Restall, and the poor young lady's innocent confidence in 'Miss Benshaw's' sympathy, gave this unscrupulous woman the means of playing the heartless trick on you which is now exposed. Malice and jealousy--I have it, mind, from herself!--were not her only motives. 'But for that Cosway,' she said (I spare you the epithet which she put before your name), 'with my money and position, I might have married a needy lord, and sunned myself in my old age in the full blaze of the peerage.' Do you understand how she hated you, now? Enough of the subject! The moral of it, my dear Cosway, is to leave this place, and try what change of scene will do for you. I have time to spare; and I will go abroad with you. When shall it be?"

"Let me wait a day or two more," Cosway pleaded.

Stone shook his head. "Still hoping, my poor friend, for a line from Miss Restall? You distress me."

"I am sorry to distress you, Stone. If I can get one pitying word from her, I can submit to the miserable life that lies before me."

"Are you not expecting too much?"

"You wouldn't say so, if you were as fond of her as I am."

They were silent. The evening slowly darkened; and the mistress came in as usual with the candles. She brought with her a letter for Cosway.

He tore it open; read it in an instant; and devoured it with kisses. His highly wrought feelings found their vent in a little allowable exaggeration. "She has saved my life!" he said, as he handed the letter to Stone.

It only contained these lines:

"My love is yours, my promise is yours. Through all trouble, through all profanation, through the hopeless separation that may be before us in this world, I live yours--and die yours. My Edwin, God bless and comfort you."

The Fourth Epoch in Mr. Cosway's Life.

The separation had lasted for nearly two years, when Cosway and Stone paid that visit to the country house which is recorded at the outset of the present narrative. In the interval nothing had been heard of Miss Restall, except through Mr. Atherton. He reported that Adela was leading a very quiet life. The one remarkable event had been an interview between "Miss Benshaw" and herself. No other person had been present; but the little that was reported placed Miss Restall's character above all praise. She had forgiven the woman who had so cruelly injured her!

The two friends, it may be remembered, had traveled to London, immediately after completing the fullest explanation of Cosway's startling behavior at the breakfast-table. Stone was not by nature a sanguine man. "I don't believe in our luck," he said. "Let us be quite sure that we are not the victims of another deception."

The accident had happened on the Thames; and the newspaper narrative proved to be accurate in every respect. Stone personally attended the inquest. From a natural feeling of delicacy toward Adela, Cosway hesitated to write to her on the subject. The ever-helpful Stone wrote in his place.

After some delay, the answer was received. It inclosed a brief statement (communicated officially by legal authority) of the last act of malice on the part of the late head-partner in the house of Benshaw and Company. She had not died intestate, like her brother. The first clause of her will contained the testator's grateful recognition of Adela Restall's Christian act of forgiveness. The second clause (after stating that there were neither relatives nor children to be benefited by the will) left Adela Restall mistress of Mrs. Cosway Benshaw's fortune--on the one merciless condition that she did not

marry Edwin Cosway. The third clause--if Adela Restall violated the condition--handed over the whole of the money to the firm in the City, "for the extension of the business, and the benefit of the surviving partners."

Some months later, Adela came of age. To the indignation of Mr. Restall, and the astonishment of the "Company," the money actually went to the firm. The fourth epoch in Mr. Cosway's life witnessed his marriage to a woman who cheerfully paid half a million of money for the happiness of passing her life, on eight hundred a year, with the man whom she loved.

But Cosway felt bound in gratitude to make a rich woman of his wife, if work and resolution could do it. When Stone last heard of him, he was reading for the bar; and Mr. Atherton was ready to give him his first brief.

NOTE.--That "most improbable" part of the present narrative, which is contained in the division called The First Epoch, is founded on an adventure which actually occurred to no less a person than a cousin of Sir Walter Scott. In Lockhart's delightful "Life," the anecdote will be found as told by Sir Walter to Captain Basil Hall. The remainder of the present story is entirely imaginary. The writer wondered what such a woman as the landlady would do under certain given circumstances, after her marriage to the young midshipman--and here is the result.