BOOK THE THIRD. DE STANCY.

I.

Captain De Stancy was a changed man. A hitherto well-repressed energy was giving him motion towards long-shunned consequences. His features were, indeed, the same as before; though, had a physiognomist chosen to study them with the closeness of an astronomer scanning the universe, he would doubtless have discerned abundant novelty.

In recent years De Stancy had been an easy, melancholy, unaspiring officer, enervated and depressed by a parental affection quite beyond his control for the graceless lad Dare--the obtrusive memento of a shadowy period in De Stancy's youth, who threatened to be the curse of his old age. Throughout a long space he had persevered in his system of rigidly incarcerating within himself all instincts towards the opposite sex, with a resolution that would not have disgraced a much stronger man. By this habit, maintained with fair success, a chamber of his nature had been preserved intact during many later years, like the one solitary sealed-up cell occasionally retained by bees in a lobe of drained honey-comb. And thus, though he had irretrievably exhausted the relish of society, of ambition, of action, and of his profession, the love-force that he had kept immured alive was still a reproducible thing.

The sight of Paula in her graceful performance, which the judicious Dare had so carefully planned, led up to and heightened by subtle accessories, operated on De Stancy's surprised soul with a promptness almost magical.

On the evening of the self-same day, having dined as usual, he retired to his rooms, where he found a hamper of wine awaiting him. It had been anonymously sent, and the account was paid. He smiled grimly, but no longer with heaviness. In this he instantly recognized the handiwork of Dare, who, having at last broken down the barrier which De Stancy had erected round his heart for so many years, acted like a skilled strategist, and took swift measures to follow up the advantage so tardily gained.

Captain De Stancy knew himself conquered: he knew he should yield to Paula--had indeed yielded; but there was now, in his solitude, an hour or two of reaction. He did not drink from the bottles sent. He went early to bed, and lay tossing thereon till far into the night, thinking over the collapse. His teetotalism had, with the lapse of years, unconsciously become the outward and visible sign to himself of his secret vows; and a return to its opposite, however mildly done, signified with ceremonious distinctness the formal acceptance of delectations long forsworn.

But the exceeding freshness of his feeling for Paula, which by reason of

its long arrest was that of a man far under thirty, and was a wonder to himself every instant, would not long brook weighing in balances. He wished suddenly to commit himself; to remove the question of retreat out of the region of debate. The clock struck two: and the wish became determination. He arose, and wrapping himself in his dressing-gown went to the next room, where he took from a shelf in the pantry several large bottles, which he carried to the window, till they stood on the sill a goodly row. There had been sufficient light in the room for him to do this without a candle. Now he softly opened the sash, and the radiance of a gibbous moon riding in the opposite sky flooded the apartment. It fell on the labels of the captain's bottles, revealing their contents to be simple aerated waters for drinking.

De Stancy looked out and listened. The guns that stood drawn up within the yard glistened in the moonlight reaching them from over the barrack-wall: there was an occasional stamp of horses in the stables; also a measured tread of sentinels--one or more at the gates, one at the hospital, one between the wings, two at the magazine, and others further off. Recurring to his intention he drew the corks of the mineral waters, and inverting each bottle one by one over the window-sill, heard its contents dribble in a small stream on to the gravel below.

He then opened the hamper which Dare had sent. Uncorking one of the bottles he murmured, 'To Paula!' and drank a glass of the ruby liquor.

'A man again after eighteen years,' he said, shutting the sash and

returning to his bedroom.

The first overt result of his kindled interest in Miss Power was his saying to his sister the day after the surreptitious sight of Paula: 'I am sorry, Charlotte, for a word or two I said the other day.'

'Well?'

'I was rather disrespectful to your friend Miss Power.'

'I don't think so--were you?'

'Yes. When we were walking in the wood, I made a stupid joke about her.... What does she know about me--do you ever speak of me to her?'

'Only in general terms.'

'What general terms?'

'You know well enough, William; of your idiosyncrasies and so on--that you are a bit of a woman-hater, or at least a confirmed bachelor, and have but little respect for your own family.'

'I wish you had not told her that,' said De Stancy with dissatisfaction.

'But I thought you always liked women to know your principles!' said

Charlotte, in injured tones; 'and would particularly like her to know them, living so near.'

'Yes, yes,' replied her brother hastily. 'Well, I ought to see her, just to show her that I am not quite a brute.'

'That would be very nice!' she answered, putting her hands together in agreeable astonishment. 'It is just what I have wished, though I did not dream of suggesting it after what I have heard you say. I am going to stay with her again to-morrow, and I will let her know about this.'

'Don't tell her anything plainly, for heaven's sake. I really want to see the interior of the castle; I have never entered its walls since my babyhood.' He raised his eyes as he spoke to where the walls in question showed their ashlar faces over the trees.

'You might have gone over it at any time.'

'O yes. It is only recently that I have thought much of the place: I feel now that I should like to examine the old building thoroughly, since it was for so many generations associated with our fortunes, especially as most of the old furniture is still there. My sedulous avoidance hitherto of all relating to our family vicissitudes has been, I own, stupid conduct for an intelligent being; but impossible grapes are always sour, and I have unconsciously adopted Radical notions to obliterate disappointed hereditary instincts. But these have a trick of

re-establishing themselves as one gets older, and the castle and what it contains have a keen interest for me now.'

'It contains Paula.'

De Stancy's pulse, which had been beating languidly for many years, beat double at the sound of that name.

'I meant furniture and pictures for the moment,' he said; 'but I don't mind extending the meaning to her, if you wish it.'

'She is the rarest thing there.'

'So you have said before.'

'The castle and our family history have as much romantic interest for her as they have for you,' Charlotte went on. 'She delights in visiting our tombs and effigies and ponders over them for hours.'

'Indeed!' said De Stancy, allowing his surprise to hide the satisfaction which accompanied it. 'That should make us friendly.... Does she see many people?'

'Not many as yet. And she cannot have many staying there during the alterations.'

'Ah! yes--the alterations. Didn't you say that she has had a London architect stopping there on that account? What was he--old or young?'

'He is a young man: he has been to our house. Don't you remember you met him there?'

'What was his name?'

'Mr. Somerset.'

'O, that man! Yes, yes, I remember.... Hullo, Lottie!'

'What?'

'Your face is as red as a peony. Now I know a secret!' Charlotte vainly endeavoured to hide her confusion. 'Very well--not a word! I won't say more,' continued De Stancy good-humouredly, 'except that he seems to be a very nice fellow.'

De Stancy had turned the dialogue on to this little well-preserved secret of his sister's with sufficient outward lightness; but it had been done in instinctive concealment of the disquieting start with which he had recognized that Somerset, Dare's enemy, whom he had intercepted in placing Dare's portrait into the hands of the chief constable, was a man beloved by his sister Charlotte. This novel circumstance might lead to a curious complication. But he was to hear more.

'He may be very nice,' replied Charlotte, with an effort, after this silence. 'But he is nothing to me, more than a very good friend.'

'There's no engagement, or thought of one between you?'

'Certainly there's not!' said Charlotte, with brave emphasis. 'It is more likely to be between Paula and him than me and him.'

De Stancy's bare military ears and closely cropped poll flushed hot. 'Miss Power and him?'

'I don't mean to say there is, because Paula denies it; but I mean that he loves Paula. That I do know.'

De Stancy was dumb. This item of news which Dare had kept from him, not knowing how far De Stancy's sense of honour might extend, was decidedly grave. Indeed, he was so greatly impressed with the fact, that he could not help saying as much aloud: 'This is very serious!'

'Why!' she murmured tremblingly, for the first leaking out of her tender and sworn secret had disabled her quite.

'Because I love Paula too.'

'What do you say, William, you?--a woman you have never seen?'

'I have seen her--by accident. And now, my dear little sis, you will be my close ally, won't you? as I will be yours, as brother and sister should be.' He placed his arm coaxingly round Charlotte's shoulder.

'O, William, how can I?' at last she stammered.

'Why, how can't you, I should say? We are both in the same ship. I love Paula, you love Mr. Somerset; it behoves both of us to see that this flirtation of theirs ends in nothing.'

'I don't like you to put it like that--that I love him--it frightens me,' murmured the girl, visibly agitated. 'I don't want to divide him from Paula; I couldn't, I wouldn't do anything to separate them. Believe me, Will, I could not! I am sorry you love there also, though I should be glad if it happened in the natural order of events that she should come round to you. But I cannot do anything to part them and make Mr. Somerset suffer. It would be TOO wrong and blamable.'

'Now, you silly Charlotte, that's just how you women fly off at a tangent. I mean nothing dishonourable in the least. Have I ever prompted you to do anything dishonourable? Fair fighting allies was all I thought of.'

Miss De Stancy breathed more freely. 'Yes, we will be that, of course; we are always that, William. But I hope I can be your ally, and be quite

neutral; I would so much rather.'

'Well, I suppose it will not be a breach of your precious neutrality if you get me invited to see the castle?'

'O no!' she said brightly; 'I don't mind doing such a thing as that. Why not come with me tomorrow? I will say I am going to bring you. There will be no trouble at all.'

De Stancy readily agreed. The effect upon him of the information now acquired was to intensify his ardour tenfold, the stimulus being due to a perception that Somerset, with a little more knowledge, would hold a card which could be played with disastrous effect against himself--his relationship to Dare. Its disclosure to a lady of such Puritan antecedents as Paula's, would probably mean her immediate severance from himself as an unclean thing.

'Is Miss Power a severe pietist, or precisian; or is she a compromising lady?' he asked abruptly.

'She is severe and uncompromising--if you mean in her judgments on morals,' said Charlotte, not quite hearing. The remark was peculiarly apposite, and De Stancy was silent.

He spent some following hours in a close study of the castle history, which till now had unutterably bored him. More particularly did he

dwell over documents and notes which referred to the pedigree of his own family. He wrote out the names of all--and they were many--who had been born within those domineering walls since their first erection; of those among them who had been brought thither by marriage with the owner, and of stranger knights and gentlemen who had entered the castle by marriage with its mistress. He refreshed his memory on the strange loves and hates that had arisen in the course of the family history; on memorable attacks, and the dates of the same, the most memorable among them being the occasion on which the party represented by Paula battered down the castle walls that she was now about to mend, and, as he hoped, return in their original intact shape to the family dispossessed, by marriage with himself, its living representative.

In Sir William's villa were small engravings after many of the portraits in the castle galleries, some of them hanging in the dining-room in plain oak and maple frames, and others preserved in portfolios. De Stancy spent much of his time over these, and in getting up the romances of their originals' lives from memoirs and other records, all which stories were as great novelties to him as they could possibly be to any stranger. Most interesting to him was the life of an Edward De Stancy, who had lived just before the Civil Wars, and to whom Captain De Stancy bore a very traceable likeness. This ancestor had a mole on his cheek, black and distinct as a fly in cream; and as in the case of the first Lord Amherst's wart, and Bennet Earl of Arlington's nose-scar, the painter had faithfully reproduced the defect on canvas. It so happened that the captain had a mole, though not exactly on the same spot of his

face; and this made the resemblance still greater.

He took infinite trouble with his dress that day, showing an amount of anxiety on the matter which for him was quite abnormal. At last, when fully equipped, he set out with his sister to make the call proposed. Charlotte was rather unhappy at sight of her brother's earnest attempt to make an impression on Paula; but she could say nothing against it, and they proceeded on their way.

It was the darkest of November weather, when the days are so short that morning seems to join with evening without the intervention of noon. The sky was lined with low cloud, within whose dense substance tempests were slowly fermenting for the coming days. Even now a windy turbulence troubled the half-naked boughs, and a lonely leaf would occasionally spin downwards to rejoin on the grass the scathed multitude of its comrades which had preceded it in its fall. The river by the pavilion, in the summer so clear and purling, now slid onwards brown and thick and silent, and enlarged to double size.

II.

Meanwhile Paula was alone. Of anyone else it would have been said that she must be finding the afternoon rather dreary in the quaint halls not of her forefathers: but of Miss Power it was unsafe to predicate so surely. She walked from room to room in a black velvet dress which gave decision to her outline without depriving it of softness. She occasionally clasped her hands behind her head and looked out of a window; but she more particularly bent her footsteps up and down the Long Gallery, where she had caused a large fire of logs to be kindled, in her endeavour to extend cheerfulness somewhat beyond the precincts of the sitting-rooms.

The fire glanced up on Paula, and Paula glanced down at the fire, and at the gnarled beech fuel, and at the wood-lice which ran out from beneath the bark to the extremity of the logs as the heat approached them. The low-down ruddy light spread over the dark floor like the setting sun over a moor, fluttering on the grotesque countenances of the bright andirons, and touching all the furniture on the underside.

She now and then crossed to one of the deep embrasures of the windows, to decipher some sentence from a letter she held in her hand. The daylight would have been more than sufficient for any bystander to discern that the capitals in that letter were of the peculiar semi-gothic type affected at the time by Somerset and other young architects of his school in their epistolary correspondence. She was

very possibly thinking of him, even when not reading his letter, for the expression of softness with which she perused the page was more or less with her when she appeared to examine other things.

She walked about for a little time longer, then put away the letter, looked at the clock, and thence returned to the windows, straining her eyes over the landscape without, as she murmured, 'I wish Charlotte was not so long coming!'

As Charlotte continued to keep away, Paula became less reasonable in her desires, and proceeded to wish that Somerset would arrive; then that anybody would come; then, walking towards the portraits on the wall, she flippantly asked one of those cavaliers to oblige her fancy for company by stepping down from his frame. The temerity of the request led her to prudently withdraw it almost as soon as conceived: old paintings had been said to play queer tricks in extreme cases, and the shadows this afternoon were funereal enough for anything in the shape of revenge on an intruder who embodied the antagonistic modern spirit to such an extent as she. However, Paula still stood before the picture which had attracted her; and this, by a coincidence common enough in fact, though scarcely credited in chronicles, happened to be that one of the seventeenth-century portraits of which De Stancy had studied the engraved copy at Myrtle Villa the same morning.

Whilst she remained before the picture, wondering her favourite wonder, how would she feel if this and its accompanying canvases were pictures

of her own ancestors, she was surprised by a light footstep upon the carpet which covered part of the room, and turning quickly she beheld the smiling little figure of Charlotte De Stancy.

'What has made you so late?' said Paula. 'You are come to stay, of course?'

Charlotte said she had come to stay. 'But I have brought somebody with me!'

'Ah--whom?'

'My brother happened to be at home, and I have brought him.'

Miss De Stancy's brother had been so continuously absent from home in India, or elsewhere, so little spoken of, and, when spoken of, so truly though unconsciously represented as one whose interests lay wholly outside this antiquated neighbourhood, that to Paula he had been a mere nebulosity whom she had never distinctly outlined. To have him thus cohere into substance at a moment's notice lent him the novelty of a new creation.

'Is he in the drawing-room?' said Paula in a low voice.

'No, he is here. He would follow me. I hope you will forgive him.'

And then Paula saw emerge into the red beams of the dancing fire, from behind a half-drawn hanging which screened the door, the military gentleman whose acquaintance the reader has already made.

'You know the house, doubtless, Captain De Stancy?' said Paula, somewhat shyly, when he had been presented to her.

'I have never seen the inside since I was three weeks old,' replied the artillery officer gracefully; 'and hence my recollections of it are not remarkably distinct. A year or two before I was born the entail was cut off by my father and grandfather; so that I saw the venerable place only to lose it; at least, I believe that's the truth of the case. But my knowledge of the transaction is not profound, and it is a delicate point on which to question one's father.'

Paula assented, and looked at the interesting and noble figure of the man whose parents had seemingly righted themselves at the expense of wronging him.

'The pictures and furniture were sold about the same time, I think?' said Charlotte.

'Yes,' murmured De Stancy. 'They went in a mad bargain of my father with his visitor, as they sat over their wine. My father sat down as host on that occasion, and arose as guest.'

He seemed to speak with such a courteous absence of regret for the alienation, that Paula, who was always fearing that the recollection would rise as a painful shadow between herself and the De Stancys, felt reassured by his magnanimity.

De Stancy looked with interest round the gallery; seeing which Paula said she would have lights brought in a moment.

'No, please not,' said De Stancy. 'The room and ourselves are of so much more interesting a colour by this light!'

As they moved hither and thither, the various expressions of De Stancy's face made themselves picturesquely visible in the unsteady shine of the blaze. In a short time he had drawn near to the painting of the ancestor whom he so greatly resembled. When her quick eye noted the speck on the face, indicative of inherited traits strongly pronounced, a new and romantic feeling that the De Stancys had stretched out a tentacle from their genealogical tree to seize her by the hand and draw her in to their mass took possession of Paula. As has been said, the De Stancys were a family on whom the hall-mark of membership was deeply stamped, and by the present light the representative under the portrait and the representative in the portrait seemed beings not far removed. Paula was continually starting from a reverie and speaking irrelevantly, as if such reflections as those seized hold of her in spite of her natural unconcern.

When candles were brought in Captain De Stancy ardently contrived to make the pictures the theme of conversation. From the nearest they went to the next, whereupon Paula as hostess took up one of the candlesticks and held it aloft to light up the painting. The candlestick being tall and heavy, De Stancy relieved her of it, and taking another candle in the other hand, he imperceptibly slid into the position of exhibitor rather than spectator. Thus he walked in advance holding the two candles on high, his shadow forming a gigantic figure on the neighbouring wall, while he recited the particulars of family history pertaining to each portrait, that he had learnt up with such eager persistence during the previous four-and-twenty-hours. 'I have often wondered what could have been the history of this lady, but nobody has ever been able to tell me,' Paula observed, pointing to a Vandyck which represented a beautiful woman wearing curls across her forehead, a square-cut bodice, and a heavy pearl necklace upon the smooth expanse of her neck.

'I don't think anybody knows,' Charlotte said.

'O yes,' replied her brother promptly, seeing with enthusiasm that it was yet another opportunity for making capital of his acquired knowledge, with which he felt himself as inconveniently crammed as a candidate for a government examination. 'That lady has been largely celebrated under a fancy name, though she is comparatively little known by her own. Her parents were the chief ornaments of the almost irreproachable court of Charles the First, and were not more distinguished by their politeness and honour than by the affections and

virtues which constitute the great charm of private life.'

The stock verbiage of the family memoir was somewhat apparent in this effusion; but it much impressed his listeners; and he went on to point out that from the lady's necklace was suspended a heart-shaped portrait--that of the man who broke his heart by her persistent refusal to encourage his suit. De Stancy then led them a little further, where hung a portrait of the lover, one of his own family, who appeared in full panoply of plate mail, the pommel of his sword standing up under his elbow. The gallant captain then related how this personage of his line wooed the lady fruitlessly; how, after her marriage with another, she and her husband visited the parents of the disappointed lover, the then occupiers of the castle; how, in a fit of desperation at the sight of her, he retired to his room, where he composed some passionate verses, which he wrote with his blood, and after directing them to her ran himself through the body with his sword. Too late the lady's heart was touched by his devotion; she was ever after a melancholy woman, and wore his portrait despite her husband's prohibition. 'This,' continued De Stancy, leading them through the doorway into the hall where the coats of mail were arranged along the wall, and stopping opposite a suit which bore some resemblance to that of the portrait, 'this is his armour, as you will perceive by comparing it with the picture, and this is the sword with which he did the rash deed.'

'What unreasonable devotion!' said Paula practically. 'It was too romantic of him. She was not worthy of such a sacrifice.'

'He also is one whom they say you resemble a little in feature, I think,' said Charlotte.

'Do they?' replied De Stancy. 'I wonder if it's true.' He set down the candles, and asking the girls to withdraw for a moment, was inside the upper part of the suit of armour in incredibly quick time. Going then and placing himself in front of a low-hanging painting near the original, so as to be enclosed by the frame while covering the figure, arranging the sword as in the one above, and setting the light that it might fall in the right direction, he recalled them; when he put the question, 'Is the resemblance strong?'

He looked so much like a man of bygone times that neither of them replied, but remained curiously gazing at him. His modern and comparatively sallow complexion, as seen through the open visor, lent an ethereal ideality to his appearance which the time-stained countenance of the original warrior totally lacked.

At last Paula spoke, so stilly that she seemed a statue enunciating: 'Are the verses known that he wrote with his blood?'

'O yes, they have been carefully preserved.' Captain De Stancy, with true wooer's instinct, had committed some of them to memory that morning from the printed copy to be found in every well-ordered library. 'I fear I don't remember them all,' he said, 'but they begin in this way:--

"From one that dyeth in his discontent,
Dear Faire, receive this greeting to thee sent;
And still as oft as it is read by thee,
Then with some deep sad sigh remember mee!

O 'twas my fortune's error to vow dutie,
To one that bears defiance in her beautie!
Sweete poyson, pretious wooe, infectious jewell--
Such is a Ladie that is faire and cruell.

How well could I with ayre, camelion-like,
Live happie, and still gazeing on thy cheeke,
In which, forsaken man, methink I see
How goodlie love doth threaten cares to mee.

Why dost thou frowne thus on a kneelinge soule,
Whose faults in love thou may'st as well controule?--
In love--but O, that word; that word I feare
Is hateful still both to thy hart and eare!

. . . . .

Ladie, in breefe, my fate doth now intend
The period of my daies to have an end:
Waste not on me thy pittie, pretious Faire:

Rest you in much content; I, in despaire!"'

A solemn silence followed the close of the recital, which De Stancy improved by turning the point of the sword to his breast, resting the pommel upon the floor, and saying:--

'After writing that we may picture him turning this same sword in this same way, and falling on it thus.' He inclined his body forward as he spoke.

'Don't, Captain De Stancy, please don't!' cried Paula involuntarily.

'No, don't show us any further, William!' said his sister. 'It is too tragic.'

De Stancy put away the sword, himself rather excited--not, however, by his own recital, but by the direct gaze of Paula at him.

This Protean quality of De Stancy's, by means of which he could assume the shape and situation of almost any ancestor at will, had impressed her, and he perceived it with a throb of fervour. But it had done no more than impress her; for though in delivering the lines he had so fixed his look upon her as to suggest, to any maiden practised in the game of the eyes, a present significance in the words, the idea of any such arriere-pensee had by no means commended itself to her soul.

At this time a messenger from Markton barracks arrived at the castle and wished to speak to Captain De Stancy in the hall. Begging the two ladies to excuse him for a moment, he went out.

While De Stancy was talking in the twilight to the messenger at one end of the apartment, some other arrival was shown in by the side door, and in making his way after the conference across the hall to the room he had previously quitted, De Stancy encountered the new-comer. There was just enough light to reveal the countenance to be Dare's; he bore a portfolio under his arm, and had begun to wear a moustache, in case the chief constable should meet him anywhere in his rambles, and be struck by his resemblance to the man in the studio.

'What the devil are you doing here?' said Captain De Stancy, in tones he had never used before to the young man.

Dare started back in surprise, and naturally so. De Stancy, having adopted a new system of living, and relinquished the meagre diet and enervating waters of his past years, was rapidly recovering tone. His voice was firmer, his cheeks were less pallid; and above all he was authoritative towards his present companion, whose ingenuity in vamping up a being for his ambitious experiments seemed about to be rewarded, like Frankenstein's, by his discomfiture at the hands of his own creature.

'What the devil are you doing here, I say?' repeated De Stancy.

'You can talk to me like that, after my working so hard to get you on in life, and make a rising man of you!' expostulated Dare, as one who felt himself no longer the leader in this enterprise.

'But,' said the captain less harshly, 'if you let them discover any relations between us here, you will ruin the fairest prospects man ever had!'

'O, I like that, captain--when you owe all of it to me!'

'That's too cool, Will.'

'No; what I say is true. However, let that go. So now you are here on a call; but how are you going to get here often enough to win her before the other man comes back? If you don't see her every day--twice, three times a day--you will not capture her in the time.'

'I must think of that,' said De Stancy.

'There is only one way of being constantly here: you must come to copy the pictures or furniture, something in the way he did.'

'I'll think of it,' muttered De Stancy hastily, as he heard the voices of the ladies, whom he hastened to join as they were appearing at the other end of the room. His countenance was gloomy as he recrossed

the hall, for Dare's words on the shortness of his opportunities had impressed him. Almost at once he uttered a hope to Paula that he might have further chance of studying, and if possible of copying, some of the ancestral faces with which the building abounded.

Meanwhile Dare had come forward with his portfolio, which proved to be full of photographs. While Paula and Charlotte were examining them he said to De Stancy, as a stranger: 'Excuse my interruption, sir, but if you should think of copying any of the portraits, as you were stating just now to the ladies, my patent photographic process is at your service, and is, I believe, the only one which would be effectual in the dim indoor lights.'

'It is just what I was thinking of,' said De Stancy, now so far cooled down from his irritation as to be quite ready to accept Dare's adroitly suggested scheme.

On application to Paula she immediately gave De Stancy permission to photograph to any extent, and told Dare he might bring his instruments as soon as Captain De Stancy required them.

'Don't stare at her in such a brazen way!' whispered the latter to the young man, when Paula had withdrawn a few steps. 'Say, "I shall highly value the privilege of assisting Captain De Stancy in such a work."'

Dare obeyed, and before leaving De Stancy arranged to begin performing

on his venerated forefathers the next morning, the youth so accidentally engaged agreeing to be there at the same time to assist in the technical operations.

III.

As he had promised, De Stancy made use the next day of the coveted permission that had been brought about by the ingenious Dare. Dare's timely suggestion of tendering assistance had the practical result of relieving the other of all necessity for occupying his time with the proceeding, further than to bestow a perfunctory superintendence now and then, to give a colour to his regular presence in the fortress, the actual work of taking copies being carried on by the younger man.

The weather was frequently wet during these operations, and Paula, Miss De Stancy, and her brother, were often in the house whole mornings together. By constant urging and coaxing the latter would induce his gentle sister, much against her conscience, to leave him opportunities for speaking to Paula alone. It was mostly before some print or painting that these conversations occurred, while De Stancy was ostensibly occupied with its merits, or in giving directions to his photographer how to proceed. As soon as the dialogue began, the latter would withdraw out of earshot, leaving Paula to imagine him the most deferential young artist in the world.

'You will soon possess duplicates of the whole gallery,' she said on one of these occasions, examining some curled sheets which Dare had printed off from the negatives.

'No,' said the soldier. 'I shall not have patience to go on. I get

ill-humoured and indifferent, and then leave off.'

'Why ill-humoured?'

'I scarcely know--more than that I acquire a general sense of my own family's want of merit through seeing how meritorious the people are around me. I see them happy and thriving without any necessity for me at all; and then I regard these canvas grandfathers and grandmothers, and ask, "Why was a line so antiquated and out of date prolonged till now?"'

She chid him good-naturedly for such views. 'They will do you an injury,' she declared. 'Do spare yourself, Captain De Stancy!'

De Stancy shook his head as he turned the painting before him a little further to the light.

'But, do you know,' said Paula, 'that notion of yours of being a family out of date is delightful to some people. I talk to Charlotte about it often. I am never weary of examining those canopied effigies in the church, and almost wish they were those of my relations.'

'I will try to see things in the same light for your sake,' said De Stancy fervently.

'Not for my sake; for your own was what I meant, of course,' she replied with a repressive air.

Captain De Stancy bowed.

'What are you going to do with your photographs when you have them?' she asked, as if still anxious to obliterate the previous sentimental lapse.

'I shall put them into a large album, and carry them with me in my campaigns; and may I ask, now I have an opportunity, that you would extend your permission to copy a little further, and let me photograph one other painting that hangs in the castle, to fittingly complete my set?'

'Which?'

'That half-length of a lady which hangs in the morning-room. I remember seeing it in the Academy last year.'

Paula involuntarily closed herself up. The picture was her own portrait. 'It does not belong to your series,' she said somewhat coldly.

De Stancy's secret thought was, I hope from my soul it will belong some day! He answered with mildness: 'There is a sort of connection--you are my sister's friend.'

Paula assented.

'And hence, might not your friend's brother photograph your picture?'

Paula demurred.

A gentle sigh rose from the bosom of De Stancy. 'What is to become of me?' he said, with a light distressed laugh. 'I am always inconsiderate and inclined to ask too much. Forgive me! What was in my mind when I asked I dare not say.'

'I quite understand your interest in your family pictures--and all of it,' she remarked more gently, willing not to hurt the sensitive feelings of a man so full of romance.

'And in that ONE!' he said, looking devotedly at her. 'If I had only been fortunate enough to include it with the rest, my album would indeed have been a treasure to pore over by the bivouac fire!'

'O, Captain De Stancy, this is provoking perseverance!' cried Paula, laughing half crossly. 'I expected that after expressing my decision so plainly the first time I should not have been further urged upon the subject.' Saying which she turned and moved decisively away.

It had not been a productive meeting, thus far. 'One word!' said De Stancy, following and almost clasping her hand. 'I have given offence, I know: but do let it all fall on my own head--don't tell my sister of my misbehaviour! She loves you deeply, and it would wound her to the

heart.'

'You deserve to be told upon,' said Paula as she withdrew, with just enough playfulness to show that her anger was not too serious.

Charlotte looked at Paula uneasily when the latter joined her in the drawing-room. She wanted to say, 'What is the matter?' but guessing that her brother had something to do with it, forbore to speak at first. She could not contain her anxiety long. 'Were you talking with my brother?' she said.

'Yes,' returned Paula, with reservation. However, she soon added, 'He not only wants to photograph his ancestors, but MY portrait too. They are a dreadfully encroaching sex, and perhaps being in the army makes them worse!'

'I'll give him a hint, and tell him to be careful.'

'Don't say I have definitely complained of him; it is not worth while to do that; the matter is too trifling for repetition. Upon the whole, Charlotte, I would rather you said nothing at all.'

De Stancy's hobby of photographing his ancestors seemed to become a perfect mania with him. Almost every morning discovered him in the larger apartments of the castle, taking down and rehanging the dilapidated pictures, with the assistance of the indispensable Dare;

his fingers stained black with dust, and his face expressing a busy attention to the work in hand, though always reserving a look askance for the presence of Paula.

Though there was something of subterfuge, there was no deep and double subterfuge in all this. De Stancy took no particular interest in his ancestral portraits; but he was enamoured of Paula to weakness. Perhaps the composition of his love would hardly bear looking into, but it was recklessly frank and not quite mercenary. His photographic scheme was nothing worse than a lover's not too scrupulous contrivance. After the refusal of his request to copy her picture he fumed and fretted at the prospect of Somerset's return before any impression had been made on her heart by himself; he swore at Dare, and asked him hotly why he had dragged him into such a hopeless dilemma as this.

'Hopeless? Somerset must still be kept away, so that it is not hopeless. I will consider how to prolong his stay.'

Thereupon Dare considered.

The time was coming--had indeed come--when it was necessary for Paula to make up her mind about her architect, if she meant to begin building in the spring. The two sets of plans, Somerset's and Havill's, were hanging on the walls of the room that had been used by Somerset as his studio, and were accessible by anybody. Dare took occasion to go and study both sets, with a view to finding a flaw in Somerset's which might have been

passed over unnoticed by the committee of architects, owing to their absence from the actual site. But not a blunder could he find.

He next went to Havill; and here he was met by an amazing state of affairs. Havill's creditors, at last suspecting something mythical in Havill's assurance that the grand commission was his, had lost all patience; his house was turned upside-down, and a poster gleamed on the front wall, stating that the excellent modern household furniture was to be sold by auction on Friday next. Troubles had apparently come in battalions, for Dare was informed by a bystander that Havill's wife was seriously ill also.

Without staying for a moment to enter his friend's house, back went Mr. Dare to the castle, and told Captain De Stancy of the architect's desperate circumstances, begging him to convey the news in some way to Miss Power. De Stancy promised to make representations in the proper quarter without perceiving that he was doing the best possible deed for himself thereby.

He told Paula of Havill's misfortunes in the presence of his sister, who turned pale. She discerned how this misfortune would bear upon the undecided competition.

'Poor man,' murmured Paula. 'He was my father's architect, and somehow expected, though I did not promise it, the work of rebuilding the castle.'

Then De Stancy saw Dare's aim in sending him to Miss Power with the news; and, seeing it, concurred: Somerset was his rival, and all was fair. 'And is he not to have the work of the castle after expecting it?' he asked.

Paula was lost in reflection. 'The other architect's design and Mr. Havill's are exactly equal in merit, and we cannot decide how to give it to either,' explained Charlotte.

'That is our difficulty,' Paula murmured. 'A bankrupt, and his wife ill--dear me! I wonder what's the cause.'

'He has borrowed on the expectation of having to execute the castle works, and now he is unable to meet his liabilities.'

'It is very sad,' said Paula.

'Let me suggest a remedy for this dead-lock,' said De Stancy.

'Do,' said Paula.

'Do the work of building in two halves or sections. Give Havill the first half, since he is in need; when that is finished the second half can be given to your London architect. If, as I understand, the plans are identical, except in ornamental details, there will be no difficulty

about it at all.'

Paula sighed--just a little one; and yet the suggestion seemed to satisfy her by its reasonableness. She turned sad, wayward, but was impressed by De Stancy's manner and words. She appeared indeed to have a smouldering desire to please him. In the afternoon she said to Charlotte, 'I mean to do as your brother says.'

A note was despatched to Havill that very day, and in an hour the crestfallen architect presented himself at the castle. Paula instantly gave him audience, commiserated him, and commissioned him to carry out a first section of the buildings, comprising work to the extent of about twenty thousand pounds expenditure; and then, with a prematureness quite amazing among architects' clients, she handed him over a cheque for five hundred pounds on account.

When he had gone, Paula's bearing showed some sign of being disquieted at what she had done; but she covered her mood under a cloak of saucy serenity. Perhaps a tender remembrance of a certain thunderstorm in the foregoing August when she stood with Somerset in the arbour, and did not own that she loved him, was pressing on her memory and bewildering her. She had not seen quite clearly, in adopting De Stancy's suggestion, that Somerset would now have no professional reason for being at the castle for the next twelve months.

But the captain had, and when Havill entered the castle he rejoiced with

great joy. Dare, too, rejoiced in his cold way, and went on with his photography, saying, 'The game progresses, captain.'

'Game? Call it Divine Comedy, rather!' said the soldier exultingly.

'He is practically banished for a year or more. What can't you do in a year, captain!'

Havill, in the meantime, having respectfully withdrawn from the presence of Paula, passed by Dare and De Stancy in the gallery as he had done in entering. He spoke a few words to Dare, who congratulated him. While they were talking somebody was heard in the hall, inquiring hastily for Mr. Havill.

'What shall I tell him?' demanded the porter.

'His wife is dead,' said the messenger.

Havill overheard the words, and hastened away.

'An unlucky man!' said Dare.

'That, happily for us, will not affect his installation here,' said De Stancy. 'Now hold your tongue and keep at a distance. She may come this way.'

Surely enough in a few minutes she came. De Stancy, to make conversation, told her of the new misfortune which had just befallen Mr. Havill.

Paula was very sorry to hear it, and remarked that it gave her great satisfaction to have appointed him as architect of the first wing before he learnt the bad news. 'I owe you best thanks, Captain De Stancy, for showing me such an expedient.'

'Do I really deserve thanks?' asked De Stancy. 'I wish I deserved a reward; but I must bear in mind the fable of the priest and the jester.'

'I never heard it.'

'The jester implored the priest for alms, but the smallest sum was refused, though the holy man readily agreed to give him his blessing. Query, its value?'

'How does it apply?'

'You give me unlimited thanks, but deny me the tiniest substantial trifle I desire.'

'What persistence!' exclaimed Paula, colouring. 'Very well, if you WILL photograph my picture you must. It is really not worthy further pleading. Take it when you like.'

When Paula was alone she seemed vexed with herself for having given way; and rising from her seat she went quietly to the door of the room containing the picture, intending to lock it up till further consideration, whatever he might think of her. But on casting her eyes round the apartment the painting was gone. The captain, wisely taking the current when it served, already had it in the gallery, where he was to be seen bending attentively over it, arranging the lights and directing Dare with the instruments. On leaving he thanked her, and said that he had obtained a splendid copy. Would she look at it?

Paula was severe and icy. 'Thank you--I don't wish to see it,' she said.

De Stancy bowed and departed in a glow of triumph; satisfied, notwithstanding her frigidity, that he had compassed his immediate aim, which was that she might not be able to dismiss from her thoughts him and his persevering desire for the shadow of her face during the next four-and-twenty-hours. And his confidence was well founded: she could not.

'I fear this Divine Comedy will be slow business for us, captain,' said Dare, who had heard her cold words.

'O no!' said De Stancy, flushing a little: he had not been perceiving that the lad had the measure of his mind so entirely as to gauge his position at any moment. But he would show no shamefacedness. 'Even if it

is, my boy,' he answered, 'there's plenty of time before the other can come.'

At that hour and minute of De Stancy's remark 'the other,' to look at him, seemed indeed securely shelved. He was sitting lonely in his chambers far away, wondering why she did not write, and yet hoping to hear--wondering if it had all been but a short-lived strain of tenderness. He knew as well as if it had been stated in words that her serious acceptance of him as a suitor would be her acceptance of him as an architect--that her schemes in love would be expressed in terms of art; and conversely that her refusal of him as a lover would be neatly effected by her choosing Havill's plans for the castle, and returning his own with thanks. The position was so clear: he was so well walled in by circumstances that he was absolutely helpless.

To wait for the line that would not come--the letter saying that, as she had desired, his was the design that pleased her--was still the only thing to do. The (to Somerset) surprising accident that the committee of architects should have pronounced the designs absolutely equal in point of merit, and thus have caused the final choice to revert after all to Paula, had been a joyous thing to him when he first heard of it, full of confidence in her favour. But the fact of her having again become the arbitrator, though it had made acceptance of his plans all the more probable, made refusal of them, should it happen, all the more crushing. He could have conceived himself favoured by Paula as her lover, even had the committee decided in favour of Havill as her architect. But not to

be chosen as architect now was to be rejected in both kinds.

IV.

It was the Sunday following the funeral of Mrs. Havill, news of whose death had been so unexpectedly brought to her husband at the moment of his exit from Stancy Castle. The minister, as was his custom, improved the occasion by a couple of sermons on the uncertainty of life. One was preached in the morning in the old chapel of Markton; the second at evening service in the rural chapel near Stancy Castle, built by Paula's father, which bore to the first somewhat the relation of an episcopal chapel-of-ease to the mother church.

The unscreened lights blazed through the plate-glass windows of the smaller building and outshone the steely stars of the early night, just as they had done when Somerset was attracted by their glare four months before. The fervid minister's rhetoric equalled its force on that more romantic occasion: but Paula was not there. She was not a frequent attendant now at her father's votive building. The mysterious tank, whose dark waters had so repelled her at the last moment, was boarded over: a table stood on its centre, with an open quarto Bible upon it, behind which Havill, in a new suit of black, sat in a large chair. Havill held the office of deacon: and he had mechanically taken the deacon's seat as usual to-night, in the face of the congregation, and under the nose of Mr. Woodwell.

Mr. Woodwell was always glad of an opportunity. He was gifted with a burning natural eloquence, which, though perhaps a little too freely

employed in exciting the 'Wertherism of the uncultivated,' had in it genuine power. He was a master of that oratory which no limitation of knowledge can repress, and which no training can impart. The neighbouring rector could eclipse Woodwell's scholarship, and the freethinker at the corner shop in Markton could demolish his logic; but the Baptist could do in five minutes what neither of these had done in a lifetime; he could move some of the hardest of men to tears.

Thus it happened that, when the sermon was fairly under way, Havill began to feel himself in a trying position. It was not that he had bestowed much affection upon his deceased wife, irreproachable woman as she had been; but the suddenness of her death had shaken his nerves, and Mr. Woodwell's address on the uncertainty of life involved considerations of conduct on earth that bore with singular directness upon Havill's unprincipled manoeuvre for victory in the castle competition. He wished he had not been so inadvertent as to take his customary chair in the chapel. People who saw Havill's agitation did not know that it was most largely owing to his sense of the fraud which had been practised on the unoffending Somerset; and when, unable longer to endure the torture of Woodwell's words, he rose from his place and went into the chapel vestry, the preacher little thought that remorse for a contemptibly unfair act, rather than grief for a dead wife, was the cause of the architect's withdrawal.

When Havill got into the open air his morbid excitement calmed down, but a sickening self-abhorrence for the proceeding instigated by Dare did

not abate. To appropriate another man's design was no more nor less than to embezzle his money or steal his goods. The intense reaction from his conduct of the past two or three months did not leave him when he reached his own house and observed where the handbills of the countermanded sale had been torn down, as the result of the payment made in advance by Paula of money which should really have been Somerset's.

The mood went on intensifying when he was in bed. He lay awake till the clock reached those still, small, ghastly hours when the vital fires burn at their lowest in the human frame, and death seizes more of his victims than in any other of the twenty-four. Havill could bear it no longer; he got a light, went down into his office and wrote the note subjoined.

'MADAM,--The recent death of my wife necessitates a considerable change in my professional arrangements and plans with regard to the future. One of the chief results of the change is, I regret to state, that I no longer find myself in a position to carry out the enlargement of the castle which you had so generously entrusted to my hands.

'I beg leave therefore to resign all further connection with the same, and to express, if you will allow me, a hope that the commission may be placed in the hands of the other competitor. Herewith is returned a cheque for one-half of the sum so kindly advanced in anticipation of the commission I should receive; the other half, with which I had cleared off my immediate embarrassments before perceiving the necessity for this

course, shall be returned to you as soon as some payments from other clients drop in.--I beg to remain, Madam, your obedient servant, JAMES HAVILL.'

Havill would not trust himself till the morning to post this letter. He sealed it up, went out with it into the street, and walked through the sleeping town to the post-office. At the mouth of the box he held the letter long. By dropping it, he was dropping at least two thousand five hundred pounds which, however obtained, were now securely his. It was a great deal to let go; and there he stood till another wave of conscience bore in upon his soul the absolute nature of the theft, and made him shudder. The footsteps of a solitary policeman could be heard nearing him along the deserted street; hesitation ended, and he let the letter go.

When he awoke in the morning he thought over the circumstances by the cheerful light of a low eastern sun. The horrors of the situation seemed much less formidable; yet it cannot be said that he actually regretted his act. Later on he walked out, with the strange sense of being a man who, from one having a large professional undertaking in hand, had, by his own act, suddenly reduced himself to an unoccupied nondescript. From the upper end of the town he saw in the distance the grand grey towers of Stancy Castle looming over the leafless trees; he felt stupefied at what he had done, and said to himself with bitter discontent: 'Well, well, what is more contemptible than a half-hearted rogue!'

That morning the post-bag had been brought to Paula and Mrs. Goodman in the usual way, and Miss Power read the letter. His resignation was a surprise; the question whether he would or would not repay the money was passed over; the necessity of installing Somerset after all as sole architect was an agitation, or emotion, the precise nature of which it is impossible to accurately define.

However, she went about the house after breakfast with very much the manner of one who had had a weight removed either from her heart or from her conscience; moreover, her face was a little flushed when, in passing by Somerset's late studio, she saw the plans bearing his motto, and knew that his and not Havill's would be the presiding presence in the coming architectural turmoil. She went on further, and called to Charlotte, who was now regularly sleeping in the castle, to accompany her, and together they ascended to the telegraph-room in the donjon tower.

'Whom are you going to telegraph to?' said Miss De Stancy when they stood by the instrument.

'My architect.'

'O--Mr. Havill.'

'Mr. Somerset.'

Miss De Stancy had schooled her emotions on that side cruelly well, and

she asked calmly, 'What, have you chosen him after all?'

'There is no choice in it--read that,' said Paula, handing Havill's letter, as if she felt that Providence had stepped in to shape ends that she was too undecided or unpractised to shape for herself.

'It is very strange,' murmured Charlotte; while Paula applied herself to the machine and despatched the words:--

'Miss Power, Stancy Castle, to G. Somerset, Esq., F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., Queen Anne's Chambers, St. James's.

'Your design is accepted in its entirety. It will be necessary to begin soon. I shall wish to see and consult you on the matter about the 10th instant.'

When the message was fairly gone out of the window Paula seemed still further to expand. The strange spell cast over her by something or other--probably the presence of De Stancy, and the weird romanticism of his manner towards her, which was as if the historic past had touched her with a yet living hand--in a great measure became dissipated, leaving her the arch and serene maiden that she had been before.

About this time Captain De Stancy and his Achates were approaching the

castle, and had arrived about fifty paces from the spot at which it was Dare's custom to drop behind his companion, in order that their appearance at the lodge should be that of master and man.

Dare was saying, as he had said before: 'I can't help fancying, captain, that your approach to this castle and its mistress is by a very tedious system. Your trenches, zigzags, counterscarps, and ravelins may be all very well, and a very sure system of attack in the long run; but upon my soul they are almost as slow in maturing as those of Uncle Toby himself. For my part I should be inclined to try an assault.'

'Don't pretend to give advice, Willy, on matters beyond your years.'

'I only meant it for your good, and your proper advancement in the world,' said Dare in wounded tones.

'Different characters, different systems,' returned the soldier. 'This lady is of a reticent, independent, complicated disposition, and any sudden proceeding would put her on her mettle. You don't dream what my impatience is, my boy. It is a thing transcending your utmost conceptions! But I proceed slowly; I know better than to do otherwise. Thank God there is plenty of time. As long as there is no risk of Somerset's return my situation is sure.'

'And professional etiquette will prevent him coming yet. Havill and he will change like the men in a sentry-box; when Havill walks out, he'll

walk in, and not a moment before.'

'That will not be till eighteen months have passed. And as the Jesuit said, "Time and I against any two."... Now drop to the rear,' added Captain De Stancy authoritatively. And they passed under the walls of the castle.

The grave fronts and bastions were wrapped in silence; so much so, that, standing awhile in the inner ward, they could hear through an open window a faintly clicking sound from within.

'She's at the telegraph,' said Dare, throwing forward his voice softly to the captain. 'What can that be for so early? That wire is a nuisance, to my mind; such constant intercourse with the outer world is bad for our romance.'

The speaker entered to arrange his photographic apparatus, of which, in truth, he was getting weary; and De Stancy smoked on the terrace till Dare should be ready. While he waited his sister looked out upon him from an upper casement, having caught sight of him as she came from Paula in the telegraph-room.

'Well, Lottie, what news this morning?' he said gaily.

'Nothing of importance. We are quite well.'.... She added with hesitation, 'There is one piece of news; Mr. Havill--but perhaps you

have heard it in Markton?'

'Nothing.'

'Mr. Havill has resigned his appointment as architect to the castle.'

'What?--who has it, then?'

'Mr. Somerset.'

'Appointed?'

'Yes--by telegraph.'

'When is he coming?' said De Stancy in consternation.

'About the tenth, we think.'

Charlotte was concerned to see her brother's face, and withdrew from the window that he might not question her further. De Stancy went into the hall, and on to the gallery, where Dare was standing as still as a caryatid.

'I have heard every word,' said Dare.

'Well, what does it mean? Has that fool Havill done it on purpose to

annoy me? What conceivable reason can the man have for throwing up an appointment he has worked so hard for, at the moment he has got it, and in the time of his greatest need?'

Dare guessed, for he had seen a little way into Havill's soul during the brief period of their confederacy. But he was very far from saying what he guessed. Yet he unconsciously revealed by other words the nocturnal shades in his character which had made that confederacy possible.

'Somerset coming after all!' he replied. 'By God! that little six-barrelled friend of mine, and a good resolution, and he would never arrive!'

'What!' said Captain De Stancy, paling with horror as he gathered the other's sinister meaning.

Dare instantly recollected himself. 'One is tempted to say anything at such a moment,' he replied hastily.

'Since he is to come, let him come, for me,' continued De Stancy, with reactionary distinctness, and still gazing gravely into the young man's face. 'The battle shall be fairly fought out. Fair play, even to a rival--remember that, boy.... Why are you here?--unnaturally concerning yourself with the passions of a man of my age, as if you were the parent, and I the son? Would to heaven, Willy, you had done as I wished you to do, and led the life of a steady, thoughtful young man! Instead

of meddling here, you should now have been in some studio, college, or professional man's chambers, engaged in a useful pursuit which might have made one proud to own you. But you were so precocious and headstrong; and this is what you have come to: you promise to be worthless!'

'I think I shall go to my lodgings to-day instead of staying here over these pictures,' said Dare, after a silence during which Captain De Stancy endeavoured to calm himself. 'I was going to tell you that my dinner to-day will unfortunately be one of herbs, for want of the needful. I have come to my last stiver.--You dine at the mess, I suppose, captain?'

De Stancy had walked away; but Dare knew that he played a pretty sure card in that speech. De Stancy's heart could not withstand the suggested contrast between a lonely meal of bread-and-cheese and a well-ordered dinner amid cheerful companions. 'Here,' he said, emptying his pocket and returning to the lad's side. 'Take this, and order yourself a good meal. You keep me as poor as a crow. There shall be more to-morrow.'

The peculiarly bifold nature of Captain De Stancy, as shown in his conduct at different times, was something rare in life, and perhaps happily so. That mechanical admixture of black and white qualities without coalescence, on which the theory of men's characters was based by moral analysis before the rise of modern ethical schools, fictitious as it was in general application, would have almost hit off the truth as

regards Captain De Stancy. Removed to some half-known century, his deeds would have won a picturesqueness of light and shade that might have made him a fascinating subject for some gallery of illustrious historical personages. It was this tendency to moral chequer-work which accounted for his varied bearings towards Dare.

Dare withdrew to take his departure. When he had gone a few steps, despondent, he suddenly turned, and ran back with some excitement.

'Captain--he's coming on the tenth, don't they say? Well, four days before the tenth comes the sixth. Have you forgotten what's fixed for the sixth?'

'I had quite forgotten!'

'That day will be worth three months of quiet attentions: with luck, skill, and a bold heart, what mayn't you do?'

Captain De Stancy's face softened with satisfaction.

'There is something in that; the game is not up after all. The sixth--it had gone clean out of my head, by gad!'

V.

The cheering message from Paula to Somerset sped through the loophole of Stancy Castle keep, over the trees, along the railway, under bridges, across four counties--from extreme antiquity of environment to sheer modernism--and finally landed itself on a table in Somerset's chambers in the midst of a cloud of fog. He read it and, in the moment of reaction from the depression of his past days, clapped his hands like a child.

Then he considered the date at which she wanted to see him. Had she so worded her despatch he would have gone that very day; but there was nothing to complain of in her giving him a week's notice. Pure maiden modesty might have checked her indulgence in a too ardent recall.

Time, however, dragged somewhat heavily along in the interim, and on the second day he thought he would call on his father and tell him of his success in obtaining the appointment.

The elder Mr. Somerset lived in a detached house in the north-west part of fashionable London; and ascending the chief staircase the young man branched off from the first landing and entered his father's painting-room. It was an hour when he was pretty sure of finding the well-known painter at work, and on lifting the tapestry he was not disappointed, Mr. Somerset being busily engaged with his back towards the door.

Art and vitiated nature were struggling like wrestlers in that apartment, and art was getting the worst of it. The overpowering gloom pervading the clammy air, rendered still more intense by the height of the window from the floor, reduced all the pictures that were standing around to the wizened feebleness of corpses on end. The shadowy parts of the room behind the different easels were veiled in a brown vapour, precluding all estimate of the extent of the studio, and only subdued in the foreground by the ruddy glare from an open stove of Dutch tiles. Somerset's footsteps had been so noiseless over the carpeting of the stairs and landing, that his father was unaware of his presence; he continued at his work as before, which he performed by the help of a complicated apparatus of lamps, candles, and reflectors, so arranged as to eke out the miserable daylight, to a power apparently sufficient for the neutral touches on which he was at that moment engaged.

The first thought of an unsophisticated stranger on entering that room could only be the amazed inquiry why a professor of the art of colour, which beyond all other arts requires pure daylight for its exercise, should fix himself on the single square league in habitable Europe to which light is denied at noonday for weeks in succession.

'O! it's you, George, is it?' said the Academician, turning from the lamps, which shone over his bald crown at such a slant as to reveal every cranial irregularity. 'How are you this morning? Still a dead silence about your grand castle competition?'

Somerset told the news. His father duly congratulated him, and added genially, 'It is well to be you, George. One large commission to attend to, and nothing to distract you from it. I am bothered by having a dozen irons in the fire at once. And people are so unreasonable.--Only this morning, among other things, when you got your order to go on with your single study, I received a letter from a woman, an old friend whom I can scarcely refuse, begging me as a great favour to design her a set of theatrical costumes, in which she and her friends can perform for some charity. It would occupy me a good week to go into the subject and do the thing properly. Such are the sort of letters I get. I wish, George, you could knock out something for her before you leave town. It is positively impossible for me to do it with all this work in hand, and these eternal fogs to contend against.'

'I fear costumes are rather out of my line,' said the son. 'However, I'll do what I can. What period and country are they to represent?'

His father didn't know. He had never looked at the play of late years. It was 'Love's Labour's Lost.' 'You had better read it for yourself,' he said, 'and do the best you can.'

During the morning Somerset junior found time to refresh his memory of the play, and afterwards went and hunted up materials for designs to suit the same, which occupied his spare hours for the next three days. As these occupations made no great demands upon his reasoning faculties

he mostly found his mind wandering off to imaginary scenes at Stancy Castle: particularly did he dwell at this time upon Paula's lively interest in the history, relics, tombs, architecture,--nay, the very Christian names of the De Stancy line, and her 'artistic' preference for Charlotte's ancestors instead of her own. Yet what more natural than that a clever meditative girl, encased in the feudal lumber of that family, should imbibe at least an antiquarian interest in it? Human nature at bottom is romantic rather than ascetic, and the local habitation which accident had provided for Paula was perhaps acting as a solvent of the hard, morbidly introspective views thrust upon her in early life.

Somerset wondered if his own possession of a substantial genealogy like Captain De Stancy's would have had any appreciable effect upon her regard for him. His suggestion to Paula of her belonging to a worthy strain of engineers had been based on his content with his own intellectual line of descent through Pheidias, Ictinus and Callicrates, Chersiphron, Vitruvius, Wilars of Cambray, William of Wykeham, and the rest of that long and illustrious roll; but Miss Power's marked preference for an animal pedigree led him to muse on what he could show for himself in that kind.

These thoughts so far occupied him that when he took the sketches to his father, on the morning of the fifth, he was led to ask: 'Has any one ever sifted out our family pedigree?'

'Family pedigree?'

'Yes. Have we any pedigree worthy to be compared with that of professedly old families? I never remember hearing of any ancestor further back than my great-grandfather.'

Somerset the elder reflected and said that he believed there was a genealogical tree about the house somewhere, reaching back to a very respectable distance. 'Not that I ever took much interest in it,' he continued, without looking up from his canvas; 'but your great uncle John was a man with a taste for those subjects, and he drew up such a sheet: he made several copies on parchment, and gave one to each of his brothers and sisters. The one he gave to my father is still in my possession, I think.'

Somerset said that he should like to see it; but half-an-hour's search about the house failed to discover the document; and the Academician then remembered that it was in an iron box at his banker's. He had used it as a wrapper for some title-deeds and other valuable writings which were deposited there for safety. 'Why do you want it?' he inquired.

The young man confessed his whim to know if his own antiquity would bear comparison with that of another person, whose name he did not mention; whereupon his father gave him a key that would fit the said chest, if he meant to pursue the subject further. Somerset, however, did nothing in the matter that day, but the next morning, having to call at the bank on

other business, he remembered his new fancy.

It was about eleven o'clock. The fog, though not so brown as it had been on previous days, was still dense enough to necessitate lights in the shops and offices. When Somerset had finished his business in the outer office of the bank he went to the manager's room. The hour being somewhat early the only persons present in that sanctuary of balances, besides the manager who welcomed him, were two gentlemen, apparently lawyers, who sat talking earnestly over a box of papers. The manager, on learning what Somerset wanted, unlocked a door from which a flight of stone steps led to the vaults, and sent down a clerk and a porter for the safe.

Before, however, they had descended far a gentle tap came to the door, and in response to an invitation to enter a lady appeared, wrapped up in furs to her very nose.

The manager seemed to recognize her, for he went across the room in a moment, and set her a chair at the middle table, replying to some observation of hers with the words, 'O yes, certainly,' in a deferential tone.

'I should like it brought up at once,' said the lady.

Somerset, who had seated himself at a table in a somewhat obscure corner, screened by the lawyers, started at the words. The voice

was Miss Power's, and so plainly enough was the figure as soon as he examined it. Her back was towards him, and either because the room was only lighted in two places, or because she was absorbed in her own concerns, she seemed to be unconscious of any one's presence on the scene except the banker and herself. The former called back the clerk, and two other porters having been summoned they disappeared to get whatever she required.

Somerset, somewhat excited, sat wondering what could have brought Paula to London at this juncture, and was in some doubt if the occasion were a suitable one for revealing himself, her errand to her banker being possibly of a very private nature. Nothing helped him to a decision. Paula never once turned her head, and the progress of time was marked only by the murmurs of the two lawyers, and the ceaseless clash of gold and rattle of scales from the outer room, where the busy heads of cashiers could be seen through the partition moving about under the globes of the gas-lamps.

Footsteps were heard upon the cellar-steps, and the three men previously sent below staggered from the doorway, bearing a huge safe which nearly broke them down. Somerset knew that his father's box, or boxes, could boast of no such dimensions, and he was not surprised to see the chest deposited in front of Miss Power. When the immense accumulation of dust had been cleared off the lid, and the chest conveniently placed for her, Somerset was attended to, his modest box being brought up by one man unassisted, and without much expenditure of breath.

His interest in Paula was of so emotional a cast that his attention to his own errand was of the most perfunctory kind. She was close to a gas-standard, and the lawyers, whose seats had intervened, having finished their business and gone away, all her actions were visible to him. While he was opening his father's box the manager assisted Paula to unseal and unlock hers, and he now saw her lift from it a morocco case, which she placed on the table before her, and unfastened. Out of it she took a dazzling object that fell like a cascade over her fingers. It was a necklace of diamonds and pearls, apparently of large size and many strands, though he was not near enough to see distinctly. When satisfied by her examination that she had got the right article she shut it into its case.

The manager closed the chest for her; and when it was again secured Paula arose, tossed the necklace into her hand-bag, bowed to the manager, and was about to bid him good morning. Thereupon he said with some hesitation: 'Pardon one question, Miss Power. Do you intend to take those jewels far?'

'Yes,' she said simply, 'to Stancy Castle.'

'You are going straight there?'

'I have one or two places to call at first.'

'I would suggest that you carry them in some other way--by fastening them into the pocket of your dress, for instance.'

'But I am going to hold the bag in my hand and never once let it go.'

The banker slightly shook his head. 'Suppose your carriage gets overturned: you would let it go then.'

'Perhaps so.'

'Or if you saw a child under the wheels just as you were stepping in; or if you accidentally stumbled in getting out; or if there was a collision on the railway--you might let it go.'

'Yes; I see I was too careless. I thank you.'

Paula removed the necklace from the bag, turned her back to the manager, and spent several minutes in placing her treasure in her bosom, pinning it and otherwise making it absolutely secure.

'That's it,' said the grey-haired man of caution, with evident satisfaction. 'There is not much danger now: you are not travelling alone?'

Paula replied that she was not alone, and went to the door. There was one moment during which Somerset might have conveniently made his

presence known; but the juxtaposition of the bank-manager, and his own disarranged box of securities, embarrassed him: the moment slipped by, and she was gone.

In the meantime he had mechanically unearthed the pedigree, and, locking up his father's chest, Somerset also took his departure at the heels of Paula. He walked along the misty street, so deeply musing as to be quite unconscious of the direction of his walk. What, he inquired of himself, could she want that necklace for so suddenly? He recollected a remark of Dare's to the effect that her appearance on a particular occasion at Stancy Castle had been magnificent by reason of the jewels she wore; which proved that she had retained a sufficient quantity of those valuables at the castle for ordinary requirements. What exceptional occasion, then, was impending on which she wished to glorify herself beyond all previous experience? He could not guess. He was interrupted in these conjectures by a carriage nearly passing over his toes at a crossing in Bond Street: looking up he saw between the two windows of the vehicle the profile of a thickly mantled bosom, on which a camellia rose and fell. All the remainder part of the lady's person was hidden; but he remembered that flower of convenient season as one which had figured in the bank parlour half-an-hour earlier to-day.

Somerset hastened after the carriage, and in a minute saw it stop opposite a jeweller's shop. Out came Paula, and then another woman, in whom he recognized Mrs. Birch, one of the lady's maids at Stancy Castle. The young man was at Paula's side before she had crossed the pavement.

VI.

A quick arrested expression in her two sapphirine eyes, accompanied by a little, a very little, blush which loitered long, was all the outward disturbance that the sight of her lover caused. The habit of self-repression at any new emotional impact was instinctive with her always. Somerset could not say more than a word; he looked his intense solicitude, and Paula spoke.

She declared that this was an unexpected pleasure. Had he arranged to come on the tenth as she wished? How strange that they should meet thus!--and yet not strange--the world was so small.

Somerset said that he was coming on the very day she mentioned--that the appointment gave him infinite gratification, which was quite within the truth.

'Come into this shop with me,' said Paula, with good-humoured authoritativeness.

They entered the shop and talked on while she made a small purchase. But not a word did Paula say of her sudden errand to town.

'I am having an exciting morning,' she said. 'I am going from here to catch the one-o'clock train to Markton.'

'It is important that you get there this afternoon, I suppose?'

'Yes. You know why?'

'Not at all.'

'The Hunt Ball. It was fixed for the sixth, and this is the sixth. I thought they might have asked you.'

'No,' said Somerset, a trifle gloomily. 'No, I am not asked. But it is a great task for you--a long journey and a ball all in one day.'

'Yes: Charlotte said that. But I don't mind it.'

'You are glad you are going. Are you glad?' he said softly.

Her air confessed more than her words. 'I am not so very glad that I am going to the Hunt Ball,' she replied confidentially.

'Thanks for that,' said he.

She lifted her eyes to his for a moment. Her manner had suddenly become so nearly the counterpart of that in the tea-house that to suspect any

deterioration of affection in her was no longer generous. It was only as if a thin layer of recent events had overlaid her memories of him, until his presence swept them away.

Somerset looked up, and finding the shopman to be still some way off, he added, 'When will you assure me of something in return for what I assured you that evening in the rain?'

'Not before you have built the castle. My aunt does not know about it yet, nor anybody.'

'I ought to tell her.'

'No, not yet. I don't wish it.'

'Then everything stands as usual?'

She lightly nodded.

'That is, I may love you: but you still will not say you love me.'

She nodded again, and directing his attention to the advancing shopman, said, 'Please not a word more.'

Soon after this, they left the jeweller's, and parted, Paula driving straight off to the station and Somerset going on his way uncertainly

happy. His re-impression after a few minutes was that a special journey to town to fetch that magnificent necklace which she had not once mentioned to him, but which was plainly to be the medium of some proud purpose with her this evening, was hardly in harmony with her assertions of indifference to the attractions of the Hunt Ball.

He got into a cab and drove to his club, where he lunched, and mopingly spent a great part of the afternoon in making calculations for the foundations of the castle works. Later in the afternoon he returned to his chambers, wishing that he could annihilate the three days remaining before the tenth, particularly this coming evening. On his table was a letter in a strange writing, and indifferently turning it over he found from the superscription that it had been addressed to him days before at the Lord-Quantock-Arms Hotel, Markton, where it had lain ever since, the landlord probably expecting him to return. Opening the missive, he found to his surprise that it was, after all, an invitation to the Hunt Ball.

'Too late!' said Somerset. 'To think I should be served this trick a second time!'

After a moment's pause, however, he looked to see the time of day. It was five minutes past five--just about the hour when Paula would be driving from Markton Station to Stancy Castle to rest and prepare herself for her evening triumph. There was a train at six o'clock, timed to reach Markton between eleven and twelve, which by great exertion he might save even now, if it were worth while to undertake such a scramble

for the pleasure of dropping in to the ball at a late hour. A moment's vision of Paula moving to swift tunes on the arm of a person or persons unknown was enough to impart the impetus required. He jumped up, flung his dress clothes into a portmanteau, sent down to call a cab, and in a few minutes was rattling off to the railway which had borne Paula away from London just five hours earlier.

Once in the train, he began to consider where and how he could most conveniently dress for the dance. The train would certainly be half-an-hour late; half-an-hour would be spent in getting to the town-hall, and that was the utmost delay tolerable if he would secure the hand of Paula for one spin, or be more than a mere dummy behind the earlier arrivals. He looked for an empty compartment at the next stoppage, and finding the one next his own unoccupied, he entered it and changed his raiment for that in his portmanteau during the ensuing run of twenty miles.

Thus prepared he awaited the Markton platform, which was reached as the clock struck twelve. Somerset called a fly and drove at once to the town-hall.

The borough natives had ascended to their upper floors, and were putting out their candles one by one as he passed along the streets; but the lively strains that proceeded from the central edifice revealed distinctly enough what was going on among the temporary visitors from the neighbouring manors. The doors were opened for him, and entering

the vestibule lined with flags, flowers, evergreens, and escutcheons, he stood looking into the furnace of gaiety beyond.

It was some time before he could gather his impressions of the scene, so perplexing were the lights, the motions, the toilets, the full-dress uniforms of officers and the harmonies of sound. Yet light, sound, and movement were not so much the essence of that giddy scene as an intense aim at obliviousness in the beings composing it. For two or three hours at least those whirling young people meant not to know that they were mortal. The room was beating like a heart, and the pulse was regulated by the trembling strings of the most popular quadrille band in Wessex. But at last his eyes grew settled enough to look critically around.

The room was crowded--too crowded. Every variety of fair one, beauties primary, secondary, and tertiary, appeared among the personages composing the throng. There were suns and moons; also pale planets of little account. Broadly speaking, these daughters of the county fell into two classes: one the pink-faced unsophisticated girls from neighbouring rectories and small country-houses, who knew not town except for an occasional fortnight, and who spent their time from Easter to Lammas Day much as they spent it during the remaining nine months of the year: the other class were the children of the wealthy landowners who migrated each season to the town-house; these were pale and collected, showed less enjoyment in their countenances, and wore in general an approximation to the languid manners of the capital.

A quadrille was in progress, and Somerset scanned each set. His mind had run so long upon the necklace, that his glance involuntarily sought out that gleaming object rather than the personality of its wearer. At the top of the room there he beheld it; but it was on the neck of Charlotte De Stancy.

The whole lucid explanation broke across his understanding in a second. His dear Paula had fetched the necklace that Charlotte should not appear to disadvantage among the county people by reason of her poverty. It was generously done--a disinterested act of sisterly kindness; theirs was the friendship of Hermia and Helena. Before he had got further than to realize this, there wheeled round amongst the dancers a lady whose tournure he recognized well. She was Paula; and to the young man's vision a superlative something distinguished her from all the rest. This was not dress or ornament, for she had hardly a gem upon her, her attire being a model of effective simplicity. Her partner was Captain De Stancy.

The discovery of this latter fact slightly obscured his appreciation of what he had discovered just before. It was with rather a lowering brow that he asked himself whether Paula's predilection d'artiste, as she called it, for the De Stancy line might not lead to a predilection of a different sort for its last representative which would be not at all satisfactory.

The architect remained in the background till the dance drew to a

conclusion, and then he went forward. The circumstance of having met him by accident once already that day seemed to quench any surprise in Miss Power's bosom at seeing him now. There was nothing in her parting from Captain De Stancy, when he led her to a seat, calculated to make Somerset uneasy after his long absence. Though, for that matter, this proved nothing; for, like all wise maidens, Paula never ventured on the game of the eyes with a lover in public; well knowing that every moment of such indulgence overnight might mean an hour's sneer at her expense by the indulged gentleman next day, when weighing womankind by the aid of a cold morning light and a bad headache.

While Somerset was explaining to Paula and her aunt the reason of his sudden appearance, their attention was drawn to a seat a short way off by a fluttering of ladies round the spot. In a moment it was whispered that somebody had fallen ill, and in another that the sufferer was Miss De Stancy. Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and Somerset at once joined the group of friends who were assisting her. Neither of them imagined for an instant that the unexpected advent of Somerset on the scene had anything to do with the poor girl's indisposition.

She was assisted out of the room, and her brother, who now came up, prepared to take her home, Somerset exchanging a few civil words with him, which the hurry of the moment prevented them from continuing; though on taking his leave with Charlotte, who was now better, De Stancy informed Somerset in answer to a cursory inquiry, that he hoped to be back again at the ball in half-an-hour.

When they were gone Somerset, feeling that now another dog might have his day, sounded Paula on the delightful question of a dance.

Paula replied in the negative.

'How is that?' asked Somerset with reproachful disappointment.

'I cannot dance again,' she said in a somewhat depressed tone; 'I must be released from every engagement to do so, on account of Charlotte's illness. I should have gone home with her if I had not been particularly requested to stay a little longer, since it is as yet so early, and Charlotte's illness is not very serious.'

If Charlotte's illness was not very serious, Somerset thought, Paula might have stretched a point; but not wishing to hinder her in showing respect to a friend so well liked by himself, he did not ask it. De Stancy had promised to be back again in half-an-hour, and Paula had heard the promise. But at the end of twenty minutes, still seeming indifferent to what was going on around her, she said she would stay no longer, and reminding Somerset that they were soon to meet and talk over the rebuilding, drove off with her aunt to Stancy Castle.

Somerset stood looking after the retreating carriage till it was enveloped in shades that the lamps could not disperse. The ball-room was now virtually empty for him, and feeling no great anxiety to return

thither he stood on the steps for some minutes longer, looking into the calm mild night, and at the dark houses behind whose blinds lay the burghers with their eyes sealed up in sleep. He could not but think that it was rather too bad of Paula to spoil his evening for a sentimental devotion to Charlotte which could do the latter no appreciable good; and he would have felt seriously hurt at her move if it had not been equally severe upon Captain De Stancy, who was doubtless hastening back, full of a belief that she would still be found there.

The star of gas-jets over the entrance threw its light upon the walls on the opposite side of the street, where there were notice-boards of forthcoming events. In glancing over these for the fifth time, his eye was attracted by the first words of a placard in blue letters, of a size larger than the rest, and moving onward a few steps he read:--

STANCY CASTLE.

By the kind permission of Miss Power,

A PLAY

Will shortly be performed at the above CASTLE,

IN AID OF THE FUNDS OF THE

COUNTY HOSPITAL,

By the Officers of the

ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY,

MARKTON BARRACKS,

ASSISTED BY SEVERAL

LADIES OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

The cast and other particulars will be duly announced in small bills. Places will be reserved on application to Mr. Clangham, High Street, Markton, where a plan of the room may be seen.

N.B--The Castle is about twenty minutes' drive from Markton Station, to which there are numerous convenient trains from all parts of the county.

In a profound study Somerset turned and re-entered the ball-room, where he remained gloomily standing here and there for about five minutes, at the end of which he observed Captain De Stancy, who had returned

punctually to his word, crossing the hall in his direction.

The gallant officer darted glances of lively search over every group of dancers and sitters; and then with rather a blank look in his face, he came on to Somerset. Replying to the latter's inquiry for his sister that she had nearly recovered, he said, 'I don't see my father's neighbours anywhere.'

'They have gone home,' replied Somerset, a trifle drily. 'They asked me to make their apologies to you for leading you to expect they would remain. Miss Power was too anxious about Miss De Stancy to care to stay longer.'

The eyes of De Stancy and the speaker met for an instant. That curious guarded understanding, or inimical confederacy, which arises at moments between two men in love with the same woman, was present here; and in their mutual glances each said as plainly as by words that her departure had ruined his evening's hope.

They were now about as much in one mood as it was possible for two such differing natures to be. Neither cared further for elaborating giddy curves on that town-hall floor. They stood talking languidly about this and that local topic, till De Stancy turned aside for a short time to speak to a dapper little lady who had beckoned to him. In a few minutes he came back to Somerset.

'Mrs. Camperton, the wife of Major Camperton of my battery, would very much like me to introduce you to her. She is an old friend of your father's, and has wanted to know you for a long time.'

De Stancy and Somerset crossed over to the lady, and in a few minutes, thanks to her flow of spirits, she and Somerset were chatting with remarkable freedom.

'It is a happy coincidence,' continued Mrs. Camperton, 'that I should have met you here, immediately after receiving a letter from your father: indeed it reached me only this morning. He has been so kind! We are getting up some theatricals, as you know, I suppose, to help the funds of the County Hospital, which is in debt.'

'I have just seen the announcement--nothing more.'

'Yes, such an estimable purpose; and as we wished to do it thoroughly well, I asked Mr. Somerset to design us the costumes, and he has now sent me the sketches. It is quite a secret at present, but we are going to play Shakespeare's romantic drama, 'Love's Labour's Lost,' and we hope to get Miss Power to take the leading part. You see, being such a handsome girl, and so wealthy, and rather an undiscovered novelty in the county as yet, she would draw a crowded room, and greatly benefit the funds.'

'Miss Power going to play herself?--I am rather surprised,' said

Somerset. 'Whose idea is all this?'

'O, Captain De Stancy's--he's the originator entirely. You see he is so interested in the neighbourhood, his family having been connected with it for so many centuries, that naturally a charitable object of this local nature appeals to his feelings.'

'Naturally!' her listener laconically repeated. 'And have you settled who is to play the junior gentleman's part, leading lover, hero, or whatever he is called?'

'Not absolutely; though I think Captain De Stancy will not refuse it; and he is a very good figure. At present it lies between him and Mr. Mild, one of our young lieutenants. My husband, of course, takes the heavy line; and I am to be the second lady, though I am rather too old for the part really. If we can only secure Miss Power for heroine the cast will be excellent.'

'Excellent!' said Somerset, with a spectral smile.

VII.

When he awoke the next morning at the Lord-Quantock-Arms Hotel Somerset felt quite morbid on recalling the intelligence he had received from Mrs. Camperton. But as the day for serious practical consultation about the castle works, to which Paula had playfully alluded, was now close at hand, he determined to banish sentimental reflections on the frailties that were besieging her nature, by active preparation for his professional undertaking. To be her high-priest in art, to elaborate a structure whose cunning workmanship would be meeting her eye every day till the end of her natural life, and saying to her, 'He invented it,' with all the eloquence of an inanimate thing long regarded--this was no mean satisfaction, come what else would.

He returned to town the next day to set matters there in such trim that no inconvenience should result from his prolonged absence at the castle; for having no other commission he determined (with an eye rather to heart-interests than to increasing his professional practice) to make, as before, the castle itself his office, studio, and chief abiding-place till the works were fairly in progress.

On the tenth he reappeared at Markton. Passing through the town, on the road to Stancy Castle, his eyes were again arrested by the notice-board which had conveyed such startling information to him on the night of the ball. The small bills now appeared thereon; but when he anxiously looked

them over to learn how the parts were to be allotted, he found that intelligence still withheld. Yet they told enough; the list of lady-players was given, and Miss Power's name was one.

That a young lady who, six months ago, would scarcely join for conscientious reasons in a simple dance on her own lawn, should now be willing to exhibit herself on a public stage, simulating love-passages with a stranger, argued a rate of development which under any circumstances would have surprised him, but which, with the particular addition, as leading colleague, of Captain De Stancy, inflamed him almost to anger. What clandestine arrangements had been going on in his absence to produce such a full-blown intention it were futile to guess. Paula's course was a race rather than a march, and each successive heat was startling in its eclipse of that which went before.

Somerset was, however, introspective enough to know that his morals would have taken no such virtuous alarm had he been the chief male player instead of Captain De Stancy.

He passed under the castle-arch and entered. There seemed a little turn in the tide of affairs when it was announced to him that Miss Power expected him, and was alone.

The well-known ante-chambers through which he walked, filled with twilight, draughts, and thin echoes that seemed to reverberate from two hundred years ago, did not delay his eye as they had done when he had

been ignorant that his destiny lay beyond; and he followed on through all this ancientness to where the modern Paula sat to receive him.

He forgot everything in the pleasure of being alone in a room with her. She met his eye with that in her own which cheered him. It was a light expressing that something was understood between them. She said quietly in two or three words that she had expected him in the forenoon.

Somerset explained that he had come only that morning from London.

After a little more talk, in which she said that her aunt would join them in a few minutes, and Miss De Stancy was still indisposed at her father's house, she rang for tea and sat down beside a little table.

'Shall we proceed to business at once?' she asked him.

'I suppose so.'

'First then, when will the working drawings be ready, which I think you said must be made out before the work could begin?'

While Somerset informed her on this and other matters, Mrs. Goodman entered and joined in the discussion, after which they found it would be necessary to adjourn to the room where the plans were hanging. On their walk thither Paula asked if he stayed late at the ball.

'I left soon after you.'

'That was very early, seeing how late you arrived.'

'Yes.... I did not dance.'

'What did you do then?'

'I moped, and walked to the door; and saw an announcement.'

'I know--the play that is to be performed.'

'In which you are to be the Princess.'

'That's not settled,--I have not agreed yet. I shall not play the Princess of France unless Mr. Mild plays the King of Navarre.'

This sounded rather well. The Princess was the lady beloved by the King; and Mr. Mild, the young lieutenant of artillery, was a diffident, inexperienced, rather plain-looking fellow, whose sole interest in theatricals lay in the consideration of his costume and the sound of his own voice in the ears of the audience. With such an unobjectionable person to enact the part of lover, the prominent character of leading young lady or heroine, which Paula was to personate, was really the most satisfactory in the whole list for her. For although she was to be wooed hard, there was just as much love-making among the remaining personages;

while, as Somerset had understood the play, there could occur no flingings of her person upon her lover's neck, or agonized downfalls upon the stage, in her whole performance, as there were in the parts chosen by Mrs. Camperton, the major's wife, and some of the other ladies.

'Why do you play at all!' he murmured.

'What a question! How could I refuse for such an excellent purpose? They say that my taking a part will be worth a hundred pounds to the charity. My father always supported the hospital, which is quite undenominational; and he said I was to do the same.'

'Do you think the peculiar means you have adopted for supporting it entered into his view?' inquired Somerset, regarding her with critical dryness. 'For my part I don't.'

'It is an interesting way,' she returned persuasively, though apparently in a state of mental equipoise on the point raised by his question. 'And I shall not play the Princess, as I said, to any other than that quiet young man. Now I assure you of this, so don't be angry and absurd! Besides, the King doesn't marry me at the end of the play, as in Shakespeare's other comedies. And if Miss De Stancy continues seriously unwell I shall not play at all.'

The young man pressed her hand, but she gently slipped it away.

'Are we not engaged, Paula!' he asked. She evasively shook her head.

'Come--yes we are! Shall we tell your aunt?' he continued. Unluckily at that moment Mrs. Goodman, who had followed them to the studio at a slower pace, appeared round the doorway.

'No,--to the last,' replied Paula hastily. Then her aunt entered, and the conversation was no longer personal.

Somerset took his departure in a serener mood though not completely assured.

VIII.

His serenity continued during two or three following days, when, continuing at the castle, he got pleasant glimpses of Paula now and then. Her strong desire that his love for her should be kept secret, perplexed him; but his affection was generous, and he acquiesced in that desire.

Meanwhile news of the forthcoming dramatic performance radiated in every direction. And in the next number of the county paper it was announced, to Somerset's comparative satisfaction, that the cast was definitely settled, Mr. Mild having agreed to be the King and Miss Power the French Princess. Captain De Stancy, with becoming modesty for one who was the leading spirit, figured quite low down, in the secondary character of Sir Nathaniel.

Somerset remembered that, by a happy chance, the costume he had designed for Sir Nathaniel was not at all picturesque; moreover Sir Nathaniel scarcely came near the Princess through the whole play.

Every day after this there was coming and going to and from the castle of railway vans laden with canvas columns, pasteboard trees, limp house-fronts, woollen lawns, and lath balustrades. There were also frequent arrivals of young ladies from neighbouring country houses, and warriors from the X and Y batteries of artillery, distinguishable by

their regulation shaving.

But it was upon Captain De Stancy and Mrs. Camperton that the weight of preparation fell. Somerset, through being much occupied in the drawing-office, was seldom present during the consultations and rehearsals: until one day, tea being served in the drawing-room at the usual hour, he dropped in with the rest to receive a cup from Paula's table. The chatter was tremendous, and Somerset was at once consulted about some necessary carpentry which was to be specially made at Markton. After that he was looked on as one of the band, which resulted in a large addition to the number of his acquaintance in this part of England.

But his own feeling was that of being an outsider still. This vagary had been originated, the play chosen, the parts allotted, all in his absence, and calling him in at the last moment might, if flirtation were possible in Paula, be but a sop to pacify him. What would he have given to impersonate her lover in the piece! But neither Paula nor any one else had asked him.

The eventful evening came. Somerset had been engaged during the day with the different people by whom the works were to be carried out and in the evening went to his rooms at the Lord-Quantock-Arms, Markton, where he dined. He did not return to the castle till the hour fixed for the performance, and having been received by Mrs. Goodman, entered the large apartment, now transfigured into a theatre, like any other spectator.

Rumours of the projected representation had spread far and wide. Six times the number of tickets issued might have been readily sold. Friends and acquaintances of the actors came from curiosity to see how they would acquit themselves; while other classes of people came because they were eager to see well-known notabilities in unwonted situations. When ladies, hitherto only beheld in frigid, impenetrable positions behind their coachmen in Markton High Street, were about to reveal their hidden traits, home attitudes, intimate smiles, nods, and perhaps kisses, to the public eye, it was a throwing open of fascinating social secrets not to be missed for money.

The performance opened with no further delay than was occasioned by the customary refusal of the curtain at these times to rise more than two feet six inches; but this hitch was remedied, and the play began. It was with no enviable emotion that Somerset, who was watching intently, saw, not Mr. Mild, but Captain De Stancy, enter as the King of Navarre.

Somerset as a friend of the family had had a seat reserved for him next to that of Mrs. Goodman, and turning to her he said with some excitement, 'I understood that Mr. Mild had agreed to take that part?'

'Yes,' she said in a whisper, 'so he had; but he broke down. Luckily Captain De Stancy was familiar with the part, through having coached the others so persistently, and he undertook it off-hand. Being about the same figure as Lieutenant Mild the same dress fits him, with a little

alteration by the tailor.'

It did fit him indeed; and of the male costumes it was that on which Somerset had bestowed most pains when designing them. It shrewdly burst upon his mind that there might have been collusion between Mild and De Stancy, the former agreeing to take the captain's place and act as blind till the last moment. A greater question was, could Paula have been aware of this, and would she perform as the Princess of France now De Stancy was to be her lover?

'Does Miss Power know of this change?' he inquired.

'She did not till quite a short time ago.'

He controlled his impatience till the beginning of the second act. The Princess entered; it was Paula. But whether the slight embarrassment with which she pronounced her opening words,

'Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,
Needs not the painted flourish of your praise,'

was due to the newness of her situation, or to her knowledge that De Stancy had usurped Mild's part of her lover, he could not guess. De Stancy appeared, and Somerset felt grim as he listened to the gallant captain's salutation of the Princess, and her response.

De S. Fair Princess, welcome to the court of Navarre.

Paula. Fair, I give you back again: and welcome, I have not yet.

Somerset listened to this and to all that which followed of the same sort, with the reflection that, after all, the Princess never throughout the piece compromised her dignity by showing her love for the King; and that the latter never addressed her in words in which passion got the better of courtesy. Moreover, as Paula had herself observed, they did not marry at the end of the piece, as in Shakespeare's other comedies. Somewhat calm in this assurance, he waited on while the other couples respectively indulged in their love-making, and banter, including Mrs. Camperton as the sprightly Rosaline. But he was doomed to be surprised out of his humour when the end of the act came on. In abridging the play for the convenience of representation, the favours or gifts from the gentlemen to the ladies were personally presented: and now Somerset saw De Stancy advance with the necklace fetched by Paula from London, and clasp it on her neck.

This seemed to throw a less pleasant light on her hasty journey. To fetch a valuable ornament to lend it to a poorer friend was estimable; but to fetch it that the friend's brother should have something magnificent to use as a lover's offering to herself in public, that wore a different complexion. And if the article were recognized by the spectators as the same that Charlotte had worn at the ball, the presentation by De Stancy of what must seem to be an heirloom of his

house would be read as symbolizing a union of the families.

De Stancy's mode of presenting the necklace, though unauthorized by Shakespeare, had the full approval of the company, and set them in good humour to receive Major Camperton as Armado the braggart. Nothing calculated to stimulate jealousy occurred again till the fifth act; and then there arose full cause for it.

The scene was the outside of the Princess's pavilion. De Stancy, as the King of Navarre, stood with his group of attendants awaiting the Princess, who presently entered from her door. The two began to converse as the play appointed, De Stancy turning to her with this reply--

'Rebuke me not for that which you provoke;
The virtue of your eye must break my oath.'

So far all was well; and Paula opened her lips for the set rejoinder. But before she had spoken De Stancy continued--

'If I profane with my unworthy hand
(Taking her hand)
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this--
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.'

Somerset stared. Surely in this comedy the King never addressed the

Princess in such warm words; and yet they were Shakespeare's, for they were quite familiar to him. A dim suspicion crossed his mind. Mrs. Goodman had brought a copy of Shakespeare with her, which she kept in her lap and never looked at: borrowing it, Somerset turned to 'Romeo and Juliet,' and there he saw the words which De Stancy had introduced as gag, to intensify the mild love-making of the other play. Meanwhile De Stancy continued--

'O then, dear Saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purg'd!'

Could it be that De Stancy was going to do what came next in the stage direction--kiss her? Before there was time for conjecture on that point the sound of a very sweet and long-drawn osculation spread through the room, followed by loud applause from the people in the cheap seats. De Stancy withdrew from bending over Paula, and she was very red in the face. Nothing seemed clearer than that he had actually done the deed. The applause continuing, Somerset turned his head. Five hundred faces had regarded the act, without a consciousness that it was an interpolation; and four hundred and fifty mouths in those faces were smiling. About one half of them were tender smiles; these came from the women. The other half were at best humorous, and mainly satirical; these came from the men. It was a profanation without parallel, and his face blazed like a coal.

The play was now nearly at an end, and Somerset sat on, feeling what he could not express. More than ever was he assured that there had been collusion between the two artillery officers to bring about this end. That he should have been the unhappy man to design those picturesque dresses in which his rival so audaciously played the lover to his, Somerset's, mistress, was an added point to the satire. He could hardly go so far as to assume that Paula was a consenting party to this startling interlude; but her otherwise unaccountable wish that his own love should be clandestinely shown lent immense force to a doubt of her sincerity. The ghastly thought that she had merely been keeping him on, like a pet spaniel, to amuse her leisure moments till she should have found appropriate opportunity for an open engagement with some one else, trusting to his sense of chivalry to keep secret their little episode, filled him with a grim heat.

IX.

At the back of the room the applause had been loud at the moment of the kiss, real or counterfeit. The cause was partly owing to an exceptional circumstance which had occurred in that quarter early in the play.

The people had all seated themselves, and the first act had begun, when the tapestry that screened the door was lifted gently and a figure appeared in the opening. The general attention was at this moment absorbed by the newly disclosed stage, and scarcely a soul noticed the stranger. Had any one of the audience turned his head, there would have been sufficient in the countenance to detain his gaze, notwithstanding the counter-attraction forward.

He was obviously a man who had come from afar. There was not a square inch about him that had anything to do with modern English life. His visage, which was of the colour of light porphyry, had little of its original surface left; it was a face which had been the plaything of strange fires or pestilences, that had moulded to whatever shape they chose his originally supple skin, and left it pitted, puckered, and seamed like a dried water-course. But though dire catastrophes or the treacherous airs of remote climates had done their worst upon his exterior, they seemed to have affected him but little within, to judge from a certain robustness which showed itself in his manner of standing.

The face-marks had a meaning, for any one who could read them, beyond

the mere suggestion of their origin: they signified that this man had either been the victim of some terrible necessity as regarded the occupation to which he had devoted himself, or that he was a man of dogged obstinacy, from sheer sang froid holding his ground amid malign forces when others would have fled affrighted away.

As nobody noticed him, he dropped the door hangings after a while, walked silently along the matted alley, and sat down in one of the back chairs. His manner of entry was enough to show that the strength of character which he seemed to possess had phlegm for its base and not ardour. One might have said that perhaps the shocks he had passed through had taken all his original warmth out of him. His beaver hat, which he had retained on his head till this moment, he now placed under the seat, where he sat absolutely motionless till the end of the first act, as if he were indulging in a monologue which did not quite reach his lips.

When Paula entered at the beginning of the second act he showed as much excitement as was expressed by a slight movement of the eyes. When she spoke he turned to his next neighbour, and asked him in cold level words which had once been English, but which seemed to have lost the accent of nationality: 'Is that the young woman who is the possessor of this castle--Power by name?'

His neighbour happened to be the landlord at Sleeping-Green, and he informed the stranger that she was what he supposed.

'And who is that gentleman whose line of business seems to be to make love to Power?'

'He's Captain De Stancy, Sir William De Stancy's son, who used to own this property.'

'Baronet or knight?'

'Baronet--a very old-established family about here.'

The stranger nodded, and the play went on, no further word being spoken till the fourth act was reached, when the stranger again said, without taking his narrow black eyes from the stage: 'There's something in that love-making between Stancy and Power that's not all sham!'

'Well,' said the landlord, 'I have heard different stories about that, and wouldn't be the man to zay what I couldn't swear to. The story is that Captain De Stancy, who is as poor as a gallicrow, is in full cry a'ter her, and that his on'y chance lies in his being heir to a title and the wold name. But she has not shown a genuine hanker for anybody yet.'

'If she finds the money, and this Stancy finds the name and blood, 'twould be a very neat match between 'em,--hey?'

'That's the argument.'

Nothing more was said again for a long time, but the stranger's eyes showed more interest in the passes between Paula and De Stancy than they had shown before. At length the crisis came, as described in the last chapter, De Stancy saluting her with that semblance of a kiss which gave such umbrage to Somerset. The stranger's thin lips lengthened a couple of inches with satisfaction; he put his hand into his pocket, drew out two half-crowns which he handed to the landlord, saying, 'Just applaud that, will you, and get your comrades to do the same.'

The landlord, though a little surprised, took the money, and began to clap his hands as desired. The example was contagious, and spread all over the room; for the audience, gentle and simple, though they might not have followed the blank verse in all its bearings, could at least appreciate a kiss. It was the unusual acclamation raised by this means which had led Somerset to turn his head.

When the play had ended the stranger was the first to rise, and going downstairs at the head of the crowd he passed out of doors, and was lost to view. Some questions were asked by the landlord as to the stranger's individuality; but few had seen him; fewer had noticed him, singular as he was; and none knew his name.

While these things had been going on in the quarter allotted to the commonalty, Somerset in front had waited the fall of the curtain with

those sick and sorry feelings which should be combated by the aid of philosophy and a good conscience, but which really are only subdued by time and the abrading rush of affairs. He was, however, stoical enough, when it was all over, to accept Mrs. Goodman's invitation to accompany her to the drawing-room, fully expecting to find there a large company, including Captain De Stancy.

But none of the acting ladies and gentlemen had emerged from their dressing-rooms as yet. Feeling that he did not care to meet any of them that night, he bade farewell to Mrs. Goodman after a few minutes of conversation, and left her. While he was passing along the corridor, at the side of the gallery which had been used as the theatre, Paula crossed it from the latter apartment towards an opposite door. She was still in the dress of the Princess, and the diamond and pearl necklace still hung over her bosom as placed there by Captain De Stancy.

Her eye caught Somerset's, and she stopped. Probably there was something in his face which told his mind, for she invited him by a smile into the room she was entering.

'I congratulate you on your performance,' he said mechanically, when she pushed to the door.

'Do you really think it was well done?' She drew near him with a sociable air.

'It was startlingly done--the part from "Romeo and Juliet" pre-eminently so.'

'Do you think I knew he was going to introduce it, or do you think I didn't know?' she said, with that gentle sauciness which shows itself in the loved one's manner when she has had a triumphant evening without the lover's assistance.

'I think you may have known.'

'No,' she averred, decisively shaking her head. 'It took me as much by surprise as it probably did you. But why should I have told!'

Without answering that question Somerset went on. 'Then what he did at the end of his gag was of course a surprise also.'

'He didn't really do what he seemed to do,' she serenely answered.

'Well, I have no right to make observations--your actions are not subject to my surveillance; you float above my plane,' said the young man with some bitterness. 'But to speak plainly, surely he--kissed you?'

'No,' she said. 'He only kissed the air in front of me--ever so far off.'

'Was it six inches off?'

'No, not six inches.'

'Nor three.'

'It was quite one,' she said with an ingenuous air.

'I don't call that very far.'

'A miss is as good as a mile, says the time-honoured proverb; and it is not for us modern mortals to question its truth.'

'How can you be so off-hand?' broke out Somerset. 'I love you wildly and desperately, Paula, and you know it well!'

'I have never denied knowing it,' she said softly.

'Then why do you, with such knowledge, adopt an air of levity at such a moment as this! You keep me at arm's-length, and won't say whether you care for me one bit, or no. I have owned all to you; yet never once have you owned anything to me!'

'I have owned much. And you do me wrong if you consider that I show levity. But even if I had not owned everything, and you all, it is not altogether such a grievous thing.'

'You mean to say that it is not grievous, even if a man does love a woman, and suffers all the pain of feeling he loves in vain? Well, I say it is quite the reverse, and I have grounds for knowing.'

'Now, don't fume so, George Somerset, but hear me. My not owning all may not have the dreadful meaning you think, and therefore it may not be really such a grievous thing. There are genuine reasons for women's conduct in these matters as well as for men's, though it is sometimes supposed to be regulated entirely by caprice. And if I do not give way to every feeling--I mean demonstration--it is because I don't want to. There now, you know what that implies; and be content.'

'Very well,' said Somerset, with repressed sadness, 'I will not expect you to say more. But you do like me a little, Paula?'

'Now!' she said, shaking her head with symptoms of tenderness and looking into his eyes. 'What have you just promised? Perhaps I like you a little more than a little, which is much too much! Yes,--Shakespeare says so, and he is always right. Do you still doubt me? Ah, I see you do!'

'Because somebody has stood nearer to you to-night than I.'

'A fogy like him!--half as old again as either of us! How can you mind him? What shall I do to show you that I do not for a moment let him come between me and you?'

'It is not for me to suggest what you should do. Though what you should permit ME to do is obvious enough.'

She dropped her voice: 'You mean, permit you to do really and in earnest what he only seemed to do in the play.'

Somerset signified by a look that such had been his thought.

Paula was silent. 'No,' she murmured at last. 'That cannot be. He did not, nor must you.'

It was said none the less decidedly for being spoken low.

'You quite resent such a suggestion: you have a right to. I beg your pardon, not for speaking of it, but for thinking it.'

'I don't resent it at all, and I am not offended one bit. But I am not the less of opinion that it is possible to be premature in some things; and to do this just now would be premature. I know what you would say--that you would not have asked it, but for that unfortunate improvisation of it in the play. But that I was not responsible for, and therefore owe no reparation to you now.... Listen!'

'Paula--Paula! Where in the world are you?' was heard resounding along the corridor in the voice of her aunt. 'Our friends are all ready to

leave, and you will surely bid them good-night!'

'I must be gone--I won't ring for you to be shown out--come this way.'

'But how will you get on in repeating the play tomorrow evening if that interpolation is against your wish?' he asked, looking her hard in the face.

'I'll think it over during the night. Come to-morrow morning to help me settle. But,' she added, with coy yet genial independence, 'listen to me. Not a word more about a--what you asked for, mind! I don't want to go so far, and I will not--not just yet anyhow--I mean perhaps never. You must promise that, or I cannot see you again alone.'

'It shall be as you request.'

'Very well. And not a word of this to a soul. My aunt suspects: but she is a good aunt and will say nothing. Now that is clearly understood, I should be glad to consult with you tomorrow early. I will come to you in the studio or Pleasance as soon as I am disengaged.'

She took him to a little chamfered doorway in the corner, which opened into a descending turret; and Somerset went down. When he had unfastened
the door at the bottom, and stepped into the lower corridor, she asked, 'Are you down?' And on receiving an affirmative reply she closed the top

door.

X.

Somerset was in the studio the next morning about ten o'clock superintending the labours of Knowles, Bowles, and Cockton, whom he had again engaged to assist him with the drawings on his appointment to carry out the works. When he had set them going he ascended the staircase of the great tower for some purpose that bore upon the forthcoming repairs of this part. Passing the door of the telegraph-room he heard little sounds from the instrument, which somebody was working. Only two people in the castle, to the best of his knowledge, knew the trick of this; Miss Power, and a page in her service called John. Miss De Stancy could also despatch messages, but she was at Myrtle Villa.

The door was closed, and much as he would have liked to enter, the possibility that Paula was not the performer led him to withhold his steps. He went on to where the uppermost masonry had resisted the mighty hostility of the elements for five hundred years without receiving worse dilapidation than half-a-century produces upon the face of man. But he still wondered who was telegraphing, and whether the message bore on housekeeping, architecture, theatricals, or love.

Could Somerset have seen through the panels of the door in passing, he would have beheld the room occupied by Paula alone.

It was she who sat at the instrument, and the message she was despatching ran as under:--

'Can you send down a competent actress, who will undertake the part of Princess of France in "Love's Labour's Lost" this evening in a temporary theatre here? Dresses already provided suitable to a lady about the middle height. State price.'

The telegram was addressed to a well-known theatrical agent in London.

Off went the message, and Paula retired into the next room, leaving the door open between that and the one she had just quitted. Here she busied herself with writing some letters, till in less than an hour the telegraph instrument showed signs of life, and she hastened back to its side. The reply received from the agent was as follows:--

'Miss Barbara Bell of the Regent's Theatre could come. Quite competent. Her terms would be about twenty-five guineas.'

Without a moment's pause Paula returned for answer:--

'The terms are quite satisfactory.'

Presently she heard the instrument again, and emerging from the next room in which she had passed the intervening time as before, she read:--

'Miss Barbara Bell's terms were accidentally understated. They would be forty guineas, in consequence of the distance. Am waiting at the office

for a reply.'

Paula set to work as before and replied:--

'Quite satisfactory; only let her come at once.'

She did not leave the room this time, but went to an arrow-slit hard by and gazed out at the trees till the instrument began to speak again. Returning to it with a leisurely manner, implying a full persuasion that the matter was settled, she was somewhat surprised to learn that,

'Miss Bell, in stating her terms, understands that she will not be required to leave London till the middle of the afternoon. If it is necessary for her to leave at once, ten guineas extra would be indispensable, on account of the great inconvenience of such a short notice.'

Paula seemed a little vexed, but not much concerned she sent back with a readiness scarcely politic in the circumstances:--

'She must start at once. Price agreed to.'

Her impatience for the answer was mixed with curiosity as to whether it was due to the agent or to Miss Barbara Bell that the prices had grown like Jack's Bean-stalk in the negotiation. Another telegram duly came:--

'Travelling expenses are expected to be paid.'

With decided impatience she dashed off:--

'Of course; but nothing more will be agreed to.'

Then, and only then, came the desired reply:--

'Miss Bell starts by the twelve o'clock train.'

This business being finished, Paula left the chamber and descended into the inclosure called the Pleasance, a spot grassed down like a lawn. Here stood Somerset, who, having come down from the tower, was looking on while a man searched for old foundations under the sod with a crowbar. He was glad to see her at last, and noticed that she looked serene and relieved; but could not for the moment divine the cause. Paula came nearer, returned his salutation, and regarded the man's operations in silence awhile till his work led him to a distance from them.

'Do you still wish to consult me?' asked Somerset.

'About the building perhaps,' said she. 'Not about the play.'

'But you said so?'

'Yes; but it will be unnecessary.'

Somerset thought this meant skittishness, and merely bowed.

'You mistake me as usual,' she said, in a low tone. 'I am not going to consult you on that matter, because I have done all you could have asked for without consulting you. I take no part in the play to-night.'

'Forgive my momentary doubt!'

'Somebody else will play for me--an actress from London. But on no account must the substitution be known beforehand or the performance to-night will never come off: and that I should much regret.'

'Captain De Stancy will not play his part if he knows you will not play yours--that's what you mean?'

'You may suppose it is,' she said, smiling. 'And to guard against this you must help me to keep the secret by being my confederate.'

To be Paula's confederate; to-day, indeed, time had brought him something worth waiting for. 'In anything!' cried Somerset.

'Only in this!' said she, with soft severity. 'And you know what you have promised, George! And you remember there is to be no--what we talked about! Now will you go in the one-horse brougham to Markton

Station this afternoon, and meet the four o'clock train? Inquire for a lady for Stancy Castle--a Miss Bell; see her safely into the carriage, and send her straight on here. I am particularly anxious that she should not enter the town, for I think she once came to Markton in a starring company, and she might be recognized, and my plan be defeated.'

Thus she instructed her lover and devoted friend; and when he could stay no longer he left her in the garden to return to his studio. As Somerset went in by the garden door he met a strange-looking personage coming out by the same passage--a stranger, with the manner of a Dutchman, the face of a smelter, and the clothes of an inhabitant of Guiana. The stranger, whom we have already seen sitting at the back of the theatre the night before, looked hard from Somerset to Paula, and from Paula again to Somerset, as he stepped out. Somerset had an unpleasant conviction that this queer gentleman had been standing for some time in the doorway unnoticed, quizzing him and his mistress as they talked together. If so he might have learnt a secret.

When he arrived upstairs, Somerset went to a window commanding a view of the garden. Paula still stood in her place, and the stranger was earnestly conversing with her. Soon they passed round the corner and disappeared.

It was now time for him to see about starting for Markton, an intelligible zest for circumventing the ardent and coercive captain of artillery saving him from any unnecessary delay in the journey. He was

at the station ten minutes before the train was due; and when it drew up to the platform the first person to jump out was Captain De Stancy in sportsman's attire and with a gun in his hand. Somerset nodded, and De Stancy spoke, informing the architect that he had been ten miles up the line shooting waterfowl. 'That's Miss Power's carriage, I think,' he added.

'Yes,' said Somerset carelessly. 'She expects a friend, I believe. We shall see you at the castle again to-night?'

De Stancy assured him that they would, and the two men parted, Captain De Stancy, when he had glanced to see that the carriage was empty, going on to where a porter stood with a couple of spaniels.

Somerset now looked again to the train. While his back had been turned to converse with the captain, a lady of five-and-thirty had alighted from the identical compartment occupied by De Stancy. She made an inquiry about getting to Stancy Castle, upon which Somerset, who had not till now observed her, went forward, and introducing himself assisted her to the carriage and saw her safely off.

De Stancy had by this time disappeared, and Somerset walked on to his rooms at the Lord-Quantock-Arms, where he remained till he had dined, picturing the discomfiture of his alert rival when there should enter to him as Princess, not Paula Power, but Miss Bell of the Regent's Theatre, London. Thus the hour passed, till he found that if he meant to see the

issue of the plot it was time to be off.

On arriving at the castle, Somerset entered by the public door from the hall as before, a natural delicacy leading him to feel that though he might be welcomed as an ally at the stage-door--in other words, the door from the corridor--it was advisable not to take too ready an advantage of a privilege which, in the existing secrecy of his understanding with Paula, might lead to an overthrow of her plans on that point.

Not intending to sit out the whole performance, Somerset contented himself with standing in a window recess near the proscenium, whence he could observe both the stage and the front rows of spectators. He was quite uncertain whether Paula would appear among the audience to-night, and resolved to wait events. Just before the rise of the curtain the young lady in question entered and sat down. When the scenery was disclosed and the King of Navarre appeared, what was Somerset's surprise to find that, though the part was the part taken by De Stancy on the previous night, the voice was that of Mr. Mild; to him, at the appointed season, entered the Princess, namely, Miss Barbara Bell.

Before Somerset had recovered from his crestfallen sensation at De Stancy's elusiveness, that officer himself emerged in evening dress from behind a curtain forming a wing to the proscenium, and Somerset remarked that the minor part originally allotted to him was filled by the subaltern who had enacted it the night before. De Stancy glanced across, whether by accident or otherwise Somerset could not determine, and his

glance seemed to say he quite recognized there had been a trial of wits between them, and that, thanks to his chance meeting with Miss Bell in the train, his had proved the stronger.

The house being less crowded to-night there were one or two vacant chairs in the best part. De Stancy, advancing from where he had stood for a few moments, seated himself comfortably beside Miss Power.

On the other side of her he now perceived the same queer elderly foreigner (as he appeared) who had come to her in the garden that morning. Somerset was surprised to perceive also that Paula with very little hesitation introduced him and De Stancy to each other. A conversation ensued between the three, none the less animated for being carried on in a whisper, in which Paula seemed on strangely intimate terms with the stranger, and the stranger to show feelings of great friendship for De Stancy, considering that they must be new acquaintances.

The play proceeded, and Somerset still lingered in his corner. He could not help fancying that De Stancy's ingenious relinquishment of his part, and its obvious reason, was winning Paula's admiration. His conduct was homage carried to unscrupulous and inconvenient lengths, a sort of thing which a woman may chide, but which she can never resent. Who could do otherwise than talk kindly to a man, incline a little to him, and condone his fault, when the sole motive of so audacious an exercise of his wits was to escape acting with any other heroine than herself.

His conjectures were brought to a pause by the ending of the comedy, and the opportunity afforded him of joining the group in front. The mass of people were soon gone, and the knot of friends assembled around Paula were discussing the merits and faults of the two days' performance.

'My uncle, Mr. Abner Power,' said Paula suddenly to Somerset, as he came near, presenting the stranger to the astonished young man. 'I could not see you before the performance, as I should have liked to do. The return of my uncle is so extraordinary that it ought to be told in a less hurried way than this. He has been supposed dead by all of us for nearly ten years--ever since the time we last heard from him.'

'For which I am to blame,' said Mr. Power, nodding to Paula's architect. 'Yet not I, but accident and a sluggish temperament. There are times, Mr Somerset, when the human creature feels no interest in his kind, and assumes that his kind feels no interest in him. The feeling is not active enough to make him fly from their presence; but sufficient to keep him silent if he happens to be away. I may not have described it precisely; but this I know, that after my long illness, and the fancied neglect of my letters--'

'For which my father was not to blame, since he did not receive them,' said Paula.

'For which nobody was to blame--after that, I say, I wrote no more.'

'You have much pleasure in returning at last, no doubt,' said Somerset.

'Sir, as I remained away without particular pain, so I return without particular joy. I speak the truth, and no compliments. I may add that there is one exception to this absence of feeling from my heart, namely, that I do derive great satisfaction from seeing how mightily this young woman has grown and prevailed.'

This address, though delivered nominally to Somerset, was listened to by Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and De Stancy also. After uttering it, the speaker turned away, and continued his previous conversation with Captain De Stancy. From this time till the group parted he never again spoke directly to Somerset, paying him barely so much attention as he might have expected as Paula's architect, and certainly less than he might have supposed his due as her accepted lover.

The result of the appearance, as from the tomb, of this wintry man was that the evening ended in a frigid and formal way which gave little satisfaction to the sensitive Somerset, who was abstracted and constrained by reason of thoughts on how this resuscitation of the uncle would affect his relation with Paula. It was possibly also the thought of two at least of the others. There had, in truth, scarcely yet been time enough to adumbrate the possibilities opened up by this gentleman's return.

The only private word exchanged by Somerset with any one that night was with Mrs. Goodman, in whom he always recognized a friend to his cause, though the fluidity of her character rendered her but a feeble one at the best of times. She informed him that Mr. Power had no sort of legal control over Paula, or direction in her estates; but Somerset could not doubt that a near and only blood relation, even had he possessed but half the static force of character that made itself apparent in Mr. Power, might exercise considerable moral influence over the girl if he chose. And in view of Mr. Power's marked preference for De Stancy, Somerset had many misgivings as to its operating in a direction favourable to himself.

XI.

Somerset was deeply engaged with his draughtsmen and builders during the three following days, and scarcely entered the occupied wing of the castle.

At his suggestion Paula had agreed to have the works executed as such operations were carried out in old times, before the advent of contractors. Each trade required in the building was to be represented by a master-tradesman of that denomination, who should stand responsible for his own section of labour, and for no other, Somerset himself as chief technicist working out his designs on the spot. By this means the thoroughness of the workmanship would be greatly increased in comparison with the modern arrangement, whereby a nominal builder, seldom present, who can certainly know no more than one trade intimately and well, and who often does not know that, undertakes the whole.

But notwithstanding its manifest advantages to the proprietor, the plan added largely to the responsibilities of the architect, who, with his master-mason, master-carpenter, master-plumber, and what not, had scarcely a moment to call his own. Still, the method being upon the face of it the true one, Somerset supervised with a will.

But there seemed to float across the court to him from the inhabited wing an intimation that things were not as they had been before; that an influence adverse to himself was at work behind the ashlared face of

inner wall which confronted him. Perhaps this was because he never saw Paula at the windows, or heard her footfall in that half of the building given over to himself and his myrmidons. There was really no reason other than a sentimental one why he should see her. The uninhabited part of the castle was almost an independent structure, and it was quite natural to exist for weeks in this wing without coming in contact with residents in the other.

A more pronounced cause than vague surmise was destined to perturb him, and this in an unexpected manner. It happened one morning that he glanced through a local paper while waiting at the Lord-Quantock-Arms for the pony-carriage to be brought round in which he often drove to the castle. The paper was two days old, but to his unutterable amazement he read therein a paragraph which ran as follows:--

'We are informed that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy, of the Royal Horse Artillery, only surviving son of Sir William De Stancy, Baronet, and Paula, only daughter of the late John Power, Esq., M.P., of Stancy Castle.'

Somerset dropped the paper, and stared out of the window. Fortunately for his emotions, the horse and carriage were at this moment brought to the door, so that nothing hindered Somerset in driving off to the spot at which he would be soonest likely to learn what truth or otherwise there was in the newspaper report. From the first he doubted it: and yet how should it have got there? Such strange rumours, like paradoxical

maxims, generally include a portion of truth. Five days had elapsed since he last spoke to Paula.

Reaching the castle he entered his own quarters as usual, and after setting the draughtsmen to work walked up and down pondering how he might best see her without making the paragraph the ground of his request for an interview; for if it were a fabrication, such a reason would wound her pride in her own honour towards him, and if it were partly true, he would certainly do better in leaving her alone than in reproaching her. It would simply amount to a proof that Paula was an arrant coquette.

In his meditation he stood still, closely scanning one of the jamb-stones of a doorless entrance, as if to discover where the old hinge-hook had entered the stonework. He heard a footstep behind him, and looking round saw Paula standing by. She held a newspaper in her hand. The spot was one quite hemmed in from observation, a fact of which she seemed to be quite aware.

'I have something to tell you,' she said; 'something important. But you are so occupied with that old stone that I am obliged to wait.'

'It is not true surely!' he said, looking at the paper.

'No, look here,' she said, holding up the sheet. It was not what he had supposed, but a new one--the local rival to that which had contained

the announcement, and was still damp from the press. She pointed, and he read--

'We are authorized to state that there is no foundation whatever for the assertion of our contemporary that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy and Miss Power of Stancy Castle.'

Somerset pressed her hand. 'It disturbed me,' he said, 'though I did not believe it.'

'It astonished me, as much as it disturbed you; and I sent this contradiction at once.'

'How could it have got there?'

She shook her head.

'You have not the least knowledge?'

'Not the least. I wish I had.'

'It was not from any friends of De Stancy's? or himself?'

'It was not. His sister has ascertained beyond doubt that he knew nothing of it. Well, now, don't say any more to me about the matter.'

'I'll find out how it got into the paper.'

'Not now--any future time will do. I have something else to tell you.'

'I hope the news is as good as the last,' he said, looking into her face with anxiety; for though that face was blooming, it seemed full of a doubt as to how her next information would be taken.

'O yes; it is good, because everybody says so. We are going to take a delightful journey. My new-created uncle, as he seems, and I, and my aunt, and perhaps Charlotte, if she is well enough, are going to Nice, and other places about there.'

'To Nice!' said Somerset, rather blankly. 'And I must stay here?'

'Why, of course you must, considering what you have undertaken!' she said, looking with saucy composure into his eyes. 'My uncle's reason for proposing the journey just now is, that he thinks the alterations will make residence here dusty and disagreeable during the spring. The opportunity of going with him is too good a one for us to lose, as I have never been there.'

'I wish I was going to be one of the party!... What do YOU wish about it?'

She shook her head impenetrably. 'A woman may wish some things she does

not care to tell!'

'Are you really glad you are going, dearest?--as I MUST call you just once,' said the young man, gazing earnestly into her face, which struck him as looking far too rosy and radiant to be consistent with ever so little regret at leaving him behind.

'I take great interest in foreign trips, especially to the shores of the Mediterranean: and everybody makes a point of getting away when the house is turned out of the window.'

'But you do feel a little sadness, such as I should feel if our positions were reversed?'

'I think you ought not to have asked that so incredulously,' she murmured. 'We can be near each other in spirit, when our bodies are far apart, can we not?' Her tone grew softer and she drew a little closer to his side with a slightly nestling motion, as she went on, 'May I be sure that you will not think unkindly of me when I am absent from your sight, and not begrudge me any little pleasure because you are not there to share it with me?'

'May you! Can you ask it?... As for me, I shall have no pleasure to be begrudged or otherwise. The only pleasure I have is, as you well know, in you. When you are with me, I am happy: when you are away, I take no pleasure in anything.'

'I don't deserve it. I have no right to disturb you so,' she said, very gently. 'But I have given you some pleasure, have I not? A little more pleasure than pain, perhaps?'

'You have, and yet.... But I don't accuse you, dearest. Yes, you have given me pleasure. One truly pleasant time was when we stood together in the summer-house on the evening of the garden-party, and you said you liked me to love you.'

'Yes, it was a pleasant time,' she returned thoughtfully. 'How the rain came down, and formed a gauze between us and the dancers, did it not; and how afraid we were--at least I was--lest anybody should discover us there, and how quickly I ran in after the rain was over!'

'Yes', said Somerset, 'I remember it. But no harm came of it to you.... And perhaps no good will come of it to me.'

'Do not be premature in your conclusions, sir,' she said archly. 'If you really do feel for me only half what you say, we shall--you will make good come of it--in some way or other.'

'Dear Paula--now I believe you, and can bear anything.'

'Then we will say no more; because, as you recollect, we agreed not to go too far. No expostulations, for we are going to be practical young

people; besides, I won't listen if you utter them. I simply echo your words, and say I, too, believe you. Now I must go. Have faith in me, and don't magnify trifles light as air.'

'I THINK I understand you. And if I do, it will make a great difference in my conduct. You will have no cause to complain.'

'Then you must not understand me so much as to make much difference; for your conduct as my architect is perfect. But I must not linger longer, though I wished you to know this news from my very own lips.'

'Bless you for it! When do you leave?'

'The day after to-morrow.'

'So early? Does your uncle guess anything? Do you wish him to be told just yet?'

'Yes, to the first; no, to the second.'

'I may write to you?'

'On business, yes. It will be necessary.'

'How can you speak so at a time of parting?'

'Now, George--you see I say George, and not Mr. Somerset, and you may draw your own inference--don't be so morbid in your reproaches! I have informed you that you may write, or still better, telegraph, since the wire is so handy--on business. Well, of course, it is for you to judge whether you will add postscripts of another sort. There, you make me say more than a woman ought, because you are so obtuse and literal. Good afternoon--good-bye! This will be my address.'

She handed him a slip of paper, and flitted away.

Though he saw her again after this, it was during the bustle of preparation, when there was always a third person present, usually in the shape of that breathing refrigerator, her uncle. Hence the few words that passed between them were of the most formal description, and chiefly concerned the restoration of the castle, and a church at Nice designed by him, which he wanted her to inspect.

They were to leave by an early afternoon train, and Somerset was invited to lunch on that day. The morning was occupied by a long business consultation in the studio with Mr. Power and Mrs. Goodman on what rooms were to be left locked up, what left in charge of the servants, and what thrown open to the builders and workmen under the surveillance of Somerset. At present the work consisted mostly of repairs to existing rooms, so as to render those habitable which had long been used only as

stores for lumber. Paula did not appear during this discussion; but when they were all seated in the dining-hall she came in dressed for the journey, and, to outward appearance, with blithe anticipation at its prospect blooming from every feature. Next to her came Charlotte De Stancy, still with some of the pallor of an invalid, but wonderfully brightened up, as Somerset thought, by the prospect of a visit to a delightful shore. It might have been this; and it might have been that Somerset's presence had a share in the change.

It was in the hall, when they were in the bustle of leave-taking, that there occurred the only opportunity for the two or three private words with Paula to which his star treated him on that last day. His took the hasty form of, 'You will write soon?'

'Telegraphing will be quicker,' she answered in the same low tone; and whispering 'Be true to me!' turned away.

How unreasonable he was! In addition to those words, warm as they were, he would have preferred a little paleness of cheek, or trembling of lip, instead of the bloom and the beauty which sat upon her undisturbed maidenhood, to tell him that in some slight way she suffered at his loss.

Immediately after this they went to the carriages waiting at the door. Somerset, who had in a measure taken charge of the castle, accompanied them and saw them off, much as if they were his visitors. She stepped

in, a general adieu was spoken, and she was gone.

While the carriages rolled away, he ascended to the top of the tower, where he saw them lessen to spots on the road, and turn the corner out of sight. The chances of a rival seemed to grow in proportion as Paula receded from his side; but he could not have answered why. He had bidden her and her relatives adieu on her own doorstep, like a privileged friend of the family, while De Stancy had scarcely seen her since the play-night. That the silence into which the captain appeared to have sunk was the placidity of conscious power, was scarcely probable; yet that adventitious aids existed for De Stancy he could not deny. The link formed by Charlotte between De Stancy and Paula, much as he liked the ingenuous girl, was one that he could have wished away. It constituted a bridge of access to Paula's inner life and feelings which nothing could rival; except that one fact which, as he firmly believed, did actually rival it, giving him faith and hope; his own primary occupation of Paula's heart. Moreover, Mrs. Goodman would be an influence favourable to himself and his cause during the journey; though, to be sure, to set against her there was the phlegmatic and obstinate Abner Power, in whom, apprised by those subtle media of intelligence which lovers possess, he fancied he saw no friend.

Somerset remained but a short time at the castle that day. The light of its chambers had fled, the gross grandeur of the dictatorial towers oppressed him, and the studio was hateful. He remembered a promise made long ago to Mr. Woodwell of calling upon him some afternoon; and a

visit which had not much attractiveness in it at other times recommended itself now, through being the one possible way open to him of hearing Paula named and her doings talked of. Hence in walking back to Markton, instead of going up the High Street, he turned aside into the unfrequented footway that led to the minister's cottage.

Mr. Woodwell was not indoors at the moment of his call, and Somerset lingered at the doorway, and cast his eyes around. It was a house which typified the drearier tenets of its occupier with great exactness. It stood upon its spot of earth without any natural union with it: no mosses disguised the stiff straight line where wall met earth; not a creeper softened the aspect of the bare front. The garden walk was strewn with loose clinkers from the neighbouring foundry, which rolled under the pedestrian's foot and jolted his soul out of him before he reached the porchless door. But all was clean, and clear, and dry.

Whether Mr. Woodwell was personally responsible for this condition of things there was not time to closely consider, for Somerset perceived the minister coming up the walk towards him. Mr. Woodwell welcomed him heartily; and yet with the mien of a man whose mind has scarcely dismissed some scene which has preceded the one that confronts him. What that scene was soon transpired.

'I have had a busy afternoon,' said the minister, as they walked indoors; 'or rather an exciting afternoon. Your client at Stancy Castle, whose uncle, as I imagine you know, has so unexpectedly returned, has

left with him to-day for the south of France; and I wished to ask her before her departure some questions as to how a charity organized by her father was to be administered in her absence. But I have been very unfortunate. She could not find time to see me at her own house, and I awaited her at the station, all to no purpose, owing to the presence of her friends. Well, well, I must see if a letter will find her.'

Somerset asked if anybody of the neighbourhood was there to see them off.

'Yes, that was the trouble of it. Captain De Stancy was there, and quite monopolized her. I don't know what 'tis coming to, and perhaps I have no business to inquire, since she is scarcely a member of our church now. Who could have anticipated the daughter of my old friend John Power developing into the ordinary gay woman of the world as she has done? Who could have expected her to associate with people who show contempt for their Maker's intentions by flippantly assuming other characters than those in which He created them?'

'You mistake her,' murmured Somerset, in a voice which he vainly endeavoured to attune to philosophy. 'Miss Power has some very rare and beautiful qualities in her nature, though I confess I tremble--fear lest the De Stancy influence should be too strong.'

'Sir, it is already! Do you remember my telling you that I thought the force of her surroundings would obscure the pure daylight of her spirit,

as a monkish window of coloured images attenuates the rays of God's sun? I do not wish to indulge in rash surmises, but her oscillation from her family creed of Calvinistic truth towards the traditions of the De Stancys has been so decided, though so gradual, that--well, I may be wrong.'

'That what?' said the young man sharply.

'I sometimes think she will take to her as husband the present representative of that impoverished line--Captain De Stancy--which she may easily do, if she chooses, as his behaviour to-day showed.'

'He was probably there on account of his sister,' said Somerset, trying to escape the mental picture of farewell gallantries bestowed on Paula.

'It was hinted at in the papers the other day.'

'And it was flatly contradicted.'

'Yes. Well, we shall see in the Lord's good time; I can do no more for her. And now, Mr. Somerset, pray take a cup of tea.'

The revelations of the minister depressed Somerset a little, and he did not stay long. As he went to the door Woodwell said, 'There is a worthy man--the deacon of our chapel, Mr. Havill--who would like to be friendly with you. Poor man, since the death of his wife he seems to have

something on his mind--some trouble which my words will not reach. If ever you are passing his door, please give him a look in. He fears that calling on you might be an intrusion.'

Somerset did not clearly promise, and went his way. The minister's allusion to the announcement of the marriage reminded Somerset that she had expressed a wish to know how the paragraph came to be inserted. The wish had been carelessly spoken; but he went to the newspaper office to make inquiries on the point.

The reply was unexpected. The reporter informed his questioner that in returning from the theatricals, at which he was present, he shared a fly with a gentleman who assured him that such an alliance was certain, so obviously did it recommend itself to all concerned, as a means of strengthening both families. The gentleman's knowledge of the Powers was so precise that the reporter did not hesitate to accept his assertion. He was a man who had seen a great deal of the world, and his face was noticeable for the seams and scars on it.

Somerset recognized Paula's uncle in the portrait.

Hostilities, then, were beginning. The paragraph had been meant as the first slap. Taking her abroad was the second.