Richard Hurdis, volume 2

William Gilmore Simms

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I will recall
Some facts of ancient date: he must remember
When on Cithæron we together fed
Our several flocks.
—— Sophoc.

CHAPTER I.

Villain, I know thou com'st to murder me.

—— Marlowe——Edward the Second.

Matthew Webber was no trifler. Though represented by his comrades, as we have seen in a previous dialogue, as unwilling to shed blood, it may be added that his unwillingness did not arise from any scruples of humanity which are always unnecessary to the profession of the outlaw. He was governed entirely by a selfish policy, which calmly deliberated upon its work of evil, and chose that course which seemed to promise the greatest return of profit with the greatest security. To avoid bloodshed was simply to avoid one great agent of detection. Hence his forbearance. To the moral of the matter none could have been more thoroughly indifferent. We beheld him giving instructions toan associate the moment that William Carrington fell by an unknown hand, to pursue the murderer, not with a view to his punishment, but with a desire to secure a prompt associate. It was not the wish of the fraternity of robbers, herding on the Choctaw frontier, that any body should take up the trade in that region, of which they desired the monopoly. When the fellow, thus instructed, had gone, Webber with his remaining associates at once proceeded to examine the body, which was lifeless when they reached it. They wasted no time in idle wonder, and gave but a single glance at the wound, which they saw was inflicted by a rifle bullet; then lifting the inanimate form into the wood, they rifled it of the large sum of money which Carrington had concealed in his bosom, and taking it into a little crevice in the hill−side which could not hide it, they threw it down indifferently, trusting to the wolves, of which that neighbourhood had numerous herds, to remove it in due season. Poor youth! with such a heart——so noble, so brave——with affections so warm, and hopes so full of promise, to be shot down in the sun−light——in the bloom of manhood——by an obscure ruffian, and be denied a grave!

When they had possessed themselves of the money, the amount of which gave them no small pleasure, they put spurs to their horses and rode back with as great speed as they had used in the pursuit. It was necessary that they should do so, and hasten their flight from the spot where their evil doings had been begun. My horse had continued on his course with a speed which had been increased by his alarm and unrestraint after the fall of his rider; and Webber saw with no small anxiety that he was in the direct road to Colonel Grafton's, to which place he did not doubt that he would return, having been so lately lodged there. The scoundrels who were guarding me had, in the mean time, become greatly disquieted by their apprehensions at the delay of the pursuers, and not small was their relief when they saw them safe, and felt themselves once more secure in their united strength. They consulted together apart, and frequently pointed to me where I lay, on my back, and bound rigidly to an exposed joist of the floor. What had taken place in the pursuit, they did not reveal in my hearing, and bitter indeed were my feelings as I lay in this doubly evil state of incapacity and suspense. The doubtfulness of my own, was not less a subject of concern in my mind than was his fate——for my strongest impression with regard to Carrington was, that he had escaped in safety to Grafton's. All then that I had to fear might be the present rage of my captors. They might sacrifice me before relief could come. I strove not to think of this——still less was I willing that the villains should see that I fearedthem——yet, to confess a truth, it required no small effort to conceal the apprehensions which I could not subdue, and my success, with all my efforts, was partial only. They must have beheld the struggle of my bosom in my face. But of this they seemed to take no heed. They were too much interested in their own situation and apprehensions, to give much regard to mine. They consulted together earnestly with the air of men who had need of haste in their resolutions. "We must be off at once," I heard Webber say at one time——"there will be no help for us now if he gets to Grafton's." This last sentence brought warmth and assurance to my heart, I did not now doubt of my friend's safety. "But this lark?" said Geoffrey——and I saw from the quick malignant glance which my gambler acquaintance bestowed upon me when these words were uttered, that it was of me they spoke. The latter bent forward to hear the resolve of Webber——whose word here seemed to be law——with an air of anxiety not less great than that which I might have shown myself. The answer of Webber did not seem to satisfy him.

"What of him?" said the latter. "Shall we stretch him?" was the farther inquiry of Geoffrey—— an equivocal phrase which I suppose coolly meant "shall we cut his throat?"

"Pshaw——no!" replied the other. "What's the good of it?——let the fellow lie where he is and cool himself.

By to−morrow, somebody will cut his strings, and help him turn over. He will get hungry in the mean time, for he didn't eat a hearty dinner——all his own fault. Come——let us jog."

Ten minutes had not elapsed when they were all ready, and I saw them prepare to depart, leaving me as I lay, bound to the floor by my body and arms, and capable of moving my legs only. Webber took leave of me with the composure of one who has nothing with which to reproach himself.

"Grafton will be here after a while," said he, "and set you free. You may tell him I'm sorry, but it don't suit me to wait for him now. He will see me, however, at his daughter's marriage. Good bye."

The man called Geoffrey said something to me in a similar spirit; the gambler grinned only upon me as he passed, but with such an expression of malice in his visage that, though I did not fear the reptile, it yet made me shudder to behold him. In a few moments more I was left alone to muse over my disconsolate condition. I heard the trampling of their horses die away in the distance, and such was the cheerlessness of my situation that I positively seemed to be chilled by their departure. This, however, was but the feeling of the moment, and I was allowed a brief time for its indulgence. To mysurprise the gambler reappeared when I had thought him with the rest of his companions full a half mile off, and the increased malignity embodied and looking green in his visage, left me little doubts as to the motive which had made him lag behind. If I had doubts at the beginning, he did not suffer me to entertain them long. His words removed them.

"And now," he said, "my brave fellow, the time is come for your quittance. You have had the word of me long enough. You are in my power. What have you to say for yourself?"

"What should I say?" was my ready and indignant reply. Truly and miserably did I feel at the conviction, that I was indeed in the power and at the mercy of this vile wretch——but if worlds had depended upon it, I could not have answered him other than in language of the most unadulterated scorn.

"Ha! do you not understand me?" he cried. "Your life, I tell you, is in my power! The only man in the world who could have kept me from taking it, is Mat Webber, and he's out of reach and hearing. It is but a blow, and with all your pride and insolence I let your blood out upon this floor. What do you say that I should not?——what prayer will you make to me that I should spare your life?"

The fellow leaned upon the table which, occupying the middle of the floor, stood between him andthe place where I lay. My feet were half under it. He leaned over it, and shook at me a long knife—— bared, ready for the stroke——in sundry savage movements. I gave him look for look, and a full defiance for all his threatenings.

"Prayer to you!" I exclaimed——"that were putting myself indeed within your power. You may stab——I cannot help myself——but you shall only murder, wretch——you shall have no triumph;" and, grown utterly reckless as I believed there was no hope of escape and that I must die, I lifted my feet, and thrusting them with all my might against the table, I sent it forward with such force as to hurl it upon him, when both came to the floor together. The fellow was not much hurt, and a few moments sufficed for his extrication. With accumulated fury, that foamed but did not speak, he was about to rush upon me, when a sudden footstep behind him drew all his attention to the new comer. Never could I have believed, till then, that fear could so suddenly succeed to rage in any bosom. The villain grew white as a sheet the moment that he heard the sound and saw the person. It was Webber who looked upon him with the eye of a master.

"You're a pretty fellow! a'nt you? So you kept behind for this? Geoffrey warned me to expect it, as soon as I found you missing; and it's well I got back in time. You are a fool, Bully boy, and you'llbe stretched for it. Mount before me, and if you're wise, forget you've ever seen this chap. Come—— begone, I say——no word——not one——Grafton's under way already."

The assassin was actually incapable of answer. Certainly he made none. The main villain of this precious set must have seen a various life of service. The whole train of proceedings which he had this day witnessed——the first assault upon William and myself——the pursuit of the former——his death——and the subsequent attempt of my enemy upon my person, all seemed to awaken in him but little emotion. There was but one subject upon which he could not preserve his temper, and that was his old employer, Colonel Grafton——but with regard to all others, his selfishness had schooled him successfully to suffer no feeling or passion to interfere in the slightest degree with what might be his prevailing policy. With the inflexibility of a superior, suspicious of his slave, he waited until he saw my enemy mount and set forth, then nodding to me with the freedom of an old friend, he left the entrance, and I was once more left alone.

CHAPTER II.

When Lycabas his Athis thus beheld
How was his friendly heart with sorrow fill'd!
A youth so noble, to his soul so dear,
To see his shapeless look——his dying groans to hear.
—— Ovid——

Hour after hour rolled on, night was approaching, and yet no aid came. What could this mean? What had become of my friend? Had he grown indifferent to my fate——did he fear to encounter a second time with the wretches who had pursued him for his life? I dismissed this doubt as soon as it was suggested to my mind; but I conceived any but the true occasion for his delay. I knew William too well to fear that he would desert me. I knew that he had no pusillanimous fears to deter him from a proper risk. He had probably not been able to get assistance readily, and to come without an adequate force, was to commit a rashness and incur a danger, without any corresponding advantage. I tried to solace myself with the conviction that he would not be much longer absent, but how cheerless did I feel the while. The very inability underwhich I laboured to do any thing for myself, was, to a mind and body like mine——accustomed to do for themselves always——enough to discourage the hope of being effectually relieved by others. The approach of night did not diminish my apprehensions. The sun had now set, and there was a brief interval of dusk and silence between its disappearance and the rising of the moon, which was particularly gloomy. How dreadfully active my imagination grew in that interval, and what effect it had upon my nerves, I almost shame to say; but I felt a degree of fear in that brief space of time, which I had never suffered before, and trust, that, in no situation, I shall ever be compelled to endure again. A state of conscious helplessness suggests a thousand fears and fancies that could not be forced upon the mind under other circumstances. Forms of danger that would seem impossible even in our dreams, become, at such a period, unquestionable foes; and the mind losing its balance, after a brief contest, foregoes all examination of the danger and yields up the contest in utter imbecility. But now the moon rose to cheer me. Light is always cheerful. I could not see her orb where I lay, but her smiles, like those of some benign and blessed spirit, streamed through the thousand cracks and openings of the log hovel which was now a prison as secure to keep me as the donjon of the feudal baron. Her beams fellaround me in little spots that dimpled the whole apartment with shining and bright glances. Yet even this cheering spectacle impressed me with added disquiet when I found myself so securely fastened to the floor, as not to be able with all my writhings to avoid the occasional rays that fell upon my face and eyes. How bitterly did this make me feel my incapacity——and when, at moments, I heard the faint but protracted bay of the wolf in his leafy den not far off, which I did as soon as the night set in, I could not doubt that he would soon make his appearance in the deserted hovel; and I, who could not shelter my face from the light of the moon, had still fewer hopes of being able to protect myself from him. With every sound in the neighbouring thickets I imagined him approaching, under the instinct of a scent as keen as that of the vulture, to his bloody feast; and I vainly asked myself what I should do in my defence, when his gaunt and shaggy body was stretched out upon my own, and his slobbering snout was thrust into my face. I strove, but could not lift an arm——I could only shout in the hope to scare him from his prey, and, such was my conscious impotence, that it struck me as not impossible but that I might have lost the use of my voice also. Such was the vivid force of this childish apprehension in my mind that I actually shouted aloud to convince myself that it was groundless——I shoutedaloud, and, to my great joy——without any such hope or expectation——I heard my shouts returned. Another and another! Never were there sweeter echoes to the cry for relief. In a few minutes more I was surrounded by a troop——a half dozen at least——all friends——yet where was William Carrington——the dearest friend of all! Where? Where? My demand was quickly answered. Colonel Grafton, who led the company, told his story which was painfully unsatisfactory. My horse, freed from his rider, had brought the only intelligence which Colonel Grafton had received. He had seen nothing of my friend. He was not at home when the horse came to his gate, and the animal was taken in by a servant. When he did return, he immediately proceeded to my assistance; though not before calling up a patrol of such of his neighbours as he could rely upon, to assist him in an inquiry in which he not only feared foul play, but apprehended an issue with more than the one villain into whose clutches we had fallen. I was

soon freed from my bonds, but how much more unhappy than I was before. How puerile had been my selfish apprehensions to those which now filled my heart when I thought of Carrington. What had been his fate?——where was he? How icy cold in my bosom did my blood run, as I mediated these doubts and dreaded the increase of knowledge which I was yet compelled to seek.

Let me pass over this dreadful interval of doubt, and hurry on to the palsying conviction of the truth which followed. Our search that night was unavailing, but the next morning the woods were scoured, and it was my fortune to be the first to fall upon traces which led me to the body of my friend. I saw where he had fallen——where the horse had evidently shyed as the shot was given and the rider fell. The earth was still smooth where he had lain, for Webber was too much hurried or too indifferent, to endeavour to remove the marks of the event. It was not now difficult to find the body. They had not carried it far; and I removed a clump of bushes which grew over the hollow in which they had thrown it, and started with a convulsion of horror to find it lying at my feet. Cold, silent, stiff——there he lay——the friend of my heart; battered and bruised ——his noble face covered with blood and dust——one of his eyes protruding from its socket, and the limbs, once so symmetrical and straight, now contracted and fixed in deformity by the sudden spasms of death.

All my strength left me as this dreadful spectacle met my eyes. I sunk down beside it incapable of speech or action. My knees were weakened——my very soul dead within me. I could only sob and moan, and my choking utterance might well havemoved the wonder and pity of those about me, to behold one who seemed otherwise so strong and bold, now sunk into such a state of woman−like infirmity. Colonel Grafton condoled with me like a father, but what could he, or any one say to me in the way of consolation. Who could declare the amount of my own loss——and yet, what was my loss to hers——the poor girl who waited for his return? From me she was to hear that he never could return? ——that he lay cold in his gore——his voice silent——his body mangled——his noble figure stiffened into deformity. I shivered as with an ague fit when I remembered that it was from my lips she was to hear all this.

An examination of the body proved two things which struck me with surprise. It was found that the fatal wound had been received in front, and that it had been inflicted by a rifle bullet. How to account for this I knew not. I had seen no rifle among the weapons carried by any of the outlaws; and even if there had been, how should the shot have taken effect in front, he flying from them—— evidently in rapid flight when shot, and they some distance behind him. There was only one way at that moment to account for this, and that was to suppose that some associate of the pursuers had either been stationed in front, or had, opportunely for them, appeared there as he approached the pointwhere he had fallen. Though still unsatisfactory to me, and perhaps to all, we were yet compelled, in the absence of all better knowledge, to content ourselves with a conjecture, which, though plausible enough, did not content us. I felt that there was some mystery still in the transaction, and that William had not been slain willingly by the pursuers. Webber had headed them, and why should he have been so prompt to murder one, and spare another——ay, even protect him from harm——who was so completely in his power. There was as little personal hostility towards William in the mind of Webber as towards me——and yet, the blood, warmed by pursuit, might have grown too rash for the deliberate resolve even of one so habitually cool as the master villain on this occasion.

Doubts thickened in my mind with every added moment of conjecture, and at length I strove to think no more upon it. I resolved to do so, though I soon found my resolution idle. How could I forbear the thought, when I found it had made my hair gray in that single night. Either that or my fears had done so, and I fain would believe it was not the latter. I could think now of nothing else. That mangled body lay before me whichever way I turned. I saw the ghastly glaze upon the starting eye that bulged half way from its socket. I saw that mouth whose smile it had been a pleasure to see,distorted from its natural shape and smeared with dust and mire. There too was the narrow orifice through which life had rushed, prayerless perhaps, and oh! with such terrific abruptness. I thought then of all his ways——his frank, hearty laugh, his generous spirit, his free bold character, his love of truth, his friendship, and the sweet heart−ties which had bound him to life and earth, and warmed him with promising hopes, never to be fulfilled. That last thought was the pang above all. Poor William ——Poor Catharine! Little, in the gushing fulness of their united hopes, did their hearts dream of a destiny like this.

CHAPTER III.

Well! he is dead——
Murdered perhaps! and I am faint, and feel
As if it were no painful thing to die!
—— Coleridge

With a stunned mind and most miserable feelings, I was almost led away by Colonel Grafton to his dwelling. For three days I could resolve on nothing. In that time we committed William to the earth. A quiet spot under a clump of venerable oaks, which the Colonel had chosen for his own final resting place, afforded one to my friend. The heavy moss depended from the trees above him, and the warm sun came to his turf in subdued glances through the withered leaves. Birds had built their nests from time immemorial in their boughs, and the constant rabbit might be seen leaping in the long yellow grasses beneath them when the dusky shadows of evening were about to fall. The hunter never crept to this spot to pursue his game of death. The cruel instrument of his sport was forbidden to sound therein. The place was hallowed to solemn sleep and to the brooding watchfulness of happyspirits, and in its quiet round we left the inanimate form of one whose heart had been as lovely in its performances, as to the eye were the serene shadows of the spot where we laid him. I envied him the peace which I was sure his spirit knew, when we put his body out of sight. God help me, for truly there was little that felt like peace in mine.

For three days, as I said before, I was like one stunned and deafened. I had no quickness to perceive, nor ability to examine. My thoughts were a perfect chaos, and continual and crowding images of death were passing before my eyes. The kind friends with whom I lingered during this brief but most painful period, did all in their power to console me. They spared no attentions, they withheld no consideration, that might have been gratifying to the bruised and broken spirit. And yet no ministerings could have been more judicious than were theirs. The work of kindness was never out of place. There was nothing intrusive in their 'tendance, but a general fitness of speech and gesture, so far as I perceived them, extended through the movements of the whole family. Colonel Grafton, with a proper considerateness, entirely forbore the subject of my loss; his words were few and well timed; and though they were not directly addressed to my griefs, their tendency was to administer to them. If his good sense made him avoid a rude tenting ofthe wound, he did not fall into the opposite error of seeking to make light of it. His countenance had a subdued gravity upon it, which softened into sweetness a face in which benignity and manliness were evenly mingled, elevating and qualifying one another, and his language was given to subjects belonging to the general interests of humanity which the mourner might very well apply to his affliction without being curiously seen to do so. Mrs. Grafton's cares were no less considerate than his. My mother could not so keenly have studied my feelings nor so kindly have administered to them. Julia, too, seemed to grow less shy than usual, and sat down like a confiding child beside me, bringing me her work to look at, and unfolding to me the most valued stores of her little library. Sorrow has no sex, and woman becomes courageous to serve in affliction, the man whom she would tremble, in prosperity, barely to encounter. Her lover made his appearance but once during my stay, and remained but a short time, so that I had her company in several of my sad rambles. Somehow, I felt my greatest source of consolation in her. It is probable that we derive strength from the contemplation of a weakness which is greater than our own. I felt it so with me. The confiding dependence of this lovely girl——her appeals to my superior information ——taught me at moments to lose sight of my cares:and, perhaps, as she saw this, with the natural arts of her sex, she became more confiding——more a child.

At length, I started from my stupor. I grew ashamed of my weakness. To feel our losses is becoming enough——to yield to them and sink under their pressure is base and unmanly. I was vexed to think that Colonel Grafton should have so long beheld me in the feeble attitude of grief. I was determined to resume my character.

"I must go," I exclaimed; "I must leave you to−morrow, Colonel."

It was thus I addressed him on the evening of the third day after the family had retired for the night.

"Where will you go?" he asked. The question staggered me. Where was I to go? Should I return to Marengo? Should I be the one to carry suffering to the poor girl whom fate had defrauded of her lover? Could I have strength to speak the words of doom and misery? Impossible! On my own account I had no reason to return. I had

nothing to seek in that quarter——no hopes to invite my steps——no duty (so I fancied then) to impel me to retrace a journey begun with so much boldness, and, so far, pursued with so much ill fortune.

"I will not return," my heart said within me. "I dare not. I cannot look on Catharine again. It was my pleadings and persuasions, that made herlover my companion in this fatal adventure, and how can I meet her eye of reproach? How can I hear her ask——'Where is he?——why have you not brought him back to me?' Well did I remember her parting directions——'Take care of one another.' Had I taken care of him? I was the more prudent, the more thoughtful and suspicious. I knew him to be careless, frank, free, confiding. Had I taken due care of him? Had I been as watchful as I should have been? Had I not suffered him heedlessly to plunge into the toils when a resolute word of mine would have kept him from them?"

I could not satisfy myself by my answer to these self proposed questions, and I resolved to go forward.

"In the wilds of Mississippi I will bury myself. The bosom of the 'Nation' shall receive me. I will not look on Marengo again. I will write to Catharine——I will tell her in a letter what I dare not look her in the face and speak."

Such was my resolve——a resolve made in my weakness and unworthy of a noble mind. When I declared it to Colonel Grafton, with the affectionate interest and freedom of a father, he opposed it.

"Pardon me, my young friend, but are you right in this resolution? Is it not your duty to go back and declare the circumstances to all those who are interested in the fate of your friend? It will beexpected of you. To take any other course will seem to show a consciousness of error with which you cannot reproach yourself. Suspicion will become active, and your reluctance, which springs from a natural dislike to give pain, will be set down to other and far less honourable motives. Go back, Mr. Hurdis——seek the friends of Mr. Carrington and your own. Though it wring your heart to tell the cruel story, and rend theirs to hear it, yet withhold nothing. Take the counsel of one who has seen too much of the world not to speak with due precaution, and avoid concealment in all matters of this sort. Suppress nothing——let nothing that is at all equivocal be coupled with your conduct where it affects the interests of others. I have never yet known an instance of departure from duty in which the person did not suffer from such departure. And it is your duty to relate this matter at large to those who were connected with your friend."

"But I will write, Colonel Grafton——I will write all and withhold nothing. My duty to the friends and relatives of William Carrington cannot call for more."

"Your duty to yourself does. It requires that you should not shrink from meeting them. Your letter would tell them nothing but bald facts. They must see you when you give your testimony. They must see that you feel the pain, that your dutycalls upon you to inflict. When you show them that, you give them the only consolation which grief ever demands; you give them sympathy, and their sorrows become lessened as they look on yours. To this poor maiden, in particular, you owe it."

"Ah! Colonel Grafton, you cannot know the torture which must follow such an interview. It was I who persuaded him to go on this hapless journey. She heard me plead with him to go——my arguments convinced him. She will look on me as the cause of all——she will call me his murderer."

"You must bear it all, and bear it with humility and without reply. If she loved this youth, what is your torture to that which your words will inflict on her? You have the selfish strength and resources of the man to uphold you——what has she? Nothing——nothing but the past.——Phantoms of memory are all that are left to her, and these torture as often as they soothe. Do not speak then of your sufferings in comparison with hers. She must, of necessity, be the greatest sufferer, and you must submit to see her griefs, and, it may be, to listen to her reproaches. These will fall lightly on your ears when you can reproach yourself with nothing. If you did not submit to them——if you fled from the task before you——in place of her reproaches you would have her suspicions, and your own self rebuke in all future time."

He had put the matter before me in a new light, and, with a sigh, I changed my purpose, resolving to start for Marengo in the morning. Meanwhile, let me relate the progress of other parties to this narrative.

CHAPTER IV.

I've done the deed.

—— Macbeth

The murderer of William lay close in the thicket after he had done the deed. That murderer was Ben Pickett, and, as the reader may have divined already, his victim had perished through mistake. The fatal cause of this was in his employment of my horse ——a circumstance forced upon him by the necessities of his flight. Pickett knew the horse and looked no farther. It was a long shot, from a rising ground above, where the umbrage was thick, and at such a distance that features were not clearly distinguishable. The dress of William unfortunately helped the delusion. It was almost entirely like mine. We had been so completely associated together for years, that our habits and tastes in many respects had become assimilated. The murderer, having satisfied himself——which he did at a glance——that the horse was mine, it was the prompt conclusion of his mind that I was the rider. Crime is seldom deliberate——the mere act I mean——the determinationmay be deliberately enough made; but the blow is most usually given in haste, as if the criminal dreaded that he might shrink from an act already resolved upon. Pickett did not trust himself to look a second time before pulling trigger. Had he suffered the rider to advance ten paces more, he would have withdrawn the sight. The courage of man is never certain but when he is doing what he feels to be right. The wrong doer may be desperate and furious, but he has no composed bearing. Pickett was of this sort. He shot almost instantly after seeing the horse. He was about to come forward when he saw the rider tumble; but the sudden approach of the pursuers whose forms had been concealed by the narrow and enclosed "blind" through which they passed, compelled him to resume his position, and remain quiet. He saw them take charge of the body, but had little idea that their aim, like his own, had been vulturous. He saw them busy about the prey which his blow had struck down, but concluded that they were friends seeking to succour and to save. Under any circumstances his hope of plunder was now cut off, and he silently withdrew into the forest, where his horse had been hidden, and hurriedly remounting commenced his return to Marengo. But an eye was upon him that never lost sight of him. The keen hunter that Matthew Webber had set upon his path had found his track, andpursued it with the unerring scent of the blood hound. More than once the pursuer could have shot down the fugitive with a weapon as little anticipated, and as unerring as that which he himself had employed; but he had no purpose of this sort in view. He silently followed on——keeping close watch upon every movement, yet never suffering himself to be seen. When the murderer paused by the way side, he halted also; when he sped towards evening, he too relaxed his reins; and he drew them up finally only, when he beheld the former, with an audacity which he never showed while I dwelt in Marengo, present himself at the entrance of my father's plantation, and request to see my brother. The pursuer paused also at this moment, and entering a little but dense wood on one side of the road, quietly dismounted from his horse which he fastened in the deepest thicket, and, under cover of the under brush, crept forward as nearly as he could, to the place where Pickett waited, without incurring any risk of detection.

It was not long before John Hurdis came to the gate, and his coward soul made its appearance in his face, the moment that he saw his confederate. His lips grew livid and quivered——his cheeks were whiter than his shirt, and his voice so feeble, when he attempted to speak, that he could only articulateat all by uttering himself with vehemency and haste.

"Ah, Pickett, that you?——well! what?"

The murderer had not alighted from his horse, and he now simply bent forward to the other, as he half whispered——

"It's all fixed, 'Squire. The nail's clinched. You can take the road now when you please, and find nothing to trip you."

"Ha! but you do not mean it, Ben?——It is not as you say?——You have not done it? Are you sure? Did you see?"

"It's done——I tell you, as sure's a gun."

"He's dead then?" said John Hurdis in a husky whisper——"Richard Hurdis is dead you say?" and he tottered forward to the rider with a countenance in which fear and eagerness were so mingled as to produce an unquiet

shrinking even in the bosom of his confederate.

"I've said it, 'Squire, and I'll say it again to please you. I had dead aim on his button——just here, (he laid his hand on his breast)——and I saw him tumble and come down all in a heap like a bag of feathers. There's no doctors can do him good now, I tell you. He's laid up so that they won't take him down again——nobody. You can go to sleep now when you please."

The greater felon of the two shrank back as he heard these words, and covered his face with his hands. He seemed scarce able to stand, and leaned against the posts of the gate for his support. A sudden shivering came over him, and when that passed off, he laughed brokenly as if with a slight convulsion, and the corners of his mouth were twitched until the tears started in his eyes. To what particular feeling, whether of remorse or satisfaction, he owed these emotions, it would be difficult for me to say, as it was certainly impossible for his comrade to conceive. Pickett looked on with wondering, and was half inclined to doubt whether his proprietor was not out of his wits. But a few moments reassured him as John Hurdis again came forward. His tones were more composed, though still unsubdued, when he addressed him: and, perhaps, something more of human apprehension dwelt upon his countenance.

"You have told me, Ben Pickett, but I am not certain. Richard Hurdis was a strong man——he wouldn't die easily. He would fight——he would strike to the last. How could you stand against him? Why, Ben, he would crush you with a blow of his fist. He was monstrous strong."

"Why, 'Squire, what are you talking about? Dick Hurdis was strong, I know, and stout hearted. He would hold on 'till his teeth met, for there was no scare in him. But that's nothing to the matternow, for you see there was no fight at all. The rifle did the business——long shot and steady aim—— so, you see, all his strength went for nothing."

"But how could he let you trap him, Ben Pickett? Richard was suspicious_and always on the watch. He wouldn't fall easily into trap. There must be some mistake, Ben——some mistake. You're only joking with me, Ben——you have not found him? he was too much ahead of you, and got off——well——it's just as well you let him go——I don't care——indeed, I'm almost glad you didn't reach him. He's in the 'Nation' I suppose by this time?"

"But I did reach him, 'Squire," replied the other, not exactly knowing how to account for the purposeless tenor of John Hurdis's speech, and wondering much at the unlooked for relenting of purpose which it implied. There was something in this last sentence which annoyed Pickett as much as it surprised him. It seemed to imply that his employer might not be altogether satisfied with him when he became persuaded of the truth of what he said. He hastened therefore to reiterate his story.

"He'll never get nearer to the 'Nation' than he is now. I tell you, 'Squire, I come upon him on a by−road leading out from Tuscaloosa, that run along among a range of hills where I kept. There was a double hill close by, and the road run through it——it was a dark road. I tracked him and Bill Carringtontwice over the ground. They had business farther down with a man named Webber, and they stopt all night with a Colonel Grafton. I got from one of his negroes all about it. Well, I watched when he was to come back. When I heard them making tracks, I put myself in the bush, clear ahead, in a place where they couldn't come upon me till I was clean out of reach. Soon he came running like mad, then I give it him, and down he come, I tell you, like a miller's bag struck all in a heap."

"But that didn't kill him? He was only hurt? You're not sure, Ben, that he's dead? You didn't look at him closely?"

"No——dickens——they were too hard upon me for that. But I saw where I must hit him, and I saw him tumble."

"Who were upon you?" demanded Hurdis.

"Why, Bill Carrington, and the man he went to see, I suppose. I didn't stop to look, for, just as I sprawled him out, they came from the road behind him, and I saw no more. You didn't tell me that Bill Carrington was going with him."

"No——I wasn't certain. I didn't know. But didn't Carrington come after you, when you shot Richard?"

"I reckon he was too much frightened——he jumped down beside the body, and that was all I stopped to see. I made off, and fetched a compassthrough the woods that brought me out with dry feet into another road. Then I kept on without stopping, and that's all I can tell you.'

"It was strange Bill Carrington didn't take after you——he's not a man to be frightened easily?"

"He didn't though."

"But you're not sure, Ben, after all? Perhaps you've only hurt him? You have not killed him I think? It's a hard thing to shoot certain at a great distance——you were far off you say?"

"A hundred yards or so, and that's nothing being down hill too."

"Richard was a tough fellow."

"Tough or not, I tell you, 'Squire, he'll never trouble you again. It's all over with him. They've got him under ground before this time——I know by the sort of fall he gave that he hadn't any life left—— he didn't know what hurt him."

John Hurdis seemed convinced at last.

"And yet to think, Ben, that a man so strong as Richard should die so sudden? It was only four days ago that he had his hand on my throat——he had me down upon the ground——he shook me like a feather. And he spoke with a voice that went through me. I was like an infant in his hands—— I felt that he could have torn me in two. And now, you say, he cannot lift an arm to help himself?"

"No, not to wave off a buzzard from his carrion," was the reply.

The arm of John Hurdis fell on the neck of Pickett's horse at these words, and his eyes with a vacant stare were fixed upon the rider. After a brief pause, he thus proceeded in a muttered soliloquy rather than an address to his hearer.

"If Richard would have gone off quietly and let me alone——if——but what's the use to talk of that now?" He paused, but again began in similar tones and a like spirit. "He was too rash——too tyrannical. Flesh and blood could not bear with him, Ben. He would have mastered all around him if he could ——trampled upon all——suffered no life to any——spared no feelings. He was cruel——cruel to you, and to me and to all; and then to drag me from my horse and take me——his own brother——by the throat! But, it's all over now. He has paid for it, Ben——I wish he hadn't done it, though——for then——but no matter ——this talk's all very useless now."

Here he recovered himself, and in more direct and calmer language, thus continued, while giving his agent a part of the money which he had promised him.

"Go now, Pickett——to your own home. Let us not be seen together much. Take this money—— 'tisn't all I mean to give you. I will bring you more."

The willing fellow pocketed the price of blood, and made his acknowledgments. Thanks too were given by the murderer, as if the balance of credit lay with him who paid in money for the life of his fellow creature.

"I will come to you to night," continued Hurdis——"I would hear all of this business. I would know more——stay! What is that? Some one comes ——hear you nothing, Ben?"

Guilt had made my wretched brother doubly a coward. The big sweat came out and stood upon his forehead, and his eyes wore the irresolute expression of one about to fly. The composure with which his companion looked round, half reassured him.

"No——there's nobody," said the other——"a squirrel jumped in the wood, perhaps."

"Well——I'll come to night, Ben——I'll meet you at the Willows."

"Won't you come to the house, 'Squire?"

"No!" was the abrupt reply. The speaker recollected his late interview with the stern wife of his colleague, and had no desire to encounter her again——"No——Ben, I'll be at the Willows."

"What time, 'Squire?"

"I can't say, now——but you'll hear my signal. Three hoots and a long bark."

"Very good——I'll be sure."

John Hurdis remained at the gate a long time after Pickett rode away. He watched his retreating form while it continued in sight, then seated himself on the ground where he had been standing, and unconsciously, with a little stick, began to draw characters in the sand. To the labours of his fingers his mind seemed to be utterly heedless, until, aroused to a sense of what he was doing and where he sat, by the approach of some of the field negroes returning from the labours of the day. he started to his feet as he heard their voices, but how did his guilty heart tremble, when his eye took in the letters that he had unwittingly traced upon the sand. The word "murderer" was distinctly written in large characters, before his eyes. With a desperate but trembling haste as if he dreaded lest

other eyes should behold it too, he dashed his feet over the letters, nor stayed his efforts even when they were perfectly obliterated. Fool that he was——of what avail was all his toil? He might erase the guilty letters from the sand, but they were written upon his soul in characters that no hand could reach, and no labours obliterate. The fiend was there in full possession, and his tortures were only now begun.

CHAPTER V.

Let the earth hide thee.

—— Shakspeare.

The murderer hurried homewards when this dark conference was ended. The affair in which he had acted so principal, yet secondary a part, had exercised a less obvious influence upon him than upon the yet baser person who had egged him on to the deed. There was no such revulsion of feeling in his bosom, as in that of John Hurdis. Endowed with greater nerve at first, and rendered obtuse from habit and education, the nicer sensibilities——the keener apprehensions of the mind——were not sufficiently active in him to warm at any recital, when the deed itself, which it narrated, had failed to impress him with terror or repentance. If he did not tremble to do, still less was he disposed to tremble at the bare story of his misdoings; and he rode away with a due increase of scorn for the base spirit and cowardly heart of his employer. And yet, perhaps, Pickett had never beheld John Hurdis in any situation in which his better feelings had been more prominent. The weaknesses, which the one despised, were the only shows of virtue in the other. The cowardly wretch, when he supposed the deed to have been done on which he had sent his unhesitating messenger——felt, for the first time, that it would not only have been wiser but better, to have borne patiently with his wrong, rather than so foully to have revenged it. He felt that it would have been easier to sleep under the operation of injustice than to become one's self a criminal. Bitterly indeed did this solemn truth grow upon him in the end, when sleep, at length, utterly refused to come at his bidding.

But, though the obvious fears and compunctious visitings of his employer had provoked the scorn of the murderer, it was decreed that he himself should not be altogether free from similar weaknesses. They developed themselves before he reached his home. It was nearly dusk when he entered the narrow by−road which led to his habitation——night was fast coming on, yet the twilight was sufficiently clear to enable him to distinguish objects. Without a thought, perhaps, of the crime of which he had been guilty; or rather, without a regretful thought, he pursued his way until the road opened upon his dwelling. The habitation of his wife and child stood before him. He could now see the smoke rising from the leaning clay chimney, and his heart rose with the prospect——for the very basest of mankindhave hearts for their homes——but, all on a sudden, he jerked his bridle with a violence that whirled the animal out from his path; and then his grasp became relaxed. He had strength for no more——he had neither power to advance nor fly. In an instant, the avenues to all his fears were in possession of a governing instinct. Guilt and terror spoke in all his features. His glazed eyes seemed starting from their sockets——his jaws relaxed——his mouth opened ——his hair started up and the cold dews gathered at its roots! What sees he?——what is in his path to make him fear? Why does the bold ruffian, ready at all times to stab or shoot——why does he lift no weapon now? He is sinewless, aimless, strengthless. There rose before him, even at the gate of his hovel, a fearful image of the man he supposed himself to have murdered. It stood between him and the narrow gateway so that he could not go forward in his progress. The gaze of the spectre was earnestly bent upon him with such a freezing glance of death and doom as the victim might well be supposed to wear in confronting his murderer. The bloody hole in his bosom was awfully distinct to the eyes of the now trembling criminal, who could see little or nothing else. His knees knocked together convulsively——his wiry hair lifted the cap upon his brow.——Cold as the mildewed marble, yet shivering like an autumn branch waving in the sudden winds,he was frozen to the spot where it encountered him ——he could neither speak nor move. Vainly did he attempt to lift the weapon in his grasp——his arms were stiffened to his side——his will was not powerful enough to compel its natural agents to their duty. He strove to thrust the rowel into his horse's flanks, but even to this effort he found himself unequal. Twice did he strive to cry aloud to the threatening aspect before him, in words of entreaty or defiance, but his tongue refused its office. The words froze in his throat, and it was only able in a third and desperate effort to articulate words which denoted idiocy rather than resolve.

"Stand aside, Richard Hurdis——stand aside, or I'll run over you. You would tie me to the tree ——you would try hickories upon me, would you? Go——go to John Hurdis now, and he'll tell you, I'm not afraid of you. No——d——n my eyes if I am, though he is! I'm not afraid of your bloody finger ——shake it away——shake it away. There's a hole in your jacket wants mending, man——you'd better see to it 'fore it gets worse. I see the red stuff coming out of it now. Go——stand off or I'll hurt you——ptsho——ptsho——ptsho."

And, as he uttered this wandering and incoherent language, his limbs strengthened sufficiently to enable him, with one hand, to employ the action of a person hallooing hogs out of his enclosure. Thesound of his own voice seemed to unfix the spell upon him. The ghostly figure sank down before his mazed eyes and advancing footsteps, in a heap, like one suddenly slain, and as he had seen his victim fall. It lay directly before him——he pressed his horse upon it, but it disappeared before he reached the spot. A brief space yet lay between the gate and the hovel, and, passing through the former, he was about to plunge, with a like speed towards the latter, when another figure, and one, too, much more terrific to the fears of the ruffian than the first——took its place, and the person of William Carrington emerged at that moment from the dwelling itself, and stood before him in the doorway. If Pickett trembled before under his superstitious imaginings, he trembled now with apprehensions of a more human description. It was the vulgar fear of the fugitive that possessed him now. He felt that he was pursued. He saw before him the friend of the man he had murdered, speeding in hot haste to wreak vengeance on his murderer. In the dread of cord or shot, he lost, in a single instant, all his former and paralysing terror arising from the blighting visitation of the world of spirits. He was no longer frozen by fear. He was strengthened and stimulated for flight by the appearance of Carrington. He turned the head of his horse, and with the movement, the avenger advanced upon him. He felt that there was no escape. There was no hope in flight. In desperation, he threw himself from the animal—— lifted his rifle, and, in taking deadly aim upon the figure, was surprised to see it move away with rapid footsteps and sink into the neighbouring woods, in the shadow of which it was soon lost from sight. The conduct of Carrington was more mysterious to the criminal than was the appearance of the spectre just before. If he came as the avenger of his friend, how strange that he should fly! And how could such timidity be believed of one so notoriously brave as the man in question? The wonder grew in his mind the more he reviewed it, and he found it easier to continue in his wonderment, than to seek by any reference to his past experience and present thoughts for any solution of the mystery.

Pale and cold with fright he at last entered his hovel without farther interruption. The anxious and searching eyes of his wife beheld in an instant the disordered emotion so prominent in his; and her fears were renewed.

"What is it Ben——what disturbs you? Why do you look around so?" she demanded.

"How long has he been here?——when did he come?——what does he want?" were the rapid questions which the criminal uttered in reply.

"Who?——who has been here? of whom do you ask?" was the response of the astonished wife.

"Why, Bill Carrington, to be sure——Who else? I saw him come out of the door just this minute and take to the woods. What did he want?——where's he gone? Who's he looking for? eh!"

"Your're sick, Ben," said the wife——"your head's disordered. You'd better lie down."

"Can't you answer me a plain question?" was his peremptory answer to her suggestion——"I ask you what Bill Carrington wanted with me or with you?"

"He?——nothing that I know of. He hasn't been here, Ben."

"The devil you say? Better tell me I'm drunk ——when I saw him, with my own eyes, come out just a moment ago and take to the woods!"

"You may have seen him in the woods, but I'm sure you didn't see him come out of this house. I've been in this room for the last hour——never once out of it——and nobody but myself and Jane in it—— and nobody's been here that either of us has seen."

The man turned to Jane, and reading in her eyes a confirmation of her mother's speech, he looked vacantly around him for a few moments, then lifting his rifle, which he had leaned up within the entrance, rushed out of the house, and hurried to the woods in search of the person whom he had seen disappear there. He was gone for an hour when he returned exhausted. In that time hissearch had been close and thorough for a circuit of several miles, in all those recesses which he had been accustomed to regard as hiding places, and which, it may be added, he had repeatedly used as such. The exhaustion that followed his disappointment was an exhaustion of mind rather than of body. The vagueness and mystery which attended all these incidents had utterly confounded him, and when he returned to the presence of his wife, he almost seemed to lack the facilities of speech and hearing. He spoke but little, and, observing his fatigue, and probably ascribing his strange conduct to a sudden excess in drink, his wife prudently forebore all unnecessary remarks and questions. Night hurried on ——darkness had covered the face of the earth, and in silence the wife and idiot child of the criminal had commenced their evening meal, Pickett keeping his place at the fireside without heeding the call to supper. A stupor weighed down all his faculties, and

he almost seemed to sleep, but a slight tap at the entrance——a single tap, gentle as if made by a woman−hand soliciting admission——awakened, in an instant, all the guilty consciousness that could not sleep in the bosom of the criminal. He started to his feet in terror. The keen and searching glance of his wife was fixed upon his face, and heedful of every movement of his person. She said nothing, but her looks were so full of inquiry that it neededno words to make Pickett aware that her soul was alarmed and apprehensive. She looked as if feeling that all her previous fears were realised. The knock at the entrance was repeated.

"Shall I open it, Ben?" was her question, and her eyes motioned him to a window in the rear. But he did not heed the obvious suggestion. Gathering courage as he beheld her glance, and saw her suspicions, he crossed the floor to the entrance, boldly lifted the bar which secured it, and, in firm tones, bade the unknown visiter "come in."

CHAPTER VI.

"Our coming
Is not for salutation——we have business."
—— Catiline

The stranger boldly stepped into the light as the door was opened for him. The heart of Pickett sank within him on the instant; for guilt is a thing of continual terrors; but his glance was fixed on the person without recognition, and there was nothing in the air or visage of the intruder, to excite alarm. His dark swarthy features and sinister eye were, it is true, sufficiently unprepossessing; but these were evidently the habitual features of the man, and being in repose, gave no occult expression to his countenance. His guise was common enough, consisting of the common blue and white homespun of the country; and this, bespattered with mud as if he had been long a traveller. He demanded traveller's fare, and begged to be accommodated for the night. There was no denial of so small a boon, even in the humblest cottage of Alabama; and though Pickettwould rather have had no company, he could not yet refuse.

"Well," said Pickett, "we are not in the habit of taking in travellers, but if you can make out with a blanket by the chimney, you can have it——it's all I can give you."

"Good enough," said the stranger; "I'm not particular. Room by the chimney, and light wood enough for a blaze, and I'm satisfied."

"Have you had supper?" demanded Mrs. Pickett——"we can give you some hoe cake and bacon."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I took a bite from my bag about an hour ago, as I crossed a branch coming on, which baited my hunger. I won't trouble you to get any thing more."

"You're from below?" asked Pickett with some show of curiosity.

"No——from above."

"Do you go much farther?"

"I think not——I've got business in these parts, and shall return when it's over."

"You've a horse to see to?"

"No——I foot it——I'm a very poor man."

The lie was uttered with habitual readiness. The emissary had hidden and hobbled his horse in the neighbouring woods. He was too well practised in his art to forego every precaution. Pickett had no otherquestions, and but little more was said for the time, by either of the parties, all of whom seemed equally taciturn. The wife of Pickett alone continued anxious. The searching glance of the stranger did not please her, though it appeared to have its impulse in curiosity alone. Perhaps, suspecting her husband's guilt, all circumstances, removed from those of ordinary occurrence, provoked her apprehensions. With a just presentiment she had trembled on the stranger's knock and entrance, and every added moment of his stay increased her fears. She had as yet had no conference with Pickett, touching the business which carried him abroad; and the presence of their guest denied her all opportunity for the satisfaction of her doubts. Her evident disquiet did not escape the notice of her husband, but, he ascribed it, in his own mind, to her desire to go to bed; which, as they all slept in the same apartment, was rendered somewhat difficult, by the presence of the new comer. His coarse mind, however, soon made this difficulty light.

"Go to bed, Besty——don't mind us; or to make the matter easy, what say you, stranger, to a bit of a walk——the night's clear and not cold neither. We'll just step out till the old woman lies down, if you please."

"To be sure," said the other——"I was about to propose the same thing to you."

The fears of Pickett were newly roused by this seemingly innocent declaration of the stranger——a declaration, which, at another time, would not have tasked a thought.

"Why should he wish to take me out to walk with him at night——why should he propose such a thing?"——was his inward inquiry; and with hesitating steps, he conducted the suspicious guest from the hovel into the open ground before it.

"I was just going to propose the same thing to you," said the stranger the moment they had got there——"for do you see, it isn't to lodge with you only that I come. I have business with you, my friend——business of great

importance."

If Pickett was alarmed before, he was utterly confounded now.

"Business with me!" he cried in undisguised astonishment.——"What business——what business can you have with me?" and he stopped full and confronted the stranger as he spoke.

"Well, that's what I'm going to tell you now—— but, not here——walk farther from the house, if you please——let's go into this thicket."

"Into the thicket!——No——I'm d——d if I do!——" cried the now thoroughly alarmed Pickett.—— "I'll go into the thicket with no stranger that I don't know. I don't see what business you can have with me at all; and if you have any you can just as well out with it here, as any where else."

"Oh, that's just as you please," said the other coolly——"It was for your sake only that I proposed to go into the thicket, for the business is not exactly proper for every body to hear; and there's no use in calling the high road to counsel."

"For my sake! What the d——I do you mean, my friend? It's your business not mine——why is it for my sake that you would have me go into the thicket?"

"Because it might bring you into trouble, if any ears beside our own were to hear me," replied the stranger with indifference. "For my part, I don't care much where it is said, only to save you from any trouble."

"Me from trouble——me from trouble! I don't know what you can mean; but if you're serious—— where would you have me go?"

"There——that thicket will do. It looks dark enough for our business."

The stranger pointed to a dense grove in the neighbourhood, but on the opposite side of the road——a part of the same forest in which the reader will remember to have witnessed an interview between John Hurdis, and Jane the idiot girl. Not knowing what to fear yet fearing every thing, the murderer followed the stranger, whom he now regardedas his evil genius. The other was passing more deeply into the woods, after having entered them, than Pickett seemed to think necessary for his object, and the voice of the latter arrested him.

"Dark enough for your business, it may be, but quite too dark for mine. I'll go no further——you can say here, all you've got to say, no matter what it is. I'm not afraid, and I think it something strange, that you should want me to go into the bush in a dark night, with a person I don't know. I don't somehow like it altogether. I'm not sure that it's safe. I mean no harm, but it's not the best sense in the world, to trust people one don't know."

"Lord love you!" said the other with a quiet tone of contempt——"you're more scary than I thought you. There's nothing to be frightened at, in me——my business is peaceable——and I'm a peaceable man. I don't carry a rifle, and I never tumbled a fellow from his horse at a hundred yards, in all my life, so far as I can recollect now."

These words were uttered with the utmost coolness, and as if they were entirely without peculiar signification. The effect upon the hearer was almost paralysing, as it was instantaneous. He started, as if he had been himself shot——for a moment was silent under the obvious imputation contained in the last sentence of his companion's speech——then, recovering himself, with the blustering manner of the bully, he addressed the other, who saw, in the dim light which surrounded them, that Pickett's hand was thrust into the bosom of his vest, as if in search of some concealed weapon.

"How! you do not mean to say, that I ever did such a thing? If you do——"

"Put up your knife, brother——and keep your hand and voice down. Lift either too high, and I have that about me which would drive you into the middle of next summer, if you only looked at me to strike."

Such was the stern reply of the stranger, whose tones changed promptly with the circumstances. Pickett felt himself in the presence of a master. He was cowed. He released his hold upon the weapon, which he had grasped in his bosom, and lowering the sounds of his voice in obedience to the stranger's requisition, he replied in more conciliatory language.

"What mean you, my friend? What is the business that brings you here? What would you have with me; and why do you threaten me?"

"Your hand!" said the other deliberately, while extending his own.

"There it is; and now, what——?" Pickett reluctantly complied.

"Only that you are one of us now, that's all."

"One of us——how! who are you?——What mean you?"

"Every thing. You are a made man——your fortunes are made. You've become one of a family that can do every thing for you, and will do it, if you'll let them."

The silence of Pickett expressed more wonder than his words could have done. The other went on without heeding a feeble attempt which he made at reply.

"You've volunteered to do some of our business, and have, therefore, joined our fraternity."

"Your business——what business——what fraternity?——I don't know, my friend, what you possibly can mean."

"I'll tell you then, and put you out of suspense. You're just from Tuscaloosa where you've taken some trouble off our hands. I've come to thank you for it, and to do you some kindness in return. One good turn deserves another you know, and this that you have done for us, deserves a dozen."

The wonder of Pickett was increased. He almost gasped in uttering another request to hear all that the other had to say.

"Why it's soon said," he replied. "You shot a lad two days ago near the 'Shade' up beyond Tuscaloosa——"

"Who says——who saw——it is a lie——a d——d lie;" cried the criminal in husky and feeble accents, while quivering at the same time with mingled rage and fear.

"Oh, pshaw!" said the other——"What's the use of beating about the bush. I saw you tumble the lad myself, and I've followed upon your trail ever since——"

"But you shall follow me no more. One of us must give way to the other," cried the criminal in screaming accents, and while, drawing his knife with one hand, he aimed to grasp the throat of the stranger with the other. But the latter was too wily a scout to become an easy victim. He had watched his man, even as the cat watches the destined prey ——to whom she suffers a seeming freedom, and sacrifices at the very moment of its greatest apparent security. With the movement of Pickett to strike, was that of the stranger to defend himself——nor to defend himself only. The strength of the former was far inferior to that of the man whom he assailed, and instead of taking him by the throat, he found his grasp eluded, and at the same moment, the arm which held the weapon, was secured in a gripe which effectually baffled all his efforts at release.

"Don't be rash!" said the stranger, with a laugh in which there was no sign of anger. "Don't be rash——it's of no use. You're only fighting againstyour own good, and your powder's wasted on me. I'm too much for you, and that's enough to make you quiet. But there's another, and a better reason than that to keep you quiet. I'm your friend, I tell you——your best friend, and I can bring you many friends. I'm come all this distance to befriend you, and if you'll have patience and be civil, you'll soon see how."

"Let go my arm," said Pickett, chafing furiously, but still ineffectually, so far as his own efforts to release himself were concerned.

"Well, I'll do that," said the stranger, releasing him at the same instant; "but, mind me, if you try to use it again, as you did just now, it will be worse for you. I never suffer a dog to worry me twice.—— I'm sure to draw his teeth, so that he will bite no other——and if you lift that knife at me again, I'll put a plug into your bosom, that will go quite as deep, if not deeper, than your bullet did in the bosom of that young fellow."

"You know not what you say——you saw not that!" was the faint answere of Pickett.

"It's a true bill, man, and I'll swear to it. How should I know it, if I did not see it? I saw the lad tumble——saw you scud from the place, rifle in hand, and take to your creature, which was fastened to a dwarf poplar in a little wood of poplars. What say you to that? Is it not true?"

Pickett leaned against a tree, silent and exhausted. He had no answer. The fates had tracked him to his den.

"Nay——fear nothing, though I know your secret,"——said the other, approaching him——"You are in no sort of danger; not from me at least; on the contrary, you have done our friends a service——have saved them from the trouble of doing the very thing that we would have had to do for ourselves. Three of us pursued the man that you shot, and if he had got away, which he must have done but for your bullet, it would have been an ugly and losing matter for us. You did us good service then I tell you——you volunteered to be one of our strikers, and we have got the game. The search of the body gave us a rich booty, and his death a degree of safety, which we might not else have enjoyed."

"Well——wasn't that enough for you? Why did you come after me?" demanded Pickett bitterly. "Why follow me with your infernal secret?"

"Lord love you——to give you your share of the spoil, to be sure, what else? Do you think us so mean as to

keep all for ourselves, and give none to a man who did, I may say, the dirtiest part of the business? Oh, no! brother——no! I've brought you your share of the booty. Here it is. You will see when you come to look at it, that we are quite as liberal as we should be. You have, here, a largeramount, than is usually given to a striker." And, as the stranger spoke these words, he pulled out something from his pocket, which he presented to his astonished auditor. Pickett thrust away the extended hand, as he replied——

"I want none of it. I will have no share——I am not one of you."

"But, that's all nonsense, my brother. You must take it. You must be one of us. When a striker refuses his share, we suspect that something's going wrong, and he takes his share, or he pays for it, by our laws;" was the reply of the stranger who continto press the money upon him.

"Your laws!——of what laws——of whom do you speak?"

"Of our fraternity, to be sure——of the Mystic Brotherhood. Perhaps, you have never heard of the Mystic Brotherhood?"

"Never."

"You are fortunate to have lived long enough to be wise. Let me enlighten you. The Mystic Brotherhood consists of a parcel of bold fellows, who don't like the laws of the state exactly, and of other societies, and who have accordingly associated together, for the purpose of making their own, and doing business under them. As we have no money of our own, and as we must have money, we make it legal to take it from other people. When they will notshut their eyes and suffer us take it without trouble, we shut them up ourselves; a task for the proper doing of which, we have a thousand different modes. One of these, the task of a striker, you employed in our behalf, and very effectually shut up for us, the eyes of that foolish young fellow, who had already given us some trouble, and, but for you, might have given us a great deal more. Having done so well, we resolved to do you honor——to make you one of us, and give you all the benefits of our institution, as they are enjoyed by every other member. We have our brethren in all the states from Virginia to Louisiana, and beyond into the territories. Some of our friends keep agencies for us, even so far as the Sabine, and we send negroes to them daily."

"Negroes——what negroes——have you negroes?"

"Yes——when we take them——we get the negroes to run away from their owners, then sell them to others, get them to run away again, and in this way, we probably sell the same negro, half a dozen times. This is one branch of our business and might suit you. When the affair gets too tangled, and we apprehend detection, we tumble the negro into a river, and thus rid ourselves of a possession that has paid good interest already, and which it might not be any longer safe to keep."

"What——you kill the negro?

"Yes, you may say so.——We dispose of him."

"And how many persons have you in the Brotherhood?"

"Well, I reckon we stretch very nigh on to fifteen hundred."

"Fifteen hundred——is it possible!——so many?"

"Yes, and we are increasing daily. Let me give you the first sign, brother; the sign of a striker."

"No!"——cried Pickett shrinking back. "I will not join you. I do not know the truth of what you say. I never heard the like before. I will have nothing to do in this business."

"You must!" was the cool rejoinder——"you must! Nobody shall strike for us, without becoming one of us."

"And suppose I refuse?" said Pickett.

"Then I denounce you as a murderer, to the grand jury," was the cool reply. "I will prove you to have murdered this youth, and bring half a dozen beside myself to prove it."

"What if I tell all that you have told me of your brotherhood?"

"Pshaw, brother, you are dreaming. What if you do tell——who will you get to believe you——where's your proofs? But I will prove all that I charge you with, by a dozen witnesses. Even if it were not true, yet could I prove it."

The discomfited murderer perspired in his agony. The net was completely drawn around him.

"Don't be foolish, brother," said the emissary of a fraternity, upon the borders of the new states, the history of which, already in part given to the public, is a dreadful chronicle of desperate crime, and insolent incendarism——"Don't be foolish—— you can't help yourself——you must be one of us, whether you will or not. We can't do without you ——we have bought you out. If you take our business from us, you must join

partnership, or we must shut up your shop. We can't have any opposition going on. The thing's impossible——insufferable! Here—— take your share of the money. It will help you to believe in us, and that's a great step towards making you comply with my demand; nay——don't hold back——I tell you, brother, you must go with us now, body and soul, or you hang, by the eternal."

Base and wretched as was the miserable Pickett, in morals and in condition, he was not yet so utterly abandoned as to feel easy, under a necessity so imperatively presented to him. The character of his wife, noble amidst poverty and all its consequent forms of wretchedness, if it had not lifted his own standards of feeling and of thought, beyond his own nature, had the effect, at least, of making him conceal, as much as he could, his deficiencies from her. Here was something more to conceal, and this necessity was, of itself, a pang to one, having but the one person to confide in, and feeling so great a dependenceupon that one. This step estranged him still farther from her, and while he passionately took the proffered money, and looked upon the uncouth, and mystic sign which the other made before him, in conferring his first degree of membership, the cold sweat stood upon his face in heavy drops, and an icy weight seemed contracting about his heart. He felt as if he had bound himself, hand and foot, and was about to be delivered over to the executioner.

CHAPTER VII.

We should know each other——
As to my character for what men call crime,
Seeing I please my senses, as I list,
And vindicate that right with force or guile,
It is a public matter, and I care not
If I discuss it with you.
—— The Conet

The emissary of the Mystic Brotherhood, which had just conferred the honors of its membership on one who so richly deserved them, though pursuing his labours with the rigid directness of an ordinary business habit, and confining himself thereto, with a degree of strictness and method not common to the wicked, was yet, by no means a niggard in his communications. He unfolded much of the history of that dangerous confederacy, which it is not thought necessary to deliver here; and his hearer became gradually and fully informed of the extent of its resources and ramifications. Yet these gave him but little satisfaction. He found himself one of a clan numbering many hundred persons, having the means of procuring wealth, which had been limitedto him heretofore simply because of his singleness, and not because of any better principle which he possessed; and yet he shuddered to find himself in such a connection. The very extensiveness of the association, confounded his judgment, and filled him with terrors. He was one of those petty villains who rely upon cunning and trick, rather than audacity and strength, to prosecute their purposes; and while the greater number of the clan found their chief security in a unity of purpose and a concentration of numbers, which, in the end, enabled them for a season, to defy, and almost overthrow the laws of society, he regarded this very circumstance as that, which, above all others, must greatly contribute to the risk and dangers of detection. The glowing accounts of his companion, which described their successes——their profitable murders, fearless burglaries, and a thousand minor offences, such as negro, horse stealing, and petty thefts——only served to enlarge the vision with which he beheld his fears; and, dull and wretched, he returned with his guest to the miserable hovel, now become doubly so since his most humiliating enlightenment, and the formation of his new ties. His wife and daughter, meanwhile, had retired for the night; but the woman did not sleep. She was filled with apprehensions for her husband, scarcely less imposing than those which troubled him for himself; yet little did shedream how completely he was in the thrall of that power from which her own severe and fruitless virtues had been utterly unable at all times to restrain him. Her wildest fear never imagined a bond so terrible as that which had been imposed upon him in the last half hour.

"Whenever you want to lie down, stranger, you can do so. There's your blanket. I'm sorry there's no better for you." It was with difficulty that Pickett brought himself to utter these common words of courtesy.

"Good enough," said the other——"I'll take it a little closer by the fire; and, if you have no objection, I'll throw a stick or two on. I've slept in a better bed, it's true, but I'll be satisfied if I never sleep in a worse."

The hesitating utterance of her husband, and the cool and ready reply of their guest, did not escape the keen hearing of the woman. Pickett muttered something in answer to this speech, and then threw himself, without undressing, upon the bed. The other followed the example, and, in a few moments, his form, stretched at length before the fire place, lay as quietly as if he were already wrapped in the deepest slumbers. This appearance, was, however, deceptive. The emissary had not yet fulfilled all his duties; and he studiously maintained himself in watchfulness, the better to effect his objects. Believinghim to be asleep, however, the anxieties of Pickett's wife, prompted her, after awhile, to speak to her miserable husband, with whom, as yet, she had had no opportunity of private speech; but her whispered accents, were checked by the apprehensive criminal on the first instant of their utterance. With a quick and nervous gripe, he grasped her arm in silence, and, in this manner, without a word, put a stop to her inquiries. In silence, thus, and yet with equal watchfulness, did the three remain, for the space of two goodly hours. The night was advancing, and Pickett began to hope that John Hurdis would fail to keep his promise; but the hope had not well been formed in his mind, before he heard the signal agreed upon between them——three hoots and a bark——and in a cold agony that found in every movement a pitfall, and an enemy in every bush, he prepared to rise and go forth to his employer.

"Where would you go?" demanded the woman in a hurried whisper, which would not be repressed, and she grasped his arm as she spoke. She, too, had heard the signal, and readily divined its import when she saw her husband preparing to leave her.

"Nowhere——what's the matter——lie still; and don't be foolish," was his reply, uttered also in a whisper, while, with some violence, he disengaged his arm from her grasp. She would have still detained him.

"Oh, Ben!" was all she said, and the still whispered accents, went through him with a warning emphasis, that well reminded him of that good counsel, which he had before rejected; and which he bitterly cursed himself for not having followed.

"She was right," he muttered to his own heart. "She was right——had I listened to what she said, and let John Hurdis do his own dirty work, I would have had no such trouble. But——it's too late now—— too late. I must now get through it as I may."

He rose, and silently opening the door, disappeared in the night. He had scarcely done so, when the emissary prepared to follow him. The wife saw the movement with terror, and coughing aloud, endeavoured, in this way, to convince the stranger, that she was wakeful like himself; but her effort to discourage him from going forth proved fruitless—— he gave her no heed, and she beheld him, with fear and trembling, depart almost instantly after her husband. She could lie in bed no longer; but rising, hurried to the door, which she again opened, and gazed anxiously out upon the dim and speechless trees of the neighbouring forests, with eyes that seemed to penetrate into the very dimmest of their recesses. She looked without profit. She saw nothing. The forms of both her husband and his guest were no where visible. Should she pursue them? This was at once her thought, but she dismissed itas idle, a moment after. Shivering with cold, and under the nameless terrors in her apprehension, she re−entered the hovel, and closed the entrance.

"God be with me," she cried, sinking on her knees, beside the miserable pallet, where she had passed so many sleepless nights.——"God be with me, and with him. We have need of thee, Oh, God—— both of us have need of thee. Strengthen me, oh, God, and save him from his enemies.——The hand of the tempter is upon him——is upon him, even now.—— I have striven with him, and I plead with him in vain. Thou only, Blessed Father——Thou, only, who art in heaven, and art all merciful on earth——thou only canst save him. He is weak, and yielding where he should be strong, timid when he should be bold, and bold only, where it is virtue to be fearful. Strengthen him, when he is weak, and let him be weak where he would be wicked. Cut him not off in thy wrath, but spare him to me——to this poor child——to himself. He is not fit to perish. Protect him!——He's——What is this——who? Is it you Jane? Is it you, my poor child?"

The idiot girl had crawled to her, unseen, during her brief, but energetic apostrophe to the Eternal, and with a simpering, half−sobbing accent, testified her surprise at the unwonted vehemence and seeming unseasonableness of her mother's prayers. With increasing energy of action, the woman clasped thegirl around the waist——and dragged her down upon the floor beside her.

"Put up your hands, Jane!" was her exclamation ——"put up your hands with me! pray——pray with me. Pray to God, to deliver us from evil——your father from evil——from his own, and the evil deeds of other men——speak out child, speak fast, and pray ——pray!"

"Our father who art in heaven!" The child went on with the usual adjuration which had been a possession of mere memory from her infancy; while the mother, with uplifted hands, but silent thoughts, concluded her own heartfelt invocation to the God of bounty, and protection. She felt that she could do no more, yet much rather would she have followed her husband into the woods, and dragged him away from the grasp of the tempter, than knelt that moment in prayer.

Pickett meanwhile, little dreaming that he was watched, hurried to the place assigned for meeting John Hurdis, among the Willows. The emissary followed close behind him. It was no part of his plan to leave the former ignorant of his proper quality; and the first intelligence which he had of his approach, was the sound of his voice, which sank into the heart of Pickett like an ice bolt. He shivered and stopped when he heard it, as if by an instinct. His will would have prompted him to fly, and leave itbehind forever, but his feet were fastened to the earth. "What's the matter——why do you come after me?" he asked.

"I'll go along with you, brother," said the stranger coolly in reply.

"As you will, but why? You don't think I'm running off from you, do you?"

"No!——that you can't do, brother, even if you would. We have eyes all around us, that suffer no movement

by any of us to be made unseen; and if you do run, such are our laws, that I should have to follow you. But I know your business, and wish for an introduction to your friend."

"My friend!" exclaimed Pickett in profound astonishment. "What friend——I know of no friend."

"Indeed——but you must surely be mistaken; your memory is confused I see. The friend you're going to meet. Is he not your friend?"

"I'm going to meet no friend——"

"Surely you are! Brother, you would'nt deceive me, would you? Didn't I hear the owl's hoot, and the dog's bark. I wasn't asleep, I tell you. I heard the signal as well as you."

"Owl's hootand dog's bark——why, that's no signal in these parts," said Pickett, with a feeble attempt at laughter which failed utterly——"you may hear owls and dogs all night if you listen to them. We are wiser than to do that."

The other replied in graver accents than usual.

"I'm afraid, brother, you are not yet convinced of the powers of the Mystic Brotherhood, or you wouldn't suppose me to have been neglectful of the duties they sent me upon. I tell you, they gave it to me in charge, to follow you, and to find out who and what you were——to learn your motives for killing the youth that we were in pursuit of, and to take all steps, for making so good a shot, and ready a hand, one of our own. Do you think I lost sight of you for a single instant, from that time to this? Be sure I did not. No! I saw you from the moment you took your nag from the stunted poplar, where you fastened him. I marked every footstep you have taken since. When you stopped at that plantation and told your friend of your success——"

"Great God!——you didn't hear what we said!"

"Every syllable.——That was a most important part of my service. I wouldn't have missed a word or look of that conference."

Pickett turned full upon the inflexible emissary, and gazed upon him with eyes of unmixed astonishment and terror. When he spoke at length it was in accents of mingled despair and curiosity.

"And wherefore was this important? Of what use will it be to you, to know that I was working for another man in this business."

"It helps us to another member of the MysticBrotherhood, my brother. It strengthens our arm ——it increases our resources.——It ripens our strength, and hastens our plans. He, too, must be one of us! It is for this, I seek to know him."

"But there's no need with him?" said Pickett.

"How——no need?"

"He's rich——he's not in want of money, as we are. Why should he be one of us."

"To keep what he's got," said the other coolly.

"But suppose he won't join you."

"We'll hang him then, my brother. You shall prove that he was the murderer!"

"The devil you say——but I'll do no such thing."

"Then, brother, we must hang you both."

The eyes of Pickett looked the terror that his lips could not speak; and without farther words, he led the way to the place of meeting, urging no farther opposition to a will, before which, his own quailed in subjection.

CHAPTER VIII.

Now we are alone, sir;
And thou hast liberty to unload the burden
Which thou groan'st under.
—— Massinger

There is no fascination in the snake, true or fabled, of more tenacious hold upon the nature of the victim, than was that of the emissary of the Mystic Brotherhood, upon the miserable creature, Pickett. A wretch born in degradation, living as it were by stealth, and in constant dread of penal atonement, life was torture, of itself, enough when it came coupled with the constant fear of justice. But when to this danger was added, that of an accountability to a power, no less arbitrary than the laws, and wholly illegitimate, the misery of the wretch was complete. But if such was the influence of such a condition over Pickett's mind, what must it be over the no less dishonourable, and far more base offender who employed him. Though a murderer, a cold blooded calculating murderer, who could skulk behind a bush, and shoot down his victim from a covertwithout warning made, or time given for preparation, he was yet hardy enough, if he had the sensibility for hate, to avenge his wrong by his own hand, and not by that of an agent. John Hurdis had proved himself deficient even in this doubtful sort of courage. He could smile and be the villain—— could desire and devise the murder of his enemy;—— but wanted even the poor valour of the murderer. What must be the feeling——the fear——of his leprous heart, when he is taught his true condition. When he finds his secret known——when he feels himself in the power of a clan having a thousand tongues, and hourly exposing themselves to a thousand risks of general detection. It would have been a sight for study, to behold those three villains gathered together in that nocturnal interview. Hurdis——his soul divided between triumph and horror——eager to learn the particulars of the horrid crime which his agent had horribly executed, yet dreading the very recital to which he gave all ears;——Pickett——burdened with the consciousness of unprofitable guilt, and of its exposure to the dogging blood hound at his heels;—— and he, the emissary——like a keen hunter——hanging upon the flanks of both, pricking them forward when they faltered, and now by sarcasm, and now by threats, quelling their spirits, and commanding all their secrets. Secure of his game, he smiled in his security at the feeble efforts which he beheld them make, and the futile hopes which he saw they entertained, of being able to baffle his pursuit, and throw out his unerring nostril from the scent which he had so fortunately followed. The struggle was, indeed, no less pitiful than painful, and well might the utter villain smile with contempt at the partial character, which the two brought to bear upon their designs of evil. Without virtue and radically vicious, they were alike deficient in that bold and daring insolence, which can defy the laws which it offends, and by a courage, of however doubtful merit, at least elevate its offences above the level of sneaking and insidious vice. His game was that of the cunning angler, who knows that his hook is keenly fixed in the jaws of his prey, and who plays with his hopes only to make his fears more oppressive, and his compliance the more unreserved and unqualified.

Hurdis was awaiting his companion in the place appointed.

"What have we here——who is this?" he exclaimed in surprise, as he beheld the stranger with Pickett.

"It is a friend?" replied the latter with a subdued and discouraging voice.

"A friend!" said Hurdis. "What friend? who? we want no friend——why have you brought him?"

"You mistake," said the stranger boldly. "Youdo want a friend, though you may not think so; and I am the very man for you. But go aside with Pickett——he'll tell you all about it."

Having thus spoken, the emissary coolly seated himself upon a log, and John Hurdis completely confounded by his impudence, turned, as he was bidden, for explanation to his agent. They went aside together, and in a confused and awkward manner, Pickett went through the bitter narration, which it almost paralysed the other to hear.

"Great God, Ben Pickett——what have you done? we are ruined——lost forever!"

The cold sweat rolled from the forehead of Hurdis, and his knees trembled beneath him. His companion tried to console him.

"No——there's no sort of danger. Hear his story of his business, and we know much more against him, than

he knows against us."

"And what is that to us? What is it to me that I can prove him a villain or a murderer, Ben Pickett? Will it help our defence to prove another as worthy of punishment, as ourselves? Will it give us security?"

"We must make the best of it now. It's too late to grieve about it," said the other.

"Ay, we must make the best of it," said Hurdis, becoming suddenly bold, yet speaking in tonesthat were suppressed to a whisper——"and there is but one way. Hear me, Ben Pickett——does this fellow come alone?"

"He does!"

"Ha! That is fortunate——then we have him. His companions are——where, did you say?"

"All about——on the high roads——every where—— from Augusta to Montgomery, to Mobile, to Tuscaloosa——from the Muscle Shoals to Jackson——from Tuscaloosa to Chochuma. Every where, according to his account of it."

"Which is probably exaggerated. They may be every where, but they certainly are not here——not in this neighbourhood."

"We don't know that, 'Squire. God! there's no telling. To think that the fellow should track me so, makes me afraid of every thing."

"You were careless, Pickett——frightened, perhaps——"

"No, I wasn't. I was just as cool as I wished to be, and I cleared every step in the road afore I jumped it."

"It needs not to talk of this. We must be more careful in future. We must match his cunning with greater cunning, or we are undone forever. We are in his power, and who knows that he is one of a gang such as you describe? Who knows that he is not anofficer of justice——one who suspects us, and is come to find out our secrets?"

"No, no, 'Squire——how should he be able to tell me all that he did? How should he know that I shot Dick Hurdis from the hill that hangs over the road?"

"You remember you told me that yourself, Ben Pickett, and you say he overheard our conversation," cried Hurdis eagerly.

"Yes, 'Squire, but how should he know that I hid my nag in a thicket of poplars——how should he be able to tell me the very sort of stump I fastened him to?"

"And did he do that, Ben?"

"That he did——every bit of it. No, no, 'Squire—— he saw all that he says he saw, or he got it from somebody that did see it."

"Great Heavens! what are we to do!" exclaimed Hurdis, as he folded his hands together, and looked with eyes of supplication upwards. But his answer and the counsel which it conveyed, came from an entirely opposite region.

"Do! well that's the question," replied Pickett, "and I don't know what to tell you, 'Squire."

"We must do something——we cannot remain thus at the mercy of this fellow. The thought is horrible. the rope is round our necks, Ben, and he has the end in his hands."

"It's too true."

"Hear me!" said Hurdis in a whisper, and drawing his companion still farther from the spot where the emissary had been left in waiting——"There is but one way. He comes alone. We must silence him. You must do it, Ben."

"Do what, Squire?"

"Do what!" exclaimed the other impatiently, though still in a whisper. "Would you have me utter every word? Do with him as you have done with Dick Hurdis."

"I've thought of that, 'Squire, but——"

"But what?"

"There's a mighty risk."

"There's risk in every thing. But there's no risk greater than that of being at the mercy of such a blood hound."

"That's true enough, 'Squire; but he's too much for me single handed. You must help me."

"What's the need? You don't think to do it now?" demanded Hurdis in some alarm.

"If it's to be done at all, why not now? The sooner, the better, 'Squire. This is the very time. He has poked his nose into our pot, and he can't complain, if he gets it scorched. Together, we could put it to him, so that there

could be no mistake."

But this counsel did not suit the less courageous nature of John Hurdis.

"No, Ben, that would be a risk, indeed. Wemight tumble him, but a chance shot from a desperate man, might also tumble one or both of us."

"That's true."

"We must think of something else——some safer course, which will be equally certain. He sleeps at your house."

"Yes,"——said the other quickly, "but I will do nothing of that sort, within smell of Betsy. It's bad enough to draw blood on the high road, but it must not run on one's own hearth."

"Pshaw! where's the difference. Murder is murder wherever it is done."

"That's true, 'Squire, but there's a feeling in it, that makes the difference. Besides, I won't have the old woman worried with any of this business. I've kept every thing of this sort from her that I could; and the thing that I most hated Dick Hurdis for, was his making such a blaze of that whipping business, as to bring it to her sight. There's Jane, too! No, 'Squire, my wife and child, must not know all the dirty matters that stick to my fingers."

"Well! as you please, on that score. But something must be done. You must fix a trap for him. When does he leave you?"

"There's no knowing. He wants to fix you as as he's fixed me——to make us both members of his clan——Mystic Brotherhood——as he calls it, and when that's done, I suppose he'll be off."

"But why should he desire this? What motive can he have in it? Why a society so extensive."

"There's no telling; only you'll have to consent."

"What! to this accursed Brotherhood? Never!"

"How can you help it, 'Squire? If you don't he'll expose you. He swears to hang you, if you do not."

"But he cannot. How can he prove his charge? Besides, I struck no blow——I never left my home."

"You forget, 'Squire, he heard our talk together."

"But who'll believe him, Ben? You can swear him down that you never had such a conversation."

"No!——I dare not, for then he'd prove me to be the man that shot. We must submit, 'Squire, I'm afraid, or he'd convict us both; and to save myself, I'd swear against you. I'd have to do it, 'Squire."

This declaration completed the misery of Hurdis, as it showed him how insecure was the tenure, by which the slaves of vice are held together. the bitterness of fear——the very worst bitterness of human passion——was in his heart, in all its force and fulness, and he had to drink deeper draughts of its humiliating waters even than this.

"What! Ben Pickett, can it be that you would give evidence against me——after all I have done for you? You do not tell me so."

"To save life only, 'Squire: To save life only—— for no other necessity. But life is sweet, 'Squire——too sweet for us to stand on any friendship, when we can save it by giving every thing up beside. It wouldn't be at the first jump neither, 'Squire, that I would let out the secrets of an old friend. It is only when I see there's no other hope to save myself, and then, I should be mighty sorry."

"Sorry!" exclaimed Hurdis, bitterly. "Thus it is," he thought, "to use base instruments for unworthy ends. The slave becomes the arbiter——the master——and to silence and subdue our fears, we add to our secret consciousness of shame."

In anxiousness, but without expression, he mused thus with his own thoughts.

"Well, Ben, since it can be no better," he spoke to his companion; "we must even hold together, and do as well as we can to work ourselves out of this difficulty. You are resolved to do nothing with the fellow at your own house."

Pickett replied in words and a tone, which made his negative conclusive.

"We must see his hand, then, and know the game he intends to play," continued Hurdis. "You are agreed that we must get him out of the way for our own safety. To say when and how is all the difficulty. Am I right?"

"That's it, 'Squire; though, somehow, if we could clinch him now, it seems to me it would be better than leaving it over for another day."

"That's not to be thought on, Ben. It's too great a risk."

"I don't know, 'Squire. I could give him a dig while you're talking with him; and if, when I made the motion, you could take him by the throat, or only dash your hat in his face to confuse him, I think it might be done easily

enough."

Pickett showed his Bowie knife as he spoke, which he had carefully hidden in his bosom, unperceived by his guest, before he went abroad. But this plan, though, perhaps, the best, met with no encouragement from his more politic, or, to speak plainly, more timid companion. He shook his head, and the voice of the emissary at a little distance, was heard, as he sang some rude ditty to cheer the solitude of his situation, or perhaps to notify the twain that he was becoming impatient.

"Hark! he approaches us," said Hurdis. "Let us say no more now. Enough that we understand each other. We must watch his game, in order to determine upon our own; and, though, I would not we should do any thing to night; yet, what we do, must not only be done without risk, but must be done quickly. Let us go to him now."

CHAPTER IX.

Your oaths are past, and now subscribe your name,
That his own hand, may strike his honor down,
That violates the smallest branch herein.
—— Love's Labor Lost
Unto bad causes, swear
Such creatures as men doubt.
—— Julius Cæsar

The emissary had awaited the end of their long conference with exemplary patience.

"I could have told you all in fewer words," he said bluntly to John Hurdis, the moment they came in sight.——"The story is soon told by one who is accustomed to it. I am compelled to talk it over to so many, that I go through it now almost as a matter of memory, with a certain set of words which I seldom have occasion to change. I trust that my brother, here, has done no discredit to my skill, by halving it in repeating."

"I fear not," replied Hurdis.——"He has certainly told enough to startle one less confidently assured in his own innocence, than myself. He has unfolded a strange history in my ears. Can it be true?"

"As Gospel!"

"And you really have the large number of persons leagued together which he mentions?"

"Full fifteen hundred."

"And for such purposes?"

"Ay!"

"And what is your object here? What do you seek from us?"

"To increase the number. We seek friends."

"Wherefore! Why should you increase your number, when such an increase must only diminish your resources?"

"I don't know that such will be its effect, and it increases our power. We gain in strength, when we gain in number."

"But why desire an increase of strength, when even now you have enough for all your purposes?"

"Indeed! but who shall know——who declare——our purposes? I, even I, know nothing of them all. I may suspect——I may conjecture——but I know them not. They are kept from us, till the proper moment."

"Indeed——who should then——if you do not? Who keeps them from you?"

"The Grand Council. They determine for us, and we execute."

"Who are they?"

"That must be a secret from you, yet. You shallknow it, and all our secrets, when you shall have taken your several degrees in our Brotherhood."

"I will take none!" said Hurdis, with more emphasis than resolution.

"You do not say it!" was the cool reply of the emissary. "You dare not."

"How! not dare?"

"It's as much as your life is worth."

"You speak boldly."

"Because I am confident of strength, my brother," replied the emissary. "You will speak boldly too——more boldly than now——when you become one of us. You will feel your own strength, when you know ours. When you feel as I do, that there are friends forever nigh, and watchful of your safety; making your enemies theirs; guarding your footsteps; fighting your battles; making a common cause of your interests, and standing elbow to elbow with you, in all your dangers. Wherefore should I be bold enough to seek you here——two of you, both strong men——both, most probably armed.——I, alone, having strength of person, not greater, perhaps, than either of you, and, possibly, not so well armed——but that I feel myself thus mighty in my connections? I know they have taken my footsteps——they know where I am at all seasons, as I know where to find others of our Brotherhood, and if I could not call them at a given moment, to save me from a sudden blow, I am at least certain

that they know where, and when to avenge me. But, for this, brothers, both, I should not have ventured my nose into your very den, as I may call it, telling you of your tricks upon travellers, and spurring you into our ranks."

The audacious development of the emissary absolutely confounded the two criminals, before whom he stood. They looked at one another, vacantly, without answer, and the emissary smiled to see in the ghastly star light, their not less ghastly countenances. He put his hand upon the arm of Hurdis who stood next to him.

"I see you are troubled, brother; but what reason have you to fear? The worst is over. Your secret is known to friends——to those only who can and will serve you."

"Friends! Friends! God help me, what sort of friends!" was the bitter speech of Hurdis, as he listened to this humiliating sort of consolation. With increasing bitterness he continued.——"And what do our friends want of me? what shall I do for them—— what give them? Their friendship must be paid for, I suppose. You want money?"

"We do——but none of yours."

"And why not mine as well as others. Is it not quite as good?"

"Quite, but not enough of it, perhaps. But we never take from our friends——from those whom weare resolved to have in our brotherhood. You might give us money upon compulsion, but it would be scarce worth our while, to extort that, when your co−operation is necessary to our other purposes, and must result in getting us a great deal more."

"I must know how——I must know your other purposes, before I consent to unite with you. I will not league with those who are common robbers."

"Common robbers, brother," cried the emissary with a contemptuous sneer, "are not, perhaps, such noble people as common murderers, but, I take it, they are quite as virtuous. But we are not common robbers, my brother; far from it. You do great injustice to the Mystic Brotherhood. Know from me that we are simply seekers of justice; and we only differ from all others having the same object, in the means which we take to bring it about. We are those who redress the wrongs and injuries of fortune, who protect the poor from the oppressor, who subdue the insolent, and humble the presumptuous and vain. Perhaps, we are, in truth, the most moral community under the sun; since our policy keeps us from harming the poor, and if we wrong any body, it is only those who do. We take life but seldom, and then only with the countenance of our social laws, and by the will of the majority, except in individual cases, when the fundamental law of self−protection makes the exception to other lawswhich are specified. Does your court house in Marengo do better than that——more wisely, more justly? I know to the contrary, my brother, and so do you."

"But we are content with our laws," said Hurdis.

"Ah, indeed! are you willing to be tried by them. Shall I go to the attorney, and tell him what I know ——shall I point to your agent beside you, and say he shot down a tall fellow without any notice, and would have robbed him of his money, if he could, and all on your account."

"You could not say that!" said Hurdis in trembling haste——"his robbery was not our object."

"His death was."

"Ay——but he was an enemy——a hateful, malignant enemy——one who trampled on his elder and his brother——"

"Was he your brother?" exclaimed the emissary starting back at the words, and looking upon the criminal in undisguised astonishment.

The silence of Hurdis answered the question sufficiently.

"Your own brother——the child of the same mother! Well! It must have been a cruel wrong that he did to you."

"It was!" stammered out Hurdis in reply.

"It must have been," said the other——"It must have been. I would take a great deal from a brother, if I had one, before I'd shoot him, and then, I tell you, if 'twas necessary to be done, my own hands should do it. I wouldn't send another man on the business. But, I've nothing to do with that. All that I've got to say is, that you're just the sort of man we want. You must be one of us. Swear to stand by us, help us and counsel with us, and in all respects obey the Grand Council, and be faithful."

"Any thing but that. Tell me, my good fellow, is there no alternative. Will not money answer? You shall have it."

"Money!——why, what can you give that we might not take. What are you worth that you talk so freely of money. We can take your life and money too. You only live by our indulgence. And why do we indulge you?——not because of any affection that we bear you, nor because of any admiration which we entertain of your abilities and valour, but simply because we lack assistants, here and there, throughout the whole southwest, in order to facilitate the progress of certain great events, which we have in preparation. But for this, we should compound with you, and take a portion of your wealth, in lieu of your life, which you have forfeited. This is what we do daily. Whenever we detect a criminal——a friend, as it were, ready made to our hands—— we do not expose, but guard his secret; and when he becomes one of us, his secret becomes ours, which it is, then, no less our policy, than principle to preserve. No, no, my brother——we want you, not your money. Do you keep your money, but we will keep you."

"Great God!" muttered the miserable wretch in self rebuke, "into what a pit have I fallen. Better die——better perish at once, than submit to such a bondage as this."

"As you please, my friend——but to one or the other you must submit. You have heard my terms, you must decide quickly. I have not much time to waste——I have other members to secure for the confederacy, and must leave you in a day or so."

"What am I to do——what is it you require?"

"Your oath——your solemn oath to do what I shall enjoin upon you, now, and what ever else may at times be enjoined upon you by the Grand Council."

"What may that be? What sort of duties do they enjoin?"

"I cannot answer you that. Our duties are various, and are accommodated to the several capacities and conditions of our members. You, for example, are a man of substance and family. From you, the tasks exacted would seldom be of an arduous character. You will, perhaps, be required to furnish monthly reports of the conduct, wealth, principles, and pursuits of your neighbours, particularly the most wealthy, active, and intelligent. It is the most importantbranch of our study, to know all those who are able to serve, or to annoy us. You must also communicate to us, the names of all who intend emigrating from your parts——find out, and let us know their destination——the route they take——the amount of money they have with them, their arms, and resolution. I will give you an address which will enable you to communicate these things!"

The enumeration of these degrading offices, filled the measure of John Hurdis's humiliation. A sense of the most shameful servitude vexed his soul, and he absolutely moaned aloud, as in the extremity of his despair, he demanded——

"May there be more than this?"

"Hardly. You will, perhaps, be required to meet the brotherhood before long, in order to learn what farther duties they may impose."

"Meet them!——where——where do they meet?"

"Every where——but where is not to be said at this time. You will be warned in season by one of our messengers, and, possibly, by myself, who will show you the sign, and whom you must follow. Let me show you the sign now, and administer the oath."

The victim submitted, as Pickett had already done, and the bonds of iniquity were sealed, and signed between them. John Hurdis began to feel that there was no slavery so accursed——no tyranny so unscrupulous——no fate so awful, as that of guilt.He almost began to steel himself with the conviction that it would be an easier matter for him to give himsel up at once to the executioner of the laws. With a feeling almost akin to despair, he beheld the cool emissary take out his pocket book, and in the uncertain light of the night record their names——nay, actually tax both himself and Pickett for the right orthography in doing so——with all the exemplary and courtly nicety of one "learned in the law."

CHAPTER X.

"It must be done:
There is no timely season in delay,
When life is waiting. I must take the sword,
Though my soul trembles. Would it were not so."
—— Conspirator

The conference was over. The emissary did not seem willing to waste more words than were absolutely necessary. He was a man of business. But Hurdis, to whom the conference had been so terrible, he was disposed to linger.

"I must speak with you, Ben Pickett, before you go," said he hoarsely to his colleague. The emissary heard the words, and went aside, saying, as he did so, with a good humoured smile of indifference upon his countenance——

"What! you would not that I should hear, though you know we are now of the same family. You will grow wiser one day."

"It's nothing," said Hurdis——"a small matter—— a mere trifle," and his tones faltered in the utterance of the lie.

"It's of no account," said the emissary, "I donot care to know it;" and, whistling as he went, he put aside the bushes which surrounded the group, and made his way towards the road.

"Ben Pickett," said Hurdis, when the emissary had got out of hearing——"I cannot bear this dreadful bondage——it will kill me, if I suffer it a week. We must break from it——we must put an end to it in some way or other. I cannot stoop to do the dirty business of this confederacy——these grand rascals——and what is our security? This scoundrel or any one of the pack, may expose us at any moment, and after toiling deeper in the mire, we shall be taken out of it at the cart's tail. It is not to be thought on——I cannot bear it. Speak to me. Say ——what are we to do?"

"Well, 'Squire——I can't say——it's for you to speak. You know best."

"Nonsense, Ben Pickett——this is no time for idle compliments. It is you who should know best. You are better taught in the tricks of these scoundrels, than I am, and can give better counsel of what we are to do. Something must be done;——is there no easier way to get rid of this fellow than by—— you know what I mean. I would not that either of us should do any more of that business."

"I reckon not, 'Squire. There's only one way to stop a wagging tongue, that I know of; and if you're willing to lend a hand, why, the sooner it's done,the better. The chap stands by the end of the broken fence——"

The constitutional timidity of John Hurdis arrested the suggestion, ere it was fully spoken.

"That's too great a risk, Ben——besides, we have not come prepared."

"I don't know, 'Squire. I've got a knife that's sharp enough, and I reckon you've got your pistols. 'Twould be easy enough as we walk along beside him. The night's clear enough to let you take good sight upon him——"

"But should the pistol miss fire, Ben——"

"Why then, my knife,"——was the prompt reply.

"It might do, Ben, if he were not armed also. But you remember, he told us that he was, and it is but reasonable to think, that he must be, coming on such a business as this. He must not only be armed, but well armed. No, no! It will not do just now; and there's another objection to our doing it here. It's too nigh home. Let him leave us first, Ben, and its safest in every respect to give him long shot for his passport. That's our plan, Ben——I see no other."

"Just as you say, 'Squire, just as you say; but to tell you the truth, I'm almost of the notion that it's best to come toe to toe, at the jump——take it now, in the starlight, and have it over. It's a monstrous cold business now, that watching behind a bush with yourrifle, 'till your enemy comes in sight. It's a cold business."

"Yes——it may be, but it's the safest of all; and our safety is now the single object of both of us. That must be the way, Ben; and——"

"But who'll watch for him? You, I think——there's no other, for, as he sleeps at my house, I can't leave him,

you know, to take a stand. You'll have to do it."

The suggestion was an astounding one; and, for a few moments, Hurdis was puzzled and silent. To become himself a principal actor in such a business, was no part of his desire. He was unprepared, as well by habit, as constitution, to engage in deeds of violence, where he himself was the chief performer, though at no sort of personal risk. Not that he had moral or human scruples in the matter. We have seen enough of him already, to know the reverse. It was necessary, however, for him to say something; and he proposed a course to his confederate which was vacillating and indecisive, and could promise not even a probable advantage. He could not muster courage enough to recognize the necessity of doing all himself, and looking his task in the face.

"Well, but you could let him off and follow him, as you followed Dick Hurdis."

"Yes, if I knew his course so well. But whenhe leaves the neighbourhood road, who knows where he'll strike. All we know, is, that he goes upward. We are sure of him then before he gets to the 'Crooked Branch,' which is but ten miles off. There you could watch for him snugly enough, and be sure of him from the opposite hill for a good quarter of an hour. But it would be impossible for me to beat round him, so as to get in front, before he reaches that point; and after that, who knows where he turns his bridle."

"Well, Ben, but you must find that out. You can inquire as you go, and mark his hoofs."

The other shook his head.

"I'm dubious about that way, 'Squire. If the fellow says true, that he has his friends all about him, I may be asking about his tracks from one of them, and then all's dicky with both of us. I think 'Squire, there's only that one way, which is the safe one. You'll have to take the bush at 'Crooked Branch,' and do this business yourself."

"But I'm not a sure shot with the rifle, Ben, and to miss were to knock every thing in the head."

"Take your double barrel; you're a good shot with that. Put twenty buck shot in each barrel, and give him one after the other. He won't know the difference."

"If I should miss, Ben——"

"You can't miss——how can you? The path's clear ——nothing to stop your sight. You're out of his reach. You're on the hill. You see him coming towards——going round by——you, and you see him for two hundred yards on a clear track, after he's passed you. There's no chance of his getting off, Squire—— and——"

"Ha! what's that," cried Hurdis, as the sound of a pistol shot aroused all the sleeping echoes of the wood. The voice of the emissary followed, and he was heard approaching them through the bushes.

"Don't be frightened, brothers, but believing you to have fallen asleep, I thought to rouse you up for fear that you'd take cold. Are you most done, for I'm getting cold myself."

They were taught by this——which the emissary probably desired——that he had fire arms, and enough, too, to render the loss of one load a matter of small consequence.

"The fellow's getting impatient," said Hurdis in suppressed tones to Pickett. Then, crying aloud, "we will be with you directly," he hurried through the rest of his bloody arrangements for the ensuing day. When they were about to go forth, Pickett suddenly stopped his employer.

"I had almost forgot, 'Squire, but do you know, Bill Carrington's got back already. He gave me a mighty bad scare to day that I ha'n't got over yet."

"How?" demanded Hurdis with natural alarm.

"I saw him going from my house door. He hadn't been in it, so Betsy swore to me, though I could almost swear I saw him come out; and without stopping to say what he wanted, he took to the woods, like one more frightened than myself."

"Strange! He hadn't come home by dinner time to day. Did you take after him?"

"Yes, after a little while I did, but I was too much scared at first to do any thing quickly; not that I was so much scared by Bill Carrington, as by another that I saw just afore him."

"Who was that?"

"Dick Hurdis."

John Hurdis started back, and with jaws distended, and cheeks, whose pallid hue denoted the cowardly heart within him, almost gasped his words of astonishment.

"Ha!——you do not say——but——why ask? You had not killed him then——and yet——if you had wounded him even, how could he be there?"

"He was not there," replied the other in low and trembling accents.——"It was his ghost."

"Pshaw! I believe not in such things," was the answer of Hurdis; but his faltering tones contradicted the confidence of his language. "It was your imagination, Ben——nothing else."

And, speaking thus, he drew nigher to Pickett, and looked cautiously around him. The other, who had faith, had less fear than him who had none.

"Well, I can't say I don't believe in the things that I see. Call it imagination or what you will, it gave me a mighty bad scare, 'Squire. But, come, sir, let us go to this man——he is approaching us again——I hear his whistle."

"A moment," said Hurdis. Pickett hung back, while the other hesitated to speak. It required an unusual effort to enable him to do so.

"I say, Ben——I'm ready to do this matter, but if you could contrive any way to take it off my hands, I should like it——"

"I don't see, 'Squire, how I can," said the other.

"If a couple of hundred, or even three, Ben——"

"I'd like to serve you, 'Squire, but——"

"Say five, Ben."

"I reckon it's imposible, 'Squire. I see no way; besides, to tell you the truth, I'd rather not. When I think that the blood on my hands, already, is got for fighting another man's battles, 'Squire, I'm worse satisfied than ever with what I've done, and I'm clear for doing no more, hereafter, than is for my own safety."

"But this is for your safety, Ben——we are in the same boat."

"Not so, 'Squire——our boats are different——verydifferent. You are in a fine large ship with mighty sails——I am in a poor dug−out. If I lose my dug−out it's no great matter. But your ship, 'Squire, if you lose that?"

"I lose more than you do, and yet we both lose all we have, Ben. You, your life——I mine——it matters not much which of us is the most wealthy, since we both lose every thing in losing life. Our loss is equal then, and it is your interest, quite as much as mine, to put this fellow out of the way."

"Well, 'Squire, the truth is, I'm tired of scuffling for life. I've been scuffling for it all my life. I won't scuffle any more. I'll take the world as I find it. I'll take my chance with this fellow, and run the risk of his blabbing, sooner than squat down behind a bush and blow his brains out."

"And yet you expect me to do it, Ben."

"No, I don't expect you. You ask me how to put this fellow out of your way——and I tell you. I know no other way, unless you'll come to the scratch at once, and have it out with him now, while the stars are shining."

"What! just when you've heard his pistol too, and know that he's well provided in arms. That would be madness."

"I know no other way, 'Squire," was the indifferent reply.

"Ah, Ben, don't desert me," was the pitiful appealof the imbecile villain.——"Don't fly from me at the very first sign of danger."

"I don't, 'Squire——I'm ready to jump now, this minute, into its throat, though you know, as well as I do, that it's full of teeth."

"That we must not do. We should both perish, perhaps——certainly, if my pistol should miss fire."

"But it would be a warm scuffle for it, 'Squire, and that's better than waiting in a cold bush."

"We must not think of such a plan. It would be folly. The first is the best after all——the safest. I must do it then myself. I will. Why should I fear? All rests on it, and he——what is he? The deed were a benefit to society, not less than to ourselves."

A sudden fit of courage and morality grew at once prominent together in the spirit of the dastard. Driven to the necessity, he at length seemed to embrace it with the resolution of the man; and, thus resolved, he went forth to meet the person whom, the next day, he had decreed for the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XI.

Like dastard curres, that having at abay
The savage beast embost in wearie chace,
Dare not adventure on the stubborn prey,
Ne byte before, but rome from place to place,
To get a snatch, when turned is his face.
—— Faery Queen

The emissary of the Mystic confederacy had been well chosen for the business upon which he came. He discriminated at a glance, between the characters of John Hurdis and his agent. The imbecility of the one had been the chief occasion of his vices; the destitution of the other had originated his. A proper education, alone, with due reference to their several deficiencies, could have saved them; and, under strict guidance and just guardianship they had, doubtlessly, been both good men. They were not, however; and the task of the emissary was to make the particular deficiencies of each, the agent for securing the required degree of influence over them. To Pickett, when Hurdis left them, he had that to say, which, though it did not entirely answer the intended purpose of securing his hearty co−operation, had, at least, the effect of confounding him. Though the agent of Hurdis could not be immediately changed into an enemy, he was effectually prevented from appearing forever after in the attitude of an active friend. The words were few, which effected this object.

"That is a poor creature for whom you risked your life. If he dared, he would even now have you risk it again for him. There is no need to risk it for yourself. He would pay you well to murder me! The fool! as if I, only, am in possession of his secret——as if I were utterly unguarded in coming down into his jaws, or stood in any sort of danger of their closing upon me. I'll tell you what, brother, ——when you stab or shoot, let it be on your own account. If you do it for another, let it be for one who is not too great a coward to do it for himself. Here's a wretch, would kill his enemy——that's nothing——if his own arm held the weapon! Has the feeling which makes him hate——the malignity which prompts him to revenge, yet lacks the very quality, which alone can make hate honorable, and malignity manly. By the seal of the Grand Council, if 'twere with me, I'd compound with the fellow for his life——take his money, as much as he could give——and let him off from the confederacy. I despise such sneaks, and would trust them with nothing. And yet——they have their uses. To savehis own throat, he can tell us where others are to be found, and do the business of a spy, if he lacks the boldness to take the weapon of the soldier. The scoundrel, too, to strike his own brother——there's no trusting such a chap, Pickett, and it's fortunate for you that another has him on the skirts, as well as yourself. If ever this business had come out, you would have suffered all——he'd have made you the scapegoat, and would have lacked the will, as well as the courage, to have helped you, by a proper effort, out of the halter. He is planning something now——I know it——something against me;——but he must be a keener hunter of blood than I think him, to find me napping. By mid−day to−morrow, I'll put another hound upon his track, so that he shall take no step without the Council knowing it."

Thus speaking, the emissary led the way back to the hovel of Pickett, with a manner of the utmost unconcern. The latter was too much bewildered by what he heard——by his own peculiar situation, and the position in which his former coadjutor was likely to be placed——to think of any thing calmly, or to make any answer. He began, with that easy pliability to vice and its suggestions, which had always marked his character, to feel that there was no need for him to struggle against a power that almost seemed like a fate; and if he had any reflections at all, they were those of one, who, buffeting muchwith the world's troubles, had, at last, learned to make something of the worst of them. His mind began to address itself to the advantages which might result from this new association, and it was not an emissary so faithful to his trust, as the one before us, who would suffer these to go unmustered into notice. Before Pickett slept that night, he had come to the conclusion that he might as well take his share in the business of the Mystic confederacy, which promised so magnificently and paid so well.

But, meanwhile, what of John Hurdis? What were his thoughts——his dreams, that night? Any thing but pleasant and promising. The hopes of Pickett——springing from his poverty and destitution ——were nothing to him. He was rich——a man of family and substance. Standing fair in the world's esteem——seeking the regards

and the affections of the virtuous, and the beautiful——what were his reflections in the position in which he now found himself? His felony brought home to his doors, and only withheld from public exposure——at the mercy of a band of professed felons——and then, only, by his timely compliance with their laws and exactions ——by his becoming one with them——forced into their crimes——forced into all their thousand responsibilities. What a mesh of dangers gathered about him! What a fecund crime was that which he had committed! The teeth of his malignity were alreadysprouting from the ground, and under his own feet. Well might he tremble at every step he was about to take, and bitterly curse the folly, not less than the wickedness, of the deed which he had commissioned Pickett to perform. And Pickett, too, had deserted him——that was a blow not less severe than the rest. Could he have thrust upon the hands of his agent the other deed yet to be done, he had been comparatively easy, not so much because of the service itself, but because he would not then have been taught so terribly to feel the awful solitude of crime. The desertion of the confederate is, perhaps, the first−felt warning which a just fate despatches to the vicious.

"Fool! miserable fool that I was!" raved the miserable Hurdis when he found himself alone. "Where am I? What have I done? Where do I stand? The earth opens before me. Would it hide me! I have labored wildly, and without profit. I am no nearer to Mary Easterby than ever——nay, farther off than ever——and the blood of a brother, shed that I might clear the way to her, is upon my hands in vain. She rejects me, and I have gained nothing but misery and danger. I am at the mercy of the worst——the most desperate of mankind!——With no ties to bind them in my service and to secrecy. The very wealth which I believed capable to do every thing, rejected at my hands.There is but one hope——but one chance for freedom. It must be done, and, double misery!——my hand alone must do it. I must not shrink——I must not falter now. On the word of this desperado my life hangs. I must risk life that he should not speak that word. He must be silenced. Better that I should do so now, than wait till the sheriff knocks at the door. It cannot be worse——it may save all."

His terrors did not deprive him of his cautions, nor operate to defeat his deliberate thoughts upon the course which he resolved to take. On the contrary, it rather contributed to increase his acuteness, and make his caution more deliberate than ever. Nature which denied him courage, seemed to have provided him, in his strait, with a double share of cunning; and one little incident will sufficiently serve to show his own providence in making his arrangements. He had to take his gun from his chamber after he had carefully loaded both barrels with buck shot, and, lest he might be met while descending the stairs, by any of the family or servants, he lowered it from his window by means of a string—— thus obviating any danger of being seen armed at an unusual hour of the night. Before the day had dawned, he had made his way to the place designed for his concealment; and with the patience, if not the indifference, of the professed outlaw, he waited for the approach of one.

He had to wait for some hours, for Pickett's hospitality towards his new associate, would not suffer him to depart till after breakfast. The same consideration was not sufficient, however, to induce the former to acquaint the emissary with the ambush which he well knew had been set for him. His regards had not yet been warmed to such a degree. His policy may be comprised in few words.

"If," thought he, "John Hurdis kills him, well and good——I've nothing to do with it——I can lose nothing by it, but will most probably escape from a connection, which is decidedly dangerous. But, whether I escape from the connection or not, at least I am safe from any charges of having done this deed; I am certainly untroubled with the consciousness of it. Should he not kill him, still well and good——we stand where we are. I am neither worse nor better. The confederacy, if it has its dangers, has its rewards also——and what am I, and what are my prospects in the world, that I should heed the former, when the latter are to me, so important a consideration. Live or die, my brother, (here he adapted the affectionate language of the emissary,) Live or die, my brother, it's all one to me."

And with these thoughts, though unexpressed, he sent the emissary forward on his path of danger. As was inevitable, he took the road upward according to the opinion of Pickett, and, it may be added, his course was directly over the ground which he had already travelled. The distance was small, however, from the house of Pickett, to the spot where Hurdis awaited him; and the fellow took no long time in approaching it. Meanwhile, what were the emotions of the felonious watcher. We may imagine——I cannot describe them. Life and death depended upon his resolve——so he thought, at least—— yet was he still irresolute. He had chosen, with the judgment of one experienced in such matters, the very spot which, for all others, afforded him the best opportunity of putting his design in execution. Approaching or departing from him, his victim was at his mercy for a full hundred yards on either hand. The bushes around effectually concealed him——his aim was

unobstructed——the path was not often travelled——not liable to frequent interruption ——the day was dark——there was not a breath stirring. Yet the hand of the assassin trembled, and the tremor at his heart was even greater than that of his hand. Nature had not designed him for a bold villain. He might have made a cunning shopkeeper, and succeeded, perhaps, in doing a far better business, though not a more moral one, in vending bad wares, and spurious money, than by crying, "stand" to a true man. His nerves were not of the iron order, and painfully, indeed, was he made conscious of this defect, as he beheld his enemy approach. No opportunity could have been better. The road by the branch, above which he lay in waiting, was almost under him; and for a good three minutes, the movement of the traveller was in a direct line with his first appearance. Hurdis got his gun in readiness, and when the victim came within its reach, he raised it to his shoulder. But it sank again a moment after. The muzzle veered to and fro, as a leaf in the wind. He could not bring the sight to rest upon the traveller. Keen was the anguish which he felt when he brought it down to the earth; and it was in desperate resolve that he again lifted it.

"It must be done," he said to himself——"there is no hope else. My life or his——shall I hesitate! I must do it——I cannot miss him now."

Again the instrument of death was uplifted in his unwilling hands, and this time he rested it upon a limb of the tree, which rose directly before his person.

"I have him now. It is but fifty yards. There he is beside the poplar! Ha! what is this——where is he——I cannot see him——a mist is before my eyes."

A mist had indeed, overspread his sight. His straining eyes were full of water, and he drew back from the tube, and looked over it upon the road. Still, his enemy was there. Why had he not seen him before? He would have resumed his aim, but just then, he saw the eyes of the emissary turned upwardsupon the very spot where he stood. Had he been seen through the bushes? The doubt was a palsying one, and he shrunk back in terror, and listened with a beating heart that shook in his very throat, to hear the steps of the enemy in pursuit of him up the hill. But he heard nothing and was emboldened to look again. He had lost one chance. The emissary had rounded the branch, and was now upon the other end of the trace and going from him. But his back was now turned to the assassin, and his base spirit derived strength from this circumstance. He felt that he could not have drawn a trigger upon his foe, while he looked upon his face. He now did not doubt of his being able to execute the deed. His arms were rigid——he felt that he was resolved. There was not the slightest quiver in limb or pulse; and with the confidence of assured strength, and a tried courage, he once more lifted the weapon. Never did man take better aim upon his foe. The entire back of the slow−moving stranger was towards him. The distance was small, for, in rounding the branch, the traveller had approached, rather than receded from, the point where the murderer lay in waiting. Cautiously, but firmly, did he cock the weapon. The slight click upon his own ears, was startling, and before he could recover from the start which it had occasioned him, and while he was about to throw his eyes along the barrel, his marrowlesspurpose was again defeated by one of the simplest incidents in the world. A flock of partridges, startled by the head of the horse, flew up from the road side, at the very feet of the traveller. The moment had passed. The victim was out of reach before his wretched enemy could recover his resolution. Desperate and wild, John Hurdis rushed out of his covert, and half−way down the hill. He would have cried aloud to the retreating emissary. He would have defied him to an equal, mortal struggle. But the soul was wanting, if not the will. The sound died away in his husky throat. The voice stuck——the tongue was palsied. The imbecile dropped his weapon, and sinking down upon the grass beside it, thrust his fingers into the earth, and moaned aloud. It is a dreadful misery to feel that we can confide in no friend——that we can trust no neighbour; but this sorrow is nothing to that last humiliating conviction, which tells us that we cannot trust ourselves. That our muscles will fail us in the trying moment——that, when we most need resolution, we shall find none within our hearts. That our nerves shall be unstrung when their tension is our safety——that our tongue shall refuse its office, when its challenge is necessary to warm our own hearts, and alarm those of our enemies. Conscious imbecility next to conscious guilt, is the most crushing of all mental maladies. To look upon that poor, base, criminal now, as he lies upon the grass——his fingers stuck into the sod and fixed there ——his jaws wide, and the frothing tongue lolling out and motionless——big drops upon his forehead——bigger drops in his red and glassy eyes——his hair soaked by the sweat of his mental agony, and all his limbs without life——and we should no longer hate, but pity——we should almost forget his crime in the paralysing punishment which followed it. But this was not the limit of his afflictions, though, to the noble mind, it must appear the worst. There were yet

other terrors in store for him. He was yet to learn, even in this narrow life, that "the wages of sin is death."

CHAPTER XII.

"Why stand you thus amazed? Methinks your eyes
Are fixed in meditation; and all here
Seem like so many senseless statues;
As if your souls had suffered an eclipse
Betwixt your judgment and affections."
—— Woman Hater

Hours elapsed before John Hurdis arose from the earth upon which he had thrown himself, overcome by the mortification of his conscious imbecility. When he did arise he was like one bewildered. But he went forward. Stunned and staggering, he went forward——the stains of the soil upon his face and hands——his gun and clothes marked also with the proofs of his humiliation. But whither should he go? His mind, for a brief space, took no heed of this question. He wandered on without direction from his thought; but, with an old habit, he wandered towards the dwelling of his coadjutor, Pickett. He was partially awakened from his stupor, by the sounds of a voice——the merry voice of unheeding childhood. The sounds were familiar——they half recalled him to himself——they reminded him wherehe was, while fully impressing upon him his forlorn condition. They were those of the idiot girl, and she now came bounding towards him with an old feeling of confidence. But ere she drew nigh, she remembered the interview with John Hurdis in which her mother unexpectedly became a party. Without knowing why, she yet well enough understood that her mother found fault with her conduct on that occasion, and the remembrance served to arrest her forward footsteps. She hung back when but a few feet from the criminal; and a faint cry escaped her. She shrunk from his altered appearance. There is no form of idiocy, which brings with it an utter insensibility to wo; and never was wo more terribly depicted upon human countenance, than it was then on that of John Hurdis. The involuntary exclamation and spontaneous speech of the girl, taught the miserable criminal, who had hitherto regarded his inner man only, to give a moment's consideration to his outer appearance; and he smiled with a sick and ghastly smile to behold the clay−stains upon his garments.

"Oh, Mister John——what's the matter——what have you been doing to yourself. Look at your clothes. You've tumbled in the ditch, I reckon."

"Yes, Jane——yes! I've had a fall, Jane——a bad fall. But how do you, Jane——I havn't seen you for a very long time."

"'Most a week, Mister John——and I've been wanting to see you too, Mister John, to tell you all about the strange man, and dad; and how mother was frightened so. But you're hurt, Mister John—— you've got a bad hurt, I'm sure, or you wouldn't look so."

John Hurdis thought only of his hurts of mind, and his moral fall, in replying to the idiot in the affirmative——a reply which she received in a purely literal sense. She would have run on in a strain of childish condolence, but he listened to her impatiently, and, at length, with an air that mortified the child to whom he had always looked indulgence only, he interrupted her prattle, and bade her go to the hovel and send her father to him. She prepared to comply, but her steps were slow, and looking back with an expression of mournful dissatisfaction on her countenance, awakened Hurdis to a more considerate feeling. Changing his tone of voice, and employing a few kind words, she bounded to him with a sudden impulse, caught his hand, kissed it, and then, like a nimble deer, bounded away in the direction of the hovel. An age seemed to pass away, in the mind of the criminal, ere Pickett came in obedience to his summons. When he beheld him coming, he retired into the wood, to which the other followed him, eagerly asking, as he drew nigh——

"Well, 'Squire——how's it——all safe——all done?"

"Nothing's done!" was the reply. All's lost—— all. Oh, Pickett! I am the most miserable, the most worthless wretch alive. My heart failed me at the very moment. My hand refused its office——my eyes——my limbs——all denied their aid to rescue me from this accursed bondage. I knew it would be so——I feared it. I would that you had done it——I am!——Pity me, Ben Pickett, that I must say the words myself——I am a coward——a poor, despicable coward. I cannot avenge my own wrong——I cannot defend my own life. I cannot

lift my arm, though the enemy stands threatening before me. I must only submit and die."

The look which accompanied these words——the looks of mingled frenzy and despair——of feebleness and passion——would beggar all attempt at description. The cheeks of the wretched imbecile were white——whiter then the marble. His eyes glassy, almost glazed with the glaze of death. His mouth was open, and remained so during the greater part of their conference; and a stupid stare which he fixed upon his companion while the latter spoke in reply, was far from attesting that attention which his ear, nevertheless, gave to his utterance. The inferior, yet better nerved villain, absolutely pitied, and, after his own humble fashion, endeavoured to console him under his afflictions. But words are idle to him who has need of deeds which he dares not to performhimself, and cannot purchase from another. It was a bitter mockery to Hurdis, in his situation, to hear the commonplaces of hope, administered by one whom guilt and ignorance, alike, made hopeless as a teacher of others, as he must have been in his own case hopeless. After hearing all that Pickett could say, Hurdis was only conscious of increased feebleness.

"Go home with me, Ben——I feel so weak——I don't think I can find the way myself. I am very weak and wretched. Let me take your arm."

Pickett complied, and relieving him from the gun, the weight of which was oppressive to him under his general mental, and physical prostration, conducted him through by−paths to his home. Ere they reached the avenue, he gave him up the gun, and finding that he was unable to confer farther, though willing, upon their mutual situation and necessities, he left him with a cold exhortation to cheer up and make the most of his misfortune. The other heard him with little head or heed, and in the solitude of his own chamber endeavoured to conceal the marks of that misery which he was only now beginning to discover it was beyond his art to subdue.

But, to return to my own progress while these events were passing. It will be remembered that, stunned by the murder of my friend, I was for three days almost incapable of thought or action. I lingeredduring that time with Colonel Grafton, whose own kindness and that of his happy family ministered unremittingly to the sorrows which they did not hope to stay. After that time I felt the necessity of action. The stunning sensations occasioned by the first blow were now over, and I began to look about me, and to think. I set forward on my way homeward, burdened with the cruel story, which I did not know how to relate. Nothing but a penknife and plain gold ring of William Carrington had been left untouched by his robbers. They had stripped him of every thing in the shape of arms and money. The knife was in a vest pocket and was probably too insignificant for appropriation; the ring——one given him by Katharine——was upon a little finger, and probably escaped their notice, or was too tight for instant removal. These I bore with me back——sad tokens of what I could not bring. His horse they had taken in their flight from the hovel, and probably sold the next day in the Choctaw nation. Mine was preserved to me, as, when William fell, and he felt himself freed from all restraint, he naturally made his way back to Colonel Grafton's where he had been well provided for the night before. I had, indeed, lost nothing, but that which I could not replace. My money was untouched in my saddle bags, and even that which I had about my person had been left undisturbed. It is true, I had concealedit in a secret pocket of my coat, but they had not even offered at a search. The flight of Carrington had too completely occupied their minds at first, and the large sum which they found upon his person, had subsequently too fully answered their expectations to render it important, in their urry, that they should waste time in examining me. Perhaps, too, they may have regarded William as the purse bearer for both. Whatever may have been the cause of their neglect, I was certainly no loser of any thing with which I had at first set out. And yet how dreadful was the loss which I had to relate! How could I relate it——how name to the poor girl, looking for her lover, any one of the cruel words, which must teach her that she looked for him in vain? This was my continual thought, as I travelled homewards. I had no other. It haunted me with a continual questioning, and the difficulty of speech seemed to increase with the delay to answer it, and before I had answered it, I reached home.

The very first person I encountered was John Hurdis. I approached him unawares. He was walking from me, and towards the house. I had dismissed from my bosom all feeling of hostility; for, since the murder of William, it seemed to me that all my old hates and prejudices were feeble. They were all swallowed up and forgotten in that greater sorrow. So completely had this become the case, that, though, at leaving him but a week before, I should have only spoken to him in curses. I now spoke to him in kindness. My speech seemed to confound him, no less than his conduct, on hearing it, confounded me. As I have said, he was walking from me in the road leading up to the avenue. He had nearly reached the entrance, and was so completely absorbed in his own thoughts that the head

of my horse provoked none of his attention. I called to him, and I am sure that my voice could not have been made more studiously unoffending.

"Well, John, how are you——how are all?"

"John——John!" he exclaimed, turning round, and staring at me with a face full of unspeakable agitation. "Who's that! What do you mean? What do you want with me? Ha!"

"Why, what's the matter with you, John?" I cried.——"What frightens you——don't you know me?"

"Know you. Yes, yes——I know you;" and his face and movements both indicated a strong disposition on his part to fly from me, but that his trembling limbs refused to assist him.

"Why do you shrink from me?" I asked, thinking that all his agitation arose from our previous quarrel, and the fear that I was seeking some opportunity of personal collision with him. "Why do you shrink from me, John Hurdis? I am not angry with you now——I do not seek to harm you. Beyourself, brother, for God's sake, and tell me how the old folks are. How's mother?"

He saw me alight from my horse, which I did at this moment, and approach him, without being able to give me any answer. When, however, I had got alongside of him, he enforced himself to speech, but without replying to my question.

"And what brings you back? How did you——I mean——you have come back safely?"

"Ay——I am safe," was my answer; "but, truth to say, brother John, you do not seem to know exactly what you mean. What! you are still angry about the old business?——but you are wrong. It is for me to be angry, if any body; but I am not angry——I have forgiven you. Tell me, then, are the old people well?"

"They are!" was his only and brief answer; and I got nothing from him, but plain yes and no, while we moved along together to the house. He was evidently overcome with astonishment and fear. I knew him to be timid, but, at that time——ignorant as I was then, of the history which has been already related——I found it difficult to account for his imbecility. It was easily understood afterwards. But even then I looked on him with pity, mixed with scorn, as, shrinking and silent, he moved along beside me. Guilty or not, I would not have had in my bosom such a soul as his, for all creation.

CHAPTER XIII.

Hold! Hold!
Oh, stop that speedy messenger of death,
Oh, let him not run down that narrow path,
Which leads unto thy heart.
—— Satiro−Mastix

My unexpected return, of course, brought the family together. John Hurdis could not well be absent, and he was a pale and silent listener to my melancholy narrative. The story was soon told, and a dumb horror seized upon all. I saw that he was palsied——that he shivered——that a spasmodic emotion had fastened upon all his limbs, but even had he not been guilty, such emotion, at such a narrative, would have been natural enough. He rose to leave the room, but staggered in such a manner that he was forced once more to take his seat. My account of the murder had confirmed the story of the emissary. He had a vain, vague hope before, that the clan——the Mystic Confederacy——was a fable of the stranger, got up for purposes yet unexplained, or, if true, that its purposes and power, had been alike exaggerated. The history of my seizure, and of thepursuit of William Carrington, however, was attended with so many circumstances of bold atrocity, that he could deceive himself no longer as to the strength and audacity of the clan. Still, his guilty soul, could draw some consolation, even from a fate so dreadful. He breathed with more freedom, when he found that I unhesitatingly ascribed the murder of my friend to the robbers, and had no suspicion in any other quarter. His own common sense sufficiently taught him that such a belief was the most reasonable and natural to one who did not know the truth; and with a consciousness of increased security, from one quarter at least, he did not afflict himself much with the reflection that he had been the murderer of one unoffending person, and the cruel destroyer of another's dearest hopes. So long as he was himself safe, these considerations were of small importance. And, yet let us not suppose that they did not trouble him. He had not slept in peace from the moment that he despatched Pickett on his bloody mission. He was doomed never to sleep in peace again——no, nor to wake in peace. Forms of threatening followed his footsteps by day, and images of terror haunted his dreams by night. He might escape from human justice, but he soon felt how idle was any hope to escape from that worst presence of all——the constant consciousness of crime.

But I must not forget my own trobles in surveyingthose of John Hurdis. Of his woes I had no thought at this moment. My only thought was of that fearful interview with Katharine. What would I not have given could I have escaped it. But such wishes were foolish enough. I had undertaken the task, regarding it as a solemn duty, as well to the dead, as to the living, and, sooner or later, the task was to be executed. Delay was proof of weakness, and that afternoon I set out for the house of the poor maiden, widowed ere a wife. During the solitary ride, I thought in vain of the words which I should use in telling her the story. How should I break its abruptness——how soften the severity of the stroke. The more I thought of this——as is most usually the case in such matters with most persons, the more difficult and impracticable did the labour seem, and, but for the shame of such a movement, I could have turned my bridle, and trusted to a letter to do that, which I felt it impossible that my lips should do well. I had seen preachers, otherwise sagacious enough, undertake to console the afflicted, by trite maxims, which taught them——strangely enough——to forbear grief for the very reason which makes them grieve——namely, because their loss is irreparable. "Your tears are vain," says the book−man.——"Therefore I weep," replied the man. How to avoid such wanton folly was the question with me, yet it was a question not so easy to answer. Themind runs upon commonplaces in the matter of human consolation, and we prate of resignation to the end of the chapter to those who never hear us. This, of course, assumes the grief to be sincere. There is a conventional sort of sorrow which is relieved by conventional language; and the heir finds obedience to the will of providence, a very natural lesson. But the love of Katharine Walton seemed to me a thing all earnestness. I had seen enough of her to know that she could freely have risked life for William Carrington——to tell her that no risk of life could save him now, I felt convinced would almost be at the peril of hers. Yet the irksome labour must be taken——the risk must be met. I had that sort of pride which always sent me forward when the trial appeared a great one; and the very extremity of the necessity, awakened in me an intensity of feeling, which enabled me to effect my object. And I did effect it——how it will be seen hereafter. Enough, that I shared deeply in the suffering I was

unavoidably compelled to inflict.

It was quite dark when I reached her dwelling. My progress towards it had been slow, yet I felt it too fast for my feelings. I entered the house with the desperate haste of one who distrusts his own resolution, and leaps forward in order that it may not leave him. My task was increased in difficulty, by the manner in which Katharine met me. Thehappy heart, confident in its hope, shone out in her kindling eye, and in the buoyant tones of her voice.

"Ah, Mr. Hurdis——back so soon! I did not look for you for a whole month. What brought you—— but why do I ask, when I can guess so readily? Have you seen Mary yet?"

While she spoke, her eyes peered behind me as if seeking for another; and the pleasant and arch smile which accompanied her words, was mingled with a look of fondest expectation. I could not answer her——I could not look upon her when I beheld this glance. I went forward to a chair, and sank down within it.

She arose and came hurriedly towards me.

"What is the matter——are you sick, Mr. Hurdis?" And, though approaching me, her eyes reverted to the entrance as if still seeking another. Involuntarily, I shook my head as if in denial. She saw the movement and seemed to comprehend it. Quick as lightning, she demanded——

"You come alone?——Where's William——where's Mr. Carrington?"

"He did not come with me, Katharine. He could not."

"Ha! could not——could not! Tell me why he could not come, Mr. Hurdis. He is sick!——where did youleave him? He is ill, perhaps——dangerously ill. Tell me——speak, Richard Hurdis——your looks frighten me."

"They should, Katharine."

I could not then speak more. My face was averted from her. Trembling with half−suppressed emotion, she hastened to confront me. Her voice grew thick and hoarse as she again spoke.

"You have come for me, Richard.——You have come for me to go to him. He must be ill, indeed, when he sends for me. I will go to him at once—— let us set out instantly. Where did you leave him? Is it far?"

I availed myself of the assistance which she thus furnished me, and replied——

Near Tuscaloosa——a two days' journey."

"Then the less time have we to spare, Richard. Let us go at once. I fear not to travel by night——I have done it before. But tell me, Mr. Hurdis, what is his sickness. From what does he suffer?"

"An accident——a hurt."

"Ha! a hurt——"

"A wound!"

"God be merciful——a wound——a wound. Out with it, Richard Hurdis, and tell me all, if you be a man. I am a woman, it is true, but I can bear the worst, rather than the doubt which apprehends it.How came he by a wound——how was he hurt——what accident?"

"He was shot!"

"Shot! shot! By what——by whom? Tell me, Richard, dear Richard——his friend——my friend—— tell me not that he is hurt dangerously——that he will recover——that there are hopes. Tell me, tell me, if you love me and would have me live."

I shook my head mournfully. Her hand grasped my arm, and her gripe though trembling, was firm as steel.

"You do not say it——you cannot tell me, Richard—— that his wound is mortal. That William——I cannot think it——I dare not, though you may tell me so—— that he will die!"

"Be calm, awhile, dear Katharine, and hear me." I answered retreatingly, while I took her hand, with which she still continued to grasp my arm, in my own. She released her hold instantly.

"There! I am calm. I am patient. I listen. Speak now, Richard——fear not for me, but tell me what I must hear, and what, if my apprehensions be true, I shall never be better prepared to hear than now. William Carrington is hurt——by an accident you say. He sends for me. Well——I will go to him—— go this instant. But you have not told me that there is hope——that he is not dangerously——not mortally hurt. Tell me that. It is for that I wait."

Wonderful woman! She had recovered her stature——her firmness——her voice——all, in a single instant. And never had she looked so beautiful as now, when her eyes were shining with a fearful light——when doubt

and apprehension had imparted to their natural fire, an expression of wildness, such as the moon shows when mocked on her march, by clouds, that flit over her disk, yet leave no impression on its surface. When her small and rosy mouth, the lips slightly parted and occasionally quivering, exhibited the emotion, which she was only able to subdue by assuming one of a higher character, and putting on the aspect of command. Full, finely formed in person, with a carriage in which grace and dignity seemed twins, neither taking precedence of the other, but both harmoniously co−operating, the one to win, the other to sway; she seemed, indeed, intended by nature to command. And she did command. Seeing that I hesitated, she repeated her injunction to me to proceed; but with a voice and words that evidently proved her to have lost some of her most sanguine hopes, by reason of my reluctant and hesitating manner.

"Tell me one thing only——tell me that I am in time to see him! That he will not be utterly lost—— that I may again hear his voice——that he may hear mine——that I may tell him, I come to be with him to the last——if need be, to die with him. Say, Richard——say, my brother, for he called you his——say that I will be in time for this."

My answer was spoken almost without my own consciousness, and it seemed as instantaneously, to deprive her of all hers.

"You will not!"

With one wild, piercing shrick, she rent the air, while tossing her arms above her head, she rushed out of the room and into the passage. Then I heard a dead, heavy fall; and, rushing after her, I found her prostrate at the foot of the stairs, as utterly lifeless as if a cleaving bolt had been driven through her heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

What! thou hast fled his side in time of danger,
That clung to him in fortune!
Oh! cruel treachery; he had not done thee
So foul a wrong as this, Away, and leave me.
—— The Paragon

I followed her with all haste and raised her from the floor. My cries brought her mother to her assistance——a venerable and worthy dame, whom years and disease had driven almost entirely to her chamber. She received her daughter at my hands in an almost lifeless condition. I assisted in bearing the poor maiden to her room; and after giving the mother a brief account of what had taken place——for the circumstances of the scene would admit of no more——I left her for my father's habitation. I shall not undertake to describe my misery that night. The thought, that, in my want of resolution, my haste, my imperfect judgment, I had given a death stoke to the poor heart that I had seen so paralysed in a single instant before my eyes, was little less than horrible to me. It was a constant and stalking terror in my eyes. In my dreams, I beheld the bloody body of William Carrington, and the lifeless form of Katharine beside it, stretched out in the same damp, cold, bed of death. If I awakened, my active fancy represented a thousand similar objects——familiar forms lying and gasping in all the agonies of dissolution, or crouching in terror, as if beneath some sudden bolt or blow. In all these visions I never lost sight of the living and real scene of misery through which I had so recently gone. At first, the smiling, hopeful face of Katharine rose before me; and I could distinguish the devoted love in the look that asked after her betrothed, when her lips refused all question. Then rose the wonder why he came not——then the doubt——then the fear——the terror next; and, lastly, the appalling and thunder−riving blow, which hurled her to the ground in a stupor scarcely less firm and freezing than was that which had stricken down her lover, and from which he could never more awake. Was it better that she should awake? Could the light of returning life, be grateful to her eyes? Impossible! The heart which had been so suddenly overthrown, was never destined to know any other than the consciousness of sorrow. There was no light in life for her. The eyes might kindle, and the lips might wear a smile, in after days, even as the tree which the wanton axe of the woodman has wounded, will sometimes put forth a few sickly buds and imperfect branches.But these do not speak for life always. The life of the soul is wanting——carried off by untimely sap. The heart is eaten out, and gone; and when the tree falls, which it does when the night is at the stillest, men wonder of what disease it perished. The natural world abounds in similitudes for humanity, which, it is our misfortune, perhaps, too infrequently to regard.

The next day, to my surprise, I was sent for, by Katharine. I had not thought it possible she should recover in so short a time——she was, it seems, resolved to hear all the dreadful particulars of my narrative; and strove, with wonderful energy, to listen to them calmly. Her words were subdued almost to a whisper, and uttered as if measured by the stop−watch. I could see that the tension of her mind was doing her but little good.——That she was overtasking herself, and exhausting the hoarded strength of years, to meet the emergency of a moment. I implored her to wait but a day, before she required the intelligence she wished; I pleaded my own mental suffering in excuse; but to this, she simply answered, by touching her head with her finger, and smiling in such a sort, as if to rebuke me for arrogating to myself a greater degree of feeling and suffering than was hers. I could not refuse, and yet, I trembled to comply with her demand. I shuddered as I thought upon the probable——nay,the almost certain——consequences of evil which must follow to her life, from the recital. Her features denoted a latent war in the mind, in which my details, like the spark to the combustible, I felt sure, must bring about an explosion no less terrible than sudden. Her eyes were bloodshot and dry——without a sign of moisture. Had they been wet, I should have been more free to speak. Her cheeks were singularly pale; but in the very centre of her forehead, there was a small spot of livid red——an almost purple spot——that seemed like a warning beacon, fired of a sudden in sign of an approaching danger. I took her hand in mine, as I sat down by the couch on which she lay, and found it cold and dry. There was little, if any, pulse, at that moment. It was not long after, however, when it bounded hotly beneath my finger, like a blazing arrow, sent suddenly from the bended bow.

"And now," she said, "now that I am calm, Richard——I can hear all that you have to say——you need not be

afraid to speak to me now, since the worst is known."

"You have heard, then, from your mother?" I asked affirmatively.

"Yes, I have heard all——I have heard that he is——" here she interrupted the sentence by a sudden pause, which was followed by a long parenthesis. "You will now see how strong I have become, whenyou hear the words that I can calmly speak——know then that you can tell me nothing worse than I already know. I know that he is dead, to whom I had given myself, and whom——I repeat it to you, Richard, as his friend——and whom, as heaven is my witness, I most truly loved."

"I believe it——I know it, Katharine; and he knew it too."

"Did he? are you sure he knew it," she asked, putting her hand upon my arm as she spoke these words in a tone of appealing softness. "Ah, Richard, could I know that he felt this conviction to the last——could I have been by to have heard him avow it——to have laid bare my heart before him——to have listened to the last words in which he received and returned my affections. Oh, those last words, those last words!——Let me hear them. What were they? ——it is for this I sent for you to come. It is these words that I would hear. Tell me, then, Richard, and set my heart at rest——give peace to my mind and relieve me from this anxiety. What said he at the last, what said he'?'

"Will it relieve you? I fear not, Katharine——I fear it would only do you harm to listen to such matters now. You could not bear it now."

"Not bear it! Have I not heard all——have I not borne the worst? What more can you have to say to distress me? I tell you, I know that he is dead; I know that I shall speak to him no more——that I can never hear his voice in answer to mine. For him, I might as well be dumb as he. You see now, that I can speak the words which yesterday you could not speak. What then have you to fear? Nothing——nothing. Begin then, Richard——begin, my brother, and tell me the particulars of this cruel story. It will be a consolation, though a sad one, to know the history of the sorrow that afflicts me."

"Sad consolation, indeed, Katharine, if any, but I will not believe that it can be a consolation now. Some time hence, when you have learned calmly to look upon your loss, and become reconciled to your privation, I doubt not that you will receive a melancholy satisfaction from a knowledge of the truth. But I do not think that it will benefit you now. On the contrary, I fear that it will do you infinite harm. You are not well——there is a flushed spot upon your brow which shows your blood to be in commotion; to−morrow, perhaps——"

"No to−morrow, Richard;——all days are alike to me now. I am already in the morrow——the present is not mine——I live in the past or in the future, or I live not at all. Let me then hear from you now—— let me know all at once——now, while the cup is at the fullest, let me drink to the bottom, and not take successive and hourly draughts of the same bitter potion. I must hear it from you now, Richard,without delay or evasion, or, I tell you, I cannot sleep again. If I do, it will only be to dream a thousand things, and conjure up a thousand fancies, much more terrible than any you can bring me now. Come, then! why should you fear to tell me, when I already know the worst? I know that he perished by the sudden stroke of the murderer, having no time given him for prayer and preparation. Can your story tell me worse than this? No! no! you have no words of darker meaning in my ears, than those which my own lips have spoken."

"Katharine, dear Katharine, let me have time for this. Let me put it off for awhile. Already the blood is rising impetuously in your veins. Your pulse beneath my finger is shooting wildly——"

"I am calm——you mistake, dear Richard——you are no doctor, clearly——I was never more calm—— never more composed in all my life. My pulse, indeed!"

The impatient and irritable manner of this speech, was its sufficient refutation.——I replied,

"Your will is calm and resolute, Katharine——I doubt not your strength of mind and purpose——but I doubt your command of nerve, Katharine, and your blood. You are very feverish."

She interrupted me almost petulantly.

"You are only too considerate, Richard. Perhaps, had you been half so considerate, when a fellowtraveller with the man you called your friend, and who certainly was yours, he had not perished."

"Katharine!"

"Ay! I speak what I think, Richard——what I feel. You are a grave physician when with me. You talk sagely and shake your head. But with him——with William Carrington——were you grave, and wise, and considerate? You persuaded him to this journey——you knew that he was hasty and thoughtless——did you shake your head

in warning, and lift your finger when you saw him running wide from prudence——from safety?"

"Katharine, my child," exclaimed the mother. "You are unkind——you do Richard injustice."

"Let him show me that I do him injustice, mother. That is what I wish him, and pray him, to do. I do not desire to do him injustice." Her tone and manner, which were almost violent before, now changed even into softness here, and turning to me, she continued, "you know I do not wish to do you injustice; but why will you not oblige me? Why not tell me what I claim to know——what I have a right to know?"

I could see that the blood was mounting in torrents to her brain. Her pulse was momently quickening, and the little speck of red, so small and unimposing at first, had overspread her face, even as the little cloud, that dots the eastern heavens at morning,spreads by noon until it covers with storm and thunder the whole bosom of the earth. It was more than ever my policy to withhold a narrative so full of details, which, though they could unfold no circumstance, worse in substance than that which she already knew, were yet almost certain to harrow up her feelings by the gradual accumulation of events before her imagination, to a pitch almost unendurable. I resorted to every argument, plea, suggestion—— every thing which might move her to forego her wish——at least for the present. But my efforts were unavailing.

"You entirely mistake me," she would say. "I am earnest——not excited. My earnestness always shows itself in this manner. I assure you that my blood is quite as temperate as it would be under the most ordinary affliction."

And this she said in words that were uttered with spasmodic effort! Her mother called me aside for a moment.

"You will have to tell her," she said; "the very opposition to her desire makes her worse. Tell her all, Richard, as she demands it, and God send, that it be for the best."

Thinking it probable that such might be the case, though still reluctant, I waived my objections, and determined to comply. When I resumed my seat by the bedside, and avowed this determination, asif to confirm the words of the mother, a sudden change came over her. Her respiration, which had been impeded and violent before, became easier; and, closing her eyes, she leaned back upon the pillow, from which, during the greater part of the previous conference her head had been uplifted; and thus prepared herself to listen. It was a strong effort which she made to be, or seem, composed, and it was only successful for a time. My confidence in it soon began to waver, as I found, when fairly in my narrative, that her eyes were re−opened, and with a fearful resumption of light——her head once more raised from the pillow; and her unconscious hand, when I reached that part of my narrative which detailed the first assault upon us at the hovel of Webber, suddenly extended and grasping my arm which lay on the bed beside her.

"Stop——stop awhile——a moment——I am not ready yet to hear you——not yet——not yet."

I paused at her direction, and she sank back upon the pillow, and closed her eyes with a rigid pressure of her fingers upon their lids as if to shut out from sight some horrible vision. In this state she remained for a space of several seconds; and I could perceive, when she resumed her attitude of attention, and bade me proceed with my narrative, that though she might have succeeded in expelling the phantom from her sight, the very effort requisite indoing so, had accelerated the action of her blood. I proceeded, however, striving to avoid every word, phrase, or unnecessary incident, which might have the effect of increasing the vividness of an event, already too terribly impressive; but with all my caution, I could perceive the constant flow and gathering of excitement in her brain. Her words became thick yet more frequent. She started constantly from the pillow to which she as constantly and immediately sank back, as if conscious of departing from the tacit pledge which she had given me, but which I had never relied on, to be calm and collected while I spoke. At length, when I told of the flight of Carrington, of his pursuit by the ruffians, of the long interval, in which, bound to the floor, I lay at their mercy, and after they had gone, before the arrival of Grafton to my relief; and how I looked for my friend in vain among those who rescued me; her emotion grew utterly beyond constraint, and she cried out aloud, and gasped with such effort between her cries, that I dreaded lest suffocation should follow from her fruitless endeavours at speech. But she contrived to speak.

"Yes! yes; they came——they loosed you——they set you free——but what did they for him——what did you, who called yourself his friend? What did you for him, who was yours? Tell me that——that!"

These were words of madness——certainly therewas madness in the wild and roving expression of her fire−darting eye. I would even then have paused if I could; but she would not suffer it. Resuming a look of calmness——such a look as mocked itself by its inadequacy to effect her object——when she saw me hesitate, she begged me to continue.

"I am calm again, Richard——it was for a moment only. Forgive me, I pray you, Richard——forgive me and go on. Let me hear the rest. I will not cry out again."

I hastened to close the painful narrative, but she did not hear me to the end. She was no longer capable of knowing what she did, or said, but leaping from the couch, in defiance of all my own and her mother's efforts——short of absolute violence——to restrain her, she strode across the chamber, as if with a leading purpose in view. Then, suddenly turning, she confronted me, with a face in which, if a face might ever be said to blaze with fire and yet maintain its natural expression, hers did. She gazed on me for a few seconds with all the intensity of an expression which was neither hate nor anger, but blind ferocity, and destructive judgment; and then she spoke, in accents which would have been bitter enough to my heart, had I not well enough understood the maddening bitterness in hers.

"And so he was murdered, and you led him on this expedition to be murdered. You were hisfriend——and while they pursued him for the accursed money——you lay quietly——without effort——having bonds, which a child——a woman——which I——weak and feeble as I am——which I would have broken at such a time——which you might have broken, had you been warmed with a proper spirit to help your friend. And he thought you a brave man, too—— he told me you were so, and I believed it——I gave him in charge to you; and you suffered your villains to murder him. Tell me nothing, I say, Richard Hurdis——they were your villains, else how should you, a brave man, submit, as you did, to be bound and laughed at, while he could break from his bonds and escape from the very snare to which you so tamely submitted. I will not hear you——they were your villains——else how should you, a brave man, submit and do nothing. Would he——would William have submitted thus? Would he have left his friend to perish. Or, if he could not save his life, would he have come sneaking home with the tidings of his friend's murder and his own base cowardice? No, Richard Hurdis——I tell you——I answer for the dead——he would have pursued these murderers to the ends of the earth. He would have dragged them to justice, or slain them with his own hands. He never would have slept in his bed till he had taken this vengeance. Day and night would have been to him the same. Day and night, he had pursued them——through the forests——through the swamps, in all haunts, in all disguises, till he had revenged the murder of his friend. 'Till, for the holy blood of friendship, he had drained the hearts of all having any hand in his murder. But you——what have you done! Ha! ha! ha! Bravely——bravely, Richard Hurdis. William thought you had courage——he did——and he relied on it. He relied too much. You have shed no blood, though he is murdered. You have neither shed the blood of his murderers, nor your own. Show me a finger scratch if you can. You are——ha! ha! ha! this is courage, is it? and he thought you brave——well, the wisest may be mistaken——the wisest——the very wisest."

She went on much farther, but her ravings grew incoherent, and at length, from imperfect thoughts her strength being nigh exhausted, she only articulated in broken words and sentences. On a sudden, she stopped; her eye grew fixed while gazing upon me, and her lower jaw became paralysed ere the halting word was uttered. I saw that a crisis was at hand, and rushed towards her at the fortunate moment. I caught her as she fell; and she lay paralysed and senseless, like the very marble, in my arms.

CHAPTER XV.

Are they both dead! I did not think
To find thee in this pale society
Of ghosts so soon.
—— The Brothers

Though little of a physician, I yet saw that something must be done for her relief instantly, in this almost complete suspension of her powers, or she must perish; and procuring a lancet which was fortunately in the house, made an opening in one of her arms. The results were hardly satisfactory. A few drops of jellied and almost black blood, oozed from the opening, and had no visible effect upon her situation. I opened a vein in the other arm but with little better success. Warm fomentation and friction were next resorted to, but to no advantage; and, leaving the patient to the charge of the mother, I mounted my horse and rode with all speed to the nearest physician——a man named Hodges, an ignorant, stupid fellow, but the best, which, at this time, our neighborhood could afford. He was one of those accommodating asses, who have the one merit at least, if theyare fools in all other respects, of being an unpretending one; and gladly, at all times, would he prefer taking the opinion of another to the task of making, or the responsibility of giving, one of his own. I have heard him ask an old lady if she had jalap and calomel in the house; and when she replied that she had not, but she "had some cream of tartar," answer "that will do ma'am," and give the one medicine in lieu of the other. There was little to be looked for at the hands of such a creature; but what were we to do? I had already exhausted all my little stock of information on such subjects; and ignorance, in a time of emergency, is compelled to turn, even to licensed stupidity, for the relief which it cannot find itself.

Dr. Hodges came and did nothing. He re−opened the veins without advantage, repeated the warm water fomentations, took an extra chew of tobacco, shook his empty head and remained silent. I ventured a suggestion of the merits of which I had only a partial guess.

"Would not a blister to the head help her, Doctor?"

"I think it would, Mr. Hurdis——I think you had better try it."

Cursing the oaf in the bitterness of my heart, I went to work, with the help of the old lady, and we prepared a blister. When it was ready, we proceededto cut away the voluminous masses of her raven hair, the glistening loveliness of which we could not but admire, even while we consigned it to destruction. But we were not suffered to proceed in this work. Ere the scissors had swept away one shred, the unhappy maiden awakened from her stupor; but she awakened not to any mental consciousness. She was mad——raving mad; and with the strength of madness she rushed from the couch where she was lying and flew at her mother like a tigress. I was fortunately nigh enough to interfere, and save the old lady from her assaults, or the effects might have been seriously hurtful. I clasped her in my arms and held her, though with some difficulty. Her strength was prodigious under the terrible excitement which raged in her bosom, and, though rather a strong man, I found that I dared not relax for a single instant in my hold, or she became free. Yet she complained not that I held her. She uttered no word whatsoever. She knew nothing——she spoke to none. Sometimes, a slight moaning sound escaped her lips, but she had no other form of language. Her eyes were fixed and fiery; yet they never seemed to look upon any one of us. I observed that they seemed instinctively to avoid the light, and that they shone with a less angry lustre when turned towards the darker sections of the apartment, and from the windows. Seeing this, I directed the mother to double her curtains and exclude as much of the light as possible——this done, it seemed to relieve the intensity of her stare and action. But she was as little disposed to be quiet as before. The moment I yielded in my grasp, that moment did she make new exertions to escape; and when she failed in her object, that same slight moaning, perhaps, once or twice repeated, was all the acknowledgment given by her lips to the annoyance which the constraint evidently put upon her. In the mean time, what a terrible loveliness shone in her countenance and form. The pythoness, swelling with the voluminous fires of the god, were but a poor comparison to the divinity of desolation, such as she appeared at that moment to my eyes. Her long black tresses which we had let loose in order to cut, were thrown all around her own neck, and partially over my shoulders as I held her. Her eyes were shooting out from their spheres——the whites barely perceptible as the dilating orbs seemed to occupy entirely

the dry and fiery cells, from which they yet threatened momently to dart. Purple lines and blotches gleamed out upon, and as suddenly disappeared from, her face——the consequence, probably, of her restraint, and the violent exertions which she made to get herself free from it; and her teeth and lips were set as resolutely as if death's last spasm had been already undergone. If theyopened at all, it was only when she uttered that heart piercing moan——so faint——so low——yet so thrilling, that it seemed to indicate at every utterance the breaking of some vital string. In this way she continued full two hours without intermitting her struggles. My arms had grown weary of the rigid grasp which I had been compelled to keep upon her, and sheer exhaustion must have soon compelled me to relax my hold. But, by this time, she, too, had become exhausted——her efforts grew fainter, though the insane direction of her mind was not a whit changed. Gradually, I felt her weight increase upon me, and her own exertions almost entirely cease; and I thought at length that I might safely return her to the couch. It was with some difficulty that I did so, for her poor mother——miserable and infirm, not to say terrified——could give me no help; and the doctor, no less terrified than she, had hurried off, on the first exhibition of the maiden's fury, to procure her, as he promised, some medicine which was to be potential for every thing. But the doctor knew not the disease of his patient. With all his "parmaceti" he could do nothing for that "inward bruise," which was mortifying at her heart.

When fairly placed in the bed, I found it still somewhat difficult to keep her there; and in order to avoid giving her pain which the grasp of my hand might do, I contrived to fold the bed clothes in sucha manner about her, as not only to retard her movements, but to enable us, by sitting upon either side, to keep her down. An old negro servant was called in to assist in this duty, and with the mother's aid, I was partially relieved. With a few struggles more, her eyes gradually closed, and her limbs seemed to relax in sleep. An occasional moan from her lips alone told us that she suffered still; and a sudden opening and flashing of her eye at other moments, still served to convince us that her show of sleep was deceptive. She slept not, and we were compelled to be watchful still.

While she remained in this situation our doctor returned to my great surprise, bringing with him a score of bottles with one nostrum or another. He seemed a little more confident now in what he should do, having, most probably during his absence, consulted some book of authority in the circle of his limited reading. Thus prepared, he compounded a dose from some two or three bottles, one of which——assafœtida——soon declared its quality to our nostrils, and left no hope to Doctor Hodges of making a medical mystery——a practice so common among small practitioners——of the agent by which he was to work the salvation of the patient. I had no great hope of the potion which he brought, for I had no great faith in the doctor, but I readily took the wine−glass in which he compounded it, and addressed myselfto the arduous task of forcing it down the throat of the poor sufferer. It was an arduous task, indeed! Her teeth were riveted together, and she seemed to have just sense enough to close them more tenaciously in defiance to our prayer that she might open them. Here was a difficulty; but as Hodges insisted upon the vital importance of the dose, cruel as the operation seemed, I determined to do all that I could to make her take it. In our efforts we were at length forced to pry her teeth apart with our fingers, and to force the glass between them. It was an error to have used the wineglass in such a situation; and the reflection of a single instant would have taught us to transfer the medicine to a spoon. We were taught this lesson by an incident of startling terror; for no sooner had we put the edge of the glass between her divided teeth, than they closed upon it crunching it into the minutest fragments. Fortunately, I was prompt enough to prevent the worst consequences of this act. I dropped the fragment of the glass which remained in my hands, and grasped her instantly by the throat. I grasped her almost as tightly as I should have done a mortal foe. It was a desperate resort for a desperate situation. I nearly strangled her, but it was the only thing that could have saved her from swallowing the broken particles. With my fingers, while the jaws were stretched apart, I drew out the bits ofglass which were numerous, though not without cutting her mouth and gums in a shocking manner. The blood ran from her mouth, and over the side of her pallid face, staining its purity; and her tongue, bleeding also the while, hung over the lips, and yet she seemed to feel none of the pain. No cry escaped her——no struggle was made——and the occasional moan which now and then continued to escape her, was the acknowledgment of a greater agony than any for which we labored to provide remedies.

Dr. Hodges persevered in his physic, but we might as well have spared the poor girl the pain of forcing it down her throat, for it did no good. Her madness, it is true, was no longer hysterical; but this change was probably quite as much the result of exhaustion as of the medicine we gave her. She seemed conscious of none of our labors. Yet she studiously kept her eyes from the spectator, and fixed them upon the darkest part of the wall of her

chamber. Her grief was speechles in all other respects; she seemed not to hear, and she answered none of our inquiries. In hope to arouse and provoke her consciousness, I even ventured to speak to her of her lover, and the cruel fate which had befallen him. I named to her the bitter words of death which I had shrunk before to utter. But the ear seemed utterly obtuse. She moved neither limb nor muscle, and the stupor of complete mentalindifference was gradually overcoming all her faculties. Thus she continued throughout that day. Night came on, and yet there was no change. It was a dismal night to me. I sat up with her and watched her with a degree of nervous irritation and anxiety which led me to fear, at moments, that I might fall into some condition of insanity like that I witnessed. The poor old mother strove to sleep, but she could not subdue the nature within her; and that raised her every moment to look into the face of her child, whose unconscious eyes were yet bright and unblessed by sleep. Besides these, there were no interruptions to the general silence of the night, unless that slight and now scarcely sensible moan, which continued at intervals to escape the lips of the sufferer, might be called one. Day dawned upon us, and found her still in the same condition. We gave her the prescribed physic, but I felt while pouring it down her throat that our labors were as cruel as they were idle. We administered the little nourishment which she took, in the same manner—— by violence. She craved nothing——she asked for nothing——and what we gave her brought no nourishment in consequence. The day and night passed in the same manner with the preceding. I snatched a few hours of sleep during the day, and this enabled me again to sit up with her the night following. But there were other watchers beside myself around herbed; and, amidst all my agonising thought of the terrible picture of affliction present in my eyes, there were other thoughts and feelings of a far differing character, mingling among them, and operating upon my mind. Mary Easterby sat by the bed−side of the invalid, and our eyes and hands met more than once during the night, which to me, though not less painful, was far less wearisome, than that which I had passed before. Such is the nature of man. We foster our petty affections even at the grave of our friend's sweetest hopes. Our plans and promises for self, desert us no where——they mingle in with our holiest emotions——they pile the dust of earth upon the very altars of heaven. Perhaps, it is only right that such should be the case. Our nature while on earth must be, to a certain extent, earthy. It may be, too, that our pride undergoes some restraint when it discovers that base necessities and narrow aims clog the loftiest wing, and dazzle the most eagle−eyed of the soaring spirits among men.

But why linger upon a painful narrative like this? Why record throbs and agonies? I will hasten to a conclusion which the reader may readily anticipate. Katharine Walker died. In three days more she was silent forever! Her hopes, her fears, her pangs ——all were silent——all buried. Five days did she live in this state of suspended consciousness——taking no nourishment save that which we poured downher throat by main force; and every added hour proved her less able to oppose us in our labors of doubtful kindness. She sank just after that last paroxysm in which she crushed the brittle glass between her teeth. Our man of art had exhausted his slender resources of skill, and with a modesty that did not shake a confident head of power to the last moment, he soon declared his inability to help her more. But we needed not his words to give us painful assurance to this effect. We saw it with our own eyes, while looking into the fast glazing orbs of hers. We knew, from every symptom, that she must die. Perhaps it was as well——what should she live for?

It was on the sixth day after her attack, when her powers had been so far exhausted that it became somewhat doubtful at moments whether she breathed or not, and when, up to that time she had given no sort of heed to any of the circumstances going on around her, that she suddenly started, as if out of a deep sleep, and turned her sad but still bright eyes, now full of divine intelligence, upon me. There was "speculation" in their orbs once more. The consecrating mind had returned to its dwelling though it were only to set all in order, and then dispose of it forever. I bent forward as I saw the glance which she gave me, and breathlessly asked her how she felt.

"Quite well," she answered in a scarcely perceptible whisper——"quite well, Richard; but it is so dark. Do put aside that curtain, if you please. Mother has shut every thing up. I don't know whether it's day light or not."

I rose and put aside the curtain; and the waiting sunlight, the broken but bright beams that he sprinkled through the leaves, came bounding into the chamber. Her eyes brightened as if with a natural sympathy, when she beheld them. She made an effort to raise herself in the bed, but sunk back with an expression of pain, which slightly impressed itself upon her countenance, even as a breath passes over the mirror giving a momentary stain to its purity. It was one breath of the approaching tyrant——to her the consoler. Seeing that she desired to be raised, I lifted, and sustained her head upon my bosom. Her mother asked her if she felt better.

"Well, quite well," was her answer. A minute did not elapse after that, when I felt a slight shiver pass over her

frame, which then remained motionless. Her breathing was suspended. I let her head sink back gradually upon the pillow, and looking in her face, I saw that her pure, yet troubled spirit, had departed forever. My watching was ended.

CHAPTER XVI.

I shall find time;
When you have took some comfort, I'll begin
To mourn his death and scourge the murderer.
—— T. Heywood, 1655.

The ending and beginning I had seen——the whole of this catastrophe. We buried the poor maiden in a grove near her dwelling in which her feet had often rambled with him whose grave should have been beside her. There was nothing more for me to do——there was no reason why I should linger in Marengo; and I resolved once more to leave it. As yet, my error remained uncorrected in regard to Mary Easterby. I still deemed her the affianced wife of John Hurdis; and——sometimes wondering why he came not with her to the dwelling of Katharine Walker, and sometimes doubting their alliance from little signs and circumstances, which now and then occurred to my observation,——I was still impressed with the conviction that there was no more hope for me. I escorted her home after the burial of Katharine, and sad and sweet was ourconference by the way. We rode together, side by side on horseback, and we soon left the animals to their own motion which was gratefully sluggish to me. I will not say whether I thought it so to her, but, at least, she gave no symptoms of impatience, nor made any effort to accelerate the movements of her steed. It will not, perhaps, be assuming too much, to suppose that, in some large respects, our thoughts and feelings ran together in satisfied companionship. We were both deeply affected and subdued by the cruel events to which we had been witnesses. There was a dreadful warning to hope, and love, and youth, in the sad history which has been written, and which we were forced to read in every stage of its performance. Never could morality teach more terribly to youth its own uncertainties, and the mutations hanging around that deity whose altar of love it is most apt to seek in worship. How evanescent to our eyes seemed then all our images of delight. The sunlight, which was bright and beautiful around us——making a "bridal of earth and sky,"——we looked upon with doubt and apprehension as a delusion which must only woo to vanish. We spoke together of these things; and what, it may be asked, was the conclusion of all this sombrous reflection? Did it make either of us forswear the world and hope? Did it make either of us more doubtful and desponding than before?No! Its effects were softening and subduing, not overthrowing——not destructive of any of those altars, to which love brings wreaths that wither, and offers vows that are rejected or forgotten. We lost not one hope or dream of youth. We gave freedom to none of our anticipations. Even the lessons taught us by the death of those who, loving in life so fondly, in death were not divided, were lessons of love. The odour of the sacrifice made amends for the consumption by fire of the rich offerings which were upon the altar; and love lost none of his loveliness either in her eyes or mine, because, in this instance, as in a thousand others, it had failed to rescue its votaries from the grasp of a more certain, if not a greater power. The lesson which was taught us by the fate of Katharine Walker, made us esteem still more highly the sacred influence, which could consecrate so sweet and pure a spirit to immortality, and lead it, without struggle or reluctance, into the brazen jaws of death. What a triumph to youth, to fancy, to reflection, was the thought which portrayed a power so wonderful——so valuable to those who more than love already.

"I will see you before I leave Marengo, Mary," was my promise on leaving her that evening.

"What! you mean to leave us, again, Richard?" was her involuntary and very earnest demand.—— "Oh, do not, Richard——wherefore would you go? Why would you encounter such cruel risks as befell poor William? Stay with us——leave us not again."

With an utterance and movement, equally involuntary, I took her hand and replied,

"And would you have me stay, Mary? Wherefore? What reward can you give——what is there now in your power to give that could bribe me to compliance?"

I paused just at the time when I should have spoken freely. To what I had said, she could make no answer; yet she had her answer ready to what I might have said. But I said nothing, and she made no reply. Yet, could I have seen it!——had I not been still the blind and besotted slave and victim to my own jaundicing and jealous apprehensions, the blush upon her cheek, the tremor upon her lip, the downcast and shaded eye, the faltering accent——all these would have conveyed an answer, which might have made me happy then. And yet these

persuasive signs did not utterly escape my sight. I felt them, and wondered at them——and was almost tempted, in the new warmth of heart which they brought me, to declare my affections, but for the thought that it would be unseemly to do so, at a moment when we had just left the chamber of death, and beheld the last gleam of life pass from the eyes of loveliness and youth. Fool that I was, as if love did not plant his roses even on the grave of his worshipper, andfind his most flourishing soil in the heart of the beloved one.

That night my mother drew me aside, and asked me with some significance, what had passed between Mary and myself.

"Nothing."

"What! have you not spoken?"

"Of what?"

"Of your love!——"

"No! Why should you think it, mother? What reason? Is she not engaged to John——is that matter broken off?"

"I think it is——he has not been to see her for a week."

"Indeed!"

"And have you not seen, my son, how sad she looks——she has looked so ever since you went away."

"That may be only because he has not been to see her, mother; or it may be because of the affliction which she has been compelled to witness."

"Well, Richard, I won't say that it is not, and yet, my son, I'm somehow inclined to think that you could have her for the asking."

"Do you think so, mother, and yet——even if it were so, mother, I would not ask. The woman who has once accepted the hand of John Hurdis, though she afterwards rejects him, is not the woman for me."

"But, Richard, I'm not so sure now that she ever did accept him. There was that poor woman, Mrs. Pickett, only a few days ago came here, and she took particular pains to let me know that Mary and John were never half so near together, to use her own words, as Mary and yourself."

"How could she know any thing about it," was my reply.

"Well, I don't know; but I can tell you, she's a very knowing woman——"

"She would scarcely be the confidant of Mary, nevertheless."

"But you will see Mary, Richard——you will try."

"If I thought, mother, that she and John had never been engaged——if I knew that. But I will see her."

The promise satisfied both my mother and myself for the time; and I now gave myself up to reflection in solitude, as a new task had been forced upon me, by the circumstances of the few past days. I had suffered more in mind from beholding the misery and madness of Katharine Walker, than it would be manly to avow; and there was one portion of this tragedy which more than any other, impressed itself upon me. I was haunted by the continual presence of the lovely maniac, as she appeared at the moment when she denounced me as deserting my friend, exposing, and leavinghim to peril, and finally suffering his murder to go unavenged. The more I thought upon this last passage of her angry speech, the more impressively did it take the shape of a moral requisition. I strove seriously to examine it as a question of duty, whether I was bound to go upon this errand of retribution or not, and the answers of my mind were invariably and inevitably the same. Shall the murderer go unpunished——shall so heinous a crime remain unavenged? Are there no claims of friendship——of manhood upon you? The blood of the innocent calls upon you. The indignities which you yourself have undergone——these call upon you. But a louder call upon you than all, is the demand of society. She calls upon you to ferret out these lurkers upon the highway——to bring them to justice that the innocent traveller may not be shot down from the thicket, in the sunshine, in the warm morning of youth, and hope, and confidence. True——the laws of man do not summon you forth on this mission; but is there no stronger voice in your heart inciting you to the sacred work? The brave man waits not for his country's summons to take the field against the foreign enemy——shall he need her call when his friend is slain almost by his side; and when sworn foes to friendship, and truth, and love, and all the social virtues, lurk in bands around their several homes to prey upon them as they unconsciouslycome forth? Can you doubt that it is your duty to seek and exterminate these wretches? You say that is the duty of others no less than of yourself; but does the neglect of others to perform their duties, render yours unnecessary or release you? On the contrary, does it not make it more incumbent upon

you to do more than would be your duty under other circumstances, and to supply, as much as lies in your power, their deficiencies? Such was the reasoning of my own mind on this subject; and it forced conviction upon me. In the woods where I had meditated the matter, I made my vow to the avenging deities.

"I will seek the murderers, so help me heaven! I will suffer not one of them to escape, if it be within the scope of my capacity and arm, to bring them to justice." And, even upon the ground where I had made this resolution, I kneeled and prayed for the requisite strength and encouragement from heaven in the execution of my desperate vow.

This resolution induced another, and endued me with a courage which before I had not felt. Conceiving myself a destined man, I overleapt, at a moment, all the little boundaries of false delicacy, morbid sensibility, and mere custom, which before, had, perhaps, somewhat taken from my natural hue of resolution——and the next day I rode over to the house of Mary Easterby. A complete change by thistime had taken place in my feelings in one respect. I was no longer apprehensive of what I said in speaking to Mary. I now proceeded as if in compliance with a prescribed law; and asking her to walk with me, I led her directly to the favorite walk which, in our childhood, our own feet chiefly had beaten out in the forests. I conducted her almost in silence to the huge fallen tree which had formed the boundary of our previous rambles, and seated her upon it, and myself beside her, as I had done a thousand times before.

"And now Mary," I said, taking her hand, "I have a serious question to ask you, and beg that you will answer it with the same unhesitating directness with which I ask it. Your answer will nearly affect my future happiness."

I paused, but she was silent——evidently through emotion——and I continued thus:

"You know me too well to suppose that I would say or do any thing to offend you, and certainly you will believe me when I assure you that it is no idle curiosity which prompts me to ask the question which I will now propose."

A slight pressure of her fingers upon my wrist—— her hand being clasped the while in mine——was my sufficient and encouraging answer, and I then boldly asked if she was or had been engaged to John Hurdis. Her answer, as the reader must anticipate, wasunequivocally in the negative. In the next moment she was in my arms——she was mine. Then followed explanations which did away, as by a breath, with a hundred little circumstances of my own jaundiced judgment, and of my brother's evil instigation, which for months I had looked upon as insuperable barriers. For the part which John Hurdis had in raising them, I was at that moment quite too happy not to forgive him. I now proceeded to tell Mary of my contemplated journey, but not of its objects. This I kept from the knowledge of all around me, for its successful prosecution, I had already well conceived, could only result from the secrecy with which I pursued it. Nor did I suffer her to know the direction of country in which I proposed to travel; this caution was due to my general plan, and called for, at the same time, by her natural apprehensions, which would have been greatly alarmed to know that I was about to go into a region where my friend had been so inhumanly murdered. I need not say that she urged every argument to keep me in Marengo. She pleaded her own attachment, which, having once avowed, she now delighted in; and urged every consideration which might be supposed available among the thoughts of a young maiden unwilling to let her lover go. But my resolve had been too seriously and solemnly taken. "I had an oath in heaven," and no ties, even such, so dearones, as those which I had just formed, could make me desire escape from it if I could. She was compelled to yield the contest since I assured her that my resolution was no less imperative than my engagements; but I promised to return soon, and our marriage was finally arranged for that period. What an hour of bliss was that, in those deep groves, under that prevailing silence. What an elysium had suddenly grown up around me. How potent was the magician which could make us forget the graves upon which we stood, and the blood still flowing around us, dreaming only of those raptures which, in the fortunes of two other fond creatures like ourselves, had so suddenly been defeated. In that hour I thought not of the dangers I was about to undergo, and she——the dear girl hanging on my bosom, and shedding tears of pleasure——she seemed to forget that earth ever contained a tomb.

Next morning, after we had taken breakfast, I strolled down the avenue to the entrance, and was suddenly accosted by a man whom I had never seen before. He rode up with an air of confidence and asked me if I was Mr. Hurdis, Mr. John Hurdis. I replied in the negative, but offered to show him the way to the house where he would find the person whom we sought. We met John coming forth.

"That is your man, sir," said I, to the stranger. He thanked me, and instantly advanced to my brother. I could not help being a spectator, for I was compelled to pass them in order to enter the house; and my attention was

doubly fixed by the singular manner in which the stranger offered John Hurdis his hand. The manner of the thing seemed also to provoke the astonishment of John, himself, who looked at me with surprise amounting to consternation. I was almost disposed to laugh out at the idiot stare with which he transferred his gaze from me to the stranger, and to me again, for the expression seemed absolutely ludicrous; but I was on terms of too much civility with my brother to exhibit any such unnecessary familiarity; and, passing into the house, I left the two together. Their business seemed of a private nature, for they went into the neighbouring woods to finish it; and John Hurdis did not return from the interview, until I had set forth a second time on my travels. The meaning of this conference, and the cause of that singular approach of the stranger which awakened so much seeming astonishment in the face of John Hurdis, will be sufficiently explained hereafter. Little did I then imagine the nature of that business which I had undertaken, and of the mysterious developments of crime to which my inquiries would lead me.

CHAPTER XVII.

What! thou dost quit me then——
In the first blush of my necessity,
The danger yet at distance.
—— Captive

It was, perhaps, an earnest of success in the pursuit which I had undertaken, that I did not underrate, to myself, its many difficulties. I felt that I would have to contend with experienced cunning and probably superior strength——that nothing but the utmost adroitness and self−control could possibly enable me to effect my purposes. My first object was to alter my personal appearance, so as to defeat all chance of recognition by any of the villains with whom I had previously come in collision. This was a work calling for much careful consideration. To go down to Mobile, change my clothes, and adopt such fashions as would more completely disguise me, were my immediate designs; and I pushed my way to this, my first post, with all speed and without any interruption. My first care in Mobile was to sell my horse which I did for one hundred and eighty dollars. I had now nearly five hundreddollars in possession——a small part in silver, the rest in United States Bank, Alabama, and Louisiana notes, all of which were equally current. I soon procured a couple of entire suits, as utterly different from any thing I had previously worn as possible. Then, having a proper regard to the usual decoration of the professed gamblers of our country, I entered a jeweller's establishment, and bought sundry bunches of seals, a tawdry watch, a huge chain of doubtful, but sold as virgin, gold; and some breastpins and shirt buttons of saucer size. To those who had personally known me before, I was well assured that no disguise would have been more perfect than that afforded by these trinkets——but when, in addition to these and the other changes in my habit of which I have spoken, I state that my beard was suffered to grow goatlike, after the most approved models of dandyism, under the chin, in curling masses, and my whiskers, in rival magnificence, were permitted to overrun my cheeks——I trust that I shall be believed when I aver that after a few weeks space, I scarcely knew myself. I had usually been rather fastidious in keeping a smooth cheek and chin, and I doubt very much, whether my own father ever beheld a two days' beard upon me from the day that I found myself man enough to shave at all, to the present. The more I contemplated my own appearance, the more sanguine I became of success; and I lingered in Mobile a little time longer in order to give beard and whiskers a fair opportunity to overrun a territory which before had never shown its stubble. When this time was elapsed, my visage was quite Siberian; a thick cap of otter skin, which I now procured, fully completed my northern disguises, and, exchanging my pistols at a hardware establishment, for others not so good, but for which I had to give some considerable boot, I felt myself fairly ready for my perilous adventure. It called for some resolution to go forward when the time came for my departure, and when I thought of the dangers before me; but when, in the next instant, I thought of the murder of my friend, and of the sad fate of his betrothed, my resolution of vengeance was renewed. I felt that I had an oath in Heaven——sworn——registered;——and I repeated it on earth.

Let me now return for an instant to the condition of my worthy brother, and relate some passages, in their proper place in this narrative, which, however, did not come to my knowledge for some time after. The reader will remember my meeting with the stranger at the entrance of the avenue leading to my father's house, who asked for John Hurdis, and to whom I introduced him. It will also be remembered that I remarked the surprise, nay almost consternation, which his appearance and address seemed to produce in my brother's countenance. There was a reason for all this, though I dreamed not of it then. John Hurdis had good cause for the terrors, which, at that time, I found rather ludicrous, and was almost disposed to laugh at. They went together into the woods, and, as I left the plantation for Mobile an hour after, I saw no more of either of them on that occasion. The business of the stranger may best be told in John Hurdis's own words. That very afternoon he went to the cottage of Pickett, whom he summoned forth, as was his custom, by a signal agreed upon between them. When together, in a voice of great agitation, John began the dialogue as follows:

"I am ruined, Pickett——ruined, undone forever. Who do you think has come to me——presented himself at the very house, and demanded to see me?"

Pickett looked up, but exhibited no sort of surprise at this speech, as he replied by a simple inquiry.

"Who?"

"A messenger from this d——d confederacy. A fellow with his cursed signs——and a summons to meet the members at some place to which he is to give me directions at a future time. I am required to be in readiness to go, heaven knows where, and to meet with, heaven knows who——to do, heaven knows what."

Pickett answered coolly enough——and with an air of resignation to his fate, which confounded Hurdis.

"He has been to me too, and given me the same notice."

"Ha! and what did you tell him——what answer ——what answer?"

"That I would come——that I was always ready. I suppose you told him so, likewise?"

"Ay——you may well suppose it——what else, in the name of all the fiends, could I tell him. I have no help——I must submit——I am at their mercy—— thanks to your bungling, Ben Pickett——you have drawn us both into a bog which is closing upon us like a gulf. I told him as you told him, though it was in the gall of bitterness that I felt myself forced to say so much, that I would obey the summons and be ready when the time came to meet the 'Mystic Confederacy.'——Hell's curses upon their confederates and mystery——that I was at their disposal as I was at their mercy——to go as they bid me, and do as they commanded——I was their servant—— their slave——their ox, their ass, their any thing.—— Death! death! that I should move my tongue to such admission, and feel my feet bound in obedience with my tongue."

"It's mighty hard, 'Squire, but it's no use getting into a passion about it. We're in, and, like the horsein the mire, we mustn't think to bolt, 'till we're out of it."

"It's mighty hard, and no use getting in a passion," said Hurdis ironically, and with bitterness repeating the words of his companion. "Well, I know not, Ben Pickett, what situation would authorise a man in becoming angry and passionate if this does not. You seem to take it coolly, however. You're more of a philosopher, I see, than I can ever hope to make myself."

"Well, 'Squire, it's my notion," said the other, "that what's not to be helped by grumbling, will hurt the grumbler. I've found it so, always; and now that I think of it, 'Squire, there's less reason for you to grumble and complain than any body I know; and, as it's just as well to speak the truth first as last, I may say now once for all, that it was you that bungled, not me, or we shouldn't have got into this bog; or we might have got out of it."

"Indeed! I bungle, and how I pray you, Mr. Pickett? Wasn't it you that was caught in your own ambush?"

"Yes——but who sent me? I was doing your business, 'Squire, as well as I could; and if you didn't like my ability, why did you trust it? Why didn't you go yourself. I didn't want to kill Richard Hurdis——I wasn't his brother."

"And then to mistake your man too——that was another specimen of your bungling."

"Look you, 'Squire, the less you say about that matter, the better for both of us. The bungling is but a small part of that business that I'm sorry for. I'm sorry for the whole of it, and if sorrow could put back the life in Bill Carrington's heart, and be security for Dick Hurdis's hereafter, they'd both live for ever for me. But if I was such a bungler at first, 'Squire, there's one thing I may tell you, and tell you plainly. I was never afraid to pull trigger, when every thing depended on it. The cure for all my bungling was in your own hands. When the man first talked with us in these same woods, under them willows, what did I say to you? Didn't I offer to close with him, if you'd only agree to use your pistol? And wasn't you afraid?"

"I was not afraid——it was prudence only that made me put it off," said Hurdis hastily.

"And what made you put it off when you way−laid him in Ten Mile Branch? No, 'Squire, as you confessed yourself, it was because you were afraid to shoot, though every thing hung on that one fire. Had you tumbled that fellow, we had'nt seen this; and if it had been convenient for me to have done it, as God's my judge, I'd much rather have put the bullet through a dozen fellows like that, than throughone clever chap like Bill Carrington. That's a business troubles me, 'Squire; and more than once since he's been covered, I've seen him walk over my path, leaving a cold chill all along the track behind him."

"Pshaw, Ben, at your ghosts again."

"No, 'Squire, they're at me. But let's talk no more about it. What can't be undone, may as well be let alone. We must work out our troubles as we can; and the worst trouble to our thoughts is, that we have worked ourselves into them. We have nobody but ourselves to blame."

The manner of Pickett had become somewhat dogged and inflexible, and it warned Hurdis, who was prompt in observing the changes of temper in his neighbour, to be more considerate in his remarks, and more conciliating

in his tone of utterance.

"Well, but Ben, what is to be done? What are we to do about this summons? How shall we get over it——how avoid it?"

"Avoid it! I don't think to avoid it, 'Squire."

"What! you intend to go when they call you?"

"Certainly——what can I do? Don't you intend to go? Did you not promise obedience?"

"Yes, but I never thought of going. My hope was, that something might turn up between this and then, that would interpose for my safety. IndeedI never thought of any thing at the moment, but how best to get rid of the emissary."

"That's the smallest matter of all," said Pickett.

"Now it is," replied Hurdis; "but it was not then, for I dreaded lest some one should ask his business. Besides, he was brought up to me by Richard, and his keen eyes seem always to look through me when he speaks. As you say, to get rid of him is in truth, a small business, to getting rid of his gang. How can that be done is the question? I had hope when I came to you——"

The other interrupted him hastily.

"Don't come to me for hope, 'Squire; I should bungle, perhaps, in what I advise you to do, or in what I do for you myself. Let us each paddle our canoes apart. I'm a poor man that can't hope to manage well the business of a rich one; and as I've done so badly for you before, it won't be wise in you to employ me again. Indeed, for that matter, I won't be employed by you again. It's hard enough to do evil for another, and much harder, to get no thanks for it."

"Pshaw, Ben, you're in your sulks now——think better of it, my friend. Don't mind a harsh word——a hasty word——uttered when I was angry, and without meaning."

"I don't mind that, 'Squire——I wish it was aseasy to forget all the rest, as to forgive that. But the blood, 'Squire——the blood that is on my hands—— blood that I didn't mean to spill, 'Squire——'tis that makes me angry and sulky——so that I don't care what comes up. It's all one to me what happens now."

"But this fellow, Ben. You say you have resolved to comply with the summons, and to go when they call for you?"

"Yes?"

"And what am I to do?"

"The same, I suppose. I'm ready to go now; and I give you the last counsel, 'Squire, which I think I ever will give you, and that is to make the best of a bad situation——do with a good grace, what you can't help doing, and it will go the better with you. They can't have any good reason to expose a man of family to shame, and they will keep your secrets so long as you obey their laws."

"But suppose they command me to commit crime ——to rob, to murder?"

"Well then you must ask yourself which you'd prefer——to obey or to swing. It's an easy question."

"On all sides——the pit——the fire——the doom!" was the pitiable and despairing exclamation of Hurdis, as he clasped his forehead with his hands, and closed his eyes against the terrors which his imagination brought before them. Suddenly recurring, he asked,

"But why, Ben, do you say this is the last counselwhich you will give me. You do not mean to suffer a hasty and foolish word, for which I have already uttered my regrets, to operate in your mind against me——"

"No, 'Squire Hurdis——I don't mind the words of contempt that you rich men utter for the poor—— if I did, I should be miserable enough myself, and make many others more so. That's gone out of my mind, and, as I tell you, I forget it all when I think of those worse matters which I can't so well forget."

"Why then say you will counsel me no more?"

"Because I'm about to leave Marengo forever."

"Ha! remove! where——when?"

"In three days, 'Squire, I'll be off, bag and baggage, for the 'Nation.' My wife's ripe for it——she's been at me a long time to be off from a place where nobody knows any good of me. And I have heard a good deal about the 'Nation.' "

"And what will you do there for a livelihood."

"Well, just what I can——try at least, to live a little more honestly than I did here——or more respectably,

which is not often the same thing."

"But do you expect when there, to evade this 'confederacy?' " Hurdis eagerly demanded.

"No——I have no such hope."

"How then can you hope to live more honestly?"

"More respectably, I may."

"They will summon you to do their crimes."

"I will do them."

"What! shed more blood at a time when you are troubled for what's already done."

"Yes——I will obey where I cannot escape; but I will do no crime of that sort again on my own account——nothing which I am not forced to do. But if they say strike, I will do so as readily as if it was the best action which they commanded. I will cut the throat of my best friend at their bidding, for you see, 'Squire, I have been so long knocked about in the world——now to one side, now to another, like a clumsy log going down stream—— that I'm now quite indifferent, I may say, to all the chances of the current; and I'll just go wherever it may drive me. This 'confederacy' can't make me worse than I have been——than I am——and it increases my security and strength. It gives me more certain means and greater power; and if I am to be forced, I will make what use I can of the power that forces me."

"But, Ben, such a resolution will make you a willing and active member of this clan."

"Surely!" said the other indifferently.

"All your old interests and friendships, Ben, would be forsaken, rooted up——"

"Ay, 'Squire, and my old friends just as liableto my bullet and knife as my enemies, if the command of the confederacy required me to use them. You yourself, 'Squire——though we have worked together for a long time——even you I would not spare, if they required me to shed your blood; and you will see from this, that there is no hope for you unless you comply with the summons, and heartily give yourself up to the interests of the whole fraternity."

Hurdis was stricken dumb by this frank avowal of his associate. He had no more to say, and with a better understanding of each other than either had ever possessed before, there was now a wall between them, over which neither at the present moment seemed willing to look. In three days more Pickett with all his family, was on his way towards the "nation," where, it may be added in this place, he had already made arrangements with the emissary for a more active co−operation with the members of the "Mystic Confederacy." His destiny which forced him into the bosom of this clan, seemed thoroughly to yield to his desire. The buffeting of the world, of which he had spoken, had only made him the more indifferent to the loveliness of virtue—— more reckless of the risk, and less averse to the natural repulsiveness, of vice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

He seemed
For dignity composed, and high exploit;
But all was false and hollow.
—— Milton.

Were it proper for me to pause in my narrative for the purpose of moral reflection, how naturally would the destitute condition of the criminal, as instanced in the case of John Hurdis, present itself for comment. Perhaps the greatest penalty which vice ever suffers is its isolation——its isolation from friends and fellowship——from warm trust, from yielding confidence. Its only resources are in the mutual interests of other and perhaps greater criminals, and what is there in life so unstable as the interests of the vicious? How they fluctuate with the approach of danger, or the division of the spoil, or the drunkenness of heart and habit which their very destitution in all social respects must necessarily originate. When John Hurdis separated from his late colleague, who had taught him that they were no longer bound to each other by mutual necessities, he felt as if the last stay, in the moment of extremity, was suddenlytaken from him. A sickness of soul came over him, and that despair of the spirit which the falling wretch endures, in the brief instant, when, catching at the impending limb, he finds it yielding the moment that his hold is sure upon it, and, in its decay, betraying utterly the last fond hope which had promised him security and life.

But, enough of this——my journey is begun. I entered a steamboat, one fair morning, and with promising auspices, so far as our voyage is considered, we went forward swimmingly enough. But our boat was an old one——a wretched hulk, which, having worked out its term of responsible service in the Mississippi, had been sent round to Mobile, at the instance of cupidity, to beguile unwitting passengers like myself, to their ruin. She was a piece of patch−work throughout, owned by a professional gambler, a little Israelite, who took the command without knowing any thing about it, and by dint of good fortune, carried us safely to our journey's end. Not that we had not some little stoppages and troubles by the way. Some portion of the machinery got out of order, and we landed at Demopolis, built a fire, erected a sort of forge, and in the space of half a day and night repaired the accident. This incident would not be worth relating, but that it exhibits the readiness with which our wildest and least scientific people, can find remedies for disasters which would seem to call for great skill and most extensive preparations. On the eleventh day we reached Columbus; but in the meantime, practising my new resolves, I made an acquaintance on board the boat. This was an old gentleman, a puritan of the bluest complexion, whom nobody would have suspected of being a rogue. Setting out to seek for, and meet with none but rogues, he yet nearly deceived me by his sanctity; and had I not maintained my watchfulness a little longer than I deemed necessary myself, I should have taken it for granted that he was a saint of the most accepted order, and, if I had not committed my secret to his keeping, I should, at least, have so far involved its importance as to make my labour unavailing. Fortunately, as I said, having put on, with the dress common to the gamblers of the great Mississippi Valley, as much of their easy impudence of demeanor as I could readily assume, I succeeded as effectually in convincing my puritan that I was a rogue, as he did in persuading me, at the beginning, that he was an honest man. It was my good fortune to find out his secret first, and to keep my own. It so happened that there were several passengers like myself, bound for Columbus on the Tombeckbe, to which place our boat was destined. As customary at that time, we had no sooner got fairly under weigh before cards were produced, and one fellow, whose lungs and audacity were greater thanthe rest, was heard throughout the cabin calling upon all persons who were disposed to "take a hand," to come forward. With my new policy in view, I was one of the first to answer this challenge. I had provided myself in Mobile with several packs, and taking a couple of them in hand, I went forward to the table which meanwhile had been drawn out in the cabin and coolly surveyed my companions. Our puritan came forward at the same moment, and in the gravest terms and tones, protested against our playing.

"My young friends," he cried, "let me beg you not to engage in this wicked amusement. Cards are, as it has been often and well said——cards are the prayer books of the devil. It is by these that he wins souls daily to his gloomy kingdom. Night and day he is busy in these arts, to entrap the unwary, whom he blinds and beguiles until, when they open their eyes at last, they open them in the dwellings of damnation. Oh, my dear children, do not

venture to follow him so far. Cast the temptation from you——defy the tempter; and in place of these dangerous instruments of sin, hearken, I pray you, to the goodly outpourings of a divine spirit. If you will but suffer me to choose for you a text from this blessed volume——"

Here he took a small pocket bible from his bosom, and was about to turn the leaves, when a cry fromall around me, silenced him in his homily, which promised to be sufficiently unctuous and edifying.——

"No text——no text," was the general voice—— "none of the parson——none of the parson."

"Nay, my beloved children——" the preacher begun, but a tall good−humoured looking fellow, a Georgian, with the full face, lively eyes and clear skin of that state, came up to him, and laid his broad hand over his mouth.

"Shut up, parson, it's no use. You can't be heard now, for you see it's only civility to let the devil have the floor, seeing he was up first. If, now, you had been quick enough with your prayer−book, and got the whip−hand of him, d——n my eyes, but you should have sung out your song to the end of the verses; but you've been slow, parson——you've been sleeping at your stand, and the deer's got round you. You'll get smoked by the old one, yourself, if you don't mind, for neglecting your duty."

"Peace, vain young man——"

He was about to begin a furious denunciation, but was allowed to proceed no farther. The clamor was unanimous around him; and one tall fellow, somewhat dandyishly accoutred like myself, coming forward, made a show of seizing upon the exhorter. Here I interposed.

"No violence, gentlemen; it's enough that we have silenced the man, let him not be hurt."

"Ay, if he will keep quiet," said the fellow, still threatening.

"Oh, quiet or not," said the Georgian, "we mustn't hurt the parson. 'Dang it, he shan't be hurt. I'll stand up for him.——Parson, I'll stand up for you; but by the Hokey, old black, you must keep your oven close."

I joined in promising that he would be quiet and offer no farther interruption, and he so far seemed to warrant our assurance as, without promising himself, to take a seat, after a few half suppressed groans, on a bench near the table, on which we were about to play. I was first struck with suspicion of the fellow by this fact. If the matter was so painful to his spirit, why did he linger in our neighbourhood when there were so many parts of the boat to which he might have retreated? The suspicion grew stronger when I found him, after a little while, as watchfully attentive to the progress of the game as any of the players.

Favourably impressed with the frankness of the Georgian, I proposed that we should play against the other two persons who were prepared to sit down to the table, and my offer was closed with instantly. We bet on each hand, on the highest trump, and on the game with each of our opponents, a dollar being the amount of each bet, so that we had a good many dollars staked on the general result of thegame. I know that I lost nine dollars before the cards had been thrice dealt. I now proceeded to try some of the tricks which I had seen others perform, and in particular that in which the dealer, by a peculiar mode of shuffling, divides the trumps between his partner and himself. My object was to fix the attention of one of my opponents, whom I suspected from the first to be no better than he should be, simply because he wore a habit not unlike my own, and was covered with trinkets in the same manner. But I lacked experience——there was still a trick wanting which no slight of hand of mine could remedy. Though I shuffled the cards as I had seen them shuffled, by drawing them alternately from top and bottom together, I found neither mine nor my partner's hand any better than before, and looking up with some affected chagrin in my countenance, I caught sight of what seemed to be an understanding smile between the opponent in question and the parson, who, sitting a little on one side of me, was able to look, if he desired it, into my hand. This discovery——as I thought it——gave me no little pleasure. I was resolved to test it, and ascertain how far I was correct in my suspicions. I flattered myself that I was in a fair way to fall upon the clue which might conduct me into the very midst of the gamblers, who are all supposed to be connected moreor less on the western waters, and yield me possession of their secrets. Accordingly, I displayed certain of my cards ostentatiously before the eyes of the preacher, and had occasion to observe, an instant after, that the play of my opponent seemed to be regulated by a certain knowledge of my hand. He finessed constantly upon my lead; and with an adroitness which compelled the continual expression of wonder and dissatisfaction from the lips of my partner. I was satisfied, so far, with the result of my experiment, and began to think of pausing before I proceeded farther; when my Georgian dashed down his cards as the game was ended against us, and cried out to me, with a countenance which, though flushed, was yet full of most excellent feeling——

"Look you, stranger, suppose we change. We don't seem to have luck together, and there's no fun in being all

the time on the losing side. The bad luck may be with me, or it may be with you, I don't say, but it can do no harm to shift it to other shoulders, whoever has it. I've been diddled out of twenty−six hard dollars, in mighty short order."

"Diddled!" exclaimed my brother dandy, with an air of ineffable heroism, turning to my partner. Without discomposure the other replied:

"I don't mean any harm when I say diddled,stranger, so don't be uneasy. I call it diddling when I lose my money, fight as hard for it as I can. That's the worst sort of diddling I know."

The other looked fierce for a moment, but he probably soon discovered that the Georgian had replied without heeding his air of valor, and there was something about his composed manner which rendered it at least a doubtful point whether any thing in the shape of an insult would not set his bulky frame into overpowering exercise. The disposition to bully, however slightly it was suffered to appear, added another item to my suspicions of the character before me. The proposition of my partner to change places with one of the other two, produced a different suggestion from one of them, which seemed to please us all. It was that we should play vingt−un.

"Every man fights on his own hook in that, and his bad luck, if he has any, hurts nobody but himself."

I had begun to reproach myself with a course which, however useful in forwarding my own objects, had evidently contributed to the loss by my partner of his money. If free to throw away my own, I had no right to try experiments on his purse, and I readily gave my assent to the proposition. Our bets were more moderate than before, but I soon found the game a losing one still. The preacherstill sat at my elbow, and my brother dandy was the banker; and in more than one instance when I have stood on "twenty" he has drawn from the pack, though having "eighteen" and "nineteen,"——upon which good players will always be content, unless assured that better hands are in the possession of their opponents, when, by "drawing," they cannot lose. This knowledge could only be received from our devoted preacher, and when I ceased to play—— which, through sheer weariness I did——I did so with the most thorough persuasion, that the two were in correspondence——they were birds of the same brood.

Moody and thoughtful, for I was now persuaded that my own more important game was beginning to open before me, I went to the stern of the boat, and seated myself upon one of the bulks, giving way to the bitter musings of which my mind was sufficiently full. While I sat thus, I was startled on a sudden to find the preacher beside me.

"Ah, my young friend, I have watched you during your sinful play, against which I warned you, with a painful sort of curiosity. Did I not counsel you against those devilish instruments——you scorned my counsel, and what has been your fortune. You have lost money, my son, money——a goodly sum, which might have blessed the poor widow, and the portionless orphan——which might have sent the blessings of the word into strange lands among the benighted heathen——which might have helped on in in his labours wayfaring teacher of the word—— which might be most needful to yourself, my son, which, indeed, I see it in your looks——which you could very ill spare for such purposes, and which even now it is your bitter suffering that you have lost."

Admiring the hypocrisy of the old reprobate, I was yet, in obedience to my policy, prepared to respect it. I availed myself of his own suggestion, and thus answered him.

"You speak truly, sir; I bitterly regret having lost my money, which, as you say, I could ill spare, and which it has nearly emptied my pockets to have lost. But suppose I had been fortunate——if I was punished by my losses for having played, he who won, I suppose, is punished by his winnings for the same offence. How does your reason answer when it cuts both ways?"

"Even as a two edged sword it doth, my friend; though in the blindness of earth you may not so readily see or believe it. Truly may it be said that you are both equally punished by your fortunes. You suffer from your losses——who shall say that he will suffer less from his gains. Will it not encourage him in his career of sin——will it not promote his licentiousness——his indulgence of manyvices which will bring him to disease, want, and, possibly——which heaven avert——to an untimely end. Verily, my friend, I do think him even more unfortunate than thyself; for, of a truth, it may be said, that the right use of money is the most difficult and dangerous of all; and few ever use it rightly but such as gain it through great toil, or have the divine instinct of heaven, which is wisdom, to employ it to its rightful purposes."

Excellent hypocrite! How admirably did he preach! How adroitly did he escape what had otherwise been his dilemma. He almost deceived me a second time.

"In your heart, now, my friend, you bitterly repent that you heeded not my counsel."

"Not a whit!" was my reply. "If I were sure I could win, I would stick by the card table forever."

"What! so profligate and so young. Oh! my friend, think upon your end——think of eternity."

"Rather let me think of my beginning, reverend sir, if you please. The business of time requires present attention, and to a man that is starving your talk of future provision is a mere mockery. Give me to know how I am to get the bread of life in this life before you talk to me of bread for the next."

"How should you get it, my friend, but by painstakingand labour, and worthy conduct. The world esteems not those who play at cards——"

"And I esteem not the world. What matters it to me, my good sir, what are the opinions of those to whom I am unknown, and for whom I care nothing. Give me but money enough, and I will make them love me, and honor me, and force truth and honesty into all shapes, that they may not offend my principles or practice."

"But, my son, you would not surely forget the laws of honesty in the acquisition of wealth?"

This was said inquisitively, and with a prying glance of the eye, which sufficiently betokened the deep interest which the hypocrite felt in my answer. But that I was now persuaded of his hypocrisy, I should have never avowed myself so boldly.

"What are they? What are these laws of honesty of which you speak? I cannot, all at once, say that I know them."

"Not know them!"

"No!"

"Well," he continued, "to say truth, they are rather frequently revoked among mankind, and have others wholly opposite in character substituted in their place; but you cannot mistake me my young friend——you know that there are such laws."

"Ay, laws for me——for the poor——to crush the weak——made by the strong for their own protection——for the protection of the wealth of the cunning. These are not laws calculated to win the respect or regard of the destitute——of those who are desperate enough, if they did not lack the strength, to pull down society with a fearless hand, though, perhaps, they pulled it in ruin upon themselves."

"But you, my friend, you are not thus desperate ——this is not your situation."

"What! you would extort a confession from me, first of my poverty——then of my desperation——you would drag me to the county court, would you, that you might have the proud satisfaction of exhorting the criminal in his last moments, in the presence of twenty thousand admiring fellow creatures, who come to see a brother launched out of life and into hell. This is your practice and creed is it?"

"No, my friend," he replied, in a lower tone of voice, which was, perhaps, intended to restrain the emphatic utterance of mine. "Know me better, my friend——I would save you——such is my heart——from so dreadful a situation——yes, I would even defeat the purposes of justice, though I felt persuaded you would sin again in the same fashion. Be not rash—— be not hasty in your judgment of me, my friend. I like you, and will say something to you which you will, perhaps, be pleased to hear. But not now—— one of these vicious reprobates approaches us, and what I say must be kept only for your own ears. To−night, perhaps——to−night."

He left me with an uplifted finger, and a look—— such a look as Satan may be supposed to have fixed on Adam in Paradise.

CHAPTER XIX.

'Twill be a bargain and sale,
I see, by their close working of their heads,
And running them together so in counsel.
—— Ben Jonson

The old hypocrite sought me out again that night. So far, it appears that my part had been acted with tolerable success. My impetuosity, which had been feigned, of course, and the vehemence with which I denounced mankind in declaring my own destitution, were natural enough to a youth who had lost his money, and had no other resources; and I was marked out by the tempter as one so utterly hopeless of the world's favors, as to be utterly heedless of its regards. Of such, it is well known, the best materials for villany are usually compounded, and our puritan, at a glance, seems to have singled me out as his own. We had stopped to repair some accident to the machinery, and while the passengers were generally making merry on land, I strolled into the woods that immediately bordered upon the river, taking care that my reverend fox, whose eye I well knew was upon me, should see the course Itook. I was also careful not to move so rapidly as to make it a difficult work to overtake me. As I conjectured would be the case, he followed and found me out. It was night, but the stars were bright enough, and the fires which had been kindled by the boat hands, gave sufficient light for all ordinary objects of sight. I sat down upon the bluff of the river, screened entirely by the overhanging branches which sometimes almost met across the stream, where it was narrow, from the opposite banks. I had not been here many minutes before the tempter was beside me.

"You are sad, my friend——your losses trouble you. But distrust not Providence which takes care of all us, though, perhaps, we see not the hand that feeds us, and fancy all the while that it is our own. You will be provided when you least look for it; and to convince you of the truth of what I say, let me tell you that it is not in goodly counsel alone that I would serve you, I will help you in other matters—— I can help you to the means of life——nay, of wealth. Ha! do you start? Do you wonder at what I say? Wonder not——be not surprised——be not rash——refuse not your belief, for of a truth, and by the blessing of God, will I do for you all that I promise, if so be that I can find you pliant and willing to strive for the goodly benefits which I shall put before you."

"What! you would make me a preacher, wouldyou? You would have me increase the host of solemn beggars that infest the country with stolen or silly exhortations, stuffed with abused words, and full of oaths and blasphemy. But you are mistaken in your man. I would sooner rob a fellow on the highway, than pilfer from his pockets while I preach. None of your long talks for me——tell me now of some bold plan for taking Mexico, which, one day or other, the southwest will have to take, and I am your man. I care not how bold your scheme——there is no one so perfectly indifferent to the danger as he who cannot suffer the loss of a single sixpence by rope or bullet."

"You do not say, my friend, that you would willingly do such violence as this you speak of, for the lucre of gain. Surely, you would not willingly slay your brother for the sake of his gold?"

"Ask me no questions, reverend sir," I replied, moodily. "I am not in the humour to be catechised."

"And yet, my friend," he continued, "I much fear me that your conscience is scarcely what it should be. This was my surmise to day as I beheld you with those unholy cards in your hands. Did I not see you, while giving them that sort of distribution which is sinfully styled shuffling——did I not see you practising an art which is commonly held to be unfair among men of play. Ha! my son——am I notright?——have I not smitten you under the fifth rib?"

"And what should you, a preacher of the Gospel as you call yourself, what should you know about shuffling?"

"Preacher of the Gospel I am, my friend," was his cool reply. "I am an expounder of the Holy Scriptures, though it may be an unworthy one. I have my license from the Alabama conference, for the year 18——, which, at a convenient season, I am not unwilling that you should see. Yet, though I am a preacher of the Blessed Word, I have not, and to my shame be it spoken, been always thus. In my youth, I am sad to say, I was much given to carnal indulgence, and many were the evil practices of my body, and many the evil devices of my heart. In this time of my ignorance and sin, I was a great lover of these deadly instruments of evil; and among my fellows I was

accounted a proficient, able to teach in all the arts of play. It was thus that I acquired the knowledge——knowledge which hurts——to see when thou designedst a trick in which thou didst yet fail, to win the money of thy fellow. I will show thee that trick, my friend, that thou mayst know, I tell thee nothing but the truth."

Here was a proposition from a parson. I closed with him instantly.

"You will do me a great service, I assure you."

"But, my friend, you would not make use of thy knowledge to despoil thy fellow of his money."

"Would I not? For what else would I know the art?"

"But if I could teach thee other and greater arts than these——if I could show thee how to make thy brother's purse thine own, at once, and without the toil of doling it out dollar by dollar, I fear me, my friend, that thou wouldst apply this knowledge also to purposes of evil——that thou wouldst not regard the sinfulness of such performances, in the strong desire of lucre which I see is in thy heart——that thou wouldst seek an early chance to put in practice the information which I give thee."

"And wherefore give it me then? Of a certainty I would employ it, as you see, to increase my means of life."

"Alas! my friend, but thy necessity must be great ——else would I look upon thee with misgivings and much horror."

"Great indeed! I tell you, reverend sir, that but for your coming, it is ten to one I had sent a bullet through my own head, or buried myself in the waters of the 'Bigby.' "

"Thou surely didst not meditate an act so heinous."

"Look here!" and I showed him my pistol as Ispoke. He coolly took it into his hands, threw up the pan, and with his finger assured himself that it was primed. His tone was altered instantly. He dropped the drawling manner of the exhorting; and though his conversation was still sprinkled with the canting slang of the itinerant preacher, which long use had probably made habitual, yet he evidently ceased to think it necessary to play the hypocrite with me any longer.

"You are too bold a fellow," he said, "to throw away your life in such a manner, and that too because of the want of money. You shall have money ——as much as you wish of it; and I take it, you would infinitely prefer shooting him who has it, rather than yourself——"

"Nay, nay, not that neither, reverend sir. There's some danger of being hung for such a matter."

"Not if you have money. You forget, my friend, your own principles. You said, and said truly, that money was the power which made virtue and opinion take all shapes among men; and when this is the case, justice becomes equally accommodating. You shall have this money——you shall compel this opinion as you please, so that you may do what you please, and be safe——only let me know that you wish this knowledge."

I grasped his hand violently.

"Ask the wretch at the gallows if he wishes life, and the question is no less idle than that which you put to me."

"Come farther back from the river——some of these boatmen may be pulling about; and such matters as I have to reveal, need no bright blaze like that which gleams upon us from yon forge. That wood looks dismal enough behind us——let us go there."

Thither we went, and having buried ourselves sufficiently among the thick undergrowth to be free of any danger of discovery or interruption, he began the narrative which follows; and which, together with much additional but unnecessary matter, I have abridged to my own limits.

"There was a boy," said he, "a poor boy of West Tennessee, who knew no parents, and had no friends ——who worked for his bread and education, such as it was, at the same moment, and in spite of all his labours, found, at the end of every year, after casting up his accounts, that he had gained during its passage many more kicks than coppers."

"No uncommon fortune in a country like ours."

"So he thought it," continued the parson, availing himself of my interruption; "so he thought it." He wasted no time and feeling in idle regrets of a condition which he found was rather more general than grateful to mankind, and one day he asked himself how many years he was willing to expend in trying to get a living in an honest way."

"Well——a reasonable question. What answer?"

"A reasonable one——like the question. Life is short even if we have money, said he to himself; but we have no life at all without it. Following a plough gives me none——I must follow something else."

"Well?"

"He resolved on being honest no longer."

"Indeed! But how could he put his resolution into effect in a country like ours, where we are inundated with so much professional virtue?"

"He put on a professional cloak."

"Excellent."

"But, though commencing a new, and, as it proved, a profitable business, he was not so selfish as to desire a monopoly of it——on the contrary, a little reflection suggested to him a grand idea, which was evolved by the very natural reflection which you made just now."

"What was that?"

"Simply that his condition was not that of an individual, but of thousands."

"Well——that is a trueism. What could he make of that?"

"A brotherhood."

"How?"

"He conceived that, if there were thousands in his condition, there were thousands governed by his feelings and opinions. We all have a family likeness in our hearts, however disguised by habits, manners, education; but when habits, manners, education are agreed, and to these is added a prevailing necessity, then the likeness becomes identity, and the boy who, on reaching manhood, resolved to be no longer despicably honest, felt assured that his resolve could be made the resolves of all who are governed by his necessities."

"A natural reflection enough——none more so."

"Accordingly, his chief labour was that of founding an order——a brotherhood of those who have learned to see, in the principles which ostensibly govern society, a nice system of cobwebs, set with a double object, as snares to catch and enslave the feeble and confiding, and defences for the protection of the more cunning reptiles that sit in the centre, and prey at ease upon the marrow and fat of the toiling insects they entangle."

"Such is certainly a true picture of our social condition. Man is the prey of man——the weak of the strong——the unwary of the cunning. The more black, the more bloated the spider, the closer hisweb, and the greater the number and variety of his victims. He sits at ease, and they plunge incontinently into his snare."

Such were some of the reflections with which I regaled my companion. He proceeded with increasing earnestness.

"He travelled through all the slave states making proselytes to his doctrine. With the cassock of a sanctified profession which we no more dare assail now than we did four hundred years ago, he made his way not only at little or no expense, but with great profit. On all hands he found friends and followers——men ready to do his bidding——to follow him in all risks——to undertake all sorts of offences, and in every respect to be the instruments of his will, as docile and dependent as those of any oriental despot known in story. His followers soon grew numerous, and having them scattered through all the slave states, and some of the free, he could enumerate more than fifteen hundred men ready at his summons and sworn to his allegiance."

I was positively astounded.

"But you are not serious?"

"As much so as at a camp meeting. There is not an atom of the best certified texts of Scripture more true than what I tell you."

"What! fifteen hundred men——fifteen hundred in these southern states professing roguery."

"Nay——not professing roguery——there you are harsh in your epithet. Professing religion, law, physic, planting, shopkeeping,——any thing, every thing, but roguery. They practise roguery, and roguery of all kinds, I grant you, but no professions could be more immaculate than theirs."

"Is it possible!" My wonder could not be concealed, but I contrived to mingle in some delight with my tones of astonishment, and my words were cautiously adapted to second my affectation of delight.

"Yes," he continued, "by the overruling influence of this boy as I may call him, though now a full grown man, such has become the spread of his principles, and such is the power which he wields. Yet, in all his labours, mark me, he himself commits no act of injustice with his own hand. He manages——he directs others——he sets the

spring in motion and counsels the achievement, yet no blow is struck by his hand. He is above the petty details of his own plans, and leaves to other and minor spirits the task of executing the little offices by which the grand design is carried out, and the work effected."

"Why, this man is a genius."

My unaffected expression of admiration warmed my companion, and he soon convinced me not only that he had all the while spoken of himself, but that he was remarkably sensitive on the subject of his own greatness. Discovering this weakness, I plied him by oblique flatteries of the wonderful person whom he had described to me, and he became seemingly almost entirely unreserved in his communications. He related at large the history of the clan—— the Mystic Confederacy, as it was termed——as it has already been partially narrated to the reader; and my horror and wonder were alike increased at every step in his progress. I could no longer doubt that the fellows who murdered William Carrington were a portion of the same lawless fraternity; and while the developments of my new acquaintance gave me fresh hope of being soon able to encounter with those murderers, they opened my eyes to a greater field of danger and difficulties than had appeared to them before. But I did not suffer myself to indulge in apprehensive musings, and pressed him for an increase of knowledge; taking care at my each solicitation to lard my inquiries thick with oily eulogies upon the great genius who had planned, and so far executed, his enterprises.

"How has this wonderful man contrived to evade detection, or suspicion at least? It is not easy to have a secret kept which is so numerously confided."

"That is one of the beauties of his scheme, that he confides little or nothing which affects himself,and he secures the alliance and obedience of those only who have secrets of their own much more detrimental to them if made public than could be any which they have of his. His art consisted simply in seeking out those who had secrets of a dangerous nature. In finding these he found followers. But though he has not always escaped suspicion——he has been able always to defy it. Societies have been formed, schemes laid, companies raised and juries prompted, to catch him in the act, but all in vain. It is not easy to entrap a man who has an emissary in every section of the country. The most active secretaries of the societies were his creatures——the schemes have been reported him as soon as laid, and one of his own right hand men has more than once been an officer of the company sworn to keep watch over him in secret."

"Wonderful man!——and what does he design with all this power? To rob merely——to procure money from travellers upon the highway——would not seem to call for such an extensive association."

"Perhaps not!——but he has other purposes; and the time will come, I doubt not, when his performances will, in no respect, fall short of the power which he will employ to effect them. When I tell you of such a man, you see at once that he is no common robber. Why should he confine himself to the deeds of one——be assured he will not. Youwill see——you will hear yet of his performances, and I tell you they will be such that the country will ring with them again."

"He must be a man of great ambition——he should be to correspond with the genius which he evidently has for great achievements. I should like to know——by my soul, but I could love such a man as that."

"You shall know him in season——he is not unwilling to be known where he himself knows the seeker, but——"

He paused, and I determined upon giving my hypocrisy a crowning virtue, if possible, by utterly overmastering his. I put my hand upon his shoulder suddenly, and looked him in the face, saying deliberately at the same time:——

"You are the man himself——I'll swear it."

"How!" he exclaimed, in some alarm; and I could see that he fumbled in his bosom as if for a weapon. "How! you mean not to betray me?"

"Betray you, no. I honour you——I love you. You have opened a road to me——you have given me light. An hour ago and I was the most hopeless benighted wretch under heaven——without money, without the means of getting it, and fully resolved on putting a bullet through my head. You have saved my life——you have saved me."

He seized my hand with warmth.

"I will be the making of you," he replied. "I have the whole southwest in a string, and have only to pull it to secure a golden draught. You shall be with me at the pulling."

"What more he said is unnecessary to my narrative, though he thought it all important to his. In brief, he told me that he had concocted his present schemes for a space of more than twenty years—— from the time that he was fifteen years of age, and he was now full thirty five; showing by this a commendable perseverance of purpose, which, in a good work is seldom shown, and which, in a good work, must have ensured to any individual a most triumphant greatness. We did not separate that night until he had sworn me a member of the "Mystic Confederacy," and given me a dozen signs by which to know my brethren, make myself known, send tidings and command assistance——acquisitions which I shuddered to possess, and the consequences of which, I well knew, would task all my skill and resolution to escape and evade.

CHAPTER XX.

I protest.
Maugre thy strength, youth, place and eminence,
Despight thy victor sword, and fire new fortune,
Thy valour and thy heart——thou art a traitor."
—— King Lear

My thoughts, in my berth that night, were oppressive enough. I had involved myself in the meshes of a formidable conspiracy, and was now liable to all its dangers. It mattered not to the public how pure were my real purposes, so long as the knowledge of them was confined only to myself. The consciousness of virtue may be a sufficient strengthener of one's resolve, but I doubt whether it most usually produces a perfect feeling of mental quiet. I know all was turmoil in my brain that night. I tossed and tumbled, and could not sleep. Thought was busy, as indeed she had need be. I had now full occasion for the exercise of all my wits. To entrap the black and bloated spiders in their own web was now my task——to escape from it myself, my difficulty. But I had sworn to avengeWilliam Carrington; and now, with a less selfish feeling, I registered another oath in heaven.

In my next conversation with the parson, who gave me, as his name, Clement Foster, though I doubt not——indeed I afterwards discovered——that he had twenty other names;——I endeavoured, with all my art, to find out if he knew any thing of Webber, and his associates. To do this, without provoking suspicion, was a task requiring the utmost caution. To a certain intent I succeeded. I found that Webber was one of his men, but I also discovered that he let me know nothing in particular——nothing, the development of which might materially affect his future plans, or lead to the discovery of his past projects. I was evidently regarded as one, who, however well estimated, was yet to undergo those trials which always precede the confidence of the wicked. I was yet required to commit myself, before I could be recognised in a fellowship of risk and profits with them. Foster gave me to know, that there was a test to which I would be subjected——a test depending on circumstances——not arbitrary——and my full and entire admission to the fraternity, would depend on the manner in which I executed my task.

"You will have to take a mail bag, or shoot an obstinate fellow, who has more money than brains, through the head. Our tasks are all adapted to theparticular characters of our men. Gentlemen bred, and of good education and fine feelings, will be required to do some bold action——our common rogues and underlings, are made to run a negro from his master, or pick a pocket at a muster, or pass forged notes or some small matter of that sort. You, however, will be subjected to no such mean performances. I will see to that."

Here was consolation with a vengeance. I felt my cheek burn, and my heart bound within me; but I was on the plank, and the stern necessity schooled me so, that I was able to conceal all my emotion. But I soon found that there were other tests for me; and that my friendly parson was not yet so satisfied that my virtue was of the desirable complexion. My brother dandy sought me out one day before we reached Columbus.

"I see," said he, confidentially, "that parson talking with you very frequently, and as you seem to listen to him very respectfully, I think it only an act of friendship to put you on your guard against him. Between us, he's a great rascal, I'm more than certain. I know him to be a hypocrite, and while I was last in Orleans, there was a man advertised for passing forged notes, and the description given of the rogue, answers to a letter, the appearance of this fellow."

I thanked him for his kindness, but told him thatI really thought the parson a very good man; and could not believe that he would be guilty of such an act as that ascribed to him.

"You're mistaken," said he; "you're only too confiding——and I'll convince you, if you'll only back me in what I do. Stand by me, and I'll charge him with it before the captain, and, if so, we'll have the reward. I'll lay my life his pocket is full of forged bills at this very moment."

I answered him with some coolness, and more indifference.

"I'm no informer, sir, and do not agree with you in your ill opinion of the poor man. At least, I have seen nothing in his conduct, and witnessed nothing in his deportment to warrant me in forming any such suspicions. He may have forged notes or not, for me——I'll not trouble him."

The fellow went off no wise discomfited, and I heard nothing more of his accusation. That night I related the circumstance to Foster, who smiled without surprise, and then said to me in reply——

"You see how well our agents work for us. Haller (that was the dandy's name,) is one of our men. He knew from me of what we had spoken, and proposed to try you. It is no small pleasure to find you so faithful to your engagements."

In this way, and by the practice of the most unrelaxing cunning, I fully persuaded Foster of my integrity——if I may use that word in such relation. Hour after hour gave me new revelations touching the grand fraternity——the "Mystic Brotherhood"—— into the bosom of which I was now to be received; and of the doings and the capacities of which Foster spoke at large and with all the zest of the truest paternity. After repeated conferences had seemed to assure him of my fidelity, he proceeded to reveal a matter which, in the end, proved of more importance to my pursuit than all the rest of his revelations.

"We have quarterly and occasional meetings of our choice spirits, who are few in number, and one of these meetings is at hand. We meet in the neighbourhood of the Sipsy Swamp, on the road from Columbus to Tuscaloosa, where we have a famous hiding place, which has heard——and kept too——many a pretty secret. We have a conference to which twenty or more will be admitted, who will report their proceedings in Western Alabama. There will be several new members like yourself, who are yet in their noviciate; but none, I am persuaded, who will go through their trial half so well as yourself."

"What! the stopping the mail, or shooting the traveller!"

"Yes——'tis that I mean. You will do your duty, I doubt not. There is another business which we have on hand, which is of some importance to our interests:——it is hinted that one of our leading confederates——a fine young fellow who committed an error, and joined us in consequence, a year ago, is about to play the traitor; or, at least, fly the track."

"Ah, indeed! And how do you punish such an offence."

How! But by death!——our very existence as a society, and safety, as men, depend upon the severity which we visit upon the head of the traitor. He must die——that is, if the offence be proved against him."

"What! you give him a trial then?"

"Yes;——but not by jury——no such folly for us. We put on the track of the offender, some two or three of our most trusty confederates, who take note of all his actions, and are empowered with authority to put the law in force without farther reference to us. I will try and get you upon this commission, as your first trial before we invest you with our orders. Haller will most probably be your associate in this business. He brings the report of the suspected treason, and it is our custom to employ in a business those persons who have the clue already in their hands. Haller has some prejudice against Eberly,—— there have been words between them, and Eberly, who is a fellow of high spirit, got the better of him, and treats him with some contempt."

"Will there not be some danger of Haller's abusing the trust you give him then, and making itspowers subservient to his feelings of personal hostility."

"Possibly——but Haller knows our penalty for that offence, and will scarcely venture to incur it. Besides, I fear there is some ground for his charges—— I have heard some matters about Eberly myself which were suspicious."

"Eberly!" said I, "where did I hear that name before? I have surely heard it somewhere."

"Not unlikely——I know several Eberlys in Georgia and Alabama——it's not a very uncommon name, though still not a common one."

The consciousness of the next instant, made my cheek burn. I remembered hearing the name of Eberly uttered by one of the banditti, while I lay bound in the hovel of Matthew Webber; and then it appeared to me in language which was disparaging. Things were beginning to fit themselves strangely together before my eyes, and when the parson left me to retire to his birth, I was soon lost in a wilderness of musing. We soon reached and landed at Columbus——a wild looking and scattered settlement, at that time, of some thirty families, within a mile of the Tombeckbe. We proceeded boldly to the tavern——our parson leading the way; and never was prayer more earnest and seemingly unaffected than that which he put up at the supper table that night. He paid amply for his bacon and greens, by his eloqeunce. He tendered no other form of pay, nor indeed, did any seem to be desired. The next morning, it was arranged between us that we should all meet at a spot a little above the ford at Coal Fire Creek——a distance of some thirty miles from Columbus, and on the direct route to Tuscaloosa. But here a

difficulty lay in my way which had been a source of annoyance to me for the three days past. I had no horse, and had declared to Foster my almost absolute want of money. To proceed on my mission, it was necessary to procure one, and if possible, a good one; and how to do this while Foster stayed, was a disquieting consideration. But he was too intent upon securing his new associate, and not less intent upon his old business, to suffer this to remain a difficulty long.

"You must buy a horse in Columbus, Williams, (that was the name I had set out with from Mobile) you cannot get on without one. As you have no money, I must help you, and you can repay me after you have struck your first successful blow. Here are a couple of hundred dollars——bills of the Bank of Mobile——counterfeit, it is true, but good here as the Bank itself. There's an old fellow here——old General Cocke that has several nags——you can possibly get one from him that will do you good service, and not cost you so much, neither. Go to him at once and get your creature——you'll find me to−morrow noon at the creek just as I tell you. Set up a psalm tune, if you can, even as you reach the creek, and you'll hear some psalmody in return that will do your heart good."

He left me, followed by Haller, and I took a short mode for getting rid of the counterfeit bills he gave me. I destroyed them in my fire that night, and taking the necessary sum from my own treasury, I proceeded to procure my horse, which I found no difficulty in doing, and at a moderate price; though General Cocke had none to sell. I bought from another person whom I did not know.

Being so far ready, I took a careful examination of my pistols, procured me an extra knife of large size in Columbus, and commending myself to Providence with a prayer mentally uttered, as earnest as any which I ever made either before or since, I set off for the place of meeting which I reached about sunset. Though nothing of a Psalm−singer, I yet endeavoured to avail myself of the suggestion of Foster, and accordingly set up a monotonous stave, after the whining fashion of the Methodists of that region——and was answered with a full burst of the same sort of melody, of unsurpassable volume, proving the lungs of the faithful whom I sought, to be of the most undiseased complexion. I was immediately joined by Foster and three other persons, among whom, I felt a spontaneous movement of pleasure inmy bosom, as I recognised the features of Matthew Webber. But it was the pleasure of the hunter, who, having his rifle lifted, discovers the wolf at the entrance of the den. It relieved me from many apprehensions to find that Webber, though looking at me with some attention, did so without seeming to recognise me. This was an earnest of success in my pursuit, which cheered me not a little in my onward progress.

We entered their hiding place together, where, in a leafy cover that might have been used by innumerable tribes of bears and foxes before, we found our supper and a tolerable lodgment for the night. There we slept though not till some hours had been spent in conversation touching a thousand plans of villany, which astounded me to hear, but to which I was compelled not only to give heed, but satisfaction. But little of their dialogue interested me in my pursuit;——to some parts of it, however, I lent an ear of excited attention. Webber spoke of Eberly; and though I could not understand much of the matter he referred to, yet there was an instinct in my mind that made me nervous while the discussion continued, and melancholy long after it was over. To me was the task to be assigned of pursuing this young man, of spying into his conduct, and reporting and punishing his return to the paths of virtue. Not to do this work faithfully to those who sent mewas to incur his risk; and this was a position into which, with my eyes open, I had gone of my own head. It was no small addition to my annoyance, that, in prosecuting the search into Eberly's conduct, I was ministering to the mean malice of Haller, and the open hate of Matthew Webber. But there was no room for hesitation now. I was to go forward or fall. My hope, as well as purpose, was for the best; my resolution to do nothing wrong. My task was to steer wide of injury to others, and of risk to myself. No easy task with so many villains around me. A sentence or two of the dialogue which so interested me, may be well enough repeated here. It will be supposed that what was said, must have had the effect of lifting the destined youth in my consideration——it certainly placed him in a more favourable light than could well be claimed for one found in such a connection.

"He is become too melancholy for any business at all," said Webber, "and least of all for such a business as ours. Set him to watch for a traveller, and he plays with the leaves, twists the vines round his finger, writes in the sand, and sighs all the while as if his heart were breaking."

"Why, he has suffered himself really to fall in love with the girl!" exclaimed Foster. "What an ass!"

"So he is——and that is perhaps his chief offence,since a man who is an ass can never be a good knave

——certainly never a successful one," was the reply of Webber.

"True enough, Matthew," said Foster, "but this is the poor fellow's misfortune. In this condition he can do nothing for himself any more than for us. Will he marry the girl?"

"If he can."

"And can he not?"

"Yes——I think he may——he might if he could keep his secret. But it is my fear that he cannot keep his secret. His heart has got the better of his head—— his conscience of his necessities; and these gloomy fits which he has now so constantly, not only makes him neglectful of our interests and his duties, but will, I am dubious, precipitate him into some folly which will be the undoing of all of us. You know the laws, Clement Foster; don't you think he could get clear of justice, by telling all he knows about us."

"Pshaw! what does he know, and who would believe him, unless he gave us up to justice——unless he brought the hounds to our cover; and even that would do little unless he could point out and prove particular acts. What does he know of me——or you; ——we could prove him a liar by a cloud of witnesses whom he never saw, who would go into court, and swear every thing."

"True enough; but that we should get clear does not do away with his offence, should he endeavor to involve us."

"By no means——but wherefore should he seek to do so. What could be his object. His own exposure follows, or indeed, precedes ours; and for a man to prove himself a knave, merely to show that his neighbour is just as bad, is thrice sodden folly."

"Well——such is always your conscientious fool."

"But Eberly is a fool of love, Mat, and not of conscience."

"And fools of love, Foster, are very apt to be fools of conscience."

"By no means——they are the greatest knaves in the wide world, and worse hypocrites than a pork−eating parson. They lie or do any thing to get the woman; for passion was never yet a moralist."

"Well——I don't know, but Eberly has done nothing for some time past. He has let several matters slip through his fingers. There was an affair only two weeks ago, that nearly swamped us all from his not coming according to promise."

"What affair? Something I have not heard of."

"Yes——there were two larks that were hitched at my house, or rather that we tried to hitch; one of them got out of the noose, and thumped Breton over his mazzard so that the bridge of his nose is brokendown for ever. He got off as far as the 'Day Blind,' and there was tumbled by a stranger——a fellow that we sent after, and made sure of. I told you something already of the matter."

Here was something to confound me. Webber evidently alluded to the affair of William and myself; yet he spoke of my friend being killed by a stranger. I was confused and bewildered by the new position of events, but was quite too awkwardly placed to venture any questions on so dangerous a topic. They proceeded in their dialogue:

"All this comes of his passion for the girl; when they are once married, you'll see that he'll recover."

"If I thought so, by God, it would please me the best of all things. It would do my heart good to sing it in the ears of her insolent father, that his daughter was the wife of a public robber——a thief of the highway."

"So, so, Mat!——don't, I pray you, disparage our profession. Tenderly, tenderly——no nicknaming—— and have done with your malice. Malice is a base, bad quality, and I heartily despise your fellows who treasure up inveterate prejudices. They are always a yellow souled, snakish set, that poison themselves with the secretions of their own venom. Now, for my part, I have no hates, no prejudices——if I haveany thing to thank Heaven for, it is possessions of a better sort than this. My chickens lay better eggs, and hatch no vipers."

A pretty sentiment enough for a rogue and hypocrite. But of what strange contradictions are we compounded. The dialogue was soon brought to a close.

"It is understood, then," said Foster, that "Haller and Williams (meaning me,) are to watch his motions, and see that he keeps in traces. Are these two enough, or shall we put a third with them?"

"Quite enough to follow and to punish, though it is well that we should all note his movements, and watch him when we can. Does Mr. Williams know the extent of his power?" demanded Webber turning to me.

"Ay," was the reply of Foster——"he knows that he has power to adjudge, and execute even to death; but I

would beg him to recollect that he must award with great caution against a confederate. An unjust punishment incurs similar judgment; and we are prompt to avenge an injury done to one of our comrades. I would not have him too precipitate with Eberly——he is a fellow of good qualities——he is bold as a lion——generous to the last sixpence——"

"And a little too conscientious, you should add," was the interruption of Webber——"a little too conscientious. We were a few thousand dollars the richer, but for that."

"Ah, you mistake, Matthew——he was busy making love and had holiday. Let him but become a husband, and you'll see then how constant he will be——in his absence from home." Here the conversation ended for the night.

CHAPTER XXI.

The drunkard after all his lavish cups
Is dry and, then is sober; so, at length,
When you awake from the lascivious dream
Repentance then will follow, like the sting
Placed in the adder's tail.
—— White Devil

The next morning, before it was yet dawn, Foster aroused me where I was sleeping beneath my green wood tree.

"We must be stirring, Williams; I have tidings from some of our friends in Tuscaloosa, who appoint to meet me to−morrow noon, at the Sipsy. We have a snug place in the River Swamp, more secure and comfortable even than this; and we shall no doubt meet many of our friends. There, too, you must keep a bright look out, for you will there see Eberly, and your watch must begin from the moment you encounter him."

I arose with no very comfortable feelings at this assurance. I was to begin the labors of the spy. Well! my hand was in for it, and it was no time to look back. I must on, with what feeling it mattered little to those around me; and, having gone so far,perhaps but little to myself. I strove, as well as I might, to shake off my sombre feelings——certainly to conceal their expression. Foster did not seem to heed my taciturnity. If he did, he did not suffer me to see that he remarked it; but playfully and even wittily remarking upon the sluggish movements of our companions, Webber included, to whom early rising seemed an annoyance, he led the way, and we were all soon mounted and on our journey. It was near noon when we reached our place of destination, and such a place! Imagine for yourself, a thousand sluices over a low boggy ground running into one, which, in time, overflowing its channels sluices all the country around it, and you have some faint idea of the borders of the Sipsy River. Nothing could we see but a turbid yellow water, that ran in among the roots of the trees, spread itself all around for miles, forming a hundred little currents some of which were quite as rapid as a mill race. The road was lost in the inundation; and but that our men were well acquainted with the region, we should have been drowned——our horses at least——in the numerous bays and bogs which lay every where before us. Even among our party a guide was necessary——and one who understood the route better than the rest was singled out to lead the way. For a time we seemed utterly lost in the accumulating pits and ponds, crossing currents and quagmires inwhich our path was soon involved, and I could easily conjecture the anxiety of our company from the general silence which they kept. But our guide was equal to the task, and we soon found ourselves upon a high dry island, within a few yards of the opposite shore, which, when we reached, Foster throwing himself with an air of satisfaction from his horse, proclaimed it our present resting place. Here we were joined by a man whom I had not seen before, who had been awaiting us, and who brought letters to Foster. Some of these, from Mobile, New Orleans, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa, he was pleased to show me; and their contents contributed not a little to confound me, as they developed the large extent of the singular confederacy, of which I was held a member. Some of the plans contained in these letters were of no less startling character. One, which was dwelt on with some earnestness by two of the writers was a simultaneous robbery of all the banks.

"A good proposition enough," was the quiet remark of Foster, passing his finger over the paragraphs——"had they in money but one tenth part of the amount which they have in paper. But to empty vaults which have no specie, is little to my taste. I should soon put a stop to specie payments, without rendering necessary an act of congressHere now, is something infinitely more profitable, but far more dangerous. We shall consider this."

He pointed out to me another suggestion of the writer which seemed to have been debated upon before——the atrociousness of which curdled my blood to read. I could scarcely propose the question.

"But you will hardly act upon this——it is too ——"

I was about to say horrible——it was well I did not. Foster fortunately finished the sentence for me in a different manner.

"Too dangerous you would say! It would be to a blunderer. But we should be off the moment it was over. Having made use of the torch, we should only stay long enough to take what was valuable from the house, and not

wait until it had tumbled upon us. But this matter is not yet ready. We have business, scarcely less profitable, to be seen to, and three days more may give us a noble haul. See to this. Here I am advised by a sure friend at Washington, that a large amount of Government money is on its way for the Choctaws——it will not be my fault if they get it. That is worth some pains−taking——but——"

He paused and folded up his papers. The tramp of steeds was heard plashing through the mire and approaching the island. Webber was next heard in conversation with the new comers whose voices now reached us distinctly. Foster addressed me as he heard them in suppressed tones and with a graver manner.

"That's Eberly's voice," he said——"you must look to him, Williams. From this moment do not lose him from your sight till you can report on his conduct decisively. Here is Haller coming towards us. He has heard of Eberly's approach and like yourself will be on the watch. Let me say to you that Haller will report of you as narrowly as he does of Eberly. He does not know you yet, and has no such confidence in you as I have. I know that you will fear nothing that he can report; and yet, that my judgment may not suffer in the estimation of our people, I should be better pleased if you could outwatch your comrade."

I made out to say——"Trust me——you have no need of apprehension. I will do my best at least."

"Enough," said he——"he comes. Poor fellow, he looks sick——unhappy!"

This was said in an under tone, as if in soliloquy, and the next moment, the person spoke of, emerging from the shade of a bush which stood between himself and me, came full in my sight. What was my astonishment and misery to behold in him, the young man Clifton, introduced to me by Colonel Grafton, and, as I feared, the accepted lover of hisdaughter. I was rooted to the spot with surprise and horror, and could scarcely recover myself in time to meet his approach. A desperate resolve enabled me to do this, and when he drew nigh, I was introduced to him as "one of us" by Foster. Clifton, or as I shall continue to call him Eberly, scarcely gave me a look. His eyes never once met either Foster's or my own. He was pale and looked care−worn. With a haggard smile, he listened to the kind yet hypocritical compliments of Foster, but uttered nothing in reply. Other persons now began momently to arrive, and by night our number was increased to twenty−five or thirty. I underwent the fraternal hug, with all the old villains, and some five noviciates like myself; and, in a varied discussion of such topics as burglary, horse and negro stealing, forging, mail−robbing and various other similarly innocent employments, we contrived to pass over the hours without discord or monotony until the coming on of night put our proprietors in mind of supper. I need not dwell upon any of the plans and purposes of crime, in particular, which underwent discussion on that occasion, since none of them will affect very materially my own narrative. It is enough for me to affirm that among these members of the Mystic Brotherhood, crime of all sorts and complexions, seemed reduced to a perfect system, and the hands which ministered seemed tomove rather like those of automata than of thinking and resolving men. At supper I sat opposite to Eberly——my eye was fixed upon him all the while, and my recognition of him, as the lover of the poor Julia, fully reconciled me to the task I had undertaken of convicting him of treason to his associates. His treason to beauty——to innocence——to hospitality, and confiding friendship——made my otherwise odious duty a grateful one; and I felt a malignant sort of pleasure, as I watched my victim, to think that his punishment lay in my own hands. And yet, while I looked upon him, I felt, at moments, my heart sink and sicken within me. I somehow began to doubt how far he could be guilty——how far he could be guilty with these——how far guilty to her? He ate nothing, and and looked very pale and wretched. His spirit seemed any where but with his associates——and though his eye acknowledged every address, and his tongue replied to every demand, yet it was evident enough that there was a lack of mental consciousness——an abstractedness of mood and thought, which left it doubtful when he spoke whether he was altogether assured of the words he uttered or of those he heard. After supper our chief rogues renewed the discussion of sundry of their plans, and for a while the curiosity which I felt at the strangeness of some of their propositions, and the stories of their several achievements, half reconciled me to listen to their heinousness. But there was quite too much of it in the end——a still−beginning, never−ending repetition of the same business, only varied by the acting persons, place and time; and, following the lead of Webber and one or two others, I went aside to the fire which Haller had kindled up, and under a tent of bark, I housed myself for the night. I did not hope for sleep, for my mind was full of troublesome thoughts, yet I was surprised by the feather−footed visitant, and slept soundly for a space of two hours. I was awakened by some one shaking me by the shoulder, and, starting to my feet, found my comrade Haller standing beside me.

"Get up," he said, "it's time to look after Eberly. He has gone out into the bushes, having left Webber whom he

slept with. He thought Mat was asleep, and stole off. We must get on his trail and see what he's after."

I obeyed and we went together with great caution to the rude tent in which Webber slept. He gave us some directions, and following them we soon found our man. He had gone to the place where Foster slept alone——a bushy dell of the woods scooped out sufficiently to enable one, by crawling through a narrow mouth to secure an easy, though perhaps confined couch within. The greater apertures made by torn branches or fallen leaves were supplied by saplingshewn from neighbouring places, and twisted in with the native growth of the spot; and with the aid of some rushes, a blanket, and a good warm watchcoat, Foster had a tenement which art could scarcely have made warmer, though in social respects, it certainly might have undergone considerable improvement.

We reached a spot within hearing distance of this, in sufficient time to note the first approaches of Eberly to its inmate. Foster came forth at his summons, and as my eye turned upon the course which they took together, Haller touched my arm. When I turned, I beheld Webber also standing beside us, who, taking Haller with him, proceeded cautiously to an opposite point, where it seems they expected the two to go, Webber giving me instructions to follow them cautiously from where I stood; by which division of our force, he seemed resolute that one of us should succeed in our espionage. The several fires of the party were nearly extinguished. But there was still light enough to enable me to discern the outlines of their persons as they moved from me. I crept and crawled upon my mission of baseness, with all pains−taking circumspectness, but every moment increased the space between me and the men I pursued, until I had nearly lost sight of them altogether, when, on a sudden, they turned about and came again towards me. It is probablethat they may have been disturbed by the too eager progress of the two spies on the other side, who thus drove them back upon me. Whatever may have been the cause of their return, I had barely time to shrink back into the shade of a large tree as they approached it; and the spot being sufficiently dense and dark prompted them to make it the scene of their conference. Foster was the first to speak. Stopping short as he reached a cluster of saplings, only a few paces removed from the place where I stood in shadow, he said,

"Here now, Eberly, we are safe. Every thing is still here, and there is no more danger of interruption. Unfold yourself now. What secret have you——why do you bring me forth at an hour when I assure you a quiet snooze would be more agreeable to me than the finest plot which you could fancy for robbing the largest portmanteau in Alabama?"

"Do not jest with me, Foster——I cannot jest; it is a matter of life and death to me which makes me disturb you, else I should not do it. My life hangs upon your hands——more than life; I cannot sleep myself; forgive me that I have taken you from yours."

Never were the tones of a man more piteously imploring than those of the speaker. I could well believe him when he said he could not sleep.

"Your life and death!" said Foster; "why, whatmean you man! Don't stop to apologise for breaking my sleep, when such is the danger. Speak—— speak out, and let us know from what quarter the storm is coming. Who is the enemy you fear?"

"You!" was the emphatic reply. "You are my enemy!"

"Me!"

"You, your fellows, and mine——myself! These are my enemies, Foster. It is from these that my apprehensions come——it is these that I fear; my life is in their hands. More than life——much, much more."

"Ha! What is all this."

"You wonder. Hear me, Foster. I will tell you the truth——nothing but the truth. I must leave the fraternity. I am not fitted for its membership. I cannot do the work it requires at my hands. I dare not——my soul sickens at its duties; and I cannot perform them. I lack the will——the nerve."

"You know not what you say, Eberly," was the grave reply of Foster. "You surely do not forget the penalties which follow such an avowal as this."

"No! would I could forget them! Have I not said that my life and death are in your hands!"

"Wherefore have you awakened me then?" was the cold and inauspicious reply. "I could tell you no more than you already know."

"Yes——you can save me. I come to you for pity.I implore you to save me, which you can. A word from you will do it."

"Can I——should I speak that word? It would ruin me——it would ruin us all!"

"No! It would not. You could lose nothing by letting me go free——nothing; for I can do nothing for you. I cannot commit crime——I can neither lie nor rob, nor slay; I cannot obey you; and, sooner or later, you must execute your judgment upon me for neglect or perversion of my pledges."

"This is certainly a very sudden attack of virtue, Mr. Eberly. You can neither lie, nor steal, nor slay. You have become too pure for these duties; but I remember the time, and that too, no very distant time, when you were guilty of one or more of these dreadful sins from which your soul now shrinks."

"Ay——and I remember it too, Foster. I did not need that you should remind me; would I could forget it——hence came my bondage. You discovered my unhappy secret, and forged my shackles. It is to you that I come to break them."

"You deny not that you were guilty of the robbery of old Harbers then?"

"I deny it not; and yet I know not, Foster, if it was an offence of which I have so much reason to be ashamed. Thank God, I took not his money for myself; the wants of a dying mother, the presence of a cruel necessity, was my extenuation, if not excuse, for that hapless act——an act which has been the heavy millstone around my neck in each succeeding moment of my life. Bitterly have I repented——"

"You cannot repent. You shall not repent!" was the sudden speech of Foster. "You have not the right to repent——you are sworn to us against it, and cannot repent without our permission."

"It is for that permission, Foster, that I come to implore you now. I know that you are superior to the cold and cruel people whom you lead You will ——you must feel for my situation. I am of no use to you. I cannot rob the traveller, nor forge a note, nor inveigle a negro from his master——still less can I stab or shoot the unoffending man who opposes my unlawful attempts upon his property. I am, indeed, only an incumbrance upon you——"

"You have our secrets."

"I will keep them——I swear to you, Foster, by all that is sacred that I will keep them."

"You cannot, to be honest——to go back to the paths of virtue. You must reveal our secrets; and not to do so is a half virtue which looks monstrously like hypocrisy. It is a compromise with vice to say the least of it, which puts the blush upon your late returning innocence. No Eberly, we must keepour secrets ourselves by keeping bound those who know them. Say that you are unable to serve us by any of the acts you mention——you are not less able to serve us in other respects, equally sinful yet not so obnoxious to public censure or punishment. As a strong man it might be my lot to depend on your friendly sympathy to save me from a halter."

"I would do it, Foster, believe me."

"We must make you do it. We must keep our reins upon you. But of what avail would be a permission to you which could not annihilate the proofs which we have against you? Whether we suffered you to go free, and held you to be no longer one of us, or not; the offence which we could prove against you, would still make you liable to the law. Our mere permission to depart would be nothing——"

"Yes——every thing. It would free me from a bondage that now crushes me to the earth and defeats all my meditated action in other respects. For the wrong I have done to Harbers, I would make atonement——"

"Repay him the money from the robberies of others," replied Foster with a sneer.

"No, Foster," said the young man patiently, "not a cent would I bear from your treasury. I would go forth as unincumbered with your booty as I hope to be unincumbered with the sin and shame of the connection."

"You use tender words in speaking of your comrades and their occupations, Eberly."

"Without meaning to offend, Foster. But hear me out. I should not merely repay Harbers, but I would confess to him the crime of which I had been guilty."

"Ha! and the subsequent sinful connections which you have formed with us; and our precious doings together. This is your precious plan, is it?"

"Not so! Though resolved to declare my own crimes and errors, I am not bound to betray the confidence of others."

"This is your resolution now——how long will it remain so; and what will be our security when the chance happens, which may happen, when, at one full swoop, you may take us all like a flock of partridges and deliver us up as an atonement for your own youthful sins, to the hands, so called, of Justice. Eberly, Eberly, you are speaking like a child; do you think we can hearken to a prayer such as that you make. Why every white−livered boy of our band, who happened to fancy a pair of blue eyes and a dimity petticoat, would be seized with a fit of virtue towards us in precise degree with his hot lust after the wench he fancied——"

"Stay, Foster, I see that you are aware of my intimacy with Miss Grafton."

"Surely. You have never taken a step that I amnot acquainted with. And now let me ask——did you feel our bondage so oppressive till you became acquainted with this girl?"

"I did not——my knowledge of her first impressed upon me, with a more just sense of their value, the value of these rewards which follow virtuous practice."

"Pshaw, man, how is the getting of this girl a reward of virtue. Can't you get her now, while you are a trusted member of the Confederacy? To the point, man, and speak out the truth, have you not spoken to her, and has she not consented to be yours?"

"She has."

"What more! Marry her——we do not hinder you. We object not to the new bonds which you propose to put on yourself, though grumbling so much at ours. Be sure, we shall none of us forbid the banns. Marry her, and settle down in quiet; our laws will give you no trouble; your duties shall be accommodated to the new change in your condition, and, as a justice of the peace, a juror, member of the assembly or of congress, you can be as eminently useful to us as——nay, more useful than——a striker along the woods, or a passer of counterfeit notes. These are small matters which any bull−head amongst us can perform; you have talents which can better serve us in higher stations."

The youth shook his head as he replied sadly——

"If I did not love Julia Grafton, or if I loved her less, it might be easy to be satisfied with what you say. But I neither can nor will fetter myself or her in a bondage such as you mention. In truth, Foster, I can serve you no more——I can serve the Confederacy no more——I make this declaration to you, though I die for it. On your mercy I throw myself——on your kindness often professed, and tried on more occasions than one. Be my friend, Foster—— on my knees I pray you to save me in this respect—— save me——let me go free——I will leave the country—— I will go into a distant state, where you can be in no danger from any thing that I can do and say. You can have no reason to refuse me, since you can have no interest in keeping me to pledges which yield you no interest, and only bring me suffering. Feeling as I do now, and situated as I am, I can do nothing for you. Command me to strike here or there, and I cannot obey you. From this day forth I must withhold my service, though you do not cancel my bonds."

Foster seemed touched while the young man spoke, but this, perhaps, was only a part of his cool and ready hypocrisy. He interrupted Eberly when he had said the last sentence.

"Your refusal to serve us would, you know, be the signal for your death."

"I know it——and if you send forth the decree, I must meet my doom, and I trust will meet it like a man. But I would escape this doom; and to you, and you only, I refer, to extricate me from it——to effect my object, and get my release from the secret council. There is but one man whose refusal I fear, and with him you would have some difficulty, I doubt not; but even that I know you could overcome. Webber hates Grafton, the father of Julia, and hates me, because I love her honourably. It was he who brought her to my notice, and prompted me to the scheme by which I became an intimate in the family; a scheme projected for a dishonourable and foul purpose, which has resulted so far, in one of which I have no reason to be ashamed. I would spare her the shame, Foster, of having consented to share the name and affections of one, who may be outlawed the very moment that he confers upon her his name."

I have said enough to exhibit the nature of this conference, which was continued twice as long. In its progress, the youth exhibited a degree of remorse and sorrow on the score of his own offences, and an honourable and delicate consideration in reference to Julia Grafton, which turned all my feelings of hostility into feelings of pity. Nor was this sentiment confined to my own bosom. I conscientiously believe that Foster sympathised with his grief, andinly determined, so far as the power in him lay, to help him to the desired remedy. The conference was ended by the latter saying to him, as he led the way back to his place of rest——

"I must think on this matter, Eberly. I will do what I can for you, but I can promise nothing. I deny not that I have influence, but my influence depends, as you well know, upon such an exercise of it as will best accord with the views and wishes of those whom I control. I am sorry for you."

The youth stood a moment when the other had gone. Then throwing his arms up to Heaven, as he turned away, he exclaimed——

"At the worst, I can but perish. But she! she at least, shall suffer nothing, either from my weakness or my love.

She, at least, shall never be wedded to my accursed secret. Sooner than that, let the bullet or the knife do its work. Thank God, amidst all my infirmities, I have no dastard fear of death;——and yet——I would live. Sweet glimpses of joy in life, such as I have never known till now, make it a thing of value. Oh! that I had sooner beheld them——I had not then been so profligate of honour——so ready to yield to the base suggestions of this wretched clan."

CHAPTER XXII.

I'll note you in my book of memory,
To scourge you for this reprehension;
Look to it well, and say you are well warned.
—— Shakspeare

The unhappy youth had scarcely gone from sight, when Mat Webber and my colleague Haller emerged from a bush opposite, not ten paces off, in which they had, equally with myself, listened to the whole dialogue as I have already narrated it.

"So!" was the exclamation of Webber, shaking his slow finger after the departing form of the youth ——"So! It is as I expected; and your doom is written, Master Eberly. Foster can save you, can he? We will see to that! It would be a difficult matter for him to save himself, were he to try it. It is well you have no hopes from me——well! I hate your girl, do I, because she is the daughter of Grafton, and hate you because you love her honourably? Well! there is truth in the notion, however your dull brains happened to hit upon it. I do hate both of you for that very reason. Had the fool used his pleasure with the girl, by God, I had forgiven him——he had had my consent to go where he pleased, and swear off from us at any moment, for he has done nothing since he has been a member——he was never of much use, and will be of still less now. But to love where I hate, is an offence I cannot so readily forgive.——No, Haller——the bullet and the knife for him. He shall keep our secrets, and his own too, if you and Williams do your duty. Ha! ——who's that?"

"Williams himself," was my answer, as I came out of my hiding place, and joined them.

"Well!——you have heard him——he avows his treason, and you know his doom. What need of delay? Go after him alone——you will not have a better place for the blow if you waited a month. Go alone, and despatch the business."

I was not prepared for so sudden a requisition, and the sanguinary and stern command at once confounded me. Yet Webber had only repeated the words of Foster. In our hands lay the award and the execution of justice. We had been instructed to punish the moment we resolved that the penalty had been incurred; and there was no reasonable pretext for doubt. What to do or say, I knew not——to think of committing the cruel deed was, of course, entirely out of the question. Fortunately, the answer of my colleague, Haller, relieved me.

"We had better wait and hear what Foster hasto say. He may not be pleased that we should proceed so suddenly, particularly when we knew that he had promised to take the affair into consideration."

"And what can his consideration come to? What can he have to say? He cannot alter the laws——he cannot acquit an offender whom we condemn——he has no power for that."

"No! He has no power for that; and, so far as my voice goes, we shall give him no such power in this instance," was the reply of Haller. "Yet, as a matter of civility only, it will be better that we should not proceed in this business till we have heard what Foster has to say. He might look upon it that we slighted his opinions, and his wishes, at the least; and there's no necessity for our seeming to do that. Besides, we cannot lose by the delay. We can execute to−morrow just as well as to−day—— Eberly cannot escape us."

"True——that's true," was the reply of Webber; "though to speak plainly, I don't like this undertaking to interfere on the part of Clem Foster. He can't certainly hope to persuade us to reverse our judgment, and let this boy loose, unmuzzled, to confuse and convict us in some of their rugged courts of justice."

"No! As you heard him say, that's a matter more easy to think upon than to do. All that Eberlycould say in a court house, could not prove against one of us, and we might hang him whenever we choose."

"Yes! But we don't want to get into a court of justice at all," said Webber; "and there's little need for it, when we have laws, and courts, and executioners of our own. I tell you, Haller, that I shall regard as an enemy any man who attempts to get this chap off from punishment. He shall die, by the Eternal."

"So he may, for what I care," said Haller.——"So, indeed, he shall, under our own certainty of what he deserves, and the power which has been intrusted to us. Be at rest, Mat Webber——I have as little reason to let Edward Eberly escape as you have. I hate him——from my heart, I hate him. He has scorned and insulted me before our men; and it will go hard with me, if I don't avenge the insult with sevenfold vengeance."

"I'm satisfied that you will keep your word, Haller; but Foster's a smooth−spoken fellow, and he may have some kink in his head for saving this chap. He used to be very fond of keeping company with him, and they were always spouting verses and such stuff together. I know, too, for all Foster speaks so promptly of punishing him, that, in his secret heart, he had much rather let Eberly go clear from punishment, though he risked the safety of the whole company by it."

"No danger of his doing it, whatever may be his wish," said Haller. "You have my oath upon it, Mat. Whatever Foster may say or do in the business, he can't say or do any thing to alter my determination.——So make yourself easy. To−morrow, or the next day, at farthest, will wind up the traitor."

"You must keep watch meanwhile upon him."

"Yes! Go about it now, Williams; look to Eberly for the space of an hour, and I will come and relieve you. I must go with Webber, to see what Foster has to say in the business; and hearken to his interference, even if we do not mind it. But I don't think he'll interfere, Mat:——The spouting poetry might please his ears well enough, but I'm convinced he could slit the pipe of the spouter the moment he was done."

"Perhaps so," was the reply of Webber; "but, at all events——"

They were leaving me now, and Haller interrupted the speaker to counsel me before he went.

"I showed you, Williams, the place where Eberly sleeps——do you think you can find it?"

"Yes——I doubt not."

"Then go to it at once, and note well who goes in to him, and who comes out. If he comes out slily, and seems disposed to make off, do not stop to consider, but give him your bullet. Be sure to do this, if you find him with his horse."

These were the instructions of Webber. The other merely said——

"Don't fear that he will try to make off. He knows such efforts cannot give him security, though he should, for the present, escape us. No!——He thinks Foster's influence can save him; and he will remain quiet in reliance upon it."

"Be not now too sure, Williams," were the parting words of Webber——"watch closely, or the fellow may escape you yet. Remember, you are on trial now; your promotion depends upon your zeal and success."

Nothing but the purposes which influenced me, could have enabled me to tolerate, with patience, such language from such a wretch. I felt my heart burn, and my blood rise, and my lip quiver, with an anger which it required all my strength of resolution to repress, every moment which I spent in my connection with this herd of rogues. They left me, and obeying their instructions, I proceeded to the place among the bushes——a leafy house——where Eberly slept; and, taking a position which enabled me to observe all the movements of its inmates, I prepared, with a thoughtful and sleepless mind, to pass away my hour of watch.

Haller afterwards related to me what took place in their interview with Foster. As he had predicted, the latter made but a feeble effort to excuse the unfortunate Eberly.

"We first tried to find out," said Haller, "if Foster was disposed to have any concealment from us; and pretending that we knew nothing of the interview between Eberly and himself, we spoke of other matters entirely. But he volunteered and told us all pretty nearly as we ourselves heard, except he may have suppressed some of those parts where Eberly spoke scornfully of Mat Webber. These he did not speak. He then asked us what we thought of the application, and when we told him that now there was no doubt that Eberly ought to to die and must die, he agreed with us entirely. Indeed, even if he had not agreed with us, he must have seen from the resolved manner in which we spoke, that it would not have been wisdom in him to express his disagreement; and his death is therefore resolved upon. We are instructed to do the business at once——better now than never——you say he is still in his house."

This conversation took place where I had been watching in front of the bushy dwelling in whichEberly slept, but my answer to the concluding question of my comrade, was a falsehood.

"Yes he is still there——no one has gone in or out since I have been here."

Nothing but the lie could save me, and I had no scruples whatsoever in telling it. I had seen persons go in and out. Scarcely had I got to my place of watch, indeed, when I saw Foster enter the dingle. I crawled closely up behind it, and heard enough to convince me that Foster was a greater hypocrite than I had thought him, yet not so bad a man.

"Eberly," he said, quickly. The youth started from the ground where I could see he was kneeling. He started

and drew a pistol in the same moment. The click of the cock warned Foster to speak again. He did so and announced his name.

"I come to warn you that you can stay here no longer. I cannot save you, Eberly. I wish I could. But that is impossible. My lips must denounce you, to keep myself unsuspected. There is a conspiracy against me, which I must foil. To seek to save you, I would only sacrifice myself and do you no service. I can do nothing, therefore, but counsel you to fly. The sooner you are off the better. Indeed, I risk not a little in coming to you now. Britton, the trusty fellow, advises me that Webber, Haller and Williams are even now denouncing me in the woods, where it seems they over−heardall our conference. It was well that I suspected them, and scrupulously addressed my words rather to their ears than yours. This will excuse to you my seeming harshness. But I can say no more. In a short time they will seek me. Take that time to be off. Fly where you can. Put the Ohio between us as soon as possible, for no residence in the southwest will save you."

But few words were uttered by the visitor; but these were enough to prompt the immediate exertions of the youth. Hitherto he had appeared to me in an attitude rather feeble and unmanly——there was something puny and effeminate in the manner of his appeal to Foster in their previous interview; but this he seemed to discard in the moment which called for resolute execution. He drew forth and reprimed his pistols, set his dirk−knife in readiness, and was ready in two minutes to depart.

"Fortunately, I left my horse on the very edge of the island!" was his self congratulating remark.

"Foster, God bless you as I do! Would that I could persuade you to fly with me."

The other shook his head.

"Go! go! that is impossible. You fly——because you have hopes to fly to.——I have none. You love, Eberly——may your love be more fortunate than mine has been——than I am disposed to think human affections generally are. It is because I too have loved, that I sympathise with you, and am willing to assist you in your flight. I know not that I am serving you, Eberly, in this, yet it is my will to serve you. Take the will for the deed and be gone with all haste. You have not a moment——adieu."

Foster left him, and an instant after, Eberly emerged from the dingle. It was in my power to have obeyed to the very letter the instructions which had been given me, and to have shot him down without difficulty. My extended arm, at one moment, as he passed from the copse, could have touched his shoulder. But my weapon was unlifted; and I felt a sudden satisfaction as I found it in my power to second the intentions of Foster. This personage had placed himself also in a more favorable light before my eyes, during the brief interview which I have narrated. It gave me pleasure to see that amidst brutal comrades, and wild, lawless and foul pursuits he yet cherished in his bosom some lingering sentiments of humanity. There was something yet in his heart which partook of the holy nature of a childhood which, we may suppose, was even blessed with hopes and kindred, and, which, however perverted now to the lessons and performances of hate, once knew what it was to do homage at the altar of confiding love. Foster, as may already have appeared to the reader, was not deficient in those requisitionsof education which refine the taste and sentiment, however much they may fail to impress themselves for good on a corrupt and insensible spirit.

To return. I denied to Haller, as already stated, that any one had gone in or out from the place where Eberly slept. In the unequivocal lie was my only hope, and I had no scruple to utter it. My comrade then spoke as follows:

"We have agreed among ourselves that he must be wound up. Foster makes no objections, and Webber insists that it be done immediately. To you it is entrusted to give the blow; and this concludes your trial. I will go in and entice him out to you. Do you creep forward as you see me enter. Stand behind you tree to the left, and I will bring him under it, on the other side. Have your pistol cocked and use it. But take care not to mistake your man. If you notice his white hat, you can't blunder. Keep quiet now, while I go in."

He left me, and I paused where I was. Musing on the unanticipated disappointment of the ruffian, a sudden whisper at my side aroused me to a recollection of myself. The voice was Webber's——he had crawled up to me with the stealthy pace of the wild cat; and my involuntary start, as he spoke, attested my wonder at the ease and dexterity of his approach.

"Why do you stand," he said in stern accents;"were you not told what to do——where to go? You have no time to waste——go forward."

Not to seem remiss, I answered promptly——

"I wished him first to get there. Both of us moving at the same time might alarm him."

"More likely to do so moving one at a time; but move now——you are slow. You will win no favour in the club if you are not more prompt."

I could have driven my fist into his teeth as he spoke thus authoritatively. But prudence stifled my anger. As it was, however, I gave a sharp reply which had in it a latent threat.

"You will find me prompt enough when the time comes, Mr. Webber."

"I hope so, I hope so," he said coolly. I went forward and reached my station but a single instant before Haller re−emerged from the copse.

"He is gone——the bird is off," he cried out as he approached.

"Ha! how is this?" exclaimed Webber, putting his hand upon my shoulder with a firm gripe—— "You have let him escape, Williams. You have slept on your post, man; or you have connived ——"

He paused, but his language, tone and manner were so irresistibly provoking, that I shook his grasp from my shoulder and facing him boldly, replied——

"It's false! whoever says it. I have done neither, sir——neither connived with him nor seen him fly. Recall your words, or by Heavens, I strike you in the mouth."

"And if you did, young'un, you'd get little profit from it. You'd get quite as good as you sent. But this is no time to vapour. It's very likely you're right and I'm wrong, and that must satisfy you at present. How is it, Haller?——Wherefore should he fly? Did you not understand that he would wait to hear Foster's decision?"

"No——I did not understand, but I inferred it. It seemed to me from the confidence which he expressed in Foster's ability to save him, that he would scarce think it policy to fly; since flight, as it indicated distrust of us, would, at once, provoke our distrust of him, and lead to a denial of his prayer. I would have sworn that we should find him here."

"He has thought better of it, and taken to his heels. But he has not gone far. He will not go far. He's to marry Grafton's daughter——I know that they're engaged and the affair is to take place very soon. I shouldn't be at all surprised from his agitation and hasty reference to Foster——not to speak of his flight now——if it is fixed for to−morrow or the next night."

There was much in this speech to confound and afflict me. "That marriage must be prevented," Iinly declared to myself——"I must risk every thing to prevent its consummation. The poor girl must not be sacrificed to such a connection. However much I may pity him"——and circumstances really began to impress me favourably toward Clifton—— "I must yet save her."

While the two confederates debated the matter, I formed my own plans.

"Mr. Webber," I said, "you have ascribed the flight of this man to my neglect, or, which is worse, my connivance; and your apology, if it may be called such, is scarcely satisfactory to me. But I leave my personal atonement over, and waive my own claims to the interests of our confederacy. I claim to pursue this man, Eberly——to pursue and put him to death. The privilege is mine, for several reasons——the principal are enough. I will establish my claim to the confidence of the confederacy, and, as the death of Eberly seems now essential to our secret, secure that. Instruct me where to seek for him——I will pursue him to Grafton's and put a stop to this wedding in the most effectual manner. Give me the necessary directions, and you shall see, that I am neither a sleeper nor a traitor. You will also see whether I am bold enough to strike either in our common cause or in defence of my own honour."

"Shrewdly crowed, young chicken, and to the purpose," was the chuckling response of Webber."Now that's what I like——that's coming out like a man, and if you succeed in doing what you promise you will undoubtedly have an equal claim on me and the confederacy. But don't misunderstand, me, Williams. I never had any doubt of your honour, and if I had, your offer now sufficiently proves me to have been wrong. I spoke from the haste and disappointment of the moment; and I have not the slightest question that Eberly took off the moment after leaving Foster. He took the alarm at something or other——and men who have in them a consciousness of wrong find cause of alarm in every thing; or it may be that he meditated flight from the first, for now I think of it, I observed when he first came that he fastened his horse on the edge of the swamp, by "Pigeon Roost Branch," which you know, Haller, is scarce a stone's throw from the main road. Though that would be a stranger plan than all, since if he meditated flight, he need not have come. He only incurred useless risk by doing so."

"He's half mad——that's it," said Haller——"but let us look if his horse is gone. That will settle our doubts. It

may be that he is still on the island somewhere."

To ascertain this fact did not take many minutes, and the absence of the horse confirmed the flight of the fugitive. I now demanded of Webber if my proffer was accepted. To go upon a mission of thiskind which would enable me to seek out and confer with Colonel Grafton, was now the dearest desire of my heart. To save his daughter was a sufficient motive for this desire——to wreak the measure of my great revenge upon the damnable fraternity with which I had herded for this single object, was no less great, if not, in a public point of view, much greater. I had a stomach for the lives of all——all. The memory of my murdered friend took all mercy from my heart.

To my question, Webber answered——

"We must see what Foster says. We will go to him at−once. I'm willing that you should go about this business, and will help you to all information; but I'm scarcely in a hurry about it now. I've been thinking it would please me better to let him marry the girl before we kill him. Then, if it so happened that I could ever lay my foot on Grafton's throat, as I hope to do before long, I could howl it in his ears, till it hurt him worse than my bullet or my knife, that his sweet Julia, his darling, of whom he is so fond, and proud, and boastful, was the wife of a common robber——a thief of the highway——a rogue to all the world, and worse than a rogue, to his own comrades. That would be a triumph, Haller; and Grafton, if I know the man rightly would go out of the world with a howl when I cried it in his ear."

Sickening at the fiendish thought, I turned withrevulsion from the fiend, and felt humbled and sad as I was constrained to follow such a ruffian in silence and without any show of that natural resentment which I felt. But I conquered my impatience as I reflected that, by delay, I hoped to obtain, at once, a complete and certain satisfaction. An image of my sanguinary revenge rose before my eyes as I then went forward; and in fancy, I beheld steaming wounds, and I felt my feet plashing in rivulets of stagnating blood——and, a strange but shuddering pleasure went through my bosom at the fancy.

CHAPTER XXIII.

——The land wants such
As dare with rigor execute the laws;
Her fester'd members must be lanced and tented:
He's a bad surgeon that for pity spares
The part corrupted, till the gangrene spreads,
And all the body perish: He that's merciful
Unto the bad is cruel to the good.
—— Randolph

Foster received the tidings of Eberly's flight with well−affected astonishment. Putting on the sternest expression of countenance, he looked on me with suspicion.

"And you were set to watch him, Williams.—— How is this? I fear you have been neglectful——you have slept upon your watch——I cannot think that you have had any intelligence with Eberly."

In answering the speaker, I strove to throw into my eyes a counselling expression, which it was my hope to make him comprehend. My answer, shaped to this object, had the desired effect.

"I have not slept, and you do me only justice, when you think that I have had no intelligence with the fugitive. But I have volunteered to pursue him,and will execute your judgments upon him, if I can; even though he should put the Ohio between us."

The reader will remember, that the phrase here italicised was employed by Foster himself, in giving his parting counsels to Eberly. Foster readily remembered it, and I could detect——so I fancied——in the tone of voice with which he addressed me in reply, a conviction that I was privy to his own partial, and, perhaps, pardonable treachery to his comrades. In every other respect he seemed unmoved, and his reply was instantaneous.

"And we accept your offer, Williams——you shall have the opportunity you seek to prove your fidelity, and secure the confidence of the club. We are agreed, Webber, are we not, that Williams shall take the track of Eberly?"

"Ay——to−morrow, though I care not that he should strike till the day following, if it be that I conjecture rightly on one matter."

"What matter? What is it that you conjecture?" demanded Foster, suspiciously.

"Why, that Eberly is about to marry Julia Grafton. It would not surprise me much if the affair takes place in a day or two.——I think it must be so, from his present anxiety."

"He would be a fool, indeed, to think of such a thing, without our permission," replied Foster; 'but even if such be the case, wherefore would youdefer execution upon him, till the day following, supposing that Williams should get a chance to strike as we blow."

"I would have the marriage completed," was the answer. "I would have Grafton's pride humbled by his daughter's union with one whom we should be able not only to destroy, but dishonor. By all that is devilish in my heart, Foster, I could risk my life freely, to tell Grafton all this story, with my own lips the day after his daughter's nuptials."

"Well, you hate fervently enough," said Foster; "and, perhaps, where one's hand's in, he may as well thrust away with his whole soul. But this helps not our purpose. It is agreed, you say, that Williams goes upon this business?"

"Yes."

"Then his course must take him at once to Grafton's neighbourhood."

"Yes——that is our course too. We meet to−morrow, you recollect, with Dillon and others, at the 'Blind.' Our beginners must be examined there."

"But Williams must start before us."

"No——it needs not" said Webber. "We need be in no hurry now, since there can be no doubt that we shall be able to find Eberly at any moment within the three next days. Williams knows that he must find him in that time,

and if he does not, send Dillon and Haller on his track, and they findhim, I'll bet my life, though they hid him in the closest scuttle−hole of Natchy swamp. Let us all go together to the meeting at the 'Blind,' and not alarm the traitor by pressing the pursuit upon him in the very moment of his flight. Let him have a little time——let him marry away, and be happy, if he can, for a night or two. It will not diminish his punishment that he has a taste only of wedlock. Julia Grafton is a sweet girl enough——I could have taken her myself, and, perhaps, been an honest overseer of her father's plantation all my life——bowing respectfully to his high mightiness, and kissing the rod of his rebuke——had he only looked a willingness to let me have her. But, as it is——let the game go! It matters not much who has what we can't have; and yet I hate Grafton so cursedly, that it gives me pleasure to think that she is to be the wife of one so completely in our power, as Edward Eberly——or Clifton, as we should call him in Grafton Lodge. Let him swing freely on his gate awhile; and Williams may take his time. He cannot escape all of us, though he may escape him."

"You will instruct Williams then, when he shall go, and where," said Foster.

"Yes——that shall be my look out. In the meantime, let us go to sleep. We have to start early, and the small hours are beginning——I can tell from the increasing darkness and the cold. Let us wrap up, and sleep fast, for we must be stirring early. Williams, I'll wake you in the morning."

"The sooner the better," was my reply; "for, between us, I don't like this putting off. If I am to go after Eberly, I'd rather start at daylight, and strike as soon as I get a chance. I hate when I have such a business on hand, to risk its justice by my own delay; particularly when delay can be avoided. Besides, I'm thinking that if Eberly marries this girl, he will be cunning enough to leave the country. Ten to one, he's made all his arrangements for an early start, and will be off on fast horses soon after the event."

"That's true," said the ruffian; "I did not think of that——you shall start as soon as possible after we have met our men at the 'Blind' to−morrow. We must meet them there first, for I have business of importance with one of them that must be seen to; and you'll have to wait till I can show you the way to Grafton's, and some few of our hiding places thereabouts."

In my eagerness, I had almost told him that I knew the place well enough, and could find it without him. My anxiety to be in season to prevent the nuptials, had nearly blinded me to the great risk of detection, to which such an avowal must have subjected me. But I met the inquiring glance of Foster's eye at this moment, and that brought me to mysenses. It taught me that I was playing a part of triple treachery, and warned me to be duly cautious of what I uttered. Without farther question or re− ply, we broke up for the night; and it seemed to me that I had scarcely got snugly into my place of rest, and closed my eyes for an instant, before I was awakened by Webber, with a summons to set for− ward. However wanting in proper rest, for my partial slumbers of the night had given me no re− freshment, I had too greatly at heart the peace of Grafton's family, and the safety of the poor girl Julia, not to leap with alacrity at the summons. Ten minutes sufficed to set us all in motion, and as the bright blaze of the sun opened upon us, we were speeding on at full gallop, some seven of us, at least, to our place of meeting at the 'Blind.' There had been, at different periods of the night, full thirty men in our bivouac in the Sipsy, but they came and went at all hours, and none remained but those who had something of the general management of the rest. Five of these were my companions now. The other two were Haller and myself. Haller, it seems, was not so much a counsellor as a trusted un− derling or orderly——a fellow sufficiently cunning to seem wise, and so much of the rogue as to deserve, even if lacking wisdom, a conspicuous place among those whose sole aim was dishonesty. But our busi− ness is not with him.

A smart ride of a few hours brought us to ourresting place, a nest of hills huddled together confusedly, and forming, with the valley already described called the "Day Blind," an hundred natural hiding places of like form and character. Here I was within a few miles only of Col. Grafton's residence. I had passed the dwelling of Matthew Webber, already so well known to the reader, and who should be my companion, side by side with me as I passed it, but Webber himself. I watched him closely when we came in sight of it, and though I could see that he regarded it with wistful attention, yet he was as silent as the grave even on the subject of his own late proprietorship; and my position was too nice and ticklish to make any reference to it, advisable on my part.

When we got to the place of rest, which was about noon, we found several of the Brotherhood already assembled, most of whom were instantly taken aside by Foster, Webber, and one or two others, who ruled with them, and underwent an examination as to what they had done or were in preparation to do. For my part I had nothing to do but saunter about like many others——lie down on the sunny knolls, and tumble among the yellow

leaves, lacking employment. This was no pleasurable exercise for one who had in his heart such an unappeasable anxiety as was then pervading mine, and which I could scarce keep from exhibition. Meantime, I couldsee men coming and going on every side; the persons seeming quite as multiformed and particoloured as the business was diverse in character in which they were engaged. While I gazed upon them without particular interest, my eyes were drawn to a group of three persons who now approached the valley from a pass through the two hills that rose before me. At the distance where I lay, I could not distinguish features, but there was an air and manner about them, which, in two of the party, compelled my closest attention. The horses which they rode seemed also to be familiar; and with more earnestness of feeling than I can now describe, or could then account for, I continued to gaze upon them, as, without approaching much nigher to where I lay, they continued their progress forward to where Foster and Webber were in the habit of receiving their followers. But, at length, overcome by strange surmises, I sprang to my feet, and shading my eyes with my hands, endeavoured to make out the parties. The next moment they disappeared behind the knoll, and, with my anxiety still unsubdued, I threw myself again upon the ground, and strove with my impatience as well as I could. Perhaps a full hour elapsed when I saw the three re−emerge from behind the knoll, and come out into the valley. They were followed by Foster, who conducted them a little aside, and the four seated themselves together for a while, onthe side of the hills; after a brief space, Foster left them and came towards me. He threw himself down beside me, with an air of weariness.

"Well, Williams, you seem to take the world easily. Here you lie, stretched at length upon the ground, as if it had no insects, and looking up to the skies as if they were never shadowed by a cloud. For my part I see nothing but insects and worms along the earth, and nothing but clouds in Heaven. This comes from the nature of our pursuits, and to speak a truth, I sometimes see a beauty in virtue which I have never been able to see in man. I almost think, if circumstances would let me, that I would steal away, like poor Eberly, from our comrades, and try to do a safer and a humbler sort of business, among better reptiles than we now work with."

This speech, if meant to deceive, did not deceive me.

"You would soon long to return, Foster, to your present companions and occupations, or I greatly mistake your temper," was my reply. "Your ambition is your prevailing principle——to sway your leading object——to be great——to have distinction, is the predominating passion of your heart."

My reply was intended merely to flatter him and it had its effect. He paused for an instant, then said with a smile,

"And you would add, Williams, that, like Milton's Devil, I am not at all scrupulous as to the sort of greatness which I aim at, or the quality of the instruments with which I wrought."

"And if I did, Foster, I do not see that the imputation would do you any discredit. Men are pretty much alike wherever we find them, and there are virtuous monsters no less than vicious ones. Circumstances after all, make the chief differences in the characters of mankind; and many a saint in white, born in my condition, would have cut many more throats than it's my hope ever to do. To rule man is to rule man——any inquiry as to the moral differences between those you rule and those you rule by, is a waste of thought, since the times, and the seasons, the winds and the weather, or a thousand differences which seem equally unreal and shadowy, are the true causes of the vices of one class and the virtues of another. A planter pays his debts and is liberal if he makes a good crop——he fails in both respects if his crop fails; and the creditor denounces him as a rogue, and sells his property under the hammer of a sheriff, while the church frowns upon him from the moment he ceases to drop his Mexican in the charity hat. Saints and devils are pretty much the same people, if the weather prevails with equal force in their favour; but when the wind changes and blights the crop of the one, and ripens that ofthe other, ten to one, the first grows to be a general benefactor and is blessed by all, while the other is driven from society as a miserable skunk, whom it is mere charity to kick out of existence. You should not bother your head in wishing for better followers or a dominion less questionable. If you have fifteen hundred men willing to fight and die for you, and not minding the laws on the subject, you are a better and greater man than the governor of Mississippi, who, do his best, cannot command fifteen hundred votes. To my mind it is clear that yours is the greater distinction."

"That is true; and yet, Williams, what is distinction, indeed, but a sort of solitude——a dreary eminence, which, though we may behold many, labouring at all seasons to scramble up its side, how few do we see able to occupy it, how much more few the number to keep it. My eminence, imposing as it may seem to you, is at best very insecure. I have rivals ——some who seek to restrain me and to crush my power, by lopping off my best friends at every opportunity and on the slightest pretences. These I am bound to save, yet I do so at great peril to

myself. I risk my own rule, nor my rule only——I risk my life daily, in this connection, by seeking to save, as I am resolute always to do, the friend, however, wanting in other respects, who has proved true to my desires and cause."

I saw which way these remarks tended; and resolved, at once, to put a satisfactory conclusion to the apprehensions which I saw prevailed in the mind of my companion. He was obliquely seeking to justify himself for his course in regard to Eberly which he saw that I knew——and, probably, he was aiming to discover in how far I might be relied on in sustaining him in any partisan conflict with the rivals of whom he spoke. My answer was not without its art; and it fully answered its intended purpose.

"You do no more than you should," was my reply. "You are bound to succour your friends even against the laws of your comrades, since they risk the peril of these laws in serving you. I understand your difficulty——Indeed, it did not need that you should declare it to me, in order to make me know it. I had not been an hour in your camp on the Sipsy before I saw the secret strife which was going on; and I may say, Foster, once for all, you may count upon me to sustain you against any rival that may be raised up in opposition to your just rule from among the confederates. Count on me, I say, to support you against Webber and his clan, for it strikes me that he is the fellow you have most to fear."

"You are right," he said grasping my hand nervously——you are quite right, and I admire your keenness of observation only less than the warmth of your personal regard for me. Webber is indeed the person who is now plotting secretly against me.—— There will be a trial of strength between us in the council of twelve to−morrow——and I shall defeat him there, though, by so small a vote that it will tend to stimulate him to still greater exertions, and to make him more inveterate in his hostility, which he has still grace enough to seek to hide."

He would probably have gone on much farther in the development of the miserable strife that followed hard upon his state, but that a movement of my own interrupted him. My eyes had been for some time turned watchfully upon the group of three persons to which I have already called the reader's attention. They had left the little knoll on which they seated themselves when Foster first emerged with them from the place of conference, and had advanced somewhat farther into the valley, and consequently rather nearer to my place of repose, which was half way down one of the hills out of which it was scooped. This approach enabled me to observe them better, and as they moved about among another party, who were pitching quoits, my eyes gradually distinguished their persons first, and at length their features. This discovery led to my interruption of Foster's developments. Whatwas my consternation and wonder to recognise John Hurdis in one, and Ben Pickett in another of this group. With difficulty I kept myself from leaping upright——my finger was involuntarily extended towards them.

"What see you?" demanded Foster looking in the same direction. His demand was a sufficient warning for me to be cautious, and yet for the life of me, I could not forbear the question in reply.

"Who are those?"

"What——the pitchers?"

"Yes——yes! and their companions——the lookers on."

"One of the pitchers is a fellow named Hatfield ——a close friend of Webber, and one of our most adroit spies——he is the fellow in green——the other two are common strikers who will set out on an expedition to−night. They are exceedingly expert horse stealers, and the people near Columbus will hear of them before they are two days older——the tallest one is named Jones——the other Baker."

"And how do they incline——towards you or Webber?" was an indifferent question almost too indifferently put to answer the purpose of a disguise to my real curiosity, for which it was intended. I heard his answer impatiently, and then with lips that trembled, I demanded——

"And who are the three lookers on? I have notseen them before?——They were not with us on the Sipsy last night?"

"No——they have just come from down the river. The smaller fellow is one of our keenest emissaries; and perhaps, one of our bravest men. He has just brought up the two men who are with him——"

"What! as prisoners?" I exclaimed in my impatience.

"Prisoners indeed! No! What should we do with prisoners? They belong to us. They are our men."

"Why then do you say he brought them up?"

"This is the affair. I have but just finished their examination. It appears that the large, fat fellow, is rather a

rich young planter some where in Marengo. He had a brother with whom he had a quarrel. This brother set off with a companion some weeks ago for the "Nation," where they proposed to enter lands. The elder brother avails himself of this opportunity to revenge himself for some indignities put upon him by the younger, and despatches after him the fellow in homespun whom you see beside him ——his hands in his breeches pockets. Webber, it appears, about the same time, laid a trap for the two travellers, one of whom fell into it very nicely——the other broke off and got away. They pursued, him, but they must have lost him, but for the timely aid of the chap in homespun, who, lying in wait, shotdown the fugitive and then made off to his employer. According to our general plan, an emissary was sent after the murderer, and in securing him, the secret of the brother was discovered. In this way, both have been secured, and are now numbered among our followers."

I have abridged Foster's narrative, in order to avoid telling a story twice. Here was a dreadful discovery. My stupid amazement cannot be described. I was literally overcome. Foster saw my astonishment and inquired into its cause. My reply was, perhaps, a sufficient reason for my astonishment, though it effectually concealed the true one.

"Good God! Can this be possible? His own brother?"

"Even so. Neither you nor I would have done such a thing, bad as we may be held by well ordered society. The fellow seems but a poor creature after all, and could hardly stand during our examination. Of such creatures, however, we make the most useful, if not the most daring members. We will let him go back to Marengo after to−morrow, and be a pillar of the church, which I think it not improbable he will instantly join, if, indeed, he be not already a member. The other fellow, who is called Pickett, takes to us with a relish, and Webber has found him a place to squat somewhere on the banks of the Big Warrior. But, a truce to this. Here Webber approaches. Do not forget Williams——and, I am your friend. We must act together for mutual benefit. Mum now!"

Webber drew nigh, bringing with him the emissary who had gone after Pickett and John Hurdis. They remained with the pitchers, among whom, I may add, Pickett was, at this time, incorporated, and working away as lustily as the most expert. But I had no time allowed me to note either his, or the labors of John Hurdis. My attention was instantly challenged by Webber, who, unless angry, was not a man of many words.

"Get yourself in readiness, Williams——I will set you on the track in an hour, and show you a part of the route."

I proceeded to obey, and it was not long, as may be conjectured, before I was properly mounted for that journey which was to eventuate in the rescue of my friend's child from the cruel sacrifice which was at hand. Webber and myself set off together. Foster shook my hand at parting, and his last phrase was one, which, between us, had a meaning beyond that which met the ear.

"I trust you will find your man, Williams, though he even puts the Ohio between us. Let us see you back soon."

I was annoyed by the searching stare of the keeneyed emissary. His eyes were never once taken from my countenance from the moment of my introduction to him; and I am sure that he had some indistinct remembrance of me, though fortunately not of a sufficiently strong character to do more than confuse him. I dreaded discovery every moment, but, though watching me keenly to the last, with a most unpleasant pertinacity of stare, he suffered me to ride away without the utterance of those suspicions which I looked momently to hear spoken.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Cold tidings, sir,
I bring you, of new sorrows. You have need
To make division of your wide estate,
And parcel out your stores. Take counsel, sir,
How you will part from life; for 'tis my fear
That you must part from hope, which life more needs,
Than the dull fare it feeds on.
—— Knight Errant

We did not delay, having now put ourselves in readiness, but, after a few brief words of parting, we left Foster and the emissary, whose searching eyes I was truly anxious to escape from. That fellow's stare gave me more uneasiness, and a greater idea of the danger that I ran, than any other one circumstance since my connection with the ruffians. Foster did not let me leave him without giving me some expressive glances. I could see that he was desirous of saying something to me, which, I fancied, must concern Eberly; but we had no opportunity for a private word after Webber joined us, and to make an opportunity was wishing far more than I desired or Foster was prepared for. Off we went at full gallop, and we were soon out of sight of theencampment, and rough hills were momently rising between us. In the course of a quarter of an hour I found myself going once more over the very spot where we found the body of William Carrington. I shuddered involuntarily as my eyes rested upon it: the next moment I saw the glance of Webber fixed curiously on the same spot, and a slight smile played upon his lips, as he caught my look of inquiry.

"A tall fellow was tumbled here only the other day," he said with an air of indifference that vexed me, "who might have been alive and kicking now, if his heels had been less active."

I now drew nigher, and pretended a curiosity to hear the story, but he baffled my desire as he replied——

"Not now——another time, when we are more at leisure I'll tell you stories of what I've seen and know, to make you open your eyes much wider than you do now. But here we reach the road, the 'Day Blind' as they call it, for it's so deep and narrow that there's always a shade over it. This road, taking the left hand fork, when you get on a mile farther, takes you direct to Grafton's. You'll see the avenue leading to the Lodge, to the right, and a pretty place enough it is. You can lie to−night at a house which you'll see two miles after you pass Grafton's, where you'll find two of our people. Give them the two first signs, and they'll know whoyou are, and provide you with any help you may call for. But the places which you must watch in particular, are the two avenues to the Lodge——the front and rear. There is a thick wood before the back avenue, where we've got one of our men watching now. You must relieve him and send him to me instantly. He will not need you to urge him to full speed if you will only remember to tell him that the saddle wants nothing but the stirrups, he'll understand that, and come."

"But what does that mean?" I demanded.

"Oh, nothing much——it's a little matter between us, that doesn't at all concern the fraternity."

"What! have you secrets which the club is not permitted to share?"

"Yes——when they do not conflict with our laws. An affair with a petticoat is a matter of this sort."

"And yet such is Eberly's affair."

"True! But Eberly would sacrifice all to the petticoat, and for that we punish him. He might go after a dozen women if he pleased, and have a seraglio like the Grand Turk, and none of us would say him nay, if he did not allow them to play Dalilah with him and get his secret. But listen now, while I give you the necessary information."

Here we stopped awhile, and he led me into the woods, where he gave me a brief account of Grafton family and Lodge, informed of one or two hidingplaces of Eberly, and even told me at what hour I might look to see him arriving at the avenue. So keen had been his watch, and that of his creatures, upon the doomed fugitive, that, as I afterwards discovered, he was not only correct to the very letter in what he told me, but he also knew every movement which his victim made; and there had not been a day, for the three months preceding, in which he had

not been able at any time to lay hands upon him. Indeed, had the directions of Webber been followed while in the Sipsy swamp, Eberly could not by any possibility have escaped, unless through my evasion of the murderous task which had been then assigned me. I need not add that such would have been the case. Regarding the unhappy youth as not undeserving of punishment, I had yet no desire to become his executioner. I had taken enough of this duty on my hands already, and my late discovery, touching John Hurdis, had increased the solemnity of the task to a degree which put the intensity of my excitement beyond all my powers of description. I could now only reflect that I had sworn in the chamber of death, and in the presence of the dead, to execute the eternal sentence of justice upon the person of my own brother. When Webber left me in that wood, I renewed the terrible oath before Heaven.

But to my present task. I rode forwards as Ihad been counselled, and soon came in sight of the well known Lodge, which, whatever might be my wish, I did not dare to enter, until I had first got out of the way of the spy whom Webber kept upon it, and whom he requested me to send to him. Avoiding the entrance accordingly I fell into a by−path, which ran round the estate, and whistling a prescribed tune, as I approached the back avenue, I had the satisfaction to hear the responsive note from the wood opposite. Who should present himself at my summons, but my ancient foe, the Tuscaloosa gambler whom they called George. I felt the strongest disposition to take the scoundrel by the throat, in a mood betwixt merriment and anger; but there was a stake of too much importance yet to be played for; and with praiseworthy patience I forbore. Subduing my voice, and restraining my mood to the proper pitch, I introduced myself to him in the prescribed form. I showed him the two first signs of the club, the sign of the striker, and the sign of the feeler——the first being that of the common horse−thief or mail robber——the other that which empowers a member to probe the nature of the man he meets and secure him, if he thinks he can, to the uses of the brotherhood. I gave him my assumed name, and the history of my membership, and then sent him on his way——happy to get him out of mine—— to the brothers in the encampment. I waited withimpatience till he had gone fairly out of sight, then, with a full heart, and a bosom bounding once more with freedom, I entered the avenue, and hurried forwards to the dwelling of my friend.

My disguise was quite as complete in concealing me from Col. Grafton, as it had been in hiding me from my foes. It was with difficulty I persuaded him to know me. His first words, after he became convinced of my identity, were——

"And the poor girl Katharine? How did she stand your tidings?"

"She is dead." I told him all the particulars; and accounted for the disguise in which I appeared, by telling him what were the novel duties which I had undertaken.

"You are a bold man——a very bold man, Mr. Hurdis——and how far have you been successful?"

Briefly, I related to him my meeting with Foster ——the success of my plans——his revelations to me—— and the progress of events until I came to the encampment in the Sipsy swamp. These he listened to with an intense interest, and frequently interrupted me to relate little incidents within his own knowledge, which, strange and unaccountable before, found an easy solution when coupled with such as I related. When I had told him thus far, I came to an uneasy halt. He had evidently no apprehension that he could be interested farther in such a narrative, than as a good citizen and a public magistrate. Finding me at a pause, he thus spoke:

"And you left these rascals in the Sipsy——you have come now for assistance, have you not?"

"You are right, Colonel——I have come to get what assistance I can to bring them to punishment. But I left them not in the Sipsy——they are nigher than you think for; and much more conveniently situated for a surprise."

"Ha!——in the 'Day Blind'——is it so? That has long been a suspicious place——and if my conjecture is right, I will do my best to ferret them out, and clear it for good and all."

"They are near it, if not in it," was my reply. I proceeded to describe the place which he very well knew.

"In three days more, Hurdis, I shall be ready for the hunt. We cannot conveniently have it sooner; since a little domestic matter will, for the next day or two, take up all my attention; and I must forget the magistrate for a brief period in the father. You are come in season, my friend, for our family festivities. My daughter, you must know, ——"

"Let me stop you, Colonel Grafton——I do know; and I trust you will not regard the bearer of ill tidings as responsible for the sorrow which he brings.Your daughter, you would tell me, is to be married to Mr. Clifton——"

"Yes——it is that. But what ill tidings?"

"Mr. Clifton is with these ruffians——I saw him in the Sipsy swamp."

"What! a prisoner?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing worse, I trust. They have not murdered him, Mr Hurdis? He lives?"

"He lives, but is no prisoner, Colonel Grafton. It is my sorrow to be compelled to say, that he was with them voluntarily when I saw him."

"How! I really do not understand you."

I hurried over the painful recital, which he heard in speechless consternation. The strong man failed before me. He leaned with a convulsive shudder against the mantel place, and covered his face with his hands. While he stood thus, his daughter entered the room, with a timid and sweet smile upon her lips, but shrunk back the moment that she saw me. As yet, none of the family but Colonel Grafton himself, knew who I was. The father turned as he heard her voice.

"Julia," he said, "my daughter,"——go to your chamber——remain there till I send for you. Do not leave it."

His voice was mournful and husky, though he strove to hide his emotion. She saw it, and preparedto obey. He led her by the hand to the door, looking back at me the while; and when there, she whispered something in his ears. He strove to smile as he heard it, but the effort was a feeble and ineffectual one.

"Go to your mother, my child——tell her that it matters nothing. And do you keep your chamber. Do not come down stairs till I call you."

The girl looked at him with some surprise, but she did not utter the question, which her eyes sufficiently spoke. Silently she left the room, and he returned to me instantly.

"Hurdis, you have given me a dreadful blow; and I cannot doubt that what you told me, you believe to be the truth. But may you not be deceived? It is every thing to me and my child, if you can think so——it is more important, if you are not, that I should be certified of the truth. You saw Clifton in the swamp with these villains——that I doubt not. It may be too that you heard them claim him as a colleague. This they might do——such villains would do any thing——they might claim me as well as you ——for the horse thief and the murderer would not scruple to rob the good name from virtue, and murder the fair reputation of the best of us. They have sought to destroy me thus already. Tell me then on what you ground your belief——give me the particulars. It may be, too, that Clifton, if he leagues with them at all, does so for some purpose like your own."

How easy would it have been to deceive the father——to persuade him to believe any thing which might have favoured his desires, though against the very face of reason and reflection.

"I would I could answer you according to your wish, but I cannot. I have told you nothing but the truth——what I know to be the truth——if the confessions of Clifton himself, in my hearing, and to the leader of this banditti, can be received in evidence."

"His own confessions——Great God!——can it be possible! But I hear you. Go on, Mr. Hurdis—— tell me all. But take a chair, I pray you. Be seated, if you please, for I must."

He strode over the floor towards a seat, with a slowness of movement which evidently proceeded from a desire to conceal the feebleness of body which he certainly felt, and to a certain extent exhibited. He sunk into the chair, his hands clasped, and drooping between his knees, while his head was bent forward, in painful earnestness, as I proceeded in my story. I related, step by step, all the subsequent particulars in my own narrative, suppressing those only which did not concern Clifton. He heard me patiently, and without interruption, to the end. A single groan only escaped him as I concluded; and one brief exclamation declared for whose sake only, all his suffering was felt——

"My poor, poor Julia!"

Well might this be his exclamation; and as it came from his lips, while his eyes were closed, and his head fell forward upon his breast——I could see the cherished hopes of a life vanishing with the breath of a single moment. That daughter was the pride of his noble heart. Nobly had he taught——dearly had he cherished her; with a fond hand he had led her along the pleasant paths of life, securing her from harm, and toiling with equal care, for her happiness. And all for what? My heart joined with his, as I thought over these things, and it was with difficulty I could keep my lips from saying after his own——"poor, poor Julia!"

At this moment a servant entered the apartment.

"Mr. Clifton, sir!"

"Ha! comes he then!" was the sudden exclamation of the father, starting from his chair, and, in a single instant, throwing aside the utter prostration of soul which appeared in his features, and which now gave place to a degree of energy and resolution, which fully spoke for the intense fire which had been kindled in his heart.

"Show him in!"

The servant disappeared.

"This night, Mr. Hurdis, this man was to have married my daughter. You have saved us just in time. You speak of his repentance——you have almost striven to excuse him——but it will not answer. I thank you——thank you from my heart——that you have saved us from such connection. Step now into this chamber. You shall hear what he will say—— whether he will seek to carry out his game of deception; and, to the last, endeavour to consummate by villany, what his villany had so successfully begun. It is but right that you should hear his answers to my accusation. He may escape the vengeance of his brother scoundrels——but me he shall not escape. He comes——into that chamber, Mr. Hurdis, I must beg you to retire——bear with me if I seem rude in hurrying you thus. My misery must excuse me, if I am less heedful than I should be of ordinary politeness."

Thus, with that nice consideration of character which made him somewhat a precisian in manners, he strove to forget his own feelings in his effort to avoid offending mine. At that moment I could have forgiven him a far greater display of rudeness than that for which he apologised. When I looked upon the face of that father, solicitous to the last degree for the welfare of the beloved child of whom such care had been taken, and thought upon the defeat of all his hopes, and possibly all of hers, which had followedmy narration, I could not but wonder at the iron strength of soul which could enable him to bear his disappointment so bravely.

He conducted me into the little room, to which for the present he had consigned me, and taking from it a small mahogany box, which I readily conceived to be a case of pistols, he returned instantly to the apartment which I left, where, a moment after, he was joined by Clifton.

CHAPTER XXV.

To what gulfs
A single deviation from the track
Of human duties, leads ever those who claim
The homage of mankind!
—— Sardanapalus

"Colonel Grafton."

"Mr. Clifton," were the simple forms of address employed by the two on first encountering.

"You are surprised to see me so soon, Colonel Grafton," was the somewhat abrupt speech of Clifton the next minute.

"Surprised! not a whit, sir," was the quick reply. "You were looked for."

"Looked for, sir! Ah! yes, of course, I was expected to come, but not yet, sir——not for some hours. You looked for me, indeed, but you scarcely looked for the person who now seeks you; and when you know the business which brings me, Colonel Grafton, you will not, I am afraid, hold me so welcome as before."

"Why should you be afraid, Mr. Clifton? Believe me you were never more welcome than at thisvery moment——never!" was the grave and emphatic reply. "You seem surprised, sir, that I should say so, but wherefore? Are you surprised that I should promptly welcome the man who seeks to do so much honor to my family as to become one of it? Why do you look on me so doubtingly, Mr. Clifton? Is there anything so strange in what I say?"

"No, sir, nothing, unless it be in the manner of your saying it. If you speak, Colonel Grafton, in sincerity, you add to the weight of that humility which already presses me to the earth——if in derision ——if with a foreknowledge of what I come to say—— then, I must only acknowledge the justice of your scorn and submit myself to your indignation."

"Of what you came to say, Mr. Clifton?" slowly replied the half hesitating listener. "Speak it out then, sir, I pray you——let me hear what you came to speak. And in your revelations do not give me credit for too great a foreknowledge, or you may make your story too costive for the truth. Proceed, sir——I listen."

"You seem already to have heard something to my disadvantage, Colonel Grafton. It is my misfortune that you have not heard all that you might have heard——all that you must hear. It is my misery that my lips alone must tell it."

The unfortunate young man paused for an instant,as if under the pressure of emotions too painful for speech. He then resumed:

"I come, sir, to make a painful confession; to tell you that I have imposed upon you, Colonel Grafton——dreadfully imposed upon you——in more respects than one."

"Go on, sir."

"My name, sir, in the first place, is not Clifton but——"

"No matter, sir, what it is! Enough, on that point, that it is not what you call it. But the letters, sir——what of them? How came you by letters of credit and introduction from my known and tried friends in Virginia?"

"They were forged, sir."

"Well, I might have known that without asking. The one imposition fairly implies the other."

"But not by me, Colonel Grafton."

"They were used by you, and you knew them to be forged, sir. If your new code of morality can find a difference between the guilt of making the lie, and that of employing it when made, I shall be informed, sir, if not pleased. Go on with your story which seems to concern me; and, considering the manner of its beginning, the sooner you bring it to an end the better. What, may I ask, did you propose to yourself to gain by this imposition?"

"At first, sir, nothing. I was the creature——the base instrument of the baser malice of another. Without any object myself, at first, I was weak enough to labor thus criminally for the unworthy objects of another."

"Ha! indeed! For another. This is well——this is better and better, sir; but go on——go on."

"But when my imposition, sir, had proved so far successful as to bring me to the knowledge and the

confidence of your family——when I came to know the treasure you possessed in the person of your lovely daughter——"

"Stay, sir——not a word of her. Her name must not pass your lips in my hearing, unless you would have me strike you to my feet, for your profanity and presumption. It is wonderful to me, now, how I can forbear."

"Your blow, though it crushed me into the earth, could not humble me more, Colonel Grafton, than my own conscience has already done. I am not unwilling that you should strike. I came here this day to submit, without complaint or prayer, to any punishment which you might deem it due to your injured honour to inflict. But, as a part of the reparation which I propose to make to you, it is my earnest desire that you should hear me out."

"Reparation, sir——reparation! Do you talk to me of reparation——you that have stolen into mybosom, like an insidious serpent, and tainted the happiness, and poisoned all the springs of joy which I had there. Tell your story, sir——say all that you deem essential to make your villany seem less, but do not dare to speak of reparation for wrongs that you cannot repair——wounds that no art of yours, artful though you have proved yourself, can ever heal."

"I do not hope to repair——I feel that it is beyond my power to heal them. I do not come for that. I come simply to declare the truth——to acknowledge the falsehood——and, in forbearing to continue a course of evil, and in professing amendment for the future, to do what I can for the atonement of what is evil in the past. To repair my wrongs to you and yours, Colonel Grafton, is not within my hope. If it were, sir, my humility would be less than it is, and, perhaps, your indulgence greater."

"Do not trust to that, sir——do not trust to that. But we will spare unnecessary words. Your professions for the future are wise and well enough; it is to be hoped that you will be suffered to perform them. At present, however, our business is with what is past, of evil, not with what is to come, of good. You say that you were set on by another to seek my confidence——that another prepared the lies by which you effected your object. Who was that other? Who was that master spirit to which your own yielded such sovereign control over truth and reason, and all honesty? Answer me that, if you would prove your contrition."

"Pardon me, sir, but I may not tell you that. I may not betray the confidence of another, even though I secured your pardon by it."

"Indeed! But your principles are late and reluctant. This is what is called 'honour amongst thieves.' You could betray my honour, and the confidence of a man of honour, but you cannot betray the confidence of a brother rogue."

"My wrong to you, Colonel Grafton, I repent too deeply to suffer myself to commit a like wrong against another, however unworthy he may be. Let me accuse myself, sir; let me, I pray you, declare all my own offences, and yield myself up to your justice, but do not require me to betray the secrets of another."

"What! though that other be a criminal——though that other be the outlaw from morals, which you should be from society, and trains his vipers up to sting the hands that take them into the habitations of the unwary and the confiding! Your sense of moral justice seems to be strangely confounded, sir."

"It may be——I feel it is, Colonel Grafton, but I am bound to keep this secret, and will not reveal it. It is enough that I am ready to suffer for the offence towhich I have weakly and basely suffered myself to be instigated."

"You shall suffer, sir; by the God of Heaven you shall suffer, if it be left in this old arm to inflict due punishment for your treachery. You shall not escape me. The sufferings of my child shall determine yours. Every pang which she endures shall drive the steel deeper into your vitals! But proceed, sir, you have more to say. You have other offences to narrate——I will hear you."

"I feel that you will not heed my repentance. I know, too, why your indulgence should be beyond my hope. I do not ask for forgiveness, which I know it to be impossible that you should grant; I only pray that you will now believe me, Colonel Grafton, for before Heaven I will tell you nothing but the truth."

"Go on, sir, tell your story; your exhortation is of little use, for the truth needs no prayer for its prop. It must stand without one or it is not truth. As for my belief, that cannot affect it. Truth is as certainly secure from my doubts, as I am sorry to think she has been foreign to your heart for a long season. If you have got her back there, you are fortunate, thrice fortunate. You will do well if you can persuade her to remain. Go on, go on, sir."

"Your unmeasured scorn, Colonel Grafton, helpsto strengthen me. It is true, it cannot lessen my offence to you and yours, but it is no small part of the penalty which should follow them; and holding it such, my punishments

grow lighter with every moment which I endure them."

"Trust not that. I tell you, William Clifton, or whatever else may be your true name——for which I care not——that I have that tooth of fire gnawing in my heart, which nothing, perhaps, short of all the blood which is in yours can quench or satisfy. Think not that I give up my hope of revenge as I consent to hear you. The delay but whets the appetite. I but seek in thought for the sort of punishment which would seem most fitting to your offence."

"I will say nothing, Colonel Grafton, to arrest or qualify it——let your revenge be full. The blood will not flow more freely from my heart, when your hand shall knock for it, than does my present will, in resignation, to your demand for vengeance. Let me only, I pray you, say a few words, which it seems to me will do you no offence to hear, and which I feel certain it will be a great relief to me to speak. Will you hear me, sir?"

The humility of the guilty youth seemed not without its effect on the heated, but noble old man, who replied promptly:

"Surely, sir——God forbid that I should refuse to hear the criminal. Go on——speak."

"I am come of good family, Colonel Grafton——" began the youth.

"Certainly——I doubt not that. Never rogue yet that did not."

A pause ensued. The voice of the youth was half stifled, as with conflicting emotions, when he endeavoured to speak again. But he succeeded.

"I am an only son——a mother——a feeble, infirm mother——looked to me for assistance and support. A moment of dreadful necessity pressed upon us, and in the despair and apprehension which the emergency brought with it to my mind, I committed an error——a crime, Colonel Grafton——I appropriated the money of another!"

"A fit beginning to so active a life——but go on."

"Not to my use, Colonel Grafton——not to my use, nor for any pleasure or appetite of my own, did I apply that ill got spoil.——It was to save from suffering and a worse evil, the mother which had borne me."

"I believe, Mr. Clifton, in no such necessity," was the stern reply. "In a country like ours, no man need steal, nor lie, nor cheat. The bread of life is procured with no difficulty by any man having his proportion of limbs and sinews, and not too lazy and vicious for honest employment. You could surely have relieved your parent without a resort to the offence you speak of."

"True, sir——I might. But I did not know it then ——I was a youth without knowledge of the world or its resources. Brought up in seclusion, and overcome by the sudden terror of debt, and the law ——"

"Which, it seems, has kept you in no such wholesome fear to the end of the chapter. Pity for both our sakes that it had not. But to make a long story short, Mr. Clifton, and to relieve you from the pleasure or the pain of telling it, know, sir, that I am acquainted with all, and, perhaps, much more than you are willing to relate."

"Indeed, sir——but how——how came you by this knowledge?"

"That is of no importance, or but little. Not an hour before you made your appearance, I received an account of your true character and associates—— thank Heaven! in sufficient time to be saved from the fatal connection into which my child had so nearly fallen."

"She should not have fallen, Colonel Grafton," said Clifton solemnly. "I came on purpose to declare the truth, sir."

"So I believe, Mr. Clifton; and it is well for you,and, perhaps, well for me, that you were so prompt to declare the truth when you made your appearance. Had you but paused for five minutes——had you lingered in your self exposure——I had put a bullet through your head with as little remorse, as I should have shot the wolf which aimed to prey upon my little ones. I had put my pistols in readiness for that purpose. They are this instant beneath my hands. Nothing but your timely development could have saved you from death, and even that would not have availed, but that you have shown a degree of contrition during your confession, to which I could not shut my eyes. Know, sir, that I not only knew of the deception practised upon me, but of your connection with the daring outlaws who overrun the country; and from whom, by the way, you have much more at this moment to fear, than you can ever have reason to fear from me. Their emissaries are even now in pursuit of you, thirsting for your blood."

"Colonel Grafton, tell me——I pray you tell me—— how know you all this."

"Is it not true?"

"Ay!——ay! true as Gospel, though my lips, though I perished for denying, should never have revealed it."

"What! you would still have kept bond with these outlaws?"

"No, sir; but I would not have revealed their secrets."

"But you shall sir——you shall do more. You shall guide me and others to the place where they keep. You shall help to deliver them into the hands of justice."

"Never, sir! never!" was the quick reply.

"Then you perish by the common hangman, Mr. Clifton," said Colonel Grafton. "Either you deliver them up to punishment, or you die for your share in their past offences."

"Be it so——I can perish, you will find, without fear, though I may have lived without honour. Let me leave you now, Colonel Grafton——let me pass."

"You pass not here, while I have strength to keep you, sir," said Grafton; and as these words reached my ears, I heard a rushing sound, and then a struggle. With this movement, I opened the door, and entered the apartment. They were closely grappled as they met my sight, and though it was evident enough that Eberly studiously avoided the application of his whole force in violence to Grafton, it was not the less obvious that he was using it all in the endeavor to elude him, and break away. I did not pause a moment to behold the strife, but making forward, I grasped the fugitive around the body, and lifting him from the floor, laid him, in another instant, at full length upon it. This done, I put my knee upon his breast, and presenting my dirk knife to his throat I exacted from him a constrained and sullen submission.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The sun has set;
A grateful evening doth descend upon us,
And brings on the long night.
—— Schiller

To dispose of him now was a next consideration, and one of some little difficulty. It was no wish of mine, and certainly still less a wish with Colonel Grafton, to hold the unfortunate and misguided youth in bondage for trial by the laws. This was tacitly understood between us. By the statements of his associates, it was clear enough that he had been a profitless comrade, doing nothing to earn the applause, or even approval of the criminal; and as little, if we except the mere fact of his being connected with such a fraternity, to merit the punishment of the laws. His hands had never been stained by blood; and, setting aside his first offence against virtue, and that which brought him into such perilous companionship with vice, we knew nothing against him of vicious performance. Apart from this, the near approximation which he had made towards a union with the family of Colonel Grafton, howevermortifying such an event may have become to his pride, was calculated to produce a desire in his mind that as little notoriety as possible should be given to the circumstances; and even had Eberly been more guilty than he was, I, for one, would rather infinitely have suffered him to escape, than to subject the poor girl, whose affections he had won, to the constant pain which she must have felt by the publication of the proceedings against him. Even as it was, her trial was painful enough, as well to those who witnessed her sufferings, as to the poor heart that was compelled to bear them. Enough of this at present.

But it was essential at this moment, when it was our design to entrap the heads of the "Mystic Brotherhood," that Eberly, though we refrained to prosecute him before the proper tribunal, should not be suffered to escape our custody. By his reluctance to accuse, or to act against these outlaws, he evidently held for them a degree of regard, which might prompt him, if permitted, to apprise them of their danger, even though he may have held himself aloof, as he had promised, from all future connection with them. But how and where to secure him was another difficulty for which an answer was not so readily provided. To imprison him in the dwelling, in which that very day he was to have found his bride, and in which, as yet uninformed of the melancholy truth, that unconscious and full heartedmaiden was even then preparing to become so, was a necessity of awkward complexion; and yet to that necessity we were compelled to come. After deliberating upon the matter with an earnestness which left no solitary suggestion unconsidered, the resolution was adopted to secure the prisoner in the attic until our pursuit of his comrades was fairly over. This, it was our confident hope, would be the case by the close of the day following, and only until that time did we resolve that he should be a prisoner. His comrades once secured, and his way of flight, it was intended, should be free. How our determination on this subject was evaded and rendered unavailing, the following pages will show.

His course once resolved upon, and the measures of Colonel Grafton were prompt and decisive.

"Keep watch upon him here, Hurdis——let him not stir, while I prepare Mrs. Grafton with a knowledge of this unhappy business. My daughter, too, must know it soon or late, and better this hour than the next, since the strife will be the sooner over. They must be out of the way when we take him up the stairs——out of hearing as out of sight. Once there, I have a favourite fellow who will guard him as rigidly as I should myself."

He left me, and was gone, perhaps, an hour——it was a tedious hour to me in the painful watch that was compelled to keep over the unhappy prisoner.In this time he had communicated the discovery both to his wife and Julia; and a single shriek, that faintly reached our ears, and the hurried pace of many feet going to and fro in the adjacent chambers, apprised us of the very moment when the soul of the poor maiden was anguish−stricken by the first intelligence of her hapless situation. My eye was fixed intently upon the face of Eberly, and when that shriek reached us, I could see a smile, which had in it something of triumph, overspread his cheek, and, though it did not rest there a single moment, it vexed me to behold it.

"Do you exult!" I demanded, "that you have made a victim of one so lovely and so young? Do you rejoice, sir, in the pang that you inflict?"

"No! God forbid"——was his immediate answer. "If it were with me now, she should instantly forget not only

her present, but all sorrows——she should forget that she had ever known so miserable a wretch as myself. But is it wonderful that I should feel a sentiment of pleasure, to find myself an object of regard in the eyes of one so pure——so superior? Is it strange that I should rejoice to find that I am not an outcast from all affections, as I am from all hopes; that there is one angelic spirit who may yet intercede for me at the bar of Heaven, and pray for, and command mercy, though she may not even hope for it on earth?"

Grafton now returned, and the flush of anger was heightened on his face, though I could see a tear even then glistening in his eye.

"Mr. Clifton," he said calmly, but peremptorily ——"we must secure your person for the night."

"My life is at your service, Colonel Grafton——I tender it freely. As I have no hopes in life now, I do not care to live. But I will not promise to remain bound if I can break from my prison. I came to you of my own free will, without any impulse beside; and, though I thought it not unlikely when I came, and revealed my story, that you would take my life, I had no fear that you would constitute yourself my gaoler. I am not prepared for bonds."

"Make what distinctions you please," was the cold reply——"you hear my resolution. It will be my fault if you escape, until I myself declare your freedom. I trust that you will not render it necessary that we should use force to place you in the chamber assigned for you."

"Force!" he exclaimed fiercely, and there was a keen momentary flashing of the youth's eye, as he heard these words, that proved him a person to resent as quickly as he felt; but the emotion soon gave way to another of more controlling influence. His tone changed to mildness, as he proceeded:

"No, sir——no force shall be necessary. Lead me where you please. Do with me as you please. Iknow not whether it would not be better and wiser for me, henceforward, to forego my own will and wishes altogether. God knows it had been far better and wiser, had I distrusted them half as much hitherto as I now distrust them. I had now——but, lead on, sir——conduct me as you will, and where you will. I will not trouble you longer——even with my despondency. It is base enough to be humbled as I am now——I will not farther debase myself by the idle language of regret. I have put down a boy's stake in the foolish game which I have played——I will bear with its loss as a man. I will go before you, sir, or follow even as you desire. It shall not be necessary to employ violence. I am ready."

We could not help pitying the youth, as we conducted him up stairs into the small garret−room, which had been prepared for him. He was evidently of noble stuff at first——naturally well fashioned in mind and moral——with instincts, which, but for circumstances, would have carried him right——and feelings gentle and noble enough to have wrought excellence within him, could it have been that he had been blessed with a better education, and less doubtful associates, than it was his fortune to have found. He certainly rose greatly in my esteem within the last two hours, simply by the propriety of his manners, and the degree of correct feeling with which he had, without any ostentation, coupledtheir exhibition. Securing the windows as well as we could, and placing a sturdy and confidential servant at the door of the chamber, which was double−locked upon him, we descended to the lower apartment, where we immediately proceeded to confer upon the other toils before us.

"There is some public good," said Colonel Grafton, with a degree of composure, which spoke admirably for the control which his mind had over his feelings——"There is some public good coming from the personal evil which has fallen to my lot. The proposed festival, which was this night to have taken place, brings together the very friends, as guests, whom I should have sought in our proposed adventure to−morrow, and whom it would have taken me some time to have hunted up, and got in readiness. Our party was to have been large——and I trust that it will be, though the occasion now is so much less loving and attractive than was expected."

This was said with some bitterness, and a pause ensued, in which Grafton turned away from me and proceeded to the window. When he returned, he had succeeded quite in obliterating the traces of that grief which he was evidently unwilling that his face should show. He continued:

"We shall certainly have some fifteen able−bodied and fearless men, not including ourselves; there may be more. Some of them will, I am sure, bringtheir weapons; they have done so usually; and for the rest, I can make out to supply them, I think. You shall see, I have a tolerable armoury, which though any thing but uniform, can be made to do mischief in the hands of men able and willing enough when occasion serves to use it. There is a rifle or two, an old musket, two excellent double−barrelled guns, and a few pistols, all of which can be made use of. You, I believe, are already well provided."

I showed him my state of preparation, and he then proceeded.

"I know the region where these fellows harbour, much better than you do, and, perhaps, much more intimately than they imagine. My plan is to surprise them by daybreak. If we can do this, our fifteen or twenty men will be more than a match for their thirty. And then, I trust, we have no less an advantage in the sort of men we bring to the conflict; men of high character, and among the most resolute of the surrounding country. I have no doubts that we shall be able to destroy at least one half of them, and disperse the rest. We must strike at your master−spirits——your Foster and your Webber——though the former, according to your account, seems not without his good qualities. The latter is a tough villain, but he fears me, deny it as he may. If he did not, having such a feeling towards me as he has so openly avowed, he would have drawn trigger on me before now. I must endeavour, this time, to wipe out old scores, and balance all my accounts with him. These two, and one or two more provided for, and we may be content with the dispersion of the rest. I care nothing for the pitiful rascals that follow——let them go."

But such was not my thought. There was one of these pitiful rascals whom it brought the scarlet to my cheek to think on. Brother though he was, he was the murderer of William Carrington, and I had sworn, and neither he nor Pickett could escape, according to my oath. But of this I said nothing to Colonel Grafton. I was resolved that John Hurdis should perish, but that he should perish namelessly. There was a family pride still working in my breast, that counselled me to be silent in respect to him. We proceeded in our arrangements.

"There are two fellows belonging to this clan," said Grafton, "that lodge, if I recollect rightly what you said, some two miles below me."

"Yes, at a place called 'the Trap Hole,' if you know such a spot; it was described to me so that I could find it easily, but I know nothing of it."

"I know it well——it's an old hiding place; but I had not thought the hovel was inhabited. These fellows must be secured to−night at an early hour. They are spies upon us, I doubt not, and will reportevery thing that happens, if they see anything unusual. Certainly, it is our policy to clear our own course as well and speedily as possible; and as soon as our men come, which will be by dark or before, we will set forth as secretly as we may, to take them into custody. This, as you have the signs which they acknowledge, can be done without risk. You shall go before, and set them at rest, while we surround the house and take them suddenly. They will hardly life weapon when they see our force; and, once in our possession, we will take a lesson from the book of Master Webber and rope them down in the woods, with a handful of moss in their mouths to keep them from unnecessary revelations."

Such, so far, was our contemplated plan. It was the most direct of any, and, indeed, we hardly had a choice of expedients. To come upon our enemy by surprise, or in force, was all that we could do, having so little time allowed us for preparation of any sort. It was fortunate that we had a man like Grafton to manage——a man so well esteemed by the friends he led, and so worthy in all respects of the confidence they put in him. As the hour drew nigh, and the looked for guests began to assemble, he rose superior to the paternal situation in which he stood, and seemed to suppress the father in the man and citizen. He revealed separately to each ofhis guests the affair as it now stood, upon which they had been summoned together, then submitted the new requisition which he made upon their services, as a friend and magistrate alike. With one voice they proclaimed themselves ready to go forth against the common enemy, and with difficulty were restrained from precipitating the assault; changing the hour to midnight from the dawn. This rashness was fortunately overruled, though it could scarcely have been thought rashness, if all the men had possessed an equal knowledge with Colonel Grafton, of the place in which the outlaws harboured. To quiet the more impetuous among his guests, he led them out after dark, in obedience to our previous resolve, to take the two fellows at 'the Trap Hole,' and, I may say, in brief, that we succeeded to a tittle in making them prisoners just as we had arranged it. Surprise was never more complete. We roped them to saplings in a thicket of the woods, filled their mouths with green moss, and the arms of which we despoiled them, enabled us the better to meet their comrades.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Had we never lov'd so kindly,
Had we never lov'd so blindly:
Never met or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken hearted.
—— Burns

We completed our preparations at an early hour, and by midnight were ready to depart on our work of peril. We had so arranged it as not to go forth en masse——it was feared that, if seen, our array would occasion apprehension, and possibly lead to a detection and defeat of all our plans. By twos and threes, therefore, our men set forth, at different periods, with the understanding that, taking different routes, we were all to rendezvous at the "Day Blind," by one o'clock, or two, at farthest. The onslaught we proposed to make with the first blush of the morning. I remained, with two others, behind with Colonel Grafton, until the designated hour drew nigh; then, with emotions exciting in the last degree, and greatly conflicting with each other, I mounted my steed, and we took our departure for the place agreed on. Let us now return, for a fewmoments, to the unhappy maiden, whose bridal night was so suddenly changed to gloom from festivity. We were permitted to see nothing of her sorrows. When first stricken by the intelligence which her father gave of her felon lover, her grief had shown itself in a single sudden shriek, a fainting fit, and, for some time after, a complete prostration of all her physical powers. Restorative medicines were given her, and it was only when she was believed to be in a deep and refreshing slumber, that her mother retired to her own apartment. But the maiden did not sleep. The medicines had failed to work for her that oblivion, that momentary blindness and forgetfulness, which they were charitably intended to occasion. The desire to relieve her mother's anxiety, which she witnessed, led her to an undoubted effort at composure, and she subdued her sorrows so far, as to put on the aspect of a quiet apathetic condition, which she was very far from enjoying. She seemed to sleep, and as the hour was late, her mother, availing herself of the opportunity, retired for the night, leaving her daughter in charge of a favourite nurse, who remained in the apartment. Julia, who was no less watchful than suffering, soon discovered that her companion slept. She rose gently, and hurried on her clothes. Her very sorrows strengthened her for an effort totally inconsistent with her prostration but a little while before; andthe strange and perilous circumstances in which Eberly stood, prompted her to a degree of artfulness, which was alike foreign to her nature and education. The seeming necessity of the case could alone furnish its excuse. She believed that the life of the youth was jeoparded by his position. In the first feeling of anger, her father had declared him to be liable to the last punishments of the law, and, in the same breath, avowed himself, as an honest magistrate, bound to inflict them. She was resolved, if possible, to defeat this resolution, and to save the unhappy youth, whom, if she might no longer look upon with respect, she, at least, was still compelled to love. Without impugning the judgment of her father, she felt the thought to be unendurable, which told her momently of the extreme peril of the criminal; and, under its impulse, she was nerved to a degree of boldness and strength, quite unlike the submissive gentleness which usually formed the most conspicuous feature in her character and deportment. We have already seen that it was really no part of Grafton's desire, whatever might be the obnoxiousness of Eberly to the laws, to bring him to trial. Though evidently connected with the banditti that infested the country, and, strictly speaking, liable to all the consequences of their crimes——yet the evidence had been conclusive to Grafton, that the unhappy youth had shared in none of their performances. Could he have proved specifically any one offence against him, Grafton must have brought him to punishment, and would have done so, though his heart writhed at its own resolution; but it was with a feeling of relief, if not of pleasure, that he found no such evidence, and felt himself morally, if not legally, freed from the necessity of prosecution, which such a knowledge must have brought with it. To secure Eberly until his late associates were dispersed or destroyed, was the simple object of his detention; for, to speak frankly, it was Grafton's fear, that if suffered to go forth, he might still be carried back, by the desperate force of circumstances, to the unholy connections from which he had voluntarily withdrawn himself. He had no confidence in the avowed resolutions of the youth, and deemed it not improbable, that, as his repentance seemed originally to have been the result of his attachment to Julia, the legitimate consequence of her rejection would be to throw him back upon his

old principles and associates. But this doubt did injustice to the youth. The evil aspects of crime had disgusted him enough, even if the loveliness of virtue had failed to persuade him. His resolution was fixed, and considering his moral claims alone, without reference to the exactions of society, it may be safely said, that never was Eberly more worthy ofthe love of Julia Grafton, than at the very moment when it was lost to him forever.

With cautious hands she undid the fastening of her apartment, and, trembling at every step, but still resolute, she ascended the stairs which led up to the garret chambers. In one of these Eberly was confined. From this——as there was but a single window, to leap from which would have been certain death——there was no escape, save by the door, and this was securely fastened on the outside, and the key in the possession of a faithful negro, to whom Colonel Grafton had given particular instructions for the safe keeping of the prisoner. But the guardian slept on his post, and it was not difficult for Julia to detach the key from where it hung, upon the fore−finger of his outstretched hand——this she did without disturbing him in the slightest degree. In another moment she unclosed the door, and fearlessly entered the chamber.

"Julia!"——was the exclamation of the prisoner, as, with a fresh sentiment of joy and love, he beheld her standing before him. "Julia, dear Julia, do I indeed behold you? You have not then forgotten—— you do not then scorn the wretch who is an outcast from all beside?"

He approached her. Her finger waved him back, while she replied, in melancholy accents:

"Clifton, you must fly. You are in danger—— your very life is endangered, if you linger here."

"My life!" replied the criminal, in tones of melancholy despair. "My life! Let them take it. If I must leave you, Julia, I care not to live. Go to your father——let him bring the executioner——you will see that I will not shrink from the defiling halter and the cruel death——nay, that I will smile at their approach, when I am once assured that I cannot live for you."

"And you cannot!" said the maiden, in sad but firm accents. "You must forget that thought, Clifton——that wish, if, indeed, it be your wish. You must forget me, as it shall now be the chief task of my life, to forget you."

"And can you, Julia——can you forget me, after those hours of joy——those dear walks, and the sweet delights of so many precious, and never−to−be−forgotten meetings? Can you forget them, Julia? Nay, can you desire to forget them? If you can——if such be, indeed, your desire, then death shall be doubly welcome——death in any form. But I cannot believe it, Julia——I will not. I remember——but no! I will not remind you——I will not seek to remind you, when you declare your desire to forget. Why have you sought me here, Julia? Know you not what I am——have you not been told what the world calls me——what the malice of my cruel fortune has compelledme to become? Have you not heard?——must I tell you that I am——"

"Hush!" she exclaimed, in faltering and expostulating accents. "Say it not, Clifton——say it not. If, indeed, it be true as they tell me——"

"They have told you then, Julia?——your father has told you——and oh! joy of my heart, you ask of me if what they have said to you can be true. You doubt——you cannot believe it of me. You shall not believe it——"

"Then it is not true, Clifton?" cried the maiden eagerly, advancing as she spoke, while the tear which glistened in her eyes, took from her whole features the glow of that joy and hope, which had sprung up so suddenly in her bosom. "They have slandered you when they pronounced you the associate of these outlaws——it is a wanton, a malicious falsehood, which you can easily disprove? I knew it——I thought it from the first, Clifton; and yet, when my father told me—— and told me with such assurances——with such solemn looks and words——and upon such evidence——ah! Edward, forgive me, when I confess to you, I could not doubt what I yet dreaded and trembled to believe. But you deny it, Edward——you will prove it to my father's conviction to be false——you will cleanse yourself from this polluting stigma, and I feel, I hope, we shall be happy yet. My father——"

The chilling accents of her lover's voice recalledher from the hopeful dream which her young heart began to fancy. He dashed the goblet of delight from the parting lips which were just about to quaff from its golden circle.

"Alas! Julia, it is only too true——your father has told you but the truth. Bitter is the necessity that makes me say so much; but, I will not deceive you; indeed, if he told you all, he must have told you that I came of my own free will to undeceive him. My own lips pronounced to him my own fault, and, humbling as its consciousness is to me, I must declare that, in avowing my connection with these wretched associates, I have avowed the extent of my errors, though not of my sufferings. Thank God! I have taken part in none of their crimes——I have shared in none of their spoils——my hands are free from any stain, save that which they have received from grasping theirs in fellowship. This, I well know is a stain too much, and the contact of my hands would only defile the purity of

yours. Yet, could I tell you the story of wo and suffering which drove me to this miserable extremity, you would pity me, Julia, if you could not altogether forgive. But wherefore should I tell you this?"

"Wherefore!" was the moaning exclamation of the maiden as the youth briefly paused in his speech, "Wherefore——it avails us nothing. Yet I will believe you, Clifton——I must believe that you havebeen driven to this dreadful communion, if I would not sink under the shame of my own consciousness. I believe you, Edward——I believe you, and I pity you——from my very soul I pity you. But I can no more; let us part now. Leave me——fly while there is yet time. My father returns in the morning, and I fear that his former regard for you will not be sufficient to save you from the punishment which he thinks due to your offences. Indeed, he will even be more strict and severe because of the imposition which he thinks you have practised upon him——"

"And upon you, Julia——you say nothing of that."

"Nothing! Because it should weigh nothing with me at such a moment. I feel not the scorn which you have put upon me, Edward, in the loss which follows it."

"Blessed, beloved spirit; and I too must feel the loss; and such a loss! Oh! blind, base fool that I was, to suffer the pang and the apprehension of a moment, to baffle the hopes and the happiness of a life. Ah, Julia, how can I fly? How can I leave you?——knowing what you are, and not forgetting that you have loved me, worthless as I am."

"No more of this, Edward," replied the maiden, quickly withdrawing her hand from the grasp which his own had passionately taken upon it; "no more of this; it will be your policy, as it shall be my duty, to forget all this. We must strive to forget——we must forget each other. It will be my first prayer always, to be able to forget what it must only be my constant shame and sorrow to remember."

"And why your shame and sorrow, Julia? I tell you that in connecting myself most unhappily with these wretched people, I have abstained from their offences. If they have robbed the traveller, I have taken none of their spoils. If they have murdered their victim, his blood is not upon my hands. I have been their victim, indeed, rather than their ally. They forced me——a dire necessity forced me—— into their communion; in which I have been a witness rather than a partaker."

"Alas! Edward, I am afraid the difference is but too slight to be made use of in your defence. Did you witness to condemn and disapprove? Did you seek to prevent or repair? Did you stay the uplifted hand which struck down the traveller? Did you place yourself on his side to sustain and help him in the moment of his deadly and last peril? My father would have taken this part——his lessons have always taught me that such was the part always of the brave and honourable gentleman. If you have taken this part, Edward; if you can prove to him that you have taken this part——"

She paused. The criminal shrunk from her while she spoke, and covered his face with hishands, while he murmured hoarsely, and in bitter, broken accents——

"I have not. I have seen him robbed of his little wealth——I have seen him stricken down by the unexpected blow; and I have not lifted voice or weapon in his defence. Basely have I witnessed the deeds of baseness, and fittingly base should be my punishment. And yet, Julia, I could say that ——will you hear me?" he demanded, seeing that she turned away.

"Speak——speak," she murmured faintly.

"Yes, Julia, I have that to say which would go far to make you forget and forgive my weakness—— my crime."

"Alas! Edward, I fear not. There is nothing ——"

"Nothing! Nay, Julia, you care not to hear my defence. You are indifferent whether I live or die——whether they prove me guilty or innocent of crime," said he, with a bitter manner of reproach. She answered with a heart−touching meekness.

"And yet I come even now to save your life. I throw aside the fears and delicacy of my sex——I seek you at midnight, Edward——I seek you but to save. Does this argue indifference?"

"To save my life. Oh, Julia, bethink you for a moment what a precious boon this is to one of whom you rob every thing which made life dear, at thevery moment when you profess to save it. This is a mockery——a sad, a cruel mockery. Let them take the life if they will; you will see how that boon is valued by me, to which you offer to prove that you are not indifferent. You will see how readily I can surrender the life which the withdrawal of your love has beggared——which the denial of your esteem has embittered forever!"

"Ah, Edward, speak not thus. Wherefore would you force me to say that my love is not to be denied nor my esteem withheld, by a will, or in an instant?"

"And you do still love——you will promise, Julia, to esteem me yet——"

"No! I will promise nothing, Edward——nothing. I will strive only to forget you; and though I promise not myself to be successful in the effort, duty requires that it should yet be made. Go now. Let us part, and forever. My father and his guests are all gone——there is none to interrupt you in your flight. Fly——fly far, Edward, I pray you. Let us not meet again; since nothing but pain could come from such a meeting."

"But, Julia, will you not promise me that if I can acquit myself worthily, you will once more receive me."

"I cannot! my father's will must determine mine, Edward; since it is to his judgment only that I canrefer, to determine what is worthy in the sight of men, and what is not. Were I to yield to my affections this decision, I should, perhaps, care nothing for your offences; I should deem you no offender; and love would blindly worship at an altar from which truth would turn away in sorrow and reproach. Urge me not farther, Edward, on this painful subject. Solemnly I declare to you, that under no circumstances henceforward can I know you, unless by permission of my father."

Eberly strode away, with a spasmodic effort, to another part of the chamber. His emotions left him speechless for a while; when he returned to her, his articulation was still imperfect; and it was only by great resolution that he made himself intelligible at last.

"I will vex you no more. I will be to you, Julia, nothing——even as you wish. I will leave you; and when next you hear of me, you will weep, bitterly weep; not, perhaps, that you have sent me from you in scorn, but that I was not wholly worthy of that love which you were once happy to bestow upon me."

He passed her as he spoke these words, and before she could fix any one of the flitting and confused fancies in her mind, he had left the apartment, and her ear could readily distinguish his footsteps as, without any of the precautions of the fugitive, tremblingfor his life, he deliberately descended the stairs. She grasped the post of the door, and hung on it for support. Her strength which had sustained her throughout the interview, was about to leave her. When she ceased to hear his retreating steps she recovered herself sufficiently to reach her chamber; where, after locking carefully her door, she threw herself, almost without life, upon her bed, and gave vent to those emotions which now, from long restraint, like the accumulated torrents of the mountain, threatened in their flow to break down all barriers, and overwhelm the region which they were meant to invigorate and refresh. One bitter sentence of hopelessness alone escaped her lips; and the unsyllabled moaning which followed it, attested the depths of these sorrows which she had so long and so nobly kept in check.

"He leaves me——I have seen him for the last time——I have heard his departing footsteps——departing forever. Hark! it is the tread of a horse. It is his. He flies——he is safe from harm. He will be free——he will be happy, and I——Oh! my father—— I am desolate!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

If thou couldst redeem me
With any thing but death, I think I should
Consent to live.
—— The Traitor

Meanwhile we sped towards our place of rendezvous. We reached it, as we had calculated, in sufficient season. The whole party was assembled at the "Blind," according to arrangement, and within the limited hour; and, for a brief period after our reunion, nothing was to be heard but the hum of preparation for the anticipated strife. Our weapons, as before stated, were of a motley description. But they were all effective——at least, we resolved that they should be made so. Leaving as little to accident as possible, we reloaded and reprimed our fire arms, put in new flints where we could do so, and girded ourselves up for the contest with the cool considerateness of men who are not disposed to shrink back from the good work to which they have so far put their hands. Encouraged by the feeling and energy of Colonel Grafton, who was very much beloved among them, there was not one of the partywho did not throw as much personal interest into the motives for his valour, as entered either into Grafton's bosom or mine. When we were all ready, we divided ourselves into three bodies, providing thus an assailing force for the three known outlets of the outlaws' retreat. One of these bodies was led by Grafton, and under his lead, and by his side, I rode ——to two sturdy farmers of the neighbourhood, who were supposed to be more conversant with the place than the rest, the other divisions were given; and it was arranged that our attack upon the three designated points should be as nearly simultaneous as possible. The darkness of the forest——the difficulty of determining and equalising the several distances—— the necessity of proceeding slowly and heedfully, in order to avoid giving alarm, and other considerations and difficulties of like nature and equal moment, rendered our advance tedious and protracted; and though we had not more than two miles to cover after separating at the Blind, yet the gray streaks of the early dawn were beginning to vein the hazy summits in the East, before we reached the point of entrance which had been assigned us.

The morning was cold and cloudy, and through the misty air sounds were borne rapidly and far. We were forced to continue our caution as we proceeded. When we reached the valley, the porch, as it were, to the home among the hills where therobbers had found their refuge, we came to a dead halt. There were slight noises from within the enclosure which annoyed us, and we paused to listen. They were only momentary, however, and we rode slowly forward, until the greater number of our little party were fairly between the two hills. In my anxiety, I had advanced a horse's length beyond Colonel Grafton, by whose side I had before ridden. We were just about to emerge from the passage into the area, when the indistinct figure of a man started up, as it were, from beneath the very hoofs of my horse. I had nearly ridden over him, for the day was yet too imperfect to enable us to distinguish between objects not in motion. He had been asleep, and was, most probably, a sentinel. As he ran, he screamed at the loudest pitch of his voice——the probability is, that in his surprise he had left his weapon where he had lain, and had no other means of alarming his comrades, and saving them from the consequences of his neglectful watch. In the midst of his clamours, I silenced him. I shot him through the back as he ran, not five steps in front of my horse, seeking to ascend the hill to the right of us. He tumbled forward, and lay writhing before our path, but without a word or moan. At this moment, the thought possessed me, that it was John Hurdis whom I had shot. I shivered involuntarily with the conviction, and in my mind I felt a busy voice of reproach, that reminded me of our poor mother. I strove to sustain myself, by referring to his baseness, and to his deserts: yet I felt sick at heart the while. I had the strangest curiosity to look into the face of the victim, but, for worlds, I would not then have done so. It was proposed that we should examine the body by one of the men behind me. It was a voice of desperation with which I shouted in reply——

"No——no examination.——We have no time for that."

"True!" said Grafton, taking up the words.—— "We must think of living, not dead enemies. This shot will put the gang in motion. We must rush on them at once, if we hope to do any thing, and the sooner we go forward the better."

He gave the word at this moment, which I seconded with a fierce shout, which was half−intended to overcome

and scare away my own obtrusive fancies.

"Better," I said to myself——"better that I should believe John Hurdis to be already slain, than that I should think the duty yet to be done. He must perish, and I feel that it will be an easier deed to slay him while he is unknown, regarding him merely as one of the common enemy."

These self−communings——indeed the whole events which had occasioned them——were all the work of amoment. I had fired the pistol under the impulse which seemed to follow the movement of the victim, as closely as if it had been a certain consequence of it. In another instant we rushed headlong into the valley, just as sounds of fright and confusion reached us from one of the opposite entrances, which had been assigned the other parties. There was now no time for unnecessary reflections——the moment for thought and hesitation had gone by, and the blood was boiling and bounding in my veins, with all the ardour and enthusiasm of boyhood. Wild cries of apprehension and encouragement reached us from various quarters, and we could see sudden forms rushing out of the bushes, and from between the hollows where they had slept; and with the sight of them, our men dashed off in various directions, and divided, in pursuit. Colonel Grafton and myself advanced in like manner, towards a group consisting of three persons, who seemed disposed to seek, rather than fly from us. A few bounds brought us near enough to discover in one of these, the person of Matthew Webber. The two deadly enemies were now within a few steps of each other; and, resolving to spare Colonel Grafton the encounter with a man who had professed such bitter malice towards him, and such a blood−thirsty and unrelenting hate, I put spurs to my horse, and, with earnest efforts, endeavoured to put myself between them; but my object was defeated, and Iwas soon taught to know that I required all my address to manage my own particular opponent. This was the man whom we have before seen as the emissary of the Brotherhood, at the habitation of Pickett, and, subsequently, when I left the encampment, ostensibly as the spy upon Eberly. This fellow seemed to understand my object, for he put himself directly in my way; and, when not three steps distant, discharged his pistol at my head. How he came to miss me I know not. It would appear impossible that a man resolved and deliberate as he certainly showed himself then and elsewhere to be, should have failed to shoot me at so small a distance. But he did; and, without troubling myself at that moment to demand how or why, I was resolved not to miss him. I did not. But my bullet, though more direct than his, was not fatal. I hit him in the shoulder of the right arm, from the hand of which he dropped the knife which he had taken from his bosom, the moment after firing his pistol. My horse was upon him in another instant; but, as if insensible to his wound, he grasped the bridle with his remaining hand, and, by extending his arm to its utmost stretch, he baffled me for a brief space, in the effort which I was making to take a second shot. It was but a moment only, however, that he did so. I suffered him to turn the head of the horse, and deliberately took a second pistol from my bosom. Hesunk under the breast of the animal as he beheld it, still grasping him by the bridle, by swinging from which, he was enabled to avoid the tramplings of his feet. But I was not to be defeated. I threw myself from the animal, and shot the outlaw dead, before he could extricate himself from the position into which he had thrown himself. This affair took less time to act than I now employ to narrate it. Meanwhile the strife between Colonel Grafton and Webber had proceeded to a fatal issue. I had beheld its progress with painful apprehensions, beholding the danger of the noble gentleman, without the ability to serve or succour him. On their first encounter, the deliberate ruffian calmly awaited the bold assault of his foe, and, perhaps, feeling some doubt of his weapon, in aiming at the smaller object, or resolved to make sure of him though slow, he directed his pistol muzzle at the advancing steed, and put the bullet into his breast. The animal tumbled forward, and Webber nimbly leaping to one side, avoided his crushing carcass, which fell over upon the very spot where the outlaw had taken his station. In the fall of the beast, as Webber had anticipated, Grafton became entangled. One of his legs was fastened under the animal, and he lay prostrate and immovable for an instant, from the stunning effect of the fall. With a grim smile of triumph, Webber approached him, and when not three paces distant from his enemy, drew his pistol, but before he could fix the sight upon him, a fierce wild scream rang through the area, and in the next instant, when nothing beside could have saved Grafton, and when looking fearlessly at his advancing enemy, he momently expected the death which he felt himself unable to avoid, he beheld, with no less satisfaction and surprise, the figure of the doubly fugitive Clifton bounding between them, to arrest the threatened shot. He came too late for this, yet he baffled the vengeance of the murderer. The bullet took effect in his own bosom, and he fell down between Grafton and Webber, expiating his errors and offences, whatever may have been their nature and extent, by freely yielding up his life to save that of one, who just before, as he imagined to the last, had sat in inflexible and hostile judgment upon his own. A faint smile illuminated his countenance a moment before his

death, and he seemed desirous to turn his eyes where Grafton lay, but to this task he was unequal. Once or twice he made an effort at speech, but his voice sunk away into a gurgling sound, and at length terminated in the choking rattle of death. Webber, while yet the breath fluttered upon the lips of his victim, strode forward, with one foot upon his body, to repeat the assault upon Grafton, which had been baffled thus, but before he could do this, he fell by an unseen hand. He was levelled to the earth, by a strokefrom the butt of a rifle from behind, and despatched, in the heat of the moment, by a second blow from the hands of the sturdy forester who wielded it. We extricated Grafton from a situation which had been productive to him of so much peril, and addressed ourselves to a pursuit of the surviving outlaws who were scattered and flying on all hands. In this pursuit, it fell to my lot to inflict death, without recognising my victim at the time, upon the actual murderer of William Carrington. I saw a fellow skulk behind a bush, and shot him through it. That was Pickett. I only knew it when, in the afternoon of the day, we encountered his wife, with countenance seemingly unmoved, and wearing its general expression of rigid gravity, directing the burial of her miserable husband, whom a couple of negroes were preparing to deposit in a grave dug near the spot where he had fallen.

But our toils were not ended. Seven of the outlaws had been killed outright, or so fatally wounded as to die very soon after. Two only were made prisoners; and we had started at least eight or ten more. These had taken flight in as many different directions, rendering it necessary that we should disperse ourselves in their pursuit. My blood had been heated, by the affray, to such a degree that I ceased to think. To go forward, to act, to shout and strike, seemed now all that I could do; and thesewere performances through which my heart appeared to carry me with an ungovernable sensation of delight; a sensation cooled only when I reflected hat the body of John Hurdis had not yet been found——that we were in pursuit of the survivors; and that I had sworn by the grave of the hapless Katherine Walker, to give no mercy to the murderers of my friend. My oath was there to impel me forward even should my heart fail me, and forward I went in the bloody chase——we urged, having a distant and imperfect view of two wretches; both mounted and fleeing backward upon the Big Warrior. They had gone through the "Blind," and for a mile farther I kept them both in sight. At length, one disappeared, but I gained upon the other. Every moment brought the outlines of his person more clearly to my eye, and at length I could no longer resist the conviction that the fates had brought me to my victim.——John Hurdis was before me. What would I not then have given to have found another enemy. How gladly would I then have unsworn myself, and, could it be so, have given up the task of punishment to other persons. There was a sound of horsemen behind me, and at one moment, I almost resolved to turn aside and leave to my comrades the solemn duty which now seemed so especially to devolve itself upon me. But there was a dread in my mind that such amovement might be misconstrued, and the feeling be taken for fear, which was in strict truth the creature of conscience. The conviction grew inevitable that the bloody duty of the executioner was mine. The horse of my brother stumbled; the fates had delivered him into my hands——he lay on the earth before me; and, with a bursting heart, but a resolved spirit, I leaped down on the earth beside him. He had weapons, but he had no power to use them. I would have given worlds had he been able to do so. Could he have shown fight——I could have slain him without scruple; but when, at my approach, he raised his hands appealingly, and shrieked out a prayer of mercy, I felt ashamed of the duty I had undertaken. I felt the brutal blood−thirstiness of taking life under such circumstances——the victim but a few paces off ——using no weapons, and pleading with a shrieking desperate voice for that life, which seemed at the same time too despicable to demand or deserve a care. And yet, when I reflected that to grant his prayer and take him alive, was not to save his life, but to subject him to a death, in the ignominy of which I too must share; I felt that he could not live. I rushed upon him with the extended pistol, but was prevented from using it by a singular vision, in the sudden appearance of the poor idiot daughter of Pickett. She came from the door of a little cottage by the road−side, which I had not before seen, andto which, it is more than probable, that John Hurdis was bending his steps, as to a place of refuge. To my horror and surprise she called me by name, and thus gave my brother the first intimation which he had of the person to whom he prayed. How this idiot came to discover that which nobody besides had suspected, was wonder enough to me; and while I stood, astounded for the instant, she ran forward like a thoughtless child, crying as she came:

"Oh, Mr. Richard, don't you shoot——it's Master John——it's your own dear brother——don't you shoot ——don't."

"Brother!" cried the miserable wretch, with hoarse and husky tones, followed by a chuckle of laughter, which indicated the latent hope which had begun to kindle in his breast at this discovery.

"Away——I know you not, villain," was my cry, as I recoiled from him, and again lifted the pistol in deadly aim. The idiot girl rushed between us, and rising on tiptoe, sought to grasp the extended hand, which I was compelled to raise above her reach.

"Run, Master John, run for dear life," was her cry, as she clung upon my shoulders. "Run to the bushes, while I hold, Mr. Richard——I'll hold him tight——he can't get away from me. I'll hold him tight enough while you run."

The miserable dastard obeyed her counsel; andwhile clinging, now to my arms, and now to my legs, she baffled my movements, and really gave him an opportunity, which a cool, brave fellow would have turned to account, and most probably saved himself. He, in his alarm, actually rushed into the woods in the very direction of the pursuit. Had he possessed the spirit of a man, he would have leaped upon his horse, or upon mine, and trusted to the chase a second time. Hardly a minute had elapsed from his disappearance in the woods, and when I had just extricated myself from the clutches of the girl, which I did with as little violence as possible, when I heard one shot and then another. I resumed my horse and hurried to the spot whence the sounds came. One of our party, who had taken the same route with me, had overtaken the fugitive, and had fired twice upon him as he fled. My voice trembled when I asked the trooper, as he emerged from the bush, if the outlaw was dead.

"As a door nail!" was the reply. I stopped for no more; but turning the head of my horse again, I renewed the pursuit of the second fugitive, whom I had first followed. My companion kept with me, and we went forward at full speed. As we rode we heard the faint accents of the idiot girl crying in the woods for "Master John;" as, here and there, she wound her way through its recesses, seeking for him who could no longer answer to her call. Thesounds were painful to me, and I was glad to get out of hearing of them. I had now none of those scruples in the pursuit which had beset me before. My trial was over; and fervently in my heart did I thank God, and the stout fellow who rode beside me, that my hand had not stricken the cruel blow which was yet demanded by justice. I urged my horse to the utmost and soon left my companion behind. I felt that I must gain upon the footsteps of the fugitive. There were few horses in the country of better bottom, and more unrelaxing speed than mine. He proved himself on this occasion. Through bog and branch, he sped; over hill, through dale, until the road opened in double breadth upon us. The trees grew more sparsely——the undergrowth was more dense in patches, and it was evident that we had nearly reached the river. In another moment I caught a glimpse, not of it only, but of the man I pursued; and he was Foster. He looked round once, and I fancied I could detect a smile playing on his lips. I felt loth to trouble this strange fellow. He was a generous outlaw, and possessed many good qualities. He had given me freely of his money, though counterfeit, and had shown me a degree of kindness and consideration, which made me hesitate, now that I had brought him to the post. I concluded it to be impossible that he should escape me, and I summoned him with loud tones to surrender,under a promise which I made him, of using all my efforts and influence to save him from the consequences of the laws. But he laughed aloud, and pointed to the river. "He will not venture to swim it surely," was my thought on the instant. A few moments satisfied my doubts. There was a pile of cotton, consisting of ten or fifteen bags, lying on the brink of the river, and ready for transportation to market whenever the boats came by. He threw himself from his horse as he reached the bags, and tumbling one of them from the pile into the stream, he leaped boldly upon it, and when I reached the same spot, the current had already carried him full forty yards on his way, down the stream. I discharged my pistol at him but without any hope of touching him at that distance. He laughed good−naturedly in return, and cried out——

"Ah, Williams, you are a sad dog, and something more of a hypocrite than the parson. I am afraid you will come to no good, if you keep on after this fashion; but, should you ever get into a difficulty like this of mine, I am still sufficiently your friend to hope that you may find as good a float. You can say to the owner of this cotton——a man named Baxter, who, I suppose, is one of your party this morning——that he will find it some five miles below; I shall not want it much farther. Should he lose it, however, it's as little as a good patriot——as it is said he is, should be ready at any time to lose for his country. Farewell——though it be for a season only. We shall meet some day in Arkansas, where I shall build a church in the absence of better business, and perhaps make you a convert. Farewell."

Colonel Grafton came up in time to hear the last of this discourse; and to wonder and laugh at the complacent impudence and ready thoughts of the outlaw. Foster pulled his hat, with a polite gesture, when he had finished speaking, and turned his eyes from us in the direction which his strange craft was taking.

"Shall I give him'a shot, Colonel?" demanded one the foresters, who had come up with Grafton, lifting his

rifle as he spoke.

"No, no!" was the reply——"let him go. He is a clever scoundrel and may one day become an honest man. We have done enough of this sort of business this morning, to keep the whole neighbourhood honest for some years. Let us now return, my friends, and bury those miserable creatures out of sight. Hurdis!" He took me suddenly aside from the rest, and said:

"Hurdis, there is a girl back here, who says that you have killed your own brother. She affirms it positively."

"She speaks falsely, Colonel Grafton," was my reply; "I am not guilty of a brother's blood; andyet I may say to you that she has spoken a portion of the truth. A brother of mine has been killed among the outlaws. Guilty or not guilty of their offences, he pays the penalty of bad company. If you please we will speak of him no more."

I had been married to Mary Easterby about three years, when one day who should pay us a visit but Colonel Grafton and the lovely Julia, the latter far more lovely than ever. Her sorrows had sublimed her beauty, and seemed to give elevation to all her thoughts and actions. The worm was gnawing at her heart, and its ravages were extending to her frame; but her cheek, though pale, was exquisitely transparent, and her eye, though always sad, was sometimes enlivened with the fires of an intense spirituality which seemed to indicate the approximation of her thoughts to the spheres and offices of a loftier home than ours. She lived but a year after this visit, and died in a sweet sleep, which lasted for several hours, without being disturbed by pain, and from which she only awakened in another world. May we hope that the loves were happy there which had been so unblessed on earth.

THE END.