THE SNOW STORM,

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

BY

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DEDICATION

TO

AUGUSTUS FREDERICK WENTWORTH GORE.

ACCEPT, MY DEAR [illegible], AS A CHRISTMAS GIFT, A STORY WRITTEN AT YOUR REQUEST, AND EXPRESSLY FOR YOUR AMUSEMENT, BY

YOUR AFFECTIONATE MOTHER,

C. F. G.

THE SNOW STORM.

CHAPTER I.

WINTER had made his appearance at the close of a bright and auspicious autumn; but with so cheerful a countenance, and in a garb so unseasonable, that none but children looking forward to the holidays, or churchwardens to their dues, could be persuaded to recognize their old friend.

Though Christmas was but at a week's distance, the oaks remained so verdant, that the misletoe was scarcely discernible among their branches. Nor did the holly bushes stand forth, as usual, in gay relief amid leafless hedgerows. So unnaturally mild

many, many years, that the old Hall, aforetime its pride and glory, had been inhabited. Two years before, the dilapidated mansion and neglected demesne had been purchased by a wealthy Londoner, who had since expended enormous sums on its reparation and decoration. But, thanks to the usual crab-like progress of country workmen, it was only the preceding summer the family had been able to take possession; and the neighbourhood had yet to learn whether the prodigious improvements effected in the old place, were to increase or diminish the measure of hospitality and benevolence, which, in the olden time, called down blessings upon the battlemented roofs of Hacklewood Hall.

The poor were sanguine. The poor are *usually* sanguine. It is one of the few luxuries in which they can indulge. But the middle class, of which the neighbourhood was chiefly composed, surmised with truth, that the new wing added to the house, and a prodigious augmentation of the stables and offices, purported expressly to enable Sir Richard and Lady Ribston to dispense with all aid or companion-

ship from their neighbours. Their friends and guests were to be brought down from London, by the train, precisely as it had brought down their chairs and tables, their patent stoves and cases of claret.

"Nothing in this part of the country is good enough for such *very* grand people," said Mrs. Gurdon, who was one of the malcontents; and with some reason,—the poor old rector having been treated with less regard by the new-comers than one of their keepers. "In the time of the Reveleys, (whom nobody will deny, I suppose, to be one of the first families in the kingdom,) the Hall was open at all times to the gentry and clergy of the neighbourhood; and at Christmas, which had *then* a right to be called *merry* Christmas, such a carouse for the yeomen's and tenants' families, used to shake the old walls, that Midsummer came round again before they seemed quite steady again!"

"We have no reason to infer that the new proprietor will not renew the old pastimes," observed the sententious Miss Amelia. "Sir Richard possesses thrice the fortune of the Reveleys"—

"Which only serves to render him thrice as uppish!" retorted her mother. "Where did he get his fortune, I should like to know, and everybody would like to know, and nobody *does* know! Not a child in any chimney corner of the village, but can tell you how the Reveleys obtained their's—by gift from King Henry, of blessed memory, when he drove the lazy monks out of the land, and left to the new church only the labour's fee of its works. Ay! and how they lost it, too—by wasting in the cause of the Stuarts, poor foolish people, what they had received at the hand of the Tudors.—The old Hall, and the old family, Amy, never held up their heads since the year '45.—I have my doubts whether the Ribstons began to hold up theirs for a century after!"

"At all events they hold them high enough *now*, replied Amelia,—"like most other moneyed people We live now under the reign of the Golden Calf; and these are early times to decide whether Hackle-wood will, or will not, be the better for it. For my part, I am free to own that it pleases me better to see blue smoke curling yonder from the chim-

neys of the Hall, than to see the rooks perch upon the old tower, as they would on a belfry. The habitation of the place was becoming a mere tradition."

"You won't deny, I hope, my dear, that it was an object of greater veneration to us in its deserted state, and left as it were to our tender mercies, than now that it has been scraped and restored and furbished up, till it looks like a railroad station, canvassing for custom?—No, no; Amelia!—With all your love for what you and your magazines and tract-books call the progress-cause and march of the times, you can't be quite so dead to recollections of your childhood, as not to feel mortified that all trace of the old family should be swept away from Hacklewood, by these bran-new people."

"I was so mere a child when the Reveleys quitted the neighbourhood," replied the rector's daughter, with a sigh, "that I scarcely recollect them.—Forty years have since elapsed — forty years, for which poor Hacklewood is not much the better; and as I have seen the Ribstons do more for the place in

the last two than I had ever hoped to see done for it again, you must not expect me, dear mother, to declare war against them, till they have done something to deserve it."

"And what do you call their incivility to your father,—a man so respected in this and all the parishes round?—Sir Richard Ribston has crossed the threshhold of the rectory but once since he came into the country!"

"Considering all he heard here, on that occasion, of papa's lamentations for the Reveleys, and demands for the poor, you could scarcely expect the attention to be renewed."

"I neither expect nor desire it!"—retorted the testy old lady. "It is not to people like the Ribstons, who come from goodness knows *where*, enriched by goodness knows *what*, that church and state ought to look for support. And if we had not to thank Heaven above for so mild a winter, I doubt whether the parish of Hacklewood would have been many chaldrons of coals, or many pairs of blankets the warmer, because so many of its hundred acres

have become the property of a man as rich as a Jew, and nearly as hard-hearted."

In these unneighbourly misgivings, Mrs. Gurdon was secretly stimulated by the antipathies of one, on whose self-love the new proprietor of the Hall had inflicted an incurable wound. Abel Drew, the clerk of Hacklewood parish, and trusty factotum of the old rector,—a clerk as pompous in his generation as P. P. of glorious and immortal memory,—had never forgiven Sir Richard Ribston his munificent gift to the parish of a handsome self-playing organ; by which he had at once endeavoured to propitiate the goodwill of the neighbourhood, and secure his tympanum against the uplifting of a certain cracked voice in the singing-loft, compared with which, the creaking of a brazen axle-tree was as the gamut of Grisi.

Forty years long had the crabbed old man inflicted four times on every sabbath-day upon his fellow-parishioners, a stave that resembled a mail-coach horn suffering under a severe attack of the influenza; and for twenty more, his offence would have been weekly

repeated, had not the gold of the new owner of the Hall, and the skill of Messrs. Flight and Robson, enabled the parish of Hacklewood to defy the persecutions of its clerk.

But though Abel Drew was silenced in the singing-loft, he took care that his voice should be heard elsewhere. He set his face at once against the Ribston dynasty. And a very extraordinary face it was; occupying, in spite of all academic laws of proportion, a third of the height of the poor little clerk, who might have passed, without ducking, under the arm of a man five feet high. Had Abel attempted to put on a long face when insulted in his vocation by the munificent gift of Sir Richard, his chin might have reached the antipodes.

But instead of a long face, Abel put on an angry one. From the first Sunday on which those full-toned and mellifluous strains ascended among the cob-webbed rafters of Hacklewood Church,—which, from the day they were morticed together in the days of Henry VII., had been visited by nothing more harmonious than the nasal twang of a village psalm,—

Abel assumed a warlike attitude. Too often apprized from the pulpit of the justifiability of retaliation—"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"—not to feel entitled to take vengeance into his hands, the little clerk conceived that, wounded in his self-love, he had a right to attack the personal pride of his wealthy neighbour.

Now it was supposed at Hacklewood, (only supposed,—for the new family, so far from entertaining confidential communication with a single individual of the neighbourhood, seemed to place the inhabitants of the parish on a level with the trees and stocks and stones purchased by their agent,) it was *supposed* that the Ribstons must cherish a jealous grudge against the popularity of their predecessors. It is usually so inferred where a great landed estate has changed hands;—chiefly because the lower classes, prompt to seize the few means of annoyance at their disposal to avenge the many in force against them, are fond of aggravating into a raw the smallest show of such susceptibility. It was soon decided therefore, that the only way in which Hacklewood could

punish Sir Richard Ribston for standing so high above his neighbours, was by fanatical adoration of the Reveleys.

Of this sect of worshippers, if old Mrs. Gurdon were the high priestess, Abel Drew was the prophet! Nobody knew so much about the Reveleys as Abel. In his capacity of clerk, the parish registers were as familiar to him as a horn-book; and though the little man found it difficult to interpret their early entries, inscribed in faded ink with a thousand obsolete flourishes of antique penmanship, without following them line by line with his forefinger, like a student in an Asylum for the Blind, he had managed to put together a family genealogy, worthy the industry and art of the Herald's College, or the authenticator of the Huntingdon peerage.

In this labour of love, he was mainly assisted by a series of curious old monuments;—from certain early brasses, which even the forefinger of old Abel was unable to interpret, to the later tablets in marble, or effigies in alabaster, concerning which he managed to blunder into a miscomprehension, seldom less than

a reign or two at fault. He never failed, indeed, to exhibit the bust of Sir Claude Reveley, an admiral of king William's time, for that of Sir Edmund, a puisne judge, in the time of Elizabeth. But it did not much matter. His auditors were the faithful lieges of Hacklewood;—whose respect was bespoken for whatever wood or stone might bear the image and superscription of the family,—whether Peter or Paul,—or those of a bitter Whig, or red-hot Tory.

But the moment the fatal organ drew breath in the old church, these monuments presented themselves to Abel as implements of vengeance. It had pleased the vainglorious spirit of the Ribstons to convert the old oaken chancel-pew, appurtenant by right immemorial to Hacklewood Hall, into what the advertisements of George Robins would call "a delicious little boudoir, fitted up à la Louis XIV." The London decorators charged with the completion of the family seat, had perhaps to answer for the profusion of crimson velvet and gilt nails they contrived to expend on the easy chairs, and still easier hassocks, provided for the luxurious devotions of the Ribston

family,—crimson velvet and gilt nails sufficient for the interment of a whole Imperial dynasty. But Sir Richard underwent all the odium of the offence. The pious called him a pharisee—the impious, an upstart. But old Abel, though he called him nothing but the "new gentleman at the Hall,"—contrived to make the new gentleman's old pew too hot to hold him!—

In spite of the clerk's attachment to the foregone race of Reveley, he had hitherto been at little pains to defend those precious monuments from the ravages of time, or invasion of spiders. The old brasses had become encrusted with verdigris; and the marble tombs were as thickly coated with dust, as though the ashes of all the Reveleys were attached to their surface. For old Dr. Gurdon was buried many fathoms too deep in his folios of controversy, to take heed of such rubbish; and Abel, to whom the embellishment and care of the damp old sanctuary were somewhat too exclusively entrusted, seemed to consider even the defeatures of the tombs too venerable to be trifled with.

But no sooner was the sanction of the rector obtained for the repairs of the chancel-pew, or rather no sooner had Abel turned the key for the last time upon the saucy London workmen employed in the task, than, stripping off his coat, and applying to his own use the ladders, brushes, and pails of whitewash left by the innovators, to work he went with scrapers, trowels, and emery paper; scouring up the brasses to the resplendent brilliancy of a Pentonville door-knocker: while by dint of scrubbing and rubbing, lime-water and verjuice, the marble busts were made to look as if recently emerged from the workshop of Westmacott. Pilasters, mosaics, and arabesques were seen to consist of rosso and giallo antico, which, at any period within the last hundred years, might have passed for cracked putty.

When Abel, after five days' incessant labour, at length removed his tools and ladders from the church, into a corner of the old charnel-house, and surveyed the results of his handiwork, he felt that his vengeance was complete.

On the Sabbath morning, instead of the attention

of the congregation being diverted from Dr. Gurdon's exhortations, by the resplendence of the "new gentleman at the Hall," the good people of Hacklewood were far more astonished to perceive that the streaks of green mould had disappeared from the newly-whitewashed wall; and that monuments of brass, and monuments of marble, had suddenly sprung up, as if by enchantment, in place of the huge shapeless colourless masses of lumber which had so long confronted the dilapidated chancel-pew of the Hall.

The work of regeneration was of course attributed to the interference of Sir Richard Ribston; but on that point they kept scrupulous silence. And when, at the close of morning service, the old men and women, in their Sunday gear, their red cloaks and mode bonnets, their thread-bare blue coats and nap-bare brown beavers, made their way by twos and threes across the churchyard, their talk was neither of the text nor of the organ, nor even of the velvet and gilding of the refurnished pew.

The name of REVELEY was in every mouth. To the unspeakable glee of the little clerk, all their

"Well-to-be-sures," and "Who'd-ever-have-thought-its," were lavished upon the miraculous renovation of the forgotten monuments of an unforgotten race!—

Though in the course of the evening service, the malicious organ was heard to usurp the functions of poor Abel Drew in leading the favourite psalm,—his *chef-d'œuvre*—the pride of forty years of his existence,—"All people who on earth do dwell," he was able to listen without a pang—nay, almost with complacency. He had turned the tables on his persecutors. The little man had the best of it. The *little* man had aimed at the *great* a thrust he was unable to parry.

CHAPTER II.

Let us say a few more words about the weather;—a subject as dear to an Englishman as to a barometer maker; and always good to fall back on, when topics are wanting.

The chief motive of the parson's helpmate and parson's clerk for finding fault with the mildness of the season, was their apprehension lest undue favour should seem to attend the inauguration of the new proprietor at the Hall. So auspicious an omen as a Christmas as warm as Midsummer, would be a grievous addition to the many advantages enjoyed by Sir Richard Ribston.

At present, the rich parterres of crysanthemums fronting the plantations of the new approach, were as bright with flowers as a rosary in June. An old

shrubbery of gigantic laurustinus and arbutus trees, which even the London improvers admitted to be unimprovable, was variegated by the gay intermingle-ment of their waxen fruit and snowy blossoms; while under the screen of their glossy foliage, the straggling and unsightly bloom of the colt's-foot filled the air with fragrance, as though the beds of heliotrope were still in bloom China-roses filled up every interstice with their cheerful clusters; and even the monthly and Portland rose laughed to scorn, in more sheltered nooks, the baffled records of the almanack.

"Lady Ribston will have the less reason to be proud of the fine new conservatory, which has displaced the old-china room!" observed Amelia Gurdon to her mother, as, in the course of their morning's walk, they stood contemplating from a neighbouring acclivity the bright aspect of the old Hall; which, when grey with the overgrowth of lichens and weatherstains, had been scarcely discernible among the stately elms that overtopped it, but now stood smiling in the sunshine admitted by a judicious thinning of the woods and shrubberies.

"There used to be a green-house in the kitchen garden," observed her mother, "which, in the time of the late Mr. Reveley, furnished such geraniums and heaths as were not to be seen elsewhere in the county. But I suppose these people have knocked it down."

"If you remember," replied Amelia, puzzled to decide whether her mother's memory, or her good will, were at fault, "it fell in after the great frost, when I was a school-girl. The new conservatory, they say, is heated by steam."

"Some modern economical contrivance, I suppose! Formerly, a kitchen-fire used to roast a leg of mutton, or sirloin of beef. But in these improvement-days when egg-shells and deal-shavings are turned to account, besides dressing the dinner it is made to warm the servants'-hall, and, may be, the floors of a bath-room, or conservatory! And by having so many things to do, it does them all badly."

"To judge from the smoking chimneys yonder, there seems no want of fires in the house!"—said Amelia. "I suppose the Ribstons are afraid the

newly-papered bed-rooms should be damp for their London guests."

"They can afford it!" was the illiberal retort of Mrs. Gurdon. "They get their coals wholesale, by the rail, on the cheapest terms. With all his pomp and show, Sir Richard is a prodigious manager. His building was done by contract, and his purchases are made at cost-price from the manufactories. Just the sort of man, who, but for his vanity, would be a miser! And here comes somebody," added the old lady, as she ambled along the park-pailing by her daughter's side, with short quick steps, as fast as her high-heeled shoes would permit,— "here comes somebody, who, if I mistake not, will realize the old proverb of 'thrifty father, spendthrift son!'"—

A fine young man, mounted upon a handsome chestnut horse, passed them at that moment, at a brisk trot. But though he raised his hat courteously to the two ladies, Miss Amelia pertinaciously averted her head, and fixed her eyes, so long as he was in sight, upon the smoking chimneys of the Hall.

"I wonder what mischief Mister Charles is after, that he seems in such a hurry this afternoon?" observed the old lady; but receiving no answer from her daughter, she stopped suddenly, and turned short round on the raised causeway, (for which the inhabitants of Hacklewood were indebted to the improvements of Sir Richard,) to ascertain, when he reached the turn of the road, what direction the young man was taking.

Indignation at length unsealed the prim lips of Miss Amelia.

"I am astonished, ma'am," said she, "to see you condescend to notice the comings or goings of that profligate young man!"

"I only want to make sure," replied the old lady, almost abashed at the unexpected reproof, "whether he is on his way to Nessford."

"The way Mr. Charles Ribston takes cannot be of the smallest consequence to *us!*" retorted the maiden lady: "and I should be sorry he fancied that we experienced any interest in his proceedings. I look upon him as one of the most un-

principled young men alive. It was a black day for Hacklewood when he came into the neighbourhood !"

" Precisely the reason I wanted to satisfy my mind whether he was going to Nessford !" replied her mother. " Old Welland is a warm, open-hearted, hospitable old man"—

" But not so great a numskull," interrupted Miss Amelia, " as not to see what takes Mister Charles idling to his house, where he has as little business as Master Welland would have at the Hall!— And I must say, that though Sir Richard and my lady are too much taken up with their pictures and statues, and fine furniture, to find time for a civil word to their neighbours, they might find a minute or two, now and then, in the course of the twenty-four hours, to make their son understand that such ways as he is pursuing are calculated to bring brown hairs to grey, and grey hairs to shame,"

Miss Amelia concluded her harangue by raising her eyes to Heaven; and even the old lady shook her head with an air of stern reprobation.

The young man whose enormities were the cause of these severe demonstrations, was neither better nor worse than the average of young men of his age,—which was the commencement of his two and twentieth year. The immoralities which so provoked the displeasure of the rectory, consisted in being seen on his shooting pony, or on his way to covert, with a cigar in his mouth; and in nodding or exchanging a merry word with some pretty girl, on market-days, who chose to examine him as he rode along with the same inquisitive scrutiny exhibited by the censorious Mrs. Gurdon. But such practices were new at Hacklewood; and consequently a dire offence.

"Whither are you running, Jock?" said Miss Amelia, when, before her doleful gestures were at an end, a sudden angle of the road brought them in contact with a whiteheaded boy of twelve or thirteen, dressed in a ragged smock-frock, blue in the folds, but of a dirty grey where it was exposed to the weather; who held up his still more ragged nether-garments with one hand, and twirled a peeled hazel-switch in

the other, while scudding along the causeway in a run consisting of three steps and a hop.

"I'm running of an erran'—I'm running of an erran'!"—replied the boy, who though he passed in the village for a born natural, had sense enough to surmise that the rectory ladies, if they found him idling on the road, might give him something to do.

"That is, you are running as usual after Mister Charles Ribston," replied Miss Amelia,—"who, I will be bound, wants none of your attendance."

"He often gives me sixpence for it," replied the half-witted boy, taunted into frankness.

"Ay, lad, to get rid of you!" added the old lady.

"It is more than e'er I get at the rectory, though, for ever so hard a day's work!" retorted the lad, marking by his restless movements his desire to shuffle off in pursuit of his young patron,—the ring of whose horse's hoofs was growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

"You are an ungrateful fellow, considering all we have done for you and your mother, for the last

dozen years !" remonstrated the indignant Miss Amelia. " You seem to forget the help you have received from my father, and the parish."

" T'would be odd if I did," muttered Jock, dropping from the causeway to the road, to get out of the way of being catechized, and secure a clear course for his pursuit of the young horseman who gave him sixpences in lieu of lectures,—" it would be main odd if I did, for I've heard enough about it; and a grudged loaf, mother says, is no bread."

And as the offender had gained half a dozen yards ahead, before Miss Amelia sufficiently recovered her stupefaction at his audacity to resume her lecturing, she was forced to content herself with expressing to her mother her conviction that the demoralization of the youth of Hacklewood under Mister Charles's auspices, was already begun.

" Till now, that poor idiot was never wanting in respect for his superiors !" said she. " It was a sad thing for him when the Wellands left the parish; for Nessford is too far off for them to do any thing

now for Jock or his mother, even if they had the means."

"For all that, few days pass without his finding his way there," replied the old lady. "Whenever I am in want of Jock to do a turn of weeding in the garden, or lend a hand at the mangle, the answer at the cottage is sure to be that he is away to Nessford."

"But Nessford is seven miles off!"

"Little more than five, by the fields; and with that odd shuffle of Jock's, it is astonishing the ground he manages to get over!—Ten mile a day is nothing to him."

"It is true," replied Miss Amelia, musingly, "when I have had occasion to send him to Whitby, for a book to the library, or skein of silk at the haberdashers, I have had him there and back in less than four hours. And the fast coach is nearly two on the road!"

"You've never known him do it, I'll be bound, since the family came to the Hall!" ejaculated her mother, as they reached the well-trimmed laurel

hedge skirting the rectory garden. "Little as those people seem to trouble themselves about the neighbourhood, it's untold the mischief they've done among the poor. Your poor dear father is not the man he has been, or he'd hint as much from the pulpit; instead of going on and on, with his round of sermons about points of divinity, which not a soul in the parish understands, though they've heard them once a twelvemonth ever since he read in, forty years ago. The very leaves of his manuscript have grown as thin as a wafer, and as limp as a cambric handerchief, with turning over!"

At that moment they entered the little low-browed red-brick parsonage; which, when the vine trained along its upper story was in full bearing, resembled the ruddy face of a Silenus crowned with grapes; a couple of windows peering forth like glassy eyes, from under the foliage.

Instead, however, of following the grumbling ladies into the dreary dusty study of the almost superannuated Doctor, to which one of these windows afforded light, let us accompany young Ribston, or rather

Jock Wootton to Nessford. For before the former reached the ferry on the mountain-stream which assigned to the little hamlet in question its name of Nessford, he drew up, as though the object of his ride were suddenly altered: and, after pausing for a moment on the brow of a cliff overlooking the little gorge at the bottom of which the river was chafing its way,—(as if escaping from imprisonment in the mill-dam above, indignant at being forced to labour for its livelihood by turning a wheel,) he directed his horse's head in an opposite direction; leaving poor Jock, who had no longer breath or strength to follow up the pursuit, to extract as much satisfaction as he might from a glimpse of a dilapidated rambling farm-house, — whose twisted brick chimneys, high above its peaked roof, appeared to have spindled to seed; while the stone frame-works and lintels of the narrow windows, assisted by certain projecting crooks of rusty iron, terminating in uncouth scroll-work, seemed alone to preserve the quaint old fabric from falling to pieces.

The date of 1572, inscribed in the same coarse

filigue of iron on one of the gables of the house, sufficiently accounted for its peculiarities. But it was clear that the venerable tenement was not inhabited by its proprietor. For while its ill-condition attested the intention of the landlord to let it fall to decay, the orderliness of the tenants was manifest in the neatness of the barnyard attached to the premises; and still more in the trimness of the little garden sloping from the house to the stream. The brightness of the Hacklewood Hall flower-beds was outdone by those of Nessford Holm. Not a weed on the gravel walks,—not a stone on the borders,—not a scattered floating straw, to deteriorate the quaker-like neatness of the place.

Apparently, poor Jock had less taste for horticultural exactness than the young squire. Or perhaps he had breakfasted less substantially. For instead of the self-sufficing quiet joy with which Charles Ribston gazed on the well-known scene, and departed, Jock was conscious only that an hour-and-a-half's run in a hilly country was a parlous provocative to the appetite:—too hungry either to follow his leader,

or pass the porch of the Holm, without offering services that were never in request, in the hope of obtaining offers of shelter and refreshment that were never wanting.

So long as Farmer Welland had tenanted the Bush Farm at Hacklewood,—like his father and father's father before him, — these concessions had been granted, partly at the suggestion of Christian mercy towards one whom the niggardliness of nature had bequeathed, as it were, to the charity of his fellow-creatures; and partly from hereditary claims—reminiscences of "lang syne,"—which tugged hard at the heart of the worthy farmer. But times were altered. Times had gone hard with the Wellands. When the estate of the Reveleys changed hands for the second time, the old man was ejected from his farm; some said justly, some *un*justly,—at all events, legally. Severe illness had followed his removal from the spot where he was born and bred; and, though still sufficiently himself to superintend the petty interests of the orchard and paddock attached to his present rambling comfortless abode, poor Welland, paralyzed

in one arm, spent the greater part of the day dozing in his wicker chair;—right glad when any kind neighbour—especially some old friend from Hackle-wood—would come and chat with him over former times, or the strange new doings of the old place.

People of refined sensibility seldom discuss the subject nearest their hearts. By an effort of mind—no matter whether arising from courage or cowardice,—they roll the stone to the mouth of the sepulchre of their griefs. To extract a word upon the forbidden topic, is like rooting up their very soul.

But it is not so with those whose susceptibilities are deadened by the wear and tear of a laborious life. *They* love to talk over their troubles: *they* love to complain of their injuries: *they* are eager to hear of changes and aggressions that bring flashes from their eyes, or a glow to their swarthy cheeks.

It was a main joy to the disabled old farmer, when some charitable soul indulged his weakness by relating to him how his old homestead had been pulled down; how the stock, sold off at his *quasi* bankruptcy, had been replaced by breeds of higher quality; and how

the Bush Farm, now a farm of gentility—a crack or model farm for the provisionment of the Hall, and a toy for the leisure of its new occupants,—was no longer *the* same place.

The pang with which he heard of his favourite oaks felled to the ground, and of the rooting-up of his decayed orchard, was to *him* as reviving as the pleasing pain which finer folks derive from witnessing the representation of a favourite tragedy.

But of all those who thus administered to his curiosity, poor Jock was the favourite; and his visits to the Holm were as welcome to the inmates as profitable to the necessitous lad. For on the word of Jock, implicit reliance might be placed. He had just sense enough to be accurate. He could relate what he had seen; but neither imagine nor fabricate what *might* have occurred. Farmer Welland and his family had faith in Jock, as in the pulpit. No falsehood, and no evil, could emerge from such a source.

"Well, lad, and what's brought thee hither the day?" said the farmer, (shoving up his spectacles

upon his deeply-indented forehead, and laying down a crumpled copy of the County Chronicle, little more than a fortnight old, in which he had been spelling over the prices current of the York and Whitby markets,) as poor Jock shouldered his way into the vast chamber—something betwixt parlour and hall, but called, after the fashion of the county, "the house"—which looked all the wider from its want of height,—the whitewashed but smoky rafters being easily reached by the hand; and which, though it struck warm on entering from a breezy walk, was more indebted for its warmth to the winter sun shining through its narrow windows, than to the ashes of the logs so thoroughly burnt out under the huge chimney that Aunt Dinah's favourite cat, more chilly than her betters, had purred herself to sleep midway on the hearth.

"Hast ever a message for me from Master Drew?" added the farmer, on seeing that, though his hospitable sister had half shoved the poor simpleton into the room, he stood there sheepish and ashamed, as if conscious of being an intruder.

But Jock Wootton's wits were not equal to magnifying into an express message the little clerk's request, (the last time he had given Abel Drew a turn of help in sweeping out the vestry,) that, when next he came to Nessford, he would "acquaint neighbour Welland great doings were expected at the Hall; —all the beds and stabling at the Reveley Arms having been engaged, in cases of emergencies from the overflow of guests and servants at the great house."

Yes!—"The Reveley Arms!"—The subversion of *that* symbol of the greatness of the extinct family, the present proprietor had not yet achieved. The old hostel, a mere wayside-traveller's inn, and yet in ample proportion to the wants of a village twenty miles distant from a manufacturing town, and ten from the railroad,—had still some years unexpired of the lease under which it was held by the widow Timmans, when included in the general purchase of Sir Richard Ribston; and as yet, the hints she had received that a change of scenery and decorations would be particularly acceptable to her new landlord, were completely thrown away.

The widow Timmans owed no man anything, and the widow Timmans was as obstinate as a mule; and to have lived rent-free, would she not have so basely capitulated as remove from the old elm-tree fronting her door, the cracked board inscribed in half-effaced letters—"The Reveley Arms;" but for which indication, the most practised herald might have been puzzled to guess that gules, or fess, or wavy, had ever adorned the mottled frame; the chief feature of which consisted of a splintered crack produced in a drunken riot with the constable, by a gang of Irish haymakers.

Thanks, however, to the accompanying inscription, the crazy board continued to afford as dire offence to the great man of the neighbourhood, as though still emblazoned with the glaring cobalt and vermilion, by which, sixty years before, a travelling limner had entitled it, to mark its allegiance to the powers that were at Hacklewood Hall.

The Reveley Arms consequently remained a favourite by-word, as denoting the nightly rendezvous of the village politicians. Not a recruiting

sergeant appeared in the parish, but established his head-quarters at the Reveley Arms. Nor a dwarf, or giant, or showman of waxwork,—not a learned pig, or Chinese conjurer,—but put up his caravan in its yard. No fear that the ancient name should be forgotten in the district, so long as the homebrewed of the widow Timmans remained so sound, and her tap so popular!—

For her obstinate adherence to the old sign, the landlady was, however, less indebted to the loyal feelings actuating the Wellands and other hereditary tenants of the Reveley race, than by the perversity of her sex in general, and her own temper in particular. The instinctive answer of Mrs. Timmans to all possible propositions, was a negative; the landlady's disposition being as crabbed as her ale was mild. Even for her customers, she always executed an order as though bestowing an alms; and rarely was the order of a traveller obeyed in the Reveley Arms, which had not been first resented as an injury.

It is more than possible, however, that the sub-

stantial benefit derived by the only inn in the village from the establishment of so large a household, and such hordes of workmen, at the Hall, might have finally prevailed upon the widow to abjure the visionary patronage of an extinct family, and abide by those who were still in the land of the living to require good entertainment for man and horse, (more particularly as no request to that effect was made to her by the Ribston party so as to provoke refusal,) but that she was kept steady to her principles by the fanaticism of others.—Abel Drew, one of the staunchest supporters of the Reveley Arms and president of its vocal club, would never have tuned up his pipes again in her parlour, had the weather-stained board exhibited a new ensign.

But above all there was Aunt Dinah;—Dinah Welland, the sister of the old farmer,—Dinah Welland with whom she had gone hand in hand through life; squabbled at the knitting school in her childhood—danced round the Maypole in her girlhood; and from whom, as a woman grown, she had inveigled her comely suitor, John Timmans of the Reveley

Arms. Though she had forgiven every other offence, and loved her for richer or poorer, better or worse, Dinah would never have pardoned any dereliction from the faith in which they were bred together—that Hacklewood was the property, by right divine, of the Reveleys; and that, let them dispose of it as they might,—by parcel, or as a whole,—by sale, or mortgage or deed of gift,—still they were its rightful owners, and the purchaser an usurper.

But Dinah Welland, with all her oddities and excellencies, deserves to figure in a chapter of her own.

CHAPTER III.

At the time Dinah Welland beheld, after a rivalship of several years, her treacherous friend Hester elected to the landladyship of the Reveley Arms, which she had long considered her own, she was a handsome Yorkshire lass of three or four and twenty, sharing with her brothers and sisters the labours of the Bush Farm; which, though the Reveleys and their estate had been long on the wane, was still then supposed to be prosperous and flourishing.

Though vexed to find herself a mark for the jeers or pity of the village, and sorely disappointed in her prospects, Dinah was not the girl to die of a broken heart. Her cheerful spirit discerned neither merit nor comfort in pining; and it was rather to avoid hearing her faithless lover abused from morning till night by her sisters and threatened by her brothers,

than to conceal or deaden her own emotions, that, instead of wearing the willow at Hacklewood, she asserted her right of independence, by seeking her fortune in service; and to the great displeasure of her friends, took her departure for town.

The good word of Madam Reveley procured her a place, and her own good conduct and good temper enabled her to keep it, till she had worked out her redemption from bondage; and from the day of the active lass's departure from the Bush Farm, to that on which the fat, jolly, good-humoured middle-aged housekeeper returned, with her earnings, to undertake the care of her only surviving brother, now an ailing and ruined man, she had laughed her way through the labours of life;—guiltless of an unkind word or unfair action; comprising her moral law in "do as you would be done by;" and her philosophy in "put your shoulder to the wheel; to-morrow 's a handier help than yesterday."

The gossips of Hacklewood prognosticated that this cheerful disposition of Dinah's would soon give way under the aggravations of her brother's peevish-

ness; and that after the luxurious habits of a London establishment, the ex-housekeeper would be unable to put up with the hard fare and hard work of a North-country farm.

But they soon found themselves mistaken. Dinah Welland's spirits seemed to rise with this occasion for realizing her favourite theory. Not only was her shoulder applied in right earnest to the wheel; but the entire savings of her laborious life were applied to establishing the infirm bankrupt in a new household. And though, with the ungraciousness of sickness and misfortune, he never ceased to grumble against the discomfort of Nessford, and revile the injustice which had been the means of ejecting him from his old home, his sister's jocund face was never so much as clouded by his fretful ingratitude.

"Let him have his say, poor soul!" was ever her rejoinder, when his neighbours or granddaughters condoled with her on finding the old man so hard to please. "It eases him. If *we* were sufferers like *him*, we should think it hard to be grudged the comfort of a cross word."

If Dinah's whole life, in short, had been one of unmixed prosperity, it could scarcely have left her more thankful, or more thoroughly content.

"Matters might have been worse. Time would bring matters round. To-morrow would prove a better friend than yesterday."

However cheerless the prospects of the family, the sunshine of her buoyant spirits rendered them light. She had looked misfortune full in the face; and had no more faith in it than in ghosts. "People talked about being unlucky—but it was all fancy. No evil in the world but had its remedy. After rain, sunshine. A little patience, and the darkest day comes to an end."

She had forgiven the man who threw her over. She had forgiven the friend who cut her out. She had forgiven the improvidence of her brother,—the craftiness of his persecutors,—simply because there was neither enmity nor rancour in her nature. All she asked of providence was a continuance of health and strength to enable her to "put her shoulder to the wheel." Meanwhile, she continued to lighten

labour with a song, and care with a smile.—Like a large, shining, rosy apple, hanging ripe and mellow in a decayed tree, Aunt Dinah's hearty face seemed to brighten the hoary dreariness of Nessford.

Never was the good woman better pleased than when able to procure the relaxation of a cheerful hour for her brother, by enticing Abel Drew now and then to accompany her back from Saturday's market for an afternoon's carouse with the invalid; and she it was who encouraged the make-believe errands of Jock Wootton; who, even by his yea and nay, had power of affording tidings to Farmer Welland touching his former pursuits and associates.

After regaling the poor lad hospitably in the kitchen, on the day in question, she had thrust him into the house, to unburden his budget of news to her brother; and now stood beside the door, with hand on hip, and a smile on her comely face, watching patiently lest aid should be wanting to prompt the questions or answers of host or guest. And when

she saw that, in spite of the farmer's encouragement, the lad was too conscious of the interested motives of his visit, to repay his entertainer by a word, instead of a rough exhortation to him to "speak up," (such as he would have received from her triumphant rival of the Reveley Arms,) she clapped him kindly on the shoulder as she inquired "how it was his friend Mister Charles had not accompanied him to the Holm?"—

For she knew the road to Jock Wootton's heart. To call the young squire of Hacklewood Hall his "friend," was like bestowing an almond on a parrot. Forthwith, his lips unclosed; and he began to tell of all he had seen and heard concerning the grand preparations for Christmas hospitality at the great house, till even the farmer would have been glad of room to interpose a few questions.

He wanted to ask, (what Jock certainly could not have answered,) the names of the guests expected; while Aunt Dinah would fain have been informed, (what was equally out of the simpleton's province of explanation,) how many best beds were made up at

the Hall, and how many were likely to sit down every day in the servants' hall.

"Them Ribstons is just the sort of new-fangled folks, who, for fashion's sake, would never be easy without a mounseer in a paper cap, for all the world like a plasterer's man,—to send up their dinner!" said the ex-housekeeper. "And if the proverb holds good, that 'God A'mighty sends meat, and the devil cooks, like enow they have got un!"

But on this point, Jock was better informed. They had not got *one*, but *two;* and though the simple lad was unable to specify that they consisted of a French *chef* for the dinner, and an Italian confectioner for the dessert, he was competent to declare that he had seen a couple of "forrun chaps" arrive in a van from the railroad, charged with as many bottles and gallipots as would have furnished an apothecary's shop.

"Fine messes and nastiness, I'll be bound!" cried the buxom ex-housekeeper; who, even had she examined the provision of pickled tunny, sardines, truffled olives, *rillettes de Tours*, *patés de foie gras*,

and *terrines de Nérac*, would scarcely have recanted her heresy.

"What matters,—so long as they go by Frenchified names!"—muttered the farmer. "Abel Drew, whose cousin's son is pantry-boy at the Hall, declares as how not a drop of malt liquor is allowed to enter the dining-room; and that for every bottle of good wholesome port served at table, there goes in a dozen o' sour French stuff with some breakjaw name or another labelled on the silver pitcher.—Well, well, much good may it do 'em!—For as black a grudge as I've got agin 'em, I wish no worse luck to the Ribston set, than that they may e'en go on as they're beginnin!"—

But to this condemnation, Jock Wootton could not say "Amen." To him, the Hacklewood Hall of the Ribstons was worth ten of the Hacklewood Hall of the Reveleys. To *him*, to-morrow was indeed worth ten of yesterday; and already, he was looking forward as sanguinely as his limited capacities would admit, to the future sovereignty of his "friend Mister Charles," who showered down sixpences like

hailstones; and had not only a stablefull of the finest hunters in the county, but the best seat and lightest hand to enable him to do them credit.

"Master Charles brought home two brushes last week. Master Charles was the only one o' the gemmen as got clear over Marnham Brook, or clear over the grip in Marnham Hollows!"—said Jock, with a fatuous smile,—half apart to the farmer,—up to whose wicker chair he had been gradually sidling.

As he stood sheepishly swinging himself backwards and forwards, Aunt Dinah seized him smartly by the sleeve.

"Hout, lad!—art going to rock the good man to sleep with thy see-saw?"—cried she, putting a sudden stop to his movements, as a plea for cutting short his panegyric. Not that it gave her so much as a twinge to hear the young squire partially spoken of. But because, on the threshold of the half-open door, unobserved of all but herself, stood one to whom she regarded that praise as the more pernicious, for being only too palatable.

The new-comer was a girl upon the verge of

twenty; a mighty pretty creature—though the young farmers of the neighbourhood, accustomed to stouter wares, denounced her as a poor, slim, palefaced, feckless wench, who looked as if a North-wester would blow her to pieces. But Grace Welland was neither born nor bred for the latitude of Nessford.

Among the numerous causes which had reduced the wealthy farmer of Bush Farm to indigence, was the paternal weakness of choosing to make a scholar of his eldest boy. For as it is a common North-country opinion, that scholars make but poor farmers, Ned Welland had evaded the imputation, by refusing to be a farmer at all. Actuated perhaps by the example of Aunt Dinah, no sooner had he attained man's estate than he hastened to London; obtained a small clerkship, and an active little wife; and partly by his own exertions, but not without frequent aid from his father, (to whom, having left him prosperous and thriving he felt no scruple to appeal,) he brought up his children as he had been brought up himself, viz., in a manner highly unsuitable to their sphere of society.

Too proud to acquaint the boy, (whom, in spite of the turn he had taken and the disunion in which they lived, he loved with all his heart,) that matters were going cross with him, that he was not the man he had been, that times were bad, and money hard to come by,—old Welland never kept his purse-strings tight, so long as a purse was in his possession, whenever a letter from London at Christmas time acquainted him that poor Ned's family expenses were yearly increasing, and his salary "as per last."

The strictness of the house of business in which he was employed, and the expenses of so long a journey in days when railroads were not, rendered it difficult for the young man to visit the North. And as he still beheld the peace and plenty of the home of his boyhood demonstrated by the frequent arrival of hampers of fat turkeys, or game, or sucking pigs, hams cured in the old chimney of Bush Farm, or cheeses pressed in its dairy, never was man so startled as when,—the purchase of the Hacklewood estates by Sir Richard Ribston, from the Newcastle attorney to whom they had been transferred, farm by farm, during the

gradual impoverishment of the Reveleys, having brought to light that the copyhold lease of Bush Farm was one that enabled the new proprietor to cancel it at a year's notice,—poor old Welland was forced to admit that the removal would be his ruin! The very report of the warning he had received, collected all his creditors upon his back; and even before the year's notice had expired, he was glad to quit the place.

There really seemed to be something fatal in the atmosphere of the parish! The farmer's difficulties were, proportionably, as great as those of his former landlord. And when, having been summoned to Bush Farm to learn the worst, and aid the old man with all he had to afford, viz., his advice,—Ned Welland, who was now a widower with a couple of daughters, had the mortification of discovering, not alone that his grayheaded father was without a roof to shelter him in his old age, but that his own thoughtless self-indulgence was one of the causes of his insolvency.—Alas! he had scarcely strength to bear up against the shock!—

After assisting his father to the best of his eloquence and arithmetic in compounding with his creditors, and superintending the arrangements which Aunt Dinah's generosity enabled him to make for his remaining years, Edward Welland returned to his London duties; not to resume them with the better courage for his greater responsibility as a father and a son; but, sinking under the terrible temptation of the moment, to "curse GOD, and die!"

And thus, two helpless girls were added to the already overburdened household at Nessford.

Maria Welland, who, though the younger was the stronger and more active of the two, possessed a sufficient spice of Aunt Dinah's spirit to resolve on becoming the mistress of her own destinies; and, under the recommendation of the schoolmistress by whom they had been brought up, obtained a situation as governess But Grace, who, from weaker health and a meeker spirit, had been the darling of her parents, shrunk from such an undertaking; and having accepted Aunt Dinah's proposition that she should become her grandfather's inmate, at least till something could

be decided for her future maintenance, arrived on a visit to Nessford Holm, which seemed likely to last for life.

It would have broken the old man's heart had she talked of leaving them; and Aunt Dinah, with more tact than might have been expected from even her kindly heart, contrived to persuade the poor girl that her assistance was essential in the little household, in keeping the accounts, and aiding and superintending the garden, spinning, and linen-press.

Right glad was Grace to be re-assured; for the timidity of her gentle nature recoiled from having her way to make among strangers. Accustomed from her childhood to the fosterage of partial affection, the cordiality of Aunt Dinah, and the kindliness of her feeble old grandfather, imparted a charm to the homely roof of Nessford Holm, which would have been wanting in the stateliest mansion on earth, if the mansion of aliens.

And though she could not sufficiently deceive herself to believe that her efforts were as efficacious and available in the family as the warm-hearted old lady,

for her comfort's sake, declared it to be, she did her best to be useful,—she did her best to improve;—and her nearest approach to happiness was when, after receiving a cheerful letter from her sister Maria, she was able to make the afternoon pass pleasantly to her grandfather, by reading aloud a few chapters from his favourite Bunyan; or exciting his almost childish interest in the fortunes of Robinson Crusoe. For, now that he was unable to take an active part in the labours of his little farm, she knew that Aunt Dinah had nothing so much at heart as to keep him quietly amused, in his easy chair, secure from all fatigue of body, or care of mind.

"Jock has been telling us of a power of fine dukes and lords expected to pass the Christmas holidays at Hacklewood Hall!"—said the old lady, with the view of diverting her niece's attention from the grateful lad's eulogium of one whom she feared might become an object of too much interest to one whose dovelike eyes would have rested, but for Charley Ribston, on no object more congenial than ploughboys or swineherds. "There's to be feasting, and

junketing, and playacting, and what not,—in hopes of making folks forget that Sir Richard's fine plumes are borrowed ones; and that he is cock of another bird's nest."

In spite, however, of Aunt Dinah's desire to speak disparagingly of the ostentation of the Ribstons, there was something in the idea of hospitality and festivity so accordant with the instincts of her nature, that an involuntary expression of sympathy beamed in her face while endeavouring to decry the doings of Hacklewood Hall.

"If you remember, aunt, when Mister Charles rode over last week to bring my grandfather the new railway-map he was so long wishing for, he mentioned that they were expecting a large party. But I fancy poor Jock has magnified their consequence. He said nothing of dukes or lords. Mister Charles spoke of college friends of his own, and relations of his mother."

"And why should not Lady Ribston's relations be dukes and lords, my dear?" persisted Aunt Dinah,—whose London experience being limited to the house-

hold of a wealthy merchant in Bedford Square, with a villa at Edmonton, she was in the habit of dividing the thrones and dominions of the earth into emperors, kings, lord mayors, and peers of the realm.

"Because," replied Grace, who, though little skilled in worldly matters, had been especially instructed on this point by the young squire, on her striving to make him sensible of the vast disparity of degree between them,—"because the Ribstons are not people of family. Sir Richard is a monied man, who has made his own way in the world; and" ——

"Not people of family, and *he* a knight?"—demanded Aunt Dinah, looking a little puzzled.

"Hav'n't I told you so till I'm tired of repeating it, Dinah?" added her testy brother. "Did you never hear Abel Drew declare that the reason the new folks don't insist on changing the sign of the Reveley Arms, is because they've ne'er a coat of arms of their own, to put in its place?"

"Master Charles, however, has coats enow,—and like a prince he looks in 'em!"—interposed Jock, as much

puzzled by this assertion as Aunt Dinah had been a moment before. "In his scarlet hunting-coat, just now, Miss Amelia and the old lady, when they met him on his road here, couldn't a keep their eyes off him; and t'other day"— —

"If thou'rt not up and stirring, my lad, thou'lt be late back at Hacklewood!"—interrupted Aunt Dinah, whose fidgets recommenced the moment the poor simpleton renewed his favourite strain.—"Days are short, and there 's no moon to speak of."

"Jock never makes more than a two hours' run of it!"—rejoined Grace Welland; vexed at what seemed like turning the poor fellow out of doors, when she saw a crimson flush ascend to the roots of his long limp flaxen hair.

"An hour and a half to come—*two* to go back," muttered the boy; "and I would go it blindfold, in a night as dark as pitch."

"And the evening seems *really* a growing as dark as pitch," rejoined Aunt Dinah. "I shouldn't be surprised if there was snow in the sky. The glass has been falling ever since yester' morning.

"All the better—all the better!" cried the farmer, who, during the recent dispute, had hobbled to the window; where, leaning on his oaken staff, he stood peering out at the state of the weather. "Frost was wanting sadly in the Mires.—Better late than never. —How's the wood-stack, Dinah?"

"As square again as at this time last year!" was the prompt reply of the old lady,—whose charitable aid to her poor neighbcurs the preceding hard winter, had exposed her family to some danger of being fireless before the spring came round.

"If you really think there is snow in the air," said Grace, who had followed the farmer to the window, "I will go and mat up my camelias and carnations before it grows dark."

"And if you see Ralph, bid him thrust a wisp of straw into the cracks of the hovel!"—said her aunt, whose heart was as tender towards the calves she was rearing, as that of her niece towards her favourite flowers.

And while the old lady proceeded to examine the clouds, and confirm the opinion of her more weather-

wise brother, that "there was loike to be a change," Jock Wootton sneaked unobserved out of the room, and followed through the porch the light footsteps of Grace, to ascertain whether she had no message for Hacklewood to entrust to his care.

"Well, well!—it can't be helped!"—ejaculated Aunt Dinah, after hearing a heavy fall predicted by her brother. "I always said Christmas know'd better than not to bring Christmas weather. For my part, I love a snowy Christmas day. It makes the cheer within-doors all the sweeter, to see icicles hanging to the eaves.—Besides, it's natural, and what folks is used to; and puts one in mind of old times, and them as made old times pleasant. And thank goodness, brother, we're prepared.—There's a week's baking in the dairy, a round of beef in corn, and Mrs. Timmans's present of stout October still untapped. If the frost should set in hard, and the mill stop (as it did last winter, to throw thirty poor families out of bread) we're well provided enough ourselves, to hold out a hand to them as wants it."

As she proceeded in her projects of benevolence,

Aunt Dinah began instinctively to lower her voice, for whenever twinges of rheumatic gout put crabbed words into his mouth, her brother was apt to accuse her of fancying his meal-tub like the widow's cruse; and dealing as liberally with their hard earnings, as with those of her former opulent master:—forgetting how good her right, in that house, to indulge in the great duty of charity,—the great duty which was also her greatest pleasure.

But in the instance of her present soliloquy, the good woman had nothing to apprehend. The infirm farmer had tottered back to his seat, and re-ensconced himself in his wicker chair; absorbed in one of those profound reveries, in which paralytic persons appear to enjoy an existence apart from either life or death,—a species of dreamy *clairvoyance*, wherein memories of old times are reproduced like tangible reality,—connecting wild visions of the past with dim foreshowings of the future.

"Poor fellow, he is asleep!"—thought she, stealing on tiptoe out of the room.

But never had the mind of poor Welland been

more actively awake. He was thinking of a Christmas eve, some fifty years before; when, after a similar unseasonable continuance of fine weather, it happened that—

But the reminiscences of the old man must wait awhile, till we have placed before our readers the state of preparations and expectations in full activity at Hacklewood Hall.

CHAPTER IV.

It is doubtless a hard matter to win a battle of Waterloo,—or compose an opera like Fidelio,—or persuade the two Houses of Parliament that they cannot be supporting Whig measures, so long as propounded by a Conservative administration.

But it would be a harder thing than all these, to convert a ruinous old manor-house into a splendid modern mansion, without converting all the country round into an enemy's camp, by injuries offered to the taste of some, and predilections of others.

Sir Richard Ribston, whom Abel Drew, had he been the Apollo he fancied himself, would have flayed alive,—Sir Richard Ribston, who was denounced from the chimney-corner of Nessford Holm as a ruthless oppressor,—reviled from the tap of the

Reveley Arms as a subverter of the laws,—and decried in the parlour of Hacklewood Rectory as an ignoramus unable to distinguish between Elizabethan architecture and the Bastard Norman,—and in the higher circles of the county, named with an indulgent smile as a *nouveau riche*, labouring under the calamity of being vulgar and insignificant,—was in point of fact a harmless man, a little over-covetous of the approval of the world; who had been harassed into painful consciousness of a mean origin, and the desire to gild over the blot in his escutcheon, less by the insolence of the great, than by the servile deference towards social distinctions by which the middle and lower classes have assigned them such high precedence above the claims of talent or work.

For of this be sure,—that, let a duke think as highly of himself as he may, four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine persons out of every five thousand surrounding him, think twice as much of a duke.—

But for this prevailing subservience, Richard

Ribston, the wealthy East India Director, would never have submitted to be knighted.—He might have presented the address which brought the royal sword upon his shoulder, without any such ignominious contingency. But the name of Dicky Ribston, which had stuck to him since he was a Charterhouse gown-boy, was connected with so many humiliating reminiscences in his mind, that he was glad to place his foot upon the only round of the ladder of preferment within his reach, in the hope of having greater greatness thrust upon him hereafter. Sir Richard had imbibed a notion, as specious as fallacious, that a man is nearer to a baronetcy for being a knight; and that, when honours are in the market, the son of a baronet has a better chance than a commoner of obtaining a peerage.

By calculations such as these, and still more by the questionable nature of his petty distinctions, a certain nervous fussiness, born with him, was grievously increased. Deprecating public opinion as though perpetually on the hustings, he was as afraid of indulging in benevolent feelings toward his poorer

or humbler neighbours, lest his sympathy should be connected by the magnats of the county with his low origin, as of any cordial advance to intimacy with the magnats of the county, lest he should be accused of "not knowing his place."

Uneasy in mind, his restless unassured manner evinced the consciousness of a false position. A foolish conciliatory laugh when there was nothing to laugh at,—a seeming absence of mind, produced by watching the countenances of all present, instead of joining promptly and intelligently in conversation,—rendered him an unsatisfactory companion, even to those who neither despised him as a *parvenu*, not detested him as the supersedor of the Reveleys.

His very wife, an amiable woman of high connections, who had married him from preference and the conviction of reciprocal affection, loved him the less when the discovery of his besetting weakness induced an apprehension that her family consequence constituted her real attraction in his eyes.

She respected herself, she respected her duties, but she ceased to respect Sir Richard;—for if it be

impossible to be a hero to one's valet de chambre, it is *difficult* to be a hero to one's wedded wife. The petty emotions and vacillations of mind connected with the period of his knighthood, (a distinction which in the eyes of her family rendered him ridiculous,)—his anxious susceptibilities concerning his predecessors at Hacklewood Hall,—but above all, his readiness in taking advantage of the flaw in old Welland's lease, that he might get rid of one of those faithful adherents of the former family who kept alive in the village the reverence for their superior importance,—had served to degrade him in the eyes of one who, content with her allotted station, entertained neither envy of the living, nor jealousy of the dead.

Following the bent of his character, the coolness which a woman living on confidential terms with her husband is unable to disguise, was attributed by Sir Richard to the source of all his other irritations—*i. e.* his want of family connection. His wife was doubtless weary of the subordinate part assigned her in society!—a suspicion that caused him to redouble the very efforts by which he had forfeited

her esteem, in hopes of obtaining, by pompous and heartless entertainments, that worldly consideration to which he was neither personally nor hereditarily entitled.

Hence, all the glare and show predominant in the arrangements of his new mansion. Transplanted into a county with which he had neither alliance nor affinity, he fancied that his only means of establishing a footing, was by the exhibition of superior elegance, and a degree of household luxury, which, however familiar in the metropolis and its vicinity, was, in those simple northern regions, utterly unknown. Hacklewood, as may have been surmised from the vast influence of the Reveleys, was remote from any of the grander family domains of our princely aristocracy; and he was accordingly prepared to dazzle the eyes of untravelled squires and homely country baronets, with refinements that rendered him a mark of contempt to *them*, and of dislike to his less aspiring neighbours.

Though, all the time the old mansion was in process of repair and embellishment, the influence of

Lady Ribston was mildly exerted to subdue the excess of magnificence suggested by wily London tradesmen, and only too readily adopted by her husband, Hacklewood Hall now exhibited such excess of carving and gilding, groining and illuminating,—such missal-like richness of colours,—such profusion of stained glass, scarlet cloth, trophies of arms, ebony *bahuts*, brackets with busts, and niches with statues, that a noble tourist, who had looked in upon the works with an air of compassion, was not far wrong in his sarcasm of — that the place would turn out "a Brumnagem Versailles."

The taunt, it is to be presumed, had not yet reached the ears of the owner. For now that he was thoroughly installed,—now that, his son being come home to him from Oxford, and his daughter from Paris, he was about, for the first time, to welcome as inmates under his roof a select few of those right honourable acquaintances who had been induced, some from curiosity, some from a love of the ludicrous, some from still unfairer motives, to patronize his London fêtes,—he kept gilding the refined gold of his service of

plate, and painting the lily in his new conservatory, till he exhausted the imagination of his designers, and tired the patience of his whole family.

His daughter Bessy, whose high spirits were untameable, even by a French education or deference to the gentle manners of her mother, was forced to take refuge in her own room from the perpetual intrusion of upholsterers with rule and compass, or fresco-painters with palette and brush, into the showy saloons, where all was comfortless ostentation, and a gallery which afforded no pleasure to its proprietor, save when viewed through the eyes of visitors. As to Charley, as he was called by his Christchurch chums, some hint has been already afforded of the nature of the pleasures on pretence of which he contrived to absent himself from his unsociable home.

As Christmas approached, matters grew worse and worse. Thanks to the mildness of the season, the improvements of the place, both in-door and out, were carried on six weeks beyond the usual time. Additional servants were hired, to meet the hourly-

increasing duties of the house. In the new stables, proportioned as for a palace, the Harley-street stud and equipages of the East India Director appeared so out of place, that a new family-coach from town, and extensive purchases at York, were judged indispensable to do them honour. Till at length, all was complete. The getting-up of the piece was achieved. Nothing remained but the signal of the prompter's whistle for drawing up the curtain.

"I almost wish, dear mamma, that the holidays were over, and these people come and gone," said Bessy to her mother, as the eventful period approached. "I am tired of hearing papa complain of the unpunctuality of his people. Though every thing appears complete, he is always declaring that nothing will be ready. As if he had bought and furnished Hacklewood only to receive a set of people who come here at best as a favour,—instead of for ourselves to live in and be happy."

Grave looks, accompanied by graver words, admonished the giddy girl to refrain from a subject sacred in the eyes of her mother.

"Charles has the best of it!"—resumed Elizabeth, after a moment's pause in deference to Lady Ribston's reproof;—"for he gets upon Ringwood, and gallops off; and may do as much, should our expected visitors prove as tiresome as the preparations made for their reception. To judge from papa's uneasy looks for the last week, I am sure *he* anticipates no great pleasure, however much honour, from their company!"

'Your father is fagged and harassed by the awkwardness of the new servants, and stupidity of his workmen," replied Lady Ribston. "For some days past, indeed, though he does not own it, I fear he has been really indisposed."

The plea was sufficient to enlist Bessy's sympathy, and silence her girlish strictures. But even Lady Ribston was little aware how serious and deeply-seated was the evil producing this semblance of indisposition.

As Christmas approached, the accomplishment of his elaborate orders and splendid preparations reminded Sir Richard how far he had extended his

projects and multiplied his expenses; till the cost of such exaggerated luxury stared him frightfully in the face. After all his care,—his trouble,—his patience, —his *im*patience,—instead of being able to enjoy the fruition of his labours, what he wished for most in the world was, that all had been left undone!—

Instead of looking forward with glee to the arrival of his long-courted guests, he dreaded the dawn of the new year with its alarming file of bills and fearful array of letters by the post, claiming "attention at his earliest convenience." For ample as were his means, the expenses incurred at Hacklewood were of a nature to intimidate the largest capitalist going.

With such length of purse and strength of credit as that of Sir Richard Ribston, it would of course be easy to obtain time for the settlement of his accounts. But the necessity of *requesting* it, was a sufficient mortification to one so covetous of the deference of his inferiors, that he was ready to purchase it by ignobly buying himself into the society of the great. The vexatious consciousness overclouding his mind, so increased, indeed, the usual irresoluteness of his con-

strained manners, that he had more the air of a shy guest than of the master of the house, in welcoming to his roof two college-chums of Charley's,—the only visitors invited to share the Christmas festivities of Hacklewood in a genuine spirit of hospitality, for the pleasure their company afforded to their young friend and the pleasure he hoped to afford them in return.

The Honourable Sidney Howard, and Sir William Meredyth, who installed themselves in the Bachelor's Gallery a day or two previous to the arrival of the London party, were two thoughtless, off-hand young fellows of the day; who, educated in habits of intimacy with Charles Ribston, and accustomed to meet his family in the brilliant circles of fashion, had never troubled their heads concerning their ancestry or estate. Taking Sir Richard for granted as an old country baronet, and Hacklewood as his family seat, they came there to hunt, shoot, and be merry; as merry as Charley had been, on previous occasions, at Howard Castle and Meredyth Hall.

But though the Ribstons led in London a life of

opulence and show, the young men were a little astounded by the resplendent gloss and novelty of everything that met their eyes in the Hacklewood household. However inferior in dignity and subordination to the establishments of the Earl of Nottingham, or the Dowager Lady Meredyth, a certain laboured pretension in all its details jarred against their notions of comfort and propriety. They came, however, too thoroughly prepared to enjoy themselves, to be more than momentarily discouraged on finding the family circle so formal; and the house so newly furnished, as to smell of varnish like an upholsterer's shop!

"We have no near neighbours," observed Sir Richard, as if apologizing for sitting down alone to so elaborate a dinner. "But I am expecting the arrival of friends from town, to fill our house."

"Country neighbours are often a greater bore than acquisition," observed Sir William, whose family place stood a mile or two from the town of Birmingham.

"Better, however, than to lie at the mercy of a journey of two hundred miles!" rejoined Charley.

"This part of the country must have been a perfect wilderness, till the existence of the railroad.—Not a thing to attract people so far out of the world. —Hunting, shooting, scenery—all mediocre!—Not so much as a mineral-spring or bathing-place within thirty miles!"—

"By Jove, how enviable!" cried young Howard, (the Earl of Nottingham's seat being a cake-house from Leamington.) "I often wonder how *my* father abstains from arson!—Nothing short of burning down his house would free us from the horde of savages who fancy they acquire a right to chase us from room to room, all day, by offering half-a-sovereign to the housekeeper."

"Still, it is pleasant to be within reach of society," observed Miss Ribston.

"The society of Leamington!—Dowager misses, —widows living in genteel cottages, on small jointures,—rheumatic old Indians,—and half-pay majors —just such people as the railroad will soon make you acquainted with!" cried young Howard. "Take my word for it, you will not have to complain long of

the thinness of the neighbourhood!—Bellevue Villas, and Prospect Places, with rustic porticos, and Genoa blinds, will be starting up at your lodge-gate.—Ten years hence, Sir Richard will scarcely know his park by sight!—Ten years hence, he will be built out of his family place."

"It is really edifying," said Sir William Meredyth, addressing Lady Ribston, (whose cheeks demonstrated, by a conscious flush, her sympathy in the embarrassed feelings of her husband,) "to notice, wherever an obscure part of the country is intersected by a railroad, the bed of mushrooms that starts up, as by magic, on either side. We cannot expect, however, that the railway companies, which show so little scruple in dealing with the property of landed proprietors, should exhibit much delicacy towards their feelings."

"The obscure part of the country, as you call it, is, however, the gainer," observed Lady Ribston, gravely. "The price of land and produce is raised,—the poor are fed,—the livings increase in value!"

"A horrid bore, nevertheless, for the old resident families!" persisted young Howard, who had not attained the age of sober patriotism; "a horrid bore, as you will find, to your cost!—When your table is covered with the invitation cards of Mr. and Mrs. Orlando Tompkins, Sir Jacob and Lady Newcome, and a whole tribe of Leeds bankers, and York grocers, knighted for carrying up addresses, you will sigh for your quiet old neighbourhood with its bad roads, ancient rookeries, and dignified seclusion!"

An awkward silence followed this flippant sortie. But for the presence of his father, whose soreness on such points was well known to him, Charley would have frankly retorted, "Have a care, my good fellow you are on tender ground;—we are but nobodies ourselves!"—As it was, he endeavoured to give a new turn to the conversation, by such rhapsodies in honour of the achievements of the nearest pack of hounds, that Howard was speedily warmed into a resolution to send for his hunters from Northamptonshire; Charley Ribston engaging to mount Sir William Meredyth for the field.

But the over-susceptible host, in whose breast the random shafts of his gay guest were still rankling, could not refrain from betraying the smart of his wound!

"Though we have no near neighbours of a visitable kind," said he, "(for even the usual country resource,—the clergy,—is unavailable,—the livings hereabouts being miserable college benefices, not worth a gentleman's acceptance,) we are expecting friends to-morrow from the other side of the county. Lord and Lady Dryasdust, who reside nearly thirty miles from Hacklewood"—

"Would it were sixty for your sake, my dear Sir Richard!" interrupted Howard,—incapable of understanding that with *some* people, to be a lord is a sufficient recommendation. "The Dryasdusts are the most insupportable people upon earth"—

"Lord Dryasdust is considered a very superior man!"—observed the host, a little stiffly, and a little affronted.

"Superior?—To what?—or *in* what?"—cried Howard, laughing.

" In the first place, he is a profound antiquarian."

" In the *first* place,—and in the *last!*—As far as antiquarianism goes, I grant you!—Finding himself little accounted in the present century, old Dryasdust ran himself to earth in the dust of ages,—where, long may he remain undisturbed!—I should ask your pardon, my dear Sir Richard, for dealing so unceremoniously with your guest, but that he happens to be a cousin of my own."—

Sir Richard did indeed look anything but pleased; partly, because he had attached undue importance to the visit of the Dryasdusts; partly, because apprehensive that in the eagerness of discussion, the merits of his twice-to-India Madeira, and salmis of woodcocks, might be overlooked.

" Luckily, we need not depend for amusement upon the Dryasdusts!"— observed his son,—un-nettled by Howard's observations, because aware that such was the usual random style of his friend's conversation. " The Charles Milbankes are on their road"—

" Lord Charles, you know, Mr. Howard, was one of the lords of the treasury during the last adminis-

tration," said Sir Richard in an explanatory tone, - ignorant that he was announcing to his guest the qualifications of another cousin—

"And we are to have the Dowager Lady Gumbledon and her two daughters," said Miss Ribston

"All three musical, and invaluable additions to a country-house!"—added her father.

Howard and Meredyth, who had seen several pleasant parties marred by the arrival of this music-mad trio, (known in their set by the names of Crotchet, Quaver, and Semi-quaver,) all but groaned at the prospect.

"I have also some hopes," observed Sir Richard with affected unconcern, "of a visit from one of the ablest and most distinguished men of the day,—my noble friend the President of the Board of Control, —who has promised to accompany his sister Lady Charles Milbanke."

"Will he bring his secretary?"—cried Howard with sudden interest in the pompous announcements of his host.—"Bob Shoreham is a famous fellow!—Bob Shoreham is one of the best fellows in the world!"—

"Mr. Shoreham was included in our invitation, I hope, my dear?"—inquired Sir Richard, ceremoniously, of his lady. And as soon as Lady Ribston could withdraw her attention from Meredyth, with whom she was conversing, to answer in the affirmative, her son forestalled the further enlargements of his father, by adding, "And as soon as Cossington, Bill Bruce, and Sydney arrive, my dear Howard, we are to attack the preserves!—Cossington has written to beg that *one* day may be set aside for a touch at gull-shooting, at Darnel Head,—capital sport, with time and tide in one's favour!"—

'Are you so near the sea, then?"—inquired Howard of Miss Ribston, beside whom he was seated.

"Scarcely ten miles, as the crow flies. But the roads are bad and tedious. Darnel Head, however, is considered in the summer season one of the lions of the neighbourhood."—

"And in winter, too," added her brother, "when the weather is favourable."—

"On that score, I think we are safe!" said the lively girl. "After so severe a summer, we are

entitled to a mild winter. And as Moore and Murphy unite in announcing a six weeks' frost, with the Thames to be frozen over, we have everything in favour of open weather."

"Thanks for your prognostications, Miss Ribston," observed Howard; "my mind is now at ease! I was beginning to be afraid Old Christmas might take it into his head to enjoy his own again, and come down upon us with a fall of snow!"

"Let him do his worst!" said Charley, while Sir Richard was preparing to pledge his young guests in sparkling champagne. "We have a capital billiard table; and if we should be snowed up, our long gallery would be the very thing for private theatricals."

"Lady Ribston looks as though she trembled for the Dresden vases I was admiring in the gallery before dinner?" observed Sir William Meredyth. "I am afraid they would be a little in the way!"

"Nothing of my mother's is ever in the way, when the pleasures of her children are in question," was Charley's affectionate rejoinder. "Besides, the

furniture of the gallery might easily be moved into an empty bedroom."

"After to-morrow, Charles," rejoined his father, with dignified consciousness, "there will be some difficulty in finding an empty bedroom in the house. For the purpose you meditate, however, let us hope none may be in request. Mac Murdy, my Scotch shepherd at the Bush Farm, informed me as I was riding home this evening, that the moles were as briskly at work as at Midsummer, and the rooks gathering for building. Mr. Howard cannot do better than send for his hunters. We are sure of open weather till the change of the moon."

Thus encouraged, Herbert Howard proceeded, after dinner, to prepare for the morrow's letter-bag, a despatch to his head groom containing instructions for the journey. Fortunately, however, the post did not go out till morning. For on rejoining the ladies, every one was conscious of a change of temperature. Every one shivered as they entered the brilliantly lighted, but comfortless saloon. Every one drew instinctively towards the fire!—

When coffee was brought in, the butler announced, in reply to Sir Richard's inquiries, that a sprinkling of snow was falling.

Before morning, the ground was white as a wedding-cake! Not a rut, not a road to be seen. Two old cedar trees fronting the Hall, looked as if in some danger, from the heavy masses of snow collected on their venerable branches.

After breakfast, and the customary visit to the stables, (maintained in as rigid and coquetish order as the Surrey hunting stables of some aspiring stock-broker,) the billiard-room afforded a welcome resource.

"A splendid table, by Jove!" — cried Howard, glancing at the richly carved rosewood legs, and highly-polished queues.

And it was lucky Sir Richard happened to be in the room to enjoy his tribute of approbation. For after a game or two, the young men were tacitly unanimous that it was one of the worst tables they had ever played on; and mechanically, they adjourned to the hall, to examine, somewhat anxiously, the state of the glass. The change of weather, which

at first had been treated as a joke, was beginning to wear a serious aspect.

By the time Lord and Lady Dryasdust made their appearance, half an hour before the first dressing bell, their arrival had been looked forward to as a relief.

" They were very late.—They were afraid they were sadly late.—They detested travelling after dark.—At one moment, their minds had misgiven them about coming at all.—In consequence of the state of the roads, they had given up attempting the first stage with their own horses; and even with four posters, and at a foot's pace, Hellyn Heath was nearly impassable. If the snow continued through the night even the rail would be stopped !"—

At this announcement, the face of Sir Richard Ribston grew nearly as long as that of Abel Drew. If the labours of his two men-cooks for the preceding fortnight, should, after all, be thrown away ! If the *pâtés de foie gras*,—and venison pasties,—and lobster cutlets, should have been prepared in vain !—

" I am afraid a long frost would fall all the more severely on the country from the want of prepara-

tion," said Lady Ribston; "and for old people and invalids, such changes are often fatal."

And though Sir William Meredyth, in spite of a foot deep of snow upon the ground, persisted, in echo of Miss Ribston's system of philosophy, that a thaw was inevitable, and that they should have a capital run in a day or two,—before the somewhat silent party separated for the night, Charley was heard to observe to his father, "I'm afraid, Sir, your Dresden China is in jeopardy!—Depend upon it, we are *in* for a six weeks' frost.—Monstrous unlucky!—with a houseful of company, and company strangers to each other.—The only chance for us will be a touch at theatricals."

Sir Richard concealed his agony under a forced smile.—After all, then, the whole thing was to be a failure!—As he watched the servants extinguishing the innumerable wax-lights in the saloon, and music-room, and library, after the party had retired to bed, he was probably reiterating the dictum of the wisest of kings, that all in this world is vanity and vexation of spirit.

CHAPTER V.

WHILE the sudden change of weather produced this excess of discomposure at the great house, it was noted in a very different spirit at Nessford Holm.—

"I hav'n't patience with myself," cried Aunt Dinah, "for trusting such a make-believe friend as winter sunshine, and putting off till the last minute to provide myself with Christmas garnish.—In Lon'on, master's greengrocer took care of us."

"And at the Bush Farm, the Hall folks was sure to send in a cartload of 'butus and 'stinus, from the Hacklewood shrubberies!"—grumbled the farmer. "Ah! them was the good old times!"—

"Well, well!—to-morrow's a handier help than yesterday; and may be 'twill clear up enow for Hodge to get us a bush or two of mistletoe!" said his sister.—"I'll on with my list shoes, and cut an arm-

full of holly in the orchard-hedge, myself, sooner than see the place bare and forlorn on Christmas Eve!"—

"No need of risking the rheumatism, my dear aunt!" said Grace. "This morning, I found a heap of laurel, holly, box, and candleberry myrtle, in the faggot-house, that nearly filled the place,—Poor Jock Wootton, more weatherwise than the best of us, foresaw this fall of snow, and took care that we should not be unprovided."

"Poor lad!—If he set to work after bidding us good-by last night, he must have been late home to his mother, after all;"—cried Aunt Dinah—"and the lower road by the river is but chanceish, walking, with the ground slape from falling snow!—I wish he may have got safe home, Grace!—And I wish, before I hurried him off, I had thought of putting something in the poor fellow's pocket, to mend his mother's Christmas meal.—But no doubt Jock's fine friends at the Hall afford to do that much once a year, for the widow and orphan!"—

But Grace was already out of hearing; off, and

back again in the room, in a moment, with a basket-full of Jock's provision of evergreens; and Aunt Dinah was soon engrossed in the busy pleasure of ornamenting with branches of holly the chimney and its brightly scoured ornaments of brass and copper,—its pestle and mortar, and candlesticks shining like gold.—For the centre-piece, was reserved a long-hoarded chef-d'œuvre of poor Jock Wootton's decorative genius, — a bouquet of dried grasses, interspersed with the silvery seeds of the rocket, and pods of the garden iris bursting with seeds resembling beads of polished coral:—while sprigs of full-berried holly,—both the orange and the red,—were stuck in every direction round the room,—surmounting the linen-presses,—crowning the black frames of a few prints, the farmer's pride, that ornamented the whitewashed walls, or suspended in garlands to many a projecting nail.

"*Now* the place looks something like!" — cried Aunt Dinah,—resting her hands upon her hips, as she surveyed the cheerful room.—"I nailed a clean vallance to the chimney-piece, and laid down the

new bit o' carpeting, afore the good man's eyes was open this mornin';—and the girl and I took a two-hours' turn in rubbin' up the tables and presses!"—

A significant smile from Grace, as, placing her workbasket on the table near the chimney-corner she glanced towards her grandfather, seemed to imply that these early labours might have been postponed, without endangering his comfort;—for, as is often the case with aged or infirm persons in snowy weather, the old man was quietly dozing away the day,—a circumstance that enabled her to put the few last stitches to a comforter she had been preparing for him in crochet-work, as a Christmas offering. Her sister Maria had forwarded from town a waistcoat for the old man, to accompany the gift; besides tokens of remembrance to herself and Aunt Dinah, which Grace profited by the present occasion to draw from their hiding-place.

"I would fain find the heart to scold her, for laying out her money on me!"—said the old lady, as her delighted niece placed a handsome shawl upon her shoulders.—"But I *can't!*—for the life o' me, I can't!

—It comes so nat'ral to be thoughtful of friends and well-wishers, at Christmas time.—Bless her, poor girl!—I wish she was with us, Grace!—'Tis the only thing wanting to make Nessford as home-like and pleasant as the poor old Bush Farm."

At that well-known name, the farmer's eyes mechanically unclosed. The familiar sound reached him, even in his sleep. Half raising himself in his chair, he began to look about him, like one startled. And startled he had a right to be: so completely, during his slumbers, had everything about him changed in aspect.

"What is all this, and where am I?"—faltered he, vainly endeavouring to raise his arm to his neck, around which Grace had entwined the soft lambs-wool comforter.

One of Aunt Dinah's hearty ringing laughs sufficed to dispel his slumbers, but not to restore him to perfect consciousness.—He still looked thoroughly bewildered.

"My own work, grandfather!" said Grace, kissing his forehead. "May it bring you a merry Christ-

mas. And here is something sent you from London, by my sister,—a good warm waistcoat, which, if this weather lasts, will have come just in time."

But much to Grace's surprise, and more to her mortification, Farmer Welland neither noticed nor acknowledged the offerings of his dutiful grandchildren.

"I thought,—I fancied,—I am afraid I have been dreaming!"—murmured he, passing his hand across his eyes, either to brush away a tear, or collect his scattered perceptions.—"Just now,—they all seemed here again!"

"And so we *are* here!"—cried Aunt Dinah. "Look about you, man, look about you, and see how Christmas Eve has brought down snow without, and holly within!—If *you've* been dreaming, *we've* been as busy as bees!"—

"I am afraid you are not well, grandfather?"—said Grace, pushing aside her work-basket, and leaning across the table towards him, as she noticed the moisture gathering anew under the old man's shaggy eyelids.

"I don't well know *what* I am!" was his scarcely articulate reply. "Nothing ails me, more than usual. But I've been dreaming of old times, Grace! —dreaming of them as is gone, and days as is gone. —And when the head gets grey, girl, and the heart heavy, there 's nothing real or living one finds to comfort one, like thoughts of what 's dead and gone."

Aunt Dinah, though she heard but imperfectly the murmured explanations of the old man, nodded significantly to her niece,—as much as to say,—"His mind 's wandering,—don't thwart him,—let him ramble as he will."

"Fifty year,—fifty year"!—resumed the farmer, incoherently, as if talking to himself; "fifty year a come and gone,—and I alone left,—*I* left all alone, —all, *all* alone!"—And he began to rock himself backwards and forwards in his chair, as if to soothe a gnawing pain within, much as the poor natural had done the preceding day.

"Not *quite* alone, grandfather!" said Grace, imprudently endeavouring to palliate an affliction of which

the origin was unknown. "You have still Aunt Dinah and your grandchildren, to tend and love you."

"But where 's the babe in the cradle?" said old Welland, almost fiercely. "Where 's the curly-headed boy as was fondling at my knee?—Poor Ned!—Afore he'd the use of his tongue, that boy was brave and strong as a lion!—And where 's Martha—where 's my young wife,—as was braver and stronger still, when aught was to be struggled for, for me or her children?—There 's a look of her in your eyes, lass!—I've oft bethought me there was a look of Martha in your eyes, and a touch of her kind natur' in your 'n. But you'll never make the wife or the woman as *she* was. Such ben't born but once in a way. And just now, I was dreamin' as I heard her voice as clear as ever I heard it in her life-time;—a talkin' she was about young Master Reveley—Master Paul, as had got into trouble,—(when was he ever in aught else?) And when I oped my eyes, Grace, and saw everything about me so trim and holiday-wise, and you a-sitting over against me at work,—just as *she* used to sit,—I thought—GOD help me!—as we were all

at the Bush Farm again ;—the old, young,—the dead, alive,—and I, a thriving man, instead of a poor old cripple—a bankrupt—a beggar,—maintained by his hard-working sister and children's children, who had need to be laying-by for themselves, instead of slaving for a helpless old creature, o' no mortal use in this world !"—

And as he reached the close of his bewailment, the poor old man's breath was broken by sobs, and he lifted up his voice and wept.

Aunt Dinah had luckily left the room, in pursuance of her household duties; or she would probably have upbraided both her brother, and brother's grandchild,—whose arm was now thrown round his neck, and her tears mingled with his,—for indulging in melancholy repinings on a day so sacred to family joy and festivity, as Christmas Eve ; more especially, as *she* maintained that they had nothing to fret for! Having worked their way through the year without let or hinderance, and laid by something into the bargain, matters might be said to be looking up at Nessford Holm.

But it was not by such arguments that the tenderer-hearted Grace endeavoured to solace the grief of the broken-spirited old man. *She* enabled him to give vent to his long-repressed tears, by encouraging him to talk of the past,—of the infancy of his children,—the childhood of her father, his favourite son; and, in return,—it might almost be said in *reward*,—he listened while she talked of her mother, and her own happy childhood. So that after an hour spent by the fire-side, in mutual reminiscences,—an hour which enabled Aunt Dinah to bustle through the extra-business of the morning, and prepare, unobserved, her pleasant surprises for the morrow,—the young girl and the poor old man understood each other better, and were closer friends than they had ever been in their lives.

Grace heard for the first time of her grandfather's earliest patron,—or rather friend,—Paul Reveley;—"Young Master," as old Welland persisted in calling him,—though, had he been still alive,—the snows of eighty years would have been upon his head;—and after giving ear to the recital of his wild exploits, and comforting her grandfather's feelings by coinciding

in his verdict that "Young Master" was as sound of heart as unsound of head,—and that, in spite of the ill-will of his own family and ill-word of the whole country round, he only needed to have been better brought up, to be a credit to his kith and comfort to his kin,—she ceased to wonder that, if such the character and habits of the Reveley family, the old Hall should have passed to other hands, and the old name become extinct.

"A black villain he was,—a scoundrel if ever scoundrel drew breath," said the old man,—"that Hilliard of Newcastle,—the attorney who, on pretence of managing the family affairs, supplied the needful to my young master, so long as there was a horse or horse-race in the country for him to risk it on,—or a dice-box at York to be shaken,—or a blazing bowl o' punch at the ordinary, to send him home to Hacklewood as gemmen was too often seen, in them days, tho' they shame to be seen so now,—trusting to GOD'S mercy, and the surefootedness of his nag, not to find his way into the mill-dam yonder,

as he crossed the bridge,—then, a poor crazy wooden thing, without rail or coping!"

"It was by such means, then," inquired Grace, "that the family property was wasted?"—

"The remnant on't:—for the best o' the land had melted away in the time of old Squire Reveley,—young master's grandfather,—who ris a regiment of dragoons on his land to join the rising in the north,—and had a hard matter to keep what was left out o' the grip o' King George's exchequer. Two years' imprisonment in Carlisle Castle and a fine o' five thousand pound, kept his neck out o' the halter.—But the king might as well have had all, as Hilliard!—He and his father afore him had been ferretin' their way into the heart o' the property, till the wicked one himsel' couldn't have smoked em out."

"It was *their* assistance, then, that enabled Mr. Paul Reveley to complete the ruin of the family?"—

"Their help, and his own love o' pleasure. Afore young master saw two and twenty,—when he was

much such a younker to look at as young Squire Ribston up at Hall,—he 'd signed away deeds, and bonds, and mortgages, and what not, — that 'ud a left him ne'er a penny fee in pocket, if the Lord had willed him to outlive the old squire, his father, as, by GOD'S will, was not to be."

"At all events, had he lived, he would at that have taken measures to secure justice being done you, grandfather, in regard of the lease of the Bush Farm!"—

The old man only shook his head. He could talk of his young wife,—he could talk of his beloved son, —(his Benjamin, his fair-haired lad!) — he could talk of young master,—he could talk of anything else;—but he could not talk of the ill-usage he had received in his ejectment from his old home!—It was a thing too great for words!—Thoughts of those he had lost, brought tears from his eyes. Thoughts of what he had borne, drove them back, as with the searing of iron, into the depths of his heart!—

"We won't talk o' *that*, lass!" said he. "Hilliard's gone to his account, and been judged for that

among the rest. God keep us from having all to answer for as *he* had."—

All the time her grandfather was talking, Grace Welland was too deeply absorbed in his interesting revelations, to take further heed of the weather than by noticing that the frequent sputtering of the logs upon the hearth, and the occasional starts and skippings of Aunt Dinah's favourite tabby when roused by their hissing from her slumbers in the chimney - corner, arose from the falling of huge flakes of snow down the wide chimney; which not even the provision of hams and flitches suspended in its smoke by her provident aunt, sufficed to protect from the "skiey influences" above.

But by degrees, the room became so darkened by the masses of snow collecting on the ledges of the narrow windows, that she could not refrain from an exclamation.

"It is well we were so prompt with our precautions, last night," — said she, — having risen and gone to the window. — "The snow is coming down so thick, grandfather, that I cannot so

much as distinguish the old pear tree at the garden gate."

"I knew there was a fall a-comin',—I knew there was a heavy fall a-comin'!"—cried the old man, peevishly,—"though Dinah was so positive the weather 'd bide open till the new year."

"And if I'd said otherwise," interposed his sister, who at that moment threw open the door, admitting a draught of air from the chilly stone passage leading to the outer kitchen, that cut like a bill-hook, "if I'd said otherwise, I should ha' been the only one in the parish as wasn't deceived!—Why there was neighbour Rudgings over at the Mill, was talkin', no later than Sunday forenoon, of having his workmen's Christmas dinner in the grange, which is open to the weather as a rook's nest,—instead of in his own kitchen, where they're straitened for room; and neighbour Rudgings, who was a seafarer in his youth, is 'counted as weatherwise as the Almanack."

"I'd back my rheumatiz for weather wisdom again his'n, any day of the year!" retorted the farmer,

—drawing his granddaughter's comforter closer round his neck, as a hint concerning the open door.

"At all events, nothin' and nobody's the worse for my obstinacy!" replied his sister, instantly shutting it, and drawing the sand bag against it for better security. "As luck would have it, we 'd warnin' in time. There's garden stuff in from the garden, for a week's use. The girl's got over her churnin', —and Malkin and the calves are foddered up snug for the night, and the henhouse shut, and all close and comfortable; so that I've been able to give Hodge leave to hie over to Hacklewood afore dark, to spend his Christmas Eve as well as day, with his poor old father."

Farmer Welland replied by a disapproving grunt; though he would have proposed the measure himself, had it not been first thought of by his sister.

"'Cause you see, brother, if the weather goes on thickening, the road 'll scarce be safe!" added Aunt Dinah,—always ready to turn away wrath by a soft answer.—"The Nessford road was never thought canny travelling, in snow time."

The Nessford road was, in fact, one of those common in Durham, Derbyshire, and other counties of hill and valley, running between overhanging cliffs and the stream that, but for its interposition, would have skirted their base, a ledge as it were of the rocks. Though since the establishment of the Ribstons in the neighbourhood, the influence of the rich man had prevailed with the quarter-sessions to do something towards its reparation, by shoring up the embankment in one or two precipitous spots, lovers of the picturesque were far more in conceit with it than horse, or driver, whether of the Hacklewood carriage, or the fly of the Wheatston station, or the waggons of neighbour Rudgings at the mill. As the farmer had himself admitted, in commiseration of Jock Wootton's scramble after dusk, "it was an ugly bit in winter time, even for a foot passenger."

He now thought proper, however, to dispute the point; particularly when he saw his sister fetch her wheel out of the corner, and establish herself opposite him in the chimney-corner, with the evident intention of enjoying a bit of chat—though not

with her hands crossed—till tea-time; for which the kettle was already on the kitchen fire. And chat was a rare pastime with Aunt Dinah; who, so long as the weather permitted, was accustomed to trudge in and out, making work for herself about the premises, if work there was none, merely to gratify the ever-restless impulses of her active frame.

But Grace had no fear that their differences of opinion might degenerate into bickering calculated to disturb the harmony of the day. Aunt Dinah knew not how to quarrel with her brother.—She would bear being chid like a child,—she would stand any amount of injustice and miscalling,—sooner than hazard an angry word to one who had met with so many troubles;—chastising from the hand of man, and the hand of GOD!—

The grumblings of the invalid were accordingly soon overpowered by the cheerful hum of the wheel; and Grace felt at liberty to answer in the same light-hearted spirit they were propounded, Aunt Dinah's sly banterings concerning the desire of

their rich neighbour at the mill that her grandniece should preside not only over the approaching Christmas dinner they had been talking of, but over his goods and chattels, and home and homestead for evermore.

"Hark!" cried the merry old lady, suddenly interrupting herself, as the fall of an unusually large flake of snow suddenly extinguished the flame of the logs she had heaped up previous to sitting down to work,—which now sent up a column of steam in place of bright tongues of light. "Sure I heard the kettle boiling over, yonder? Yet the doors are both shut."

Grace replied by pointing in explanation to the state of the hearth; glancing from the steaming logs to the darkened and still darkening windows.

"No!—tisn't the fire I hear!"—persisted Aunt Dinah.—"'Tis a voice without!—There's folks at the gate.—Don't you hear Jowler givin' tongue?"—

And the loud barking of the yard-dog was indeed no longer to be mistaken.

Before the old lady had time to set by her wheel and hurry out to investigate the state of affairs, the

door was partially opened, and a figure presented itself, fully calculated to justify the inhospitable objections of Jowler:—Lawyer Endless, on emerging from the meal sack, was not whiter from head to foot than the unexpected guest!—Nor was it till the new-comer unfurled a yard or two of woollen wrappers from his mouth, and removed from his head a broad-brimmed hat, which transferred as much snow as would have made a well-sized snow-ball to the well-ruddled brick floor, that a shout of laughter and an accompanying ejaculation from Aunt Dinah, announced to the panic-struck farmer that their strange visitor was no other than Master Drew!—

Hearty welcomes ensued.—A cork was drawn and an arm-chair drawn to the chimney, for the half-frozen guest, long before he returned from hanging his outer garments to dry before the kitchen-fire, and issuing orders to "the girl" who officiated as proxy for Hodge, about housing his cart in the shed, and stabling Dobbin in the cow-house.—For the horse and cart being borrowed goods, he was bound to see justice done them.—He came only as the

delegate of another;—plenipotentiary and envoy-extraordinary from no less a person than Widow Timmans of the Reveley Arms.

This circumstance, however, for the present he kept to himself.—He had a right to enjoy, for a time, the interest of his situation, as a victim of the neighbourly feelings which had prompted him to travel seven miles of dangerous road in a snow-storm, only to spend Christmas Eve with his old friend; as he had been accustomed to do, aforetime, in the inglenook of the Bush Farm.

Two hours and a half had been consumed by the little man in accomplishing a distance of little more than seven miles!—And no fault of Dobbin,—the fastest trotter in the parish of Hacklewood.—No fault of the driver,—whose arm,—though better exercised as a bell-puller,—was brawny enough to keep half-a-dozen Dobbins to their work. No one and nothing was to blame but the weather;—the blinding snow that rendered it so hard a matter to find the road, and the slipperiness that rendered it, when found, still harder to keep.

"My missus dinned in my ears, afore I set off." said Abel, (elongating, by a quarter of an ell, his naturally long face), "that as sure as I made the start, there'd be no returnin' to-night!—Nay, a pretty scuffle, may be, to save my time for ringing in to morning-service!—And sure enough, the old 'oman's words ha' come to pass.—For just as I passed the turn o' the river at Willow Hollows, down came a slid behind me, as covered the road for a matter of a couple o' dozen yards,—such as would take six able-bodied men six hours to clear away!"—

"Lucky the Whitby coach had passed," observed Aunt Dinah, "for *that*'s mostly the last thing on the road. The night-train don't stop at Wheatston; and we've seldom much beyond a higler's cart or so passes the Holm a'ter dark."

"The Lord be praised—the Lord be praised!" rejoined the clerk, in his most emphatic professional tone. "For not a step ayon Nessford will anything on wheels budge this night!—If so be, indeed, as you thought the evening train might ha' brought travellers as was still on the road, 'twould be but a

charity, now dusk's come on, to set up a lantern anigh the Hollows, as a warning to 'em against purceeding."

"And who's to go and set it up?"—cried the farmer, whose milk of human kindness was chilled, almost to freezing-point, by the state of the weather. "My sister has chose to send our man holiday-making to Hacklewood; and unless she were to stump through the storm, or you were to undertake the job yoursel', neighbour Drew, there 's none but the lass yonder, or the poor old cripple here in the wicker-chair, to be meddlin' with what's little business of our'n!"

To escape further talking at, on the part of her brother, Aunt Dinah now bustled away to the kitchen, on pretence of adding to the tea-table what would convert it into supper for the unexpected guest; and eggs and rashers were forthwith set on the fire, and a portion of the morrow's fare drawn forth from the larder; on emerging from which, the old lady (a bad hand at concealments of any kind,) hurried back into the house, and, having burst open the door like

a whirlwind, gave a free course to her wonder and glee.

"So, so, so!" cried she,—still full of the half unpacked hamper she had discovered in her sanctum: —"a fine surprise, Master Drew—and you to keep your own counsel, like a barrister at 'sizes!—I thought it warn't any common matter as 'ud engage widow Timmans to lend her cart and horse o' Christmas Eve, in such ugly weather, for such ugly roads. A goose-pie fit for the Mayor o' York!—and a hamper of ale—no doubt o' the old brew,—and show me the man could show me a better!"—

The grim face of old Abel was by this time brightened by conscious smiles;—smiles far *too* conscious, indeed,—considering that all his share in the Christmas offering consisted in packing and transporting the hampers, with a tolerable certainty of sharing the contents.

But when the old farmer, touched home by the consolation of finding himself an object of solicitude to his old neighbour, now that in comparative poverty and positive infirmity he had no means of

offering an equivalent, gave loose to his thankfulness, —and, above all, when Grace, who, though she cared little for goose-pies or March ale, was full of gratitude to those disposed to honour the grey hairs of her grandfather, rose from her chair, and going over to the generous friend whose little legs all but dangled from the high oaken arm-chair in which he was ensconced, shook him cordially by the hand, —Master Abel was forced to put forward the name of the widow Timmans, as the source of the good things of this world suddenly abounding under the roof of the Holm.

The Yorkshire pie, whose battlemented crust should contain, according to county tradition, every bird that flies, from a lark to a bustard, was a gift, it appeared, from the lordly hall of the Earl of Malton, one of the first nobles of the shire; whose son had been tenderly nursed, some years before, at the Reveley Arms, after a bad fall in hunting. But the ale was the produce of a tap especially and somewhat painfully known to the Wellands;—a hogshead of the stoutest, brewed in the pride of his heart

by the old farmer of the Bush Farm, on hearing of his son's marriage; with the project, borrowed from the ancient habits of the Hall, of keeping it to be broached when his first grandchild should attain years of discretion. When all was sold off at the farm, it had been purchased, with other matters, by the widow Timmans; not with the sordid view of retailing it to her customers, but to be rendered back to the Wellands on every rare occasion of family festivity.

At Shrovetide, or Christmas, or Michaelmas, whenever there was a pretext for the exchange of neighbourly hospitalities, the old ale, well kept and bottled, found its way by dozens to the cellar of its former proprietor.

"And Madam Timmans bid me say," added Abel, when the truth of the case was at length extorted from his lips, "that as sure as might be, she'd have druv' over herself—which is an insertion she don't make once in a quarter—to wish you a merry Christmas in person, which merry, 't won't be her fault if t'arn't to be, only"—

"Only for this plague of a snow-storm!"—interrupted Aunt Dinah, cutting short his long-winded oration.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Dinah! Excuse me, ma'am!—I was about to say only for a lot o' strange guests, o' one kind or t'other, and more kinds than she knows what 's to make of, which, for this week past, ha' kept pouring into the Reveley Arms, for business, or what not, connected with the comings and goings at the Hall."

"She's got her house full, then?"—cried Aunt Dinah.—"The more 's her luck, and the less ours, since it bars us of her company!—Hows'ever, of one thing I'm main glad, Master Drew;—that without e'er a misdoubting in life of what the wind was to bring us from that quarter, I'd made up a bit of a basket, (as you'll find yourself, if you're in the mind to go and pay a second visit to the larder,) a few preserves and pickles o' my making, as used to be thought a deal on in Lon'on,—which Hodge was to ha' carried with him this blessed a'ternoon, but for the foul weather.—May be you'll take charge on 'em to-morrow instead?"

The commission was cheerfully undertaken. But now that Abel Drew, thawed by the fireside so that his cheeks glowed with heat rather than his nose with cold, found himself stripped of his momentary consequence by a transfer of the gratitude of the Welland family to the rightful owner, all his chance of resuming a little importance, was by exaggeration of the news from Hacklewood Hall;—multiplying the numerals of the more truthful Jock Wootton, by hundreds of thousands of pounds, and scores of invited guests.

To listen to the clerk, whose untirable tongue bore full proportion to his lengthy visage, the splendours of Belshazzar's feast were to be exceeded in the new banqueting room at the Hall.

"And who knows," added he, with his usual nasal twang of emphasis,—"*who* knows, my dear friends, but all may end as on that direful occasion!—There are strange stories, I promise you, rife among the strange folks a-crowding to the Reveley Arms!"

"Strange stories?"—repeated Aunt Dinah, who, after clearing away the plentiful remnants of the tea-table, and barring the window-shutters, was pre-

paring to set upon the green baize a pair of yule-candles, ornamented with box-leaves, to match the huge yule-clog whose stag-horned unwieldiness already blocked up the wide chimney,—affording at present less warmth than the glowing embers in which it was carefully embedded.

And even Grace raised her eyes from the crochet-work she had resumed after the removal of the tea-things, in hopes that Master Drew might prove in a communicative vein.

The farmer himself drew with a tremulous hand from his waistcoat-pocket his horn snuff-box, and placed it on the table, halfway betwixt himself and his guest, as was his wont in his more expansive social moments; prepared to hear—what it was difficult for a man so injured to listen to without satisfaction—evil tidings of the family at the Hall.

"You must know, then," said Abel, after authoritatively clearing his throat, as he was wont of yore, preparatory to his performances in the singing-loft,—"you must know, farmer, that, yesterday-was-morn, at the usual time for the 'rival o' the

fly and van from Wheatston station-'us,' there druv' up to the Reveley Arms"—

"Hush!"—interrupted the gentle voice of Grace Welland.—"Surely I heard a shout on the road?"—

"Who's there—who knocks?"—cried Aunt Dinah, going towards the window fronting the mill-works, the heavy window-shutter of which was closely fastened from within;—while the renewed barking of the yard-dog left little doubt that strangers were at hand.

"Bide a bit in your story, Master Drew, till I've been to the gate,"—cried Aunt Dinah, taking one of the heavy candles from the table, and shading it with her hand against the draughts of the passage, as she prepared to quit the room.

"Bide a bit yourself, Dinah, woman, till the girl's lit the lantern!"—growled her brother, vexed at the interruption.—"You don't think to keep the candle alight to the gate, do ye,—wi' the snow coming down in cartloads?"—

But Aunt Dinah was already out of hearing.

"Suppose you lend a hand, and look a'ter what's

a goin' on, Master Drew?"—added the old man. "Who knows what sort o' customers it may be, a knockin' at honest folks' windows, a'ter dark?—Them railroads has let a power o' varmin' loose upon the country!"—

On which exhortation, Master Drew possessed himself of the remaining candle, and stalked out of the room, like Goliath about to do battle.

But it was evident that he had seized the brazen candlestick as an implement of defence.—Nor could Grace, who at present saw no cause for alarm, forbear to notice that his sudden panic had sufficed to moderate to paleness the recently rubicund complexion of the swaggering little clerk.

Aunt Dinah possessed but a poor reinforcement in the person of Abel Drew!

CHAPTER VI.

"Was ever aught so unlucky!" cried the old lady to her neice, when, in the course of a few minutes, she returned into the house, bringing with her such a current of the external air in which she had been standing, and such a sprinkling of snow on her garments, as sufficed to chill the room.—"Here's a power o' fine folks in trouble on the road; and every chance in life as we shall be forced to put 'em up for the night!"

Surprised at hearing, for the first time, an inhospitable sentiment from her cordial kinswoman, Grace Welland hazarded a few inquiries;—when, lo, it appeared that the slid announced by Master Drew, (a fall of snow from the cliffs somewhat of the nature of a landslip, or more properly of a slight avalanche,)

rendered the high road utterly impassable!—Two carriages and the evening van and fly communicating between the Wheatston station and Hacklewood, belated by the delay of the train owing to the unpropitious state of the weather, had, for want of warning, been nearly precipitated into the stream, at Willow Hollows! Reluctantly convinced of the impossibility of proceeding, a couple of gentlemen and one of the fly-passengers who professed himself familiar with the localities, had ventured, in spite of the blinding snow, to grope out on foot the cut across the fields; while the carriage party despatched one of the post-boys to Nessford, for lights and assistance; still hoping to be enabled to pursue their journey to the Hall.

"Them Wheatston lads ha' no more sense than their own horses!"—cried Aunt Dinah.—"Here cam' one on 'em,—fancying the mill-folk would be up and about, at this time of the evening;—on Christmas Eve too, of all nights in the year, (when the worst nigger-driver going, closes an hour or two sooner than custom;)—cryin' out for workmen and mattocks

and picks,—as though at a railway work!- And I,—who hadn't so much as Hodge to send on with a lantern!"—

"Most unlucky!"—said Grace, now indeed reiterating the old lady's apostrophe.—"But could not Master Drew go to these poor people's assistance?"

"I promise you he made mouths enough about it!—He seemed to think he 'd had his share of sleet and snow for the day!—Hows'ever, when I told him the carriage folks was guests expected at the Hall, the pleasure o' putting them Ribstons under an obligation, put him on 's mettle at last!"—

"He is gone on, then, to the Hollows?"—

"First and foremost to the mill,—to engage neighbour Rudging's assistance; and warn him about purviding beds for the travellers. For the post-boy says every bed at Wheatston was engaged afore they left the station!"—

"But if they are likely to come here, had we not better be preparing for them?" said Grace,—in her turn a little flustered.

"Surely, my dear,—surely!—But I'm in such

a pucker, I scarce know whether I've a head on my shoulders. To think I should have sent off Hodge, with all this a coming upon us!—Plague take Christmas Eve, and everything belonging to it, say I!"

Matters must have been going very cross with Dinah, to elicit so heathen a sentiment!—But she was still further put out when, having agreed with her niece that the first thing to be done was to get off the farmer to bed,—that the strangers might not be in his way, or he in the way of the strangers,—the old man insisted upon being up and about, to see what was going on. Nothing but the impossibility of the case prevented him from hobbling into the snow, to offer his aid, or rather his opinion that all aid, till daylight, was unavailing.

"Last time the river-road was blocked up," said old Welland—"it took four days to clear. For four days, the Whitby coach couldn't run; and the mail-bags were for'arded over fields by express."

Four days! It was some relief to know that though the "dukes and lords" expected at Hackle-wood Hall could not be "for'arded over fields" on

a posthorse, the London train of the morrow might convey them back to town.

Meanwhile, in spite of Aunt Dinah's "flustrums," the calm good sense of Grace enabled her to decide that three good beds could be made up in their spare rooms; a similar number being in all probability available at the mill. The servants might content themselves with shakedowns,—Yorkshire fashion,—in the kitchen.

"I doubt tho' we shall have more trouble with *them* than with their masters!" cried Aunt Dinah—(a housekeeper's vision of London lady's-maids and flunkies rising appallingly before her mind's eye.,) "Hows'ever, at such a time, even idle folks like must put their shoulder to the wheel."

To her niece, meanwhile, such a hint was superfluous. Already, finding it impossible to persuade her grandfather to retire to rest, Grace had set the house in order; and was selecting from the old walnut-wood press, the finest of their homespun linen, only used on state occasions, to be aired for laying on the beds. Fires were speedily kindled

by the girl in the spare rooms,—from which webs of unbleached cloth, dried herbs, flower seeds, old baskets, and empty bird-cages, had been hastily removed; and everything under the roof of the Holm being at all times in the strictest order of cleanliness, the moment the blaze of the dried fern and birch faggots diffused a cheerful light and aromatic vapour through the old-fashioned chambers, whose walls though bare were neatly white-washed, they presented an aspect more than sufficiently inviting to travellers who had run some risk of spending the night on the high road, in a pelting snow-storm.

The old man, still propped in his wicker-chair, was apprized of what was going on only by the unwonted noise of feet overhead, and, now and then, the shrill exhortations of his sister to the girl, (a stout wench of the North Riding,) to "look sharp and put her shoulder to the wheel." But he soon began to grow fretful at the unwonted stir, and the interruption of the evening's promised festivity; more especially since, at present, there was no sign of the travellers.

"A pretty rumpus for nothin'!" muttered he to himself, — as Aunt Dinah clattered back in her pattens from the dairy, with a bowl of eggs under her arm. "The strangers is no doubt gone on to the Hall! All as they wanted was lights, to pick their way a bit. And most likely Master Drew has stopped to gossip with neighbour Rudgings; forgetting all about the beakers he was to brew for us, and the Christmas Carol he used to be so fond o' giving us, when we was all merry and hearty at poor Bush Farm!'

But at that moment, as in self-exculpation, the cracked voice of the little clerk resounded in the entry; not indeed rehearsing the jocund measures of the Christmas Carol; but marshalling the way, as he threw the light of his lantern on the slippery door-steps, to facilitate the access of the travellers.—The sound of the carriage wheels had been muffled by the depth of snow.—Nay, as if aware of the magnitude of the occasion, even Jowler had remained silent; and kept leaping up joyfully in his chain, to welcome the new-comers.

"This is the place I spoke of, my lady—this is Nessford Holm, where your ladyship will find hospitality for the night!" said Abel,—subduing his untunable voice to the blandest accents of which it was susceptible. "Mind the step, young ladies. Along this passage! You'll find a good fire within!"

And much to the surprise and a little to the dismay of the old man, who began to repent his obstinacy in refusing to retire to bed, in bustled no less than four ladies; all richly dressed, and panting under the sudden transition from the oppressive cold of the external atmosphere to which they had been so long exposed. Three of them kept indulging without ceasing in complaints and vociferations; while the fourth threw herself into the nearest chair, as if overcome by terror, fatigue, and the loquacity of her companions.

Farmer Welland, who had hitherto heard only of "dukes and lords" as expected at the Hall, and was wholly unprepared for ladies and duchesses, sat staring aghast at the new-comers; without even presence of mind to reiterate the offers of supper and beds they

were so gratuitously receiving from the obsequious clerk.

"Surely there must be some better place than this in the village, where one might obtain accommodation?" cried the Dowager Lady Gumbledon, after a supercilious survey through her glass of the brick floor and simple furniture of the room, but without taking the smallest notice of his civilities. "Is there no inn of any kind hereabouts?"—

"None, my lady, nearer than Hacklewood."

"Nor any decent house where one might hire a lodging for the night? Be so good, sir, as to forbid their taking off the horses till I have decided about remaining here."

"But if there is no other place, mamma?" argued one of the young ladies, who, without so much as noticing the astonished farmer, was holding to the fire her thin shoes, saturated with snow.

"There *must* be another place, my dear! I saw a large house opposite with lights burning, as we drew up at the gate of this horrid hole."

"The mill, my lady—Mr. Rudging's mill!"—

interposed Abel Drew, more awe-struck than indignant at the fastidiousness of the travellers.

"And why can't we go there?—It seems a much better sort of place than this!"—

"I doubt your ladyship won't be half so well accommodated. Neighbour Rudgings is a single man. Hows'ever if you'd like to step into the carriage again, and see,—the mill-folks is warned, and ready to offer their best."

"Why could not you say so at first?" cried the dowager, "instead of bringing us to this tumble-down house.—Pray, sir, call my people!—Call the carriage!"

"But surely, mamma," pleaded her second daughter, "anything is better than going out again into the snow?—I am wet through!"

"Yes! by holding your feet to the fire."

"But they were quite frozen!"—

"Nonsense, nonsense!—Pray let me hear no objections. Follow this person to the other house, where we can, at all events warm ourselves and get something to eat, till the answer returns from Hac-

klewood. I feel convinced the Ribstons will hasten over, the moment they hear of our disaster; and manage, somehow or other, to get us out of the scrape."

"Somehow or other" constitutes the general resource of great ladies, who, like Lady Gumbledon, fancy that, however desperate a case, for *them* some expedient must present itself;—roads, where roads there are none, and hotels at a moment's warning.

With a kind of vacant, mandarin-like nod, therefore, to old Welland, (who, sooth to say, sat staring at her, more like an automaton unwound up, than an animated being,) the dowager, followed by her daughters, swept out of the room; contenting herself with saying, as she passed, to the fourth lady—"Don't you accompany us, Lady Charles?—Too tired?—Good-night, then, if you have courage to remain here!—Should I hear anything from the Ribstons, I will send over this comical little cicerone of ours, to let you know!"

The noise occasioned by their departure was the first intimation of their arrival to those occupied in

but preparing the comfortable bedroom above. By the time Aunt Dinah and her niece hurried down to do the honours of the Holm, the elder lady was already in the carriage, and the younger ones closely following. All that poor Dinah had the satisfaction of hearing from the lips of the dowager, was her exclamation to Lord Charles and two other gentlemen who reached the house-door of the Holm just as they emerged from it, "We are going to the great house over the way. You will find this a wretched hole!—Not a soul to be seen but an idiotic old man. —We could not persuade Lady Charles to come with us. I am afraid she will repent her obstinacy."—

"Let them go!" was the next word that reached her ear, addressed in a whisper by Lord Charles to another of the new-comers.—"We should find them a dreadful nuisance."

"But they will be miserably off in that damp barn of a factory?" observed Mr. Shoreham, who, at the suggestion of his noble patron, had already taken a survey of neighbour Rudging's accommodations.

"That is *their* affair! If they had not sense to know when they were well off, it is no business of ours. Their absurdity quite exhausted my patience on the road yonder.—Hillo!—House!" continued he, raising his voice as the dowager's carriage drove from the gate, and Abel Drew and his lantern disappearing with it, left them in total darkness.

But at that moment the new-comers caught sight of the cheerful blaze of the kitchen fire; and without further ceremony, in they hurried, right glad to escape out of the rude gusts that drove the snow into their faces.

But Aunt Dinah was no longer on the same "hospitable thoughts intent" as before her ears were wounded by the impertinence of the fastidious Lady Gumbledon. For once in her life, she endeavoured to look harsh and sullen, while pretending to busy herself at the fire-place, as an excuse for turning her back on the intruders.

The frankness, however, with which she was accosted by Lord Charles Milbanke, rendered it impossible to one—Yorkshire born, and standing, as

she was, on her own hearth-stone, in presence of strangers.

"I fear, ma'am, our misfortunes have occasioned you sad trouble and disturbance,"—said he, removing his hat to address the old lady, "and that, before we part, you will have still further to complain of us, more especially as we have neither right nor title to your kindness."

Aunt Dinah was on the point of expanding into irresistible demonstrations of welcome. But recollections of the insult her poor brother and homestead had received, were still too recent. The original sin of human pride prevailed. Instead of answering, she thrust another log into the overloaded fire-place.

"I find you have already afforded hospitality to my wife," said Lord Charles, a little startled to find himself in company with three females, and not a word extractable—"May I ask the favour of you to show me where I can find her?"—

And now, even over the pride of the species, prevailed the curiosity of the sex!—On Grace's whispered hint to her aunt that there might be still

another lady in the house, a lady who had not preferred neighbour Rudging's mill to the Holm, old Dinah let fall the corner of her apron, which she was apt to seize in moments of emergency, to keep herself in countenance; and led the way, half pleased and half in dudgeon, along the dark passage.

And a charming surprise it was, even to *her*, on throwing open the door at the end, to behold by the light of the blazing fire within, seated opposite to the wicker chair, in cheerful chat with the old man, a pleasant-looking pleasant-spoken lady, who, having soon recovered after the departure of her fussy companions the overpowering effects of prolonged cold, fatigue, and anxiety, had already accepted, with grateful thanks, the hospitable offers of the farmer, to whom she made known her distresses.

"Thank goodness you are come!" cried she, the moment her husband entered the room—"I did not know where to send you word that I had been so fortunate as to obtain comfortable shelter, and was afraid you might be misled by the Gumbledons."

And on obtaining a glimpse over Lord Charles's

shoulder of the jolly face of Aunt Dinah, whom she naturally mistook for the farmer's comely spouse, she repeated her acknowledgments, and inquired whether it would be *too* great an inconvenience to the family to afford additional beds to the gentlemen of the party.

"Not the least in life, if they didn't object to a double-bedded room. Two chambers, with three beds, and such entertainment as they could offer, were heartily at the lady's service,"—was the blithe reply of the old housekeeper to one whom, she saw in a moment, (as she afterwards confidentially declared to Abel Drew,) "was as different from them three saucy flare-aways as chalk from cheese!"—

"But where are my brother and Mr. Shoreham?" added Lady Charles, on perceiving that her husband was unaccompanied. — "Surely you were not so unkind as to leave them to the mercy of Lady Gumbledon?"—

And then it was Aunt Dinah discovered that two of the three strangers had loitered in the kitchen, to make further inquiries of her niece; a proceeding

which did not much surprise Lady Charles Milbanke when, on her return with the old lady from surveying her accommodations for the night, and arranging what was to be done with the lady's maid, (who remained half stupefied by the cold under an umbrella in the rumble of the carriage, as if iced to her seat,) she found the pretty graceful granddaughter of her host engaged in laying the cloth for supper, with as much celerity as the compliments addressed to her by Lord Castlemort's secretary would allow.

His noble master, meanwhile, as well as her husband, was occupied in cross-questioning the now roused-up old farmer, concerning the nature of the road where the accidents had occurred, the distance from Hacklewood, and their chances of extrication on the morrow. And as Aunt Dinah had by this time ensconced her bib and apron, and tucked up her sleeves, to "set her shoulder to the wheel" in the kitchen, on the fire of which a variety of pots and pans were already simmering, while the gridiron awaited a fine fowl, intended for the Christmas dinner

of the morrow, no chance of a check to the young secretary's assiduities!

The moment Lady Charles appeared, however, the influence of her quiet lady-like manners prevailed. Grace was instantly left at liberty to dispose upon damask which brought the Yorkshire looms into close rivalship with those of Hamburgh, a few silver covers, of old-fashioned form, rescued from the wreck at the Bush Farm; an old tankard,—the gift of some former Reveley to some former Welland,—bought in by Aunt Dinah as a family relic; with a loaf of home-baked bread, and a decanter of sparkling spring-water, which had scarcely passed the threshold of the room before it was encoated with steam

According to Aunt Dinah's instructions, a couple of bottles of the famous Bush Farm ale were placed near enough to the fire to be slightly susceptible of its influence; and long before the conclusion of poor Grace's labours, who was a somewhat less experienced butler than her aunt a housekeeper, savoury fumes from the kitchen found their way along the dark

passage; and whenever the door opened, a prodigious hissing and bubbling became audible, which Lord Charles and Shoreham declared, and rubbed their hands exultingly as they declared it, was worth all the united harmonies of the Ladies Crotchet, Quaver, and Semiquaver.

"After being starved and frozen to death, on Christmas Eve," cried the young secretary, "the music of the frying-pan is the only Pan-dean music worth listening to."

Lord and Lady Charles rewarded his bad pun with a hearty laugh. For their hearts were merry within them: Aunt Dinah having just entered the room with a smoking dish, of excellent portent; while a huge bowl of fried potatoes, which the girl was placing on the table, had scarcely done frothing and sputtering from the fire.

Few compliments sufficed to usher them to table!—Some delicately broiled slices of slightly salted salmon from the Tees, recommended by their hostess, looked too tempting to admit of hesitation. But without trusting to the hunger derived from a long day's

fast, a *sauce piquante* had been provided by the skill of Aunt Dinah, consisting of nasturtiums, flavoured with capsicum; which, had it been called *purée de capucine à la poivrade,* and served at a Parisian *restaurant,* might have made the fortune of the inventor.

Ere the applause of the hungry travellers was half exhausted, a brandered fowl, well sprinkled with mushrooms, and flanked by slices of Yorkshire ham, was placed upon the board; after due discussion of which, the guests, concluding that with fish and fowl their impromptu supper was concluded, proposed, before the dishes were removed, the health of their hospitable entertainers.

While the foaming ale was uncorked, Aunt Dinah, whose heart was now glowing with hospitable sympathies, as her cheeks with the assurance she had received of being a second Mrs. Glasse, acknowledged with a sly smile the compliment of her guests, ere she requested Shoreham, whose facetiousness at table had placed him high in her good graces, to accompany her to the larder, and lend a hand in the removal of a

certain pewter dish, which defied the muscles of her brawny arms. For Master Drew, on whose aid she had counted, did not return.

Away went the young secretary, laughing heartily at the new post of honour to which he was elected. But his mirth ceased suddenly when required to try the weight of the right-regal pie he was to assist the old lady in placing upon the board, and which seemed proportioned to the round table of King Arthur. And in her heart of hearts did Aunt Dinah acknowledge the generosity of mine hostess of the Reveley Arms, while listening to the exclamations of the company!—That a coachful of lords and ladies should have come all the way from London to take their commons at Nessford Holm, and be forced to do homage to a dainty dish not only "fit to set before the queen," but such as few queens had ever the fortune to partake of, —was indeed good fortune.

A rare triumph would it have been for Lord Malton's out-and-out Yorkshire cook—born at Ferrybridge, and bred at the Black Swan, at York,—could he have heard the praises lavished upon the chef-

d'œuvre of his oven; and a rare triumph for the widow Tinmans, could she have known the tribute offered to her neighbourly generosity. As it was, Aunt Dinah was forced to enjoy them, for both. And enjoy them she did, till her large moist grey eyes twinkled with glee.

The arduous duties of the bib and apron, however, did not admit of indulgence in this almost selfish pleasure. Back she bustled to her kitchen range; so that when Shoreham and Lord Charles volunteered their services to remove the huge dainty which, though they had rendered it ample justice, scarcely bore a trace of the incision, Aunt Dinah was ready to replace it with her second course; viz., a dish of pancakes as thin as wafers, served after the old Yorkshire fashion over the bowl of an inverted basin, having a slight layer of wine sour jelly between each, and surmounted by a crisping of burnt sugar.

The sleep into which the farmer, soothed by the genial warmth of the yuleclog fire, had gradually subsided, must have been hard indeed; since he re-

mained unconscious of the unwonted excitements of the evening, while his roof rang again with the hearty encomiums of the strangers. The last crumb had been cleared away from the supper-table by the neat hand of his granddaughter, to make way for a platter of ancient Delft which now occupied the centre, piled with nonpareils, chaumontel pears, and amber-shelled walnuts nearly as big as either, from his own orchard, — the very epitome of a dessert,—and still, old Welland enjoyed his nap.— Luckily, perhaps: for he was spared the vexation of hearing his visitors declare their inability to taste his famous eddish cheese,—the pride of Nessford Holm, as of the Bush Farm; and the amazement of noting the good faith with which his sister had forborne to infringe upon the bespoken store of clarified apricots and currants, gratefully destined to her friend of the Reveley Arms.

Already the merry little party, chirruping under the influence of comfort and good cheer, after the fatigues they had undergone and the risk of passing the night under a hedge, had removed to the fireside,

to chat over the strange adventure which fated them to enjoy the best supper they had ever tasted, under the humble roof of a stranger, instead of spending it at Hacklewood, where they were so eagerly expected; when, lo! Aunt Dinah, returning for the last time from the kitchen, (where Lady Charles's bewildered maid and Lord Castlehurst's man were now supping as merrily as their masters,)—placed upon the snowwhite cloth a smoking bowl of spiced elder wine, which she protested to be sovereign against cold-catching!

"A genuine wassail-bowl for Christmas Eve!"—cried Shoreham,—sniffing the rich aroma of cinnamon and cloves it diffused through the room.

"And of the finest old Japan china!"—added Lady Charles, rendering homage due to a certain curious old punch-bowl, which had graced the buffet of Bush Farm nearly a century before,—a gift to old Welland's grandfather, from the skipper of a Hull Indiaman

And now arose a friendly debate, whether it would be a greater act of kindness to wake the infirm old

man from his slumbers, to pledge them to a "merry Christmas," and hear their wishes that many more might be in store for him;—or leave him to the enjoyment of his quiet dreams,—dreams, probably, of Christmas Eves long past, so much the sweeter from having been enjoyed with the vivid impulses of youth.

For how were they to guess that poor Welland, like Dogberry, was "one who had had losses;" or how much bitterness was included in all the memories of his heart!—

"Better let my poor grandfather sleep, sir; far better let him sleep!"—whispered Grace, forestalling the movements of Shoreham, who was hastily filling a bumper for the old man.

And as she fixed her eyes tenderly on the venerable head reclining against the wicker chair, a thought of Cordelia and the sleeping, helpless, venerable Lear, rushed simultaneously into the minds of Lady Charles and the young secretary.

The farmer, meanwhile, was not so easy to disturb as they supposed. For a minute or two afterwards,

though Jowler set up a yelping calculated to wake the dead, and though the voice of Master Drew was heard, first attempting to silence him, and next disputing in the entry with the girl in the least harmonious of its discordant tones, while a few notes of the still hoarser croak of a stranger served only to heighten the uproar—not a muscle of his face was moved!

"What the plague ails neighbour Drew?"—cried Aunt Dinah, setting down untasted the spiced cup, in which her guests had insisted on her pledging them in the good wishes of the season.—"Sure there ben't *more* travellers in distress, in want o' beds?"—

Before she had time to reach the door for inquiry, it was thrown open;—and the little clerk was descried, vainly endeavouring to shuffle back a strange-looking figure; a little old man, enveloped in a threadbare green cloak that looked as though it must have been old at the deluge,—who bade him in the same grumbling voice they had overheard, but with an air of some authority, "Mind his own business, and begone!"

"But the quality, my good man!—I tell you the house is full of quality:"—interposed Master Abel,—again endeavouring to draw him back into the passage.

"A fig for the quality!"—cried the stranger, striking his oaken cudgel on the brick floor, till it rang again.—"A man's a man, I suppose?—Fine quality, forsooth, if they've the conscience in such a night, to turn a fellow-creature from the fire!—House full?—Ha! ha!—As if houses and hearts were not bound to stretch like India rubber, on Christmas Eve, and in a snow-storm!"—

CHAPTER VII.

Aunt Dinah, to whom the new-comer was already an object of displeasure, as having "broke the good meeting with most admir'd disorder," was about to remonstrate in no measured terms with Master Drew for not having circumvented his entrance;—when her noble guests, recognising under the threadbare cloak a fellow-traveller who had accompanied them from London in the railway, and shared their disasters on the road in the Wheatston fly—(the only individual, in fact, who afforded rational advice or available aid on the occasion,)—besought her forbearance.

Lady Charles had already profited by the interruption to avail herself of Grace's attendance, and retire for the night; and the three gentlemen, whose hearts were merry with good cheer, seemed to regard as a

piquant supplement to the adventures of the night, that their *veillée* was to be shared by one whose intelligence and oddity pleaded strongly in his favour against all deficiencies of dress or address.

At their suggestion, accordingly, a seat in the chimney-corner was assigned to the stranger.

"Told ye so,—told ye so!" chuckled he, to the crest-fallen clerk.—"Would ye have white-faced Christians show less humanity to their countrymen than the heathen of the desart?—Ha, ha!—They 've the heart to do it, may be; but, in this age of cant, hang me if they 've the courage:"—

At the sound of his singular laugh, old Welland opened his eyes, and raised himself in his chair; and, as if the aspect of a man of his own years excited his sympathies and curiosity more strongly than that of youthful beauty or manly vigour, gazed fixedly upon the stranger.

Partly to conceal her vexation at the intrusion which had occurred, and partly because really afraid that late hours might prove injurious to the infirm invalid, Aunt Dinah seized the occasion to renew her

entreaties that he would retire to rest; and Master Abel being now at hand to lend the assistance in gaining his chamber usually afforded by his farm-servant, old Welland, after another wistful glance or two at the stranger, gave his consent. Having reiterated his Christmas salutations to all present, he hobbled out of the room, leaning on the shoulder of the little clerk, which was but a trifle higher than his customary oaken staff.

"An old fellow of the right sort!"—observed Shoreham, as the door closed upon the farmer, whom his sister was preceding with a light.

"A fine stout yeoman, no doubt, in his day; and the very soul of hospitality!"—added Lord Charles, filling another bumper of mulled wine to his health.

"Hospitality!—Ha, ha!—Fine hospitality, that leaves him eaten out of house and home in his old age!"—muttered the stranger, who, having by this time dismantled himself of his green cloak, had the audacity to assume the farmer's post of honour in the wicker chair.—Nor did the surprise

with which he was viewed by all present arise half so much from the coolness of his self-assumption, as from the sudden transformation effected in his singular person.

Attired from top to toe in a suit of black, of old-fashioned cut but the finest texture, the sable colour of his garments served to throw out in yet stronger relief the whiteness of his long straight silvery hair, which hung almost to his slightly-rounded shoulders. A thousand scarcely-perceptible wrinkles puckered his sallow cheeks; and there would have been little semblance of animation in his wan visage, but for the vivacity of a pair of deep-set grey eyes, twinkling, with almost unnatural vivacity, under his projecting brows. Even in his ragged cloak, his companions had judged him truly. He might be an original—a humorist;—but gentle blood was in his veins.

Either because disinclined to profit by their good opinion, or perhaps disgusted by the sample of their society afforded by Lady Gumbledon and her fine-lady daughters, no sooner had he settled himself in the wicker-chair, than the somnife-

rous influences bequeathed to it by Farmer Welland appeared to operate like a charm. Having planted himself right opposite the fire, with his silver-buckled shoes resting on one of the huge brass dogs, and his back turned to the light and the company, he soon breathed so hard that, in spite of his presence, there still seemed but three persons in the room.

Thus relieved from restraint, as the excitements of conviviality subsided, political questions of high interest, and too important a nature for discussion in the public conveyance in which they had been passing the day, arose between the two privy councillors and the private sec.

Lord Castlehurst was one of the many Englishmen who, though the moment their heads are set to work on a state-paper, or their hands on a despatch, the sterling faculties of their mind become developed, are incapacitated by shyness and reserve for shining in parliament, or even in familiar conversation ;—first-rate men, who judge like Solomon, and write like Courier but can neither talk nor debate. His brother-in-law, Lord Charles, though in abilities many degrees infe-

rior, had often the best of it; and but that Shoreham, with his audacious glibness of tongue, was at hand as an auxiliary, Her Majesty's minister would have found himself sadly overcrowed.

While Grace Welland was endeavouring to supply the infinite number of deficiencies discovered by Lady Charles's now thawed and active lady's maid, in the comfortable chamber in which her lady saw nothing but a cheerful blazing fire, and the fine and fragrant linen covering a bed whose curtains of new dimity were white as snow,—and while Aunt Dinah indulged in the kitchen in a crack of gossip with Abel Drew, concerning the torments and trouble inflicted on neighbour Rudgings by the three supercilious ladies billeted at the mill,—the ex-Lord of the Treasury was attacking the President of the Board of Control in the fastnesses of Affghanistan,—driving him in disorder across the mountains,—flinging in his teeth the injuries of the Ameers of Scinde, and the sufferings of the martyrs of Bokhara;—themes on which he had been badgered throughout the session, and which he flattered himself, on quitting London for the

holidays, were left behind in his despatch-boxes in Cannon Row.

Without much depth of information, Lord Charles possessed the readiness of tongue and adroitness of tact that constitute the current coin of the parliamentary exchange; especially available in opposition, by enabling him to seize the weak point of an opponent, and render it so prominent and painful as to invalidate even his more cogent arguments.

After a quarter of an hour's bantering on an unlucky blunder of Indian policy produced by want of information, or false information, during the recent campaign, the coruscations of his lordship's wit so dazzled the eyes of his adversaries, (already beginning to wink with fatigue and spiced wine,) that even the valiant secretary found himself — to use an Affghan phrase — "gobrawed," or at a nonplus.

"At all events," said Lord Charles, perceiving that they were too tired or too lazy to reply, "if you maintain in the legality of your Oriental protectorate —your armed intervention,—your maintenance

of the right divine of an infant Rajah, by pointing your cannon up the gorges of his territories, and holding your sabres to the throats of his wuzeers, be a little less bitter against Louis Philippe and Dupetit Thouars, for their care over the destinies of Queen Pomare!—Between the merits of the Tahiti question and the conquest of Scinde, Vattel himself might be puzzled!"—

"Wait till you see the investiture of the Punjaub!" cried a croaking voice from the chimney-corner. "Wait till you see Lahore dismembered like Poland; and all that is left of the treasures of Runject Singh buying mercy in the way of tribute-money, from the conquerors of Gwalior. Ha, ha! If the same vulgar interests against which Charles Fox and his India Bill broke their heads in '84, are to be allowed to put the country to the blush more than half a century afterwards, much good have we gained from the march of intellect and freedom of the press!"—

Nothing could exceed the surprise of the disputants at this unexpected sally. The little old man they had fancied so fast asleep, was after all

the widest awake of the party! Still greater was the amazement of Lord Castlehurst when, with fluent and masterly precision, he resumed the policy of our recent administration of Indian affairs; exhibiting the most intimate knowledge not alone of the spirit and factions of the Council at Calcutta, and Board of Directors at home, but of the courts of the native princes,—the amount of their resources,—the temper and discipline of their troops: and, above all, the means, both acknowledged and private, to which the English government have had recourse to consolidate their allegiance.

More than once, the brow of Lord Castlehurst was suffused with a sudden flush, on finding what he had supposed to be the most secret measures of his administration coolly exposed, and subjected to able commentation.

"Do not waste so much good advice on this gentleman!" gaily interrupted Lord Charles, erroneously supposing that both himself and his brother-in-law were personally unknown to the free-spoken stranger. "Reserve it for me, who am a

friend to the country. My two companions are government clerks. My two companions are capable of giving information against you in Leadenhall Street, where doubtless you hold an appointment."

"Not they!" chuckled the strange old man, in his former tone of irony. "Far more likely to show me the colour of the secret-service money, to secure a secret or two still safe in my keeping.—But they 've too much of the Jew in them for my market! They beat down a member of council last year, and lost intelligence that would have saved us two hundred miles of territory and five thousand men, by splitting the difference in a paltry thousand pounds."

In order to divert Lord Charles's observation from the discountenanced air of the noble President, Shoreham seized one of the candles, and pretended to examine the feet of the stranger.

"No more cloven than my own!" cried he, replacing the light upon the table. "And yet, I should decidedly say, '*Aut diabolus, aut.*'"

"Ha, ha! A short cut, eh, to a name you 're no more likely to find out than that of your own grand-

father!—Why, if you were well up in your business, Mister Secretary, 'twould be inscribed in the first page of your pocket-book, instead of tailors' addresses and the autographs of Italian singers!"—

It was now the turn of Bob Shoreham to fire up; and he was preparing a retort which even the callous old gentleman might have found hard of digestion, when, lo! the sound of hurried footsteps and merry voices became audible, approaching the door.

"A-bed and asleep?—Lor' bless you, no, Mister Charles,—nor no thoughts on it!"—cried Aunt Dinah, flinging open the door; and in walked the young squire of Hacklewood Hall, without pausing to throw aside his wraprascal and overalls, powdered with snow;—his handsome face glowing with exercise, and his young eyes bright with the joy of finding himself, no matter at what hour or on what pretext, under the roof of Nessford Holm.

"I am the bearer of a thousand regrets and condolences from my father," said he, after a cordial exchange of salutations with Lord Castlehurst and his companions. "Uncertain as we were what shelter

you might have obtained, my mother was in despair at the impossibility of enabling Lady Charles to reach Hacklewood to-night. But I, at least, am relieved.—It is only poor Lady Gumbledon, who is to be pitied; and who will probably return to town to-morrow by the early train, rather than wait while the road is clearing."

"We should be graceless dogs, indeed, to complain!"—cried Lord Charles,—as his young namesake, having consigned his wraps to the ready hands of Aunt Dinah, took his place among them beside the fire.—"No bones broke,—no, nor so much as the spring of a carriage;—yet with twenty chances to one against us, of being overturned into the river!"

"And instead of having to sup on oatcake as we expected, and sleep in a cowshed, we have been feasting like emperors, and have well-aired beds in prospect!"—added Shoreham.

Aware that his father had only been prevented from getting on his horse to accompany him to Nessford, by misgivings as to the entertainment Farmer Welland might be disposed to offer to the

guests of Hacklewood, and even the sort of reception awaiting himself, Charles Ribston was overjoyed to find that *his* confidence in the hospitable propensities of the Yorkshire farmer and his sister, had not outstripped the truth.

"Assure Sir Richard," said Lord Castlehurst, "that you found us quite reconciled to our disasters by the prompt attentions of his worthy tenants."

"*His* tenants? — Ha, ha!" — chuckled the old stranger,—who, on the arrival of the new-comer, had edged his chair still further into the chimney-corner; so that, even when Charley Ribston's attention was attracted by his ungracious exclamation, he could make out nothing of the exclaimer.

"My father has no property hereabouts," said he, a little annoyed.—"The hospitalities of this house are offered solely on your own account."

"At all events, pray satisfy Lady Ribston," added Lord Charles, "that my wife is as comfortably off as, I will not say at Hacklewood Hall,—but as in her own home."

"You will have an opportunity of satisfying my

mother quite as soon as myself," said Charles, "I have been three hours in accomplishing my journey hither; and in such jeopardy all the time from the impossibility of distinguishing drift from cliff, in this driving storm, that I much prefer sitting up beside a Christmas fire, with a good house over my head, to renewing the attempt before morning."

"Have a care, my dear fellow,—for you may chance to be taken at your word!"—cried Bob Shoreham, clapping him on the shoulder. "I heard the comely old gentlewoman who was so much interested just now in the fate of your maciutosh, acquaint my friend here in the corner 'that there wasn't another spare bed in the house, not if the Pope o' Roame war to ask for 't.'"

"I suspect I have a somewhat better chance with Aunt Dinah than the Pope of Rome!"—retorted young Ribston, after a hearty laugh at Shoreham's mimicry of Aunt Dinah's Doric Yorkshire.—"But what do I want with a bed?—I must be astir before daylight, to expedite and direct the workmen already engaged to clear the road,—in the hope that

you may still fulfil your promise of breakfasting at Hacklewood on Christmas-day."

"And, by Jove! it is nearer one than twelve, already!"—cried Lord Charles,—as Mrs. Dinah, in defiance of time and tide, made her reappearance with a steaming skillet in one hand to replenish the exhausted bowl, and in the other a plate of dry toast, lest, in spite of the macintosh, Mister Charles should be the worse for his night-ride.—"So if you look for company in your watch, my dear Charles, you must even content yourself with Castlehurst and Shoreham. Sober family-men like myself must to bed, after the fatigues of such a day."

"On the present occasion, excuse *my* being numbered among the bachelors!"—cried the former, starting up, to accompany Lord Charles's retreat;—alarmed at the prospect of prolonging Christmas Eve till daylight, with two youngsters like Shoreham and Charley,—and a mysterious old man of the mountains, like him of the tattered cloak. "Good-night, then," was the cordial response of the young squire.—"Your lordship cannot be in safer

keeping that that of my friend, Mrs. Dinah.—Pleasant dreams to ye both,—and to *us* a merry vigil."

And while the old lady proceeded with much ceremony to marshal to their chambers the guests, of whose rank and consequence she had by this time been apprized by the gossip of their servants, Charley Ribston and Shoreham drew first a deep breath, and next their chairs towards the fireplace,—where the yuleclog was now emitting a lambent flame, that lighted up the chamber beyond all need of candles; —as if relieved by the prospect of making a night of it, out of reach of their more square-toed companions.

An expressive gesture from the young squire to the secretary implied, however, an interrogation concerning the anonymous contents of the wicker chair.—But it mattered little that Shoreham's reply was incomprehensible to the questioner; — both being of opinion that the little packet of black clothes and hoary locks which had rolled itself up, hedgehog-wise, to sleep out the remnant of the night

need impose no obstacle to the freedom of their communications.

"And so, my dear fellow," said Shoreham, after they had expressed their mutual satisfaction, and toasted happy dreams to the nightcaps of their elders, —"you really hope to persuade me that your object in spending the night under these bare rafters, instead of in a four-post bed, is to watch over the interests of your father's guests?"

"To what other motive," retorted Charley, "do you attribute my chivalry in exposing my best hack, to say nothing of my incomparable self, to the perils and dangers of such a night-ride?"

"Would it were in my power to *show cause!* But I fear the lovely creature has followed Lady Charles's example, and retired to rest."

"If you allude to the granddaughter of your landlord," said young Ribston, colouring deeply, but speaking in a steady voice, "you will oblige me by dropping the subject."

"The affair is *serious*, then?" demanded Shoreham, who had hazarded a random guess.

"So serious, that I can only hear the young person in question mentioned in the same terms of respect I should use towards a sister of your own."

"A sister?"—ejaculated the secretary, shrugging his shoulders.

"I use the name as the most sacred that presents itself. But since you have alluded to Miss Welland, may I ask whether the Milbankes have made any discoveries concerning her?"

"*Discoveries?*—Only, I should imagine, that a more attractive creature never crossed their path; —Grace by name, and grace by nature!"

Charles Ribston, perceiving that the mulled wine was sparkling in the eyes of his companion, considered it safest to dismiss the subject.

"I was afraid I should find Cossington with you?" said he, "who would have been pretty nearly as hard to accommodate as the three Crotchets. Herbert Howard and Meredyth have been with us at Hackle-wood these two days!"—

"You will be glad to get rid of them and *us*,—should this ugly weather last," observed Shoreham.

" The strongest friendship is not proof against being snowed up at Christmas in a country house."

" But it won't last!—It shan't last!"—replied Charles Ribston, emptying his glass.

" Do you often have these confounded avalanches in this part of the country?"—inquired Shoreham interrupting his asseverations.

" This is the first I ever heard of."

" Ha, ha!—And the first that ever heard of *you* I fancy!" interrupted a croaking voice from the wicker chair.

" Who is he, and what does he mean?" inquired Charley of his young companion, in some surprise.

" I mean that so long as I've known canny Yorkshire, (fourscore years and more!) this is the first time I ever heard the name of Ribston tacked to aught in it save a streaked pippin!"

Charles Ribston, ere he suffered himself to resent the irritating tone in which this taunt was uttered, rose from his place, to overlook the high wicker back concealing the speaker

" I perceive that your hair is white, sir, and your

coat black," said he;—" two peremptory claims to indulgence."

" Black and white ?—Ha, ha !—You'll find, though, that you've to deal neither with a parson nor a poltroon."

" Nor you, sir, with a schoolboy !" was the cool retort of the young man.

" As little trace of *schooling* about you, my lad, as may be !"—rejoined the malicious stranger.

" We are under a hospitable roof, sir," said Charley, with much self-command,—" united there by circumstances over which we have no control. Let me request you, therefore, to forbear from provocations, such as must terminate in a manner that would ill repay the kindness of our worthy and unfortunate host."

" Worthy and unfortunate ?—Ha, ha !—And whom has he to thank for his misfortunes ?" cried the stranger. " Came the arrow out of *your* quiver, or mine ?"

" At all events,"—Charles Ribston was beginning, with a heightened colour—by no means desirous that

the family-history of Farmer Welland should reach the inquisitive ears of his friend Shoreham. But he was silenced by a more authoritative voice than his own.

"Does it never occur to you, young man," persisted the stranger, who, by degrees, had turned the wicker-chair edgeways towards his companions,—"does it never occur to you, as you urge your thoroughbred horse past this accursed old rat-hole, which a few such nights as this would shake to pieces like a house of cards, that old John Welland has twice as good a right to be merry and thriving under the roof of the Bush Farm, as your upstart of a father under that of the Reveleys?"—

"Amuse yourself with what impertinence you please towards myself, old gentleman!" cried Charley, starting from his place, and with difficulty withholding his clenched hand—"But, by the God of Heaven I will make you respect my father!"—

"Order, order, order, order!" cried Shoreham, pulling back his young friend by the skirts of his coat, and forcing him to be seated.

"Let the lad talk!—No man ever died of a few hard words!"—said the hoary aggressor, who, on Charles Ribston's menacing advance, turned coolly towards him, and sat surveying him from head to foot,—"He knows as well as I, that the good man of this house was jockied out of his farm by a trick of the law, to make way for a gimcrack exhibition of china milk-pans, and a pack of varnished cow-houses and pigsties, to tickle the vanity of Sir Richard Ribston, *Knight!*"

"Since you are so well versed, sir, in my family history," retorted Charles, with flashing eyes, "you ought to be aware that Welland's lease was quashed before my father purchased the Hacklewood property."

"Ay! because Dicky Ribston made it a *sine qua non* of the purchase, to have the whole estate in his hands!"—sneered the bitter old man—"And what won't an attorney manage to make good in law, which is to accomplish his own ends, and put hard money into his pocket?"

"*Did* your father purchase the Hacklewood property, Charles?" inquired Shoreham, with seeming

unconcern. But before young Ribston had time to more than nod his unconcerned assent, the stranger renewed his attack.

"Small matter to a man without a root in the ground he stands on, or a tie to the hired hearth by which he warms himself, to say—'Give the old fellow notice to quit. I want the farm in my own hands,'—Ha, ha! '*Notice to quit!*' To quit the place where you first drew breath—where your mother's hand first smoothed your hair—where you were first chastised and first forgiven—and where you know that all this had happened from one generation to another—to your father, and your father's father before him!—I tell ye, youngster, that to leave the ashes warm upon your hearth, and go forth and turn your back on't for ever, and know that strangers' hands are about to pollute all you hold sacred in the world, is enough to wrench a cleaving curse out of the mildest nature.—See that Hacklewood flourish the more, under the weight of such a malediction on its roof!"—

"Are you a kinsman, sir, of Farmer Welland?"

demanded Charles, trying to find an excuse for the old man's energy.

"Not he! I saw him arrive here.—He is an utter stranger to the family," whispered Shoreham, half aside.

"Are ye so sure of that, my young malapert!" retorted the old man, overhearing him.—"But if I *were* a stranger, is there nothing in the bond of fellow-creatureship, to justify sympathy in the wrongs of a helpless pauper?—Ay, smile, sir!—You are a fine gentleman—I, an unmannerly crack-brained old ass! Ha, ha!—That is what you feel, and what brings a simper to your face. But be assured by one who looks at the things of this world as through his coffin-lid, that if grey hairs bring wisdom to the head, they bring twice as much to the heart. You two, who would bluster with the best about the depth of your feelings and nobleness of your sentiments have plenty of superfine wire-wove sensibilities no doubt, at your fingers' ends. But, I tell ye, you know no more of the strong human love at the bottom of a simple human heart that what monsters are swimming at this moment in the depths of the Pacific Ocean."

In spite of the aggressive tone of the eccentric stranger, there was something so heartfelt in every word he uttered, that neither of his younger companions found courage to resent his freedoms. Admonished by his previous conversation of the keenness of his intelligence and extent of his information, Shoreham regarded him as privileged; while the forbearance of Charles was bespoken by his tenderness towards the misfortunes of the Wellands.

So greatly, indeed, was his interest excited by the singular sympathy evinced by the stranger in the fate of the family so dear to him, that it was a great relief when, as the flames of the yuleclog gradually subsided into glowing embers, and the lees of the bowl grew tepid and uninviting, the secretary, rubbing his eyes, scarcely needed to be reminded that "a good bed was awaiting him above, and that he did not lessen, by sharing, the fatigues and inconveniences of the *veillée*," to admit that he should be all the fresher for the morrow's expedition after laying his head upon a pillow.

For Shoreham, having received more than one

home-thrust from the old gentleman with whom, at first, he had been inclined to deal so unceremoniously, was as content to leave his company for the remainder of the night to the exclusive enjoyment of Charley, as Charley to be relieved from the espionage of so great a chatterbox as the fashionable sec. He had hopes of extracting wonders from his new friend, in the freedom of a *tête-à-tête.*

But this expectation was apparently destined to disappointment. Even after Shoreham had quitted the room, and the sound of his steps, stealing a-tiptoe up the creaking stairs and along the rambling passages above, died away into silence, though the old man did not resume his former unsociable attitude by replacing his easy chair towards the chimney corner, he settled himself into a comfortable attitude, like a dog rolling itself up for a snooze. And soon, the chirping of the crickets and the measured click of the old eight-day clock, became so predominant in the room, that Charley was forced to relinquish his hopes of conversation.

He too, therefore, ensconced himself deeper in his

oaken chair; and endeavoured to renounce the consciousness of passing the night in a room which he had fifty times resolved never again to enter (and invariably entered again within a few hours of each succeeding resolve!) he tried to forget that he was under the same roof with Grace,—that Grace was sleeping in one of the wretched chambers above;—or rather, perhaps, that, compelled to resign her bed to the strangers who had claimed hospitality, she was spending the dark hours of the night in the same watchful discomfort as himself.

Fixing his drooping eyes upon the glowing embers, he pondered upon all this, and pondered and pondered, — till by degrees even the chirping of the crickets and clicking of the clock became unheard. He had escaped from that narrow room to the boundless landscapes of a land of dreams,—from the dreary snow-storm to summer sunshine. One moment, he was shooting sea-fowl among the cliffs of Darnel Head, with Jock Wootton for his game-keeper, and Lady Charles Milbanke arrayed in

snow-snoes and a shooting jacket, for his companion. The next, he was rehearsing for private theatricals at Hacklewood,—with Abel Drew enacting Ophelia to his Hamlet, and the fair face of Grace Welland disfigured by the hoary wig of Polonius! —A thousand disjointed images passed before him, thanks to the benumbing influence of the hard oak on which his head was resting, and the bewildering fumes of the elder-wine.

Such slumbers are fortunately as unsound as they are unsoothing. Before the great yule-candles had sunk more than an inch nearer the socket, a slight sound in the chamber caused the young man to unclose his eyes. To his surprise, the wicker-chair opposite was empty, and one of the candles removed from the table!—

Placed as he was, he commanded the whole room; and, perceiving that his companion had profited by his sleep to quit his seat for the purpose of a careful examination of every object it contained, Charles Ribston's mistrust was sufficiently

excited to determine him to retain the semblance of sleep, and keep a vigilant watch over the movements of the old man.

He might be a robber,—he might be an assassin! The care he took to move with noiseless footsteps, and screen from the eyes of his companion the light he carried, sufficed to prove that he entertained some evil project.

With suspended breath and an accelerated pulsation of the heart which at all times beat so freely, Charles Ribston bent a scrutinizing glance upon the proceedings of one, whose decrepitude might, after all, be a mere disguise to facilitate some nefarious undertaking!—

CHAPTER VIII.

THE "witching time of night," with all its nerve-thrilling associations enhanced by the singular circumstances in which he was placed, in some degree justified the suspicions and precautions of young Ribston. But he held himself inexcusable when he beheld the poor old gentleman, whom he had half surmised to be a burglar in masquerade, instead of proceeding straight to the walnut-wood press in search of silver spoons or hoarded guineas, content himself with a deliberate survey of every other object in the room; pausing, in succession, before each of the old picture-frames, garnished with holly and mistletoe, that served to decorate its humble walls.

"He must be in his second childhood!"—thought Charles, after counting the number of minutes

devoted by the old man to contemplation of a faded coloured print; of which the subject might have been a mystery to the spectator but for the accompanying motto of "Thou shalt not leave me, Sylvio!" which announced the lackadaisical female figure it displayed to be intended as a portrait of Sterne's Maria.—"Nothing but dotage could find pleasure in such a daub!"—

A moment afterwards, the sight of an equally detestable work of art, contained in an adjoining frame, and, as an especial favourite with Aunt Dinah, adorned with her choicest blossoms of laurustinus, and the last half-faded china-roses of the year,—produced on the infatuated spectator an effect still more unaccountable.—He even neglected, in the interest of his survey, to screen the light from the eyes of the supposed sleeper.—He forgot the presence of a stranger.—He forgot every thing but himself and his feelings.—Nay, having tottered back to replace upon the table the heavy brazen candlestick he was no longer capable of holding, he threw himself into the chair he had quitted, and sobbed like a child!

Now Charles Ribston had been a sufficiently frequent visitor at Nessford Holm, to have noticed every object and article contained in that well-remembered room. He knew the frame in question to contain only one of those parodies upon the human face divine, which, under the name of "shades," constituted the cheap likenesses of the last century, as Daguerreotypes of the present; an unmeaning black profile, traced in Indian ink, on paper now stained and yellow with time. Whether intended to represent a man or woman, he could not call to mind, or had perhaps never decided;—so little is there in such profiles to excite the livelier imaginations of the present day

Impossible to conjecture, therefore, by what impalpable chain of associations this frightful old sketch had touched the heart of his companion. But it was equally impossible to pretend to sleep, while he gave such unbridled course to his emotions; and Charles Ribston accordingly turned towards the table, and removed the candlestick a little further off, in order to intimate to the stranger that he was exposed to

observation. It was not to such demonstrations that Charley had intended to play the spy.

Having waited till the composure of the old gentleman seemed sufficiently restored to admit of intruding on his notice, young Ribston ventured to address him.

"You appear deeply interested in the Welland family, Sir?"—said he; "more deeply than I had conceived any human being on earth to be, except myself. You are perhaps a long-estranged kinsman,—perhaps an old friend? I have no right to expect your confidence," continued he, receiving no reply. "All I ask is your favour and assistance in affording them such benefit, as, in my own name, it might be held an insult were I to offer."

Flinging back from his face the long white hair which his uncontrolled emotion had discomposed, the stranger fixed his small twinkling eyes fixedly and somewhat ironically on the young man who so ardently addressed him. The tears were already drv upon his cheek. — There seemed to be something caustic and unnatural even in his grief!—

"You are aware, I find, of Farmer Welland's broken fortunes," resumed Charles, somewhat embarrassed at receiving no encouragement to proceed. —"But I doubt whether you are half acquainted with the *extent* of his necessities.—This day is a day of unusual feasting in the house;—and there is an air of plenty and prosperity around us. But you little guess by what toil and privation it has been purchased!—There are those under this roof, who deny themselves rest or recreation, in order that the wants of the family may be supplied."

An impatient shrug of the shoulders was the only answer vouchsafed to this moving appeal.

"What I wish to do," added Charles, in a less assured voice, "that is—what I wish *you* to do—what I wish you to enable ME to do,—is, in some measure, to repair the evils you somewhat unfairly attribute to the agency of my family. From my father,—from myself,—the farmer would, I am persuaded, accept no act of grace. But if you are in any way privileged, or if you are even acquainted with those who have influence over him, I entreat

you to induce him to accept, in your name or their's, the pecuniary relief,—the sum,—the— "

"Ha, ha!—You want to force an alms on the poor old fellow, eh,—and are afraid he should fling it in your face?"—croaked the ungracious stranger, with all his former bitterness.

"You speak it harshly, sir, but I see you understand me," replied Charles, with some dignity. "By my father's bounty, I am rich; and God knows the money he lavishes upon me for the advancement of my pleasures, cannot be better employed than in"—

"Healing the wounds inflicted by his reckless and wanton selfishness!"—rejoined the stranger. "Certainly not!—Ha, ha!—The twenty-pound note with which you wish me to play the benefactor towards Dick Ribston's victim, *I* regard as mere conscience-money!"

"I have five times twenty to place this very moment at your disposal," said Charles, almost with his former hesitation,—"and can promise that as much shall be annually forthcoming."

"A hundred a year,—to repay a broken down

Yorkshire grazier for having a pretty granddaughter! —Ha, ha!" cried the malicious old man. "Why, at this rate, man, your father must make you the allowance of a prince of the blood?"—

"Far beyond my pretensions and deserts, certainly," replied Charles. "Him of whom you have presumed to speak so lightly, is one of the kindest of fathers, and most liberal of mankind."

"I never denied his prodigality!" retorted the stranger. "Those who take from the poor, are apt to give to the rich. The two coroneted numskulls above stairs, are bound, I fancy, to his gimcrack castle; while the cheer placed to-night on old Welland's board"—

"It was not my father's *hospitalities* we were discussing!" interrupted Charles, blushing scarlet.

"No!—you were endeavouring, if I remember, to canonize him, by virtue of his ostentatious liberality to his only son!"—added the stranger "Never interrupt me, young gentleman!—You have asked a favour at my hands, and must obtain it on my own terms."

"You grant it, at all events?" cried Charles Ribston, with sparkling eyes.

"I don't say nay!—Such nights as Christmas Eve have a key for the rusty padlock of an old heart. For hours, I have been wandering back into the past, till mine has become as that of a child."

Auguring well from these words, the young auditor suffered the present vein of the stranger to flow on unchecked.

"I have been thinking of the days when I, too, had a generous father—an affectionate father!"—continued he;—"that is, a father whom I thought generous and affectionate, because he suffered me to have my own wild way, and become profligate, idle, worthless;—till, my money and credit being exhausted, I came to be accounted *too* worthless and wild, and was flung, without resource, upon the world!—After squandering the means of my family, I trifled with its good name and my own;—and then, what availed me his generosity and affection?—Where were his fondness and indulgence then?—What did he do to screen me,—what did he do to save me?—Spurned

me in an angry hour out of his disorderly, half-ruined home,—left me friendless, houseless, penniless, on such a night as this,—ay! even on such a howling, withering, inhospitable, accursed night as this!"

The old man paused. But rejoinder, on such a subject was impossible.

"I lie!" resumed he, after a distressing pause. "I said friendless!—Didn't I say friendless?—It was a calumny against myself and human nature. I *had* a friend,—a friend who, in spite of the angry parents that threatened to do as much to him and more also unless he renounced his scapegrace master, — the supposed corrupter of his youth,—gave me shelter against the inclemency of the skies and the bitterness of my relations!"—

"Such was the duty of real friendship," observed Charles Ribston, — conceiving that the old man paused for a reply, because his voice was for the moment broken.

"The duty?—Ha, ha!—And how often are such duties fulfilled? How many would have stood, as Welland did, beside the cradle of his firstborn

child,—(of all the things this world contains the one to make a woman of a threatened man!) and in defiance of the risk that, before another night, that child and himself might be made homeless as myself, afford refreshment to my hunger and thirst, and share with me the few poor earnings which our common follies had rendered a meagre store!"

"Welland?"—exclaimed Charles Ribston, now indeed becoming interested in the strange narrative of his companion.

"Fifty years and more have come and gone since then!" resumed the stranger;—"fifty years—which have rendered the decrepit object on whom your eyes are fixed so searchingly, as unsightly, faded, and forgotten as his miserable likeness yonder on the wall;—and worse still, which have made his mind as cankered as his body,—blighting every germ of good implanted there by nature, and rendering him cold, crafty, and calculating, as all the world cried out there was need to be, to secure prosperity, at the time when *he* saw nothing on the face of the earth but its beauty and its joy!—And

so, sir, I have become, an't please you,—a man of mark and honour. Ha, ha!—I am now, by virtue of my thousands per annum, entitled to bestow rebukes on yonder lordly noodles, and lectures on your father's son!—For once, the prodigal has returned in purple and fine linen. And yet, for the means of reaching Hull, (from whence I sailed, for India, where, from a vagabond on the quays of Calcutta, I scraped, groped, toiled, and hoarded my way to opulence,) I was indebted to the beneficence of poor Welland,—poor Welland, who has toiled as hard as I have,—yet sunk from poor to poorer, to utter ruin at last!"—

Recalling suddenly to mind his friend Shoreham's assertion, that he had been present at the arrival of the old gentleman at Nessford, where he appeared to be an utter stranger to the family, Charles Ribston began to question the sanity of his companion. As a visitor from motives of humane curiosity to the Hanwell and York Asylums, he had heard narratives quite as connected as the one to which he was listening, concocted by lunatics.

"But when you became wealthy, sir," said he,—hoping to touch some chord whose vibration would force the old man to betray himself,—"how came you to overlook the necessities of your benefactor?"

"Who said I overlooked him?"—cried the stranger,—instantly excited.—"Whoever said so, lied in his throat.—Was it Hilliard?—or was it your father?"—

"What should my father know upon the subject?"—demanded Charles—more and more convinced of the insanity of the individual with whom he had been forced into this singular *téte à tête.*

"*What?*—ay, what indeed!—I forgot what I was talking about!"—faltered he, shrugging his shoulders. "But if I did *not* overlook him, I admit that I allowed myself to be too easily baffled by the difficulty of communicating with Bush Farm, without apprizing those whom I wished should believe me dead and buried, that I still survived their unkindness,—nay, that I was prospering on their ill-usage. I had worked my passage out to Calcutta under a feigned name. And how was I, while slaving under that name my way to fortune, by picking up

the gold dust that fell from the feet of men made reckless by money-turning, to remit a portion of my hoard to the Bush Farm—a portion, as it was, of my abandoned home."

"Is it possible, then, that I behold the last of the Reveleys?" cried Charles Ribston, rising from his seat with involuntary deference, as Bolingbroke might have done in presence of the deposed Richard. For from the young heir of Hacklewood, the mere name of Reveley commanded fourfold more respect than the opulence of which the stranger boasted himself the master. But, instead of satisfying his curiosity by an affirmative, the old man motioned him back authoritatively, almost contemptuously, to his place.—

"Moreover," resumed he, without so much as noticing Charley's interruption, "though—as one who, from a lofty tower commanding the country round, is able to measure distances and estimate objects at a glance—at my present age, I look back on my eventful life as a whole, and by comparing causes with effects, comprehend the value of my obligations and the motives and results of my con-

duct, yet while I still groped on and on, along the base level of petty gain, I neither looked backwards nor forwards. My mind was darkened with lucre-love.—The care of the day was the profit of the day. Estimating the value of money by the fact that its waste had bereft me of all the ties of life,—estranged from me parent and kith and kin,—and left me nameless and houseless on the face of the earth,—gold—GOLD—became my GOD!—I clutched at it as a drowning man at the floating spar which is to save him.—It was my friend—my kinsman—my mistress.—I thought of it by day—I dreamt of it by night.—Money—ha, ha!—MONEY was to replace all I had lost,—and eventually entitle me to trample on the necks of my enemies, and reward my only friend!"—

The whole attention of the young squire had become riveted on the face of his companion; so animated were the glances of those deep-set eyes, that twinkled like coals of fire, and so spasmodic the movements of the thin lips and toothless jaws that gave utterance to his wild revelations.

"As should ever befall those who would usurp the privilege of vengeance which is the exclusive right of the Almighty," resumed he, in a milder tone, "I was doomed to disappointment!—By the time my fortune rounded itself into sufficient form to admit of the realization of my projects, I was the sole survivor of my family. The newspapers, from which alone I gathered tidings of them, announced in succession the deaths of my parents!—

"In the first conscience-struck pang of my bereavement, I addressed a letter to my only sister, acquainting her that the outcast so long supposed dead, not only lived but prospered, and imploring tidings of the last days of my old father.—Thank God, my letter was a kind one, for it reached the poor woman on her death-bed!—In the interim of my absence, she had married—married obscurely—and not only married, but become a widow.—Restrain your symptoms of weariness, young gentleman, for these details concern you nearly. In them, the destinies of the Wellands are as much involved as my own!"

A vivid blush was all the answer vouchsafed by poor Charles to this detection of his sensations.

" How fearful was the excitement of my feelings," resumed his companion, " when the fleet was expected that was to apprize me whether my blood yet ran in the veins of living mortal!—I, who had so often abjured my family, so often all but cursed them in my heart, trembled like a child at the notion that perhaps my letter might be returned to me,—that my sister might be no more.—And dead indeed she was! —But she had lived long enough to thank Heaven for my survival, and bequeath to me by the assumed name I had communicated to her, a poor, wretched, helpless orphan—her only child!"

" Whom, of course, you adopted?"

" I accepted the guardianship.—What more I might choose to do hereafter, was to depend on his behaviour. The boy was yet an infant; and I took care that his relationship to the rich man should remain as complete a secret, as his connection with any better blood than that of his low-born father. —

" Still, as the last scion of your family, you cannot

but have experienced a kinsman's interest in behalf of the little fellow?"—

"One should care for a dog, so thoroughly dependent on one's mercy.—And when he grew older, distinguished himself at school by his abilities, and in his childhood by probity, diligence, and zeal, I was pleased.—The work of my hands seemed to prosper."—

"And by prospering, I fear, threatened to efface all memory of your poor old friend at the Bush Farm!"—

"By my sister's death, my last means of inquiring after the Wellands was destroyed. Besides, it was now my intention to leave India.—I was rich,—I sometimes thought, rich enough; and in the pauses of my active life, was ever projecting my return to my native country. I wanted to see this nephew of mine, now that he was a man grown,—having thriven on the ample means of my supplying, till his name was honourably known in the mercantile world,—ay, even in that wondrous mercantile world of London, where it is a hard matter to be heard of! And above all, I wanted to take my old friend, Welland, by the hand.—But those whose desires of

heart and soul are subsidiary to their covetings after gain, suffer the days to go by, and the months to elapse, and even the years to roll past them, unobserved, while *they* still count but on the morrow;—the morrow, which is to clench some bargain,—the morrow, which is to witness some payment,—the morrow, which is to sow the seeds of some lucrative enterprize!—The richer I grew, the more intricate my connection with others who, like myself, had sold their souls to the insatiable demon of money-making.—I was now the head of a firm.—I was the active agent of half-a-dozen companies.—I was—But it is not to announce myself to you by the name that would command a hundred knees from money-lovers (like your father,) that I am keeping your eyelids from slumber.—Suffice it that by degrees, unobservedly to myself,—I learned to content myself that my nephew should become as it were, the English representative of my wealth.—I enabled him to stand forward in society.—I enabled him to marry.—It seemed like planting trees whose grateful shade would overshadow my old age.—Since fate had

willed that the ancient name of Reveley should become extinct, it was something that its blood could be perpetuated, even in the veins of a collateral."—

Charles Ribston who, throughout the latter part of the old gentleman's narrative, had evinced unmistakable symptoms of lassitude, sufficiently excused by his tedious day, his prolonged watch, and the warmth of the glowing embers of the yuleclog, found it at length impossible to repress a yawn; which provoked either the indignation or compassion of the stranger so strongly, that of his own accord, he proposed to defer till the morrow, the conclusion of his eventful history.

"The state of the roads," said he, "will make us company-keepers longer than may be pleasant to either of us.—But I promise you that, before we part, something shall be agreed upon for the relief of the poor Wellands."—

He spoke to disregardful ears.—Already the weary senses of his young auditor were steeped in forgetfulness.—Another moment, and the measured click of the old clock was interrupted only by the shrill chirrup of the crickets.

CHAPTER IX.

Dreams are but foolish things in the repeating.—The disjointed images which form so pleasant an enlivenment of sleep, and which, like the arabesque frescoes of Herculaneum, appear so much the brighter for the black groundwork on which they are portrayed, will not bear being transferred to the searching light of day.

Suffice it that it was from a vision of his father's splendid abode, peopled in strange confusion with Wellands, Reveleys, Milbankes, and Ribstons, and brightened by a bridal in which Abel Drew was enacting the part of Hymen with his torch, uniting a happy couple, not very unlike to Grace and himself, that poor Charley was startled by prolonged shouts of laughter,—to find himself, alas! still seated beside the humble hearth of Nessford Holm, where

the ashes of the yuleclog were still glowing,—the cock crowing at the window, and the sun of Christmas day shining so bright in the heavens, that crystal drops were falling from the icicles hanging to the eaves, though the snow was a foot upon the ground, and crisp as straw.—

"A merry Christmas t'ye, Charley!"—cried Shoreham, who was holding his sides beside the oaken chair in which his friend had slept so soundly.

'A merry Christmas to you, Mr. Ribston!" added Lord Castlehurst, who had followed him into the room;—while Lord Charles, who stood on the threshold, impeding for a moment the entrance of Aunt Dinah with an armful of logs to refresh the fire, could not restrain his merriment at the air of stultified consternation with which their young friend started from his sleep, and stammered out his apologies for not having anticipated their early rising.

On regaining more perfect consciousness, he was about to excuse his oversleeping himself on the true ground of having been kept awake all night by his companion, when he suddenly perceived that the

old gentleman was absent from the group which had amused itself so unceremoniously at his expense.

"Where is Mr. Reveley?" cried he, addressing Aunt Dinah;—then, recollecting that he had received from the old gentleman neither a confirmation of his surmise concerning his identity, nor sanction to the disclosure of his mysterious history, he checked himself, and inquired in more general terms, "what had become of the venerable stranger who had shared his watch the preceding night?"—

"Up an' away, at daybreak, Mister Charles!" cried the old lady. — "Ay, ay! old folks is stronger and lighter now-a-days, than young!"—added she, with another hearty laugh at the chagrined countenance of her young guest.—"The old man was off, afore I wer' astir mysel'; and bad the girl, (to whom he left a token as seems to ha' turned her head, which I'm loath to forgive him, 'cause it seems like wanting to pay for harbour that wer' a free-will gift,)—bad the girl, as I was saying, not wake the poor young gentleman he'd left asleep by the fire, till the room wer' wanted for breakfast."

"*Gone?*—How provoking!—how *treacherous!*" cried Charles, disregarding all ceremony towards his companions, in the vexation of finding that the stranger had given him the slip.

"The merry old gentleman, Mister Charles, said he 'd give somethin' handsome for *your* genus for sleepin' hard on a hard pillow; for you 'd never opened your eyes nor ceased from snorin' the night long!"—cried Aunt Dinah. And while Shoreham joined in her mirth at this provoking accusation, Charles Ribston could scarcely refrain from asking himself at what point the delusions of the night had commenced. Of the strange disclosures imprinted in his mind, *which* were reality, and *which* a dream?—

His present object, however, was to obtain permission to refresh his disordered toilet in Shoreham's room, ere he proceeded to his morning duties; and on returning to the party, brightened and restored by his ablutions, great was his joy to find them seated round a cheerful and plentiful breakfast-table; —for, thanks to his having overslept himself,

the labours of the road-clearers were probably at a stand-still, and the wishes of his father concerning the transfer of his guests to the Hall on Christmas morning, consequently unaccomplishable.

So long as they remained at table, indeed, his thoughts were too embarrassed between the confusion of his midnight visions, and the annoyance of beholding his darling Grace fulfil towards Lady Charles the menial duties to which he knew her to be, by nature and education, so superior, that he neither heard the commendations of the party on Aunt Dinah's home-baked bread, home-churned butter, and cream all but solid; nor troubled his head concerning the probable discomfort of the Gumbledon portion of the party.—Nor was it till the cracking of the postboys' whips, towards the end of breakfast, apprized them that the carriages which had been taken back to Wheatston for the night, were returned according to order to convey the travellers to the Hall, that Charley started up,—accusing himself of neglect, supineness, and stupidity.

"Ay, ay!—we should have been finely off, Mr.

Engineer, had we depended on your activity!"—cried Lord Charles, helping himself to a third of Grace Welland's delicate bantam eggs.

"Don't disturb yourself,—my dear fellow!—Take it easy!—You'll tear off the sleeve of your paletot, if you're in such a deuce of a hurry!"—added Shoreham.

"I fancy, my dear Ribston," observed the more solemn Lord Castlehurst, "all that remains for you to do is to assist us in offering our thanks to our kind hosts, for the excellent fare and accommodation they have afforded us,—and mount your horse in order to escort us to Hacklewood."

"I sadly fear, my lord, that the road"—Charles Ribston was beginning—

"Is as clear as the Ring in Hyde Park!"—cried Shoreham, slapping him on the back.—"Bless your soul, Charley, do you suppose your father didn't know you too well to depend upon your exertions?—There were twenty men from Hacklewood, it seems, at work before daylight."

"So that even Master Drew, who had counted on

marching back across the fields, Mister Charles, to be in time for morning service, wer' able to take the road wi' the horse and cart of the Reveley Arms!" added Aunt Dinah, who was leaving the room with a cup of tea for her infirm brother, whom in severe weather she never suffered to quit his bed before noon.

And the mere sound of the name of Reveley so instantly renewed the perplexing reveries of the young squire, that he twice allowed Grace Welland to tender him, unnoticed, a plate of smoking Yorkshire cake.

"Late hours don't seem to agree with you, Charley!" cried Shoreham—profiting by his absence of mind to appropriate to himself the offered plate.—"You seem all abroad this morning?—What did the old wizard do to you last night, after I quitted you, to make you so confoundedly down in the mouth?—Miss Welland!"—continued he, flippantly addressing their fair attendant—"pray tell us the truth!—Did not a deadly combat ensue between Charley and the mysterious Methuselah who sat

up with him; and have you not charitably disposed of the body of the victim?"

The reply of poor Grace was forestalled by exclamations of surprise from Lord and Lady Charles Milbanke.

"Welland!"—repeated the latter, turning towards the blushing Grace.

"Have you ever been in London?"—added Lord Charles—"But why do I ask?—I said from the first that this obscure village could not be your natural home!"—

"I ought to apologize for what may appear our idle curiosity," resumed his wife, perceiving her unwillingness to answer.—"But we have a young lady residing with us—a young lady who so fully possesses our love and confidence, that our children are at this moment left under her care—who also bears the name of Welland."

"My sister Maria!" replied Grace, with still deepened blushes,—while the increasing embarrassment of Charles Ribston denoted perfect sympathy with her own.

"Your sister?—By Jove, I'm glad of it!"—cried Lord Charles.

"And I, ashamed not to have guessed it!" added his wife.—"From the first moment, there was something in the tone of your voice that seemed familiar to me! But, surely, my dear, I always understood from *our* Miss Welland that her family had always lived in town?"

"Till the death of my father, three years ago, neither of us ever quitted London," replied Grace, with much emotion.—"Since then, Maria has resided with your ladyship, and I, with my grandfather."

"This is the very strangest adventure—the most extraordinary coincidence!" cried Lord Charles—

"And the most satisfactory!" added his wife, offering her hand, with the kindest conciliation, to her new acquaintance;—"for we shall be able to carry back to Maria the pleasantest news of *her* family, in return for attentions to mine, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful."

"But now I think of it, Charley," cried her lord, "*you* might have given us, from the first, the solu-

tion of this enigma!—It was from yourself we heard of Miss Welland, when inquiring for a governess for the children."

"I was acquainted from a boy with her late father," replied Charles Ribston, the flush of whose cheeks now exceeded that of poor Grace. "Aware that she was seeking a situation, I merely referred you to the lady by whom she had been educated."

It was, of course, unnecessary to add, that, from the moment Lady Charles engaged the services of Maria Welland, he had done his utmost to encourage an intimacy between her ladyship and his family, in order to obtain from the governess, throughout the London season, tidings of his idolized Grace.

When Aunt Dinah made her appearance again, from attendance upon the poor old farmer, who was vainly endeavouring to rise to do honour to their guests, she had the joy of learning from "my lady's own lips," the value that was set upon "M'ria" in the "grand family" in which she was established; and the conversation would probably have proceeded into greater circumstantiality concerning the fortunes

of her nieces than the susceptible feelings of Charles Ribston found agreeable, had not the door been suddenly thrown open, and Lady Gumbledon and her daughters made their appearance, still fuller of ejaculations of horror than the preceding night.—

"*Such* beds!—flock, they verily believed,—and sheets, positively of sail-cloth!—Not the vestige of a carpet on the plaster floors; and, for supper, some dreadful village tea, with bread and butter a week old!"

"But they told you, my dear Lady Gumbledon, if you remember, that 'Measter Rudging wer' a bochelor!'" cried Lord Charles, counterfeiting to admiration the Yorkshire dialect of Abel Drew—"so what could you expect?"—

"Was I to suppose that because a man was unmarried he would drink poisonous tea?" retorted Lady Gumbledon—"and we are positively quite ill from it!—For heaven's sake let us start!—For heaven's sake let us get off to Hacklewood without further delay."

"*We* are in no such terrible hurry," replied Lady

Charles, with a smiling countenance—"We have enjoyed a most comfortable night; and, as you perceive, have scarcely concluded a capital breakfast."

"If ever I venture out of London at Christmas again!" resumed the dowager, scarcely hearing her to an end—"I am certain we have all three caught our deaths!—I begin to feel terrible twinges of rheumatism; and the poor girls have so utterly lost their voices, that they will not be able to sing a note for the next fortnight!"

Little did she surmise how sincerely Lord Castlehurst was thanking his stars for this consolatory announcement.

"But where is Mr. Ribston?—They told me Mr. Ribston was here!" continued the lady. And on glancing round the room, she had the vexation to perceive the young heir of Hacklewood engaged apart in an earnest colloquy with Grace Welland, who, in her simple morning dress of Yorkshire stuff, was looking prettier than ever; and, as the eyes of Charley were sparkling with interest, and the cheeks of the lovely girl crimsoned by emotion, it was impos-

sible for the envious dowager to conjecture that the colloquy for which her own claims to attention were neglected, regarded nothing more interesting than the history of a frightful picture suspended from the wall, from which Charley took down a sprig of laurustinus, and placed it, by way of trophy, in his button-hole.

"Mr. Ribston!" said the dowager, addressing him in her harshest tones—"Let me entreat the favour of you—as soon as you are at leisure to attend,—to assist me in compelling the people where I was forced to put up last night, to accept payment for their horrible accommodation."

"In apologizing rather for having offered it!" cried Lord Charles, who saw that the clouds which had begun to gather on Aunt Dinah's open countenance from the moment of Lady Gumbledon's intrusion, now portended an open storm. "You know little of Yorkshire, my dear lady, if you fancy that hospitality is made a market of in the cordial old county, unless by those who obtain a living by the trade.—Take example by myself!—All *I* ask my good

friends here to accept, is my warm thanks; giving me in return their promise that, whenever they visit the south, they will knock as freely at my gate as I have done at their own."

"That's kind and hearty, and spoke like a gentleman born!" cried Aunt Dinah, "and I don't wonder my niece M'ria should write us word she was nigh as happy in Lon'on, as if living among her own kith and kin!"—

Disgusted and indignant at the tone of familiarity established between the Milbankes and the "Nessford people," Lady Gumbledon lost no time in sweeping out of the room, like a swan followed by her cygnets. She was in the carriage before assistance was tardily offered by Charles Ribston.

"I shall be at Hacklewood by the cross-road long before your ladyship, and announce your coming!"—said he, jumping on the horse which one of the Wheatston postboys had, at the suggestion of "the girl," saddled for his use. And while the dowager kept exclaiming "A cross-road? And, pray, if there

is a cross-road, why were we detained last night in this miserable place?"—Charley disappeared along a lane leading by a bridle-way to the Hall.

Though there was no longer a chance of reaching Hacklewood in time for morning service, the Milbankes now good-naturedly hastened their departure, lest they should interfere with the Christmas devotions of the family at the Holm

"If I were not certain we should meet again, and speedily, I should indeed be loth to say good-bye!"—was the courteous parting salutation of the amiable patroness of Maria Welland.—"At all events, we shall call here on our way to Wheatston, as we return to town, to receive any packet you may wish to forward. You must not be affronted, my dear madam," she continued, addressing Aunt Dinah, "if your niece assists us to select in London a somewhat easier chair for your invalid, than the one which he has in use."

A glad woman was Aunt Dinah and a proud, as the handsome travelling carriage rolled away on the now solid snow,—the only sound emitted being the

smacking of the postboys' whips as they proceeded triumphantly through the hamlet sparkling with frost,—a glad and a proud woman was she, that her guests had so perfectly entered into her spirit and character, as to make no attempt at remuneration.—Never had her Christmas-day commenced more auspiciously. Never had she felt more overbrimming with glee. The only thing she could by no means reconcile to herself, was that, on proceeding to the bedchamber vacated by the Milbankes, the first object that met her eye should be her niece Grace, concealing her face on the back of the chair into which she had thrown herself.

"Why, what on earth ails the girl?" cried she. "Sure, Grace, that smart-spoken younker in the furred wrapper, as was followin' ye in an' out like your shadow, didn't forget himself?—No?—Why then you must be cryin' after the quality, lass!—which, for a day and night's acquaintance, is hasty friendship!"

For how was Aunt Dinah to surmise, that the poor girl's tears arose from mortification at having been

seen by Charles Ribston,—Charles Ribston, who, on her father's death and grandfather's ruin, would have acted the part of a brother towards her sister and herself, but for the more seemly intervention of Aunt Dinah's generosity,—in menial attendance upon persons of his own rank in life.

While poor Grace was fretting over the only too natural results of her ambitious attachment, Charley was making the best of his way home;—right thankful for the agency, whosesoever it might be, which had repaired his negligence, and watched in good time over the clearance of the road;—and not a little pleased that the halt of the London caravan at Nessford, should have concluded without further mischance.—Impossible to surmise what *might* have been the results of a visit from so flighty a family as the Gumbledons!—All he *now* feared was the banterings to which he might be exposed by the indiscretion of the Milbankes; and even the quizzing of Bob Shoreham would perhaps be less easily silenced, when backed by the encouragement of Meredyth, Herbert Howard, and the rest of his set.

On reaching the Hall, he had the satisfaction to discover that the family had proceeded to church, and that the party from Nessford was not yet arrived. —Scarcely, however, had he effected a hurried change of dress, when the clang of the hall-bell announced the return of the former; and on hastening down to satisfy the anxiety of his father concerning his expected visitors, the first person he encountered at the foot of the stairs was Sir Richard, in a high state of excitement, making loud and angry inquiries of the butler, the object of which was at present a mystery to his son.

"The workmen said, Sir Richard, that they were acting by your orders.—The picture was brought here in a case, in a Wheatston car, as others have been before," said the terrified servant.

"But why allow them to hang it up during my absence?"—cried the still irritated master of the house.

"They seemed, sir, to have your authority.—The head workman declared there was not a minute to be lost;—that the picture was to have arrived last

night, only for the state of the roads; and that you were anxious to have it in its place before the London visitors made their appearance."—

"In its *place!*"—reiterated Sir Richard, who appeared so frantic with vexation,—that his son could scarcely believe such furious excitement to originate in a mere mistake of the servants, or the misplacement of an article of furniture, or object of *virtù*.—

"I am happy to tell you, my dear father," said he, hoping to give a new turn to his ideas,—"that the Milbankes, Lord Castlehurst, and the Gumbledons will be here in a moment."

A tremendous oath instantly burst from the lips of Sir Richard.

"There will be no time, then," cried he, in a still more infuriated tone, "for removing this accursed picture!"—

"Believe me they are all too much engrossed by their night's adventures, to take the smallest heed of a picture, even if you had Raphael's Transfiguration in the house!"—was the imprudent rejoinder of Charles.

"How, sir!" retorted his angry father!—"Would you have me believe that any person under this roof is likely to overlook the fact forced upon their attention by yonder portrait?—Some enemy must have devised the insult!—Some damned hanger-on of the old family doubtless projected this petty act of vengeance, and found agents bold enough to execute a project that was to degrade me in the eyes of my London guests, and render me the laughing-stock of the whole county!"—

Raising his hand, which trembled with ill-suppressed passion, he pointed out, to the astonishment of his son, that a fine hunting-piece by Snyders, usually the first object to greet the eye of a visitor on entering the Hall, had been removed from its position, and replaced by a noble portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, in a finely carved frame:—bearing inscribed in gold letters at the foot, the name of—

"JOHN PAUL REVELEY, ESQ.,
1785, owner, by an inheritance of thirteen descents, of
HACKLEWOOD HALL."—

CHAPTER X.

Further arrivals fortunately interdicted all further effusion of wrath on the part of the irate Sir Richard.—The carriage of the dowager, heavily charged with the finery and rattletraps of three vain and selfish women, having been overtaken on the road, and closely followed by that containing the Milbankes and Lord Castlehurst, the whole party was soon assembled in the library: the former, unfolding their tribulations to the sympathizing ear of Lady Ribston; while the latter, somewhat to the surprise and a little to the indignation of Sir Richard, protested that they should always be thankful to the snow-storm of Christmas, 1844, for having made them acquainted with so gratifying a specimen of old English hospitality as they had met with at Nessford Holm.

But the mortified proprietor of Hacklewood had no leisure to be angry. Wounded in the tenderest point, and expecting every moment the triumphant malice of his enemies to manifest itself in some new act of hostility, he had scarcely presence of mind to reply with coherency to the questions of his "noble friend, the President of the Board of Controul," concerning the average inclemency of Yorkshire winters. While to Lady Gumbledon's inquiry as to *when* the Wheatston road had been last blocked up, he answered, with a look of vague bewilderment,—"In the year 1785!"—

"Your ladyship perceives that I was right!" interposed the jocose Lord Charles. "An occurrence so rare must be regarded as a phenomenon. I shall always consider it an omen purporting to signalize our entrance into the county.

Instead of reaping the glory he had been so long anticipating from the tasteful decorations of his mansion, the beauty of his conservatory, (which, contrasted with the dreary snow without, seemed to display the vivid hues of a rainbow,) and the

commodious arrangements of his whole establishment, Sir Richard was forced to listen to praises of the clean neat whitewashed bedrooms of Nessford Holm, and the merits of a goose pie served on the simple board of poor old Farmer Welland; while, ever and anon, he gathered from the laughing chat between Bob Shoreham, Howard, Meredyth, and Lord Cossington, who was the last comer, how diverting an evening the latter had lost by his non-arrival by the evening train of the preceding night.

"It was worth being snowed up on the road, I promise you," cried the flippant secretary, "to obtain a glimpse of the fair maid of Nessford,—the loveliest creature you ever beheld in your life."

From this indiscreet sally, it will be inferred that Charles Ribston was not in the room. He had, in fact, seized the first opportunity to escape, to pursue his investigations concerning the exact mode in which the mysterious picture had been introduced into his father's house. It was essential to ascertain whether there existed collusion between the confidential

servants of the Hall, and the rebellious dissidents of Hacklewood.

"And I can promise you, my dear Sir Richard," added Lord Castlehurst,—who was comfortably established, in the English fashion, on the hearthrug of a glorious Christmas fire,—"it was not alone in Yorkshire cheer that the rambling old grange which afforded us hospitality, so exceeded our expectations. We had the luck to stumble there upon an eccentric old gentleman, whom I would have given half a year's income to capture, and carry in a cage to Leadenhall Street. If but a tenth part of his extraordinary assertions were founded on fact, (and for *my* part I am inclined to put faith in the whole), we have all much to answer for in our ignorance of the state of Affghanistan. Never did I meet a shrewder or more remarkable old man!"

The moment the Honourable Director's official honour was touched, Sir Richard became himself again. Losing sight at once of his frivolous pretensions as a man of the world, he entered eagerly into

the questions which had been mooted between Lord Castlehurst and the stranger: listening with deference to many curious facts, possessing the stamp of authenticity; and arguing strenuously against such statements as appeared to be the result of prejudice and party spirit.

"The most unaccountable part of the old gentleman's revelations," said Shoreham, who had been summoned from his gossip with the junior members of the party to supply confirmation of certain statistical details in which the memory of Lord Castlehurst was at fault—"consisted in the fact that his information concerning the affairs of India is full a month posterior to our own."

"The Overland mail was expected the day we left London," replied Lord Castlehurst, "and our visit at Hatfield delayed us a day. To-night's papers will probably bring the interesting news with which he favoured us."

"Still, the despatches could not have been published when the train left town. As I before hinted to your lordship, the old prophet must be

in some way or other connected with the India House."

"Pity but you had seen him, Ribston," added Lord Castlehurst, "for *you* could have resolved us in a moment. Perhaps your son can tell us something about him, for they spent the night together."

"Ay, but Charley won't 'peach!" cried Shoreham. "I cross-questioned him the first thing this morning; and from his confusion, any one might have supposed I was catechizing him about a pretty girl, instead of an old man of the mountains."

"All this is becoming stranger and stranger! Where *is* my son?" cried Sir Richard, glancing hastily round the saloon, which was now deserted; the ladies having repaired to their rooms, and the young men to the stables, leaving only Lord Dryasdust deep in a new number of the Old Gentleman's Magazine.

"Where is Mr. Ribston?" demanded he of the butler, who answered the bell, which his master rang as though the house were on fire.

"In the library, Sir Richard."

"Let him know that I wish to speak to him immediately!" cried the agitated host, frighted from his propriety by a series of events of which he alone conceived the connection.

"I believe, sir,—that is, I had orders, sir,—Mr. Ribston desired, sir, that he might not be disturbed!' stammered the butler, perceiving that his master had not yet recovered his composure.

"Disturbed?"—

"He is engaged, sir, in conversation with the old gentleman."

"By Jove, I am beginning to think that *everybody* here has dealings with the old gentleman!" cried Lord Charles Milbanke—who had been an auditor of the preceding conversation—on perceiving Sir Richard Ribston rush out of the room, without explanation or apology.—"We have met with nothing but surprises since we entered the county!"

But a greater surprise than had ever yet startled the nerves of poor Sir Richard, awaited him in the library.

Beside his own particular writing-table, in his own

particular arm-chair, with the most authoritative mien and deportment, sat a venerable gentleman, who, but for a slight difference of age and costume, might have been mistaken for the original of the portrait so mysteriously introduced under his roof; while, at no great distance stood Charles, with downcast looks, and in the attitude of a schoolboy receiving a reprimand.

As he entered the room, the first words that met his ear were an adjuration to forbearance, hesitatingly uttered by his son.

"Whatever faults my father may have to account for, sir," said he, "I implore you to defer your remonstrances to a more private occasion. The presence of strangers would render too painful and too humiliating the admonitions you are, perhaps, privileged to offer."

"For *your* sake, my lad—" the old gentleman was beginning.—But at that moment, Sir Richard made his appearance.

"So, sir!"—was the cool apostrophe of the old gentleman, — without making the slightest move-

ment to qnit his place on the arrival of the master of the house—"you have a guest more than you bargained for, you see, to partake of your Christmas fare!"—

Instead of replying, the cheeks of Sir Richard became blanched to an ashy paleness; and he stood dumb and motionless before his interlocutor.

It was now the turn of the young man to feel astonished.

"When I wrote you word, a few years ago, sir, that I was too old a tree to be torn up by the roots from the soil in which I had so long flourished, the prospect of five months of sea-faring had determined me to lay my old bones in Calcutta!"—resumed the old gentleman.—"But it was loathing of ship-board, not dread of fatigue, that deterred me! Ha, ha!—Not a jot the worse, I flatter myself, for my Overland journey. The night before last, sir, I touched British ground for the first time these fifty years; and in spite of all that earth or sky could do to thwart me, here I am!—Two months ago, on seeing in the English papers a fine flourish about

the grand doings about to take place at poor old Hacklewood, I swore an oath to myself that I would spend Christmas-day under your roof."—

"This is so unlooked for a pleasure,—so overpouring a surprise, my dear uncle!"—faltered Sir Richard Ribston.—But instead of rushing forward to greet and welcome his beneficent kinsman, he sank into a chair.

"So unlooked for,—ha, ha! as to overcome you with delight!"—cried the old gentleman in his bitterest accents.—"But I'd have you to know, sir, that though travelling 's been made a pretty pastime by dint of modern inventions, 'tis a hard thing for a man of fourscore years to be forced into a journey of thousands of leagues, because he can't get his orders attended to by persons bound to zeal and obedience, alike by ties of blood, and ties of gratitude!"—

"I trust, sir, that no remissness on my part—" Sir Richard began.—But he could not face the intent scrutiny with which his eccentric kinsman sat regarding his confusion.

"When I charged you that, in your purchase of Hacklewood, the Bush Farm should be expressly included," resumed the old gentleman, "it was not that you might make a puppet-show of the place,—but for the love of those who abided there, and had a right to abide there for evermore.—To your neglect of *this* commission, however, I have the less to say, that I feel in some measure to blame.—None but asses who do not know their own minds, should be inexplicit in their orders.—I did not speak plain enough.—I fancied myself writing to one who had tact and feeling to comprehend my intentions."

"I can assure you, sir, that had I fully understood"—

"I know it—I know it!—Enough said!—Concerning the injuries of my poor old friend Welland, I insist no further."

"Your friend Welland?"—involuntarily repeated the amazed Sir Richard.

"But what have you to say, sir," resumed the old gentleman, "concerning your disregard to my injunctions, unequivocally expressed and peremptorily

enforced,—that, after completing the repairs of the old mansion of Hacklewood Hall,—which I afforded you the means of purchasing, and instructions which enabled you to *compel* the Hilliard family to effect the sale,—you would restore to its place the portrait of its former owner,—*the portrait* of *the last of the Reveleys?*" added he, in a less assured voice.

"It was perhaps by your interposition, then, that the picture was introduced into this house?"—said Sir Richard, drawing a deep breath, as if relieved from inexplicable oppression.

"You have said it!—Better for *you* had it been by your own.—Your neglect of the only request I ever made you, in return for benefits unceasingly conferred from your infancy till this moment,—(nearly half a century of kindness, liberality, and care!) — has taught me an important lesson. — I acquainted you where the picture was to be found. —I apprized you of the exact position I wished it to hold!—"

"But consider, my dear sir," pleaded the crestfallen

Sir Richard, "in how humiliating a position I should have been placed in my own house, with this memento of the family I had displaced, perpetually before the eyes of my servants and guests."

"And what could it tell them which they did not already know,—that with gold amassed in trade, you had purchased the tattered remnants of a property, once the proudest in the shire?—On one point only, sir, were they misinformed;—attributing to your own industry the opulence secured by the partial affection of your hard-working uncle!"—

Sir Richard Ribston was too much abashed to resume his self-defence.

"When I found your vanity too thin-skinned to admit of restitution to the Reveleys of the honours that were their due," resumed his admonitor, "when I found that you had not so much as claimed the picture for your own, I determined to take justice into my own hands;—to quit the soil where I had so long burrowed, and ascertain with my own ears and eyes whether the heirs with which your marriage has supplied me, were of a nobler nature than your own.

With one of them, accident has favoured my acquaintance;—and though I cannot compliment you, Sir Richard Ribston, on the taste of your be-gilt and be-varnished edition of poor old Hacklewood, I honestly wish you joy of your son."

Deeply wounded for his father, Charles Ribston experienced little pleasure in this unlooked-for compliment.

"If you would but place yourself a moment in my position, sir," pleaded Sir Richard, in an altered and desponding voice, "and consider what it is to be harassed from morning till night, by being twitted with the popularity of your predecessors"—

"Ha, ha!—They continue then to be popular,—the poor, broken-down, attorney-hunted, disgraced, and ruined race?"—

"To find that, whatever your exertions for the advantage of the neighbourhood, or benefit of the poor," continued his nephew, without noticing his almost hysterical interruption,—"your best efforts are disparaged, and yourself regarded as an usurper of the rights of those whose name is as a watchword

in every mouth, and whose importance a charm in every memory,—you would admit the cruelty of requiring me to freshen all these associations, and substantiate before their eyes a spell which operates to my continual mortification."

"A watchword in every mouth!"—mechanically repeated the old man.

"The parson preaches at me from the pulpit,—all but naming by name the former benefactors of the parish!—The publican refuses to withdraw the arms of the Reveleys from his door!—The neighbouring farmers, whenever they find their interests opposed by the improvements my readier funds enable me to introduce into the agriculture of the district, revile me as an upstart. Whichever way I turn on the land you have entitled me to call my own, I hear nothing but cries of——"

"Reveley for ever! Long live the old family!—God bless the last of the Reveleys!"—shouted at that moment hundreds, nay, thousands of voices, which appeared to surround the house.

"You hear them!" cried Sir Richard,—his face

crimsoned with emotion, at the idea that these demonstrations would be witnessed by his aristocratic guests. For on following the glance of his tormentor towards the noble Elizabethan window of the old library, he saw that the white surface of the lawn was obscured by the gathering of a great multitude: —the whole population of Hacklewood, shouting with joyful acclamation;—some carrying huge branches of holly as if to unite the favourite name with the especial festival of the day;—some bearing long streamers of silk or riband, supplied from the toilet stores of the parsonage, and hastily attached to poles; —but loudest and most active of all, Abel Drew,—who with much pains had contrived to detach from its iron crook the sign of the Reveley arms, which now dangled at the extremity of a huge hedge-stake,— a burden almost too great for his puny arm.

Before him, with the antics and caperings of a Flibbertigibbet, danced poor Jock Wootton;—foremost in renewing the shouts of "Long live the last of the Reveleys—Reveley, Reveley for ever!"—

"My dear Ribston!" cried Lord Charles Mil-

banke, hurrying into the library, followed by the greater number of the Hacklewood guests. "What on earth is the meaning of all this electioneering uproar? Are these good folks canvassing for the office of beadle, or churchwarden, or what?"—

"They are in league, I fancy, to drive me to distraction!"—cried Sir Richard, on perceiving his visitors assembled in presence of his implacable uncle.

"The very person in the world I most wished to see again!" exclaimed Lord Castlehurst, on obtaining a glimpse of the old gentleman, who stood in the centre of the window, contemplating, at first, with exulting glee, but at length with all but tears, the noisy demonstrations of the gathering multitude, over which the winter sun was shining, in all the bright transparency of a frosty sky.

"Reveley for ever!—Long live the last of the Reveleys!" cried the people, waving their hats, and flourishing their branches of evergreens.

"By Jove! they could scarcely evince more loyalty if the queen herself were amongst us!" cried Bob

Shoreham, addressing his friend Charley, who stood perplexed and confused by sympathy in his father's mortification.

"But who *is* the last of the Reveleys?"—inquired Lady Charles of her hostess, whom she had compelled to follow the rest of the party.

"Ay!—who *is* the last of the Reveleys, and *where* is the last of the Reveleys?"—cried her husband.

"HERE!" exclaimed the old gentleman, to whom the eyes of the whole multitude were directed;—and, as he spoke, he drew forward Charley Ribston from the group, and placed him in full view of both his father's guests and the exulting populace. "Henceforward, the heir of Hacklewood will assume the name of his grandfather, as representative of one of the most ancient houses in the shire."

"His grandfather?" inarticulately murmured Sir Richard.

"His *great* grandfather, since you choose to be precise!" persisted the old gentleman;—"the name so ill-exchanged at her marriage by my poor sister."

Sir Richard was speechless. Between his dread of

unnecessary exposure of his family affairs, and his newly-awakened hopes that the blood of the long-envied Reveleys might really be flowing in his veins, every pulse throbbed within him.

"Introduce me to your friend," whispered Lord Castlehurst, unable to forego an Englishman's delight in formal introductions, even at that awkward moment, —so eager was his desire to make acquaintance with the wise man of the East.

And the embarrassment with which Sir Richard prepared to accede to his request, was fortunately covered by the renewal of the acclamations of the throng, on learning from the exposition of Master Drew, the genealogist of the Reveley family, that, in the heir of Hacklewood, they beheld the last scion of that time-honoured race.

And this time, when the shout raised by old Abel Drew and Jock Wootton, was eagerly echoed by the throng, and "Reveley—Reveley for ever!" burst like thunder over the lawn, "Reveley—Reveley for ever!" added Lord Charles Milbanke. "Now we can appreciate the cry, huzza for my friend Charley!"

In a moment loud cheers burst from the party in the library, as though the enthusiasm were infectious.

During the continuance of this flattering uproar the shrewd old gentleman seized the opportunity for a few indispensable words of explanation with his discomfited nephew.

"If you expect the past to be forgotten," said he, in a voice audible only to Sir Richard—"forget, in your turn, that I ever bore another name than the one under which you have always known me as your uncle, and benefactor. The only Reveley here, is your son."

By the time, therefore, the loud hurrahs of the Lords and Commons subsided, Sir Richard sufficiently recovered his self-possession to present the old gentleman to his friends, by a name known to all those familiar with the affairs of India, as influentially connected with its financial and political interests.

It might have amused an indifferent spectator to observe that, while this eccentric kinsman suddenly attained colossal proportions in the eyes of

the vainglorious Sir Richard, as the legitimate owner of Hacklewood, the descendant of all the old brasses and alabaster tombs, — he himself added as many cubits to his stature in the estimation of others of the party, as nephew and heir to one who passed for the Rothschild of the East.

And now, Lady Ribston and her daughter, to whom all that was passing had been an enigma, could no longer repress their warm greetings to the man in whom they beheld the last surviving relative of Sir Richard, and his friend and patron through life. And though the strangeness of the recent proceedings, and the excitement of the Hacklewood tenantry, seemed to the Gumbledons and one or two of the young men difficult to account for, even by an incident so exciting as the unexpected arrival from India of a near relative who had been all but smothered in a snow-storm on the threshold of the Hall,—the whisper circulated by Bob Shoreham of "the richest commoner in England,—a man to whom the Court of Directors are glad to per form Ko-too!" — was not without its influence in

smoothing over all that was unpleasant, and explaining all that was obscure.

"And to think of our having treated him so cavalierly last night!" whispered the dowager apart to her daughters. "But how could one suppose that a man in the enjoyment of half a dozen millions would travel in the Wheatston fly, in a patched green cloak!"—

That patched green cloak, however, was one of the objects nearest in the world to the heart of its wealthy owner. It was the identical one in which he had been expulsed from his ruined home, and sheltered by the friendship of Welland; and notwithstanding the really affectionate manner in which he was welcomed by Charley and his sister and their excellent mother, and the deference with which he was treated not only by his panic-struck nephew, but by the noble guests who, even when unapprised of his social consequence, had fully appreciated the brightness of his intelligence and copiousness of his information, nothing would induce him to pass the remainder of Christmas-day at the Hall.

Arm in arm with him whom he had designated as his heir,—arm in arm with "the last of the Reveleys,"—he went forth attired in the memorable old garment; and, escorted by the shouting multitude, and preceded by the happy little clerk who had been chosen as the dispenser of his bounties and executor of his recent arrangements, he repaired to the parish church, to give thanks at evening service for the blessings of his preservation and prosperity.

And though, for once, the responses of Master Abel were a little irregular, and the attention of Madam Gurdon and Miss Amelia a little divided between the pulpit and the whiteheaded old man, who, instead of entering the gorgeous chancel-pew, chose to perform his devotions kneeling in humble contrition on the spot pointed out to him as his parents' grave, as Mrs. Timmans observed that night over the colossal bowl of punch with which she recreated the Reveley Arms—"what mortal present could keep their eyes off him,—the dead alive,—the Master Paul of whom they had heard from their fathers and mothers afore 'em!" —

But further than Hacklewood Church, the old gentleman chose that Charley should not accompany him.

"Go back to your fine folks!" said he.—"Whatsoever else they be, they're your father's guests,—ha, ha!—and as such, entitled to your consideration.—When they're gone, maybe I may come and visit him myself. Meantime, you'll hear of me, and I suspect I shall hear of *you*, where I'm going to eat my Christmas dinner,—at Nessford Holm."

In spite of his grand-nephew's entreaties, he chose to proceed alone, and in the same humble vehicle that had brought him to the spot, to wait upon his valued friends.

"Not a step further!" cried he to the enthusiastic populace, who showed themselves somewhat less submissive to his authority on this point than the young man who already regarded him as the guardian of his future happiness—"I want to be quiet, and I want to be alone.—I won't have my old friend Welland frighted out of his wits by your shouting, as the fine ladies were up yonder at the Hall, when they wasted so many wry faces on your ullabaloo!"

But though Charley Ribston, or let us at once assign him the name which the Heralds' college and the sign-manual were about to make legally his own, —though CHARLES REVELEY was content to return to Hacklewood to satisfy the anxieties of his father and the inquisitiveness of the whole party—nay, though he was content to allow his singular kinsman the joyful task of breaking his secret in person to his friend the farmer, he was too eager that Grace should ingratiate herself into the favour of his grand-uncle, not to put her a little upon her guard!

A few hastily-scribbled words, consigned to the care of Jock Wootton, were, he knew, as sure of reaching her as if entrusted to a cabinet courier; and so earnestly did he impress upon the poor lad the urgency of despatch, that, long before the rattling cart of the Reveley Arms was drawn up once more by Abel Drew before the old porch of the Holm, Grace had contrived that all should be in the neatest order for the reception of a friend, and her grandfather duly prepared for the visit.

"But I tell you, child, I'm in no mind for more

company this evening!" remonstrated old Welland, on seeing her heap up the hearth, and set forth his best and brightest, on the plea that *more* guests were at hand.—"The fine folks last night, (though God forbid I should deny 'em shelter under my roof in so bitter a snow storm, more especially the lady in the blue velvet bonnet who 's been so kind a friend to poor M'ria,)—the fine folks, I say, were the means of cutting short the crack over old times with Master Drew which I'd promised myself o' Christmas Eve. For 'tis n't often, now, Grace, he can spare an a'ternoon to me! It is n't quite so easy to make his way to Nessford as it was to drop in at the Bush Farm.—And every year I live seems to make old times dearer and dearer, as they grow dimmer and dimmer! In the whole parish now, there 's but two or three as know aught, except by hearsay, of them as the wickedness of attorney Hilliard drove by false dealing and false swearing out of the county.—Another year or two, and 'twill be, maybe, forgot that these Ribstons are not the real right owners of the place! Ah! poor

Hacklewood—poor Hacklewood,—and poor *me!*—I wish they 'd ha' shot me outright, Grace, as they do an old dog there's no further use for, afore they thrust me out from the place where I reckoned to live and die!"

But to these desponding sentiments Grace Welland could no longer find it in her conscience to respond. *She* knew that better days were in store for him!—*She* knew that a few minutes would bring her grandfather into the presence of him whose faded effigy had followed their fallen fortunes from the Bush Farm to the Holm; and which, as it hung right opposite to her, still adorned with Aunt Dinah's faded flowers, which she would have thought it sacrilege to replace, appeared to her sanguine eyes like a talisman of renovated hope for them all.

He who had found his unsightly profile an object of domestic worship at the Holm, though even his express commands had proved insufficient to obtain a harbour at Hacklewood for the noble effigy of his father would at least prove a friend to the faithful adherent who, as she had heard thousands of times

from the lips of her father and Aunt Dinah, had perilled his future maintenance and respectability, in order to render a last service to the spendthrift who had wrought his own ruin and that of Hacklewood Hall.

Whether she entertained the same sanguine expectations that he might be tempted to favour the disproportionate attachment of his grand-nephew, it is difficult to say. But certain it is, that, by the time the barking of Jowler announced the arrival of the cart, the cheeks of the conscious Grace, which, a moment before, had almost rivalled the hue of the holly-berries, became white as the delicate tissue of her own lawn kerchief.

Trembling in every limb, she had not courage to be present at the trying moment of explanation between the ruined farmer and the man of millions, who stood before him, humbled and thankful, as in the presence of a benefactor! But to whatever emotions might ensue, Aunt Dinah, good hearty soul, was at hand to administer. And when Abel Drew, in the officiousness of his zeal, went running to the

well for cold water, and to the hen-roost for feathers to burn, for the behoof of both host and guest—"Let 'em alone—let 'em alone!" cried the good woman—"Let 'em sob their hearts out.—They 'll be none the worse for 't!—I warrant we shall have a rainbow anon!"

And a bright rainbow it was!—Never was there a happier meal than the one which served as dinner to the great man, and supper to the humble friends, who, as his obligers, were at that moment greater than he!—

"I had always hoped this meeting would take place under the roof of Bush Farm!" said he, after toasting a merry Christmas to all, in the renowned old home-brewed ale,—"But my ass of a nephew, whose flourishes about Hacklewood read as plausibly in his letters as his speeches in the newspapers, seems to have taken a pleasure in thwarting my plans. Dick Ribston is either the hollowest or the thickest dog that ever encumbered the conclave in Leadenhall Street,—and that 's something to say!"

"Fair-spoken enow he was, surely," added old

Welland, "when, six or seven year agone, he first made his appearance with his son, then but a youth, at the Bush Farm."

"Ay!—about the time I first suggested my desire for the purchase of Hacklewood," muttered his former master.

"And when he asked my commands for Lon'on, (for all the world, like one a canvassin' to be a parliament man!) I told him as I'd a son a clerk in the city, and where he lived, and that I'd be obligated if he 'd call and let 'em know how matters was a going wi' us in the north"—

"And did he execute your commission?"—cried the old man, his deepset eyes brightening with the hope of discovering *some* trace of good in his sister's son.—

"Not he! — But the younker wer' warmer-hearted—'

"Oh! — the *younker*!" — repeated his visitor, glancing askance at Grace, whose varying complexion avouched her interest in this portion of her grandfather's narrative.

"And from the first day he made acquaintance with my poor Ned and the gurls, never did Mister Charles lose sight on 'em!" added old Welland, with a mournful shake of the head.—"'Twas no fault o' his'n, when,—thanks partly to the rogue Hilliard, and partly to his father,—I was jockied out o' the old place. Master Charles was away at college.—And never shall I forget how the tears stood in his eyes, and how he gav' my hand a gripe as a' most brought 'em into mine, when first he found me in this broken-down place,—(which wern't then, God knows, what poor Dinah's help and poor Grace's hardworkin' ha' since made on't)—and heard how all had been turned inside-out at the Bush Farm."

"No doubt the young rascal had some bad end in view!" sneered the shrewd old gentleman, still keeping his eyes upon Grace.

"Lor' bless you, Mister Paul,—you don't know Master Charles!"—interrupted Aunt Dinah, firing up for her favourite. "There ben't an honester heart nor opener hand in the three Ridings,—and that's saying som'at for him!"

"The fox's whelp turns out a fox in time!"—persisted the old gentleman, who, as Dinah Welland had been but a girl of twelve years old at the period of his banishment from Hacklewood, still regarded her but as "a bit of a lass." "I daresay the lad knew well enough he was paying his court to his father's rich old uncle, by making much of Ned Welland's family."

"You wrong him, sir,—you do him the greatest injustice!" said Grace, recovering her powers of speech on hearing poor Charles thus shamefully aspersed.—"He did not so much as know of your existence. I have heard him hundreds of times express his surprise that, though his mother was so extensively connected, his father should not possess a single surviving relation."

"And how came the young jackanapes, pray, to make *you* the confidante of his family affairs?—Ha, ha!—You have chosen to push your way into the witness-box, young lady, and must stand a little cross-examination!"—

"My niece feels thankful to Master Charles, for

having procured a situation for her sister, when their prospects was at the blackest," interposed Aunt Dinah, in compassion to the downcast looks and gathering tears of poor Grace.

"Let the wench speak for herself—let her speak for herself!" cried the provoking old gentleman. "I was just thanking my stars for the discovery that she'd got a tongue in her head.—I'm not fond of dumb women!—'Tisn't natural!—Ha, ha! My mind misgives me against those who have not wherewithal to say their souls are their own.—More particularly in this case!" continued he, on perceiving that Grace's self-possession was in some degree restored. "For I've made my mind up,—Jack Welland, my boy,—that before you and I lay our bones in the parish church, we will see a fourth generation of Reveleys under the old roof of Hacklewood; and that this saucy champion of my grand-nephew's shall be the mother of them all!—"

"Grace?"—said the farmer, not exactly comprehending his drift.

"Grace Welland, Mister Charles's wedded wife?" —cried Aunt Dinah, half starting from her chair.

"And why not, pray?—Isn't she a lady of nature's making?—Isn't she one of the best of girls?—Is'nt she the grandchild of the man, but for whom I might have died in a ditch?—Who 's got anything to say against the match?"—

The eyes of the old folks turned instinctively and affectionately towards poor Grace, who made a vain attempt to seize the bony hands of this kind though terrible friend, and press them to her lips.

"Let Dick Ribston but so much as pretend to raise his voice against my plans," resumed he, "and he may look elsewhere for the means of providing rack and manger for the dukes and lords he 's so fond of herding under his roof; ay, and for a portion for Miss Bessy, too,—though a pleasant hearty-spoken girl she is,—to enable her to marry one of the fine gentlemen whom her foolish father 's so proud to see dangling after her.'

It was but an act of justice on the part of Grace

"The eyes of the Old Miller turned towards poor [illegible] P. 216.

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to take up the defence of Charley's sister, and set forth the number of kind and charitable actions for which Hacklewood was indebted to Lady Ribston and her daughter. But it was also an act of self-denial.—For she was eager to escape from the room, and ascertain whether Jock Wootton had taken his departure with Master Abel, (whose annual Christmas Carol was pledged to the punchbowl of the Reveley Arms!) or was still loitering about the premises; that she might charge him with the couple of lines that were to convert "the last of the Reveleys" into "the happiest of men."

But in this project, she was frustrated.—"I have but one condition to make with Charley's advocate!" —said the quaint old gentleman, after a hearty squeeze of her trembling hand,—"*I* must be the first to communicate the good news to the young fellow!—I've taken a fancy to the cut of his face.—To my mind, there's the old name of Reveley writ in every line on't!—And besides, I've discovered, of late, that the true Paradise water for making old folks young, arises out of the tears of joy we find

upon happy faces.—Ha, ha! I feel like a boy to-night, only from knowing that I've lightened more than one heavy heart since morning.'—

"Ay, ay!—you 've given most on us a merry Christmas indeed!"—cried Aunt Dinah—wiping her eyes,—though there was a grin on her comely face.

"And above all," resumed the happy old gentleman,—"when I put the poor fellow to sleep last night, like an old wife rocking a cradle, only by talking to him of his father's history and my own, I promised him the end on't on the morrow;—and I'm too steady a man o' business to break my word. —No laughing, Jack Welland, man, at the notion of Master Paul's becoming a steady man of business!"—cried he,—on perceiving a gentle shake of poor Welland's frosty poll.—"Necessity's the best of schoolmasters."

"And whenever a man sets his shoulder to the wheel, he gets help from a stronger hand than his own!"—added Aunt Dinah.—more gravely than was her wont.

But it was not gravely that either she or any other of the party was able to contemplate the explanation between the uncle and nephew, and still more between the uncle and his future heir.—It was a rash act on the part of Sir Richard to leave his fine house and fine company on the morrow's morn; and endeavour to conciliate by fine speeches a man whose ear was as that of the mole, and whose eye as that of the lynx towards the measures and motives of mankind;—and who already thoroughly despised the Dick Ribston who had chosen to be knighted, and was heartsick with envy and jealousy of a name which had struck deeper root in the land than his own obscure patronymic.

But he despised him still more, when he saw him submit with forced smiles to an alliance that was hateful to him; not because the venerable farmer was now placed before him as the benefactor of his sole benefactor; but as the only means of securing a portion of the inheritance he had so long regarded as his own.

On finding his eccentric kinsman obstinately adhere

to his determination of remaining the inmate of the Wellands so long as his own house was full of fashionable guests, right thankful was he to the unpropitious state of the weather, which, by depriving Hacklewood of half its attractions, disposed his visitors to decline his hollow invitation to them to prolong their stay; and he scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry, when the united entreaties of Lady Ribston, her children, and the Wellands, obtained from Lord and Lady Charles Milbanke a promise that they would accompany Maria, (whose services they grieved to find henceforward lost to their children,) to officiate at the happy wedding which was to inaugurate their friend Charley into the neighbourhood, as the last of the Reveleys, and the owner of Hacklewood Hall.

After the vexations Sir Richard had undergone, indeed, he was content to enjoy the continued bounties of his severe uncle on condition of adhering exclusively to his mercantile and official duties, and his residence in London. More especially as, the moment a change of weather, and the dispersion of the Hacklewood party, favoured the

translation, John Welland was restored in triumph to the enjoyment of all his former rights, privileges, and properties at the Bush Farm.

It was from thence the wedding took place.—It was thither the population of Hacklewood repaired to fetch the gentle bride of their beloved young squire. Needless to enlarge upon the joy of the whole district!—the zeal with which the service was mumbled by Doctor Gurdon, and the responses shouted by Abel Drew; who, in the triumph of the event, listened without so much as the utterance of a groan, to the anthem contributed by the self-playing organ.

Since then, twelvemonths have elapsed; and already the aid of the little clerk has been required to announce to the parish by a merry peal, the birth of a little Reveley, to whom is about to be assigned the name of Paul.

His triumphant godfather, the singular being who, by a life of industry and old age of benevolence, has effected the expiation of the errors of a dissolute youth, is at present occupied with the construction of

a bungalow, at the extremity of the Hacklewood estate; within equal distance of the Bush Farm and the Hall.—But Aunt Dinah and her friend the hostess of the Reveley Arms are of opinion that, when complete, he will never have the courage to tear himself from the hourly spectacle of the domestic happiness his bounties have created.

On one point, however, his prejudices have been forced to give way. Though he expressed a hope last Christmas, that neither lords nor dukes would thenceforward be heard of as guests at the Hall, on penalty of another snow storm and being benighted at the now deserted and dismantled Holm, yet when Lord and Lady Cossington spent a portion of their honeymoon with the friend and brother who had been the original promoter of their attachment, he not only played the generous kinsman but the courteous host, to two young people thoroughly deserving the fraternal affection with which they are regarded by the last of the Reveleys.

Already, the Wheatston road has been placed in perfect repair; and the neighbourhood is beginning

to afford evidence of the influence of an enterprising spirit, combined with a colossal fortune and partiality to the spot.—There are none of the cottages of gentility, indeed, foreshown by the sarcasms of young Howard. But useful institutions and works of benevolence secure the gratitude of old and young towards him who was so inauspiciously restored to Hacklewood, and familiarized with its family secrets, by the agency of

THE SNOW STORM.

THE END.

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