

## II

IN his acceptance of Sidwell's reply, Peak did not care to ask himself whether the delay of its arrival had any meaning one way or another. Decency would hardly have permitted her to answer such a letter by return of post ; of course she waited a day or so.

But the interval meant more than this.

Sylvia Moorhouse was staying with her friend. The death of Mrs. Moorhouse, and the marriage of the mathematical brother, had left Sylvia homeless, though not in any distressing sense ; her inclination was to wander for a year or two, and she remained in England only until the needful arrangements could be concluded.

' You had better come with me,' she said to Sidwell, as they walked together on the lawn after luncheon.

The other shook her head.

' Indeed, you had better.—What are you doing here ? What are you going to make of your life ?'

' I don't know.'

' Precisely. Yet one ought to live on some kind of plan. I think it is time you got away from Exeter ; it seems to me you are finding its atmosphere *morbific*.'

Sidwell laughed at the allusion.

' You know,' she said, ' that the reverend gentleman is shortly to be married ?'

' Oh yes, I have heard all about it. But is he forsaking the Church ?'

' Retiring only for a time, they say.'

'Forgive the question, Sidwell—did he honour you with a proposal?'

'Indeed, no!'

'Some one told me it was imminent, not long ago.'

'Quite a mistake,' Sidwell answered, with her grave smile. 'Mr. Chilvers had a singular manner with women in general. It was meant, perhaps, for subtle flattery; he may have thought it the most suitable return for the female worship he was accustomed to receive.'

Mr. Warricombe was coming towards them. He brought a new subject of conversation, and as they talked the trio drew near to the gate which led into the road. The afternoon postman was just entering; Mr. Warricombe took from him two letters.

'One for you, Sylvia, and—one for you, Sidwell.'

A slight change in his voice caused Sidwell to look at her father as he handed her the letter. In the same moment she recognised the writing of the address. It was Godwin Peak's, and undoubtedly her father knew it.

With a momentary hesitation Mr. Warricombe continued his talk from the point at which he had broken off, but he avoided his daughter's look, and Sidwell was too well aware of an uneasiness which had fallen upon him. In a few minutes he brought the chat to an end, and walked away towards the house.

Sidwell held her letter tightly. Conversation was no longer possible for her; she had a painful throbbing of the heart, and felt that her face must be playing traitor. Fortunately, Sylvia found it necessary to write a reply to the missive she had received, and her companion was soon at liberty to seek solitude.

For more than an hour she remained alone. However unemotional the contents of the letter, its arrival would have perturbed her seriously, as in the two previous instances; what she found on opening the envelope threw her into so extreme an agitation that it was long before she could subdue the anguish of

disorder in all her senses. She had tried to believe that Godwin Peak was henceforth powerless to affect her in this way, write what he would. The romance of her life was over; time had brought the solution of difficulties to which she looked forward; she recognised the inevitable, as doubtless did Godwin also. But all this was self-deception. The passionate letter delighted as much as it tortured her; in secret her heart had desired this, though reason suppressed and denied the hope. No longer need she remember with pangs of shame the last letter she had written, and the cold response; once again things were as they should be—the lover pleading before her—she with the control of his fate. The injury to her pride was healed, and in the thought that perforce she must answer with a final ‘No,’ she found at first more of solace than of distress.

Subsidence of physical suffering allowed her to forget this emotion, in its nature unavowable. She could think of the news Godwin sent, could torment herself with interpretations of Marcella Moxey’s behaviour, and view in detail the circumstances which enabled Godwin to urge a formal suit. Among her various thoughts there recurred frequently a regret that this letter had not reached her, like the other two, unobserved. Her father had now learnt that she was in correspondence with the disgraced man; to keep silence would be to cause him grave trouble; yet how much better if fortune had only once more favoured her, so that the story might have remained her secret, from beginning to end.

For was not this the end?—

At the usual time she went to the drawing-room, and somehow succeeded in conversing as though nothing had disturbed her. Mr. Warricombe was not seen till dinner. When he came forth, Sidwell noticed his air of preoccupation, and that he avoided addressing her. The evening asked too much of her self-command; she again withdrew, and only came back when the household

was ready for retiring. In bidding her father good-night, she forced herself to meet his gaze ; he looked at her with troubled inquiry, and she felt her cheek redden.

'Do you want to get rid of me?' asked Sylvia, with wonted frankness, when her friend drew near.

'No. Let us go to the glass-house.'

Up there on the roof Sidwell often found a retreat when her thoughts were troublesome. Fitfully, she had resumed her water-colour drawing, but as a rule her withdrawal to the glass-house was for reading or reverie. Carrying a small lamp, she led the way before Sylvia, and they sat down in the chairs which on one occasion had been occupied by Buckland Warricombe and Peak.

The wind, rarely silent in this part of Devon, blew boisterously from the south-west. A far-off whistle, that of a train speeding up the valley on its way from Plymouth, heightened the sense of retirement and quietude always to be enjoyed at night here under the stars.

'Have you been thinking over my suggestion?' asked Sylvia, when there had been silence awhile.

'No,' was the murmured reply.

'Something has happened, I think.'

'Yes. I should like to tell you, Sylvia, but'——

'But'——

'I *must* tell you! I can't keep it in my own mind, and you are the only one'——

Sylvia was surprised at the agitation which suddenly revealed itself in her companion's look and voice. She became serious, her eyes brightening with intellectual curiosity. Feminine expressions of sympathy were not to be expected from Miss Moorhouse; far more reassuring to Sidwell was the kind attentiveness with which her friend bent forward.

'That letter father handed me to-day was from Mr. Peak.'

'You hear from him?'

'This is the third time—since he went away. At our last meeting'—her voice dropped—'I pledged my faith to him.—Not absolutely. The future was too uncertain'—

The gleam in Sylvia's eyes grew more vivid. She was profoundly interested, and did not speak when Sidwell's voice failed.

'You never suspected this?' asked the latter, in a few moments.

'Not exactly that. What I did suspect was that Mr. Peak's departure resulted from—your rejection of him.'

'There is more to be told,' pursued Sidwell, in tremulous accents. 'You must know it all—because I need your help. No one here has learnt what took place between us. Mr. Peak did not go away on that account. But—you remember being puzzled to explain his orthodoxy in religion?'

She paused. Sylvia gave a nod, signifying much.

'He never believed as he professed,' went on Sidwell, hurriedly. 'You were justified in doubting him. He concealed the truth—pretended to champion the old faiths'—

For an instant she broke off, then hastened through a description of the circumstances which had brought about Peak's discovery. Sylvia could not restrain a smile, but it was softened by the sincere kindness of her feeling.

'And it was after this,' she inquired impartially, 'that the decisive conversation between you took place?'

'No; just before Buckland's announcement. We met again, after that.—Does it seem incredible to you that I should have let the second meeting end as it did?'

'I think I understand. Yes, I know you well enough to follow it. I can even guess at the defence he was able to urge.'

'You can?' asked Sidwell, eagerly. 'You see a possibility of his defending himself?'

'I should conjecture that it amounted to the old proverb, "All's fair in love and war." And, putting aside a few moral prejudices, one can easily enough absolve him.—The fact is, I had long ago surmised that his motives in taking to such a career had more reference to this world than the next. You know, I had several long talks with him; I told you how he interested me. Now I can piece together my conclusions.'

'Still,' urged Sidwell, 'you must inevitably regard him as ignoble—as guilty of base deceit. I must hide nothing from you, having told so much. Have you heard from anyone about his early life?'

'Your mother told me some old stories.'

Sidwell made an impatient gesture. In words of force and ardour, such as never before had been at her command, she related all she knew of Godwin's history prior to his settling at Exeter, and depicted the mood, the impulses, which, by his own confession, had led to that strange enterprise. Only by long exercise of an impassioned imagination could she thus thoroughly have identified herself with a life so remote from her own. Peak's pleading for himself was scarcely more impressive. In listening, Sylvia understood how completely Sidwell had cast off the beliefs for which her ordinary conversation seemed still to betray a tenderness.

'I know,' the speaker concluded, 'that he cannot in that first hour have come to regard me with a feeling strong enough to determine what he then undertook. It was not I as an individual, but all of us here, and the world we represented. Afterwards, he persuaded himself that he had felt love for me from the beginning. And I, I tried to believe it—because I wished it true; for his sake, and for my own. However it was, I could not harden my heart against him. A thousand considera-

tions forbade me to allow him further hope ; but I refused to listen—no, I *could* not listen. I said I would remain true to him. He went away to take up his old pursuits, and if possible to make a position for himself. It was to be our secret. And in spite of everything, I hoped for the future.'

Silence followed, and Sidwell seemed to lose herself in distressful thought.

'And now,' asked her friend, 'what has come to pass?'

'Do you know that Miss Moxey is dead?'

'I haven't heard of it.'

'She is dead, and has left Mr. Peak a fortune.—His letter of to-day tells me this. And at the same time he claims my promise.'

Their eyes met. Sylvia still had the air of meditating a most interesting problem. Impossible to decide from her countenance how she regarded Sidwell's position.

'But why in the world,' she asked, 'should Marcella Moxey have left her money to Mr. Peak?'

'They were friends,' was the quick reply. 'She knew all that had befallen him, and wished to smooth his path.'

Sylvia put several more questions, and to all of them Sidwell replied with a peculiar decision, as though bent on making it clear that there was nothing remarkable in this fact of the bequest. The motive which impelled her was obscure even to her own mind, for ever since receiving the letter she had suffered harassing doubts where now she affected to have none.

'She knew, then,' was Sylvia's last inquiry, 'of the relations between you and Mr. Peak?'

'I am not sure—but I think so. Yes, I think she must have known.'

'From Mr. Peak himself, then?'

Sidwell was agitated.

'Yes—I think so. But what does that matter?'

The other allowed her face to betray perplexity.

'So much for the past,' she said at length. 'And now?'—

'I have not the courage to do what I wish.'

There was a long silence.

'About your wish,' asked Sylvia at length, 'you are not at all doubtful?'

'Not for one moment.—Whether I err in my judgment of him could be proved only by time; but I know that if I were free, if I stood alone'—

She broke off and sighed.

'It would mean, I suppose,' said the other, 'a rupture with your family?'

'Father would not abandon me, but I should darken the close of his life. Buckland would utterly cast me off; mother would wish to do so.—You see, I cannot think and act simply as a woman, as a human being. I am bound to a certain sphere of life. The fact that I have outgrown it, counts for nothing. I cannot free myself without injury to people whom I love. To act as I wish would be to outrage every rule and prejudice of the society to which I belong. You yourself—you know how you would regard me.'

Sylvia replied deliberately.

'I am seeing you in a new light, Sidwell. It takes a little time to reconstruct my conception of you.'

'You think worse of me than you did.'

'Neither better nor worse, but differently. There has been too much reserve between us. After so long a friendship, I ought to have known you more thoroughly. To tell the truth, I have thought now and then of you and Mr. Peak; that was inevitable. But I went astray; it seemed to me the most unlikely thing that you should regard him with more than a doubtful interest. I knew, of course, that he had made you his ideal, and I felt sorry for him.'

'I seemed to you unworthy?'—



'Too placid, too calmly prudent.—In plain words, Sidwell, I do think better of you.'

Sidwell smiled.

'Only to know me henceforth as the woman who did not dare to act upon her best impulses.'

'As for "best"—I can't say. I don't glorify passion, as you know; and on the other hand I have little sympathy with the people who are always crying out for self-sacrifice. I don't know whether it would be "best" to throw over your family, or to direct yourself solely with regard to their comfort.'

Sidwell broke in.

'Yes, that is the true phrase—"their comfort." No higher word should be used. That is the ideal of the life to which I have been brought up. Comfort, respectability.—And has *he* no right? If I sacrifice myself to father and mother, do I not sacrifice *him* as well? He has forfeited all claim to consideration—that is what people say. With my whole soul, I deny it! If he sinned against anyone, it was against me, and the sin ended as soon as I understood him. That episode in his life is blotted out; by what law must it condemn to imperfection the whole of his life and of my own? Yet because people will not, cannot, look at a thing in a spirit of justice, I must wrong myself and him.'

'Let us think of it more quietly,' said Sylvia, in her clear, dispassionate tones. 'You speak as though a decision must be taken at once. Where is the necessity for that? Mr. Peak is now independent. Suppose a year or two be allowed to pass, may not things look differently?'

'A year or two!' exclaimed Sidwell, with impatience. 'Nothing will be changed. What I have to contend against is unchangeable. If I guide myself by such a hope as that, the only reasonable thing would be for me to write to Mr. Peak, and ask him to wait until my father and mother are dead.'

'Very well. On that point we are at rest, then. The step must be taken at once, or never.'

The wind roared, and for some minutes no other sound was audible. By this, all the inmates of the house save the two friends were in bed, and most likely sleeping.

'You must think it strange,' said Sidwell, 'that I have chosen to tell you all this, just when the confession is most humiliating to me. I want to feel the humiliation, as one only can when another is witness of it. I wish to leave myself no excuse for the future.'

'I'm not sure that I quite understand you. You have made up your mind to break with him?'

'Because I am a coward.'

'If my feeling in any matter were as strong as that, I should allow it to guide me.'

'Because your will is stronger. You, Sylvia, would never (in my position) have granted him that second interview. You would have known that all was at an end, and have acted upon the knowledge. I knew it, but yielded to temptation—at *his* expense. I could not let him leave me, though that would have been kindest. I held him by a promise, basely conscious that retreat was always open to me. And now I shall have earned his contempt'—

Her voice failed. Sylvia, affected by the outbreak of emotion in one whom she had always known so strong in self-command, spoke with a deeper earnestness.

'Dear, do you wish me to help you against what you call your cowardice? I cannot take it upon me to encourage you until your own will has spoken. The decision must come from yourself. Choose what course you may, I am still your friend. I have no idle prejudices, and no social bonds. You know how I wish you to come away with me; now I see only more clearly how needful it is for you to breathe new air. Yes, you have outgrown these conditions, just as your brothers have, just as Fanny will—indeed has. Take to-night

to think of it. If you can decide to travel with me for a year, be frank with Mr. Peak, and ask him to wait so long—till you have made up your mind. He cannot reasonably find fault with you, for he knows all you have to consider. Won't this be best ?'

Sidwell was long silent.

'I will go with you,' she said at last, in a low voice. 'I will ask him to grant me perfect liberty for a year.'

When she came down next morning it was Sidwell's intention to seek a private interview with her father, and make known her resolve to go abroad with Sylvia ; but Mr. Warricombe anticipated her.

'Will you come to the library after breakfast, Sidwell ?' he said, on meeting her in the hall.

She interpreted his tone, and her heart misgave her. An hour later she obeyed the summons. Martin greeted her with a smile, but hardly tried to appear at ease.

'I am obliged to speak to you,' were his first words. 'The letter you had yesterday was from Mr. Peak ?'

'Yes, father.'

'Is he'—Mr. Warricombe hesitated—'in these parts again ?'

'No ; in Lancashire.'

'Sidwell, I claim no right whatever to control your correspondence ; but it was a shock to me to find that you are in communication with him.'

'He wrote,' Sidwell replied with difficulty, 'to let me know of a change that has come upon his prospects. By the death of a friend, he is made independent.'

'For his own sake, I am glad to hear that. But how could it concern *you*, dear ?'

She struggled to command herself.

'It was at my invitation that he wrote, father.'

Martin's face expressed grave concern.

'Sidwell ! Is this right ?'

She was very pale, and kept her eyes unmovingly directed just aside from her father.

'What can it mean?' Mr. Warricombe pursued, with sad remonstrance. 'Will you not take me into your confidence, Sidwell?'

'I can't speak of it,' she replied, with sudden determination. 'Least of all with you, father.'

'Least of all?—I thought we were very near to each other.'

'For that very reason, I can't speak to you of this. I *must* be left free! I am going away with Sylvia, for a year, and for so long I must be absolutely independent. Father, I entreat you not to'—

A sob checked her. She turned away, and fought against the hysterical tendency; but it was too strong to be controlled. Her father approached, beseeching her to be more like herself. He held her in his arms, until tears had their free course, and a measure of calmness returned.

'I can't speak to you about it,' she repeated, her face hidden from him. 'I must write you a long letter, when I have gone. You shall know everything in that way.'

'But, my dearest, I can't let you leave us under these circumstances. This is a terrible trial to me. You cannot possibly go until we understand each other!'

'Then I will write to you here—to-day or to-morrow.'

With this promise Martin was obliged to be contented. Sidwell left him, and was not seen, except by Sylvia, during the whole day.

Nor did she appear at breakfast on the morning that followed. But when this meal was over, Sylvia received a message, summoning her to the retreat on the top of the house. Here Sidwell sat in the light and warmth, a glass door wide open to the west, the rays of a brilliant sun softened by curtains which fluttered lightly in the breeze from the sea.

'Will you read this?' she said, holding out a sheet of

notepaper on which were a few lines in her own handwriting.

It was a letter, beginning—‘I cannot.’

Sylvia perused it carefully, and stood in thought.

‘After all?’ were the words with which she broke silence. They were neither reproachful nor regretful, but expressed grave interest.

‘In the night,’ said Sidwell, ‘I wrote to father, but I shall not give him the letter. Before it was finished, I knew that I must write *this*. There’s no more to be said, dear. You will go abroad without me—at all events for the present.’

‘If that is your resolve,’ answered the other, quietly, ‘I shall keep my word, and only do what I can to aid it.’ She sat down shielding her eyes from the sunlight with a Japanese fan. ‘After all, Sidwell, there’s much to be said for a purpose formed on such a morning as this; one can’t help distrusting the midnight.’

Sidwell was lying back in a low chair, her eyes turned to the woody hills on the far side of the Exe.

‘There’s one thing I should like to say,’ her friend pursued. ‘It struck me as curious that you were not at all affected, by what to me would have been the one insuperable difficulty.’

‘I know what you mean—the legacy.’

‘Yes. It still seems to you of no significance?’

‘Of very little,’ Sidwell answered wearily, letting her eyelids droop.

‘Then we won’t talk about it. From the higher point of view, I believe you are right; but—still let it rest.’

In the afternoon, Sidwell penned the following lines which she enclosed in an envelope and placed on the study table, when her father was absent.

‘The long letter which I promised you, dear father, is needless. I have to-day sent Mr. Peak a reply which

closes our correspondence. I am sure he will not write again ; if he were to do so, I should not answer.

'I have given up my intention of going away with Sylvia. Later, perhaps, I shall wish to join her somewhere on the Continent, but by that time you will be in no concern about me.'

To this Mr. Warricombe replied only with the joyous smile which greeted his daughter at their next meeting. Mrs. Warricombe remained in ignorance of the ominous shadow which had passed over her house. At present, she was greatly interested in the coming marriage of the Rev. Bruno Chilvers, whom she tried *not* to forgive for having disappointed her secret hope.

Martin had finally driven into the background those uneasy questionings, which at one time it seemed likely that Godwin Peak would rather accentuate than silence. With Sidwell, he could never again touch on such topics. If he were still conscious of a postponed debate, the adjournment was *sine die*. Martin rested in the faith that, without effort of his own, the mysteries of life and time would ere long be revealed to him.

### III

EARWAKER spent Christmas with his relatives at Kingsmill. His father and mother both lived; the latter very infirm, unable to leave the house; the former a man of seventy, twisted with rheumatism, his face rugged as a countenance picked out by fancy on the trunk of a big old oak, his hands scarred and deformed with labour. Their old age was restful. The son who had made himself a 'gentleman,' and who in London sat at the tables of the high-born, the wealthy, the famous, saw to it that they lacked no comfort.

A bright, dry morning invited the old man and the young to go forth together. They walked from the suburb countrywards, and their conversation was of the time when a struggle was being made to bear the expense of those three years at Whitelaw—no bad investment, as it proved. The father spoke with a strong Midland accent, using words of dialect by no means disagreeable to the son's ear—for dialect is a very different thing from the bestial jargon which on the lips of the London vulgar passes for English. They were laughing over some half grim reminiscence, when Earwaker became aware of two people who were approaching along the pavement, they also in merry talk. One of them he knew; it was Christian Moxey.

Too much interested in his companion to gaze about him, Christian came quite near before his eyes fell on Earwaker. Then he started with a pleasant surprise,

changed instantly to something like embarrassment when he observed the aged man. Earwaker was willing to smile and go by, had the other consented; but a better impulse prevailed in both. They stopped and struck hands together.

'My father,' said the man of letters, quite at his ease.

Christian was equal to the occasion; he shook hands heartily with the battered toiler, then turned to the lady at his side.

'Janet, you guess who this is.—My cousin, Earwaker, Miss Janet Moxey.'

Doubtless Janet was aware that her praises had suffered no diminution when sung by Christian to his friends. Her eyes just fell, but in a moment were ready with their frank, intelligent smile. Earwaker experienced a pang—ever so slight—suggesting a revision of his philosophy.

They talked genially, and parted with good wishes for the New Year.

Two days later, on reaching home, Earwaker found in his letter-box a scrap of paper on which were scribbled a few barely legible lines. 'Here I am!' he at length deciphered. 'Got into Tilbury at eleven this morning. Where the devil are you? Write to Charing Cross Hotel.' No signature, but none was needed. Malkin's return from New Zealand had been signalled in advance.

That evening the erratic gentleman burst in like a whirlwind. He was the picture of health, though as far as ever from enduing the comfortable flesh which accompanies robustness in men of calmer temperament. After violent greetings, he sat down with abrupt gravity, and began to talk as if in continuance of a dialogue just interrupted.

'Now, don't let us have any misunderstanding. You will please remember that my journey to England is quite independent of what took place two years and a



half ago. It has *nothing whatever* to do with those circumstances.'

Earwaker smiled.

'I tell you,' pursued the other, hotly, 'that I am here to see *you*—and one or two other old friends; and to look after some business matters. You will oblige me by giving credit to my assertion!'

'Don't get angry. I am convinced of the truth of what you say.'

'Very well! It's as likely as not that, on returning to Auckland, I shall marry Miss Maccabe—of whom I have written to you. I needn't repeat the substance of my letters. I am not in love with her, you understand, and I needn't say that my intercourse with that family has been guided by extreme discretion. But she is a very sensible young lady. My only regret is that I didn't know her half-a-dozen years ago, so that I could have directed her education. She might have been even more interesting than she is. But—you are at leisure, I hope, Earwaker?'

'For an hour or two.'

'Oh, confound it! When a friend comes back from the ends of the earth!—Yes, yes; I understand. You are a busy man; forgive my hastiness. Well now, I was going to say that I shall probably call upon Mrs. Jacox.' He paused, and gave the listener a stern look, forbidding misconstruction. 'Yes, I shall probably go down to Wrotham. I wish to put my relations with that family on a proper footing. Our correspondence has been very satisfactory, especially of late. The poor woman laments more sincerely her—well, let us say, her folly of two years and a half ago. She has outlived it; she regards me as a friend. Bella and Lily seem to be getting on very well indeed. That governess of theirs—we won't have any more mystery; it was I who undertook the trifling expense. A really excellent teacher, I have every reason to believe, I am told that Bella promises to be a re-

markable pianist, and Lily is uncommonly strong in languages. But my interest in them is merely that of a friend ; let it be understood.'

'Precisely. You didn't say whether the girls have been writing to you?'

'No, no, no! Not a line. I have exchanged letters only with their mother. Anything else would have been indiscreet. I shall be glad to see them, but my old schemes are things of the past. There is not the faintest probability that Bella has retained any recollection of me at all.'

'I daresay not,' assented Earwaker.

'You think so? Very well; I have acted wisely. Bella is still a child, you know—compared with a man of my age. She is seventeen and a few months; quite a child! Miss Maccabe is just one-and-twenty; the proper age. When we are married, I think I shall bring her to Europe for a year or two. Her education needs that: she will be delighted to see the old countries.'

'Have you her portrait?'

'Oh no! Things haven't got so far as that. What a hasty fellow you are, Earwaker! I told you distinctly'—

He talked till after midnight, and at leave-taking apologised profusely for wasting his friend's valuable time.

Earwaker awaited with some apprehension the result of Malkin's visit to Wrotham. But the report of what took place on that occasion was surprisingly commonplace. Weeks passed, and Malkin seldom showed himself at Staple Inn; when he did so, his talk was exclusively of Miss Maccabe; all he could be got to say of the young ladies at Wrotham was, 'Nice girls; very nice girls. I hope they'll marry well.' Two months had gone by, and already the journalist had heard by letter of his friend's intention to return to New Zealand, when, on coming home late one night, he found Malkin sitting on the steps.

'Earwaker, I have something very serious to tell you. Give me just a quarter of an hour.'

What calamity did this tone portend? The eccentric man seated himself with slow movement. Seen by a good light, his face was not gloomy, but very grave.

'Listen to me, old friend,' he began, sliding forward to the edge of his chair. 'You remember I told you that my relations with the Maccabe family had been marked throughout with extreme discretion.'

'You impressed that upon me.'

'Good! I have never made love to Miss Maccabe, and I doubt whether she has ever thought of me as a possible husband.'

'Well?'

'Don't be impatient. I want you to grasp the fact. It is important, because—I am going to marry Bella Jacox.'

'You don't say so?'

'Why not?' cried Malkin, suddenly passing to a state of excitement. 'What objection can you make? I tell you that I am absolutely free to choose'—

The journalist calmed him, and thereupon had to hear a glowing account of Bella's perfections. All the feeling that Malkin had suppressed during these two months rushed forth in a flood of turbid eloquence.

'And now,' he concluded, 'you will come down with me to Wrotham. I don't mean to-night; let us say the day after to-morrow, Sunday. You remember our last joint visit! Ha, ha!'

'Mrs. Jacox is reconciled?'

'My dear fellow, she rejoices! A wonderful nobility in that poor little woman! She wept upon my shoulder! But you must see Bella! I shan't take her to New Zealand, at all events not just yet. We shall travel about Europe, completing her education. Don't you approve of that?'

On Sunday, the two travelled down into Kent. This

time they were received by Lily, now a pretty, pale, half-developed girl of fifteen. In a few minutes her sister entered. Bella was charming; nervousness made her words few, and it could be seen that she was naturally thoughtful, earnest, prone to reverie; her beauty had still to ripen, and gave much promise for the years between twenty and thirty. Last of all appeared Mrs. Jacox, who blushed as she shook hands with Earwaker, and for a time was ill at ease; but her vocatives were not long restrained, and when all sat down to the tea-table she chattered away with astonishing vivacity. After tea the company was joined by a lady of middle age, who, for about two years, had acted as governess to the girls. Earwaker formed his conclusions as to the 'trifling expense' which her services represented; but it was probably a real interest in her pupils which had induced a person of so much refinement to bear so long with the proximity of Mrs. Jacox.

'A natural question occurs to me,' remarked Earwaker, as they were returning. 'Who and what was *Mr. Jacox*?'

'Ah! Bella was talking to me about him the other day. He must have been distinctly an interesting man. Bella had a very clear recollection of him, and she showed me two or three photographs. Engaged in some kind of commerce. I didn't seek particulars. But a remarkable man, one can't doubt.'

He resumed presently.

'Now don't suppose that this marriage entirely satisfies me. Bella has been fairly well taught, but not, you see, under my supervision. I ought to have been able to watch and direct her month by month. As it is, I shall have to begin by assailing her views on all manner of things. Religion, for example. Well, I have no religion, that's plain. I might call myself this or that for the sake of seeming respectable, but it all comes to the same thing. I don't mind Bella going to church if she

wishes, but I must teach her that there's no merit whatever in doing so. It isn't an ideal marriage, but perhaps as good as this imperfect world allows. If I have children, I can then put my educational theories to the test.'

By way of novel experience, Earwaker, not long after this, converted his study into a drawing-room, and invited the Jacox family to taste his tea and cake. With Malkin's assistance, the risky enterprise was made a great success. When Mrs. Jacox would allow her to be heard, Bella talked intelligently, and showed eager interest in the details of literary manufacture.

'O Mr. Earwaker!' cried her mother, when it was time to go. 'What a delightful afternoon you have given us! We must think of you from now as one of our very best friends. Mustn't we, Lily?'

But troubles were yet in store. Malkin was strongly opposed to a religious marriage; he wished the wedding to be at a registrar's office, and had obtained Bella's consent to this, but Mrs. Jacox would not hear of such a thing. She wept and bewailed herself. 'How *can* you think of being married like a costermonger? O Mr. Malkin, you will break my heart, indeed you will!' And she wrote an ejaculatory letter to Earwaker, imploring his intercession. The journalist took his friend in hand.

'My good fellow, don't make a fool of yourself. Women are born for one thing only, the Church of England marriage service. How can you seek to defeat the end of their existence? Give in to the inevitable. Grin and bear it.'

'I can't! I won't. It shall be a runaway match! I had rather suffer the rack than go through an ordinary wedding!'

Dire was the conflict. Down at Wrotham there were floods of tears. In the end, Bella effected a compromise; the marriage was to be at a church, but in the greatest possible privacy. No carriages, no gala dresses,

no invitations, no wedding feast ; the bare indispensable formalities. And so it came to pass. Earwaker and the girl's governess were the only strangers present, when, on a morning of June, Malkin and Bella were declared by the Church to be henceforth one and indivisible. The bride wore a graceful travelling costume ; the bridegroom was in corresponding attire.

'Heaven be thanked, that's over !' exclaimed Malkin, as he issued from the portal. 'Bella, we have twenty-three minutes to get to the railway station. Don't cry !' he whispered to her. 'I can't stand that !'

'No, no ; don't be afraid,' she whispered back. 'We have said good-bye already.'

'Capital ! That was very thoughtful of you.—Good-bye, all ! Shall write from Paris, Earwaker. Nineteen minutes ; we shall just manage it !'

He sprang into the cab, and away it clattered.

A letter from Paris, a letter from Strasburg, from Berlin, Munich—letters about once a fortnight. From Bella also came an occasional note, a pretty contrast to the incoherent enthusiasm of her husband's compositions. Midway in September she announced their departure from a retreat in Switzerland.

'We are in the utmost excitement, for it is now decided that in three days we start for Italy ! The heat has been terrific, and we have waited on what seems to me the threshold of Paradise until we could hope to enjoy the delights beyond. We go first to Milan. My husband, of course, knows Italy, but he shares my impatience. I am to entreat you to write to Milan, with as much news as possible. Especially have you heard anything more of Mr. Peak ?'

November the pair spent in Rome, and thence was despatched the following in Malkin's hand :

'This time I am *not* mistaken ! I have seen Peak. He didn't see me ; perhaps wouldn't have known me.

It was in Piale's reading-room. I had sat down to *The Times*, when a voice behind me sounded in such a curiously reminding way that I couldn't help looking round. It was Peak; not a doubt of it. I might have been uncertain about his face, but the voice brought back that conversation at your rooms too, unmistakably—long ago as it was. He was talking to an American, whom evidently he had met somewhere else, and had now recognised. "I've had a fever," he said, "and can't quite shake off the results. Been in Ischia for the last month. I'm going north to Vienna." Then the two walked away together. He looked ill, sallow, worn out. Let me know if you hear.'

On that same day Earwaker received another letter, with the Roman post-mark. It was from Peak.

'I have had nothing particular to tell you. A month ago I thought I should never write to you again; I got malarial fever, and lay desperately ill at the *Ospedale Internazionale* at Naples. It came of some monstrous follies there's no need to speak of. A new and valuable experience. I know what it is to look steadily into the eyes of Death.

'Even now, I am far from well. This keeps me in low spirits. The other day I was half decided to start for London. I am miserably alone, want to see a friend. What a glorious place Staple Inn seemed to me as I lay in the hospital! Proof how low I had sunk: I thought longingly of Exeter, of a certain house there—never mind!

'I write hastily. An invitation from some musical people has decided me to strike for Vienna. Up there, I shall get my health back. The people are of no account—boarding-house acquaintances—but they may lead to better. I never in my life suffered so from loneliness.'

This was the eighteenth of November. On the twenty-eighth the postman delivered a letter of an appearance which puzzled Earwaker. The stamp was Austrian, the mark 'Wien.' From Peak, therefore. But the writing was unknown, plainly that of a foreigner.

The envelope contained two sheets of paper. The one was covered with a long communication in German; on the other stood a few words of English, written, or rather scrawled, in a hand there was no recognising:

'Ill again, and alone. If I die, act for me. Write to Mrs. Peak, Twybridge.'

Beneath was added, 'J. E. Earwaker, Staple Inn, London.'

He turned hurriedly to the foreign writing. Earwaker read a German book as easily as an English, but German manuscript was a terror to him. And the present correspondent wrote so execrably that beyond *Geehrter Herr*, scarcely a word yielded sense to his anxious eyes. Ha! One he had made out—*gestorben*.

Crumpling the papers into his pocket, he hastened out, and knocked at the door of an acquaintance in another part of the Inn. This was a man who had probably more skill in German cursive. Between them, they extracted the essence of the letter.

He who wrote was the landlord of an hotel in Vienna. He reported that an English gentleman, named Peak, just arrived from Italy, had taken a bedroom at that house. In the night, the stranger became very ill, sent for a doctor, and wrote the lines enclosed, the purport whereof he at the same time explained to his attendants. On the second day Mr. Peak died. Among his effects were found circular notes, and a sum of loose money. The body was about to be interred. Probably Mr. Earwaker would receive official communications, as the



British consul had been informed of the matter. To whom should *bills* be sent ?

The man of letters walked slowly back to his own abode.

'Dead, too, in exile!' was his thought. 'Poor old fellow!'

THE END.

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