CHAPTER XXXIII

The expedition to Luxor and Karnak was inaugurated with due pomp and circumstance, as the last bit of Nile travel that was likely to be enjoyed for many and many a day. In preparation for their Hegira across the desert, as Isabel insisted on calling it, nothing but the Arab steed would satisfy her aspirations. All the horses of any beauty or value in the adjoining village were requisitioned. A most imposing cavalcade careered across the plain of the Thebaid as day broke, for they had determined to commence by beholding the statue of Memnon at sunrise, so as to verify the well-known legend of his vocal power at the first beam of the sun.

Allerton and Isabel rode at the head of the party, immediately behind the Arab guide, her horse, a noble bay with a star, being the handsomest of the whole troop. She rode Eastern fashion, with wide Turkish trousers; a shawl which fell evenly on either side from her waist gave the outward semblance of the ordinary English riding-habit. Behind them came the Honourable Bertie with Marguerite, who handled her grey Arab in a way which excited the admiration of her companion.

Mr. Baldhill and Sir John brought up the rear, neither Mrs. Baldhill nor Marie being minded to increase their acquaintance with ruins; the former lady having acquired, she averred, a sufficient knowledge of temples and tombs generally to last her for the remainder of her life. "The next thing I want to see, my dear," she confided to Marguerite, "is a well-built two-storey house, and my room with a four-post bedstead and mosquito curtains. That's what I look forward to now, and value above all the ruins in the world."

"Here are the two gigantic statues of the Kings, Tama and Chama," said Allerton, as they reined up before the colossi, about twenty yards apart. "Sitting alone amid this wide sea of verdure, they keep watch
over the mysteries of the past. 'There they sit,' says Miss Martineau, 'hands on knees, gazing straight forward, seeming to be looking over to the monumental piles on the other side of the river, which became gorgeous temples after these throne-seats were placed there—the most immovable thrones that have ever been established on this earth.'"

"And which is Memnon?" said Isabel.

"The northerly one. He has been greatly knocked about either by Cambyses, the old ruffian, or as Strabo reports, and the Prophet Ezekiel foretold, by an earthquake; 'No shall be rent asunder.'"

"The sun will rise in five minutes over the Arabian mountains," said Isabel. "Now we shall know whether 'a sweet melancholy cadence like an Æolian harp' will issue from him. Keble says:—

's Soft as Memnon's harp at morning
Touched with light by heavenly warning.'

The Greeks called it Memnon's welcome to his mother, Aurora."

The fated moment referred to in chronicle of dimmest eld was about to arrive. All sat silently on their horses, expectant, almost solemn. In a second the golden rim of the sun's globe was raised as by an invisible hand slowly over the far purple range. All looked to the grim, solemn giant; then shouted aloud in irrepressible reaction from their previous calm. "But there was no voice, nor any that answered."

"The oracles are dumb," said Allerton. "The priests in old days may have arranged matters more successfully—or possibly the sound may have been due to purely natural mechanism."

"I feel disappointed," said Isabel; "after all our early rising too! But I suppose after going on for three thousand years or so the poor thing got discouraged. Besides, his chest seems to have gone, and to have been built up."

"He fell down in 70 B.C., and had to be built up altogether," said Allerton. "It is said there were eighteen similar statues, which extended to the palace
of Ammon. In time of inundation they must have had an imposing appearance, standing fifty feet above the ordinary level as they do. The pedestals are seven feet deep in the sand. Memnon's arm measures seventeen feet nine inches from the elbow to the hand; from the knee to the foot nineteen feet eight inches. The foot is nearly ten feet long, as indeed a certain size would be necessary for his support.”

“‘As we are not likely to hear anything from Memnon,” said Isabel, “we must bid farewell to him, and had better make the best of our time in looking over this said plain of Thebes, the hundred-gated. Who was it said that?’”

“Homer, if I mistake not, speaks of—

‘Royal Thebes—
Egyptian treasure-house of boundless wealth,
That boasts her hundred gates, through each of which
With horse and car two hundred warriors march,’”

said Allerton. “It seems curious to think that this place was populous, wealthy, and celebrated a thousand years before the Greeks assembled in siege before the walls of Troy.”

An early breakfast—a “chotah hazree,” as the Indian travellers called it—had been partaken of before they left their encampment. The sun was high when they had partially explored the Thebaid and were in a manner surfeited with avenues of ram-headed gods, of sphinxes, miles of columns, acres of temples. At Luxor they had wandered through the labyrinth of immense courts magnificently decorated—the innumerable pillars that everywhere reared their richly-carved capitals; the superb colonnades that surround the courts, presenting forms of grandeur before which all human architecture except Karnak dwarfs into insignificance. Columns lay strewn about in such profusion that Aladdin's Genii might have despaired of creating them, yet they measured six-and-thirty feet in circumference, and gleamed, like a cathedral's painted window, with every colour of the rainbow, bright and vivid as if the sun shone through them.
They had wandered through the hall of the Memnonium, as the palace and temple of Sesostris is called. Within it was the library. The ceiling is covered with astronomical figures, which make the date of the building 1322 B.C. A statue of Sesostris lies without the temple, in the position which he has occupied since Cambyses overthrew him. The upper part of his body is broken into vast fragments. The breadth of the enormous figure across the chest is twenty-three feet. The whole was cut from one single block of granite, and polished like marble.

Care had been taken to arrange that luncheon should await them when they had finished their morning's work. Ibrahim had sent a couple of the Arab boatmen with a laden camel and a guide, who, expectant of backsheesh, managed to hit upon a very suitable place for their symposium.

A moderate-sized, but beautifully ornate hypaethral temple, dedicated to one of the numerous family of "Pashts" or sacred cats, made a tempting dining-room—the smooth granite slabs of the floor; the massive walls between them and the sloping sun-rays; the overhanging date-palms, which waved and rustled to the faint, fitful breeze; the picketed horses, which "a man clad in a flowing garb did watch the while"—all these purely Arabic adjuncts of easternry made a picture which the travellers long remembered.

"What a most wavishing place faw ah picnic," said the Honourable, stretching himself luxuriously upon a rug which had formed part of the camel garniture. "Heah one has evewything to gwatify the most epicu-wean taste. Society in the midst of solitude, palaces in pwofusion, cold game pie, and—ah—bittah beah."

This last indispensable fluid, so grateful to the British palate in all lands, had been supplied by the speaker and his comrade, it being the only thing, thanks to a most liberal supply at Cairo, that they had not run out of when they joined forces with Mr. Baldhill.

"We are looking our last, I suppose," said Marguerite, "upon these 'kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them.' All in the past tense, as it seems they are, I shall always be thankful for having had the
privilege of seeing them before I die. No amount of imagination could have presented them to one's mind."

"Nothing like them in the world, I suppose," said Danvers, "and certainly nothing will ever be constructed like them again. One can almost imagine that they were the work of pre-Adamite giants. However did these weeds of Egyptians move blocks weighing hundreds of tons in so many different ways?"

"They may have had mechanical advantages that we know nothing of," said Allerton. "Did you notice the broken statue in the Ramesseion? It must have weighed nearly 900 tons. It is made from Syene granite, and now lies hundreds of miles from its pristine quarry."

"Things that no fellah can undahstand," said the Honourable Bertie. "I give it up. Must wead up on shipboard. Feah I'm painfully ignowant of ancient Egypt."

"We shall all know enough about it when we get to Kosseir," said Isabel. "I feel as if I had lived here all my life. Except Lady Duff Gordon and one or two others, I shall give way to no one on the Nile question generally. I wonder how much longer we shall have to wait for news of Omar and his party?" she continued. "We had better devote to-morrow to Karnak, and who knows whether we may have much more time? It is one of those things in this world that rarely come twice."

"All things considered, we have done a pretty good day's work," said Allerton. "I vote that we ride quietly home and prepare for a full, final, and complete exploration to-morrow. I suppose the Sheik will lend us the horses again. We shall need a little practice for the Hegira."

"I must say there is something very nice about an Arab horse," said Isabel. "They are so sympathetic. I won't give in that our horses in Australia, the thoroughbred ones, I mean, are not as good as any in the whole world; but still, these are great pets, and there is a wonderful elasticity about them."

"If you get back safe to Merradoolah you may pose as an Eastern traveller to any extent," said Allerton.
"While you are about it, you ought to take a dromedary or two. A favourite 'delul' would create a sensation on the Myall Plains. You could easily ship them at Kosseir, and so on to Aden."

"If I thought you were laughing at me," said Isabel, with pretended anger, "I would make dad turn back and go right down the Nile to Cairo again and spoil everything. But you cannot be so lost to all decent feeling."

"I am afraid you are becoming too Eastern in your feelings, Miss Baldhill, and can't stand contradiction or mild chaff. As you kindly admit, I was not laughing at you, but as a friend perhaps I may be allowed to hint that we mustn't overdo this Eastern business."

On their return Mrs. Baldhill was unaffectedly surprised that they were so anxious to spend another day in exploring ruins; as if they had not had enough of it. Mr. Baldhill, too, was not enthusiastic. "I'm just about full of this ruin racket," he said; "poking about day after day among these temples and tombs and pillars. I don't see anything in 'em now more than a lot of stockyard posts. It seems to me as if half the living in those days must have been working for the dead, and the other half making all safe with the priests for the time when they wanted tombing. It suited them, I suppose, but it's not in my line; and this week, I hope, sees the end of it, unless we're going to take up country and sit down in Egypt for good."

"Don't be cross, daddy," said his daughter, nestling up against him, and pressing her soft face against his weather-beaten countenance. "We shall never see anything like this again till we go to Heaven; remember Mr. Stanhope and Sir John haven't seen it before, so we are going to have one very grand day—only one—and then we'll make ready for this Kosseir march, so as to be off directly Omar comes."

"Well, you can go, pussy; I shall stop at home with mother and Marry. There will be enough of you without us."

"All right, dad; Mrs. Mortimer wants to go too. She's getting younger every day. I never thought she
could ride as she does, but she’s one of those people that can do everything.”

“As long at she keeps you straight, pussy, and manages to knock what she’s paid for into your pretty little head, she may have all the riding and driving and exploring she’s a mind to.”

Once more the glowing Eastern morn, the free fast ride through a wide plain covered with coarse grass, varied by gloomy lakes and the yellow-haired acacia. At the end of an hour, the guide reined in his horse and pointed southward with his spear. There lay Karnak, darkening the whole horizon with a world of portals, pyramids, and palaces. They entered beneath a lofty portal eighty feet high and two hundred in width, a long avenue of sphinxes, their heads broken off; but the rest of the body had remained unmoved, the guide said, since the days of Joseph, or the Sheikh Yussuf.

“What a sight this must have been in the palmy days of Thebes!” said Allerton. “An avenue of two hundred enormous statues, terminated by that temple. Yet this is only one of many. There are at least seven others, with similar porticoes and archways leading from this stupendous edifice. We ride through half a mile of sphinxes before we get to the temple, the splendour of which no words can describe.”

“Are we never to come to the end of these marvels?” said Isabel. “No wonder there were descriptions of enchanted palaces, pre-Adamite Sultans, and stupendous architecture in the Arabian Nights romance. The writer must have copied these, or heard the traditions of Arabs about these palaces of the waste. But we lose time talking. What a dead world is here!”

A glorious portal opened into a vast court crowded with a perfect forest of magnificent columns, thirty-six feet in circumference, covered with hieroglyphs and surmounted by capitals all of different patterns and richly painted. There were about one hundred and fifty, though authorities differ. The central ones measured about sixty-six feet in height, exclusive of the pedestals and abacus. The temple altogether was one mile and three-quarters in circumference, with walls eighty feet high and twenty-five feet thick.
Silent with astonishment, and almost with awe, they rode through labyrinths of courts, cloisters, and chambers, only dismounting where masses of masonry had fallen in. The fairy beauty of the obelisks particularly arrested their attention. The eye at times could hardly follow the tapering shaft until at length it seemed to lose itself in the dazzling sunlight.

"Here let us rest and have our lunch," said Isabel, at length dismounting and seating herself upon one of the paws of a partially dismantled sphinx, close by a wonderful propylon, eighty feet high, and covered with most delicately-carved hieroglyphs. "I see old Hassan, the camel-driver, ever so far off. Somebody guide him over here. I want to sketch that palm-tree and the obelisk beside it. How I shall miss my temples to be sure! And to think that this is our last day!"

"We must make the most of it," said Allerton. "We shall none of us be inclined to forget it."

Hassan was telegraphed for, and within reasonable time the meats and wines of the infidel were spread under the shadow of the palace of that dread King before whom piles of human heads were displayed at his coronation like so many loaves.

"Strange what a modern quality mercy is, when one comes to think," said Allerton. "Conquest, or even moderately secure rule, was always cemented with the blood of the vanquished, and torture was freely employed to give a zest to the triumph and the victory."

"Wouldn't have missed this view, these picnics, this delicious mixtchah of the modern and the antique, for a golden cwown," said the Honourable Bertie. "Would you, Mrs. Mortimah? I feel a wisah and a bettah man, I assuah you."

"I don't know that I should go quite so far," said Marguerite; "but this memory will abide with me during my whole life, and be put away among my treasures. Whatever comes, we have seen that to which earth holds no parallel."

"Didn't some one say that the Nile at one time took a different course?" queried Sir John. "From the appearance of some of the temples one would not think
they were intentionally placed on the very bank, almost underneath."

"Quite true," said Allerton. "Palgrave says that within historical memory the Nile, instead of flowing West of Luxor and Karnak, thus separating one half of ancient Thebes from the other, followed a more easterly course under the mountains by the Red Sea, leaving the Lybian Plain wide and unbroken. Indeed, it is said to have adopted its present course only two centuries ago. It is now ploughing the mid-level at random among the ruins, undermining some, lifting up others; it will probably sweep a few clean away—Luxor, for example."

"It is disappointing to think that this most ancient river should be variable and inconstant," said Isabel. "It is only the sphinxes that are immutable, and that is due to their feminine nature. There are sphinxes and sphinxes too. I have discovered one close by here with a most sweet and gentle expression of countenance."

"If we stayed here long enough we should make wonderful discoveries, I doubt not," said Allerton; "but we must make the best of our way home so as to begin to-morrow to put everything in order for the overland route. There are still a few last looks to be taken before we leave this paradise of sculptors. It is a pity we had not brought one with us."

"We should never have got him away again," said Isabel. "Never mind, an Australian genius, nurtured amid 'round stuff' and stringy bark slabs, will come here for inspiration and astonish the world. The old lands are evidently 'played out,' as Americans say. The future destiny of earth will rest with new nations. The older nations appear to have consisted, with the exception of Greece and Rome, of a few individuals of note and a herd of slaves or peasants. Such, no doubt, was the constitution of these realms when tens of thousands of the inhabitants worked at these magnificent but chiefly useless edifices."

"I suppose it is only in free and Christian nations that the individual can be fully developed," said Marguerite; "the laws that secure the freedom of the
humblest citizen provide for the gradual elevation of the whole population."

"Very gradual, I am afraid," said Isabel, "if we may judge from some of our people; but now tell me, is the tomb unknown of Pharaoh who oppressed the Jews?"

"Well, the savans tell us," Allerton replied, "that the tombs of the Theban Pharaoh who resigned in right of his wife, Taosiry, and of the Jews' Pharaoh are well known. In the former the King appears as man and spirit—in his past and present. In the latter the wide extent of his dominions is indicated by five lines of tribute-bearers—black, red, light and dark brown, yellow—offering gifts of ivory, apes, leopards, skins, gold, &c."

"And did you see the tombs of the Kings when you were here before?"

"Yes, Sinclair was mad about sepulchres, so we did the tombs religiously. You must know the old Egyptian Kings set about furnishing their tombs directly they began to reign. Being of a semi-divine nature (as they believed), it was incumbent on them to provide carefully for their befitting passage to another state of existence. So among the Libyan Hills in the sacred solitude of the mountains, we ascended in search of the royal sepulchres."

"It must have been a weird and sombre expedition," said Marguerite, listening eagerly.

"It was inexpressibly mournful and unearthly. We climed the first of two gorges—the very ideal of desolation—before and behind, on either side, rocks utterly denuded of vegetation. This was the last retiring place of the Theban Kings, and a scene of more unrelieved horror cannot be imagined."

"Did you go into the chambers of the dead?"

"We entered a sculptured portal in the very face of the wild dark precipice, and found ourselves in a long, lofty corridor, narrowing into successive halls covered with a hard white stucco—this stucco with colours as vivid now as they were thousands of years ago. Forty-seven tombs were known by the ancients in the time of Diodorus, twenty-one have been discovered by modern
explorers; but only three are complete and perfect as when they received their royal occupants. Some were more magnificent than others, being most gorgeous palaces, hewn out of the solid rock and richly embellished. Here, truly, 'all the kings lie in glory, every one in his own house,' from the eighteenth to the twenty-first dynasty."

"What a wonderful and strange idea," said Isabel, "this solitude and splendour of funeral custom!"

"It was important," continued Allerton, "you see, that the body should remain uncorrupted. When Osiris awakened the King from his long sleep, his soul rejoined his body at that moment, and entered upon a career of unbounded happiness with his immortal ancestors. The tomb also where he was enshrined was necessarily concealed from profane eyes or disturbing touch."

"That is the reason, I suppose, why the sculptures on the tombs," said Marguerite, "reproduce as far as possible the details of human life, so that the King, on awakening, might see around him the familiar objects."

"Exactly; and the farther we advanced into the great tomb, the more deeply we became involved in continuous processions of jackal-headed gods and monstrous forms of good and evil; the goddess of Justice, with her single ostrich feather; barges carrying mummies across the sacred lake; more than all, incessant convolutions of serpents in every form and attitude—human-legged," he added, "crowned—entwining mummies, enwreathing or embracing processions. At length we reached the vaulted chamber where lay the immense granite sarcophagus which once contained the body of the King. Here the processions attained their climax, meandering in all directions, in white and black, red and blue, legs, arms, and wings spreading over roof and walls in enormous and fantastic forms, like the phantasmagoria of a dream."

"It must have seemed like one of de Quincey's opium visions," said Marguerite. "You would be thankful and relieved to get to upper air."

"I feel quite sorry we are not to see them," said Isabel. "That is the worst of being pushed for time."
One ought to stay for a year or more in these places, once one does come."

"I vote we establish ourselves at Assouan, under the ægis of Britannia and wait for the finale," said Sir John Danvers. "It seems a shame to go away while Gordon's fate lies trembling in the balance."

"If it was not for mother, I really would stay," said Isabel, with an air of prosaic calculation of chances. "I could persuade dad, I know; but it will be the death of her, I know, poor dear, if she doesn't get back to Sydney and the South Head Road within a reasonable time. She has exhausted her interest in foreign travel, and I would not for worlds run the risk of her health."

"I fear it can't be done just at present," said Allerton; "but, as Mr. Baldhill says, if the price of wool keeps up, there is no reason why we shouldn't return. Other people, ladies too, manage to pay more than one visit. But the day is closing fast. Andiamo!"

"We are leaving, perhaps for ever, the splendours of the Old World," sighed Isabel, "for the rude architecture and vulgar comfort of the New. I wonder how we shall relish the contrast?"

"There are compensations," said Allerton; "but it is something to have seen 'the utmost display of funereal grandeur which has ever possessed the human mind—the whole religion of Egypt unfolded as it appeared to the greatest powers of Egypt at their most solemn period.' We have explored that mysterious valley, and our lives will be richer to the latest day for the experience."

"For all that we have seen," said Isabel, "I should have thought our journey incomplete without this. I now feel nearly satisfied and cheerful and sanguine about the future. Farewell, Thebes! beautiful by nature and art! I shall see in memory's magic mirror the wide green plain, river-encircled and mountain-guarded; the long avenue of sphinxes, the shadowy palm, the giant gateways. Glimpses of these things will mingle with my reveries, and blend with my dreams. It is a vision that has been stamped on my brain, and will leave its impress there for ever."
As they reined their steeds by the shore of the great river, in the crimson shadows of the evening, they were conscious of an unusual stir among the village population. As Ibrahim and the elders approached with respectful salaams and complimentary expressions to take their horses, it was evident something important had occurred. The intelligence was soon conveyed by Ibrahim. Omar had returned, and; with his following, was encamped on the river meadow.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ISABEL could hardly sleep for thinking of the "army with banners" which awaited her review in the morning.

With the first light she was dressed. After a hurried cup of coffee, she compelled her father to go with her towards the strip of irrigated land where the "ghazu" was encamped. But quick eyes had espied them. They had not gone above half the distance, and could see the rows of horses picketed and the black tents upon the level verdant oasis, when a mounted Arab dashed forward at full speed, and pulling up his horse, delivered this message. "He had been ordered by Omar Bey, the servant of the Bahadoor of the Inglesi, to report that the troop of horse under the command of his cousin, Abdallah-ebn-Moharrek, would march to the camp in full array with proper and respectful ceremony later in the morning."

"Oh, dear!" said Isabel; "how provoking! I wanted so particularly to see my horses, if they had come, and now I shall be consumed with anxiety for the next two hours."

"Told you we had better stop and get our breakfasts like Christians, pussy!" said Mr. Baldhill. "These Eastern fellows don't like to be hurried, and Omar wants to show off a little bit, of course."

"And when shall we be able to start?" said Isabel, poutingly. "We can't wait a week, surely?"
"A week!" said her father, in amazement. "I see nothing to prevent us from getting away to-morrow, or the day after; I am always for a short journey rather than none at all the first day."

"What do you say to camp on the Plain of Thebaid, as they call it here, daddy, the first night?" inquired Isabel, insinuatingly. "It will just do for an afternoon start."

"Anything and anywhere rather than stay an hour longer in this hole of a place," said her father. "If you knew how sick and tired your mother and I are of the whole thing!"

"It's nearly as bad as going to school and taking you with me, poor old dad," said she, coaxingly. "Never mind, it's not much worse than going to balls with me, and you'll have to do that some day."

There was then nothing for them but to wend their way back to the dahabieh. There they found everybody up, and breakfast about to be served, a proceeding which afforded Mr. Baldhill a lively satisfaction.

"So our army has arrived at last," said Allerton. "Omar the faithful has proved himself so far a good investment. When we sight the Red Sea we shall be better qualified to judge. Meanwhile the Guard of Honour appears to be well armed, well mounted, and altogether an efficient contingent."

"Did you see my horses?" said Isabel, eagerly. "I am dying to know what they are like. Of course he has brought them?"

"We had not a close view," said Allerton; "but we thought we saw a negro riding one horse and leading another, which might possibly be your precious steeds."

"Oh! how perfectly delightful!" said she, clapping her hands. "I suppose I can ride one when we start to-morrow. I daresay he will be beautifully trained, and quite a luxury to sit upon. I must get a jereed, and learn to do 'fantasia.' I don't see why I shouldn't play at it like other Arabs. I am going to be an Arab girl till we get on board our steamer. After that, I must play Miss Propriety again, I suppose."

"Once we get on board a Christian ship, Isabella," said Mrs. Baldhill, "I do hope you will put all this..."
Egyptian rubbish out of your head. I am afraid if we stayed much longer in this hot, nasty place you would lose all the benefit of your education; and to think of what it cost your poor papa! Indeed, only for Mrs. Mortimer, you would have gone back terribly. But mind now, Bella, no more Egyptian nonsense once we get among decent people again."

"I don't see why a 'fellah' should give up Egyptian," said the girl, with a look of mock seriousness. "That's not a bad mot; is it, Mr. Allerton? I feel myself a 'fellah' all over, I assure you, hating the Turks, dreading the conscription, and yet with a bad feeling towards England, which protects us from both."

"Everything is geographical," answered Allerton, philosophically. "No doubt if we stayed here long enough we should change into either Turks or Arabs, slaves or slave-dealers. Happily for all, we seem likely to make a move at last."

Breakfast was long concluded, and Isabel's resources for passing the time exhausted, Mrs. Mortimer's words—she was reading aloud—being heard without corresponding ideas resulting, when a change became visible in the vicinity of the cavalry quarters. The "shrill horn of Afric" awoke the air with sudden blast, and with stir of plume and pennon, jingling of spurs and bridle-chains, and lifted lances, the Children of the Desert formed into column and came swiftly towards them.

"There appear to be more than I expected of them," said Allerton, as rank after rank formed in line, and swept up at full speed, but wonderfully in order, towards the point of land where the Fatima was moored. "I can't quite make it out. Either Omar has met with some ready-made force out on the war-path and has annexed them, or I misunderstood egregiously the number of free companions we mentioned to Akbar."

"Never mind! The more the merrier," almost shouted Isabel, in high glee. "Oh! how splendid they look! When I am mounted on 'My beautiful, my beautiful, that standest meekly by'—I don't know what I am going to call her—I shall feel like Zenobia and
Semiramis, or 'some o' thae folk,' as the old Scotch-woman said."

And now, to the intense joy and admiration of the possible Queen of the East, the body of wild horsemen advanced with a half-circular sweep, and checked their steeds so as to march past her and her companions with due military pomp and circumstance.

At the head of the troop, side by side with a young Arab of noble appearance and haughty bearing, rode Omar. But how changed, how transformed, from the scarred, sullen, despairing captive upon whom Isabel's gaze had fallen in the slave mart!

Richly, not to say gorgeously, dressed in Arab vestments of the best fashion; mounted on a high-caste charger, with sword and pistols, and the long gun which the Bedaween chiefly value, Omar seemed the incarnation of the chivalry of the desert. Probably judicious use of the bag of piastres furnished by Mr. Baldhill had contributed to this astonishing alteration. His whole bearing and expression seemed changed. His large dark eyes beamed with pride and courageous confidence, as behind himself and his kinsman came the troop, in number about three hundred, swarthy and grim of aspect, but evidently a well-disciplined band, well armed, and mounted upon horses of exceptional condition and quality. Their hawk-like countenances, their carefully kept arms, their long lances, their easy horsemanship, powerfully impressed the English party, particularly Isabel, who could hardly restrain herself from uttering exclamations of delight.

The whole troop at the word of command defiled before the party, lowering arms, and making a salute as they passed. After the march past they proceeded at a slow pace to their encampment, while Omar, springing from his horse, prostrated himself at the feet of Isabel.

"Lo!" he said, "Omar the slave, but trusted by his mistress and the Bahadoor, whose word is fate, and whose riches are exhaustless as the mercy of his heart, has returned, through God's help, to his duty. I present humbly to your acceptance as the Bey of your soldiers, my kinsman, the Sheikh Abdallah-ebn-
Moharrek, whom, with his followers I encountered in a lucky hour. They have a ‘ghazu’ in hand of their own; but in obedience to Akbar, who is the chief of their house, and to pay honour to the English Khanum and the Bahadoor, they will engage to escort them safely to Kosseir, though the desert were thronged with robbers and infidels. Have I spoken the truth, O Abdallah, friend of my soul?"

Here the young Arab, who had also dismounted, advanced and bowed low before Isabel, and, being interpreted by Ibrahim, said a few modest words. "He felt honoured in being chosen by Allah to guard the beauteous lady and the merciful Bahadoor to the shores of the Red Sea. They had sworn an oath to Akbar, the great Sheikh of their house, to die in her defence, man by man, before evil should happen to one of the party."

"Tell him," said Mr. Baldhill, "that he has spoken well, and that I will make him a suitable present when we reach Kosseir."

"And tell him," said Isabel, who had no idea of being excluded from the conference, "that I trusted Omar, and that I trust him. I admire his gallant troop of horsemen, and feel sure they will protect us from all the dangers of the desert."

The swarthy cheek of the young Arab glowed and his eye flashed as he shook his lance and said, with an accent of deep feeling, "Not a man among them will ever enter the tents of the ebn-Moharrek again who has not seen their ship bearing the noble strangers sail safely from Kosseir. On my head be it!"

At this moment a negro, nicely dressed, and with a silver collar round his neck, but evidently considering himself a person of importance, rode slowly forward, mounted on one horse of great beauty and leading another. Isabel could not help clapping her hands. "Oh, look at this dear white horse! What an angel he is! What an exquisite head, and how proudly he carries himself! I must kiss him. The other is the sweetest creature, and brought by a black slave with a scarlet turban too! It is too exciting and delicious; just like the Arabian Nights, isn't it, Mrs. Mortimer?"
“Suppose we hear what Omar, or rather his friend, has to say,” said Marguerite. “He looks astonished at your demonstrations of joy.”

“Never mind that. I can’t help it. He’s going to tell us all about them.”

“Akbar-ebn-Moharrek,” said the young Arab, “sends greeting to the lady of the Inglesi who has showered blessings upon the children of his blood, having rescued them from captivity. She deigned to express a wish to possess two steeds of pure race. They are here. Behold the slave Gholab—also a gift to the Khanum.” He waved his hand to the negro, who took the bridles of the docile animals, and placing them in Isabel’s hand, prostrated himself at her feet. “This lady has but to wish, and the ebn-Moharrek will execute her commands, even as the Djinns and Afreets obeyed Suleiman-ebn-Daood.”

“Oh! what a glorious creature!” cried Isabel, stroking the smooth crest and silken mane of the magnificent white horse, the larger of the pair. “Ask him his name and race.”

“May Allah preserve me in my need,” said the young Arab, with a serious and devout air; “but this is Zohrab, a white Seglawi-Jedran horse, whose blood can be traced back to the four mares of the Prophet. His pedigree is written on the scroll which is enclosed in the bag suspended to the saddle-bow, and likewise that of Zuleika, the dark bay Kehilan mare, having a star, token of good fortune, on her forehead. Both are in their prime, they are known for speed, courage, and endurance throughout all the tribes with whom the ebn-Moharrek have dealt in peace or war. They will serve to recall the desert to the lady of the English in a far land.”

“Tell Akbar for me,” said Isabel, “that I shall remember him, and you, too, as long as I live, as friends and brothers—men of truth and valour. Zohrab and Zuleika shall be cherished all their lives, and never go out of our family.”

“Their blood has been in ours for five hundred years,” said Abdallah, with a proud yet grateful smile. “Nor has one of the race ever been sold or parted
from, save in friendship or war. But they go to a place of honour, and we are content.”

At a sign the negro resumed the bridles, and stood in the attitude of one ready for the next command, while Omar and his friend, after a few words to Ibrahim, made the requisite obeisance, and rode slowly back to their encampment.

“Omar will return presently and receive your commands,” said Ibrahim to Mr. Baldhill. “The guard will be ready to start to-morrow at whatever hour you may appoint. The slave Gholab and the horses are now the property of the Khanum, and will henceforth be subject to her commands.”

“Then let them be taken down near the boat,” said Isabel. “I won’t trust them out of my sight in future. I’ll ride Zohrab this afternoon. Mrs. Mortimer, I’ll make over Zuleika to you for the journey. I’m sure she’s as easy as a sofa. They’re sure to be quiet.”

In the afternoon accordingly a riding party was organised, consisting of Mr. Baldhill and Allerton, with Isabel and Marguerite. The rest of the party were busily employed in packing up and making a careful disposition of what was to be sold, taken on, or left behind. Sir John Danvers and Mr. Stanhope had been lucky enough to find a couple of travellers who had come in from Sennaar, and who were so burnt up and spent with heat and dust that they pined for the Nile travel and the plash of water once more. They had no difficulty in disposing of their dahabieh to them, with the whole outfit and whatever they elected to leave behind. This simplified the troublesome matter of a “change of gauge” wonderfully.

Mr. Baldhill had also settled his affair after a fashion peculiar to himself by presenting Ibrahim with the Fatima and all that it contained, less what they required for their sojourn in the desert.

“It wasn’t worth bothering about,” he observed, with his customary free-handed manner of looking at things. “Ibrahim was a capital fellow, and had done everything in a way that had saved them no end of trouble and anxiety. He believed in paying a good
man well, and if he got a few hundred pounds for the boat, it was nothing more than he had earned."

The rest of the party fully endorsed this sentiment, and Allerton in his own mind, knowing the wide circulation which would be given to this act of liberality, deemed it might turn out to be even diplomatically prudent, though no thought of such a notion, he was sure, had crossed his friend's brain.

When the grey horse Zohrab was led up by the turbaned attendant, with a scarlet saddle-cloth, a Mameluke bit, and other Eastern accoutrements and adornments, he certainly looked the most splendid charger that any maiden ever had in the world. His beautifully-shaped head and large, intelligent eye; his arcing, crested neck; his muscular, oblique shoulders; his clean, flat legs and hoofs like hammered iron; his glossy, satin coat—all these traits and points stamped him as one of the long-descended aristocrats of the equine race—a true child of the desert—a comrade of warriors and hunters since the days of their ancestor, Ishmael.

Before they had moved a dozen paces, Isabel shook her reins lightly, and the gracefully-fleet courser bounded off at a deliciously easy, deer-like pace, which the impatient damsel quickened to a hand-gallop, even for a short distance to racing speed.

"Oh, charming, heavenly, intoxicating!" she cried out, as the perfectly-trained, even-tempered palfrey moderated his gallop gradually, without the slightest shock or jar, relapsing into a walk.

"I never rode any horse so elastic, so beautifully free and fast, yet obedient, before," said the excited girl. "You only need make a sign, and he knows what you mean. He sympathises instinctively. I feel like the Knight of the Leopard, in the Talisman, when the Saracen Emir starts off with him and the two high-bred mares distance the cavalry of the Crusaders. It is the next thing to wings. Don't you think so, Mrs. Mortimer?" said she to Marguerite, who just then came up; having, with Mr. Baldhill, followed at a more moderate, though sufficiently fast, pace.

"How does Zuleika carry you?"
“She is charming!” said Marguerite, patting her horse’s neck. “I never felt anything so delightfully easy, gentle, and swift. I am equal to any amount of desert travel on her.”

“You shall have her all the time,” said Isabel. “You appreciate a good horse. This one is a pearl—a ‘Mootee,’ as the Arabs say; but I must not change his name, or there is no saying what may happen. Horses’ names and pedigrees are serious matters in this part of the world. How glad I am we did not go up the Nile and disappoint Omar and Abdallah. I should never have forgiven myself.”

“Wait till we’re all aboard a P. and O. steamer before you’re quite sure of that, pussy,” said Mr. Baldhill. “It’s a wild bit of country across to Kosseir; isn’t it, Allerton?”

“It was an old overland route from Keneh once,” said he, “and regularly followed by all classes of travellers. But it has been long disused, and I have no idea what it is like. However, two days and a half ought to do it, at the outside.”

“Why, the English Government might run a railway across without much expense,” said Mr. Baldhill. “It would save no end of bother, and come in handy just now, in more ways than one.”

“It is not at all a bad idea,” said Allerton. “By improving the port and putting up warehouses, Kosseir might recover its ancient prosperity, and become a great emporium, as Berenia, not so far off, used to be. A line of steamers might be established between it and Suakim, which would be the terminus of the Soudan railway.”

“Splendid,” said Isabel; “I must put that in my book; we can pose as pioneers and prospectors; perhaps the Australian share-market will take it up; I’ll invest, if dad will let me, because it will help to put down the Soudan slave-trade; but this is our last ride near Thebes; let us make the best of it.”

The stars were up, and the weird shadows of distant pylons and temple masses, “clear against the crimson rim” of the horizon, were deepening as they rode into camp, where Gholab, in attitude of deep humility, awaited them. He had looked slightly troubled as he watched
the party come sweeping in at half-speed, which Isabel, who was leading, did not feel inclined to moderate. "I can't find it in my heart to pull him up," she said; "the sensation is so truly delicious, but I suppose with my weight there's no fear of over-riding him? Ask Gholab."

That responsible official, being appealed to, replied that either Zohrab or Zuleika might be galloped fifty miles without stopping, and then fifty miles after that, without fear of injury. They were true "wind-drinkers," and had never been known to fail in war or peace.

"Now I shall always feel comfortable," said Isabel, dismounting. "I'm not hard-hearted, but I like to think that my horse can do something out of the common when I want him."

The evening meal was of an unusually cheerful, not to say festive, description. Messrs. Stanhope and Danvers had completed their negotiations with their compatriots, and delivered over their boat and its contents without hitch or disagreement. Having brought up their arms, including Sir John's famous repeating rifle, and all their personal belongings, they were in high spirits at being perfectly free and unfettered for new adventure. Mrs. Baldhill and Marie had finished, with Ibrahim's assistance—who was steeped in gratitude at Mr. Baldhill's generosity—their more arduous and responsible task of packing. So peace and satisfaction reigned.

Omar had also during the afternoon informed them that Abdallah and his troop would be ready to attend them, and to commence the journey to-morrow. As doubtless there would be some slight delay in the first packing of the baggage-camels and other matters inseparable from their departure, it was proposed to encamp by a ruined aqueduct on the Karnak Plain the first night. On the day following they would reach, if Allah permitted, the half-way stage to Kosseir. The next evening would disclose the waters of the historic sea.

This was good news, and cheering to the soul of Mr. Baldhill, who was secretly chafing at the delay. The Englishmen were full of anticipation of the novelty of desert travel, with the further excitement of the terra Australis incognita thrown in. Isabel could talk of
little save Zohrab and Zuleika, which she said were worth coming to the desert to obtain, if for nothing else. She felt supremely happy, and at peace with all the world, except El Mahdi and the slave-dealers.

"Those dear horses have even put that hero-prince, Gordon, out of my head," she suddenly exclaimed. "Has any fresh news been heard about him?"

"Two Berber camel-drivers came in yesterday, who have been employed as spies," said Sir John. "They report that he made a sortie and routed a strong body of El Mahdi's troops. One can't say, of course, how true it is."

"Wegulah welief expedition with flotillah of boats up the Nile nearly weady to embark," said the Honourable. "Heah Lord Wolseley's to take command. Going to do the thing wesspectably at last."

"Oh, joyful news!" said Isabel. "Pray Heaven they won't be too late. What a pity we can't stay and go up with them! I should like to see Sir Garnet, too. I can never think of him as Lord Wolseley."

"It will be a deal too late if you don't go to bed," said Mrs. Baldhill, interposing at this juncture. "There's a lot to be done to-morrow, and I'm that tired I can hardly keep my eyes open. Good night, Sir John. Good night, everybody."

CHAPTER XXXV

The sun rose as usual on that most eventful morning, though to Isabel's excited brain it would hardly have appeared inconsistent with the ordinary course of nature if Rameses had appeared in person to bar their passage through his ruined realm. But long before the first beams of the day-god gleamed on the ancient river and fallen fanes, the encampment was astir; the sound of voices, of trampling steeds, of hurrying feet, proclaimed that preparations for the march had fully and earnestly begun.
Before mid-day, in spite of certain delays and miscalculations, common to all expeditions soever, whether of peace or war, Omar and Abdallah were riding in front of their troop, with their faces towards the historic sea, followed at a short distance by their Frankish employers and friends. Behind them came the baggage camels and their attendants, superintended by Ibrahim, who had, with a few of the village notables, begged to be allowed to accompany the Bahadoor on the first day's journey.

Omar had taken care to bring a sufficiency of spare horses for the rest of the party, so that they were suitably mounted, though none could boast of coursers for one moment to be compared to that "bright, particular star," Zohrab. He excited general admiration as he arched his neck and trod the deserts with free, elastic step beneath Isabel's graceful, swaying form. Mr. Baldhill's mount was, perhaps, the next in value, being a muscular, compact, and, for an Arab, full-sized chestnut. He was noted for extreme surefootedness (as Omar informed the party), a point upon which Mr. Baldhill set great store, and was capable of performing the longest day's journey without diminution of speed or freshness.

"Just the nag I should have picked for a stock-horse twenty years ago," said that gentleman, as he gained his saddle with practised ease, though not with the agility of an earlier day. "Well up in the shoulder, though he's a trifle hog-necked. Wonderful legs and feet, and a back rib like a cask. He'd carry me from here to Merradoolah, flying, if we could only ride there overland."

Mrs. Baldhill, who, like most Australian ladies, had in her youth been accustomed to coursers of various sorts and conditions and so acquired the almost instinctive knowledge of the art of equitation which rarely comes with later training, expressed her satisfaction with the docile, easy-paced animals which had been allotted to her and Marie. Omar explained that either of them could be ridden with a halter, if the Khanum and the Frangi lady found the Mameluke bridles troublesome. But to this Mrs. Baldhill objected.
"I've ridden pretty fast down-hill before now," she said, "in old days with nothing but a gunny bag to sit sideways on, and a green-hide leg-rope round our old pony's nose; but that was when I was young and lissome. A bridle's a bridle, even with the quietest horse, and there's nothing like being safe when you're getting on in years."

As for Marie's charger, she seemed to have divined the inexperienced character of her rider before many minutes, and attaching herself to Mrs Baldhill's steed, followed that lady's course without reference to Marie's opinions or suggestions.

"Oh, isn't this glorious!" said Isabel, as she watched the long line of spear-men, holding their course as directly as a bird's flight across the apparently illimitable desert—the far horizon but faintly darkened by the outline of the vast ruins which, with the following day, they would quit for ever. "It is worth a year, a whole year of life. I would cheerfully make the exchange if Mephistopheles was here in person to propose the bargain."

"It is fine in its way, but of the nature of fleeting enjoyments," said Allerton, who rode on her right hand. "You would soon tire of the discomfort, and find even some prosaic annoyances, were this state of things continued."

"I can hardly think so," said the excited damsel. "War and gallant adventure, of which our little army is an emblem, have always brought out the noblest traits of humanity. I wonder if there is any likelihood of a real fight? Not for anybody to be killed, but I should like to see a real charge or two. These lances would look so splendid lowered, and this troop going at full speed at another about the same size. How I used to admire that battle in Marmion! No one ever wrote a description, I am sure, which came so near to the actual thing.

'Where bill-men deal the ghastly blow,
And charging knights like whirlwinds go.'

Fancy a whole line of knights in full armour too! We
are living too late in the world's history for any romance."

"I wouldn't say that," said Sir John Danvers. "When Bertie and I were in India last year, we saw one of those Rajah fellows with such a bodyguard of cavalry—a thousand men, all in chain mail and splendidly mounted. It was quite a mediæval reminder; wasn't it, Bertie?"

"Elephant in the procession with £20,000 worth of jewels on his person," affirmed the Honourable Bertie. "Ranee of Jhansi, too, no end of a Wajpoot Queen, wode at the head of her own twoops. Cut down fellah one day, they say, for mutiny. Wegulah Semiwamis, give you my word."

"I shouldn't like that," said Isabel, with an expression of pain. "But the men in the chain mail must have been splendid."

The first night's halt had been arranged to be upon the plain of the Thebaid, as affording conveniences of water and forage in the long coarse grass which at the locality covered it. They had travelled at a leisurely pace, as befitted the commencement of a journey. Yet the sun was an hour high as they moved into camp, upon a knoll near a vast hall, of which the pylon, hardly showing a trace of decay, reared itself to a height of nearly a hundred feet above the sands.

At a short distance the troop found a fitting position for their encampment, and the picketed horses were soon deep in the enjoyment of the barley, which had been brought from the village on camels for their use. This was another specimen of Mr. Baldhill's liberality, for on learning from Omar that they would have to trust entirely to the natural herbage and edible shrubs on their journey, he at once offered to lay in a store of grain.

"Grass-fed horses are all very well in their way, and many's the thousand mile I've ridden on them," he said; "but there's nothing like a little corn if there's anything extra to be done. We don't know what's before us yet."

So the horses had their forage provided for a morning and evening feed; and the heart of every man in the
troop warmed to Mr. Baldhill, as a man learned about horses, and who treated them with proper consideration.

"May the shoulder of his horse never fail him in flight or in battle," said a grizzled Bedawee, guarding his charger—who had displayed a strong inclination to eat his neighbour, and to kick the ribs in of the animal behind him—with extreme watchfulness. "Verily the Prophet spoke truth, 'He who gives grain to a good steed shall have a year's earlier entrance to Paradise.' The Frankish Sheikh is a sultan for generosity, and we will fight for him, if need be, like Rustum and Antar."

"We shall carry our sabres unsheathed to the borders of the Red Sea; is it not so, Achmet?" said a slight young Arab who was lounging near. "What is the use of talking about Rustum and Antar. I wonder if half the tales about them are true?"

"May Allah shield us from unbelief," said the veteran. "Are not their names in the Koran? But I heard, ere we quitted Hail, that the Tuarek Bedaween—may their black faces be scorched by Eblis—were ready to join El Mahdi, and would plunder all caravans and travellers that did not carry his protection."

"But they are far enough away from this line," said the young Arab, with a graver inflection in his voice as he spoke. "Neither are their numbers great."

"Togrul Bey can muster five hundred spears," answered the senior. "When there is plunder in the case he would not think much of riding three hundred miles in three days and nights. Some one may tell him that the Bahadoor travels with a bag of gold, and we know he has an old blood feud with Abdallah since he killed his sister's son."

"It is a coffee-divan story," retorted the young Arab. "But why not tell it to Abdallah, or to Omar of Khartoum, who rides on his right hand?"

"He knows it all, and more," said the old Bedawee, sententiously. "But do you, Selim-ebn-Saood, keep your horse in good wind, and your arms ready. Allah knows what is to be. For my part a cloud of dust may turn itself into armed men before we sight the warehouses of Kosseir."
“May the grave of Togrul’s father be defiled—Kodereeyah that he is!” said the young Arab, impetuously. “Before he touches one of the Bahadoor’s party, there will be one of the ebn-Saoods the less. I swear it, by the black stone of Kasba!”

It is possible if this conversation had been overheard by Mr. Baldhill, that everybody would not have been so joyous and utterly contented with life in general as were all the members of that little party under the great pylon.

After the evening meal, as the moon rose slowly over the sea-like level of the desert plain, Isabel, whose spirits and energies no amount of exercise could lower, proposed a ramble through the ruins. The moon-rays bathed the mysterious masses of masonry with a flood of silver light, as with grave or sportive converse the travellers paced terrace and corridor, mausoleum and vestibule, with lingering footsteps. They grouped themselves shudderingly in the vast and shadowy halls; they heard the owl hoot in the King's Chamber, and saw the wild-goat leap from the altars of a forgotten priesthood. The night was far spent when they returned to their tents, and Mrs. Baldhill was disposed to be condemnatory as to the imprudence of curtailing the hours of sleep when a long day's travel awaited them on the morrow.

“We shall have plenty of time to sleep when we get to the steamer,” said Isabel. “People do nothing but eat and drink, sleep or flirt, on board ship, that I ever saw. Depend upon it, mother, we're more profitably employed in storing up memories of these mighty relics of the past, than in anything we're likely to do for the next six months.”

“I can't say for that,” said the old lady. “I hope it will be an improvement on the last year. But unless you intend to sleep on your saddle you'd better go to bed now.”

Mr. Baldhill had impressed upon Omar, through Ibrahim, that as they were to do a long day's stage on the following day, a very early start was a matter of necessity. He also subjected him to a rigorous examination as to the character of the route—whether there was
water; whether they would halt at mid-day; or make the whole day's journey without a stoppage.

"We shall halt at the fountains of Zobeydah," said Omar. "It is a good stage for the camels; but they will start at midnight, and be there as soon as the troop. It is a walled fountain. Blessings on the gracious Queen who had it constructed. We can await the evening there, and go as far as the palms of Johan before the moon rises."

"And when must we be ready to start?"

"Abdallah and his horsemen will form rank ere the stars pale in the sky," said Omar. "It will be prudent not to be separated from them. It is never safe to trust the desert too far."

"We shall be ready?" said Mr. Baldhill. "It will be 'boot and saddle' before the Southern Cross turns round—if we were in Australia, that is—you may trust me for not sleeping on my watch."

The promise was kept. The dawn had not tinged the pale-hued Orient; the deep, intense lustre of the stars, which burned away in that cloudless azure, was undimmed, as the band of horsemen, like a ghostly array of warriors from some forgotten battle-field, moved silently forward. The Europeans were not quite so soundless, and indulged in their usual mirthful badinage as they followed in the rear, at a moderate distance from their escort.

The stage was long, the track faint but followed with unerring fidelity by the hawk-eyed scouts, who rode on either side at the head of the troop through the breezeless sand ridges. In spite of the excellence of their horses and the novelty of the whole affair, the unwonted exercise beneath the pitiless sun-rays commenced to tell upon the more inexperienced travellers. Marguerite and Marie were terribly fatigued. Mrs. Baldhill complained audibly of the heat, the dust, the flies, and the unreasonable distance of the stage; while Sir John and the Honourable Bertie averred that if eastern land travel were no better fun than this, they would confine themselves to the Nile and P. and O. service in all future wanderings. As for Mr. Baldhill and Allerton, long experience of every discomfort which could arise
under such circumstances had rendered them impervious to ordinary inconveniences. Isabel appeared to have inherited a similar immunity. They addressed themselves to the task of raising the spirits of their fellow travellers, and luring their minds to the contemplation of the rest and ease which awaited them at the fountain of Zobeydah.

"Think of the delight of cool water and shade, and a carpet to lie down on, mother—a real delicious lunch, too. Such nice things that went with the camels last night. I feel the most terrific appetite already. Mrs. Mortimer, I hope you won't be really fatigued when we stop to-night—only decently tired, so that the night's rest will recover you."

"I was almost fainting coming through those terrible airless hollows," said Marguerite; "I really thought I should have fallen off Zuleika, though I struggled hard against the feeling. But I am stronger again now. If we could see the walls that surround this pearl of the desert, this fountain of the generous Zobeydah, I should feel quite restored again."

"I believe I really do see something," said Isabel, bending a keen, searching glance towards the horizon. "Yes, there it is; a low line of wall and four towers, one at each corner. Hurrah! I must go and tell dad. I believe Mr. Stanhope will be as glad as any of us at the news."

It was so indeed. The prospect of speedy relief, though of a temporary nature, from their troubles, had the effect of raising the spirits and restoring the energies of the party. The pace was quickened, a new expression of grateful anticipation brightened every face, and when they reined up before the mass of heavy masonry with which the benevolence of the dead sultana had surrounded the priceless waters, and saw the camels lying down or browsing contentedly near the entrance gate, all feelings but those of relief or satisfaction were effectually banished.

The ladies of the party were assisted to alight, and conducted through the massive gate into the interior of the enclosure. Allerton then betook himself to organise the commissariat, and found to his great satisfaction
that their attendants had already made the necessary arrangements for a comfortable repast, having had abundant leisure for the operation. Despatching them with instructions to spread the carpets under the shade of the massive walls and a solitary palm tree, he sought Mr. Baldhill, who was regarding their escort with unusual interest.

"It looks queer, doesn't it," he said, "that they don't seem to care about dismounting. Omar and Abdallah and a few of the head men are jabbering away, but no sign of going to camp. They were here before us, too. I don't fancy the look of it."

The appearance of the leaders had also, in Allerton's eyes, something uncommon. They were engaged in earnest conversation. There was no sign of the breaking up of ranks which so quickly follows a halt, especially after a fatiguing stage. The order to dismount had not been given. The men sat patiently upon their horses, which, by champing and an occasional movement, betrayed impatience.

"They are all looking one way, too," continued Mr. Baldhill. "Surely to God there's no danger of any of these robbers of the Mahdi's dropping across us here?" And the cheek of the hardy explorer paled as he thought of his wife and child, and the terrible hazards of Eastern warfare.

"Pray Heaven there be nothing of the sort!" said Allerton, fervently. "But they have all the air of men at sea with a strange sail in sight. I saw something like a cloud myself a minute ago, and it certainly looks more distinct now and larger too."

"I was mad to risk this journey," said his companion in a tone of bitter repentance. "I might have known the chances were against us. But luckily we have a larger escort than I calculated on, and these fellows will fight well, or I am mistaken in them. God alone can help us, and we must do the best we can for ourselves."

"I'll walk over and see Omar quietly," said Allerton. "You had better go back to the ladies. See that they have their lunch comfortably; they will want all the support it may give them. Danvers and Stanhope are
with them. Keep them there till I return. You may trust me to tell you exactly what our chances are."

"All right, Bruce," said his friend. "We know one another of old. There's no use getting flurried, and these chaps, even if they're the wrong sort, can't be here for a good spell yet."

When Allerton joined the little group, which consisted of Omar, Abdallah, and a few of what might be called the non-commissioned officers of the troop, Omar addressed him, pointing to the far cloud on the horizon, which even in the short time which had elapsed, had sensibly increased in size, and which now began to assume an appearance as of moving dust.

"Does the Bey of the Inglesi see that?" said he.

"I see a cloud," said Allerton, "also dust. Perhaps it may be only a whirlwind or a sand pillar. We have often seen them before."

"The dust comes from the hoofs of the horses of Togrul Bey, a leader of the Tuarek Bedaween, a robber and a seller of blood," said Omar, solemnly; "unless the best eyes in the troop are deceived. He has led a 'ghazu' across this track, hundreds of miles from his usual beat. He expects to find a rich booty. He has perhaps heard from his spies of the rich Bahadoor. He will fight hard before he gives up the prize."

"But there is nothing much to be got from us," said Allerton, affecting an indifference which he hardly felt. "A few good horses and camels, our rifles, and a bag of piastres—little of any consequence."

"You know not Togrul Bey," said Omar, sadly. "He is the most remorseless of his robber tribe. The Tuareks are celebrated all over Northern Arabia for cruelty and greed. This mongrel Kodereeyah—he is as black as Gholab, nearly—is capable of holding you all for ransom in a cruel captivity, and of every outrage if he is disappointed of his price."

"We must fight him to the last drop of our blood then," said Allerton. "After all, Abdallah's force is well armed and well mounted. They appear to be picked men. There is no fear of them not doing their duty to the utmost."

"Wait till you see them charge," said Omar, with
raised head and flashing eye. "Mark them now, each man has dismounted, and stands by his horse. He has nothing to eat, but a mouthful or two of dried corn; a little water they will get in the fountain. When Togrul Bey comes near enough, they will mount at the word, and then you will see how the ebn-Moharrek can fight for the friends they have sworn to protect."

"I believe they will," said Allerton. "All the same, I wish we were well out of it. And will they have no food but what I have seen; the horses none either?"

"The Bedawee is accustomed to pass days and nights in the saddle and to fast until the time comes when he can enjoy himself without fear of interruption. He cares nothing for a divided pleasure, or for filling himself one hour and fighting the next, like you Franks."

"And the horses, will they taste nothing?"

"A little water they may have—just sufficient to wet their lips—but no more. The Arab never feeds his horse but in morning and evening. A high-mettled horse of pure race can go for twelve or fourteen hours without food, and only improves on the journey. You will see these horses, when the signal for battle is given, and the Tuareks are ranked before them."

"I must speak to Abdallah," said Allerton. "Bring him here."

"It is plain from what Omar has told me that we are in great danger," he said to Abdallah. "If this be Togrul Bey's 'ghazu,' and it is larger than yours, we may be taken prisoners and cast into captivity. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, but it is best and necessary to speak plainly."

"It is the will of Allah that I should fight hand to hand this day with the evil djinn of my tribe, the destroyer of my race," said Abdallah, in a tone of such concentrated hatred and wrath that the young Englishman stared at him. "But his fated day has come. Our numbers are not less than three-fourths of his approaching troop; their doom is sealed."

"That is well, Abdallah; but as sensible men, let us arrange the plan of the battle first. We must not leave more to chance than we can help. How do you
propose to form when they come up? They are getting rapidly nearer."

"Hearken unto me, O Bey! Are not your two rich Inglesi friends unerring marksmen? Have they not guns which can kill like Heaven's lightning at ten times the distance of ordinary ones?"

"It is true, O Abdallah! Their aim is sure as the finger of Azrael. They can load and fire as fast as the hail falls upon the mountains in winter."

"That is well. To Allah be the praise! Let them be posted with the camels, the Khanum, and the other ladies behind the walls of the Zobeydah. We will draw up at no great distance from them. As the Tuarek charge, we will wheel to either side. Let them aim at Togrul Bey and his sons. Him they may know by his scarlet turban, a suit of chain mail, and a necklace of gold, which he wears round his neck. The young men are also richly dressed. We will wheel in and charge like all the demons of Eblis as soon as the volley is fired. We will defend the gate till the last man of us is down. Before a man of Togrul's troop drinks of the water of the fountain our band will be no more. Here is my hand! Be strong of heart, and trust in Allah. Something tells me we shall drive them before us like chaff before the wind."

"So may it be. I must now inform my friends," said Allerton.

He ordered the camel-drivers to take their patient beasts within the enclosure, and then proceeded to the extremely unwelcome task of informing the party of the state of imminent peril in which they would find themselves in a comparatively short space of time. Mr. Baldhill's expression of countenance was troubled and anxious, but the remainder of the party, thoroughly rested from their fatigue and recruited by the well-earned meal, seemed in higher spirits and by no means cast down by the announcement.

"I feel sure you have come to tell us something of importance," said Marguerite, in a low voice, fixing her eyes upon him. "And it is not good news either, unless I mistake your expression. You had better let us know the worst at once."
“It is only this,” said Allerton, raising his voice; “that a body of horsemen are approaching; there is doubt as to whether they are friends or enemies.”

Marie turned pale, and shrieked aloud. Mrs. Bald-hill uttered two words—“My child!” The Englishmen neither spoke nor changed colour. Then Mr. Stanhope said, in his ordinary dulcet accents, “Jack, old man, I think I observed my field-glass with you. Most miraculous range it has. Miles upon miles. Trouble you to hand it over.”

Danvers proceeded to hunt for the desired instrument, which being produced, was handed to his friend, after which he busied himself in examining his rifle, which apparently was in perfect order and condition. He then extracted a plethoric bag of cartridges from his handbag, and proceeded to stow away a large number of them in a cunningly-constructed belt around his person.

The Honourable Bertie, meanwhile, had quickly mounted upon one of the walls of the enclosure, and was busy scanning the still distant dust-cloud, with a careful and painstaking air.

“So our battle has come at last, and perhaps more realism than will be comfortable,” said Isabel, looking up at Allerton with an expression of high resolve. “Is it quite certain that the strangers are hostile, and if so, what is our chance of victory?”

“Suppose we ask Stanhope what he can make out from them. We had better expect a fight, in case of the worst. What do you see?”

“Large troop of horse, savage-looking lot, armed to the teeth, coming on at a gallop. Horses rather exhausted, I should say. Saw several stop and fall out of wank.”

So delivering himself, the Honourable Bertie slowly descended from his watch-tower and joined them.

“Tell us all about it, Allerton,” said he. “We saw you having a conference with Abdallah. Is he eagah for the fway; and are those respectable Awab parties of his likely to be steady under fire?”

“I think I can answer for them. They are a game, resolute-looking lot, and will stand the steel. They
have a private grudge against Togrul Bey, if it turns out to be that particular scoundrel. I told Omar besides to promise them fifty piastres each from Mr. Baldhill and myself when we reach Kosseir."

"Quite right; happy thought! Danvers and I will make it up to a hundred; and for that princely donation the Awabs of the pewioid ought to fight to the death and an hour or two afterwards. What part of the play is entrusted to us?"

"Our party, with the baggage camels, is to be entrenched inside this masonry. We are to do the sharp-shooting and rifle practice generally. Great results are anticipated from Danvers' repeating rifle."

"I'll back Jack to make a sensational score," said the Honourable; "he's the coolest hand, and he laid in a prime stock of cartridges to my certain knowledge; he'll make it hot for Togrul of Tuaweek, or whatever his respectable name in full may be."

"Then Abdallah and his men are to have all the fighting in the open," said Isabel, in a disappointed tone of voice, "while we are to be stuck behind stone walls out of harm's way, ingloriously taking sitting shots at the Tuarek?"

"Afraid there's nothing else for it," replied the Honourable, as if he were anxiously casting about for some means of permitting Isabel to go to the front. 'Discwetion aw—bettah part of val-ah,' Shakespeah, you know. Must considah Mrs. Baldhill's feelings."

"Well, I call it mean," said Isabel, "to look on while men are shedding their best blood for you, and not be able to risk a scratched finger to help them. But we shall have a good view of Abdallah's first charge. If Marie was not such a nervous little goose, she might sketch it roughly, her figures are wonderfully good."

"All this will be quite in place afterwards, when we are on board ship again. At present may I suggest to you, Isabel, to go and comfort your mother, who naturally will feel this bloodshed and danger very deeply. For my part, I think we shall make a good fight of it. These fellows will be pretty well done when they do come up. Omar thinks they may have come a hundred and fifty miles without a halt. They expected,
no doubt, to find a smaller party. Our men and horses are in first-rate condition, sound in wind and limb. If I were a betting man I would take odds that we see their backs within two hours.”

“I hope they won’t run too soon,” said Isabel; “I have set my heart upon being slightly wounded if there is a real engagement. I am sure darling Zohrab would be as steady as a rock under fire.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

In a comparatively short space of time the advancing body of horsemen was visible to the naked eye. So far as could be judged from their loose and irregular array, they were a hundred or two more in number than the band of Abdallah. They came on at a headlong gallop, and seemed bent upon charging right up to the gate of the fountain. They approached nearer and yet more near. Then it became apparent that an extraordinary forced march had been made. It had been the intention of Togrul Bey to swoop down suddenly upon the group of Franjis, as the Arabs would call them, who, his spies had informed him, were about to travel from Keneh to Kosseir. Rich, defenceless, infidels, and strangers, they were in his estimation a valuable and an easy prize. If furnished with an escort, it would be of such moderate size that a full-sized “ghazu,” such as he now led, would be able to ride over it. He had heard that the Wells of the Sultana would be their mid-day halt. Since sunset of the preceding day his troop had ridden an almost incredible distance, in order to make a surprise at this point. Now that it was actually in sight, the fierce falcon of the desert had not been able to control his eagerness. Thus, without going through the form of halting before his enemy, in order to bring his disordered ranks into line, he had ridden straight on.

The effect of this rashness was to prevent him from duly estimating the number of Abdallah’s troop. Close-
ranked and concentrated in square, they appeared fewer than they really were. They could see, however, the Europeans, and the baggage camels in the enclosure, and from the smallness of their numbers, despised them as antagonists.

The situation now became intensely exciting—even dramatic. The crowd of wild horsemen brandishing their lances, shouting their war-cry, swinging at times their long guns above their heads, came sweeping on. They were near enough for their faces and general equipment to be distinguished. Swarthy, savage countenances, with black elf-locks, thrown into stronger relief by their white haiks, their long Arab “jibbehs” floating behind them. Yells and cries came at first faintly; then clearer as the distance lessened. Many a mile had the high-couraged horses come since dawn. Perhaps even this was the second day in which they had hardly ceased that long, regular gallop. Their drawn flanks and wide-blown nostrils showed the distress under which many of them had been going, perhaps for hours. None, however, showed fatigue in the way those of less pure blood would have exhibited it. None slackened pace; none faltered. Those whose strength was unequal to the strain either stopped dead or fell like logs, utterly devoid of sense or motion. Several in this form raised their mute protest against the unsparing barbarity of the march.

"Seems as if he'd winded some of his nags," said Mr. Baldhill. "They look to me like a mob of wild horses I once met coming in to water on the lower Lachlan. They hadn't had a drink for best part of a week. I saw the leader stagger, and one old mare drop in her tracks, like that fellow's horse that went down last. He ain't moved yet. I've a notion Abdallah's chaps'll knock saucepans out of 'em when it comes to the charge. That barley I found 'll put double life in our lot."

"Not to mention the piastres which the men are to have at Kosseir," said Allerton. "Our fellows will stand to pull that off if they can. Love goes first with an Arab, war next, and money third."

"Like enough," assented Mr. Baldhill. "But I wish
it was over and done with. I wonder if we can spot that Tuggeral, or whatever they call him. It puts me in mind of Tuggerah Bay at Illawarra. They’re coming close now. It’s time for Abdallah to shape.”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Baldhill and Marie, with Isabel and Marguerite, were disposed of in safety behind the solid angles of masonry, where nothing, humanly speaking, could reach them. Between the enemy and the outer gate, Abdallah’s band was drawn up, patiently awaiting their hereditary foemen. Sir John Danvers and Mr. Stanhope had picked out for themselves a “coign of vantage” where they could aim with certainty, as they considered, and whence they could not be easily dislodged, unless the Tuareks had it all their own way. Mr. Baldhill and Allerton, at an opposite angle, also commanding the gate approach, were lying flat upon the wide wall, nearly protected by one of the towers, and apparently as calm as if they were duck-shooting.

In spite of all Mr. Baldhill’s injunctions and admonitions, Isabel had climbed up some projections of the rude masonry, and gained a position where she could view the advancing foe. She had persuaded Marguerite, who was also unwilling to be debarred from all personal knowledge of the combat, to follow her example. Only portions of their heads were exposed, and these, from the great height of the walls, could scarcely be seen from below.

“Oh! how grand, and yet terrible,” said Isabel, as with hands clasped together they stood side by side on the rude parapet, with a bird’s-eye view of the advancing host, “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Mr. Kinglake ought to be here. No one else could do it justice. Look at those wild horsemen with their eyes glaring and their teeth fixed. I call it sublime.”

“I can’t quite enter into your feelings, my dear Isabel,” said Marguerite, “when I think of our possible fate; not that I have not every hope of our safety. But it is altogether too awful a danger to be calmly criticised. It is like philosophising in a shipwreck.”

“I believe I am a little like Mr. Midshipman Easy,” averred Isabel, “for I can argue and analyse under all circumstances. And, after all, why should it be taken
for granted that we women of the present day have no courage? Many of the wives and daughters of the Crusaders accompanied them, and into this very country, too. Think of what they must have 'had to put up with,' as people say. They had to find courage, and plenty of it. Oh! look, Mrs. Mortimer; that must be Togrul Bey himself. What a horrid-looking wretch, and what a grand horse—nearly as handsome as Zohrab."

"Our troop is wheeling into line now," said Marguerite. "And I suppose Togrul Bey, if that be he, is rallying his men. He looks more like a negro than an Arab, certainly. His gold collar and coat of mail render him easy to pick out. He is talking to two dark young men, his sons, I suppose, and now they have partly halted in order to charge with more effect. Oh! my dear child—may God preserve and shield us this day."

"Amen," said the girl, reverently. "We are in His hands. May He show the right, as the knights used to say, and now—oh, look, how splendidly our troop has wheeled into line opposite the gate, waiting for Togrul to charge. Here they come! What a frightful tumult!"

At that moment an overwhelming din, partly made up of the small brass kettle-drums which are used in Arab warfare, and of shrill blasts of horns, but mainly of every kind of yell and shriek which could come from the human throat, arose in the air, as with lifted lance, brandished sword, and levelled gun, the wild, fantastic crowd of strange riders charged furiously at Abdallah's band.

"Look at Omar, how proudly he rides in the front rank," said Isabel. "I declare he means to rival Abdallah, who has won his spurs in many a hard-fought battle, they say. Ah! now he has given the word to charge."

There was a moment of breathless anxiety, as the two bodies of mounted men approached each other. Even the unpractised spectators could discern the difference in calibre between the well-fed, well-accoutred steeds of Abdallah—of his trained, disciplined troops—and the disorderly half-tamed rabble of Togrul Bey.
In another moment the opposing bodies would have hurled themselves upon one another—when, like lightning flash, the front ranks of Abdallah's band swerved right and left, thus permitting the enemy to continue their course towards the gate of the fountain. This sudden manoeuvre surprised and partially discomposed them. Suspecting an ambush, they drew up somewhat irresolutely, as if to fully comprehend the meaning of the movement. At that moment, the simultaneous fire of the concealed party told with murderous effect. Not a bullet was wasted, and from their breech-loading arms they were enabled to keep up an almost continuous fire, while the sixteen shots which Sir John's repeating rifle was able to send forth consecutively almost doubled the effective strength of the riflemen. More than a score of saddles were emptied. One of the sons of Togrul Bey dropped dead from his horse, and the redoubtable chief himself was severely wounded. A certain amount of confusion was created.

At that moment, above all the din of battle, of the groans of dying men, and the strange, sharp cry of wounded horses, Abdallah's charging shout was heard. Like one man the troop, which had drawn off upon the flanks, now converged, and with irresistible force and "elan" dashed full into the ranks of the disordered foe. Their impetuosity was so great, their steadiness so marked, that the desert band, faint with long fasting, and mounted upon horses which had been taxed to their utmost strength, were outmatched. They commenced to give way, at first fighting desperately and doggedly, but after a while with less vigour and determination.

But the Arab warrior dies hard. Secure of finding himself in Paradise (according to the promise of the Prophet), he who rides to his death in the front of the battle feels neither fear nor uncertainty. If victorious, there are prizes and plunder, glory and repose; if unsuccessful, Heaven holds forth no higher rank, no choicer pleasures, than for the believer who falls amid lance-thrusts and sabre-sweep to rise no more.

Hence, although with every charge the horsemen of Abdallah—who drew off again and again to ride
triumphantly through the thinned ranks of their opponents—became more confident, and had each time an easier task in slaying and utterly routing their foes, a desperate hand-to-hand conflict was kept up by the group of veterans around their leader that still preferred death to dishonour.

Togrul Bey himself, though wounded in several places, showed that ferocious courage and dexterity in the use of his arms which had gained for him in his youth pre-eminence among the rude freebooters of the Tuarek and the Bishareen. In the varying fortunes of the fight, it chanced at length that he and Abdallah came within a short distance of each other. Abdallah rode straight at Togrul, who had just cut down one of his best men; yelling as he came, "Turn, robber of the Tuarek, murderer of women and children, who hast not courage to bare thy breast to the Arab spear like other men. Turn, and face Abdallah-ebn-Moharrek."

"You shall sup with Eblis this night—companion of Giaours that you are," growled the robber, his dark face looking more demoniac than ever from the blood which streamed from a cut on his brow. "You are come to atone for the blood of Husseyn."

A hand-to-hand combat ensued, which almost divided interest with the real issue of the battle. A sufficient number of the adherents of each leader were at hand to keep the general fighting going, and to prevent unfair interruption. Isabel and Marguerite watched with absorbing interest from the wall, as first one champion and then the other obtained a temporary advantage.

"What a splendid swordsman Abdallah is," said Isabel. "His yataghan seems to be in all places at once; but that chain-mail protects Togrul, I can see. He is so strong, too; I quite tremble for Abdallah. Ah! that thrust," and here she gave a loud shriek. "He's down; I fear he is killed."

Scrambling from the wall, Isabel rushed across the enclosed space and placed herself as near to the outer gateway as she could, near which the concluding part of the battle was raging. Allerton, who had been firing steadily in company with Mr. Baldhill, at this
moment quitted his side and joined Isabel. "Oh! can nothing be done?" said she. "Look, he has fallen close to the gateway. He is right under the horses' feet. Could you not drag him in?"

"I will try at all hazards," he said. With this he made a rush from the portal, and seizing the fallen man, from whom the tide of battle had now fallen away, lifted him up, and proceeded to half-drag, half-carry him towards the entrance. Pale was Abdallah's cheek, and heavy the lifeless body which, with the blood flowing fast from a dangerous-looking wound in the side, had all the appearance of a corpse.

As he struggled along, encumbered with his burden, a mortally wounded Arab rose to his knees, and seizing a spear which lay beside him, plunged it into Allerton's side. Unaware of a concealed foe, Allerton had used no precautions, and fell an easy victim to the treacherous assailant. The Tuarek dragged himself along on his wounded limb. The dying wretch was evidently bent upon making certain of the death of the Franji, whom he had so craftily brought to earth. But the Australian girl, now roused to the highest point of excitement, was not minded to behold her helpless friend and countryman done to death before her eyes. "Assassin," she shouted, as dashing out of the gateway she possessed herself of one of the short maces used in Arab warfare which lay scattered about. She made straight for the ruthless savage, who, with a ghastly grin, compounded of pain and deadly hate, was about to finish his work. He raised his spear, and but for her activity might have transfixed that fair and fearless bosom; but, bounding on one side, she struck him fairly between the eyes, so shrewd a blow that he sank motionless backward, at the same time that his dangerous weapon passed through the fleshy part of her right arm.

"You're out of it for the present, my friend," she remarked. "For two pins I'd give you another; but as you're down, I'll forgive you. Help me, Mrs. Mortimer, and we'll carry in both of these poor fellows."

Marguerite had not been able to restrain herself when she saw the fall of Allerton, and now stood by Isabel's
side. Allerton was first carried in, bleeding freely from a wound which promised to be dangerous, if not fatal. Then Mr. Baldhill appeared upon the scene, and helped to bring in Abdallah, who was still unconscious.

By this time the conflict had lost its character of a contested fight, and settled into that of an absolute defeat, culminating in a rout. The principal portion of the band, headed by Omar, pursued the broken remnants of Togrul's "ghazu" into the desert, slaying at their will, and not returning till far into the night, when they brought back many captives, and a considerable number of the more valuable horses. Togrul Bey himself had been killed by a rifle-shot soon after his encounter with Abdallah, so that their leader slain, their band routed, and the best of their horses in the hands of the enemy, the Tuarek found themselves in a worse position than they had ever been since the accession of Feysul-ebn-Saood.

On the wounded men being examined, it was found that Abdallah had fainted more from loss of blood than from any actual damage to life. Allerton's was unquestionably the worst hurt. Isabel's wound was slight, but very painful for the time. She, however, refused even the slightest modicum of pity.

"I wouldn't have been without this experience for anything," she said. "It's a wound, and received in battle too. If I were a soldier I should be reported as slightly wounded. I am quite proud of it, I assure you. But I felt it no more at the time than a cut with a switch. It's a good thing that wretch didn't run me through the body, too. I stiffened him for the time, though. He dropped just like an old man kangaroo."

Omar and his men were all in.

"They were weary at night when they ceased to slay,
Like reapers whose work is done."

Togrul's branch of the Tuarek tribe had received a blow from which it would take them years to recover. Save for Abdallah's wound, the whole affair had been a triumphant victory for the ebn-Moharrek.

Now that the battle was over, the hospital work
commenced. Allerton was duly attended to, and found himself able to sit up, though weak from loss of blood, and doubtful of how long he would be on the sick-list. He was not badly off for nurses, and found one or other of the ladies of the party continuously by his couch. Abdallah was taken to the encampment at his own request, and there tended by the child Ayesha and the soldiers of his band.

It was decided to remain one day longer at the fountain for the sake of the wounded men, and then to try to reach Kosseir on the one following. It was not likely that they would be again attacked, and the patients would be better able to bear the journey on camels. It would be but for a day, and then—then they would be restored to civilisation, to alas!—Isabel sadly reflected—to prosaic security also, and to utter freedom from adventure.

With Omar, and a sufficient number of men for ambulance duty, the battle-field was explored, and the wounded (after taking precautions) brought in.

Scattered about the field, here and there, were men killed by rifle-bullets, the number of whom showed how true and close had been the aim of the marksmen. Ghastly wounds, severed heads and limbs, bore token to the keenness of the scimitars of the ebn-Moharrek. Lance wounds were plentiful, and many a swart corpse, with face towards the foe, told of the fury of the charge and the stubborn valour of the onslaught. All the wounded on both sides were brought in, including the treacherous ruffian who had done such damage, and placed in close proximity to the water, under the charge of men specially appointed to nurse them.

They were visited by Mrs. Baldhill and Marie, who, now that the fighting was over, had recovered their faculties, and distinguished themselves as hospital nurses.

"There's a chap I hit," said Mr. Baldhill, pointing to a truculent-looking Arab, with a shattered shoulder-blade. "I saw him kill two of our fellows running; one of 'em, that nice youngster that was always about with Omar. I did my best to pot him, but I only winged him after all. Anyhow, it stopped his gallop.
Water, is that what you want? Here you are! There's no malice. It was a fair fight, according to the ways of your tribe, I expect."

"Who slew the first wobber, the wedoubtable Togwul?" inquired the Honourable. "I feel anxious on that point. I sighted him wepeatedly, but that wascally chain-mail always blocked me. I suspect Jack must have potted him by a fluke."

They found the dead chief lying face downwards. He had been leaving the field, doubtless, hoping to get his men together, after the fall of Abdallah, when a long shot from the "repeater" had, possibly by chance, struck him on the back of the head. A peculiar mark of the bullet verified the gun from which it had flown.

"You must let me have that curb-chain shirt arrangement, Sir John," said Mr. Baldhill. "And the gold collar for my girl. Bella's got a bad scratch over it, and she ought to have a trophy to show. We'll hang 'em up at Merradoolah; they'll astonish the natives there with a vengeance."

"Miss Baldhill is most welcome to them or any other memento of the engagement in which she has behaved so pluckily," said Sir John. "I am only too happy to have been able to contribute my share to the victory. I think we kept up the prestige of old England among those niggers."

"We've put the fear of God in their hearts for many a day to come, take my word for it," said Mr. Baldhill; "they won't tackle the next lot of Englishmen quite so simple, I expect."

On the next day the march was resumed. The roll-call showed many a gap in the ranks of Abdallah's troop, but "it is the will of Allah" was all the requiem that the truest comrade gave. The dead were buried; the wounded brought along, save those who were too badly hurt. Mr. Baldhill, with his usual liberality, left a bag of piastres to be distributed among the sick and wounded of the Tuarek, and arranged that they should be brought to Kosseir when recovered sufficiently. "I couldn't content myself," he said, "if I thought those poor beggars were left behind without help or comfort."
They wouldn't have bothered about us, I expect. But that's their nature; it isn't mine."

Allerton was provided with a litter, and hoisted on to a camel. Abdallah would not hear of being left behind, and though weak from loss of blood, managed to endure the journey. It was not far from midnight, but still on the same day as they left the fountains of Zebeydah, that the port of Kosseir was reached, where, even at that late hour, their arrival created a considerable sensation.

All sorts of rumours were in circulation on the following day, among the native inhabitants. "The troop was the sole surviving remnant of an army which a wealthy and eccentric Englishman had fitted out at his own expense for the purpose of rescuing Gordon. They had failed in their attempt, but had repulsed El Mahdi, and fought their way through the desert, when the youngest wife of the Englishman had been wounded in a skirmish with the Bishareen. It was the practice of rich Englishmen to take their wives with them to the seat of war. The other Franjis were engineers. They were going to carry out a railway from Kosseir to Keneh, or perhaps Assouan. They would make the fortunes of everybody living in Kosseir, and would turn it into a second Alexandria. They were a wonderful people, these Franjis. If Allah had not deprived them of sense, so that they went mad periodically, they would rule the whole world."

The little party of foreigners were not particularly affected by these reviews and criticisms. They were safe. The sea was before their desert-weary eyes, and the "Bahr-el-Ahmar" over which had sailed the fleets which bore to Suleiman-ebn-Daood, "gold, apes, peacocks," with other treasures of Ind. In this latter stage of the world's mysterious progress, they were chiefly interested in finding out whether or no a steamer of the gallant P. and O. was likely to call, and lo! by special interest of Isabel's guardian angel, there was. They had to wait a week, however; but under the circumstances, no pleasanter time was ever passed in Florence, Paris, or Vienna, the choicest of earth's favourite cities. What cared they for a few days' detention? They
were absolutely safe. No marauding tribe was likely to venture so near the coast. Abdallah’s troop, gallant, victorious and fêted in all the Moslem society of the place, was there, ruffling it in crimson and gold holiday attire, Mr. Baldhill having punctiliously paid up, with his two friends, the hundred piastres for each promised on arrival. They were prepared to fight the Wah-hahbee sultan himself, or the Mahdi’s picked troops, in defence of the Bahadoor, who had mines of silver and gold in a far country, and was as generous with the precious metals as Haroun-al-Raschid himself in a good humour.

Gholab was unaffectedly pleased with having only to clean and exercise his beloved horses for the service of his mistress, and rejoiced that war’s alarms were for a space in abeyance. Mr. Allerton improved daily in health and spirits, and it was confidently predicted that he would be able to walk on board the Chusan when she arrived. She was but a small boat comparatively, having been under the well-known Captain Down, one of the pioneers of the Australian service; but she would serve their need, and was considerably bigger than the Fatima, any way. With the few English who were, like themselves, accidentally there, Isabel and Marguerite were tremendous favourites. They bowed down before them, looking upon them as heroines, who had survived the dangers of war and the desert, and had added fresh lustre to the name of England.

Gholab and the horses also came in for much attention. The wounded men were sad but unmistakable witnesses to the reality of the perils the expedition had passed through. Altogether next to Gordon himself, Mr. Baldhill found that he and his party, whose arrival had already been notified to leading English newspapers, were the most famous and celebrated personages.

Thus the time passed. Marguerite and Isabel, Marie and Mrs. Baldhill, ministered by turns to Allerton’s needs as an invalid. Perhaps the two former were the most assiduous and successful as nurses. They fanned his fevered brow; they kept up an unfailing supply of cooling drinks with which to assuage his thirst. They read and talked to him in the rare intervals when he...
could bear such recreation. Finally, they had the satisfaction of discovering that he had certainly improved, and though powerless to move without help, was able to walk on board the *Chusan* when that eagerly expected steamer arrived.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The *Chusan* had come into this by no means oft-frequented port of Kosseir chiefly in consequence and on account of the general disturbance in the Soudan and the transport service generally. She was landing a corps of Royal Engineers, specially instructed to survey the route across to Keneh, in case it was definitely resolved by the Government to lay down a railway between the two points.

Having performed this transport service, the *Chusan* was to proceed to Aden; thence to be in readiness to return with one of the sepoy regiments at present quartered there, with no particular duty to perform except to see that the Arabs did not take possession of that extremely arid but valuable strategical position.

First-class English passengers for Kosseir had not been expected. An Arab merchant or two having successfully disposed of a dhow-load of slaves, a home-returning pilot, half-a-dozen Parsee store-keepers, and a runaway Somali—these were the average collection likely to avail themselves of safe transit. When, therefore, the captain and officers found so large and distinguished a party, including four ladies, with followers and appendages, waiting and anxious, they were as much delighted as surprised, and made all possible arrangements for their comfort. The captain did not exactly fancy having to take the horses, but being won over by Isabel's entreaties, capitulated, and ordered temporary boxes to be put up for their accommodation. After a couple of days' examination and contrivance, everything was fully arranged.
All went smoothly on shore, chiefly by reason of Mr. Baldhill's prompt use of his never-failing solvent, ready money.

Be sure, there were great leave-taking and farewell making. Abdallah and his band, arrayed in their finest clothes, and armed to the teeth, solemnly escorted the whole party to the shore, Abdallah himself dismounting and with Omar prostrating himself before Isabel and Mr. Baldhill in real sorrow for their departure.

It was explained to the troop that Mr. Baldhill, with the generosity which was now proverbial from the First Cataract to Assouan, had given Omar his freedom in consideration of his faithful services, besides presenting him with a sum of money calculated to make his altered condition still more agreeable. The child Ayesha refused to leave her mistress, and was therefore to accompany her to Australia, with the full permission of her brother, her only surviving relative. Sir John Danvers and his friend were curious to see Australia. They had had enough of Egypt for a while, and expressed themselves as quite ready to undergo a little Antipodean civilisation. The wounded of both sides were suitably cared for. Such was the general enthusiasm in favour of Mr. Baldhill when the Chusan steamed out into the main channel and took the southward course, that he might have successfully contested the Electorate of the Lower Soudan with El Mahdi himself, had universal suffrage prevailed around the Red Sea littoral.

"This is something like, at last," said Mr. Baldhill to Allerton, who, lying full length in a Cingalese cane lounge, was gratefully inhaling the sea breeze. "What does the chap say in the play? 'My foot is on my native heath': eh? I feel something like again, with the captain walking the quarter-deck, and these Lascar fellows swarming in the rigging, and the serang and his tindals, yabbering 'Jao, jao, puckeron.' It puts me in mind of old times, and my first voyage to England. This boat won't take us further than Aden; but we shall drop in for one of the regular liners there."

"Thank God we're out of the desert," said Allerton. "I don't want to hear another word about Egypt for
the next ten years. To think that I have so nearly been done for by a rascally fanatic like that Arab, and the brute dying, and knowing it too. I shall never forget Isabel's pluck, and Mrs. Mortimer's in dragging me in; that they saved my life I haven't a doubt. I feel awfully weak though. I'm not so sure that I shall pull through after all."

"You're worth two dead men yet, Bruce, my boy," said Mr. Baldhill, kindly. "A week at sea will make a deal of difference to your appetite; and after we leave Aden you'll begin to find your sea-legs again, and have plenty of nurses to look after you."

"I must make the best of it, I suppose," groaned the Australian. Wasted, languid, pallid, he looked very different from the bronzed athlete who had ridden up to the fountain at Zebeydah. "But this deathlike weakness is bad to bear. I never was a day ill in my life before, and it comes harder to me in consequence."

"It was as much as Abdallah could sit on his horse to-day," said Mr. Baldhill. "I saw that; but these Arabs recover from wounds quicker than we do. How those fellows of his fought! And so did Togrul's lot, for that matter. We're well out of it, anyway, and I've done the last exploring I'm going to tackle farther out than the three-chain road to Merradoolah."

"You mustn't talk to the sick man too much, Joe," said his worthy spouse, who now appeared on the scene with Marguerite. "He's a deal stronger than he was; but we're not going to have him put back again, are we, Mrs. Mortimer?"

"I think Mr. Allerton has wonderfully improved in the last few days," she replied; "but I have had some experience in nursing, and I know a relapse is to be dreaded."

As she spoke she made a movement forward. The strong man had grown suddenly pale, and fell forward in a swoon, as complete and lifeless as any woman with whom fear or emotion arrests the currents of life in reflex action. When he recovered, he felt that his head had been raised, the pillow adjusted; the soft, delicate hand of Marguerite was bathing his forehead, and administering restoratives, while Mrs. Baldhill on the
other side of his couch was exhibiting a truly maternal solicitude.

"You gave us both a start, Bruce," she said. "Why, Mrs. Mortimer's nigh as white as you are. I'd no idea you were so low, I'm sure. We must fatten you up now you're aboard ship, and we've got to Christian cookery again. Mind! you're not to talk. I see you understand. There's Isabel a-coming back from looking after those precious horses of hers. I must tell her she'd better keep away from you just now, and let Mrs. Mortimer stay by you till you go to sleep."

It happened that, between Kosseir and Aden, Allerton had more than one relapse, and the sanguine anticipation of his return to health was not borne out. The desert-wolf had bitten deep; a fragment of the spear-point, as was afterwards discovered, had remained in the flesh, causing irritation and feverishness, culminating in a return of the more dangerous symptoms.

During the whole voyage, therefore, Bruce Allerton, much to his annoyance, was the invalid of the party, having in his intervals of prostration, and even delirium, to be unremittingly watched and tended by one of the staff of volunteer nurses, all of whom willingly took their turn at the service.

All were anxious to help the strong, unselfish comrade, stricken down in their defence. He was now more feeble than the weakest woman in the party. Mrs. Baldhill and Marie were always in attendance when wanted. Isabel was sisterly in her care during her allotted hours of nursing; but when a longer vigil than usual was necessary, when the spirits of the wounded man became lower and more desponding, when the spasms returned with fresh intensity, it was Marguerite who handed him the cooling draught in the silence of night, when her soothing voice fell on his ears like music in the dreary intervals between feverish excitement and death-like torpor.

Who doubts—for so it has ever been—that a deep and an intense sympathy is prone to arise between persons of opposite sexes in whom imagination has not utterly died out, when the relations of patient and
nurse are continued for any lengthened period? The
gentleness and the unselfish care with which all the
minor necessary duties are performed cannot but appeal
strongly to the heart of the recipient. If he be young
and ardent he is certain to exalt into the similitude of an
angel the woman whose companionship has soothed so
many weary hours, whose watchful tenderness has
chiefly aided recovery—nay, may even have saved a life
all unworthy of her love, as it eventually may be.

If no longer young, calmer by temperament or ex­
perience, and doubtful of earthly perfection, he acquires
by this a more intimate knowledge of human nature, a
belief in a more elevated, more spiritualised individu­
ality, a convert—therefore an enthusiast—on that
account chiefly he is willing to risk his future
happiness.

There grows up besides, insensibly, on the woman's
side, too, a feeling of property in the helpless being
who is so dependent upon her good offices. When the
need of her services ends, a reactionary feeling of
blankness and loneliness is apt to supervene; and
unless the man so removed is singularly devoid of
mental or physical endowment, this is his golden
opportunity.

It so befell that before the Chusan left Aden and the
passengers gazed gratefully upon the sombre volcanic
peaks which compose the landscape of that interesting
fortalice, Allerton had got into the habit of considering
Marguerite as his regular and devoted attendant, and
the others as only occasional nurses. Insensibly a more
intimate knowledge of each other's characters was
attained, and a familiarity of address arose which
Allerton felt to be a distinct advance upon the reserve
of their former acquaintance.

As for the general progress of the voyage, it was
held to be a most safe and joyous ending to their some­
what too exciting experiences. Nothing was wanting
on the part of the officers of the vessel—polished men
of the world as well as efficient navigators, as they
chiefly are in that company—to render the short interval
which would elapse as pleasant and rest-giving as wind
and wave would permit. Isabel's horses were petted
and pampered, until Gholab grew at times seriously angry, complaining bitterly when the time-honoured but stern dietary of the desert was interfered with. Mr. Baldhill received the full measure of respect due to his well-known Australian position, and the reputation for boundless wealth which heralded him always. The Englishmen enjoyed the total freedom from responsibility which generally characterises ocean travelling; while Marie, finding herself once more *en grande route* to Australia, and not wholly debarred from the savour of *succès de salon*, was quite in her element, happy in the present, and looking forward hopefully, though not impatiently, to a reunion with her long-expectant Alphonse.

Isabel, perhaps, of all the party, was the least satisfied, the least contented. Her energetic and restless disposition rendered her disposed to carp at the enforced inaction after the stirring life they had led of late. She was, besides, deeply grieved at the lamentable condition to which Allerton was reduced. She could not help blaming herself as the cause; nor regretting that she had induced him to expose himself so rashly. "And yet we could not see poor Abdallah perish before our eyes," she would say, for the twentieth time, in self-exculpation. "I did it for the best, Bruce. I almost wish the spear had struck me instead of you. It would only have been one foolish girl the less, and it seems so sad to see you lying here day by day."

"You don't think of your father and Mrs. Baldhill when you talk like that, Isabel," said Allerton, with a smile more like his former self than had been seen of late. "I'm afraid you want something to engage your attention profitably. What has become of the great book *The Battle of the Nile*? Has the literary fire died out?"

"Not quite, though I haven't had the heart to think much about it lately. I've kept up my journal regularly though. We've had a battle in earnest, haven't we? It was close enough to Keneh to call it *The Battle of the Nile*, and I will too. Does any one know, by the way, when the real battle of the Nile was fought?"

"I can answer that question most satisfactorily, Miss Baldhill," said the captain; "so put me at the top of
the class; besides a few other little details, if you would like to know."

"Oh! I feel so interested," said Isabel. "I have always thought it was such a splendid affair. We never seem to have such battles now. Please begin at once."

"Well, then," said the captain. "The Times of October 3rd, 1798, as nearly as possible—how many years ago?—contained a despatch from Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson to the Commander-in-Chief, which read as follows:—

"Vanguard, off the mouth of the Nile, "Aug. 3rd, 1798.

"My Lord,—Almighty God has blessed his Majesty's arms in the late battle by a great victory over the fleet of the enemy, whom I attacked at sunset off the mouth of the Nile. The enemy were moored in a strong position for defending the entrance to the bay (of Shoals), flanked by numerous gunboats, four frigates, and a battery of guns and mortars on an island in their van; but nothing could withstand the squadron your Lordship did me the honour to place under my command. Their high state of discipline is well known to you, and combined with the judgment of the Captains, together with their valour and that of the officers and men of every description, it was absolutely irresistible.

"Could anything from my pen add to the character of the Captains I would write it with pleasure; but that is impossible.

"The support and assistance I received from Captain Berry cannot be sufficiently expressed. I was wounded in the head, and obliged to be carried off the deck; but the service suffered no loss by that event. Captain Berry was fully equal to the important service, and to him I must refer you for every information relative to the victory. He will present you with the flag of the second-in-command—that of the Commander-in-Chief being burned in L'Orient.

"Herewith I transmit to you lists of the killed and wounded, and the lines of battle of ourselves and the French.

"Horatio Nelson.

"To Admiral the Earl of St. Vincent, Commander-in-Chief, &c., off Calais."
"Good gracious, Captain Capel, one would think you’d learned it all by heart," said Isabel, "or else you’ve got the best memory for history I’ve met for ever so long. What do you think, Mr. Allerton?"

"It was a glorious victory," he said. "Out of seventeen vessels of the enemy, nine were taken, three burned, and one sunk. Four only—two liners and two frigates—escaped. It is said they were afterwards captured."

"Rule Britannia!" struck up Isabel; while just at that moment Marie came on deck.

"What is that of your national songs?" said she. "It is always of you English to commemorate some battle, some victory. Waterloo, again, par hasard?"

"Only the battle of the Nile this time," said Isabel. "I am going to call my book by that name."

"Ah! It is well. There was a battle of your Nelson, is it not? Brueys, Admiral de France, perished in L'Orient, et ce cher Casabianca. Your Nelson was a galant homme. We Francais honour his name—unlike Vilainton."

"The poor Duke," said Isabel; "he is dead, and won’t mind now, perhaps—any more than that splendid Nelson, who was occasionally not so discreet. That’s why everybody is so fond of him. We hate perfect people, I believe. How many were killed and wounded? That is the worst of battles, isn’t it, Mr. Allerton? Think of my poor arm, too; I shall never be able to wear short sleeves."

"Raison de plus," said the captain, raising his cap. "As to the butcher’s bill, as we improperly term it, there were, I see, of ours 37 officers, 562 seamen, 78 marines wounded; 16 officers, 156 seamen, 46 marines killed. Total, 895. In the proportion of one ship’s company, or rather more, out of the fifteen sail, killed and wounded."

"How sad to think of," said Isabel. "How many did the French lose?"

"It was calculated at five thousand men killed and wounded. More than five times our number."

"I can’t bear to think of it," said Isabel. "Read
some more, Captain Capel. Of course there is some more about it."

"Yes, there is a trifle more. But it was before the time of war correspondence. The news seems to have taken two whole months to reach England. Fancy what a state of things, with *The Times* about the size of two sheets of foolscap paper! Here is the leading article:

"**ADMIRAL NELSON'S VICTORY.**

"The official news of the glorious victory obtained by Admiral Nelson over the French fleet, near Rosetta, arrived at the Admiralty yesterday morning at a quarter past eleven o'clock. It was brought by the Honourable Captain Capel, one of Lord Essex's sons, and lately made Master and Commander into the *Mutine* cutter, from the Admiralty Flagship. He was detained at Naples one day, owing to some necessary ceremony connected with the quarantine.

"The Park and Tower guns and the merry peals of the bells from the steeples of several churches, soon announced the happy news to the public. Lord Spencer wrote official information of it to the Lord Mayor, and Mr. Winchester, the messenger, was sent off express to the King at Weymouth, in order that his Majesty might learn the glad tidings before he went to rest."

"After the play, in which the part of Zanga, in *The Revenge*, was taken by Mr. Kemble, 'with a dignity of emotion which almost justified the excessive resentment of the Moor,' the news of Admiral Nelson's glorious victory produced a burst of patriotic enthusiasm that has been rarely witnessed in a theatre. 'Rule Britannia' was loudly called for from every part of the house, and Messrs. Leak, Kelly, Dignum, Sedgwick, Miss Leak, and Mrs. Bland came forward and sang it, accompanied by numbers of the audience. It was called for and sung a second time. The acclamations were the loudest and most fervent we have ever witnessed."

"I've no doubt they were," said Isabel. "How I should like to have heard that 'Rule Britannia'!"
What excitement there must have been throughout the whole of England!

"Must have had highah spiwits in those days," said the Honourable Bertie. "How they wing the changes on the mewwy peals, happy news, and all that! Couldn't even let the poor old King go to bed without wushing in with the whole stowy! Tewwible bad form, I call it."

"People feel as much now, Mr. Stanhope," said Isabel, archly, "though they may not proclaim it on the housetops as they used to do. Don't you think, sometimes, there is a little affectation about not feeling things at all?"

"Can't weally say," quoth the Honourable. "Shouldn't say there was anything worth howling about."

"I'm afraid you and Sir John are both blasks," said Isabel. "However, we'll bring out some genuine feeling in you both when you get to Merradoolah, even if we have to put you on to a buckjumper to do it."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ADEN was reached without misadventures, save those common to Red Sea voyaging. The outward-bound passengers from England were lost in amazement at the calmness with which the Australian party took the heat and other inflictions concerning which they made lamentations loud and long. They could not imagine ladies braving the ills of desert travelling, or the breezeless heat of the Red Sea, without murmur or mention.

"There are worse evils," said Marguerite, in answer to a fresh-coloured young married woman on the way out to India to join her husband, a military officer who had been compelled by the exigencies of the service to leave his bride in their first year of wedded bliss.

"When one has known the real dangers of the desert, unrelieved hardships, and actual privation, it seems
childish—you must pardon me—to complain of this feather-bed travelling, where we lie with awnings above us, and only need to summon the steward for iced lemonade and fresh fruit."

"Oh, but you Australians are used to all kinds of outlandish experiences—at least the Indian ladies say so," replied the daughter of Albion; "and really the heat is terrible. I feel as if I shall die."

"Thank you and the Indian ladies for the compliment," said Marguerite, with an amused smile; "but though I am going to Australia, I have never been there in my life; nor has Marie, who is French, as I am altogether English. Mr. and Mrs. Baldhill, their daughter, and Mr. Allerton are the only Australians of the party. We have been six months in Egypt, it is true, but that is rather a fashionable bit of travel. I do not see why we should differ from ordinary Britons."

"Oh! is that nice-looking man, who is so ill and wasted, an Australian too? I thought he was an Indian officer on sick leave. Well, really Miss Baldhill is very pretty, and would create a sensation anywhere. Is her father as rich as they say? And did she really get wounded in a battle with the Arabs?"

"Very slightly, yes. I really have no idea of the amount of Mr. Baldhill’s income. I presume he is fairly well off, as neither he nor Mr. Allerton seem to consider the matter of finance very closely."

"Dear me, how nice!" said the young matron. "I wonder when Harry and I will attain to that enviable state? Miss Baldhill seems very quiet and unpretending in her manner. I shouldn’t think she was the sort of girl to go rushing into a skirmish with wild Arabs."

"She is much like all well-educated girls, only exceptionally sweet-tempered and amiable," said Marguerite. "Perhaps she has more courage than the sex is generally credited with. If it had not been for her presence of mind, our Arab ally, Abdallah, would have been killed before our eyes, and possibly Mr. Allerton too."

"What a brave girl she must be, and so young, though she looks nearer nineteen than seventeen to my eyes. I hardly thought such nice people could come
from Australia; but the truth is I didn’t know much about the country or people, and I am nearly as ignorant of India.”

Bruce Allerton, strange to say, did not appear to gain strength. At times his spirits were high, and he told himself and his fellow-voyagers that he was in a fair way of recovery, and would probably join them in a few days. Then, inexplicably, his strength would desert him as rapidly as it had arisen. Dreadful weakness would supervene. Terrible fits of despondency came next. Languor, delirium, and fever would again take possession of the wasted frame. A death-like pallor would overspread his features. It was hard to imagine that the stricken invalid lying so prone and nerveless upon his couch was ever the sportsman, the hunter, the tireless explorer of a few months back. “It was hard to bear, but it was the mercy of God which had rescued and preserved him so far,” said Mrs. Baldhill. Now at Aden, or Galle at farthest, they would be able to procure the services of a medical man, in whose charge he could be safely left, if they decided to go to Australia without him.

“Go on without him!” echoed Isabel. “Oh! mother, that isn’t like you at all. How could we leave him behind, to die in solitude—supposing he did die? If you do go on to your beloved Sydney before he’s better, you may leave me behind, that’s all. I won’t stir a step until he’s better—or worse—worse, think of that! And you’ll stay with me, Mrs. Mortimer, won’t you? Say you will. You wouldn’t surely go and leave him, even if you had to work your passage back to England as stewardess?”

“I am quite sure, Isabel, your mother never dreamed of leaving Mr. Allerton unless he was quite out of danger,” said Marguerite, in her low, vibrating voice. “But you are right in thinking I would not quit Mr. Allerton in any case while he required our care.”

“Of course,” protested her mother, “I never meant to go away and leave him unless he was on the way to get well, but not strong enough to bear all the rough knocking about of these steamers every time the wind shifts. I think you are in a great hurry, Miss Bella,
to believe that no one has any heart but yourself. I should just as soon think of deserting my own son, my darling Sydney, if he had been alive."

Isabel here relieved her feelings by throwing her arms round the old lady’s neck, and having what young women call “a good cry,” during which performance she informed her mother that she was the best of living parents, and that she, Isabel, deserved to be whipped and sent to bed, which awful executive sentence had been carried out once, and once only, in her extremely fortunate record of home education.

It had chanced somehow that by far the more considerable portion of the nursing of which Mr. Allerton stood in such sore need had fallen to the share of Marguerite Gordon. Isabel pitied the state and condition of the wounded knight, and from time to time devoted herself with her usual thoroughness to his aid and consolation. But, restless and impatient of mood, to sit by a sick couch resignedly was foreign to her nature. It frequently happened, therefore, that she was called away, as fresh occurrences or exciting events summoned her. Her “fancies and feelings, like birds on the wing,” were too imperatively volatile and impulsive to permit her to remain long at a time by the sick man’s side.

Such things as were sufficient, however, to lure the eager girl from her self-imposed task, or to cause her to call Marie to take her place, had no influence over Marguerite’s more steadfast soul. Hour after hour, day after day, would she sit silently yet cheerfully by the side of the feverish or unconscious invalid, ever ready to minister to his lightest wish, to bathe his throbbing brow, to pour the cooling draught, to lift the weary pillow that he so hated yet could not quit.

The sombre volcanic peaks of Aden were as sharply outlined against the cloudless sky as when they saw them last, but the “melancholy rock in a far distant sea,” was now in a state of abnormal upheaval and excitation. There was as much chattering and gesticulating among the sepoy regiments, who with their families and camp followers occupied its lines, as would have sufficed to move the whole British army. There
was something repugnant to British taste in the loose-robed Moslems who lounged across from their tents to the parade. But once ranked and in uniform, they had the appearance of steady and effective troops, who would no doubt give a good account of their co-religionists, for these were chiefly Mussulmen from Delhi, if ever they got within bayonet length of them.

"We should have been very glad to have seen these fellows at our back," said Sir John Danvers, who with the rest of the party had arrested their course to the tanks in order to inspect the march past. "How steady they are. Their drill must be regular and strict."

"They've got English officers," proclaimed Mr. Baldhill, from the dizzy height of a camel, upon which unusual animal he had taken a fancy to ride the short distance necessary. "All the non-commissioned officers, though, like our sergeants and corporals, are natives. They won't trust 'em to be captains and majors."

"Quite right, too," said Sir John; "we had a lesson about that in the last war. Jack Sepoy, whether Brahmin or Mussulman, fights well, and is a very good soldier, when he has faith in his officer. But we should never forget that they belong to a conquered nation, to an alien, and, so to speak, oppressed race. They hate us in their hearts, with a bitter, endless, unreasoning hate. We should be kind and firm with them, but never give them the opportunity of paying off old scores."

"There are other people to whom the same reasoning applies. Jack Sepoy is not alone, though we act as if we thought so. Justice is the religion of nations, but blind trust is generally misplaced, and often disastrous in result."

The tanks are the great sight which everybody goes to see at Aden. Thither accordingly the travellers wended their way, passing close by one of the high archways in the wall which surrounds the town, and through which they had a glimpse of the desert. By the gateway paced the British sentry in the uniform
with which so many of the waste places of the earth have become familiar.

A couple of Arabs had just been admitted, bringing with them a camel laden with dhurra, maize stalks, and firewood, on the high piled top of which a goat balanced itself proudly, and surveyed the surrounding scene.

Before they were suffered to enter the town, they were searched for arms, and a kandjah or dagger, also a long gun, taken from them.

"This precaution was rendered necessary," said Sir John, "after one or two officers had been stabbed, one mortally. Fanatics find their way in, and if armed, are sure to do damage. They take care to draw their stings now."

"What permanent improvements those Roman fellows put up," said Mr. Baldhill, looking at the deep transparent water in the tanks, bordered with green umbrageous trees and with iron railings, through which stone stairs led far down to the reservoir's edge.

"Everywhere you go it's the same story. Roman roads that are used still, and aqueducts like railway works. The guide book says these waterholes were dug out of the solid rock and cemented nearly three thousand years ago."

"They were repaired and these trees planted by us about five-and-twenty years back," said Sir John. "Fellows told me that the cement that was picked out was as compact as the rock itself. Much of the work did not need repair or alteration."

"I wish they'd have come to the West Logan when they were about it," said Mr. Baldhill, thoughtfully. "I know some runs up there that these things would have suited to a 'T.' But our country didn't belong to the map of the world in those days."

"Most likely not," said Sir John; "and now having done the tanks, suppose we go down to those Parsee shops, and see what there is to buy. Of course Miss Baldhill wants something to take with her."

"I should think so," said Isabel. "Think what a time it is since I've seen a shop; I want a pair of gazelles, some ostrich eggs, and lots of things."
"Haven't you got enough yet, pussy?" inquired her father doubtfully. "Anyhow, as we've got safe here, I won't balk your fancy, darling. Buy a shopful if you like, and a ship to take it home in."

"I'm not going to be extravagant, dad, but I've always wanted—

'A dear gazelle,
To glad me with its soft, dark eye."

and as this is its native land, and we're not going to come back in a hurry, I may as well make sure of a couple here—lovely little things that they are."

Returning to the town they managed to lunch with an approximation to comfort, after which they proceeded to a market-place, where all sorts of things justly regarded as rarities were for sale, either by the Parsee shopkeepers with their long high dark caps, or by Arabs and Somalis.

Here the gentlemen availed themselves of the opportunity to invest in striped silk pugarees, papooshes, delicately cool garments, and pipes of various length of stem and capacity of bowl; while Isabel carried off triumphantly three gazelles, four ostrich eggs, and a pound of feathers, a brass lotah, and several of the black and white hair-covered Aden sheep.

"They will look so nice in the home paddock at Merradoolah," she said, coaxingly, as her father demurred to this last purchase, setting forth as a fact bearing on the question that as there were a hundred and fifty thousand sheep there already, it was hardly worth while adding these to them. "Such brutes, too," he remarked sotto voce.

"Oh, but they're so delightfully ugly," said Isabel; "that's the very reason; they look more like goats than sheep, I must say, but they're not at all bad to eat. There must be some sheep with wool on them in the desert, daddy, though, because we saw a camel come in as we were at the gate with two bales packed on him."

"I don't care what they've got," said Mr. Baldhill,
"you'll never catch me here again; our dry country's bad enough, but you don't get four or five hundred fellows on horseback stickin' you up on an overland track. But I've done with 'em for good; they may take the whole country, from the Cataracts to Cairo, for all I care."

"But think of Gordon, daddy! You don't want him to be sacrificed, surely?" and here Isabel's eye showed a dangerous glitter. "If anything happens to him, I'll turn Catholic and go into Soubiaca; so you and Gladstone had better mind."

"Gordon's quite able to take care of himself, my pet," said Mr. Baldhill, soothingly. "Don't you know we heard that he had retaken Berber, and had gained a victory over the rebel Arabs. Depend upon it, he'll keep things straight till the relief force under Lord Wolseley gets to Khartoum."

"Why didn't they send it before?" said the girl, indignantly. "If it was worth while doing at all, why not do it at the right time? They have a thousand miles to march. They'll lose a lot of brave men. Every tribe in the desert knows they're on the way. Khartoum may be taken and sacked, and Gordon dead or broken-hearted, weeks and months before they get there. I've no patience with that Liberal Government. They're not fit to manage a big cattle-muster, much less a war."

"We must have a federation of the Australian representatives in the Imperial Parliament, with female suffrage to follow!" said Allerton, with a faint smile, as he raised himself on his couch. "Miss Isabel Baldhill will be elected as one of our first representatives. The British Lion will kinder quail then, as our American friend would say."

"It's all very well to laugh," said Isabel. "But that dear old Gladstone talks too well to be much of a general. I don't believe there ever was a general who could speak much. He's always thinking about his three score and talking about the future, while the opportunity is running away from him as fast as it can gallop. He's like a man who gives you a treatise on horse-breaking instead of going to catch your horse when he's thrown you."
"I'm afraid, Isabel, that you're irreverent, like too many young people of the day—far too prone to underrate the experience of age," said Marguerite. "You mustn't speak evil of dignities, you know."

"If Gordon's life is lost, muddled away before our eyes, and all those poor creatures that depended upon England's protection abandoned to those bloodthirsty savages of Arabs," said Isabel, "I think the English people will say something, unless they've changed their nature very much. I wish, oh! how I wish I were a man, and in the English Parliament. I think I could say a few things people would listen to."

"You must mawwy in England, and coach up your husband, Miss Baldhill," said the Honourable Bertie. "That's the way to get a hearing nowadays. Buy a Conservative seat, and dish the wretched Wadicals. The thing's painfully easy."

"Perhaps I've been talking a little fast," said Isabel, with a slight blush. "But I do get so excited when I think of the danger poor Gordon's in, that I hardly know what I am saying."

"Wait till I'm well again, Isabel, and I'll devote myself to the cause," said Allerton. "One may just as well live in London as Sydney, if the seasons keep good. I'll get appointed Agent-General, and put on pressure."

"You'll have to work a good deal harder than you've ever done before, then," retorted the fiery damsel. "How you can go on for ever dawdling about the world for years and years as you do, while there's a man's work ready for you in half-a-dozen places, I can't think! But wait till you're well," she added, with a softened tone, as she bent over him, and arranged his pillow. "I mustn't scold you now, poor fellow! They say on board that there's a great army surgeon from Bombay waiting at Galle for the steamer. We must make him put you right, or else our glorious victory will be all in vain."

The sun was low as the whole party went on board; the last coal sack had been stowed, while decks and saloons were still grimy with the unaccustomed dust. Isabel amused herself for a time by throwing in shillings for the
Somali boys to dive for, and finally managed to convey her multitudinous treasures, alive and otherwise, on board. As the last sun-rays illumined the darksome peaks of the lone outpost, and the crimson lines of light faded first into paler hues and then into one uniform neutral tint, the mighty heart of the great steamship appeared to throb as she slowly moved outward into the mid-channel, and was soon speeding with guarded swiftness over the dim, flickering plain towards the grim Cape of Fires which cries aloud, "Africa, Africa" to the voyager from the farthest south.

"Only one more stage," said Mrs. Baldhill to Marguerite, "and we shall be heading straight for dear old Australia again. I'm that sick of black faces and palm trees, and sand, and sun, that I sha'n't stir outside of our house at Darling Point for many a day. Travelling's all very nice for you young people, but comfort's everything as you get on in life, and we do live pretty snug in Sydney, to my thinking, even after seeing England."

"Is Sydney a beautiful place?" asked Marguerite, with a sigh, as she thought that, now a settled life seemed imminent—the distractions of danger and adventure were laid to rest—the lulled memories of her former life would again be revived, like the fabled ashes. Would they slumber, or evermore writhe and torment her?

"Wait till you see, my dear," said the Australian lady with a smile of pardonable pride, all unheeding of the hidden agony. "I think you'll find our cottage snug. It's shady enough at any rate, and when you shut the rooms up early, and keep them dark, you can hardly tell whether it is a hot day or a cool one outside. We must telegraph from Adelaide to have the carriage to meet us. Oh, dear, oh, dear! I wish we were going inside the Heads now."
CHAPTER XXXIX

GALLE Harbour! A vision of glory, of Eden in primal loveliness. The swaying palms murmured around the hoary ramparts. The bright red streets were filled with a gentle, mild-eyed, picturesque population, undistinguishable chiefly as to sex, by reason of the males setting as much value upon their "back hair"—silken, abundant, and lustrous—as do the gentler sex. Far in the distance towered the wonder-mountain, Adam's Peak. To the sensitive organs of Isabel, the proverbial spiceries which "blow soft from Ceylon's isles"—were distinctly apparent. Alas! for this unromantic age—far more excitement was exhibited by the male passengers with regard to the precise moment of time at which the Chusan passed the last harbour buoy, inasmuch as nearly every one in the ship had a pecuniary interest in the event, the Indian officers having got up a "pool" on the event, to be won by him whose throw as to the precise moment of entrance to the harbour was nearest the fact. Mr. Baldhill, who had taken no part in the "consultation," was prevailed upon to stand upon the bridge with the captain, and note the time to the second by his repeater. He announced it to be exactly twelve minutes past 10 A.M., a declaration which caused the Honourable Bertie to be richer by the sum of fifty-four pounds ten shillings, he having made the luckiest cast of the dice.

One day only could be spared for coaling, and for the glories of Galle. Even so short a stay was a relief from the tedium of the passage from Aden, part of which had been exceedingly hot and sultry. The major part of the passengers hied themselves to Wak-wallah, and the cinnamon gardens, unwilling to lose a moment of the short holiday.

With the Australians a different course of action was imperative. Bruce Allerton's health had so seriously suffered during the voyage from Aden that grave apprehensions for his recovery began to be felt. His feverish attacks had increased in number and seriousness, the
state of weakness to which he was reduced was pitiable to behold. Day after day the ordinary signs of mortal sickness became more potent and persistent. He himself despaired at heart, and confessed at length his belief that there was severe internal injury, to which he must succumb.

"Internal fiddlesticks!" said Isabel. "I don't believe there's anything the matter with you except a piece of bone or stick or something left after that wretch's spear. You're never going to give in that you were killed by a dead Arab, with a broken spear! Ha! I thought that would make you laugh. Now, don't you go and die before your time comes. I'll tell you when there's no hope, and you promise me not to think of it till then. Won't you, Bruce?"

The sick man's face relaxed. "You're a queer girl, Isabel. I'm afraid you would make me laugh if the death-rattle was in my throat. But I'll attend to your wishes."

"And the best thing too. Now I found where that famous Bombay army surgeon is staying. He's at the Colombo Hotel. He thinks he's going on to-morrow, but he isn't. He must stay here and cure you, if pappy has to give him an annuity. They say he knows more about wounds than any man in India. So of course he must find out all about yours."

"Couldn't be a better chance," said Mr. Baldhill. "We'll go straight to the Colombo, and take up all the spare rooms. We must collar the doctor whatever happens. I dare say we can square it somehow—"

Within an hour the whole party were safely and pleasantly lodged in that well-remembered caravanserai. As they entered the lofty open hall, and saw the cool balconies and shaded courtyard, Isabel uttered a cry of joy, which caused Allerton to raise his head from his couch, carried by four bearers.

"Oh! what a lovely place! Look at that splendid banana; and how cool the tiled roof must be. I am quite sure you will recover here, Bruce, if it is for nothing but the coolness and comfort of the whole thing. Order in breakfast, dad, while I forage about for the doctor.
You can attack him after breakfast, you know. He'll be in a better temper then, and so will you."

When Isabel returned, bringing word that the great Dr. Warburton, on his way home via Australia to be knighted, would be happy to see Mr. Baldhill at half-past ten o'clock, the aspect of the breakfast-table was cheerful and inspiring.

Fresh fruit, oranges, bananas, pineapples, guavas, all things which could tempt the languid appetite were there; fish, game, fresh bread, butter, eggs, all the essentially shore-going luxuries of which the passengers had necessarily been deprived. Every one was in excellent spirits. Marguerite's face lost its aspect of sad repose, Marie chirped like an uncaged bird; even the wasted lineaments of the invalid appeared for the moment to have regained something of their former steadfast cheerfulness.

"The air of this place must be good for me," he said. "I don't know whether I am deceiving myself, but I am sensible of a wonderful change generally."

"It is good to have faith," said Marguerite. "I disbelieve in miracles, as a rule, but I have known, in hospital experience, wonderful instances of sudden recovery for which there was no explanation."

"If watchful nursing will save any one," he said, with a look of gratitude, as he turned towards her, "you and Isabel, with my other kind friends, have saved my life. I must only trust that when this pundit of medicine comes, he may be able to hit upon some novelty in treatment and cure me out of hand. I feel a difference in my chest this morning, and have lost the gnawing pain which was killing me."

At the appointed hour Dr. Warburton made his appearance—a stern-faced, elderly man, who looked as if wounds and death, fever and pestilence, were things of course and everyday matters of business with him.

"Mr. Baldhill, I presume; much pleasure in making your acquaintance," he said. "This gentleman the patient? Hum, ha! Spear wound—Arab—bad style of laceration generally—confound them—never know where you are. Examination necessary. Perhaps the ladies had better retire; sorry to be peremptory"
Here the arbiter of fate, the trained antagonist of disease, the confronter of death in many a varied form, raised his hat and relaxed the official sternness perceptibly. Mrs. Baldhill and Marie went first; then Marguerite, reluctantly; Isabel stood for a moment, with a mutine expression, then addressed the august autocratic personage.

"I'm as certain as anything in the world, Dr. Warburton, that part of that spear has been left behind. From the way Mr. Allerton moves, you can see something hurts him. He's easier this morning, and it may have shifted. I'm only a girl, I know, but I thought it right to tell you."

"My dear young lady," said the great surgeon, bowing with grave politeness, "I am always ready to profit by information; you have behaved courageously, and sensibly. Be assured that I shall attach due weight to your suggestion." Here he bowed again, and Isabel followed the others.

"I will ask a few questions," he said, turning to Mr. Baldhill, "then before I decide upon any specific line of treatment, I shall prefer to see my professional brother, the medical gentleman of the steamer in which you arrived. Perhaps you will oblige me by sending a messenger for him."

This was done, and Dr. Warburton had a short but pointed conversation outside with Mr. Baldhill, after which he re-entered the room and commenced an easy and natural colloquy with Bruce Allerton.

When the doctor of the Chusan was announced, the medical gentlemen retired, and, after consultation, re-appeared in the room.

"Dr. Evans and I," said the army surgeon, "have carefully considered the symptoms, and have, as we suppose, arrived at a satisfactory diagnosis. I have been much assisted by the observations of my friend here, made on the voyage. We have arrived at our decision."

"Don't hesitate in announcing it," said Bruce Allerton. "If my time has come, the sooner I am told the truth the better. The news will not be unexpected. If an operation is to be performed, I am ready to bear it."
"You have saved me some trouble, my dear sir," said the surgeon. "We are of opinion that a splinter of wood or bone has been detached from the weapon, and is now lodged internally, causing irritation, with possibly dangerous consequences. An operation is, in our opinion, necessary, which, as I wish to have this gentleman's assistance, I will undertake this afternoon. I may say that I have every hope of a successful termination."

The pale face of the sufferer grew more set and contracted, but the steadfast eyes smiled as he said, "Lose no time, doctor, I am ready at any moment. You have relieved me very much. I had lately come to the same opinion myself."

Dr. Evans, of the Chusan, was a capable and qualified practitioner, but he was young in his profession, and had not considered himself to be justified in assuming the responsibility of so important an operation. He was highly gratified at being associated with so eminent a surgeon, and made all necessary preparations for the event.

If it succeeded, Bruce Allerton would be convalescent in a month. If anything went wrong, if the seat of the mischief was too intimately connected with a vital organ, another brave and gallant spirit would pass away, a needless, inexplicable sacrifice. That was all.

This part of the affair being disposed of, Mr. Baldhill called Dr. Warburton aside. "Now, doctor," he said, "I know this operation is, in one way, a dangerous one. I suppose we may call it so, seeing that poor Bruce is so low and weak."

"That is where the risk undoubtedly lies," said the surgeon. "I have little fear of the result otherwise. But in his present state of health he may succumb. The most careful nursing and restorative treatment will be necessary for more than a month after the operation."

"Can you stay for that time, and watch over the whole affair? Give an eye to the case, and see that we're doing right, and so forth, as I'm as anxious about him as if he were my own son."

Here Mr. Baldhill looked at the man, who, in his estimation, held the scales of life and death, with a
wistful, appealing expression upon his rugged features that was piteous to behold. It touched the heart of the army surgeon—a man to whom wounds and death had been for many a year the merest commonplaces of daily life.

"I am most anxious, indeed forced, to leave this hot climate. My own health has been impaired by long residence in India; but, under the circumstances, I will stay another month, or for such time as may be necessary. My fee, however, will be heavy."

"Name the amount—five hundred—a thousand! Anything you like to say," said Mr. Baldhill, with effusive gratitude. "My draft on London, Robert Brooks and Co., is good for cash here, I dare say. Anyhow, the money part needn't stop matters; Bruce and I can settle that afterwards—don't tell him a word."

"The smaller sum will do very well," said Doctor Warburton; "and now, my dear sir, you had better prepare the ladies for the perhaps doubtful side of the event, and at three o'clock, Dr. Evans and I will be ready to begin. I must get the hospital surgeon here to help us with some of the necessary instruments and antiseptic bandages."

CHAPTER XL

The operation was commenced. Difficult, delicately hazardous in its probings amid the great vital organs and the internal mysterious formation. Poor human nature pays dearly for a higher mechanical standard in a capacity for tortures indescribable, unparalleled among sentient creatures.

It appeared that Isabel’s conjecture was true. A portion of the spear had broken off when the weapon was pulled out, remaining in dangerous proximity to the cæliac axis, and needing all the skill, courage, and coolness of the practised operator who now ventured to undertake the terrible risk,
Though patient and resigned, in one respect, however, Bruce Allerton withstood authority. He would not permit chloroform to be used, preferring, if he died under the knife, of which there was no remote chance, to retain full possession of his senses to the last. He flinched not from the terrible ordeal, and by his calm endurance of the inevitable agony gave greater confidence to the surgeons.

All was done that human skill could devise. The terrible wound was re-opened—the jagged fragment was extracted—the exhausted patient removed; all that was now necessary, Dr. Warburton averred, was to adhere with minute exactitude to his written instructions as to medicines and diet, stimulants and sedatives; any failure of which in the state of death-like weakness to which the patient had been reduced might suddenly terminate his existence. If this were done, if the weather continued cool, if his constitution disclosed no hidden weakness, if no detail of nursing was omitted—then—but then only—there was a reasonable expectation that perfect recovery would take place.

"It seems to me that the doctor hardly thinks poor Bruce will recover," said Mrs. Baldhill, a few days afterwards; "that's the reason he's so careful to let us know how many chances there are against him; either that, or he doesn't like to make little of his cure."

"I hardly think that," answered Marguerite, who had been most unremitting in her attendance upon the sick man, taking indeed Marie's share of night-work as well as her own, and in every way assuming a right to the chief burden of responsibility. "But I could scarcely realise his being so weak, so helpless. I think he's better to-day, however, than he has been yet. The wound begins to heal, and the doctor thinks the appearance favourable."

"Pray God in His mercy that it may," said the tenderhearted matron. "It would be like losing poor Sydney over again if he went now. I've known him ever since he rode his first pony, and he always puts me in mind of my own poor boy. But we'll have you on the sick list, Mrs. Mortimer, if we don't mind. You've no rest night or day, and it's telling on you, I can see."

"I am renewed in health and strength," said Mar-
But little is left for me to do in this world that takes the shape of duty. I may well devote myself to works of mercy if they come across my path. I need not say I share in the strong friendship you all have for Mr. Allerton."

"I don't know what's come to Isabel lately," said Mrs. Baldhill, continuing the thread of her own thoughts rather than replying to her companion's words. "The child's out of sorts, full of fancies, and cries at the least thing. I expect this anxiety about poor Bruce, on the top of the battle and all that, has been too much for her. I shall be glad, as I said before, when we're out of this place and safe inside the South Head Light­house. That'll come natural to me again, and nothing here does; though this isn't a bad place to stop at, everything considered."

Marguerite had herself noted the change that had recently taken place in Isabel's demeanour. Instead of being the life of the party, her light-hearted manner had given place to one of uncertainty and caprice, with intervals of deep despondency.

Lastly, neglecting all ordinary objects of interest, she devoted herself to the care of the sick man, rivalling Marguerite herself in the unwearied industry with which she studied his every shade of improvement and relapse. She grudged the moments, apparently, which were not spent in ministering to his comfort.

Slowly the anxious days, the weary nights, passed on. The skill and assiduity of the practised healer were, however, never wanting. At every turn of the dread struggle between life and death which such a battle of the vital forces illustrates, his ready aid and counsel were forthcoming. At length, though tardily and reluctantly, the time of doubt and danger drew to a close. Words of encouragement from him were more frequent, and in the last week of the month which had been stipulated for the long-expected verdict of "out of danger" was pronounced.

That day was held, for the first time since the Chusan had sailed southward, as one of festal cheer. The object of so much solicitude was sufficiently advanced in convalescence to be removed to one of the airy, bal-
conied rooms which commanded a far-reaching view of
the harbour, the distant groves, and purple mountains.
And in fulness of heart the assembled party of friends
made merry over the restoration of him above whom
the shadow feared of man had so long been hovering.

Sir John Danvers and Stanhope, who had been
absent on a visit to certain hospitable coffee-planters
whose acquaintance they had made, returned in time to
add to the general congratulations, and to express their
satisfaction as well at Allerton's recovery as at the
prospect of quitting the East in a body by the Indus
(P. and O.), which was now daily expected.

"Splendid scenewy, glowious climate, pictuwuesque
suwwoundings," said the Honourable Bertie, in ex-
planation of their experiences; "but wather too much
of the Indian business ovah again. Done it befoah;
seem to know it all like a book. Weady to woam
throught the pathless solitudes of Australia, Miss
Isabel, by your side, and to chase the bounding kanga-
woo."

"Very glad to hear we shall be off again on Thurs-
day," said Danvers; "now that Allertno's nearly on
his pins again, we're all due for a little extra amuse-
ment. Heard any news of Gordon recently, Miss
Isabel? I've rather neglected his movements lately."

"He captured Berber the other day," replied that
damsel, with returning animation. "Think of that.
The Mahdi's adherents are quarrelling among them-
selves, and Lord Wolseley is pushing on his relief ex-
pedition by the Nile, though I think it is a pity they
didn't go by Suakim and across the desert."

"Pace evewything in these mattahs," said the Hon-
ourable Mr. Stanhope. "Didn't seem to think the
march ovah the—ah, desaht—feasible. Distance ap-
parently twifling, aftah all."

"Only two hundred miles," said Isabel. "Why,
what is that, with all the help they have at command?
The Government aggravates me by the slowness with
which they do things. There's no dash about them.
Mr. Cook and his tourists could march to Khartoum
if they had time allowed. British soldiers are brave
enough, we all know; but they've no idea of fast travelling, it always seems to me."

"We must have an Australian general or two, with a brigade of irregular cavalry, some day," said Dr. Warburton; "eh? Miss Baldhill? We shall have to go to the New World, I believe, to learn the proper commissariat business. Our home people are too full of precedent. I've seen it in the days of the Mutiny. Terrible slow-coaches sometimes! I dare say our friend here"—turning to Allerton—"will be glad to mount his favourite horse again."

"Can words express what my feelings would be to feel myself a man again, and breathe the free bush air once more—God's glorious oxygen, as poor Gordon has it?"—replied Allerton. "But I should never have backed another horse, or seen another cattle-camp, which I hope to show our friends, if it had not been for my dear nurses here; should I, doctor? I put you out of the question, you see."

"It was a very near thing, I can assure you, my dear sir; I do not now mind admitting so much. All depended upon the nursing, and to these ladies"—here the doctor waved his hand comprehensively—"I consider that under Providence you may be said to owe your life. And now the best thing you can do to repay them fully, and to be enabled to show your gratitude, is to get strong as fast as you can, and avoid all but cheerful subjects of conversation. I have the honour, therefore, ladies and gentlemen, to propose the health of Mr. Allerton's lady nurses, and trust that he may be spared to exhibit his gratitude in such form as may be most gratifying to one and all of them."

"Wather owacular and pwophetic, doctor," said the Honourable. "But pwobably time will pwovide the solution."

Once again preparations were made for a life amid wild wind and dashing wave. The huge Indus, one of the largest passenger steamers in the world, had arrived and would speedily depart towards the long untravelled land of the south. Being the cold weather season, she was crowded with Indian passengers, and for the two
days which her coaling required at Galle, they made a very sensible difference in the social atmosphere. Allerton was visibly gaining strength. His party therefore felt themselves justified in surrendering themselves to a reactionary carnival excitement. There happened to be a larger proportion than usual of home-returning Australians, to whom Allerton and the Baldhill family were well known. By way of change Mr. Baldhill organised a mammoth picnic to Wak-wallah, to which not only the Australians, but those friends and intimates whom they had made on the voyage were bidden. Fellow-passengers! What a world of memories—mirthful or, alas! pathetic—does the phrase evoke! What volumes might be written of the confidences, the sudden friendships, the unchecked intimacies, the irrevocable partings of a voyage! Does not a week of "board-ship" life, in the long, aimless, dreamy days, the still, starry, glowing nights, with none of the cares of life to check the growth of passionate love, of tenderest friendship, count for more than a year upon prosaic *terra firma*?

In that wondrous microcosm, the hollow oak or metal shell that holds so safe and speeds so sure its chance-gathered company of souls, rocked in its ocean cradle between the twin immensities of sea and sky, what communing of spirits is possible, nay, well-nigh compulsory! How the like-minded, the souls akin, rush to each other as by chemical attraction! What compacts of defence are made against the unsympathetic and the aggressive! How the stranger of yesterday becomes the pleasing acquaintance, the valued friend, ay, the ardent lover, long ere the short term of sea-journeying be passed!

It may have been that some, if not all, of these graduated socialities had been reached by the Australian passengers of the *Indus*. It may have been that the fame of Mr. Baldhill’s princely hospitality and the exceptional adventures of the party had reached the *Indus via* Aden. However that may be, the friends of the Australian passengers were nearly as many in number as themselves, and with a proportion of the officers of the vessel made up the largest party for a *Fête Champêtre* which had taken the Wak-wallah road
since the last Viceroy's time. Bruce Allerton, driven in a carriage drawn by Arab ponies, was strong enough to join the cheerful throng. Isabel threw off her late fit of depression, and, mounted upon Zohrab, caracoled forth, the centre of a group of her own countrymen, who having provided themselves with steeds preferred —more majorum—the saddle to the carriage cushion. The day was exquisite, and all Galle was in ferment at the scale of the entertainment.

CHAPTER XLI

WARM as high noon would necessarily find it, the day commenced with the fresh coolness which in tropical countries is as delicious as it is rare. Nothing could have been more favourable to the festive project. Soldiers and sailors, civilians and colonists, ladies and landsmen, all hailed the auspicious morn with feelings of joyful surprise and sanguine anticipation. Mr. Baldhill seemed determined that they should not be disappointed, and so bent the whole force of his will with an organising faculty which had before now compassed considerable enterprises to the successful carrying out of his programme.

To this end he made all possible preparations for the comfort of the ladies of the party. Half of the hackney carriages in Galle were hired; these were fairly comfortable four-wheelers, with hoods that protected from the sun, drawn for the most part by small, spirited Eastern horses. Ponies as they were, they were quite equal to the short stage over the level, well-kept, winding road from Point de Galle to Wak-wallah.

By ten o'clock the whole party—or series of parties, more properly—was on the march, amid mirth, satire, frolic spirits, and laughter sufficient for the mobilisation of the Household Brigade.

Besides Isabel, a few of the Indian ladies had elected to ride on horseback, but the best palfrey procurable for
love or money at Galle looked like a half-conditioned "tatt" when contrasted with the lofty bearing, satin-skinned elegance, and aristocratic manners of Zohrab, while Gholab, richly dressed, attended on Zuleika, and divided the admiration of the public with his mistress.

"Now I can take some pleasure in being on horseback again," said Isabel, as she reined her proud steed near the carriage in which Marguerite sat. "If Bruce had died, it would have broken my heart. What a dreadful thing it is to have a friend taken from you suddenly—from your side, as it were—in all his health and strength! How different the sky looks—the trees, that lovely lake! The face of nature seems changed to me—a sort of Fata Mergana. I feel as if I had not a wish on earth ungratified; that is if my darling gazelles survive the voyage, and Khartoum is relieved."

"You are expressing what we all feel," said Marguerite. "With your customary frankness, my dear child, you have opened a window into your heart. Words cannot tell the thankfulness I feel also at Mr. Allerton's recovery. Like you, I could hardly have borne his death; that is—if—if other duties did not intervene."

As the gay cavalcade swept on, the sailors riding with proverbial recklessness, the carriages following and occasionally racing each other; groups of white-robed natives appearing deeply interested in the strange behaviour of their English visitors; the silver waters of the great artificial lakes flower-bespangled as they were in the golden sun; the green-gloomed forest, through which the white pillars of a temple were ever and anon shining—the scene was indescribably lovely, varied and enchanting as a revel of Boccaccio. Of the glory of the tropical forest through which the bright red road led them, how can one hope to convey a dim expression? Columnar palms; the jak-fruit tree, with fluted lustrous leaves; the great tops of lofty, feathery bamboo, flower and climber, shrub and forest tree, were all mingled together in lavish, glittering confusion, and heaped up vegetable wealth.

"The Garden of Eden will be less faint and shadowy..."
in my mind henceforth," said Isabel. "That is one thing. What a wonderful green those rice fields are! And look at those dear little children." (Here one little elf threw her bouquet at her, trusting to her good feeling and the chance of future payment.) "And oh, what lovely water-lilies growing in that tank, with the granite wall around it! Will no one risk his life for my sake, and gather me some?"

The Honourable Bertie here dismounted gravely and walked to the edge of the tank, as if about to wade in for the coveted large white-star flowers which lay on the bosom of the lake; but, with characteristic coolness, he signalled to a native, who was sitting near, taking out at the same time a silver coin. The Cingalese, who was inexpensively arrayed in thin cotton robes, made no more ado, but solemnly walked in nearly up to his chin, and plucking the flowers handed them to the Honourable. He then shook himself, much as a Newfoundland dog would have done, then calmly sat down on the steps in the sun to dry.

"How wonderfully obliging they are," said Isabel, as she received the flowers from Stanhope. "And, oh! what lovely lilies! If I had not had my habit on, I would have gone in for them myself. How deliciously cool that native must be. I quite envy him."

"Chawmed to be of the slightest service," said the Honourable. "You must positively ask me to do something difficult next time. Heah we appeah to be at our journey's end."

By this time they had reached the old-time bungalow which belongs to the estate and gives its name to the place. A glorious residence in a hot climate. Pillared verandahs and balconies, stone floors, a high-walled courtyard with massive gates, the general plan and architecture most imposing.

It was evidently a mansion built in the good old times. There might even have been a little compulsory labour about it. The Dutch officials were sufficiently autocratic in those days. They knew how to build in a hot climate for comfort and coolness. The lines of their forts extend for miles. Even their store houses are mediæval-looking, castellated edifices,
Group after group now arrived. The air was filled with jest and merriment. Marguerite and Mrs. Baldhill, with Allerton, who was slightly fatigued, sat down upon a rock and gazed on the unequalled landscape. Around them were hills, forest-clothed, or dotted here and there with clearings. Vast rice meadows stretched on three sides, vividly green, and level as a lake of emerald, with a silver-threaded river meandering through. The broad stream which flowed beneath them boasted a wharf and walled-in cove, which attested to a bygone age of trade. They saw the coffee shrub, with its green berries, and picked the nutmeg, with its immature crimson-lipped mace. Native labourers in the out-buildings were chopping up tons of cocoa-nuts for the manufacture of oil.

Far in the distance rose the cloud-enfolded summit of Adam's Peak. They roamed about the glorious gardens, they lounged on the shady verandah of the old mansion, the whole livelong day, with the abandon of holiday-making children. Mr. Baldhill disregarded the landscape in great measure, but addressed himself to the question of luncheon with energy and decision. Two vans, deeply laden, were carefully unpacked, with the aid of a contingent of the stewards of the Indus, for that day only available. The results, when half-a-dozen impromptu tables, arranged on tressels, were laid, were brilliant, and altogether puzzling to the inexperienced British mind.

"How was it possible, my dear," inquired one of the lady passengers, "to get here in good order that lovely plate, the glass, the profusion of viands and wines of all kinds, and lastly the fish, the soup, the Parisian twenty-franc bonbonnières (of which every lady present was presented with one)? Mr. Baldhill must be a man of great taste."

"He's awfully rich, my dear," said the other lady; "they can buy taste, as well as most other things. His wife seems a nice, quiet, motherly sort of person. Possibly she may have something to do with this wonderful entertainment."

"I wonder how they will live in Australia when they
"Not so much as you might think—in fact a good deal the other way. I was there for a year when Arthur was down on sick leave; it was cheaper than going to England. We were asked out a good deal up country, and were considerably astonished at the style they kept up and the substantial comfort of everything in 'the bush,' as they call it."

"Style! You can't mean it!"

"Well, I don't know if you think fine large houses with billiard-rooms, libraries, asphalte tennis courts, and lovely gardens count for anything. Troops of stabled horses, handsome carriages, very fair shooting, Arthur said, and the whole thing done with a most generous disregard of everything except the comfort of visitors."

"You amaze me. If it's as good as you say, and a fine climate into the bargain, I must make Sir Harry take me there next time we get our leave. England's too cold altogether. The last time I was there I got a cold in my chest which nearly finished me; but it seems to me as if the serious business of the day—the déjeuner, I mean—were about to commence."

Those who averred that the lunch at the great Wak-wallah picnic, given by the "Waler" of fabulous wealth, was the best thing of the sort ever known in Galle since the Dutch Burgomaster had celebrated the purchase of a cinnamon garden by an entertainment of classical completeness, were not far out. The riding and driving, the dry, fresh atmosphere, the change from recent imprisonment on board ship, had given the guests an entirely praiseworthy appetite. They did justice, therefore, to Mr. Baldhill's great joy and satisfaction, to the very carefully compiled banquet for the quality of which he stood sponsor.

Nothing could exceed his assiduity as host. He was ubiquitous and omnipresent. He appeared to divine instinctively the precise brand affected by those of his guests who were particular as to their wines; the delicacies precisely in season, the fish, flesh, and fowl,
the viands and fruit, which were then and there available.

As for the ladies, Mrs. Baldhill and Marie, with Isabel for a sort of flying column, managed to tempt even the most delicate and heat-oppressed among them to unwonted daring in the way of entrées and champagne. Whatever slight gêne and reserve there might have been at the commencement of the banquet, there was none at its close. The popping of champagne corks was not indeed more continuous than the fire of mirthful allusion, good stories, prompt repartee, and sudden confidences which characterised the later proceedings.

It was therefore thought to be a graceful recognition of the claims of their host to their high consideration when Sir Harry Gaveston, a distinguished Indian officer and the swell of the Indian party, proposed "the health of the gentleman to whom they were all indebted for so much enjoyment, for one of the pleasantest days he had ever experienced—a day to be marked with a white stone, as Horace averred, or was it Catullus? His classical memory was still serviceable, but most strangely either the sea air or that last superb bottle of claret had temporarily obscured the origin of the quotation. As a great Australian proprietor, those who, like himself, occasionally sought the genial climate of the south for hygienic reasons were frequently brought into contact with the country gentlemen of the land. He could say from experience that their host that day was a type and exemplar—a most worthy one—of the boundless hospitality and generous scale of entertainment which proverbially characterised Australia. For the ladies of the family, who had so gracefully and genially done their part, they would understand the depth of his feelings, though he would not trust himself to say much; but they would all remember their amiable hostess and her accomplished friends, together with one of the heroines of the nineteenth century, who had almost sealed with her blood her devotion to a brother officer and one of England's foremost sons—he alluded to General Gordon, now beleaguered at Khartoum, and for all they knew, in sore strait and need. Whenever the news of the success and deserved triumph of this hero
arrived they knew who would be the most sincere of sympathisers, and in their hearts the names of Miss Isabel Baldhill and General Gordon would ever be closely associated.” (Loud and continuous cheering.)

Mr. Baldhill rose at once, and said heartily and forcibly that “he never was more pleased in his life than to see so many friends around him, enjoying themselves, he hoped and trusted. In his own country he had many friends, he believed—some of them very old, tried, and proved. He believed he appreciated them; but when he could not get old friends, he was always glad to surround himself with new ones, as on the present occasion. He trusted to see many of those now present at his own place in his native land, in Australia, where, though the country might not be always up to the mark in point of scenery and so on, they would receive a hearty welcome, and perhaps find that, in a general way, Australians know how to live. At any rate, they were always glad and proud to see their friends, and nearly always, he thought, contrived to amuse them. In the name of his wife and daughter, and the good friends who had shown themselves so true in the dangers they had shared together, he thanked them warmly and heartily for the way in which they had responded to Sir Harry Gaveston’s very kind remarks.”

Mr. Baldhill was much more fluent than he had been known to be on any previous festal occasion, and, indeed, impressed his wife with the idea that he was preparing for a Parliamentary campaign and a political career with reference to the land question on his return. But he evidently rose to the occasion, and possibly a glass or two of the very excellent dry champagne which he had provided, among other desirable tipple, may have aided his eloquence. Anyhow, his deliverance was highly approved of, and he was referred to by the younger members of this gathering as “a regular first-class, jolly old bird, and not half a bad hand at a speech.”

A time of careless freedom followed; in groups and smaller divisions still. The enfranchised guests bestowed themselves in such nooks and corners as best suited their views, whether for smoking, general conversation, or more personal and private discussions
chiefly interesting to those immediately concerned. Coffee—such coffee as is only remembered in dreams—was served as the afternoon glided past; and with sunset the satiated revellers betook themselves along the homeward road.

The shadows lengthened apace. The forest awoke with her tribes of manifold life to revel in that season of joy in the tropics—the thrice-loved eve. The landscape had lost the brilliant hues of early morn as they rode homeward along the winding forest-embowered path; but the softer tints of the eventide, which deepened and blended without effacing the gorgeous masses of colour that overspread sea and sky, were more in accordance with the mood of subdued joy which had succeeded with Isabel—that of joy unconfined.

She sat on her horse dreamy and pre-occupied, as with the delicious ease and elasticity of his race Zohrab swept swiftly onward, like flowing water, as she always averred. The girl seemed lost in a reverie, which the gay badinage of her cavalier was powerless to dispel.

"How strange a thing real, absolute, undeniable pleasure seems when you come to think of it," she said at length, after a protracted silence, which bore hard upon the most successful causeur of his regiment. "This day has been made up of it, 'if we never have another,' as I heard a shearer say once. All of us have been so miserable lately, too, it makes one wonder when the next misfortune will arrive."

"Don't pay to take that view of life," said the light cavalry cornet.

Bruce Allerton sat on the hotel balcony smoking long after the party had finally broken up. Marie and Isabel had lingered, but they, too, had disappeared. As for Marguerite, a reactionary meditation engrossed her, in which the events of her past life, the expectations of her future lot, were strangely intermingled.

Soon would she be in the strange new land of which she had heard so much. What was to be her occupation? What her career? Was she to fill up her life with completing Isabel's musical education and directing her reading? And when the girl married—as was
highly probable—nay, certain—what was to become of her? Was she to continue to be an integral permanent portion of the Baldhill household for an indefinite period? She looked forth upon the night. All was still but the plashing of the waves in the moonlit bay, the whispering murmur of the cocoa palms and serara trees, as the faint breeze stirred their slumbering leaves. The stars glowed with almost magical brilliance to her excited vision—large, lambent, lustrous—in the dark blue heaven. The low, confused hum from the thickly-crowded suburbs came faint and more faintly still to the ear. The lights glimmered in the silent bay. Hushed, calm, strangely beauteous were all things—glorious and overpowering to the senses with the unearthly splendour of tropical night.

At this mystical, fateful moment a voice fell upon her ear, low and deep, yet tender with the deep earnestness of the strongest passion which thrills mortality.

"Mrs. Mortimer—Marguerite, listen to me. We are alone. I have much to say to you. At least grant me a hearing, and do not speak until I have told you what my heart has long repeated."

She turned now, and saw Bruce Allerton, who had been sitting near her and Isabel when they last spoke. She had hardly noticed that they were alone, and had taken it for granted that her companion was indulging one of the moods of silence which had often come upon him of late, and which the intimacy of their companionship had come to permit without remark.

"Listen to me, Marguerite," he said, taking her hand. "You will let me call you so—will you not?—while I tell you of a love as deep and passionate as ever burned in mortal breast."

She gazed at him like one in a dream, and neither by word nor movement made answer to his appeal. Her surprise was so great that she felt herself for the time incapable of words or volition.

Strange though it might appear, she had been so wrapped in her own misfortunes that she had never for one moment imagined that he entertained for her any feeling warmer than that of friendship—a sentiment which, indeed, in its best and purest sense, she was
strongly conscious of feeling for him. The suddenness of his confession, in the midst of her long-indulged reverie, confused and almost stunned her. The veil which he had lifted from his inmost feelings—a matter on which she had found him the most reticent of men—had revealed so unexpected and startling a disclosure.

But, with the lightning flash of exalted intuition, she saw other things spread out before her mental vision which, never before apparent, arose now with a clearness of outline, with a depth of light and shadow, which amazed and terrified her.

CHAPTER XLII

The questions which had disturbed her mind, which she had with half-acknowledged volition asked her heart during her hour of introspective thought, returned with clamorous persistency. The circumstances of her former life as they arose before her from the troubled past seemed strangely inappropriate to her changed entity, as if they had belonged of right to another woman—to a wholly different individual.

And was she the same woman as she sat here in the charmed farewell night of her sojourn in this wondrous summer land? Was not that other woman dead in law? Sentenced to deprivation of all her rights, civil and personal, of home and hearth, husband and children, position and friends—ay, even of her very name? Had not he, the lover of her youth, the husband of her womanhood, the father of her children, been by an apparent refinement of cruelty selected as the unconscious instrument by whom the sentence had been carried out—forced to be the chief agent in reducing her to this desolate state of sorrow and forlornness? Was she alone (she asked herself) compelled to abide by the oath, so long forsworn—the vow which years since had been broken? Was she to immolate herself,
still living, like some poor Hindoo widow, upon the
corpse of that dead and gone marriage ceremony?

Still living! Yes, still living! Ah, heaven! did she
not know that never before in her life's history had her
pulses throbbed with fuller consciousness of vigour than
at this moment, when the voice of him who offered her
the priceless wealth of a true man's love sounded in her
ear! The absolute alteration of scene, the complete
transformation of every thought, habit, and motive of
her former life, had worked a magical change in her
inmost being. The balmy air of the Orient, in which
sense and spirit alike bathed, as in a newly-created
atmosphere, seemed to have rejuvenated her every
faculty. Her step was lighter, her head more proudly
erect; her air and carriage more closely recalled to her-
self the days of her lost youth than she could have con-
ceived possible—than any one could have dreamed who
beheld her in the first years of her agony and despair.

She could not deceive herself. An instinctive reply
cried aloud within her. She could have responded in
this new land, among these unknown people, to the
accents of tenderness, to the love of a husband, to the
daily duties and honours of a wife, even as a sorrow-
stained soul, escaping from the sins of earth, might
shine in rehabilitated splendour in some brighter world,
placed far amid the glorified immensities of space.

As these thoughts passed through her mind, with her
face turned to the soft, shimmering wavelets of the
harbour bay beneath them, the voice of Bruce Allerton,
low and pleading, fell softly and with almost rhythmical
cadence as it mingled with the sighs of the serara trees.
It was an hour rich in accessories of love—moonlight,
silence, the breath of flowers, and the hush of night.
All things went to influence the listener with strange
and increasing force towards that answer so often given
—the assent which marks the surrender of woman's
reasoning to man's passionate pleading, the capitulation
of the châtelaine betrayed by the treacherous promptings
of her own heart. Gradually, though unheeded, after
the first few startling accents, Bruce Allerton's words
became clear and resonant in her listening ear, while he
told how ' he had, from their first meeting, recognised
in her an allied soul, a kindred spirit; how he had divined easily that she was not what she seemed, that her social position had been, ah! so different. He knew, he could perceive, that a mystery enveloped her career. But he denied, from careful study of her every word and action, that aught save honour and purity could ever have been attached to her name. He was willing to take the risk; he defied all uncertainty as to her antecedents, if she would make him that unspeakably happy mortal which a word from her lips would do. He was willing to remain patient until she unravelled the mystery at her pleasure. Long had he waited and wandered for his soul's ideal. Till now he had never looked upon that combination of intellect and grace, of beauty and high-souled distinction of character, to which, from his boyhood, he had vowed fealty. He owed to her the exaltation of his ideal of womanhood—of faith in her mission to purify, to ennable, to save the ruder sex; he owed to her half a year of companionship which had made their adventurous journeying a veritable Elysium; finally, to her care and unselfish devotion he owed his life. 'That life, Marguerite, oh! my love,' he said, 'I now dedicate to you. But one word—one only—to say that you do not scorn the offering.'"

In his concluding accents there was a tone of tenderness and passion which, in that hour and place, it was hard for any daughter of Eve to resist; he moved his arm as if to draw her towards him. The slight action seemed to arouse her half-dormant faculties, as with a sudden movement she disengaged herself and stood before him.

Waving her hand with a slight but imperious gesture of command, she repressed his intention of approaching her as effectually as by speech, and gazing at him with an air of melancholy reproach, attempted to speak. Her voice failed her—

"The imperfect note
    Was choked within her swelling throat."

Then, "I have been thinking,"—she faltered at length—"oh! so deeply, since you first spoke. I had
long relinquished all thoughts of love and marriage, there is no coquetry therefore in my declaring that I never dreamt of awakening such sentiments in your heart. I will not, cannot deny my strong, yes, tender friendship for you. I shall always feel pride in your success. While life lasts your joys and sorrows will never lack one sympathiser, and there are circumstances—there might even have been such now—when the offer you have honoured me by making would have been welcome, would have been dear to my heart. But now, do not mistake me, I implore you, for having once arrived at this resolution I am changeless as death. These circumstances for me—for us, I will say—do not, can never exist.”

“Then you give me hope; if there be a contingency, a chance, even the most remote, I will wait for you—for ever—if you but bid me hope,” he replied.

“No! no! do not cheat yourself with a vain illusion. There is no hope, there can be none, none in this world. Even if the course of events were swayed, if what is unlikely, impossible, should happen, I feel now, though I have wavered, I confess, that I could never be yours.”

“But will you not explain? Oh! Marguerite, my life, my destiny, will you not take counsel with me about what so nearly concerns our happiness? Is the bar to our union insurmountable? It must be no mortal obstacle, if my devotion—my despair—cannot overcome it.”

“No, no! I must not say. I cannot explain. Look upon me as dead to the world. I may speak, may wear the appearance of a living woman, but I am not permitted to act like one. Look upon me rather as one of those creations of the poet’s fancy—the vampire, the lamia—who is granted power to disturb the souls of men, to awaken love, to excite hopes which she is compelled by an inflexible fate to destroy.”

Here Marguerite raised her eyes to Heaven, as if in mute appeal against the stern destiny beneath which her life had so long remained prostrate, and wringing her hands burst into a tempest of tears—a wild passion of sobbing which he who witnessed it could never have
imagined possible from the calm, graceful, self-restrained Mrs. Mortimer.

He would have consoled her, would have whispered assurances that they were in an intellectual age, the arbiters of their own destinies, the disposers of their own happiness. Why, all innocent and unconscious of evil, should they devote themselves to lifelong misery, at the mandate of outworn and narrow superstition?

"Oh! do not speak so, Bruce Allerton," she replied, and her voice had the tone of winning entreaty which had so often charmed him. "Do not you join the band of scoffers, nor tempt a weak woman in her hour of danger to consent to what every lesson of her youth, every principle of her womanhood, teaches to be false and demoralising. Could you endure to see me, could I myself bear to support existence daily, hourly, conscious as I should be of degradation and despair? No! while he lives to whom I vowed every thought of my heart, every faculty of my being, I can never entertain the thought of another's love. You have my secret in part. You can divine the torturing doubts, the deadly struggles. But, no! I am fixed in my resolve. My path is that of duty, clear and unswerving. Like yonder moon, as she glides through heaven's fields, passing through cloud and mist but to shine in serene, undimmed splendour, so must the soul of Marguerite Mortimer pursue its course on earth below, pure and unsullied by the gusts of passion, the shadows of remorse. And now, farewell! This subject must never be reopened between us. We are friends, are we not? Yes, and more than friends. May we never have cause to lose confidence in each other's truth and honour."

She gazed on him for one moment with a bright sorrowful glance, such as he told himself could come upon the face of no mortal woman that he had ever known,—then passed before him with her swift gliding step, as of an apparition, disappearing through one of the open doors of the balcony which led to the inner apartments.

So sudden and noiseless was her departure that Bruce Allerton gazed vacantly after her retreating form, as
though he were watching the evanishing of a being from another world. He looked around with an air of half-surprise, then sank exhausted upon his couch.

Next morning was devoted to the service of one of the deities in the British Pantheon, the great god Bustle. Mr. Baldhill, an invariably early riser, secured certain advantages of embarkation by a daylight commencement, and was therefore enabled to instal (literally) Isabel's horses and other live stock on board the _Indus_, as well as to secure undivided attention to the baggage of the party before the majority of the Australian passengers had left their beds. He wore, therefore, a serenely virtuous countenance at breakfast, as of a man who had "broken the neck" of his day's work. He was so fully occupied, in fact, by his feelings of self-gratulation, to which he more than once alluded, that he omitted to remark till nearly the close of the repast the somewhat silent and abstracted air of the other usually talkative performers.

"Why, Bruce!" he said at length, "you've regularly knocked yourself up over that Wak-wallah spree—don't look half the man you did yesterday morning. You must lie up aboard ship, or you'll not be very fit when we sight the South Head lighthouse. Mrs. Mortimer's tired herself out looking after you—seems to me—and Isabel too. Why, pussy, what's come over the lot of ye? You're not sorry to leave this hot hole of a place, surely to goodness?"

"Weaction after the wild wevelwy of Wak-wallah," said the Honourable Bertie, coming adroitly to the rescue, as he perceived a certain awkwardness on the part of the persons alluded to. "Wegulahly welaxed myself—haven't a word to thwow to a dog. Jack, old man, didn't you expwess yourself to the same effect this morning?"

"Parting with all our Indian friends," said Sir John, taking the cue extended to him. "Miss Isabel's half-score of admirers feel much worse, no doubt; I'm regretting that cheerful widow from Kurrachee, and Bertie was nearly making up his mind (a great thing for him) about that tall girl from Madras. Allerton, old
fellow, you'll promise to go to no more picnics till we get to Sydney?"

"Somebody told us there was news of the fall of Khartoum," said Isabel. "Captain Vyner says it's only a canard, but it has an ominous sound; that's what I'm mourning about. Only suppose it is true for one moment, and Gordon in the hands of the enemy! I feel as if I should never have another happy moment."

"We have heard so many of these reports," said Marguerite, forcing herself to join in the conversation. "I begin to fear that this relief expedition may be too late. Still, as long as it is unconfirmed, we must hope everything from his consummate generalship and the good fortune which has hitherto attended him."

"Luck is a bridge which breaks down sometimes," said Marie. "Even Napoleon the First found his Moscow. But surely le bon Dieu will preserve General Gordon. He is le chevalier Bayard of the age sans peur et sans reproche."

"We shall hear by telegram at King George's Sound," said Mrs. Baldhill. "Very likely he'll get through somehow. If he thought as much of that country as I do, when he came away the first time he'd never have gone back. And now, don't let us forget that the steamer starts at ten o'clock sharp, and there's a deal to be done before then."

This practical announcement brought the chief part of the audience back from the realm of the abstract to the concrete necessities of life. Sir John Danvers and the Honourable Bertie disappeared in search of their portmanteaux. Marie and Isabel followed Mrs. Baldhill meekly, as recognising that their hour had come. Marguerite had excused herself at the first mention of the steamer's sailing hour, while Mr. Baldhill lighted a cigar and looked around with an air of superior wisdom.

"I've got all your traps, Bruce, except what you'll want in your cabin," he said, "safe and sound in the after-hold, along with mine. The horses are eating their barley in their boxes, and Isabel's deer and spotted sheep—confound them!—are snug and comfortable in a
big crockery crate. 'An early start makes easy stages,' as Sam Slick says.'

"Thank you, my good old friend," said Allerton; "I really don't feel as if I'd the energy to have done it for myself. My traps might have stayed behind and been divided among the hotel waiters, as far as I'm concerned. I suppose they will cart us down altogether. Take care I'm not left behind myself, for I'm really not up to much this morning."

"It's that blessed picnic," said Mr. Baldhill. "It's taken too much out of you. I thought you were stronger than you seem. But we must tell off Mrs. Mortimer to take charge of you to-day. Splendid woman that! She's always to be depended upon when there's any good to be done. I'll tell her to look you up. I don't know what you'd have done without her."

Mr. Baldhill thereupon departed with an air of increased self-satisfaction upon his good-humoured countenance, evidently pluming himself upon having hit the right nail on the head, and provided for his friend an ally and supporter of the most unexceptionable description.

Bruce Allerton threw himself back upon the cane lounge he had adopted with a groan that came from the bottom of his heart. "Which was the sorer, the first word or the last?" he said to himself. "Why did not the Arab spear strike deeper?"

It was well for Bruce Allerton that he was not committed to the tender mercies of any of his feminine guardians except the one allotted to him by Mr. Baldhill, but, as he sadly reflected, denied to him by fate. The other ladies, frankly good-humoured and attentive to his wants on ordinary occasions, were on this eventful morn strictly unavailable.

Mrs. Baldhill, after counting and recounting all the trunks, bags, parcels, and wraps that were to be deposited in her cabin, together with an ample supply of fresh fruit for the voyage, became firmly convinced that her dressing-case, containing jewellery and valuables, was missing, and declined to leave the hotel until it was produced. As it was eventually routed out from the lower strata of a mountain of luggage deposited in a
waggonette, the search was protracted, and the chance of boarding the steamer in time appreciably lessened.

As for Isabel, she was engaged in a spirited personal controversy with several native jewellers and sellers of curios up to the very last moment. She had loaded Marie besides with pale yellow tortoise-shell bracelets, cats'-eyes, turquoise, and amethysts, including one large rose-diamond (a second Koh-i-Noor), for which she gave three pounds on the personal guarantee of the merchant that it was of the first water; so that the little Frenchwoman was utterly distracted between anxiety about the valuables and terror at the loud voices and frantic features of the bargainers. She had temporarily forgotten the existence of Allerton.

That luckless invalid had, between the over-excitement, the fatigues of the excursion, and his shattered hopes, indeed suffered a dangerous relapse. The recurrent pains caused him to imagine that internal hemorrhage had set in—that probably his last hour had come. Not that he dreaded the summons. He rather welcomed the idea as an easy means of escape from the burden of an existence which had of late been painful and wearisome, and which was now become utterly distasteful. Still, as he lay unnerved, weak, and half-fainting upon the couch, realising that the rest of the party were carrying out their plan for embarkation and strictly protecting their own interests without reference to him, he smiled bitterly as he choked back the feeling of desertion and neglect.

"I can enter into Lord Marmion's state of mind," he thought to himself, "and gauge that unscrupulous nobleman's feelings with curious fidelity, though I don't know that I have any feudal or other claim to particular attention; not indeed that it matters," and he hummed in a low tone—

"And half he murmured, 'Is there none
Of all my halls have nursed,
Page, squire, or groom, one cup to bring
Of blessed water from the spring,
To slake my dying thirst?'"

"Dying thirst; not a bad idea. I wonder if I could
ring the bell? I should like a glass of lemonade. Oh! It's you, Mrs. Mortimer. I thought you were all on board by this time."

"And left you behind! Surely you did not think that?" And here, as she noted his fatigued and haggard expression, her manner gained an indescribable softness, and her eyes filled with tears. "It was certainly unkind to leave you all alone, and so long; but Mrs. Baldhill delayed us all, and I have had to see about a carriage for you myself. Mr. Baldhill was carried off to the steamer. There is no time to spare; but everything is ready for you."

"You are my good angel," he said; "but it would be better far if you all went on without me. Mrs. Baldhill will take care of my luggage—it is not very valuable—till I come on."

"So you are going to lie down and die because you have suffered the first disappointment of your life?" she said, bending over him, and re-arranging the pillows under his throbbing head. "How hardly used men consider themselves to be when they have to suffer a tithe of what every woman bears uncomplainingly. If you wish me to preserve the respect I have always felt for you, Mr. Allerton, you will shake off this unmanly weakness and accompany me to your carriage. We must land you in Australia restored to health of body and mind. And here, in good time, comes Isabel. I know her step."

In good sooth it was that spirited damsel, who, ascending several stairs at a time, burst into the room with characteristic impetuosity.

"Why, what's all this?" she exclaimed. "Nearly lost your passage—all our passages! I took it for granted you were on board, and then found you'd never turned up. Thought you'd run away with Mrs. Mortimer. I did indeed. Gone to Kandy or Colombo. So I came back in spite of mother and father; defied the captain and all his officers. Now, no more words; we can't perform the play of Hamlet without the Prince. So come along, your Royal Highness."

And here the direct and practical young person leaned over and raised up the invalid by the simple application
of her strong right arm to his waist. "Mrs. Mortimer," she said, "you help to support him on the other side. I think, Master Bruce, you can manage to walk with our help downstairs, unless you want us to carry you. We could do that, at a pinch, too, I dare say."

The sick man smiled feebly, and bracing himself for the effort, walked in a feeble fashion between the two fair supporters until he reached the carriage, which entering he lay back in a very fair imitation of a fainting fit. The passage through the air revived him somewhat. They were rapidly driven to the shore, where a swift, broad-sailed outrigger canoe received them, in the stern of which sat Mr. Baldhill, anxious and impatient of mien. Arrived at the Indus' side, they were hurriedly assisted up the gangway; in less than five minutes the great steamer left her ground, the captain's stern voice was heard to pronounce the words "full speed," and Bruce Allerton was again on his way to his native land.

Once more on blue water, the passengers settled down to their new positions and unaccustomed cabins. All the Indians had departed. The Australian and New Zealand contingents were necessarily few in comparison. There was a forlorn and dejected look about things generally which Isabel, with her usual freedom of criticism, did not fail to remark.

"I'm afraid we have lost our aristocratic admixture; our social flavour suffers in consequence," she said on the third morning, when, Allerton being considerably renovated and able to sit up, they were all congregated after breakfast on deck in various conversational positions. "Of course, I'm truly thankful to you, Sir John, and Mr. Stanhope; but I can't help thinking we look rather provincial. I notice we've fallen off in our conversation. There's no singing in the evenings; and we're all disposed to think our own thoughts and be unsocial. All this must be changed."

"We don't expect anything; we're going to Australia," said Sir John. "Bertie and I are ready to take the rough with the smooth. So we intend to be cheerful. Don't we, Bertie? But we have remarked
that a tinge of melancholy pervades the atmosphere. I attributed it chiefly to Allerton's relapse, poor old chappie; but there were some nice people among those Indians."

"Nice! I should think so," said Isabel. "Not to mention that beautiful Mrs. Alvanley, whom you admired so, Sir John. I quite lost my heart to that charming Captain Yorke Northington, the Bengal Cavalry man with the heavy moustache. He was so clever, amusing, and distinguished-looking, so interested in my reading too. There was something very enjoyable in his society, until the doctor said something about his wife being such a sweet woman, and that they'd only been married six months. It was a shock to me, I can tell you. Don't you think he ought to have told me at first?"

"Most careless of him," said Danvers; "very reprehensible indeed. I think there ought to be a list of passengers hung up in the saloon, correct card, weight for age, and all that, column for married and single, widowers, and so on—any leading information which might be useful, in fact, about every one, male or female. Why should we be in danger of bestowing our young affections unsuitably, or under wrong impressions?"

"Why, indeed?" said Isabel. "I might have done myself a lasting injury, all for the want of a little private information. If Bruce had been well, I'd have made him get it for me. It's been a dreadful loss to me, the poor fellow's being so ill; but he's better now—are you not, poor old Bruce?"

"I do feel better, but you're not to 'poor dear' me, Miss Isabel Baldhill, as you girls say, any more. I'm extremely grateful to you for all your kindness, but I decline to be exhibited as an object of compassion. Perhaps you'll remember that."

"Poor—fellow, I was going to say, but I beg your pardon, Mr. Bruce Allerton. I perceive by your being so cross that you're improving rapidly, upon which receive my sincere congratulations,"
CHAPTER XLIII

EASTERLY winds dead in the teeth of the *Indus* had prevailed for the last week. An unchanging gale had seemed to have persecuted the ship from 8° south latitude. The captain passed his life in looking to windward, as if hoping to see a favourable bank of clouds, denoting a shift of wind. But none came. Then down went the barometer—down—down—until it appeared by its exceptional depression to justify a hurricane, a contingency upon which several experienced passengers of desponding temperament remarked in so many words.

"Rather an eerie thing this undefined expectation," said Isabel; "and yet, I don't know, a real good storm, that would show what the *Indus* was made of, would be something worth seeing."

"There is something terrible in 'the horror of a great tempest' settling down upon one," answered Marguerite, as they stood on the deck long after their usual hour of retiring, watching the limitless and sombre ocean waste, the "dim, desolate deep" heaving and foaming around them under the midnight sky. As far as eye could reach was that wondrous plain, now lashed and tortured into an upheaval phenomenal and menacing. The phosphoric light dimly revealed abysses which seemed yawning even to the recesses of that fathomless deep, while again the crest of the mountainous wave glimmered as if poised high on an alpine steep, to be lost the next moment in pitchy darkness. As the gale increased, with the weird shrieking, like an evil spirit, through every stick and shroud, one of the lady passengers hurriedly inquired whether there was any danger.

"None whatever, my dear madam," said the captain, smiling urbanely, "as long as the *Indus* holds together; and very great care was taken in building her. She will mind a gale like this no more than a waterman's boat does a tide ripple."

"But suppose anything should happen; fire, or a
leak, or anything of that kind," said the fair cross-questioner; "what would become of us then?"

"In such case, no doubt," admitted the Captain, "life might be sacrificed; but these disasters are improbable, and we are all in the hands of Providence; even on land, you know, accidents happen."

"Oh, yes! but it seems so much safer on land. The least little thing may go wrong at sea, and you can't get out and walk; on shore—"

"We have our boats," said the Captain, "and though they are inconvenient, many thousand miles have been safely voyaged in that way. But I must go forward; and in the meantime" (here the good ship Indus appeared to rear straight up, and gave a most awful pitch, while the screw revolved in air ominously) "I would suggest to you ladies to go to bed."

"Oh! but this is the time and the night that we expect to make the Cape Otway light," said Isabel. "I positively can't go to bed while there's any uncertainty about our seeing our dear old Australian beacon. Come, Mr. Allerton, you're pretty well now, thank goodness! Won't you back me up in my patriotic resolve?"

"When Prudence says one thing and the caprice of the hour another," replied Allerton, who, muffled in a portentous overcoat, was peering into the eye of the blast, "I know which will win. I really think, Miss Baldhill, that we might, as Australians, exhibit a little sentiment on this occasion. The first officer said it couldn't be long now, so I vote we sit up and confront the Otway and its dioptric light."

"Strange that science should enable this great ship," said Marguerite, "to run fearlessly towards a wild coast through storm and darkness."

"There is something awful about it," said Isabel, "but terribly fascinating. What do you say, Sir John? Shall we walk forward and stand near the look-out? I wonder which of us will see the light first, and which would win it if we made a bet on it?"

"Capital idea," said Sir John; "guinea sweepstakes, to be won by the first that sights it. We'll walk forward and see the fun for ourselves."

The night had grown wilder as they went forward,
beside the drenched and silent sailor who stood at watch, calm and collected, amid the shrill cry of the shrieking wind, the hoarse growling, the hissing wave-voices.

"Do not the waves put you in mind of a horde of Malay pirates?" said Isabel, gazing over the side of the vessel, as she plunged heavily with each revolution of the screw against the water-demons that threatened to engulf her. "They dash at the throat of the poor ship, that groans and trembles in every plank. Then they seem to be boarding her with a swarming rush, as they leap over and around and down gunwale and deck and hatch, then fall struggling, shrieking, clinging, back into the deep over bow and side."

"Bravo, Miss Isabel," said Sir John; "a most life-like, yet imaginative description. Nothing more grand in its way than what we are looking upon now. The gale is rising, too; hope we're not going to have a sensational blow—the tale-end of a cyclone; but it looks very like it. That would be worse than all."

"I don't know that I find the night below when one lies awake in this provoking head-windy weather, more weird and dismal than a downright gale," continued Isabel, whose romantic mood was now exerted to an unusual degree. "When you lie awake hour after hour the noises are dreadful. The dashing waters swish and gurgle close to your ear; the engine clanks with a sad, mechanical swing, like a galley slave; the Lascars, jabbering as they run, every now and then raise a wild cry, as if the ship were going down; the stern voice of the officer of the watch—everything tends to magnify these vast and awful nature-forces. One feels in a world of giants, that might crush one if only a foot from our course. Oh! there it is! and see!" with a shriek of delight the girl pointed to a glimmering speck of fire, hardly distinguishable from a star in the far horizon.

Almost at the same moment the look-out man growled hoarsely out in the deep tones which a sea life seems to produce, "Otway light, sir, on the weather beam, bearing sou'-sou'-east."

The girl's piercing vision had descried the beacon even before the practised eye of the seaman; and great was
the congratulation and triumph in consequence. The pool, which represented something over ten guineas, was handed over to her, and everybody vied in eulogising her sight, which had descried the beacon even before any of the officers or seamen on board.

It was a quarter of an hour after midnight when the Cape Otway light was sighted, and the captain had indicated ten to twenty minutes after twelve as the time when the lighthouse might be expected to come into view. He was not sorry to have his reckonings so accurately verified, and was evidently easier in mind, running as he was end on to the coast at the rate of fourteen knots an hour.

In despite of the waves, and the ebon terrors of the sky, no particular cyclone or special storm-blast developed itself. A long rolling swell alone told of the recent disturbances of the ocean. They learned, however, that there had been a terrific gale, such as had not been known for many years.

But it was a golden dawn which found them steaming through those vast sandstone portals, the Sydney Heads—soft, clear, opaline as a painter's dream. The towering araucarias were ranked on the elevations around the harbour as if sentinels posted to guard that hitherto inviolate haven. A Turner-esque haze slightly softened without confusing the outlines of sea and shore, the flower-crowned promontories, the fair, pale-hued pillared mansions. Early as was the hour, the calm, deep harbour bays were alive with boats and vessels of all classes. Gliding yachts swept by, broad-winged with outspread sails, tug-steamers with outward bound vessels behind them were straining and puffing towards the entrance through which they had lately passed. On all sides was unfolded a marvel of beauty—a nature picture heightened by art. It was a maritime stronghold of Britain replete with the luxuries of the race—a community thriving, enterprising, prosperous, knowing little of want, scarcity, or poverty but the names.

"What a wonderful place to be at the very end of the world," said Marguerite. "It seems another England, with a kind of semi-tropical flavour. The ships, the boats, the population are all English; but
the brightness of the sky, the clearness of the air, the gaiety and vivacity which pervades everything, these are different."

"Wait till you see the shops, Mrs. Mortimer," said Mrs. Baldhill. "They're English, if anything is; and I'm sure we shall want a week's steady buying before we are fit to be seen. I suppose the carriage will be there to meet us; that will be one comfort, as we telegraphed to Mason from Adelaide, and got an answer. If not, there are plenty of cabs."

"Cabs!" echoed the Honourable Bertie, faintly; "I call that distressing, wegulah imposition. Heah we twavel all wound the world, expecting a new countwy with boundless fweedom of action, and we ah met on the vewy shoah, the stwand of a new hemispheah—if I may so expwess it—with cabs!"

"Never mind, Mr. Stanhope," said Isabel, "don't despair yet. Wait till we get to Merradoolah; we'll show you something new and strange—won't we, Mr. Allerton? And now, you're all well and strong again—by the bye, we ought to have the prayers of the congregation requested at St. James's as a sort of thanksgiving, you know. Oh, no! it's only when people are likely to die that they do that."

"I hope you won't encourage her in any more wild ways, Mr. Allerton," said the old lady, anxiously. "Now that we've got home and among our friends and civilised people, Isabel, I shall expect you to behave like any other well-brought-up girl."

"Oh! I couldn't do that, mother," said the unconventional damsel, pleadingly. "Think what quantities there are of them, and all so painfully alike. But I'll promise to keep closely to the schoolroom, and let Mrs. Mortimer work me up in music and drawing, and all sorts of things that we've rather dropped lately. Then I've got my book to write; we mustn't forget 'The Battle of the Nile,' you know. Oh! we shall be so happy, I'm sure, and then when I've been good for a couple of months or so we must all go up to Merradoolah. Now we're within sight of George-street, safe and sound, too, life will be full of happiness, I foresee."
“Well, here we are at the wharf,” said Mr. Baldhill. “I see Mason and the carriage all right, the horses looking grand, too. What a size they are after those little cats of Arabs! Now, keep cool and collected; there’s always a rush at landing, and we’ve got such heaps of things to take care of besides the heavy luggage. I see Mason has brought William with him, so he can stop and see your horses landed, Isabel, and show Gholab the way to Orara. Bruce, of course you’ll take these gentlemen to the Club. All of you come up and dine at eight, and we can have a quiet talk over things. Ah! there’s Marie’s husband; regular little Frenchman, ain’t he? He must have thought she was lost. Never mind, Marry, ‘all’s well that ends well,’ isn’t it?”

Marie—“Alphonse, mon ange—mon ange!”

Home at last! A home strong in the security, solitude, and independence of British habitudes, sweet with the feeling of absolute control, and rich in those material comforts and allowable luxuries which wealth provides.

It was a peaceful pleasure for Isabel and Marguerite to ramble through the handsome rooms of the noble mansion in which a certain expansiveness of style had been sedulously studied; to sit on the wide verandah in the moonlight, and hear the surges on the beach beneath, to mark the lines of brilliant light which were broken by masses of foliage, or absorbed by thickets of strangely brilliant flowers. Mr. Baldhill spent his days in the city, at club or bank, or where merchants most do congregate, and thus was enabled to receive recent information about his various properties and investments.

Allerton and the English friends explored Sydney socially and geographically to their hearts’ content; but either at dinner-time or during the evening generally found their way to Orara. Here, souvenirs of the desert and the Great River formed a never-failing fund of mutually interesting conversation, while the sketches and travels in Sydney proper produced the usual amount of chaff and playful criticism.
Isabel fulfilled her promise, and during the day worked industriously at all branches of learning in which she felt herself to be deficient. She, indeed, displayed an ardour and enthusiasm which delighted her instructress. Marguerite had from the first experienced considerable difficulty in fixing her pupil's somewhat too easily attracted attention upon the work in hand. Now the latent energy of a strong temperament seemed to have asserted itself. The result was a remarkable advance in several distinct directions. With the exception of an early morning walk, and an afternoon ride upon the peerless Zohrab, Isabel Baldhill's days were devoted to genuine and unrelaxing study.

She resisted, with unusual firmness, the temptations to ordinary gaiety and social dissipations which would have interfered with her self-imposed task. She had become, almost immediately upon her arrival, a fashionable celebrity of no mean eminence. Her beauty, her intelligence, her naïve originality and daring, combined with the prestige derived from her father's wealth, would have secured her a leading place in colonial society under any circumstances. But when to these titles to distinction were added those of a rumour of adventurous Eastern travel; of the actual experience of a wound received in hand-to-hand encounter, wherein Bruce Allerton, the well-known squatter and country gentleman, was nearly killed; the whole emphasised and verified by the possession of Arab horses, slaves, and arms, with other trophies of conquest, the excitement about the heiress rose to a pitch altogether exceptional.

In the romantic interest which now surrounded all the members and intimates of the Baldhill family Marguerite fully shared. Her distinguished appearance, her stately manner, her accomplishments, and her attractiveness did not dispose the good people of Sydney to believe that she was "only Isabel Baldhill's governess." They, therefore, insisted upon constructing imaginative historiettes of her life and times, some of which probably came rather nearer the truth than the accepted version, in that they held it for self-evident
that she was perhaps a widow, but more probably separated from her husband under mysterious circumstances. As for Isabel, she was either engaged to Bruce Allerton, whose life she had saved in Egypt (very luckily for her, some of her contemporaries thought—they would have dared a little danger, if certain of being similarly rewarded), or else to one of the English travellers, one of whom was the son of an earl, and the other one of the richest country gentlemen in England. But the Baldhills were always a lucky family, and no one would wonder at anything they might arrive at. It was a pity, certainly, that poor Syd had died so young. If he had lived, Isabel would not have been the great heiress she was now; and all the better for her, too. For she was a little spoiled with her Arab horses, and her slaves and gazelles, and all that nonsense.

As for Mrs. Baldhill, her delight in finding herself once more on her native heath, the South Head-road, knew no bounds. She repeatedly asked Mr. Stanhope and Sir John Danvers whether they did not think people were very foolish to leave a home in a place like Sydney, where they had all the comforts and most of the luxuries of life.

These gentlemen were indeed so pleased with Sydney in general that they declared that no consideration should induce them to depart from Australia for years to come. "Capital yachting; famous club; most hospitable people; billiards, whist, ecarté, all to your hand; fish dinnahs, good cookery; splendid climate; nevah cold; seldom damp." (The Honourable Bertie's chest had been throwing out danger signals for some months before he left England for the East.) "Pwetty girls and agweeable women in evewy house. Don't see the good of going away from such a place; do you, Jack?"

"Too much like England, that's the worst of it," said Sir John. "Barring a little more sun, we might as well stop in Mayfair, in order to acquire a knowledge of foreign parts and acquaint oneself with one's countrymen in Britain's most important colony."

In deference to this view of things, it was decided
finally that everybody was to "desipere in loco" for the next two or three months. By that time the pleasures of the metropolis would have begun to pall on the male portion of the party. Shearing was impending, wherefore it would be a seasonable time to visit Merradoolah in September, in which month Mr. Baldhill generally inspected his properties and overseers. He liked to see matters for himself. Latterly he had taken Isabel as a sort of travelling companion. Mr. Allerton's chief property, Jimburah, lay at no great distance from Merradoolah, so it was decided after much discussion and many pros and cons, that they should all start for this much quoted place, and spend the last quarter of the year in the peaceful enjoyment of country pleasures—Christmas to be passed there. Then, and not till then, would they essay again to inhale the ocean breeze, watch the mimic fleet at play on the waters of the bay, and ride under the swaying pines which sheltered the gardens of the City by the Sea.

So on a certain morning another call to arms took place, which, Mr. Stanhope and his friend averred, reminded them strongly of their Hegira, the flight from Egypt, only that Abdallah and his followers were absent. Isabel regretted this deeply, but Mrs. Baldhill considered the superior safety of the North-Western Railway line to be more than compensating for the absence of the romantic element.

"The country is as dry and sandy, as flat and as bare, in a dry season, as any of the desert. I know that," said the conservative matron. "But at any rate we can travel in peace without thinking of those wretches of Arabs. I declare the thought of them makes me quite miserable now."

"But I heard you had bushwangahs and blacks," said the Honourable Bertie. "Wather ugly customahs, I should weckon."

"Oh, bushrangers!" said Mrs. Baldhill; "they're nothing. There are never more than three or four of them at a time, and they only rob you. As for the poor blacks, there are very few of them—like the snakes—and the chances are very much against your dropping across them."
Gholab and Zohrab and Zuleika were duly put into the train, to the surprise and amazement of the former, who had never before travelled in the fire carriage of the Giaour. Also the spotted sheep and the gazelles, henceforth to be located permanently at Merradoolah. A crowd had assembled at the station, and when Ayesha followed her mistress arrayed in yashmak and saree the interest became intense.

Growing fast, and developing with the rapid maturity of her race and clime, the slender child was fast changing into a striking-looking woman, her great starlike eyes, slight rounded figure, and clear-cut features forming an Oriental type of beauty decidedly novel in this altogether British community. No persuasion, however, could induce her to leave her mistress.

"She gave me my life," she would repeat. "It belongs to her in the future. She may do as she thinks fit with it. Who am I to run against the will of God? He has willed it, or I should never have crossed the black water. It is my fate. I am a Christian, and I can serve Him as well here. It may be better than near my childhood's home."

A day and a night found them at the terminus of the railway, whence they were to drive to Merradoolah. The route had not been wholly devoid of interest. Emu and kangaroo had they seen flying wildly out of the track of the iron horse. Strange birds had risen from the pools and watercourses as they passed. Immense flocks of sheep had retreated with but moderate haste from before them. Wild horses and cattle in herds had crossed the waste.

Their spirits were high; and when the four-in-hand drag with a team of grand, highly-conditioned brown horses—which was to bear them to their destination came rattling into the station, and the Honourable Bertie was invited by Mr. Baldhill to take the reins, every one foresaw that the whole thing was to be triumphantly successful.
CHAPTER XLIV

"Why, what's all this, govahnaw?" demanded that gentleman, as he assumed the ribbons with an air that showed long and intimate acquaintance with the mysteries of the coaching art. "Why inflict these tewiffic suppwises upon unoffending stwangahs? Why didn't you bweak it gently? Who would evah have thought to have encountahed a team and dwag like this in the wilds of Austwaliah? Blood, bone, bweeding, and matched to a hair? I should like to tool them on the opening day of the Faw-in-Hand Club."

"What was the good of gassing about 'em?" replied Mr. Baldhill calmly. "People say Australians are too fond of blowing as it is. I didn't want to sell them, though I've got more of the same sort coming on. But I like to sit behind the best nags I can turn out of my stud. And these aren't easy beat, either at home or abroad."

"I should think not," said Sir John. "You don't find a team like this in England every day—matched in colour, size, and action; sixteen hands too, if they are an inch. Of course they're all of one strain of blood?"

"Sixteen one, or a trifle over," declared Mr. Baldhill, with conscious pride and exactitude. "Half-brothers, all of them. Sons of Brown Ben (imported), and he was a grandson of Irish Birdcatcher. Can't beat 'em for blood and action, but I've had some trouble to breed up to the size."

"Now, what pwice would such a team bwing heah?" said the Honourable Bertie, "in case one turned dealah in one's old days; a light business faw which I've always had a taste."

"It's a fancy price, perhaps, but I have been offered five hundred guineas for the four," said Mr. Baldhill. "I don't want to sell."

"Sell!" echoed the roused aristocrat, almost departing from his ordinary languor of demeanour, "I should
think not. Why, the leadahs would bwing all the money in England."

The plain was wide, the road level and sound, the air fresh, and the day not too warm as the party set out for the oft-quoted Merradoolah. The high-conditioned horses went at their collars, and the heavily-laden but well-appointed drag rolled away at a pace which showed how little they made of it. Well-bitted, well-broken, running true and level, in perfect form, the team settled down into a twelve-mile-an-hour trot, a pace which they appeared to be capable of keeping up for a hundred miles on end.

"The vewy poetwy of motion," exclaimed the Honourable Bertie, as with all the reins in his left hand, and the whip carelessly disposed as if he were tooling a dogcart, he sat in rapt admiration of the horses, the drag, the appointments, the road, and, lastly, himself in the character of charioteer. "They work even maw bwilliantly than I expected fwom their appeawance. How fah have we to go, and when do we get there, Baldhill?"

"Fifty-five miles; to-night, please God, we shall sleep at home."

"Don't you think it's wather a full stage without a bait? But I speak under cowection, as not knowing the ways of your interwesting countwy."

"And quite right, too, Mr. Stanhope," said Isabel. "Most English people have so little consideration in that way. They seem to think we have no sense either. They're always saying 'Why don't you do this?' 'I'm surprised you don't try that.' Just as if these obvious things wouldn't have been done if there hadn't been some good reasons against them. Oh, I nearly forgot to say that we stop at such a nice clean inn half-way, which we shall reach in about two hours, if you don't steady them a little.""

"Going too fast, are we?" said Mr. Stanhope, moderating their transports. "So you do think of your horses a little in this countwy? I thought p'waps they could go on like this for evah, like the bwook."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Stanhope. We do just
the same reasonable things here that other people do. Ask dad and he'll tell you that it's a mistake to go too fast in the early part of the day. If you want to hit out you can do it in the last ten or fifteen miles, for then it won't matter. We don't want to get to Morrissey's before one o'clock."

"I begin to comprehend," said Mr. Stanhope. "We mustn't get to the half-way house too early, so we may pull back and proceed steadily. It's wather hard work, I can tell you, though; these pwoud steeds are deucedly fwesh and impatient."

It was scarcely past mid-day when the long-absent, welcome vision of Mr. Baldhill's drag, accoutred properly and furnished with visitors and the family, as of old, presented itself at the sign of the "Jolly Shearers," an old-fashioned, garden-surrounded inn on the bank of Emu Creek.

Mr. Stanhope and Sir John were charmed with the alacrity and completeness with which the unharnessing was managed. Almost before the ladies had descended from their seats, the four horses had been taken out, and upon their driver throwing down the reins, led off to the long range of stabling by an elderly hostler and his helper. The party was ushered into a cool, roomy apartment by the hostess, a buxom, middle-aged woman, who was enthusiastic in her greeting. The amount of honest satisfaction and real friendliness which she displayed was refreshing to behold.

"Walk in, Mrs. Baldhill! Well, I'm that glad to see you and the master here again in the bush and among our people as I can't hardly say what I've got to say. And little missie that was, Miss Bella, what a grand young lady she's growed into! My word! I couldn't have believed it. Come along in, though, out of the sun. There's the best bedroom, and the one next to it. You'll find 'em clean anyhow, and tidy. You can settle yourselves how you like. The gentlemen can take any of 'em on the other side, and now I'd best go and send in some dinner. So you're quite well, Mrs. Baldhill?"

"I am as well as ever I was in my life, Mary Ann," said that good lady. "And not sorry to see Emu
Creek again. Many's the time Mr. Baldhill and I've stopped here before, and it seems like home to see the old place again. I recollect the sofa and these chairs when you got 'em new as well as if it was yesterday. There's nothing like the bush for real comfortable living, after all."

"Quite of your opinion, my dear Mrs. Baldhill," said Sir John. "All this sort of thing strikes me as truly delightful. The drive over grand natural roads, the fresh dry air, and all that. And now this jolly, old wayside inn, with everything so snug and beautifully clean. Look at the tablecloth, napkins and all. I feel confident I shall have a splendid appetite."

"And I'll be bound Mrs. Morrissey has got something extra good for us," said Mr. Baldhill. "She'd know we were coming from the man, and she likes to do things well. Ah, I thought so. What a splendid wild turkey. Now the murder's out. We'd better get ready for dinner—we haven't too much time to spare."

By the time Mr. Baldhill and his friends had concluded their lavations the whole dinner equipage was in place and official notice given of the fact. When the party sat down a most appetising flavour was diffused throughout the apartment. Without attempt at ornamentation there was little for a fastidious critic to condemn.

A noble wild turkey, perfectly roasted, displaying the brown breast-meat, white legs, and pinions which content the southern epicure; Mr. Baldhill fronted a saddle of mutton, hung for nearly a week—juicy and crisp it was—almost too good an alternative to the wild fowl; new potatoes, green peas, lettuces, parsnips, and cauliflower, all these last from the heathen Chinee encampment lower down the creek, which comprehended gardens. The light wines of the country—Dalwood and Cawarra—sound and cool, were found to harmonise perfectly with the generous fare.

"No dinner like this in Egypt, eh, Stanhope?" said Mr. Baldhill, exultingly, as he forwarded a second consignment of the ample breast to that gentleman. "It will be nearly as hot coming back as the Nile bank.
But the notion of comfort's different hereabouts, isn't it?"

"Landlady Bwitish evidently," affirmed the Honourable. "Makes a remarkable difference in this kind of thing; don't it, Jack? Old England saw cookewy and—aw—clean linen. Next to whatsy' name, you know."

Mr. Baldhill filled himself a glass of the white Dalwood with the air of one requiring refreshment after his late fatigues. Drinking it slowly and appreciatively, he then replied: "Pure Australian, thorough-bred currency; born within thirty miles from here; daughter of an old sheep overseer of mine; mother Irish; very clever, industrious woman, gives her mind to her business."

"You suppwise me. Wegawded her from her accent and English ways as a distinctly marked home product. But, weally, you New South Wales people are more English than the English themselves; good old-fashioned style, too. How vewy intewesting!" and here Mr. Stanhope looked inquiringly around.

"The reason is, I suppose," said Isabel, "that in the country parts the manners and customs which the people brought with them nearly a century since are unchanged. With some exceptions, like Mrs. Morrissey's people, they were English village folk."

Every one felt fully rested and refreshed by the time the horses were led round, their coats showing all proper attention. Again they took the road, which—save for an occasional shrubbery of which the bright-leaved trees and flowers, strange of petal and hue, made welcome change in the eternal ocean plain—was an exact copy of the pre-symposial stage. The horses swept along without the slightest abatement of pace or alteration of form, with heads held high and the free-stepping, darting trot in which time was evenly kept. Three hours and a small portion of the fourth had gone by, when an elevation crested with waving trees, the gleam of a broad winding sheet of water, the halt at a pair of gates of more than usual ornamentation, aroused interest and curiosity in the strangers.
“Here we are,” said Mr. Baldhill, looking at his watch, “and in good time, too. There’s the old place. Mrs. Mortimer and gentlemen, welcome to Merradoolah! Thank God, it’s a good season, anyhow,” he continued; “look at the wild oats, and the crowfoot, with the trefoil smothering everything like a crop of lucerne; the water in the Cowall, too, bank-high on both sides. Who’d ever think as we’ve seen this very place at this time of year all dust and ashes, as you might say, the Cowall as dry as a bone, the fish all dead, and we carting every drop of water eight miles!”

It would indeed have required a person of strong imagination, under the present aspect of affairs to reproduce this extremely realistic picture. The waving grasses, the succulent herbage, the shining lakelet, in which numbers of wild fowl swam and disported themselves; the great flocks of sheep, which, fat, and well-grown, and heavily fleeced, seemed half-hidden in that abundant pasture—all things appeared to denote a pastoral Arcadia, a reign of peace, plenty, and unbroken prosperity for man and beast. How, indeed, could the mental vision travel forward a few years, and descry these very regions bare, desolate, barren as “the deep’s untrampled floor” (which it probably was in far remote æons), the birds fled, and the emaciated flocks dying in tens of thousands?

But this abomination of desolation was apparently far off; neither, should it immediately commence, could Mr. Baldhill’s immense fortune and manifold investments be dangerously affected. He was in a position to treat such a contingency as an undesirable natural phenomenon, but not otherwise menacing his interests materially.

“Come, dad,” interrupted Isabel, “you need not bring out these unpleasant stories now. They’re not amusing, and everybody says the seasons have changed, and that we shall never have these terrible droughts again. At any rate, Merradoolah is fit to look at now, so don’t frighten Sir John and Mr. Stanhope; only show them where their bath-room is first thing, and then their rooms, so that they can dress comfortably for dinner.”

These instructions were superfluous, as in accordance
with the general habits of the establishment, Mr. Stanhope and his friend found that nothing remained for them to do but, as in an English country-house, to surrender their persons and portmanteaux to the officials who presently took charge of both.

The former were carried off to a detached building, in which, in addition to extremely comfortable chambers, were bath, billiard and smoking-rooms. * Mr. Baldhill looked in to see that they wanted for nothing, indicated the bath facilities, mentioned that dinner would be at 7 o'clock, and departed.

"So this is the way these energetic colonists mortify the flesh!" said Sir John to his friend and comrade as they sat arrayed in evening costume in a couple of luxurious easy chairs awaiting the dinner gong. "They don't spend all their time chopping down trees, or galloping about on horseback, or tending their flocks, or fighting Indians, as we were led to imagine in England."

"Twees appeah scarce in this part of the countwy," said the Honourable Bertie; "but our worthy host did not always live like this. He did the twee-chopping first, depend upon it, in some form. When a man makes his pile, or lands a big stake, he can live as he likes. There goes the gong! I wonder if the billiard-table has been looked after? We must have a fluke or two to-mowow morning."

"This feels like old times," said Sir John Danvers, as they filed into the drawing-room after their host, and found themselves in a lofty, cool apartment, handsomely furnished in strictly modern taste, where Mrs. Baldhill, Mrs. Mortimer, and Isabel, in evening dress, had already arrived.

"I don't know whether we shall be able to eat anything," said Isabel, "after lunching on wild turkey, and all the rest of it at Mrs. Morrissey's; but we always dine late when we're up here, and it was hardly worth while to alter things."

"We collect eating two dinnahs in one day long ago," said Mr. Stanhope; "first one at Dijon, time midday. Aftah we weached Pawis, the othah fellahs insisted on dining at Vevy's. Marvellous to welate, we all did
vevy well theah, fwom the soup to the celewy, and
dwank a bottle of champagne fwappé each. Felt as fit
as possible next morning, assu-ah you.”

“Whether it's the bath, or the bush air, or the sur­
prise of finding such a palace in the wilderness, I can’t
say,” said Sir John; “but I really feel as if I had only
had a glass of beer and a sandwich for lunch. I shouldn’t
be surprised if I emulated this feat of Bertie's. But he
has a superior appetite generally, if you remark.”

“It's the luckiest thing my old cook came back here
a month ago,” said Mrs. Baldhill, “or it wouldn’t have
mattered much whether the dinner was late or early.
Though she's a funny old thing, she's an astonishing
talent for cookery, and as she's not likely to go till
after the shearing on account of the wages, we're safe
for that time.”

This was voted to be the most enjoyable entertain­
ment since Wak-wallah. The menu was tempting and
delicate, the light wines in perfect condition, the whole
service and appointments, even to the trim parlourmaid,
whom Mrs. Baldhill had sent on in advance, were such
as to charm and surprise the visitors. The dinner con­
cluded, the ladies half an hour after pleaded fatigue and
retired for the night; while the men, having made a
shorter sojourn than usual in the smoking-room, did not
disdain to follow their example.

Breakfast was initiated at the respectably early hour
of eight o'clock, at which time, summoned by the second
gong, all the inmates of Merradoolah appeared, looking
exceedingly fit and fresh. Mr. Baldhill had indeed
walked over to the woolshed shortly after 5 a.m., and
had for a couple of hours made a searching inspection
of the important business being transacted within that
imposing edifice.

He had returned shortly after 7 o'clock, well satisfied
with the shearsers, the wool rollers, the pressers, the
pickers-up, the shed manager—in fact with everybody
and everything but the wool-sorter.

“Everything's going on very fair,” he observed to
the overseer, Mr. Driver; “but that wool-sorter ain't
up to the mark. He knows, in a general way, the
difference between first clothing and second combing,
but that's as much as he does. If he goes on that way, he'll muddle the clip. This is one of the best seasons we have had for many a year, that is, and I want to turn out the Merradoolah wool A1. What's to be done?"

"I'm blest if I know, sir. There's a run on classers this season, and of course all the other sheds are in full work. We mightn't get one till the end of the year."

"I know of a man that's up to his work," said the proprietor, "and one I've promised to do something for. If this chap'll work under him, well and good. If not, he'll have to go."

"Oh! I dare say he'll be reasonable; he's not a bad meaning fellow, and I'll talk to him a bit. He'd better just pack the wool in the bins till the other man comes up."

"Just so. Tell him he'll have the same wages, and all I want him to do is to take orders from the man I'll get up, and help him all he can. Make him understand that."

"All right, sir; he'll do it. He won't be fool enough to quarrel with his bread and butter."

"Then I'll go to breakfast," quoth Mr. Baldhill. "My man ought to be up in three days."

Now Mr. Baldhill had ascertained at second hand (through Mrs. Mortimer and Isabel) that Monsieur Alphonse Durand was an experienced and scientific wool classer, having been employed in that capacity on the Rambouillet stud farm and other celebrated Imperial merino establishments in France. He carried a diploma and numberless certificates of efficiency. Mr. Baldhill had, on this account, promised Marie that he would, either directly or otherwise procure her husband a situation on some station where his attainments in this branch of pastoral science would have scope and recognition. He had not brought him up to Merradoolah, thinking very properly that his manager was not to be lightly interfered with in arrangement of detail. But now that an opening had presented itself he decided upon his course.

A mounted messenger bore to the township the following telegram: "To Mr. Alphonse Durand, Bay
View House, Macquarie-street, Sydney,” that being the address which had been supplied by Marie at their parting on the wharf. This was the wording:—

“Come at once to Railway Terminus, Ringwood, both of you; permanent employ; salary satisfactory; rooms prepared.

“J. BALDHILL, Merradoolah.

“8 A.M., September 20, 1884.”

“That'll fetch 'em,” said Mr. Baldhill, perusing his missive admiringly. “He'll know I mean him to bring Marry. He'll be just the man for the work, and she can stay with the missus and Bella, just as she did before; she was always a merry-hearted, amusin' little shrimp. We seem to miss her above a bit.”

When Mr. Baldhill at breakfast related his achievement he was overwhelmed with congratulations. He had done exactly what everybody wanted him to do. It was a brilliant piece of originality, his thinking of such a plan. Everybody sang his praises in chorus. He was in the happy position of having accidentally pleased everybody. Had Mr. Baldhill been a classical scholar he would have said piously “Absit omen.” It was obviously too good to last.

CHAPTER XLV

However, next morning all was couleur de rose and joyous expectation. The guests had slept well. Everyone did justice to the glorious cold round of beef, the chops and steaks, the hot rolls, cream and fresh butter, the honey and marmalade, and the broiled fowl with mushrooms, which constituted the morning meal. Mr. Baldhill was in unusually high spirits. Old memories were strong within him. The present season and its concomitants recalled an earlier time when the click of
the shears exercised upon his own sheep was the pleasantest music which could meet his ear.

"What are we all going to do with ourselves to-day?" asked Isabel, as if a more serious aspect of life were imminent. "Shall we show Mr. Stanhope and Sir John the practical side of Australian life?—that it's not all 'beer and skittles,' as the man we met in the train said who had lost five thousand head of cattle and two-thirds of his sheep the year after he bought Bondolmon. What do you advise, mother? How are these gentlemen to begin to acquire a real idea of the country?"

"Doesn't everybody go and look at the shearing first thing; that is, when there is any going on?" said Mrs. Baldhill. "We don't hear of much else, I'm sure, this month and next, so we may as well let Mr. Stanhope and Sir John understand what it's all about."

"The vewy thing," said the Honourable. "Most anxious to see a big 'shed.' That's what they call it heah, isn't it?"

"Let us all go over this afternoon, then," said Isabel. "And it won't be a bad idea to tell dad that we're coming. After we've had an hour or so of it we can go for a ride. Gholab and his precious horses (on his head be fortune!) are here all safe. It will be nice and cool in the late afternoon, so that we can stay out till nearly dinner time."

"Combines pleasure with instruction," said Sir John. "I shall be able to tell them wonderful things at home; only they won't believe me, I'm afraid."

The morning was spent by the young men partly in the billiard-room—where they found the cloth, the cues, and all necessaries in good order and condition—and partly in the stables. Into the latter establishment they lounged about mid-day, chiefly with the idea of inspecting the grand animals which had brought them so fast and safely on their upward journey.

The team was looking well in their stall boxes, with rugs and all other appointments, much as in England, while their legs elicited from both gentlemen expressions of fastidious approval.

"How is it," Sir John inquired of the coachman,
"that you manage to keep your horses' legs so uncommonly clean and free from puffing? They must be very regularly exercised."

"They exercise themselves, sir," said the official. "Do you see that small paddock, with the high paling fence round? In the hot weather we turn 'em into that o' nights, and in winter time by day. It's warmish now, so we keep 'em in this cool stable all day, so as the flies don't bother 'em, and at night they can move about in the paddock, and cool their legs and feet like."

"First-rate idea!" exclaimed Sir John, "when you come to think of it. Wonder it never occurred to us in England. Helpers are cheap there, that's one thing, so we don't trouble ourselves to find substitutes."

"Like to see the stables, gentlemen?" said the coachman. "They're the best in this district, people say. Master took a lot of trouble about them; had plans drawed, and I don't know what all."

Shouldn't have dweamed of finding stables like these out heah," said the Honourable, with a rapt expression of wondering surprise. "Must weally wefuse to ex-pwess opinions in futchah, been sold so fwequently."

"A good resolution," said Sir John. "Strikes me we'd better open our eyes and ears and keep our mouths shut for the next month or two. We must do the stables, though."

They followed the highly respectable coachman, who in stable jacket and gaiters led the way to the harness room. There was the four-in-hand set, best Long Acre quality, the carriage pair harness, the buggy sets, both single and double, all in perfect order, well secured from damp and dust, behind sliding glass frames. Saddles and bridles were dispersed upon their various pegs and stands, the bits and irons of which shone like silver. A fireplace denoted a convenient rallying point in a wet afternoon, as well as a preservation against damp.

As for the horses, they were of various sorts and sizes—necessitating a considerable number of loose boxes, stalls being regarded as heterodox. Hacks were there—middle-sized, well bred, and "fit to go for a man's life." A couple of lately broken colts, a thoroughbred sire, a
steeplechase horse in training, and a pair of fast trotting buggy horses. To Gholab had been adjudged a separate wing where he could feed, dress, and adore his beloved steeds without let or hindrance.

In the forage room bales of pressed hay, bundles of lucerne, bins filled with maize, chaff, and bran, showed that provender of the best sort was never wanting. A high-walled courtyard connected the coach-houses, sleeping rooms, and stables, a threefold line of buildings forming a convenient outlet for the equipages of the establishment.

By means of a wind-mill water was brought from the creek and laid on by pipes, so as to be available in every loose-box and in every corner of the house and stables.

"No end of riding horses here, as well as coachers; a sweet park hack, that bright bay with a star," said Sir John. "Puts me in mind of the Arabian Nights business, where you've only got to clap your hands and they send up everything you want. 'Bring more curricles!' That sort of thing. I suppose they could mount Abdallah and all his men here on a pinch. I wonder when we shall see a lance or a tulwar again? Near thing for Allerton, though! Wonder why he didn't come up here with us?"

"Natuurally wanted to see his own place, I expect. Had enough of our company faw one while. Asked us to come and see him by-and-by, you know."

"I vote we go when the shearing's over here. Nothing like seeing the country. I suspect we shall be glad enough to make for Sydney at Christmas."

"Pwobably hot by that time. I should pwefah a wesidence heah in the wintah. Long way fwom town; that's all."

"It certainly is, when you come to think of it," said Sir John, laughing. "All the same, I never saw a country I'd sooner live in. The people here have all the best part of our English ways, and essentially our manners and customs, with more freedom, less ceremony, but genuine friendliness. Magnificent distances, too, give a flavour of adventure that's wanting in Britain. If I were a young fellow—and hard up, as I
used to be, before poor Cyril dropped in India—nothing would have kept me away from Australia."

"Same heah," said the Honourable Bertie. "Per­fectly chawmed with the countwy, the people, the horses —evewything! All the same, I suppose next hot weathah will see us homeward-bound again."

"Shouldn't wonder," said his companion. "I gener­ally find that a year in a new place, even if I've been ever so enthusiastic at first, sees me at the end of my interest. Then I set out to create a new country, new friends, new surroundings of all sorts, with whom I get on quite as well as with the former ones."

"Doesn't beah the impwess of stability, Jack, I'm afwaid," said the Honourable Bertie; "but it's the way of the world. Some day you'll make a fwiend that you won't like to leave pwobably; what then?"

"I shall do as other men, I suppose. Meantime vogue la galère. And à propos, there goes the luncheon bell. My appetite up here is simply fiendish."

There was great anxiety and curiosity in the shed when it was announced that Mrs. Baldhill and other ladies, besides "The Boss" and "two swells from Home," were coming down to see the shearing. Some slight admonition was thought necessary by the over­seer, to the effect that the ordinary shed conversation, marked by more freedom than elegance, was to be wholly repressed, and superseded by studiously correct and colourless talk.

The irreverent wits of the party chafed at this, but submitted with a good grace to the inevitable, partly on account of the unwonted appearance of strange ladies, and partly because of Mr. Baldhill's unvarying popularity.

Luncheon over, it was decided to walk to the wool­shed, an ample, informal building distant about a mile from the house, which had early in the day attracted the attention of the two Englishmen.

"The weather is rather warm than otherwise," admitted Isabel; "but after Egypt, I suppose it will
not seriously affect any of us. Mrs. Mortimer and you
two foreigners will see something different from dear,
neat, steady-going old England."

"Delighted to see sheep-shearing on a large scale," said Sir John; "but my dear Miss Isabel, you are not
to call us foreigners. It is unfriendly, too, after all our
joint adventures."

"We were all English when we were in the desert," said Isabel, "but now we are Colonists, as you proud
Britons call us—believing in your hearts that we have
degenerated more or less. So you will have to be
foreigners, or what the men call 'new chums,' until you
have gained colonial experience."

"Dreadful depwivation," said the Honourable, with
plaintive apprehension. "Is it anything like fwee-
masonwyy? Ordeal to go thwough? Novices to be
blindfolded, and so on?"

"Not quite so bad as that," laughed Isabel. "And
some people being clever and sensible, get over their
apprenticeship—their wanderjahre—(you like German,
Sir John)—sooner than others, only you mustn't mind
being laughed at if you make little mistakes."

"Gweat Heavens!" exclaimed the Honourable Bertie,
"I'm only a youngah son, and my position is one of
humility. But fancy Jack heah, such a swell in his own
countwy, a live bawonet, with an unencumbahed estate,
being laughed at in Austwaliah!"

"Strikes me, Master Bertie, that you are learning
one Australian accomplishment already," said his friend.
"That of 'blowing.' I must ask you to permit me to
be my own trumpeter."

"Oh, we're no respecter of persons here," said the
southern maiden. "We should laugh at the Prince of
Wales himself, if he made the mistakes some of you do.
Not but what we're frantically loyal. I can't exactly
describe our feeling out here. We're pathetically
attached to the throne, but we have not that deeply-
rooted inborn reverence for rank—that instinctive habit
of 'ordering ourselves lowly and reverently to all our
betters' which English people have."

"Quite wight," said the Honourable Bertie. "You've
few equals and no superiors, Miss Isabel. You've
expressed the Australian relation to Britain admiringly. *Je vous en fais mes complimens.*

"I didn't mean that," she replied, blushing slightly, "and you know it, Mr. Stanhope. So we'll change the conversation. How many sheep are you going to shear this year, daddy?"

"About two hundred and thirty thousand altogether," said her father; "but the Banjee flocks will be shorn on their own run. A hundred and eighty thousand's enough for one shed."

"You take my breath away," said Mr. Stanhope. "Two hundred thousand odd! And what are their fleeces worth, if I may be permitted to inquire?"

"Oh, five or six shillings each; sometimes a little more."

"Gracious heavens! No wonder colonists appear to take life on the whole weather easily. Sowwy I didn't emigrate in early life."

"It's not too late now," said Isabel. "Papa will show you how to begin. In ten years you might be ever so rich—if the seasons keep good."

"Afraid I should hardly succeed as a squatter. However, must give the subject my earnest consideration."

They were now almost at the entrance of the wool shed, and upon nearing the immense congeries of yards, roofs, huts, and buildings of all kinds, of different sorts, sizes, and dimensions, the surprise of the visitors was apparent.

"What a town," said Marguerite. "It puts me in mind of a fair which I saw when I was a girl—quantities of sheep, and ever so many dogs; only things are more silent and orderly here."

"There is no beer allowed for one thing," said Mr. Baldhill. "Our people don't mix work and play well together. We find tea the best thing until shearing is over. After that they do as they choose. And now, Driver, which way shall we go in?"

Mr. Driver, who had taken off his hat and bowed comprehensively to the whole party, now advanced. "I think we'll show the ladies where the sheep come in," he said, "and afterwards we can come up to the floor.
It’s a good cutting day, and the men are shearing well.”

They walked through a gate in the more distant part of the enclosure, between two great buildings. They observed primarily an immense shed, entirely filled, even crowded, with sheep. These were standing together, yet divided by pens, upon a floor of open battens, promoting cleanliness and ventilation. The hundreds of clean, highly-washed fleecy bodies had a curious appearance, jammed together as they were, alike helpless and patient, with eyes mutely pleading for relief.

“Poor things! I always feel for them,” said Isabel. “When I was a little girl, I used to think the slaves were packed in a slaver’s hold like them, being smothered every now and then, as the poor sheep are when they get too closely pressed.”

“But they were packed in three tiers, one above another, in the old slave ships,” said Danvers. “Some of those in the Arab dhows on the Nile didn’t look too comfortable either. These are much cleaner, that’s one thing.”

“And most of them will be on the grass to-morrow,” said Mr. Baldhill. “They’ll be out by dinner time at the rate they are working now, Driver tells me. Watch the sheep running up this race.”

This was an interesting operation, and the visitors were amused by the gravity with which an old sheepdog advanced to a corner of one yard, when the narrow outlet called a “race” was opened, and intimidated certain sheep, more by silent expressiveness than by barking, until they ran into it. He then drew back, dividing those behind, which pressed forward and filled up the gap instantly.

Then the double moving doors at the farthest end being held by a lieutenant of Mr. Driver’s, the sheep ran through uninterruptedly, and were separated with wonderful quickness and accuracy into different divisions and enclosures.

“Howevah do they contwive to let them wun thwee or four ways at once?” said Mr. Stanhope. “Is it by haphazard?”

“Not at all,” said Mr. Baldhill, smiling. “That
man notes a brand or an ear-mark on every sheep as it comes towards him, which tells him what his place is. But it's pretty quick work, isn't it? In England they would catch every sheep and lift it over the fence."

"Is not that the surest way?" said Sir John.

"Slow and sure, if you like," said Mr. Baldhill; "but how many men and how many days would it take, do you think, to draft twenty thousand sheep—a lot we can put through before breakfast, if we begin early enough?"

"I understand," said Sir John. "The immense numbers of sheep you have here could never be treated in our Old World way. And yet, how simple is the principle of those little gates—working so cleverly both ways."

"The 'swing gate,'" said Mr. Baldhill, "and a wonderful saving of labour it is—was an Australian invention. It was never known in Britain. One of our colonists was smart enough to discover it."

"And a great many other things," said Isabel. "And 'Oh, Australia! and oh, my native land!' as Wentworth says in that beautiful poem of his (it's twice as fine and original as the one of Praed's that those old Cambridge dons gave the prize to); we shall discover ever so many more things yet, and make our mark in art, science, and literature, which Lord Kimberley doubted whether we had ever heard of. But though this is very interesting, and these portcullis doors are lovely, I vote we go and interview the shearers."

Passing up a long aisle, and noting how, by an artful reticulation of enclosures, the rows of small pens were filled and refilled from a central reservoir of unshorn sheep, they reached the "floor," as that most ancient arena—the shearing floor—is called, par excellence.

The sight was uncommon and bordering upon the dramatic. On either side of the immense floored enclosure stood nearly one hundred men, each holding or bending over a sheep in different stages of denudation of fleece. "The sheep before her shearers is dumb"; still, sounds were heard, a ceaseless clicking of the steel shear blades supplied a sort of running accompaniment? But little conversation took place, what there
was being low in tone, and apparently of an unimportant nature.

The men were, for the most part, young and in the prime of life, a few grizzled beards only being observable. It could be seen at a glance that they were working up to the extreme limit of endurance and speed in their avocation.

"What a fine set of men!" said Sir John, as he marked the tall athletic figures, the prompt, intelligent air, the manly expression and bearing of the majority. "If these are your ordinary labourers, I must say they are considerably in advance of our British rustics, of whom we are so proud. Are these men a class by themselves, or merely average specimens?"

"Perhaps they are a turn above the ordinary bush hand, but not much," said Mr. Baldhill; "they're chiefly small farmers, free selectors, as we call them, and their sons—others just station hands that have picked up the knack of shearing. It pays well."

"They are all native born Australians, I suppose?"

"I should say all—except perhaps a few of the older men. It's rare now to see a shearer who isn't a native. In my early days most of 'em were from the old country; and good men too. But these young fellows can shear rings round them."

"How are they wemonewated?" inquired the Honourable. "By weekly wages?"

"I am afraid they would not work as hard as they do at that rate," said Mr. Baldhill, smiling. "No! this is piecework. A pound a hundred, and find themselves—that is, they pay for their food. That young fellow in the striped jersey that turned out the well-shorn sheep just now will have shorn nearly a hundred and fifty sheep to-day when they knock off."

"One pound ten shillings for a day's work!" said Sir John. "No wonder they work hard. And what has he to pay out of it?"

"About half-a-crown, but he couldn't make the pace better if he was working for his life. He's doing his level best; and, when the grass seed's coming on, it's a good thing to get 'em to wire in like that."

"This is indeed a wonderful sight," said Marguerite.
"I have seen sheep-shearing in old times in England, when we lived in the country; but it was always done very carefully. It seemed a slow, painstaking, performance. The poor sheep had their legs tied, and were lifted up on a table."

"We shouldn't have time for all that here," said Isabel. "Look at Mr. Burrawong Jack there; isn't that the young man Mr. Driver was talking about, father? He hardly seems to have let go his last sheep, and now he has another half shorn. How his back must ache, I should think."

"They work like niggers when they are about it," said Mr. Baldhill, "and earn plenty of money. It seems a pity when they spend it foolishly. But these men will take away their cash mostly to help their harvesting in the high country."

"Fine upstanding fellows, most of these," said Sir John. "Taller than our men, they don't look quite so broad. You're rearing a nation in this great country that will do honour to the old flag some day."

"We hope so," said Mr. Baldhill. "The country fellows are the best. They're neither so well built nor so well behaved in the big towns."

"Case all the world over," said Stanhope. "God made the country, and so on. Stwikes me these men are smarter-looking, better set up and turned out than our yokels. Don't look like backwoodsmen, eh?"

"They are sharper in a general way," said Mr. Baldhill. "They travel about and pick up ideas. It must improve 'em, like the rest of us, you know. Burrawong Jack's been to Victoria and New Zealand. He's quite a man of the world. Driver told me he saw him come in from a ride on Sunday last toggled out in a tourist suit, with shoes, too, and coloured socks. Fancy Giles Chawbacon with shoes and a tweed suit."

"I should like to have seen him," said Isabel. "According to that dear Charles Kingsley's ideas, we ought to ask him up to tea. But we're not quite advanced enough yet. In another century, who knows?"

"I perceive that the equality in Australia, of which I heard something in England," said Sir John, "is
chiefly theoretical. For my own part, I prefer it to remain in that stage; but there is no saying where the communistic principles that are gaining ground in Europe will end."

"Don't mind waterising with the private soldier on a march or in action," declared the Honourable. "Vevey good fellow, Tommy Atkins, in his way; but decidedly object to him as a man and a brother, when the campaign's over."

"You can love your fellow-creatures as much as you like," said Isabel. "But life wouldn't be worth living if one were compelled to associate with people whose tastes and habits were utterly dissimilar."

"Is life worth living?" asked Marguerite softly. "Would the practice of utter renunciation for our Lord's sake be so utterly hard and distasteful, do you think?"

"I can't say how I may feel when I'm old and there is no more sunshine in the world," said Isabel; "but at present—ah! me, why should I go down into a vault and put on grave clothes? I see the wool-room over there, and the dear, raw-silk-looking fleeces. Oh! dad, talking of fleeces, won't Monsieur Alphonse be up in the train to-morrow?"

"Yes, and I'll be glad to see him," said Mr. Baldhill. "The wool-room is getting regularly choked up with fleeces, and he'll have a week's work to get through to begin with."

"Can't we do something in the way of a small compliment for these poor fellows?" said Isabel. "Just to make them glad we've come. They do seem to be working so hard. One man has cut his hand badly, and another looks pale and has his wrist bandaged up. I know what that means."

"Tell them, Driver, they'll all be paid a shilling a hundred extra," said Mr. Baldhill, "when they're settled up with; that is, of course, those that shear well, and stop till the shed's cut out. Tell 'em Miss Isabel gives it to 'em."

This announcement being heard by the men who were nearest the party, was promptly telegraphed to the others, the consequence of which was that there
was a murmur of thanks and appreciation quietly audible, while Mr. Burrawong Jack, who, having just let go his sheep, was unimpeded as to attitude, raised himself to the full height of his grand stature, and taking off his shearing cap made a highly creditable bow.

"A guardsman lost in that fellah," said Stanhope. "Pity you haven't an Australian army, isn't it? A smart sergeant would soon turn him out a cwack fwont-wankah."

"Just as well as he is," said Mr. Baldhill. "As for the army, I hope we sha'n't want one in my time; not, but what these fellows have plenty of bulldog in them, when it's necessary to show it."

"Runs in the breed, I suppose," said Sir John. "Melibœus could stand up to his man, I expect, as well as loaf in the shade—sub tegmine fagi, and all that. I wonder how they got on with the shearing in Virgil's day? More fun and frolic, red wine, and roasted chestnuts, laughing girls, and so on. I suppose it would not work here. What hundreds and thousands of fleeces!"

This last exclamation was caused by their entrance into the wool-room, a large and comparatively lofty apartment, sub-divided by "bins" or divisions of battens close enough to confine the bulky fleeces, and reaching nearly to the roof. There was a perfect mountain of wool awaiting due discrimination and distribution into separate compartments.

"So poor Alphonse will have to sort all these to begin with," said Isabel. "However will he do it? Isn't it beautiful stuff underneath?" she said, lifting a fleece, and showing the wonderfully bright, serrated, lustrous fibre, which the under portion of a well-bred, well-washed, well-grown merino fleece displays.

"Most wonderful," said Marguerite, examining it closely. "I never thought it could be such a beautiful fabric. It is really not unlike the silk we used to unwind from cocoons in our childhood."

"And are you going to pay Alphonse well, father?" said Isabel. "I should like him to succeed, for poor Marie's sake. She is such a clever, honest, bright little
woman. I needn’t ask you on the novelty of the one well. But will he have book of the season.

"If he’s lucky with this, Stanhope averred that such a real judge of wool, tian bush life (with late dinners, father. "He has all driving, shooting, and kangaroo and if he can class our occasionally whist thrown in), right, it will make determined to settle in the country, too."

"Oh! I’m so, which the whole routine of station "and they’ll !", they judged that they themselves, if two spare round soon learn to manage a station with capitally for id sheep. At this assertion Mr. Baldhill

"Well," I smile.

"the wooly nothing could be more complete in its way for Marie country-house life at Merradoolah. It had you’ve see, the reputation of being perfect as a guest’s your rid Everybody was welcome to do as he liked. Driver ody was helped and assisted in that laudable 

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took rtainly many of the requisites for happiness or for guerised forms of enjoyment were there. There was, swe, of all, a delicious morning room, which contained plages and journals, besides writing-tables and all springs necessary for the most extended correspondence.

ne side was entirely filled with shelves in which resided a fair collection of classics and old editions, besides an assortment of modern history, travels, biography and fiction, which last exhibited traces of careful supervision by the lady of the house. Then there was the billiard-room, which answered indifferently well for smoking in the morning, besides preventing the young men from losing club form altogether. To this apartment a general adjournment was often made after dinner, when pool and cheerful converse filled up the time agreeably enough till the hour for retiring. Isabel generally distinguished herself at the game, playing with a dash and precision which few young ladies exhibited. M. Alphonse showed himself to be a neat and scientific performer. At this game, as well as at écarté and picquet, it was discovered that he was well able to hold his own with the sons of Albion. He was voted a decided addition
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founded confidence, grounded on the novelty of the material that it would be the book of the season.

Sir John Danvers and Mr. Stanhope averred that such was the charm of Australian bush life (with late dinners, tennis, four-in-hand driving, shooting, and kangaroo coursing, billiards and occasionally whist thrown in), that they really had determined to settle in the country, particularly as from the extreme regularity and apparent ease with which the whole routine of station work went on, they judged that they themselves, if necessary, could soon learn to manage a station with fifty thousand sheep. At this assertion Mr. Baldhill was wont to smile.

Certainly nothing could be more complete in its way than the country-house life at Merradoolah. It had long borne the reputation of being perfect as a guest’s house. Everybody was welcome to do as he liked. Everybody was helped and assisted in that laudable pursuit, whatever turn it might take, or in doing nothing at all, if that suited his constitution better.

Certainly many of the requisites for happiness or for civilised forms of enjoyment were there. There was, first of all, a delicious morning room, which contained magazines and journals, besides writing-tables and all things necessary for the most extended correspondence. One side was entirely filled with shelves in which resided a fair collection of classics and old editions, besides an assortment of modern history, travels, biography and fiction, which last exhibited traces of careful supervision by the lady of the house. Then there was the billiard-room, which answered indifferently well for smoking in the morning, besides preventing the young men from losing club form altogether. To this apartment a general adjournment was often made after dinner, when pool and cheerful converse filled up the time agreeably enough till the hour for retiring. Isabel generally distinguished herself at the game, playing with a dash and precision which few young ladies exhibited. M. Alphonse showed himself to be a neat and scientific performer. At this game, as well as at écarté and picquet, it was discovered that he was well able to hold his own with the sons of Albion. He was voted a decided addition
to the little society, and both he and Marie shared the
honours always accorded to favoured guests.

Occasionally in the late still evenings the boat—which
was kept well painted and otherwise repaired in a boat-
house on the Cowall—was requisitioned for active
service. Fitted with a sail in case of a capricious breeze,
she was often speeded many a mile across the calm,
deep waters. The night air was deliciously cool. There
was a feeling of unreal adventure and strangely soothing
languor as they floated, hour after hour, upon the dim
solemn lake which loomed vast and shoreless in the
midnight.

At luncheon the whole party made a point of meeting,
and at that time arrangements were made for the after-
noon's occupation and amusement. Riding and driving
were the principal entertainments. From the number
of horses and equipages, this form of amusement ad-
mitted of considerable variation. Mr. Stanhope and Sir
John had a fervent admiration for the noble animal, and
of the inexhaustible science which is connected with their
breeding, breaking, riding, driving, and racing they
deemed themselves to be past-masters.

They tried every form of harness or saddle-work, from
the buggy trotters to the old stock horse which was
kept to run up the ordinary working horses from the
paddock. They made trials of their paces and courage,
accomplishments and defects, their speed and endurance.
It was during one of these impromptu performances
that the Honourable's celebrated encounter with the
buckjumper occurred. It had been guaranteed that
something like an international contest would take
place. The Honourable had expressed his wish to
"'wide an untwained coursah of the desert,'" and had
emphatically declared his confidence in his own ability
to "'sit a buckjumpah, or whatevah you call it.'"

He had taken very kindly, with his friend, to the
equitation portion of the establishment. He had noted
with pleasure and interest the herds of brood mares and
foals which roamed over the endless enclosures, and had
watched the process of breaking-in the large annual
drafts of colts and fillies—some destined for home use,
some for the metropolis, and some, the pick of the
basket, for the Indian market. This breaking-in business appeared to be ceaselessly proceeding. Day after day fresh batches of youngsters seemed to be run in by the stock-riders, large, handsome, well-grown, well-bred, but somewhat in the condition of Mazeppa’s involuntary mount—

“With arching neck and flowing mane,
And hoofs that iron never shod;
By spur and snaffle undefiled.”

As the great raking three-year-olds came into the high circular horse-yard, thence to be caught and haltered after rather a primitive and reckless fashion, also to be mounted shortly afterwards without regard to their feelings of extreme surprise and dislike to the educational course. Mr. Stanhope demurred. He did not hesitate, being more incautious and sympathetic on this subject than most others, to express his deep disapproval of the whole process. One morning he even went so far as to remonstrate when he saw the rough-rider, Bill Staunton, seated upon a very violent chestnut filly, she doing her very best to unseat him by frantic plunges, spasmodic “props,” side leaps, kicks, and rearings, apparently simultaneous.

“This is the consequence,” said he, “of the hasty treatement of the young horses which you fellahs seem to delight in. I wondah you don’t all get your necks bwoken. That mightn’t mattah so much, but it spoils all these nice young horses; that’s the worst of it. Once they get the twick of kicking like that they nevah lose it. It all depends upon the first mount how a horse turns out.”

“You’re sure of that, Mr. Stanhope,” said Bill, with whom the two “new-chum gentlemen,” as they were not disrespectfully called, were highly popular, on account of their general bonhomie and exceptional largesse. “You couldn’t make no mistake, I suppose. Now I’ve been bred on the place same as the horse stock, and I’ve never done anything all my life but ride. I’ve been a breaker ever since I was ten year old, and my old dad used to wollop me with a stirrup-leather if I fell off. Now I ain’t half as certain as you are. I
can't raly say what causes buck-jumping and vice in horses, and yet I've done my best to find out.

"Why, all the wough handling at the start, of course; any child can see that," said the Honourable.

"If it's so dashed plain to be seen, why haven't we seen it all this time? Mr. Baldhill's father had these runs, and first got the stud together. He was a smart man, but he never seen it. I never seen it, and I've been studyin' to work points in horseflesh ever since I left off petticoats. And here you come, Mr. Stanhope, from a place ten thousand miles off, and you see it first round."

"It wears a look of swagger," said Sir John, "I admit; but Mr. Stanhope only says what he's heard every trainer in England say. We all think so, and all the books say so."

The stud-groom and horse-breaker at Merradoolah was a tall, sinewy Australian, whom any one could have verified as belonging to that sub-section of the Anglo-Saxon race had they met him on the steps of the Coliseum. Like many of his countrymen he was slow of speech, but withal of a reflective and logical turn of mind. He did not, therefore, answer hastily when Mr. Stanhope said, "What else can it be? What othah weason can they have for such fwantic pwactices?"

Mr. William Staunton appeared to be taking counsel with himself, and carefully weighing evidence before he answered. At length he spoke:

"Haven't you never come across strains of blood, sir, among men and women, let alone dogs and horses, where, do what you would, they always turned out cronk? Bolted off the course, ran crooked, or went wrong some road, no matter how careful they were looked after? And other sorts never gave no trouble from the jump and went straight from post to finish? Did you think it was the first nurse they had, or the first school they went to, that did all the mischief?"

"Can't say for that exactly, William; but horses and dogs and men and women diffah matewially."

"Not so much, they don't—you take my tip for it, sir. Well, there's good and bad, treacherous and true,
straight and crooked, cowardly and game among horses just as there is among us. And you don’t change their nature, mind that! You may keep ’em going pretty straight while your eye’s on ’em; but the least check or bother, and then all the devilment shows out in ’em.”

“But what made the chestnut filly ‘buck,’ as you call it?”

“She’s Bay Kitty number nine. We number ’em according to the year. Now old Crazy Kate, her grandmother, she was by Vagabond, imported, and a savage old wretch that would almost eat a man. She did break a boy’s leg and ribs one day. Bay Kitty, her daughter, was very little better, and this blessed wretch here would throw you first, and then study which eye she’d kick out of you afterwards.”

“And you’ve tried to be quiet and peaceful with her, William?” said Sir John.

“I alway takes ’em easy if they let me,” said Mr. Staunton. “The less trouble they give the better for both of us; but it don’t answer with any of the old mare’s stock. You must let ’em see you’re master from the start.”

“Any maw of them, William?” quoth the Honourable. “Seem to fancy I should like to try my hand and see what wegulah treatment might do.”

“Certainly, sir,” answered the Australian Master of Horse. “There’s Kitty’s three-year-old colt, own brother to this vixen here. That chestnut with the blaze face and white stockings you see there. Fine colt too. We’ll halter him to-day, and you shall have him all to yourself, sir, if you’d like to try your hand at breaking, and see how your plan answers.”

“You don’t believe in my ability to wule the untamed steed by fair means and considewate treatment. You’re not sure of its ansahing?”

“I’m dead sure it won’t,” said the unabashed specialist, who, though perfectly respectful in manner, had no idea of being overcrowed by a lord, as they all considered the Honourable to be, in the matter of his own profession. “I’m that certain that the colt will do his best to shift you the first time you cross him,
that I'll lay a fiver he bucks; and another that he puts you down, though you ride better than any other gentleman from the old country I ever saw at Merradoolah."

"Done with you, William," said the Honourable, good-naturedly. "Give you my word, I'll twy all my powahs of persuasion. You don't believe in the powah of patience. I wawn you I shall bit him pwopahly befah I mount, and lunge him wespectably in English fashion."

"You may bit him till his mouth's like velvet, and lunge him for a year," said the unconvinced William, "and then he'll buck like a brumby. It's in the blood of 'em, and nothing any man can do'll fetch it out. That's my tip, sir, and I've watched 'em close."

This colloquy had taken place before breakfast, and at that meal the subject was mentioned and received full ventilation. To Mr. Stanhope's surprise, the issue of his spirited enterprise was considered doubtful by the non-European powers of the conference.

"I should have thought," said Marguerite, "that any young animal would be completely subjected by patience and kindness. Surely what they need is an assurance that they will be treated with gentleness and forbearance, though I grant that Staunton rides superbly."

"Blood and all that's a strange thing, when you come to think of it," said Mr. Baldhill, meditatively. "There's people I've known where education and kindness and advice, everything that money and good-will could do, has been tried over and over again, and all for no good. The family fault breaks out in 'em, and it's the same with old Crazy Kate's lot. She was a regular old tigress, and they mostly take after her. Good-looking they are, too, and clippers to go."

"It's discouraging to think that careful training and early habitues go for nothing," said Marguerite; "I am indeed surprised. Look at those horses of Isabel's—how gentle and docile they are. Now, the Arabs love their horses like children. Surely the same treatment would produce the same results here."

"I don't know much about Arabs," said Mr. Baldhill. "These two are out-and-out pets, and you might make
'em turn a barrel-organ, I believe; but even in the desert you'd find some tempers, I expect, if you knew where to look for them. As for our horses here, they follow their families mostly. I advise you to have nothing to do with any of the old mare's lot, Stanhope. They're not a good thing.'

"And what do you advise, Miss Isabel?" said the Englishman. "Is a man who has widden with the Quorn and Pytchley to be bullied by a 'Waler' colt, a wegalah baby, with the odds in his favah of being allowed to 'gentle' him, as Wawey says?"

"You ride and drive beautifully, Mr. Stanhope, in your own line. I admire you immensely, and in the hunting field I hardly think Australians would have a chance with you; but riding through timber and breaking young horses are things you can't have had any practice in. You must excuse me for fearing that Bill Staunton will prove more than a match for you."

"Oh! surely not, if Bertie brings all his English stable lore to bear, Miss Isabel," said Sir John. "Our young horses give so little trouble when they're kindly treated."

"I'm only a jeune demoiselle bien élevée," said Isabel demurely. "Perhaps I don't know; but when this fortunate grandson of Crazy Kate's is to be mounted we'll all go and see. Very likely he'll be overawed and do nothing."

Here the discussion terminated. The ordinary amuse­ments and occupations followed with tranquil regularity as before. The month that preceded the Christmastide was nearing its close; only a few weeks remained of the early summer time which they had arranged to spend at their pastoral retreat. The temperature had by this time become more decidedly torrid. Fiercely glowing was each day, even the evenings were sufficiently warm to send the whole party, with one accord, to their Cingalese chairs in the verandah directly dinner was concluded.

"Oh, ciel! It is as hot as Egypt—as the Thebaid!" exclaimed Marie, when the cloudless night, breezeless, silver-starred, with its unchanging azure and eastern in its calm splendour, had succeeded a more than
usually warm day. "Only we have no Arabs; no sense of exile; no fear of the morrow. These are much."

"We are far away from *La Belle France,*" said Alphonse, inhaling his cigarette; "but, as for me, I regard not the patriotic rôle. Europe is becoming too full. One is even jostled; and since the war many things are changed. *Pour moi, je suis enfant de grand Bretagne.* What you call Breeteeesh soobject, is it not?"

"When I left France," said Marie, "and found myself *en route* for the unknown land, I felt that I must die. Dost thou not remember—thou?" she said, appealing to Isabel. "Thou didst comfort me, and Madame Mortemère—*ange que vous êtes.* Now I should die to return. I mourn myself nightly—*ma foi*—to know how speeds that Bayard of a Sir Gordon. I figure to myself, perhaps, his corse, like those others near the walls of Zobeide, all bleeding, gashed, motionless. Hast thou forgotten him, Isabel, inconstant *Australienne* that thou art?"

"Say that word, again, and I'll carry you over and drop you in the Cowall, you little French dragon-fly that you are," exclaimed Isabel. "Do I not think of him by day, by night, in my prayers, in my dreams? I have cut out every paragraph that relates to him, every illustration from the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News,* till I have a scrap-book as large as the sideboard. How I hope to end it all with the defeat and downfall of the Mahdi! No! in life or death Gordon will always be my hero. If anything happens to him the current of my life will be changed."

"I sometimes think people in the colonies feel a more vivid sympathy with our leading men and are capable of more intense hero-worship than we are in England," said Sir John Danvers. "I certainly have found people generally more *au fait* with the persons and incidents of modern history. I fell across a lady the other day who was better up in the life and times of General Herbert Edwardes, the Punjab man, you know, than I was, and we are related; she had never seen him either. Climate favours enthusiasm and admiration generally."

"For the noble and great," said Isabel, with flashing eyes—"for a name and fame above the blight of earthly breath! for the Körners, the Lawrences, the Havelocks,
the Hampdens, the Falklands of these and other days. And long may it be so! We are not ashamed of our national taste."

"He-ah! he-ah," said the Honourable Bertie, clapping his hands approvingly, "Miss Isabel; most chawming chawctewistic. Gwand cweachah, Gordon. Dwink his health at Cwistmas. Fancy spending Cwistmas at that beastly hole, Khartoum! Enough to kill and slay him without the help of the Mahdi. By the way, didn't you say, Governaw, that Bwuce Allerton was coming heah for Cwistmas?"

"Sorry to say he can't come," replied Mr. Baldhill. "Letter from him this afternoon. Had to go and deliver one of his cattle-stations on the Barwan. Purchaser wouldn't wait. I thought we should have been all together here for a week or two."

"What a shame!" said Isabel. "Oh, dad, why didn't we know in time? I'd have written him such a letter. I call that mean. It's all an excuse about his station. He could have sent his overseer, or a stock agent, or anybody rather than disappoint us. Don't you think he is wicked and ungrateful, and I don't know what all, Mrs. Mortimer? It's a weak invention, too. I wish I knew his real reason."

"Mr. Allerton generally has good reasons for his conduct," said Marguerite, calmly. "No doubt he has one now."

CHAPTER XLVII

The Honourable Bertie Stanhope addressed himself to his task of subjugating the chestnut colt with determination; though forewarned of his inheritance of the fierce blood of Vagabond, a sire of astonishing speed, marred by a sullen, uncertain temper and distinctly cannibal tendencies, he lightly regarded that important fact. Bit and cavesson, lunging rein, and patient firmness would correct all erratic tendencies.
Method and perseverance would prove too much for any feeling of colonial independence the youngster might have. Besides, he was prone to disbelieve, like many English people, in even the defects of the Australian animal types, holding them to be necessarily inferior in resolution to their insular prototypes.

So, the colt having been haltered with Staunton’s assistance, and inducted into a loose box with all proper consideration, Mr. Stanhope entered upon the enterprise with enthusiasm, and confidently predicted that he would have “Highflyer,” as he asked permission to name the colt, quiet enough for Miss Isabel to ride him by Christmas.

“You won’t catch me on his back,” said that young lady with decision; “I should never have any confidence in him if he appeared ever so quiet and peaceable. I should never know the moment he wouldn’t go off like a catharine-wheel and be the death of me.”

“Surely, Miss Isabel, you don’t think I would recommend you to mount a horse not perfectly broken in for the world?”

“Quite so. You’d think he was quiet and trustworthy; but I should know that he wasn’t. His heart would be the same. And horses have hearts just like men—some of them very bad ones too. So I should be sure he was only waiting for a chance, and some fine day he’d kill me, or do his best that way—perhaps himself too. He wouldn’t mind that in the least.”

“You Australians are—you must pardon me—the most obstinate people in some ways. Amounts to unreasonable prejudice against poor Highflyah’s family, against which the utmost propriety on his part is unavailing. Most unkind!”

“Very well; Mr. Stanhope, of course, knows best, having lately come from the fountain-head of all knowledge. ‘They’re a simple people, these French. They don’t know much about horses. Their priests keep it from ’em.’”

With this quotation from Judge Haliburton, which closed the dialogue, and in spite of his superior knowledge caused the honourable horse-tamer to reflect
how the Elder’s experience in dealing had proved insufficient, from ignorance of an unknown factor, and to wonder whether, after all, these Arcadians might not have their hidden sources of knowledge even about matters so apparently simple as colt-breaking. He was resolved, however, to leave no means neglected by which he might win his bet, and, what he valued much more, prove to his entertainers and the “gallery” that, though a newly-arrived Englishman, he was capable of meeting colonists on their own ground, and proving a knowledge of rural accomplishments not inferior to their own.

To this end he daily dressed, fed, and watered Highflyer; led and lunged him with the assistance of one of the stable-boys, who became temporarily devoted to him, by reason of sundry half-crowns; carefully bitted and reined him; accustomed him to the sights and sounds of the buildings and farmyard; and in a general way put him through the first stages of equine education.

“Great point to accustom them to all the objects and sounds befaw they’re mounted, George,” he said affably to the lad, a sharp-witted station-bred urchin about fourteen, who, under a rustic demeanour, concealed much general knowledge of men and manners within his limited area, and more cunning, not to say undeveloped rascality, than was generally believed.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Stanhope, I think that’s the way; they’re a deal too fond of jumpin’ on ’em just as they’re caught; and jammin’ the hooks into ’em. That’s what makes ’em go to market.”

“You are a weally shrewd observer, my young fwiend,” said the Honourable—“ideahs pahaps pwov-incially expwessed. Now we must get this colt so quiet that when he’s mounted, just befaw Christmas, he’ll go off like a made horse—don’t you think so?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Stanhope, he’ll go all right!” replied the young monkey, who in his heart did not believe anything of the sort, looking upon Highflyer and all old Kate’s lot as incurably “touchy” and only serviceable when in regular work, or lowered in spirit by poverty and wayfaring. “Bill Staunton thinks nobody can’t
ride but himself, 'cause he's been here so long and knows all the mares and foals like a book."

"Staunton wides wewy well—most sensible fellah," said the Honourable, "but there are pwobably a few mattahs even he does not know. With pwopah care all the nonsense about buckjumping, as it is called, may be avoided."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Stanhope," assented George, at the same time looking with interest at Highflyer standing near, who had suddenly exhibited symptoms of alarm at a piece of newspaper which the wind was blowing towards him. His ears were thrown forward, his eyes dilated and fixed, his nostrils expanded; his whole frame showed a nervous concentration which presaged some abnormal effect. Mr. Stanhope at once stepped to his head and patted his neck. "Steady, Highflyah," he said; "steady boy. Why, what's the mattah with the horse? His neck feels like a board." Here Highflyer gave a trumpet-like snort, and shivered all over. Mr. Stanhope held him more closely by the head, and spoke encouragingly to him, at the same time a swirl of wind carried away the object of terror in another direction, and the horse gradually recovered his self-possession.

"I nevah saw him so startled befaw," said the Honourable; "weally shouldn't have believed it of him. But he appeahed to twust in me aftah the wetched papah blew away."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Stanhope," said the attendant sprite; "he didn't mind it a bit after you spoke to him. He knows you fust rate."

Mr. Stanhope was a little doubtful on the point, and also as to whether he had fully gauged the depths of Highflyer's temper, as on one or two other occasions he had shown unexpected powers of resistance. But the fit had passed off. He had wisely forborne to press for unconditional submission. On the next day the colt seemed to have recovered. He trusted that on any future occasions such would be the case, and on returning to the house named the day before Christmas as the one on which he would put his theory to the test of practice and mount Highflyer.

"I'm sure I wish you every success, Mr. Stanhope,"
said Isabel, who had been several times to see the re­
doubtable animal in his box, and had watched him at ex­ercise. "You've taken a world of trouble with him, and it won't be your fault if he doesn't turn out well. But —"

"You think there's a 'but' in the affair; you weally can't believe that any Bwiton can know as much about horses as the wedoubtable William Staunton?"

"Only because they are his horses—his country's horses, I mean," said Isabel, gently. "He thinks, and I too, that we know our own country ways best, and about the people and animals that belong to it, because we've lived here all our lives."

"Appeahs weasonable," said the Honourable. "Pahaps I'm the obstinate cweatchah aftah all. The wesult must decide."

Christmas was imminent. The shearing was over, the wool teams, with waggons bearing forty and fifty bales each, had all rolled away to the railway terminus. The sheep, shorn, tar-branded, slight and elegant of shape, had been turned out by thousands and tens of thousands into the paddocks, now so opulent in grass and water. All the hard and anxious work for the next six months was done and over. The shearers were gone; the washers, the knock-about, the supernumeraries of all sorts had been paid up. Cheques had been flowing like a financial fountain since the day after the shearing. In reaction, a certain feeling of loneliness, a hint of ennui, was felt in the atmosphere.

There were not above twenty or thirty people left on the place. These were boundary riders, stockmen, and members of the permanent staff, ordinarily necessary upon so large a property as Merradoolah. Only one day remained before the great annual festival common to all British communities. In the afternoon a truce to all labour conditions would be declared, and the modest modern Saturnalia lasting until the new year would be proclaimed.

After breakfast, according to invitation, the whole party from the "big house" walked over to the stables,
to which the Honourable Bertie had preceded them by a few minutes. As they came within sight they observed that most of the men about the place were collected in the stableyard, where Highflyer was being walked quietly about by George, who, clad in a new Crimean shirt, a comforter, and newly-washed mole-skin trousers, evidently considered himself suitably attired for so important a ceremony.

To Highflyer, on his part, no exception could be taken by any lover of horseflesh or judge of the befitting in stable lore. The regular grooming, joined to a season of the year when under the Southern Cross every horse had a naturally fine coat, had given him a satin skin which shone golden-bright in the morning sun. He stepped lightly, he held his head well, and his arched neck and champing of the bit showed the perfection of his mouthing. His saddle was closely, but not too tightly girthed, while crupper and martingale both helped to prevent any undue alteration of garniture. George's expression was an indescribable affectation of honest confidence in his master's system and instinctive doubt of the colt's temper and tactics.

"The ground's rather hard, isn't it, Bill?" said Mr. Baldhill. "Mr. Stanhope rides well for a stranger to the country, but I expect the colt will shift him. You'd better hold him; the boy will let go if he makes a jump."

"All right, sir, he might go steady, and Mr. Stanhope has taken an awful lot of trouble about him. But you know the breed of him. What's bred in the bone—and cetterar."

"He's a grand colt," said Mr. Baldhill; "only he's too small an eye, you can hardly find a fault with him. I see Mr. Stanhope's ready now."

The colt did justice to his breeder's encomium. Standing fifteen hands and a half in height, he was compact, powerful, blood-like, with legs and feet of iron. His loins and quarters were immensely muscular; his shoulder oblique, though perhaps a trifle heavy on top. His eye was decidedly his worst feature. It was small, and, except when excited, dull of expression; a little white also showed above and below the pupil. As
Mr. Stanhope walked over to him, there was quite a buzz of admiration from the crowd.

"I'll hold him for you, if you don't mind," said Staunton. "He might move, and the boy ain't strong enough to stick to him."

"Thank you, William," said the Honourable. "It's weally vewy considewate of you."

Mr. Stanhope was attired for the occasion in boots and breeches; a cool close-fitting coat, without collar or necktie, completed a costume at once correct and suitable for the feat he proposed to himself.

"It's quite nervous work," said Isabel, as they watched their guest walk carelessly up to his mount. "I'd almost as soon do it myself. Suppose he should he hurt? Upon my word, my heart goes pit-a-pat; worse than it did before our battle."

"But does he not ride well? I always thought he rode beautifully," said Marguerite.

"He does and he doesn't," said his fair critic; "well enough -for 'cross-country' work on any reasonable mount; but he's not quite good enough for a regular 'terror' like Master Highflyer. Oh! now for it. Stick to him, Bill."

These last exclamations, apparently involuntary, were elicited by the sudden course of events.

When Staunton took the colt's bridle from the boy, he stood close to the animal's shoulder, holding him firmly, close to the broad-reined snaffle in which he was ridden, the while patting his neck soothingly. The Honourable advanced with his usual leisurely step, and taking the reins, mounted lightly and easily, as if able to ride round the park. As his leg went over, the colt gave a fierce snort, and bounded from the earth, dragging Staunton with him, who hung on to him like a bulldog, forcing him to return to nearly the same spot. As he touched the earth with his fore-legs, the Honourable quietly took advantage of the occasion to put his right foot into the stirrup.

"Wather wapid and wesolute," said he; "didn't dweam he'd be so ungwateful. 'Gentlemen of the Guard, fire first.' "

"Look out, sir; he means it," said Bill; and at that
moment the colt, whose feet had seemed rooted to the earth but the instant previous, sprang into the air, all four legs off the ground at once, and lit with his nose between his fore-legs, having dragged his head down, in spite of Mr. Stanhope's efforts and the really fine mouth which he owed to that gentleman's unremitting attention.

Mr. Stanhope had had ample time before the second movement to fix himself firmly in the saddle. He was therefore prepared, and sitting well back, was not shaken in his seat when the colt came down after the first regular "buck jump." A cheer came from the spectators, who were really pleased to see his success, and hoped he might yet overcome his extremely doubtful mount.

But the fierce blood of the racehorse that never won a race when he was heavily backed was now aroused in Highflyer, all his apparent docility notwithstanding. It was the first real contest he had been engaged in, and all who understood the symptoms watched earnestly in silence. Without a second's respite the frantic brute rose on his hind-legs, and so nearly fell backwards that Marguerite uttered a cry of terror. Bending forward, however, the rider threw his balance in the right direction, and once more Highflyer stood trembling with rage and fear in a natural position.

Mr. Stanhope began to think that the tales he had heard about buckjumping were exaggerated, when the colt made a wilder plunge than any previous one, at the same time dashing his head forward to the earth, after a fashion which nearly unsettled Mr. Stanhope's seat in a vain attempt to hold him up. All previous action was a joke to the terrific rapidity and variety of the attempts which he made to unseat his rider. Astonishing side-leaps, which necessitated a different degree of muscular exertion and balance on Mr. Stanhope's part, succeeded wild plunges, "props," bucks, rearings, and kickings, all apparently at one and the same moment, the whole without a moment's intermission, began to cause Mr. Stanhope's breath to come fast and his head to feel dizzy. The horse seemed to move like an automaton wound up to a
particular pitch of frenzied contortions, unable to stop before the close of the allotted period. His rider was just on the point of hoping that he had succeeded in tiring him out, when one desperate lurch dragged him forward in the saddle, leaving him a little off his balance.

The next moment he felt himself pitched violently over the horse's head; and as he rolled over, he was conscious of a sort of devil's tattoo being performed by Highflyer's hoofs in close and dangerous proximity to his face. This was caused by that insatiable animal's efforts to knock the bit out of his mouth with his fore-legs.

"Well, he is a savage brute," said Isabel, in justly indignant tones; "he really ought to be shot. Oh, Mr. Stanhope! you rode him splendidly. You would have won the bet with any decent horse. You only want a little more practice to ride anything."

"Must suwenda'n my sword," said that gentleman, advancing with but little abatement of his usual coolness of demeanour; "lost my money fairly. Too many faw me, just at pwesent."

"But you aren't hurt, are you?" said Isabel, eagerly. "I was afraid the wretch would brain you with his fore-legs, he was quite close enough."

"Spwained my wist, that's all the damage, or I think I'd twy again; a twifle shaken as well. No, William," he said, as Staunton, having caught the redoubtable Highflyer, was walking him up and down. "I'll give you anothah fivah, if you'll wide him. Just faw the lesson, you know. Learn all I can while I'm about it."

"Certainly, sir; glad to see you're not hurt," said Bill, affably and respectfully; "never saw a home gentleman ride so stunning before. Of course, now you've 'monkeyed' him, George could ride him, or any one, in a manner of speaking."

George here looked over with a guilty and abashed countenance, knowing full well that he stood convicted in the eyes of his contemporaries of having "run" (that is, helped artfully to persuade) the new-chum gentleman to believe that the colt would do nothing vicious—and had thereby risked his life.
"I won't get on 'im, Bill," he exclaimed; "not to­day, any road. I didn't think he was such a nut, I didn't raly."

Bill looked contemptuously at him, but refrained from speaking, and proceeded at once to shorten the stirrups and mount. As he moved up to Highflyer's shoulder the same expression of nervous terror came into the horse's countenance, presaging a repetition of mis­conduct. Staunton did not attempt any method of conciliation; but taking hold of his ear, held it and the shortened bridle rein in his left hand with a vice-like grasp, the pain of which caused the animal to cringe slightly, and prevented him from moving.

Taking hold of the side of the pommel with his right hand, Mr. William slipped easily into the saddle, and was perfectly ready as he drew the bridle rein and released Highflyer's ear with one and the same motion, as the uncongenial animal snorted and plunged forward.

Here was seen the difference of seat and horsemanship, born of years of practice in the particular department of equitation. He did not sit back, he even leaned slightly forward, keeping a short and close haul on the rein, and swaying with each movement. It appeared too as if there were some invisible counter­check on the part of the horseman which prevented the still desperate animal from carrying out his frantic motions to the end. He still ran the old gamut of instinctive and violent paroxysms, by which he sought to disencumber himself of his human burden, but with each parry, as it were, his defence became less savagely obstinate.

During the whole time, it was a marvel to see how each movement was calculated and followed by the matchless roughrider, whose lithe frame moved like a portion of the animal he bestrode. Finally, as Highflyer began to show signs of capitulation and partial fatigue, the observant William struck the spurs into him, gave a shout, and succeeded in forcing the unwilling animal into a canter out of the gate and round an adjoining paddock, bringing him in apparently quite subdued, and carrying himself like an old horse.

"Thought I could wide," said the Honourable, faintly,
"befaw I came to Auswaliah; nevah say so again, give you my hon-ah. Must begin again, and appoint William my widing-mastah."

Mr. Stanhope did not altogether relinquish his interest in Highflyer, his first untoward adventure notwithstanding. He, however, gratefully accepted any hints which Staunton proffered, and became possessed of more than one "wrinkle" with respect to the art and mystery of colt-breaking. So guided and aided, he learned how to subdue the too sensitive, reckless nature of the colt, and able to ride him regularly without more than an occasional trial of strength and sudden, inexplicable outburst of temper. He however never suggested to Isabel to make a trial of him as a lady's horse—smooth, fast, and safe as he was in all his paces. He had also the added experience of seeing Highflyer's sister, Juanita, the one whose vagaries had led to his bet with Staunton, put into harness.

Mr. Baldhill, admiring her size and figure, thought she might be tried in the brake, as, if she "took to the collar," it would enhance her value. This being done with great caution, she reared up and fell upon her back, the first time; on the second trial she nearly kicked the brake-horse's ribs in, and lamed that valuable animal temporarily. After these feats it was decided to send her to Sydney with the next draft of horses for sale, and that Highflyer should accompany her, both horses to be sold without warranty.

After these practical experiments, both Mr. Stanhope and Sir John were observed to speak with reserve about the Australian horse question, admitting freely that there were certain aspects of the subject to which extended experience seemed necessary.

Christmas had come and gone—a season of restful home pleasures, and rational recreations; of utter freedom from care or anxiety, of thought for the morrow, or dread of the future. Such was its significance to nearly all the dwellers of Merradoolah during the last remnant of the year in which they had seen so many and various adventures, whether by land and sea, on the banks of the ancient river, or in the heart of the eternal desert.
Glowing hot as was the summer land in which they were now placed, partly from choice, partly from necessity, yet was there such a well-ordered course of life that all felt the days as one followed the other in dreamy repose to be days of peace and happiness, filled with gladness, and as far removed from the shadow of evil as from the Djinns of the Arab.

The house itself, with its broad, vine-trellised verandah, was cool, shaded, and well-ventilated. The mornings were fresh and cool before breakfast, when the men of the family chiefly elected to swim in the calm waters of the Cowall, finding the grapes which hung in such countless clusters about the trellised pathways to be exceedingly gratifying as they returned to their rooms to dress. The scent of the orange blossoms was fragrant in that early hour, and the laden peach and apricot invited the most fastidious saunterer.

Breakfast was a joyous and an animated meal, at which Isabel and Marie always appeared in refreshingly cool toilettes, while their piquant conversation effectually prevented the presence of any form of ennui. Every one seemed to be healthful, vigorous, and charged with vitality to an extent which gave the whole party something of the gay spirits of holiday-enjoying children.

In an enclosure close to the house, which had been fenced in specially for the purpose, Isabel's gazelles and Aden sheep roamed about; the former being the objects of admiration to all visitors, great and small, who came to Merradoolah, and the latter of undisguised wonder and amazement.

"I wonder what the New Year will bring forth?" said Isabel, toying with her grapes one decidedly hot morning, a bunch of muscatels and a glass of water having composed part of her breakfast. "It seems almost a pity to go away from this dear old place, but I suppose it's our duty to go to the seaside, when it's easily reached and there are no Bedaween between. I feel as if we could go on here for ever—with Sir John and Mr. Stanhope to read to us in the library every morning, and such lovely rides and drives in the evenings. 'Why should we roam? We will go home no more,' as the Lotus-eaters sang—only
we are at home in one sense here. If Bruce Allerton were here, it would be quite perfect. I wonder if he'll come and see us in Sydney? But I fully expected him to be here for Christmas.

Various answers and rejoinders arose at this somewhat disjointed monologue of Isabel's, and despite of her regrets, it came to pass that one day the four-in-hand was put into requisition for the return journey, and the following day beheld them once more within wave sound.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SYDNEY once more! And New Year's eve!

Again the strong sweet breath of the ocean. Again at dawn and eve the sea-nymph's whispering tones, with tales of tropic isles and coral reefs, of palm-shaded bowers amid the purple main; of dread polar kingdoms, and endless ice wastes, where Death sits enthroned amid the unending days, illumed by midnight suns and sleepless stars; of castaways gaunt and grim, of drowned men with staring eyes. Oh! the wondrous love and dread, the mystery and the marvel of "that most ancient, thrilling, haunting melody, the Song of the Sea."

To these they listened hour by hour as they sat—Isabel and Marguerite with their friends of the old land—on the broad verandah overlooking the waveless mirror of the bay, while around them were all sweetest scents, all brightest blooms, mingled with a subtle, encircling atmosphere, aromatic yet stimulating.

"This is the heavenly paradise of which the poet sings," said Marguerite, as they sat, as was their wont, one balmy night on the verandah, and listened to the low murmurous surge-voices in the bay below. "I cannot imagine existence passing in a more delicious, dreamy fashion than with a succession of days and nights like this. I never realised before what a counterpoise
a climate like this might afford to all human woe. It is an anodyne, an atmospheric Lethe, granted to assuage the agonies of mankind—to lighten that dark despair into which weak souls so often fall."

"Why, you'll become quite Australian by and by," said Isabel; "don't you think so, Sir John? Are you going to be converted too, and settle down on the plains? I'll pick you out wives, and nice ones too. I'm afraid Mr. Stanhope will be harder to suit."

"Leave myself in your hands, literally and personally," said that gentleman. "Perhaps you'll take pity on me yourself, Miss Baldhill? Learn to Wide in time, you know. Pick up colonial expewience by degwees."

"That's not what I meant, Mr. Stanhope, and you know it. So don't pay me foolish compliments. You know we're friends and comrades—fellow soldiers, and all that. By the by, The Battle of the Nile is coming out next week. I've nearly worn out my eyes correcting the proofs. I feel too anxious to sleep almost. I've got a splendid sketch of the encounter, done by that traitor, Bruce Allerton. I've a great mind to order Gholab to take off his head when he does come; it must be a convenient Eastern fashion. And I've got a full-length picture of my darling Zohrab. He shall go down to immortality at any rate."

"I feel inclined to buy up the edition to distribute among my friends in England," said Sir John. "I shall never appear so favourably in print again as long as I live."

"Wecord of our wandewings in the wildahness," said Mr. Stanhope. "Wildly intewesting. Believe it will wival the Voyage of the Sunbeam in circulation."

"Did you ever read The Pilgrim's Progress, Mr. Stanhope?" demanded Isabel.

"Wevelled in it, in my infancy."

"Then you remember a character called the Flatterer—society man of the day, I suppose?"

"Wevevently wesigned to your webuke," said the Honourable, penitently. "Fwozen twuth, nevahtheless, as our Amewican fwiends say."

"Don't you dare to trifle with my self-respect as an artist again, then," said the fiery maiden, "or I'll take
you out of the second edition and fill up with Arab slave dealers and all the rest of it.”

“How is our friend Gordon getting on all this time?” asked Sir John, running a herring conversationally across the trail. “Wolseley got to Khartoum yet?”

“The last news is reassuring,” said Isabel, joyfully. “The advance camel-corps has got as far as Ambuhol. the Mahdi’s troops are sick, and in revolt. I am full of hope that all will be well in a few weeks, and our hero return to us triumphantly.”

“I don’t think he ought ever to be let out of England again,” said Marguerite; “the strain upon the national mind is too great. Is it not wonderful that one man’s fortune should have the power to stir the universal heart of Britain so deeply?”

“A man of his calibre is only born once in a generation, perhaps in a century,” said Isabel. “It says much for the morale of the nation, that the people instinctively recognise him when he appears, and have not forgotten the old faith of hero-worship. However, we shall see what the morrow brings forth, for the English mail will be delivered at breakfast time.”

“Is the fateful hour so close at hand?” said Sir John. “Who knows how our lives may be influenced? I expect a budget of letters, and Bertie is in a state of mild impatience, though he disdains to show it.”

“Let us hope all our news may be good,” said Isabel.

“Mrs. Mortimer, do you expect letters?”

“I can hardly say that I do,” she replied. “But they may come nevertheless. If I believed in presentiments, I should say I have had a foreshadowing of a stage in my destiny. Whether it be for good or evil, I cannot tell.”

Long after her companions had retired, Marguerite Gordon sat on the balcony which rose before her bedroom window apparently absorbed in thought. A feeling of deep, almost uncontrollable depression seemed to have taken hold of her every feeling.

Doubt and dread, an indefinable horror and darkness of soul, seemed to penetrate and envelop her whole
being. Long-forgotten scenes passed before her in vivid presentation, which seemed as if they could not be wholly unreal. Again she saw, as in a vision—the while her eyes were open and her bodily senses in abeyance, as those of a somnambulist—her husband and her children, the home which had once been hers, that abode of unquestioning love, of all that a woman holds dearest in her inmost heart. She was conscious that although no act of volition on her part had tended to sever these holy ties—those natural, inalienable sacraments—the circumstances of her new life had caused their outlines to become somewhat blurred and faded, as though the car of fate had borne her farther off in mental as in corporeal attributes.

What was to be the end of her soul's tragedy? and would the final act be played in a theatre of this world or the next? As the bells of the various churches chimed, now fitfully, now all in unison, upon the calm untroubled air of the midsummer night, it seemed to her, with each recurring harmony, as if angels and demons were contending for the souls of those who, like herself, were overburdened by mysterious trials—the unuttered oracles, the enigmas of human life and passion. Which would gain the victory? How doubtful at times seemed the answer. Would the spirit, arising purified from all earthly trials, from the furnace of affliction, the scourge of adversity—gradually free itself from all trace of earthly dross, to stand radiant and serene before the throne of God? As this thought traversed her excited brain a wave of consolation appeared to dominate every pulse of her being, thrilling and yet soothing each nerve-centre. The bells once more seemed to join in one melodious triumphant peal of thanksgiving, when with soft reverent footsteps, as over holy ground, Marguerite sought her apartment and relieved her laden heart with long and passionate prayer. As it ended, the chimes which announced the birth of the New Year burst into harmonious clangour.

At length, fatigued by the mental travail which she had undergone, Marguerite Gordon slept soundly—not awakening, in fact, until the dressing bell—which at the half-hour summoned all visitors in Mr. Baldhill's
household to their preliminary duties—had given them
the signal.
She had just completed her toilette when a knock
was heard at her door, and Isabel, bearing the loveliest
of bouquets, and looking as fresh as a rose herself,
entered the room.
“All happiness in the coming year, my dearest Mrs.
Mortimer,” the girl said. “May it be a happy year for
you and yours, for all of us! I really believe in omens,
and it has opened propitiously. Papa is in great spirits.
They have had rain in that back country of his, from
which they nearly had to bring the sheep away. Bruce
Allerton has turned up, on his way to New Zealand,
and is coming to dine to-night. Mother’s gigantic lily
has bloomed a perfect wonder, and there is a letter for
you, an English one. If your news is good, you dear,
we shall be a happy family indeed.”
“May God in His mercy grant it, my darling Isabel,”
said Marguerite, whose heart was full almost to bursting
with contending emotions. “Happiness and I have
long been strangers; but it may be that the after years
will be less unkind. Whatever peace and comparative
freedom from morbid grief I have enjoyed has been due
to your good parents and yourself.”
“And I hope we shall never be separated all our
lives,” replied the girl, with deep emotion. “That’s
the worst of getting so desperately fond of people; it
tears up your heart-strings when you are parted. I
don’t intend to ‘pay out,’ as the sailors say, any more of
my more valuable emotions for the future. But let us
all have breakfast first, and we’ll go into mother’s
morning-room, and read our letters luxuriously
afterwards.”
Marguerite was not unwilling to delay the shock of
which the letter mentioned by Isabel might be the
unsuspected herald until, fortified by the splendour of the
southern morn, her spirit had regained its usual serenity.
She obeyed the laughing girl’s behest, and with her
entered the breakfast-room, where the rest of the house-
hold were already assembled.
“No wonder that people have happy new years, and
old years too, in this part of the world,” said Sir John.
waving his hand toward the oriel window, which commanded a full view of the bay beneath them and the harbour. "How can people be unhappy, or anything but virtuous and high-minded, with such a glorious panorama ever before their eyes?"

"*Vous avez raison,* as that French friend of yours at Galle used to say," said the Honourable. "If I had been brought up amid such surroundings, I should have been a worthy Admiral—feel confident of it. That's why Miss Isabel—but, I remember, compliments are contraband, and liable to confiscation. Can't help contributing my mite to Jack's poetical impromptu—cauwsies me back to my happy childhood."

There was much excuse for the enthusiasm of Sir John Danvers and his friend. Less observant natures might have been stirred by the varied glories of sea and sunlight, of grove and shining sands, of a view unrivalled for effective combination of the charms of Nature in all the freshness of her wild untrammelled garb, yet contrasted with the vast results of civilisation, the miracles of science, the triumph of art.

Before them lay the unstirred waters of the bay, dotted with every variety of sail and steam, flag and pennant. White-winged skiffs, gliding from the innumerable inlets, appeared to emerge from recesses amid the wood-crowned heights, the slopes of which were covered with white walled villas and mansions; gardens like their own crowded with exotics from every southern clime, and though profuse and apparently dense of growth, yet most carefully and scientifically tended. A huge ironclad, with a brace of frigates at no great distance, lying calmly majestic upon the slumbering wave, showed that England's farthest outposts are carefully guarded by the Empress of the Seas. Below the garden, a schooner from the islands had anchored in the night—a trim, low-hulled, long-sparded clipper—her stern and rigging hung with bananas and pineapples, while dark faces were peering over the side at the wonders of the great City of the South, of which they had heard so much from missionary and trader, sailor and beach-comber.
“What a contrast to our British New Year’s Day,” said Sir John, “with its snow and ice, melancholy trees, and death-like, shrouded landscape! I don’t intend to run down the dear old country, but, somehow, one seems to prefer this. I expect my people will find me rather altered in tastes—spoiled, they will call it—when I return.”

“Don’t think I’ll evah weturn,” said Mr. Stanhope. “It will be like turning out of pawadise into the aw—world of twial and pwosiac westwaint.”

“You are all going to turn out of this extremely pleasant, breakfast, dawdling room, and undertake the duty of reading your letters this minute,” interposed Isabel, decidedly. “I hope there will be nothing intolerably prosaic about them.”

A general departure was made, and as each person appropriated his or her budget it was evident that the suggestion but anticipated general opinion. Each recipient selected a suitable lounge, and commenced to decipher the half-desired, half-feared messages from afar.

As Marguerite recognised, amid a shower of postmarks and addresses, the characteristic hand of Madame Faucher, she instinctively offered a silent prayer before, with eager, tremulous hands, she tore open the envelope. Well might her heart beat tumultuously, and then arrest its life-current until her cheek was blanched and her brain became a vacuum, after she had glanced at the first page! Well might her steps falter as she rose hastily and retreated to her room; for this was the home picture that Madame Faucher’s clear-cut, minute caligraphy exhibited:

“London, November 7th, 1884.

“O LOVED AND HONOURED FRIEND,—

“Were it that you were doomed to drag out the remainder of existence in exile, in that far off Galles du Sud so remote from civilised parts, unhonoured and unknown in thy sainted martyrdom, I should despair of the mercy, the justice of le bon Dieu. My directeur has in vain rebuked me for my doubt of Providence. He has ever warned me that my unbelief would provoke the anger of the Church. I have, in effect, resisted Him.
I am now—may He pardon me—a penitent and undoubting believer. I trace His hand in the shaping of your destiny. You are required in your own house; your successor—she who has filled your place in the heart, in the home which belongs to you of right—of necessity vacates her place. Madame Mariana Gordone—how the title must have pierced your devoted heart again and again!—is dying. I have seen her. I composed a pious fiction—a case of distress. She is une ange de charité. I saw enough. The consumption—your great English destroyer—has seized upon her. A hollow cough shakes her pitifully. All the doctors have condemned her. If you wish to see her alive you will hasten back, losing not a day, not an hour. I send you an exchange—what you call it, authorisation—to draw on me for passage monnaie, in the case that you have not so much in your bureau. You will repay me in the aftertime. Monsieur Gordone naturellement is plunged into grief. The children are sad to behold. The household is desolated. Were it but to aid these distressed and helpless ones, you will fly to them. Is it not so? I can figure to myself your instant resolve. You will close the eyes of her who has so dutifully, so innocently, supplanted you. You will dry the tears of the orphans. You will console him who has been so true to your memory, and yet in act false through a terrible error. And that le bon Dieu will yet spare you years of peace, of honour, of happiness, prays your faithful friend,

"Celine Faucher."

A revelation! A message as from the tomb! A dread and awful citation to the death-bed of her rival, all innocent, loving, reverently cherishing her own memory, as she had ever been! And now the Death Angel had in truth and fact hurled the fatal darts which he had but threateningly poised at her. The letter dropped from her cold hands, to be recovered, read, and re-read with tears and sobs, sighs and groans, as though it were a renewal of her own doom which she was lamenting.

In all her endless musings and recapitulations of the
possible and probable terminations of their involved condition she had never contemplated the death of Mariana. She apparently possessed the placid constitution, mental and physical, which ensures its possessor a long life, a tranquil, slowly-fading age; other people might become ill, might fail in mind or body, might suddenly pass away, and it seemed but a part of the world's daily routine; but that Mariana should perish in the flower of her womanhood was a contingency that had never crossed her thoughts.

And now she lay dying! Her informant was not a person to be deceived or to miscalculate. A chance cold, contracted in the bitter winter during an errand of mercy to a starving family, had struck deeply into the vital organs. A latent taint of consumption in the constitution had been developed. There was no hope. She pictured Mariana—her bright hair tossed in disorder over her pillows—lying on the couch from which she was never to rise. She could bring before her the mute despair of her husband—of their husband. Great God! How she longed to stand by his side and comfort him in his bitter grief. He might not, could not sorrow for Mariana as, in his first agony, he had sorrowed for her. But was it in nature that his heart should not be rent to the very core as he watched the lingering death of the fair creature who had lain on his bosom for years, had been the light of his hearth, the mother of his children, who had cherished no earthly thoughts but those of love and duty for him and his? And when she, Marguerite Gordon, as if risen from the dead, stood like an apparition in the household, what would be his feelings—what those of Mariana?

The acme of doubt and anxiety, of hope, fear, and regret, had been reached as these conflicting thoughts rushed through her overcharged brain. She fell forward on the floor, when total unconsciousness forbade further torture—perhaps mercifully preserved her reason.
CHAPTER XLIX

Hours had passed before Marguerite Gordon had recovered sufficiently to form plans for her future guidance or calmly contemplate the necessity of action. Unable to bear the idea of joining the family circle, she sent for Mrs. Baldhill, resolved to confide fully in that shrewd but kindly matron.

"And so, you poor dear," said her listener, after a recital broken by sobs, which seemed to be the outflow of years of pent-up misery, "all this time you have been turned out of house and home, driven away from your husband and children, and all through no fault of your own? We know enough of you to be sure of that. How you could have left him and her to be happy together, and you out in the cold, I can't think. I wouldn't, I know—not for a thousand cousins and husbands—let alone children and friends. But I dare say it's all for the best; and now, as things have changed, you'd better start by the mail steamer on Thursday. Mrs. Romer and her children are going home in her. You know her a little, and she's just the person you'd like to be with and make a friend of. No; don't come down to-night. You want rest and quiet. I'll tell my old man and Isabel, in a general way. Tomorrow morning you'll be stronger, and we'll help you pack. Mr. Baldhill will take your passage and all that, so don't you bother yourself. You've enough to think of," and with a maternal and sympathetic kiss the worthy dame departed.

She lost no time in announcing as much of the facts to the company as she deemed it necessary for them to know. "Poor dear Mrs. Mortimer had bad news of her family at home. A relation of hers given over by the doctors; she might linger on for months yet, so she thinks it best to go home to her at once. She means to start in the Aden on Thursday."

This statement fell like a shell into the midst of the party assembled at dinner. They had been by this time joined by Bruce Allerton, now on his way to New Zea-
land, but who had so far remained true to his allegiance to the Baldhill family as to pay a flying visit in passing. Still shaken by his disappointment, he dreaded the sight of the woman who had so fascinated and enthralled him. Her image had never since been absent from his thoughts. But he was unwilling to risk any misconstruction of his conduct, which a persistent absence from the Baldhills’ society might occasion. He had, therefore, resolved to pay at least a short visit before he took refuge, amid the picturesque forests and geysers of New Zealand, from the Australian summer and his own thoughts.

He was extremely surprised at Mrs. Mortimer’s communication, which fell upon him with all the suddenness with which we receive tidings of an altogether undreamed of change in the destiny of those who have made themselves a portion of our lives. He, however, concealed his emotion, and left to Isabel the task of expressing the surprise which every one more or less felt.

“ I never was so astonished at anything in my life,” said she. “ Somehow, I got it into my head that Mrs. Mortimer was going to stop with us for ever and ever. She is such a dear, sweet creature, and suits us all so wonderfully, that I don’t know what we shall do without her. Mother would die of a broken heart, I believe, if she hadn’t dad to cheer her up a little. I shall feel a kind of orphan, or more nearly as if I had lost an elder sister. All my naturally bad disposition will come out when I have no one to quell my evil passions. So wisely and gently as she always did it, too! How we shall miss her!”

“Gweat mind to go home too,” said the Honourable Bertie. “Wants some one to look after her on board ship, p’waps. First bweak up of our party, too. I had a dweadful pwesentiment last week; now it comes twue.”

“ The best thing you and Sir John can do is to go with Mr. Allerton to New Zealand. You’ll never have a better chance of seeing that lovely country,” said Isabel. “He doesn’t look over well either. Lost his spirits. Is it the old wound, Bruce, do you think?”
I'm afraid it is," he hastily assented, pleased to avail himself of the easy opening thus unconsciously offered. "The hot weather doesn't suit me as well as in old days. But what will you do if every one goes away? You'll be horribly lonely."

"Never mind me, perhaps it will do me good to be en retraite for a while. Dad can't leave his business this year. It's setting in dry, he thinks, and there may be trouble with the stock. At any rate, I've had excitement enough—we've all had—for a while, and I'm going to see if I can't do the calm, unruffled home-life, path-of-duty business, and all that, for a year."

The next day was one compounded in equal parts of leave-taking, hurried recollections, and confused fears of forgetting matters of importance.

These trifles mingle with the gravest solemnities, which precede, in most cases, the journey to a far country.

Isabel would be one moment sobbing in Marguerite's arms, and the next hurrying to and fro, kneeling beside trunks or insisting upon pressing some fresh token of remembrance upon her departing friend. Much was done, however, in those hours of concentrated energy, and on the same morning that the Aden cleared the Heads and moved majestically through the calm waters of a summer sea, the Rotomahana sailed for New Zealand, having among her list of passengers Bruce Allerton, Esq., Sir John Danvers, and The Honourable Mr. Stanhope.

Ere these important events and destinations became fully transacted, Bruce Allerton found opportunity for a last conversation with Marguerite.

"I can't help divining," he said, looking into the tear-dimmed eyes, "that no ordinary tidings have so shaken you. I, who know every change in your features, see clearly that the inmost recesses of your heart have been rent. Is there anything I can do in this strait which a brother could offer? My feelings are—will ever be—unchangeable. Yet, once again, can these events in any way affect your decision? Now or in the future, is there hope for me?"

He bent his eyes earnestly upon her; he took her
hand mechanically; his whole frame was trembling with eagerness; his expression and bearing those of a man who listens for the sentence which dooms to death or restores to life and rapture.

"I do full justice—all honour," she said, "to the loyalty of your love. Why should I affect to employ another name? But it cannot be, nor could have been. More than that, we both have reason to rejoice that my resolve remained unshaken—aye, to our dying day. When I tell you that my husband was living then—still lives, thank God!—I need add nothing but that our compulsory separation was without blame to either. Some day you shall know all. Meanwhile I have confided in Mrs. Baldhill; she is in possession of my sad story."

"You have told me much," he said, "more than is needed. I should never have connected your life-history with the faintest shadow of blame. Whatever happens to us, you have raised all womanhood in my eyes. You will remain enshrined in my heart the exemplar, the ideal of perfect womanhood."

"If it be so," she said, while the tears stood in her eyes as each tone of his low, vibrating voice fell on her ear, "will you give me proof by following the counsel I give you? Not for a while, perhaps, but when Time has effected his usual cure. Nay, do not shake your head. I am older in the world's ways, at least, than you, and I speak as I have seen. Promise me that you will give heed to the truest friend you have in the world."

"I promise, without limitation," he said, bowing low. "'You can ask nothing which I will not cheerfully fulfil. Order as you will my future life—the fragment, at least, which is left of it.'"

"I will not order, and I cannot with a clear conscience ensure your doing my behest; but could I do so, I would say, 'Marry Isabel Baldhill.'"

Bruce Allerton started. He seemed about to speak, but he uttered no sound.

"I mean what I say," she continued impressively, "and the day will come when you will bless me for these words. A man thinks in the first despair of loss
that he can never love more, nor endure life. As well
might the leafless oak refuse the buds of springtime.
There is an aftermath with men, however it may be
with our more emotional sex. And with a tender-
hearted, loving woman devoted to him, any man, the
best man living, may be, aye, has been happy. He
resigns himself to a serene, satisfying existence, filled
with affection and repose. Is life so joyous that a man
can disregard such a fate?

"Isabel is a happy child," he said at length; "I am
a world-weary, disappointed man, chilled with the
failure of my life's brightest aspirations. Would not
her happiness be wrecked in an unavailing effort to
float a foundering barque?"

"I will take the risk of that. I know you both too
well to doubt the result. She is no child now, but a
sweet, pure-minded, high-souled woman. She loves
you, Bruce Allerton, with the unconscious idolatry of a
girl's fresh heart. Do as I say, and the dream of her
life will be fulfilled. She will be to you a peerless wife,
and you—yes, little as you think it now—will be a
happy man. I who speak have seen the hazard tried—
have watched the issue. Her life is almost in your
hands. Will you hold back at the bidding of sensations
which one day you will regard as phantasms and
chimeras?"

"I would do much," he said at length, "so that I
might say to myself in after years, 'I did her bidding.
It was she who thus moulded my life.' I will prove
worthy of you and my better self. But not yet, not
yet."

"There is no need; you are leaving her native land
for a season of travel. Protract your absence till your
soul's health is re-established. She will remain stead-
fast. You little know her if you doubt her constancy.
On that day you will find her heart drawn instinctively
towards yours."

"May you not be mistaken? Can one woman
answer for another undoubtingly?"

"I would answer for her with my own life," she
said. "I know each thought of her inmost heart.
Were it not for her future happiness this should never
have been divulged. But the confidence is sacred between us."

"Every word from your lips is, for me, sacred as of old were the oracles of the gods. Since you have willed it, it shall be so, and no thought of mine shall run counter to its accomplishment. And now, sweetest, fairest, dearest of womankind, farewell! If we meet no more, think of me as of one whose whole existence you have swayed. Trust me, I do not wholly forget." He bent low over her hand, then raised it reverently to his lips, and left her presence like one who renounces the light and colour of existence for the drear monotony of a monastery.

Mr. Baldhill, with habitual liberality, had insisted upon paying Marguerite's passage in the mail steamer and providing for all necessary expenses in England, as well as for the return voyage. She went on board the Aden with those kindly, steadfast friends, and indeed felt something like the desolation of spirit which accompanies quitting home when she parted from them and found herself alone with the lady to whose kind offices she had been recommended. Isabel was inconsolable, and, indeed, completely broke down at the parting moment, notwithstanding her usual firmness and indisposition to create scenes.

"I shall never have a friend like you again," she sobbed out. "I don't know any other woman in the whole world that I'd knuckle down uncomplainingly to as I've done to you. It's seeing the self-command you practise, I suppose. I shall be very lonely too. There's those dear Englishmen and Bruce Allerton gone, though he's hardly a friend now. I can't quite make him out. However, I'm determined to work like a Trojan, or a Girton girl, at any rate, and improve myself. That's the best way to drown care and please you, isn't it?"

"That's my own Isabel," said Marguerite; "you promised to think of my words when I was far away. Do what you know to be right, and trust in that Divine mercy which, in spite of our hardness of heart and unbelief, will yet save us in our need."

The girl threw herself upon Marguerite's bosom. After one long, clinging embrace, she raised her head,
and with a sorrowful gaze in her bright, tear-bedewed face the friends parted.

Again the long eventless days, the endless wave and sky, the storm and sunshine of the restless, wondrous main! As they neared Europe they realised in the wrath of ocean their proximity to the icy North. Marguerite's heart commenced to pulsate more irregularly as one by one the uncertainties of her new position forced themselves upon her. Again and again she pictured to herself her former home, with its inmates, under the conditions in which she would return. Would she arrive in time to close Mariana's eyes? How should comforting words be spoken to him in his sore need? And who would speak them so that consolation should follow? Or would he hear her message with shocked surprise, with mortal terror at the appearance of one raised from the dead?

How should she act? In what way secure the privilege of aiding these loved ones in their sore need, at the same time guarding against the inevitable shock, which might prove fatal to Mariana?

Day after day she revolved these doubts, anxious fears, terrible uncertainties. A slender, yet still distinctly-defined hope would also arise in her breast that she might yet be all in all to the man she loved, to the children of her youth—bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. The anticipation seemed too nearly allied to a beatific vision to be fulfilled on earth. And day by day, assailed by these tempestuous thoughts, the cheek of Marguerite Gordon grew pale and yet more pale until, on their arrival at Marseilles, but for the firmness of her step and the elasticity of her frame, she might almost have passed for the invalid that had quitted the dreary hospital of Le Saint Jacques five years before.

"I never saw any one fall away as you have done lately," said Mrs. Romer to her, in the long-looked-forward-to railway journey to Paris. "Your appetite has improved in this cold weather, but you are getting thinner daily. One would think that you expected misery of all kinds to meet you in England. So different
from most people's anticipations. Whatever is the matter with you?"

"It must be the cold weather which does not agree with me after the hot climates in which we have been living lately," she replied. "Associations unspeakably mournful are connected with this Marseilles Railway line in my mind. Perhaps at Paris I may recover a little more tone."

As the train glided by the well-remembered route the soul of Marguerite Gordon, laden with sad memories, as of a former state of existence, sank into darkest depths of despair.

The very air, bitterly cold and striking every sense with almost polar severity of temperature after the sun-bright skies of the South, seemed filled with sorrow, agony, and death. The ghosts of the victims of the collision, pale and blood-streaked, writhing or motionless, seemed to shriek and moan amid the wintry blasts which wailed through the leafless trees.

The desolation of nature revived afresh the terrible trials, the unutterable agonies, through which soul and body had passed in that time of dread. Truly, it was a purgatory endured on earth for some wise purpose of Eternal Mercy!

And would not her spirit be blessed with compensating joy, even here below? Might not she be restored to the heaven of love and peace from which she had been so violently reft? She had suffered and been strong so far. Surely now she could endure to the end?

Shuddering and all tremulous, as one who stands safely on the farther brink of an abyss, Marguerite Gordon humbly committed her future lot into the hands of the Supreme Ruler of our destinies, and with a recovered sense of peace and steadfastness of purpose awaited His disposition of her fate.

In any case, she felt assured of her ability, as of her desire, to devote herself to the welfare of the mourning household which she would so soon re-enter. In despite of the mental disturbances through which she had so lately passed and their temporary effects, she knew that the reserve of strength and endurance acquired
beneath the benign skies on which the Southern Cross looks down could be drawn upon at need. And as the tidal steamer neared the historic cliffs of Albion, she felt conscious of power to confront the coming situation, whatever it might be.

CHAPTER L

MARGUERITE GORDON'S first visit was paid to Madame Faucher. She had been a staunch friend, an indispensable ally. Whatever minor defections from the ideal standard might be laid to her charge, no one could accuse her of not being a steadfast patroness, a brave and persistent comrade, as indeed she was a bitter and somewhat unscrupulous enemy. Marguerite Gordon was one of the few persons for whom she cherished an enthusiastic admiration. Her firmness under trials, her endurance of unmerited misfortune, her patient dignity, had aroused whatever poetical instincts the worldly-wise Parisienne had in her composition. In friendship, as in war, she was not one to rest satisfied with half-measures.

Marguerite's reception by her was warm—even enthusiastic—to a degree which would have astonished some of her oldest lodgers, who held that she was incapable of strong emotion which had not a pecuniary basis.

"So behold you of return!" she cried, after an embrace prolonged and unprecedentedly fervid. "You come but to assist at the funeral obsequies of cette chère Mariana. She lingers still, she is of an angelic piety, she is resigned to the will of heaven; but when she thinks of her children, of her—of Monsieur, she is overcome. But what will you? She does not know whom le bon Dieu has sent to her aid."

"I will go this very night. Perhaps it will not be too late; but may God in His mercy pity me! How can I
tell that my presence will not give pain, will not quench
the flickering spark of life?"

"It will not be so. I have been there of late—ah! oui, these many times. My Parisian tongue pleases
Monsieur and her—her. It was the association with
madame, as they called you. She speaks with tender­
ness of you; oh! it is sublime, it is not of this earth.
A hundred times I have heard her say were you but there
she would die happy. He also calls for you."

"They have not then the faintest idea of whom they
speak?" said Marguerite, in a changed voice. "Have
they no surprise why I quitted their house, their
country?"

"It has been a mystery to both—a grief, an enigma.
Their household has never been the same, I have re­
peatedly heard them say; and therefore you will have
your petit dîner with me. Our soup, our entrées are good,
as of old, and you shall then go down to Gordon
House. Is it not so?"

"Will they recognise me, do you think? It is not
possible, surely. Yet I should like to see her, dear,
dear Mariana, before she dies. She may not outlive
this night, if it is as you say."

"She will not see the dawn. So said the doctor
yesterday; but this day it will be true. I go to the
house with you."

It was so arranged. Margaret had perforce to dine.
Madame Faucher made so great a point of that ceremony
that she could not in common courtesy refuse. Her
overwrought feelings had prevented her from consider­
ing the question of refreshment. So that, as madame
put it, she must choose between dining or fainting.

"But; yes, now that I look at you well," said
madame, after the first course had been removed, "you
have changed—you are transformed, since I saw you
carried away by la femme Baldhill—cette Australienne.
You have sorrowed, but that land of the sun has
been a potent restorative; a divine climate doubtless,
Marie has said so to me. She wept tears of joy that le
bon Baldhill goes to make the fortune of Alphonse. And
you, ma chère! you are again young; you are beautiful.
It is a coup de théâtre. It is sorcery."
"I have been very well and nearly happy. I am strong and youthful once more—may God be thanked!" said Marguerite. "How little I could have expected to feel as I do in body and mind while she is dying. Dying! I cannot bear the thought of it. Let us end the suspense. I feel as if I could glide through the streets, like a mesmerised subject, over all obstacles and hindrances."

The winter wind was keen. It had been snowing, and the driving sleet struck—death-like and chill—through Marguerite's frame, long accustomed to the balmy air of a summer land. She shivered and trembled as they left the house to enter the cab which had been provided for them.

"Wait but the moment," said madame. "You will perish. Sit yourself in the carriage."

Madame ran back and returned with a thick and handsome fur covering, which, in the dimly-lighted cab, Marguerite, who seemed to be in a condition of dreamy immobility, put on without remark.

Arriving at the house, they were admitted by the servant, whose eyes were swollen by weeping as she replied to Madame Faucher's low inquiry:
"Can't last till daylight, the doctor says. Poor dear missis! And she so young, too!"

Here a voice—the well-known voice of Hugh Gordon, every tone of which thrilled through the heart of his agitated listener—said, "Is that Madame Faucher? Tell her to come here. I have something to say to her."

Madame Faucher tightly closed her clasp upon the hand which Marguerite unresistingly yielded to her. Half-led, half-following, she passed on to the darkened room where Hugh Gordon lay almost in a stupor of grief upon a couch.

"This is so kind of you, Madame Faucher," he said. "But whom have you brought with you?" As he put the question, the door opened, and the light from the hall appeared to flood the apartment, revealing the two figures almost as clearly defined as day.

"It is madame returned—our madame!" he said, with sudden cheerfulness. "The angel in the house.
It is. Ah! My God! Am I already bereft of my senses? or can the grave give up its dead?"

Marguerite stood as if spellbound. She became suddenly conscious from an opposite mirror that she had suffered her friend to wrap her in a sealskin cloak of curiously close similitude to the one so long remembered as her husband's purchase before the collision: as the death shroud of the wearer.

As the actors in the tragedy for which Fate had mercilessly cast them stood regarding one another with awe-stricken countenances, from which the violence and novelty of their emotions had expelled all ordinary expression, what a world of memory, of passion, thrilled the very centres of their being. Madame Faucher stood like the spectator of some great his-trionic triumph, as the leader of the chorus in Medea, unwilling by premature movement to disturb the effect of the performance.

But there was a wondrous and subtle difference between the bearing of the protagonists who had thus met under circumstances so unusual as to border upon the supernatural. The face of the man was worn and haggard with grief, with watching, wan almost with the pallor of sickness, wasted with the slow torture of despair. His whole frame was tremulous—his expression nerveless and despondent to the last degree. For the woman, while upon her face shone the light of an infinite pity, an almost divine tenderness, her erect figure exhibited the grace which ever accompanies a full measure of health, with those whom the gods have made beautiful at birth. As for one moment she moved suddenly towards him with resistless impulse, and then arrested her step, his eye appeared to take in with sudden illumination the form and face, the well-remembered pride of bearing—even the garb in which he had last seen her alive, as he believed. His own proud, beauteous, faithful love had been restored to his sight, clearly and freshly outlined, as on the day of parting. Again she stood before him a radiant vision of beauty and grace—an angelic visitant in the days of darkness, in the hour of death.

“You have returned, oh! my lost love,” he said at
length, slowly—and his voice sounded hollow and almost unnatural as he strove to regulate his utterances—"to the home where you have been so long, so deeply mourned. I see it all now. Blind and insensate as I was! It would break my heart, were I capable of ordinary feeling how, with weak, trembling steps, you came to my door and were refused admittance to your own home. Thank God that it was again opened to you, as a loved and honoured guest, though under a feigned name—a tenderly false personation. Thank God that you have come in time! Let us go to Mariana."

She looked appealingly to Madame Faucher. "Think of it, Hugh," she said at once; and the word—his name—so long unuttered, seemed to her, to the hearers, to comprehend in its low, rich cadence a world of tender memories and unforgotten love. "May not my presence—my return—"

"Shock her? Pain her? You little know how the faint glimmering of life's taper will be relumed by this act of God's providence. She has never had you out of her thoughts. In your dual character you are dear to her—loved and mourned beyond the power of speech. Is it not so?"

"Monsieur has reason," the Frenchwoman gravely answered. "She has often spoken of you to me. She has pined for your possible return; it will soothe her last hour. Allons," said she, taking the arm of Marguerite. "I see in this the hand of le bon Dieu. There is an inspiration in the situation in which we find ourselves."

Together they entered the apartment of the dying woman. She lay on the luxurious couch, upon the adjuncts of which every conceivable means of relief had been lavishly supplied. The bright masses of her silken hair were spread over her pillow, tossed and disordered by the restlessness of pain. The wasted frame, the ashen pallor of the features, the hueless lips were piteous to behold. The lustre of her violet eyes—fever-bright—alone remained undimmed. They shone still with a strangely brilliant glow. The expression of the worn and sharpened features relaxed, and a shadowy smile even wreathed itself around the
pale lips as she saw Madame Faucher; her gaze momentarily brightened as she recognised her husband, and the nerveless hands made a sad, ineffectual motion, as if to beckon him towards her.

But as she caught sight of Marguerite’s tall figure standing near her husband, though in part behind him, a mysterious change took place in her expression. Light and colour at once came to the weary face; the wasted frame grew strong. Electrical agency seemed to have freshly vitalised the mysterious interdependent forces of mind and body. She made as if to speak. To the astonishment of Hugh Gordon, she partially raised herself, and then, leaning forward, uttered in a voice of agonised joy, unutterably pathetic and appealing: “It is she! It is Marguerite! God in His great mercy has sent her.” She stretched out her thin, white, wasted arms with a feeble, imploring gesture. With a sudden impulsive movement, and features glorified with pity, love, tenderness unspeakable, Marguerite moved swiftly forward, and clasping the sweet wan face, threw herself on her knees by the bedside and sobbed unrestrainedly, while the fingers of the dying woman played with her raven hair, and her voice murmured lovingly, as a weary child on its mother’s breast, “Marguerite! Darling Marguerite! I knew you would return.”

“Let us leave them,” said Madame Faucher in a reverent tone to Hugh Gordon, as she drew him softly through the door. “They have much to tell. Her return has acted like a charm, a tonic the most powerful. Now her soul will be at rest. She knows to what protectress—ah! so noble, so saintly—she goes to confide her infants.”

“It is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful in our eyes,” quoted Hugh Gordon from the volume of sacred writ which had been of late his constant companion and poor Mariana’s hourly support, alas! in her hour of need. In the flush of prosperity, in the indifferentism of daily life, how neglected, if not contemned, is the Book in which most of us have read at a mother’s knee, with lisping speech reciting the most ancient history of the relations of God and man. In the days
of health it perhaps lies unnoticed. But in the sad and lonely hours when the dark wing of the Death Angel casts a shadow over the chamber wherein lies wife or child, sister or brother, how do we flee for comfort, for hope, to the only source for consolation granted on earth to those who trust to meet the loved and lost in Heaven!

When Hugh Gordon returned to her chamber he found Mariana in a state of abnormal mental force and lucidity. Even her bodily powers had increased miraculously in the eyes of those who had watched her labouring breath on the preceding day. An expression of joy and resignation irradiated her features as she lay with her hands clasped in those of Marguerite. A seraphic glow had succeeded to an expression of wistfulness and child-like, unquestioning regret.

"Were we not bewitched, blind, and deaf," she said, in a voice low and enfeebled, but strangely clear and distinct, "that we did not recognise our lost Pleiad, as Hugh loved to call you, when she lived with us day after day? A thousand times you reminded me of Marguerite; but did I not know that she was dead? Had I not seen the tomb, read her name and epitaph? Oh! my poor darling! you that were so proud and stately, so delicately tended, so daintily surrounded, what trials, what miseries have you undergone, and so uncomplainingly! But you are alive now, are you not? Or am I released from earth? Do I behold a saint?"

Here the weakened brain commenced to ramble in unconnected sentences; but with a visible effort she recovered herself.

"Was it not fortunate that we both loved you so? You witnessed our grief. There could be no deceit before you, a stranger, as we thought you; and yet that was the reason, perhaps, that you did not discover yourself. For pity's sake! For love and mercy! Lest I might be hurt and disgraced, or the children shamed—for this you bore poverty, sickness, mean living, the sight of another woman in your own place! And now your day of recompense has come. I shall not be long in your way. But my children, oh, my little ones!"

Here the mother's heart overflowed, and her sobs shook
the enfeebled frame. "It is the punishment of sin."

"You loved and cherished mine," Marguerite said, in her low, soft tones, rich with suppressed emotion. "You have nothing to accuse yourself of. There could be no sin when your love was given to the husband of a dead wife with the innocent guilelessness of a child. Do not fear; they shall be the children of my bosom. In that dark hour they shall never miss a mother's love."

"I know it. I heard every word from your lips," she faltered, yet more faintly; "and you love your poor Mariana still; do you not? She never cherished a hard thought of your memory. If she did less than her duty, it was because she was weak. Oh! she loved much, loved much," she repeated, "like the woman in the Bible."

"You have made him happy—happier than I ever thought he could have been when he lost me," whispered Marguerite, pressing her cheek. "For that I honour you. I had no jealousy. God knew of such love. It was the happiness flowing from the companionship of a pure heart, from duty well performed, from unselfish fondness. You are worthy of his, of any man's love. And hard must have been the heart that would have refused it."

When the doctor made his usual visit, he was surprised to mark the general alteration which had taken place in the patient.

He warned Hugh Gordon, however, against entertaining fallacious hopes. "This lady's presence," he said, "is the exciting cause. From some reason great nervous exaltation has supervened. The proximate effect is to protract life in such cases as this. But within forty-eight hours a change must come."

"Let me stay with her," said Marguerite. "I will call Mr. Gordon whenever there is need. I can lie on the side couch. I would not on any account quit her. I am certain she wishes it earnestly."

"Stay with me," she whispered faintly. "I shall not fear death when you are near. You do not know what an intense relief, what a support, your presence
has been to me.” Their tears flowed fast together, their hands were clasped. Marguerite’s head was bowed over the fair form that was so soon to be clay—cold, speechless, motionless, in the cruel grave. Ah, me! how hard is life. How uncertain the tenure by which the happiest mortals hold their power of love, hope, enjoyment in this world! What terrible sufferings, what racking tortures have ere now afflicted the dear dumb flesh ere the soul quitted the shattered tenement! What can love do but sit with folded arms, or kneel with bowed head over the motionless form, while the chamber appears filled with dread and awful shapes mocking the unutterable anguish and despair of the final hour!

No such dire accompaniments troubled the last hours of Mariana. There was perfect freedom from pain, and until the hour which preceded the great change a wonderful serenity, a calmness almost cheerful. Permitted to see her children daily, at the first opportunity she informed them that madame, whom they loved, whom all had loved so dearly when she was with them, and whom the elder children remembered, had come back, and would stay with them, and love them always, when poor mamma was gone. They looked at her wonderingly, then, after the manner of children, were eager to be petted and tended by the strange lady.

So the hours passed. Hugh Gordon had long, whispered conversations with the dying woman, in which, from both hearts, welled forth the secret thoughts which from that relation only are evolved. “Do not grieve unreasonably for me, my darling,” she said. “I have had a part of your heart, I know. I have striven to deserve it. But she was your first love, the charm of your youth, the first flower of wedded life. You will be happy once more. Her beauty and grace, her noble nature, will again fill your heart. What other woman would have acted as she has done? If I had known what she kept in her breast, I should have died of shame. Now—may God’s holy name be praised!—I die in His good time, and at peace with all the world, with gratitude and love in my heart. I do not grudge you to her—to her alone, of all living
women," she whispered, "now. It is God's will; but oh! my darling, it is hard to bear." Her tears fell fast as her voice broke, and an interval of low, tremulous sobbing succeeded, while Hugh Gordon abandoned himself to the expression of the half-spoken feelings which had grown up during the years of their calm, untroubled existence, and adjured her to believe in his unalterable love and tenderness.

"Then the children! Oh! my little ones," she moaned. "I know that they will receive all love and affection, but what will their position in the eyes of the world be?"

"Neither they nor the world shall ever know, I swear to you," he replied. "It is fortunate that Alister and Rita are so far away. It is my intention to quit England for ever, and adopt as my own the beautiful south land from which Marguerite has come. She will return with our babes—when—when,"—here the strong man bent his head, and once more clasped in his arms that slight form, still so fair. He played with the tangled tresses of her hair as she hid her face in his bosom, while he continued—"as the governess to my children, our re-union, when it formally takes place, in God's good time, will excite no remark. Thus, our children's name, and yours, my gentle darling, may be for ever shielded from blame."

"And she has consented to your plan?" asked Mariana. "It is like her."

"She has even suggested a modification of it," he replied. "We shall not see each other for a year, during which time I shall wind up my affairs, and completely sever my connection with England."

"No other woman in the world would have acted as she did," she murmured, "would have given up her name for the sake of mine. You will love her the more, will you not, for her thought for your poor Mariana? She was always tender and wise for me in our girlhood. How strange that I should feel the old sense of leaning upon her for support, even to the very verge of the grave."

Ere the next eve, the dread change which the
physician had foreseen occurred. When the spiritual exaltation subsided which had so strangely controlled the ordinary course of nature, Mariana's bodily powers collapsed. The painful feebleness, the labouring breath, the tremulous automatic movements, all told that the hour was at hand.

Hugh Gordon had been watching by her bedside since midnight. He summoned Marguerite. Her approach brought expression to Mariana's dim orbs. After a short interval, she raised Marguerite's hand, in which her own had been clasped, to her lips. Then placing it within Hugh Gordon's palm, a smile of ineffable sweetness glorified the pale face and upturned eyes. Her head sank slowly back. The light faded out of the countenance, yet left a tranquil, fixed look, as of a sleeper.

A deeper silence fell on the senses of the gazers. The awe-stricken hush in which they found themselves seemed an arrest even of time. Sorrowfully their eyes met, and told the mournful truth. Mariana's pure spirit was at rest.

CHAPTER LI

Marguerite instinctively felt that in this hour of doom hers was the stronger nature. Fully able to hold his place among his fellow-men in the race or the battle of life as Hugh Gordon had proved himself to be, he was apt to be unmanned in any supreme crisis where his affections were concerned. At such periods women display, in addition to the calmest courage, an organising faculty which in the ruder sex is generally found wanting.

Together the mourners knelt by the side of the dead —of her who had loved both so well—whose fate had been so inexplicably mingled with their lives. Long and earnestly they prayed. Then Marguerite prevailed
upon her companion to retire to his chamber, while she performed the last sad offices.

"I would rather no one approached her but myself," she said; "dear, gentle-souled Mariana. I will close her eyes, and dispose her sweet limbs for their long sleep. Later on I will send for Madame Faucher. No other hands shall touch her."

Once again only on earth did Hugh Gordon behold the fair features of the woman who had been the support of his life in that disastrous period when a flood of despair had engulfed his soul—when but for her sweet influence he would have gone down to the grave in which he deemed that every feeling, hope, and interest which bound him to earth lay buried.

When he again beheld Mariana all that loving care could imagine had been done to retain in death the exquisite delicacy of form and feature which had been in life so remarkable. In that Northern clime, in that stern season, there is a long interval during which the faces of the dead retain their wonted expression, fixed in statuesque calmness,

"Before decay's effacing fingers
Have swept the lines where beauty lingers."

The masses of bright hair had been simply combed back from the forehead, not confined in the traditional manner so often employed to render death unseemly and repelling. The marble hue of the calm face gave an ethereal appearance to the exquisitely moulded features, which in death retained the almost infantine air of gentleness which had distinguished Mariana in life.

The day so unspeakably mournful for the survivors at length arrived. The sad procession passed from the house where for many a day the dead and her mourners had dwelt in the enjoyment of so many of the material blessings which this life can afford.

Within a few short years what havoc had been made by the arch-demon Circumstance! To this house had both brides come in the first flush of maiden pride and joy at being the chosen companions of one who stood
high among his fellows in all "that gives the world assurance of a man."

And now to what goal had Fate's iron hand conducted them? One woman was sorrowfully following the other to the house appointed for all living, while the husband, who in all singleness of heart had mourned, almost to the verge of madness, his first bride, was now clothed in sable garb, a mourner and bereaved, while beside him sat the living dead, in the shape of her who had but yesterday returned as from the silent land.

Small wonder that during that sad period Hugh Gordon felt himself to be in a land of dreams and shadows, half unconscious whether in the presence of phantoms or realities.

He was partly recalled from these morbid fancies and imaginings by the voices of his children as they greeted him on his return—"Will poor mamma never come back to us, father, and is this lady to be our mother now?"

"I will be your mother, darling," said Marguerite, lifting the wondering child in her arms. "Mamma has gone to Heaven, and God has sent me to love you always."

It was now necessary that arrangements should be made and a future course resolved upon. Marguerite proposed to quit England at once for Australia, taking with her the children, of whom henceforth she constituted herself sole guardian and protectress. She would retain the assumed name of Mrs. Mortimer, and rent a house in Sydney as the governess in charge of the family of a deceased cousin.

Hugh Gordon would dispose of his property with the exception of one estate which had for many generations been the inheritance of the eldest son of the house. Of this he would arrange to have the rental transmitted until Alister was in a position to occupy it himself. After an interval of a year or more had elapsed, Hugh Gordon would rejoin his Marguerite in the New World of the South, and under the Southern Cross would their new vows be pronounced.

Since her return, Marguerite had deeply deplored
the absence of her own children, her first-born, Alister, and her heart's darling, Rita; but, for one reason, she was resigned. Alister had, after passing a brilliant examination, been gazetted to his regiment in India, where they had many relatives. The wife of a high Indian official who had retained a loving memory of his mother, on hearing that he had a sister, had sent a most pressing invitation to Rita for a year's visit. As the winter of her native land was thought to be severe for her constitution, Hugh Gordon and Mariana had yielded to her solicitation, and despatched Rita to the land whence Alister had written such glowing descriptions.

This, then, was the explanation of their absence at the time of Mariana's illness, on account of which it was not thought wise to recall them. Alister would in two years get his furlough, which he would spend in Australia, when Rita would accompany him.

On the day following the funeral Hugh Gordon departed for the Continent. Unable to bear the sight of the familiar rooms, the empty chamber, the dark-robed children, he was restless until he quitted the scene of his misery. He gave Marguerite carte blanche as to expenses with reference to the projected voyage and establishing of herself in Sydney. He arranged with his agent for the wants of the family—the payment to her order of an income amply sufficient, and, directing him to sell Gordon House and grounds, with all the furniture, directly Marguerite should quit it, left England for a lonely ramble in Spain, where he hoped in course of time to lull the poignancy of regret.

On the same day Marguerite arranged with Madame Faucher to undertake the lodging of herself and the children until the mail steamer should depart, and quitted for ever the house which had witnessed such crushing disasters—which had grown so darkly familiar with sorrow and mourning that it seemed to her now, in the dreary twilight of a fading winter day, the very vestibule of death.

Before the time of embarkation she had long conversations with Madame Faucher as to her future plans and destination.

"You have resolved, then, to return no more. It is
well," said that lady. "What is this England? A tomb, a mausoleum affreux, a land of sadness, of gloom, where even the sky weeps itself, ma foi, unceasingly. Vous avez raison. You go to meet the sun in a summer land, where flowers and fruits grow all the year round—where the seas are calm, the heavens blue. It is the newly-found paradise ce vieux Adam was turned out of. We of the earth will all follow you some day. These children, ah! so pale, will then grow and flourish like palm trees."

"The climate will suit them admirably," said Marguerite; "and for me I could have been so happy there, but—"

"But! What is but? There will be no buts in the happy future. Monsieur returns in the year and a day, like the old romanciers. Naturellement, he marries Mrs. Mortimer; so accomplished is she; so tenderly, so firmly she manages his children. You have thus sacrificed yourself again; is it not so? Well, it is your metier; there must be saints and martyrs, or we sinners would have no one to intercede for us with the good God."

"He may permit us a season of consolation in the future when these sorrows have been softened by time," Marguerite replied. "My husband and I are still young; we have been separated; alas! in this world we shall never know why. But we have been true to our trust—we have done our duty in the past. It will brighten our lot in the future. I shall always be thankful, my dear Madame Faucher, that I acted upon your advice, and returned in time to close our beloved Mariana's eyes. I was doubtful, even then, whether I should reveal myself fully. It was the accidental wearing of your sealskin cloak which caused my husband to recognise me. It is wonderfully like the one he last saw me in. Where did you purchase it?"

"Of a truth it was not bought at a shop, but from a distressed demon of a compatriot of mine. Ah! but yes! I considered afterwards that she had probably stolen it. I discovered of her history acts the most dreadful. Do you remember her name? It was Manon Delorge. Her companions had another name for her. But I forget much."
"It was La Chatte des Bois," exclaimed Marguerite, shuddering as she pronounced the ill-omened name, which brought back such bitter recollections—the thrill of such unspeakable misery. "It is possible that it may have been my own mantle. Ah! how well I remember the day Hugh placed it on my shoulders with such pride."

"We will soon behold," said madame vivaciously; "she was voleuse—brigande, everything of bad that is necessary for a woman."

And madame rushed upstairs with Gallic impetuosity, in a few moments reappearing with the still handsome and carefully preserved garment. It was but little altered after its varied and terrible experience.

"Yes," said Marguerite, opening the folds carefully, almost fearfully. "I cannot be mistaken. This is the very mantle of which I was so proud. Poor Hugh made me walk up and down, and admired me in it to his heart's content. He said that it suited my figure admirably, and that none but tall women should wear furs. Here is my own private mark," and she turned back a half-concealed lappet, where the letters, "M.G." though faded, were still distinct. "I wrote my initials there on the day I left home, in the event of its being necessary. It was this mantle which I lent to poor Lady Delacour, who was killed in the collision. When Hugh recognised it as mine she was buried in my name. Our hair, our height, our appearance had a general resemblance. They told me she had been buried in this mantle."

"She then robbed the dead," said madame, crossing herself with pious horror. "Sacrilegious that she was. Elle en est capable. Did she not betray me, traduce me, who saved her from dying of hunger in London! But you will now receive it from me. Sad and precious memorial. Is it not so?"

"You must let me buy you a new one, for I should like to show it to Hugh," said Marguerite, sighing. "Ah me! how little we thought of what was before us the day we parted!"

Once more in the Indus, fortunately available—once
more on the blue and bounding wave beneath a brighter sky. Again parting the tropic seas in the great, gay, populous ocean steamer, Marguerite daily gained strength and cheerful serenity as the land wherein she had known so many sorrows receded and the Britain of the South was daily nearer.

The children were benefited by the change from the darkness and low temperature of the Northern winter to the soft airs and sunny skies of the tropics. They revelled in the liberty and variety of their new life; were never weary of listening to Marguerite's tales of the beautiful land to which they were speeding. The voyage, commenced under melancholy auspices, was exceptionally free from storm and tempest, and when after a most favourable passage the Indus entered the majestic portals of the unrivalled haven, Marguerite hailed with joyful recognition the flower-crowned heights, the mirrored wave, slumbering beneath the pearly mist of a vaporous autumn morn, as the entrance to the good land which had been to her an asylum from care, at once a sanctuary and a home.

Her arrival had been anticipated, and, early as was the hour, the steamer was no sooner within reach of the wharf than Mr. and Mrs. Baldhill arrived in a boat and carried off the whole party to Orara. There the children were transported with delight at the beauty of the surroundings, as well as at the comprehensive breakfast and the fresh fruits with which they were regaled.

"And so you are here again, safe and sound, with your dear children, too," said Mrs. Baldhill, affectionately. "What sweet little things they are. Poor dears! not that they'll miss much for the future; but a mother's a mother. Never mind; don't say a word for an hour or two. Just sit still and look round and enjoy yourself. How well you're looking, too. But the sea air always did agree with you. Mr. Baldhill thinks you look better than ever. Isabel's away on a visit to Mount Wilson, but she'll be down to-morrow. She's well, but I think she's been studying too hard lately. She doesn't go out much. She's taken a serious fit since last year. Did she tell you Sir John
Danvers proposed to her before he went home, when they came back from New Zealand? She wouldn't have him, though; she said she liked him, and always would, but not in that way; it was a first-rate match, but we're not sorry. We'd like to keep our girl a year or two longer with us, and it would break our hearts if she went to live in England altogether, away from us. We couldn't live there, you know. Too cold, my dear; and Mr. Baldhill would die, I really believe, if he was more than a year or two away from his sheep and stations. Where's Mr. Allerton? Oh, he's at Honolulu, or Tahiti, or somewhere among those islands. He didn't come back from New Zealand with Mr. Stanhope and Sir John Danvers—said he wasn't quite recovered yet, and wanted more change. I think he was more hurt than we thought; don't you? He never quite got over that wound. Perhaps his heart's affected. There's a great deal of that sort of thing nowadays."

"Let us hope he will recover in time," said Marguerite, with less sympathy than the good woman thought the occasion required. "He is young, and not quite tired of life. He has the strong heart which belongs to gifted natures. He will come back to his own land in good time, and settle down into a model country gentleman."

"Well, I should like to see him with a good wife, and a family about her," said the worthy matron. "I declare I'm as fond of him as if he was my own son. There's trouble enough in matrimony, Heaven knows; but a man that isn't married—or a woman either—lives only half a life, to my thinking. But I seem as if I could do nothing but talk and run on. I'm that happy to see you out here again that I hardly know what I'm saying. After breakfast we'll drive over and see the furnished house I've taken for you, by the month, till you get settled. I've got you two capital servants, too. It's Marchmont, that beautiful place in Rose Bay that Mr. Thorndale built just before we came out last. They're at home now, and won't be out till the spring."

"Oh! that lovely place," exclaimed Marguerite. "How delighted I am. Don't you know how Isabel
and I used to admire it, with the rose garden on the
sea cliff, and the balcony overhanging the bay. It's
like a place in Brittany where I spent a happy summer
once. How good of you to take so much trouble."

"Trouble! We'll do anything in the wide world for
you, now you've come back to live amongst us. I
expect Isabel will be quite a new girl, bless her!"

Marguerite took possession of her new home before
nightfall, and Isabel came rushing down after break­
fast to demonstrate her transports in person.

"Oh! I am resigned to existence now. I am
satisfied with my destiny," she exclaimed, in the
intervals between her embraces. "I began to think
that I should have nothing to look forward to in life but
the Children's Hospital, where I've spent half my time
lately. Now you are back again life seems to have
brightened all of a sudden. And are you going to live
here always?"

"Always, my darling Isabel, as far as we can judge.
It will take very serious reasons to dissemble me from
Sydney again."

"And oh! what dear little children, what delicate
mites! They put me in mind of the 'Non Angli, sed
Angeli' darlings. So these are your poor cousins!
How fortunate that you were able to get back in
time!"

"But for your good father, I could hardly have
managed that. I shall be grateful all my days. But it
is one of the many debts to your family, dear child,
which we hope partly to repay in the future."

"You have a hundred times repaid us for anything
we could do," said Isabel, excitedly. "What should I
have been if I had never known you? A spoiled, half-
educated, fanciful creature, with hardly an idea beyond
dances and dresses, like so many of the poor things I
see here; a thoughtless trifle in youth, a discontented
complainer in age."

"Whereas now," said Marguerite, smiling, "if
Khartoum were only relieved and Gordon safe, we
should be perfectly happy, and devote ourselves to
good works and ennobling duties for the rest of our
days."
"Khartoum is all but relieved. General Herbert Stewart gained a victory over the Arabs," replied the girl, joyfully. "Lord Wolseley has the Mahdi in the hollow of his hand. We are expecting fuller news daily."

"And so all our pleasant friends have gone?" said Marguerite. "Mr. Stanhope, that nice Sir John, and Mr. Allerton; where is he?"

"How should I know?" replied Isabel. "He writes to mother now and again, but he never seems to wish to come back"; and here a rising sob was with difficulty suppressed, as she threw her arms round her friend's neck and leaned her head on her shoulder in childlike fashion as of old.

"We must abide God's good time," said Marguerite, gently. "Wait patiently for Him, and He will give thee thy heart's desire. As long as my girl does her duty and preserves her faith in the justice of a merciful Father, no evil will have power to harm her. And now let us explore this beautiful house. My house! which I am never tired of admiring. Was there ever a more perfect view than from this balcony?"

But little more remains to be told. Marguerite Gordon's destiny was so far fulfilled that no malign forces were suffered to invade her future path. Surrounded by friends and admiring acquaintances whom her unpretending yet dignified character never failed to attract—happy in the care of the children whom she had taken to her heart—she calmly awaited the day when her husband should rejoin her and the cup of mortal happiness be filled to overflowing.

That event took place in little more than the year of mourning due to the memory of Mariana. Hugh Gordon, having realised his property in England, found himself in possession of an income which amply sufficed for the needs of a cultured, unconventional mode of life, such as they both were agreed in thinking to be the sumnum bonum of existence. Mr. Baldhill even persuaded him to make a few guarded investments which would safely add to his already considerable capital.
Bruce Allerton arrived at length from an exhaustive tour—which had, indeed, even included New Guinea—wave-tossed and sun-browned, even more tanned than amid the wanderings in the desert, where he had so nearly found a grave. His collections afforded endless interest to Mr. Gordon's scientific soul, and in that gentleman he recognised a kindred spirit. Mr. Allerton was apparently even more changed in mental than in physical attributes, inasmuch as he speedily set at rest all doubts on the subject of his matrimonial intentions which might have been entertained by his fair compatriots, among whom he had been for many reasons an object of considerable interest, by declaring in form to Isabel, and arranging for as early a date as was consistent with indispensable preliminaries. That he was happy, no student of human nature will doubt who has noted the result of unions where the fresh, pure heart of a high-minded, loving girl is delivered into the keeping of a man of stainless honour and generous disposition. They were happy—supremely, consciously, undeniably happy. Whether in after years they passed the glorious Southern winter in peaceful enjoyment of their country home, or returned during the too ardent summer to the wave-washed promontory which had sounded Isabel's earliest lullaby, no mortal man (or woman) noticed the trace of a wish ungratified, of a hope unfulfilled in Bruce Allerton's cheerful, manly countenance. Still less could one have doubted that the handsome, stately matron into whom Isabel developed spared a moment for regret or ennui from the management of her household, with its troop of happy, healthy boys and girls, and her befitting social duties.

More than once had Bruce Allerton confessed with heartfelt thanks to Marguerite that she had known far better than he himself how to secure his true happiness, his enduring good. For the superfluous energy, the demonstratively high spirits that were ever bubbling over in Isabel's happy girlhood, were but the natural outcome of a fearless, richly-endowed nature, unrestrained by conventionality, yet pure, unselfish, and capable of emulating the deeds of the loftiest exemplars of her sex. Now the occasionally rebellious forces,
causing limited natures to shrink and disapprove, were merged in the absorbing maternal tenderness which a happy union had developed.

"I am aware that I was not your first or your only love, Bruce," she remarked on more than one occasion; "but you love me and me only now, darling; don't you? That is all I care about. It will be my fault if you love any one else for the time to come."

No one who saw Bruce Allerton in his happy home with the second Isabel climbing upon his knees and the eldest boy Gordon, already possessed of a pony and aware of the difference between catch-weight and weight for age, would have considered the contingency probable.

And when the day arrived—the half-desired, half-dreaded day—when for the second time Hugh Gordon stood at the altar with the bride of his youth, how strangely solemn and sweet a moment was it. Such was the course taken as necessary to avoid the comments of the curious, to shield Mariana's memory, to remove reproach from her innocent children. The promise had been made as she lay on her death-bed. It had soothed her dying moments; and both Hugh Gordon and his wife found relief in conforming rigidly to it.

And did her second nuptials bring to Marguerite the rapture, the unquestioning love and total absorption of one being in another which crown the bridal of those whose inmost hearts throb in unison? Much had intervened—another life, another love had come and gone since first she had rested in her lover's arms, a happy bride, glad with the triumph of pure, fresh girlhood.

Yet was their later love, assured as they were that no obstacle now interrupted the free course of the warmest affection, scarcely less passionately enchanting than in the days of the buried past. Both had been purified in the furnace of affliction. Weighed in the balance, Marguerite had not been found wanting. Through sorrow and weakness, misery and despair, she had kept "the bird in her bosom." She had been
faithful to the love of man, to the faith of God. Loyal to the gentle being who had unwittingly usurped her place, she had not resented her husband's seeming infidelity—the constancy of his heart to the dead. And now she was to reap her reward. As her husband, the long-lost lover of her youth, pressed her to his heart she recognised the truth of the immortal promise—"Come to Me, all ye that are weak and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest"—she was to receive her reward on earth. The deliverer had come, bringing precious sheaves with him.

Mr. Baldhill carried out the promise, as was his wont, of providing for Alphonse and Marie. He raised his salary annually, as he developed fresh capacity, and finally advanced him sufficient capital to purchase a wool-scouring establishment, with machinery, in the successful working of which large profits were to be made, and in which his scientific, specialised knowledge would insure him an easy victory over competitors.

The girl Ayesha contracted a liking for civilised Australian life. Being teachable and a Christian, she improved much under Isabel's tuition. She eventually married a fair-bearded, rising young overseer of Mr. Baldhill's, who upon one of his rare excursions "down the country," being "fetched," as he expressed it, by Ayesha's wondrous eyes and willowy form, asked the momentous question without notice, and received a satisfactory answer. They went after the honeymoon trip to an extremely warm locality on the Queensland border, which in all desert essentials—camels and Arabs excepted—must have reminded Ayesha of the Soudan.

Gholab after a time—much doubting between his duty to Zohrab and Zuleika and his affection for his family—decided to return via Aden, to which historic locality he was accordingly shipped. The horses were entrusted to Ayesha and her husband at Outer Back Murgah, where in a few years several true descendants of the prophet's immortal steeds might have been seen in the home paddock. The spotted sheep and the gazelles were likewise relegated to this far-away lodge in the wilderness, where in the after time quite an Arab
The sealskin cloak colony appeared to have grown up. On great occasions Zohrab was solemnly led down to Allerton Hall, as the principal estate was named, for the delectation of Mrs. Allerton, who always managed to get up a riding party, and show off her beloved steed, either in her own person or by causing him to be ridden by the best horsewoman of the party. The gazelles also seemed to find the saline herbage and dry, warm climate of Outer Back Murgah suitable to their constitutions. Visitors are never tired of admiring the “soft, dark eye,” and the well-known lines are frequently quoted.

Hugh Gordon and his wife had been settled for a year in their new home when the Indian mail brought a letter from Alister. He and his sister Rita might be expected in Sydney by the next steamer. What words can describe the rapture with which Marguerite received the intelligence! Her brave, her beautiful boy—her first-born—the child of tears of joy—of unutterable love—of boundless gratitude to Heaven for the priceless gift—all the passionately mingled feelings of maternity filled her head and oppressed her brain. And Rita! the softened image of her father, with his love of literature, his contemplative nature—and ardent faith—how should she bear the happiness which was in store for her? And yet again, a complication arose. Were they acknowledged as the children of their first—their only marriage—legally, how explain to the world—to the younger children, their true position? For one moment she repined at the necessity for concealment; but when she saw the fair innocent faces of Mariana’s babies, and recalled her last look of grateful love, she checked the involuntary thought.

As Alister and his sister were of age to comprehend the nature of the case, it was decided that they should be fully informed of all the circumstances.

They met; the orphaned children, the mother so long mourned as dead. Can words describe the deep unutterable joy which beamed in every eye, which found relief in cries, in sobs, in uncontrolled weeping? But they were tears of joy. For when the young creatures learned that they had unwittingly shared her tenderness as “madame” during the life of Mariana, they de-
clared that instinctively they must have divined that she was their real mother.

To preserve the existing family arrangement it was assumed that Alister and his sister were the children of Mrs. Gordon by a former marriage. This was true in fact, and was received with unquestioning acquiescence by the society of the day. Hugh Gordon and his wife were too popular and too valuable as component parts thereof for idle curiosity to receive encouragement to criticise their private affairs. In due time Alister returned to India, whence from time to time he "ran down" as he expressed himself, to freshen up and lay in constitution for another dose of Indian ills. On one of these occasions he brought a brother officer, sore wounded in a skirmish with the tribesmen of the frontier, whose mild heroism and amiable qualities so impressed Rita that she followed him and his fortunes to "Morningland."

And now the restful, happy days for the long-parted pair passed in an Elysium of peace, of unvarying contentment, of that perfect love which casteth out fear.

Then it so chanced one day that they had been invited by the admiral of a French squadron, making some short stay at the Australian station, to go on board a transport which had called in on her way to Noumea. She carried with her a number of female récidivistes. Marguerite did not care to behold anything so painful; but Hugh Gordon wished to send a message connected with botanical science to an acquaintance on the island. The rest of the party were eagerly curious.

As Marguerite had anticipated, the sight was painful and repulsive. Caged within iron compartments, the wretched women, physically well-cared-for, looked less like human beings than fierce animals confined in a menagerie. Unsexed, evil of aspect, presenting every type of criminal instinct, reckless of speech and manner, they constituted a sight unspeakably revolting. Saddened and repelled by a sight so opposed to her every instinct, Marguerite was about to withdraw, when she was attracted by a woman, whom the Sister of Charity,
moving among these ruined natures like an angel of pity in the lowest pit of the Inferno, was addressing in mild reproof.

The woman suddenly turned, her fierce eyes gleaming like those of a tigress in their hollow caverns. There was an instantaneous recognition. It was La Chatte des Bois.

"It is you, then," said she, with an intonation that was almost a growl. "What la sœur tells me is probably true. There is a God who rewards and punishes. You are in heaven—restored to him—is it not so?—while I am in hell."

"Then, par hasard, you have formerly known Manon, whom her companions call La Chatte?" said the Sister of Charity in her soft voice, speaking also in French, as she perceived that Marguerite understood the words of the récidiviste.

"I knew this unhappy woman many years ago," replied Marguerite. "She was a nurse in a hospital in which I was unhappily a patient in consequence of a terrible accident. What will be her position in Noumea?"

"She will have an opportunity of reforming," said the sister. "Let us hope she will see the necessity of turning to the Saviour—to the Holy Virgin, who will soften her heart, if she prays to her."

"Are there any means of procuring her indulgences in the shape of food, of little articles of dress, for instance?" And here Marguerite took out her purse. "I should like to do something for her. Is it permitted to give to you in trust for her?"

"She will enjoy a restricted freedom after a period of probation," said the sister, "dependent always upon good conduct and submission to rules. Then a few Louis d'or may be useful."

"Perhaps la sœur will oblige me by taking charge of these in her interest," said Marguerite, as she looked with sorrowful pity upon her enemy, now reduced to an abject condition of degradation which might well have satisfied the most revengeful mind. With a last gaze at the hard face of La Chatte, she handed her purse, with its contents, to the sister.
At this proof of womanly compassion and forgiveness, the features of the criminal underwent a sudden and wonderful change. The face softened, the fierce regard disappeared, and was replaced by a look which seemed to have returned from the recesses of lost years; tears stood in the savage, glittering eyes as she fell on her knees and stretched her hand imploringly towards Marguerite through the grating.

"You have conquered," she said, in a broken voice. "You have returned good for evil. I did not believe there were people like you in the world. It was in your power to exult over me. That is how the people of my world treat their enemies, and I that persecuted you without a cause—without a cause! But I will repay you for your gold. Henceforth I will change, I swear it. That is how the children of le bon Dieu wish to be repaid. La sœur will write to you of me. Is it not so?"

"I will do so without fail, Manon," said the sister. "You will afford me good news to send. And, madame," she continued, bowing with graceful humility, "will permit me to thank her for the support she has afforded to my exhortations by her generosity, by her holy act of Christian charity."

"It would not be fair to our unfortunate compatriots," said the admiral, now stepping forward, and bowing low with true French gallantry to the sister, "to permit Madame Gordon to be the only contributor. Permit me to present my small offering in so good a cause."

The remainder of the party here insisted upon performing their part, the result of which was that the good sister had received a considerable addition to her fund, and the companions of Manon had cause to bless the day when Marguerite Gordon’s foot pressed the deck of their floating prison.

"We leave behind us the last link which binds us to that time of lamentation and woe," said Hugh Gordon, as from their fast-receding boat they watched the heavy outlines and sombre colouring of the prison ship.
"I wonder that you could find it in your heart to forgive that fiend Manon. I cannot, I own."

"We are commanded to forgive our enemies," said Marguerite, softly. "And you should not think too hardly of her, Hugh, as through her dishonesty she enabled you to recognise me on the night of my return in the Sealskin Cloak.

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