So it seemed to us we were done with clews. As the sequel, to which I now hasten, will show, we were mistaken.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH A STRANGE REVELATION THROWS NEW LIGHT ON THE MYSTERY OF MY UNCLE'S DEATH.

SOME of the happiest periods in our lives become insufferably dull when we undertake to render an account of them. The following year at St. Maure's was for us poets a golden year. Much as we had loved our studies in the lower classes, we now threw ourselves into them with renewed ardor. For we were at an age when sentiment, with its verbal freshness, awakes in the youthful heart, and in a class where all the studies—be it of Latin, Greek, or English—are directed toward stimulating sentiment, developing it in some directions, pruning it in others, rendering it, in short, a noble instrument for appreciating all that is highest and holiest in human life, thought, and endeavor.

It is hardly necessary to state that all of us poets had exchanged our knickerbockers for trousers, and walked about with the certain step of man—so, at least, we thought.

Percy was the real poet of our class. His delicate imagination was a storehouse of fancies, sweet, pure, charming—he had but to touch a seemingly dry idea and it burst into blossoms of beauty.

Tom was not so successful in poetry proper, but in English prose, for strong, vigorous thought and expression he led all. In Latin, too, he advanced

rapidly and soon took the lead of Percy, who, it must be confessed, relaxed a trifle in the pursuit of the classics that he might give more time to the muse. Frank Burdock remained in the small yard, not a little to his disgust. He was growing fast, however, and gave promise of joining us the following year. Whenever he met me he invariably asked in a whisper:

"Say, Harry, don't you think I'm growing?" and he would draw himself up and look me fixedly in the eye.

It was a bright, cool Thursday morning toward the end of May. Percy, Tom, and myself were out for a long walk. We had obtained permission from the president of the college to visit the village of Sykesville, six miles to the east of us. Our plan was to make it by half-past nine, procure lunch there, depart at ten, and reach the college by noon-time.

"Harry," remarked Tom, after a pause which had succeeded a desultory conversation, "it's strange that you've got no news lately about what your lawyer is doing."

"That reminds me," I answered; "my father sent me a letter of his yesterday. The lawyer holds out little hope. He says that our finding Mrs. Raynor is almost a matter dependent upon chance. He thinks that in all probability she is going under an alias. Then he adds: 'From the fact that she lived with you on intimate terms for several years without giving any clew to her former life up to the very night of the murder, I infer that she is a very extraordinary woman. A woman or even a man of such reticence is a hard subject to overreach.'"

"He's quite a different character from the invalu-

able Tinker," said Tom. "I think he's quite right. Chance is your hope, and yet I'll wager my last poem that you'll meet her yet."

"Isn't it sad," said Percy, in his sweet, winning way, "to think that this woman, whom you looked upon in the sacred relation of mother, should turn out to be a criminal. It's cruel! I don't want to believe it."

"Nor I, Percy; but I fear I must. God knows I loved her as a mother, and she loved me. I'm certain of it. She'd have laid down her life for me, I once thought."

"It looks strongly against her," said Tom. "But the great mystery is to reconcile her love and affection for Harry with the cruel way in which she took her revenge. Children don't love people like that. Innocence is the greatest detective in the world."

"Well, for the present it is a mystery," said Percy. "Who knows when it may be cleared up? 'It is the unexpected that always happens.'"

We entered Sykesville presently, soon found a bakery and confectionery, where, taking seats in a back room, screened from the front part of the store by heavy curtains, we ordered our lunch of a smiling young man with heavy eyes, who looked as though he had gone to bed very late and hadn't succeeded in sleeping well even then.

"Bring in your shop," said Tom.

"Shop! shop!" echoed the heavy-eyed. "Do you mean Scotch cakes?"

"Exactly. Scotch cakes for three and cream cakes and baker's toast and——"

"Yes, sir."

"And lemonade."

"All right, sir." And the young man hastened off.

If the three of us had put off the small boy we had not put off his appetite. We kept the young man busy, while Tom worried him into the lowest depths of stupidity by his absurd remarks.

In the midst of an amusing story Tom stopped short.

"What in the world's the matter, Harry?" he exclaimed as I sprang from my seat and peered through the curtain; for a strangely familiar voice had stirred the roots of my hair. I looked through the curtain and a dizziness came upon me.

"Catch him, Percy—he's falling."

For I staggered, the wheels of life stood still, and I would have fallen to the floor had not Percy caught me and restored me to my chair.

"Here, drink this," said Tom, putting a glass of water to my lips. "Hallo, there!" he added in a louder voice. "Bring in some wine, quick!"

Startled by his tone, the shopman came hastening in with a bottle of wine. Tom very calmly knocked the neck off the bottle and filled me a glass. As this was a prohibition town, the intelligent reader will understand how it was that wine was on sale in a bakery.

"What is it, Harry?" inquired Tom as I showed signs of coming to.

"I just saw Mrs. Raynor. She's in this shop now."

Tom bounded to the curtain and peeped cautiously through the opening. He saw standing at the counter a woman of middle age, poor but neat in dress, with a refined face, on which lines of suffering and,

it may be, of privation had written the pathos of many years. She had just bought a loaf of bread and was turning to go out.

"Harry," he said, "you just stay where you are. I'll not speak to her at all. But leave everything to me." Saying which, he drew the curtains aside and hurried away.

Percy and I were very sober. We knew that a great crisis in my life was come. Terrible fancies stared me in the face and conflicting emotions fought strong within me. At sight of that familiar countenance all my former filial affection returned. Oh, it was cruel! She had been a mother to me, and now it might become my duty to hand her over to the law. Percy perceived my distress.

"God help you, my dear friend," he said, his blue eyes swimming. "Be brave and strong; trust in Him."

I bowed my head upon the table and wept and prayed.

Tom came in at length, his face softened with pity.

"I've got her house, Harry. Of course you'll see her alone first?"

"Of course."

"Well, we'll be near, so as if anything happens to help you."

"O Tom! if what we dread most proves to be true, what shall I do? It is my certain duty to have her put in custody."

"Go and see her," said Tom. "If the worst does come, old boy, Percy and I will see to the unpleasant parts."

We left the bakery together, quite different from

the merry, laughing, happy-eyed boys who had entered.

Walking down the length of the street and turning to our left, we presently found ourselves before a tiny cottage overgrown with creeping plants and standing back in a small, tastily-arranged garden.

"That's the house," said Tom. "Go in, Harry, and be a man."

"God bless you!" added Percy.

Summoning all my courage, I walked up to the cottage. A small window gave me a view of the interior before I reached the door. I paused and looked in. Oh! what a trial it was to me—what an agony even to think of going one step farther. At a sewing-machine sat Mrs. Raynor, her face, furrowed though it was, calm and serene. Beside her was a boy of ten or eleven, dark-eyed, black-haired, neatly but poorly clad, working at a lathe. His beautiful face was lighted with an expression of joy. Near them and playing upon the floor was a bright little girl of six or seven. As I stood looking in upon the scene, the boy turned proudly and held up his work to Mrs. Raynor. She smiled approvingly, then bent over and kissed his cheek. Whereupon the little girl, with the socialistic spirit common to children, came running over to claim her share, too.

"I'm learning fast, mamma," said the boy. "In a few weeks I'll be able to do two hours' good work every day—you've promised me, you know—and then you're going to get a rest, mamma. And then you'll get strong and well—and sis and I will be so happy!"

When Enoch Arden gazed upon the happy household whereof his own lawful wife was the light, he

crept away like a guilty thing, dug his hands into the earth, and prayed! Not unlike his position was my own. Should I enter and destroy this sacred home-life? God knows I would have departed on the moment had I but felt certain that I knew all, had I felt certain that Mrs. Raynor had done the deed. Yes, I would have departed even should I be haunted from that day to the day of my death by my uncle's ghost. But the one element of uncertainty—the mystery; Tom's words so often repeated urging me to see Mrs. Raynor; the sense of duty—all conspired to move me on.

And so, with the merry laugh of the children ringing in my ears, "like sweet bells jangled out of tune," I knocked.

"Come in!"

I threw the door open and stood gazing at my former attendant, who on the instant had arisen, putting aside her sewing as she did so.

The eyes I knew so well—had they not met mine a thousand times in love and tenderness?—looked at me inquiringly, then there was a sudden start, then a cry, and she was weeping with joy upon my bosom.

"My own dear Harry!" she sobbed.

I was unmanned for a moment. But with a wrench at my heart I drew myself away and looked meaningly at the children.

She took my thought at once. Her face was very pale as she turned to the little ones and said:

"My dears, go out. I shall call you in a few minutes."

How hateful I appeared in my own eyes as they each kissed their mamma an affectionate farewell.

When they had left the room I cleared my throat and began my story. I told my nurse of my terrible awakening on Christmas morning, of the scene in my uncle's room, of my visit with Tom Playfair to the haunted house, and of the dream ghost that had seemed so real.

"And oh! Mrs. Raynor," I concluded, "black as stands the evidence against you, for God's sake give me your word that you are innocent! I will believe you now as I did when, a little child, I called you mother."

"Harry, my own dear boy, in God's name I assure you that I am innocent."

I gave a gasp of joy. A great gloom lifted from my heart, and I would have thrown my arms about my nurse's neck had not a peculiar quivering of her lips, a growing paleness in her face, warned me that she had left something untold.

"Who was it?" I cried. "You know more!"

"Harry—God help you, my dear boy—you killed your uncle yourself!"

The room swam; my brain reeled; Mrs. Raynor in a moment helped me to a chair.

"Listen!" she said. "Let us recall together what went before that dreadful night. I knew when we took the train that sad Christmas eve that I was to face the only man I had ever had reason to hate. I had never seen him nor he me. I counted on saying nothing when in his presence, but the very moment we stood before him all my pent-up wrongs came thronging upon my memory. I failed to restrain myself, and you remember well the scene that ensued between me and your uncle. Then you remember how, when at eight o'clock we went to your bed-

room, I told you all the sad story of my life—of my noble husband, of his death of a broken heart. You in your sweet love mingled your tears with mine. You were angry at your uncle, and at ten o'clock, when you fell asleep, you left me meditating on the terrible wrongs James Dee had done my baby children. I had not told you of them, Harry. You saw them just now. I had left them in charge of an aunt under their real name, for Raynor was not my married, but my family name. Now, please to remember that when you went to sleep at ten you left me sitting beside you, worn out with a day's journey—as you know I did not sleep on the cars—and still more worn from the terrible emotions that had shaken my soul. For an hour or more my thoughts were busy with the past—vividly busy. Then came a sort of heavy feeling; sleep was coming upon me. I arose and paced the room; but walk as I might, sleep was struggling with me and I detected myself staggering as I moved up and down. But notwithstanding all that, I would have fought it off, I think, had not a sudden weakness come upon me. I felt that I was about to faint; I made over to the bed and tried to call you, but fell to the floor, midway in the room, unconscious. It was some time before I recovered at all, and even then I continued to lie half-conscious upon the floor. During this period, which lasted, I imagine, fifteen or twenty minutes, I remembered, in a sort of horrid nightmare, that I was in the house of an enemy. Then I heard, or thought I heard, the sound of some one walking on tiptoe, and it occurred to me that perhaps your uncle was coming to kill me. I tried to move and failed; the nightmare became more and more vivid;

the footfalls, slow, stealthy, came nearer. Oh, the horror of that dream!"

Mrs. Raynor paused and wiped her brow.

"At last I burst the spell upon me and rose to my feet in a state of terror you can hardly imagine. I stood for a moment listening to catch those ominous footfalls. But I heard nothing. Then I turned to your bed. It was empty. Oh! my dear Harry, you were gone. For a moment I stood paralyzed with fright! Here you were alone, in a strange house, walking in your sleep. I shivered as it occurred to me that you might have fallen out of some window! Even as I stood I heard without the sound of a light footstep—not like the heavy footstep I had heard or thought I heard in my nightmare. That was the sound of a man or woman's tread on tiptoe; this was the sound of a child's bare feet. As I caught your tread, Harry, I took up the lamp and hastened to the hallway. How I thanked God as I saw you coming along quietly, easily, from the further end of the hall. I hastened to meet you. But as I got near, imagine my feelings when I saw that your night-shirt was dabbled with blood. It was an awful sight! You with your innocent face and eyes wide open—yet seeing nothing—walking along unconscious of those awful stains. I kept beside you and followed you to your room, where you walked straight to your bed and got into it. Then, lamp in hand, I hurried down the corridor to the very end, where I saw an open door. I entered trembling, and holding the lamp up gazed around. Then, my dear boy, I saw what you saw the next morning—your uncle cold in death."