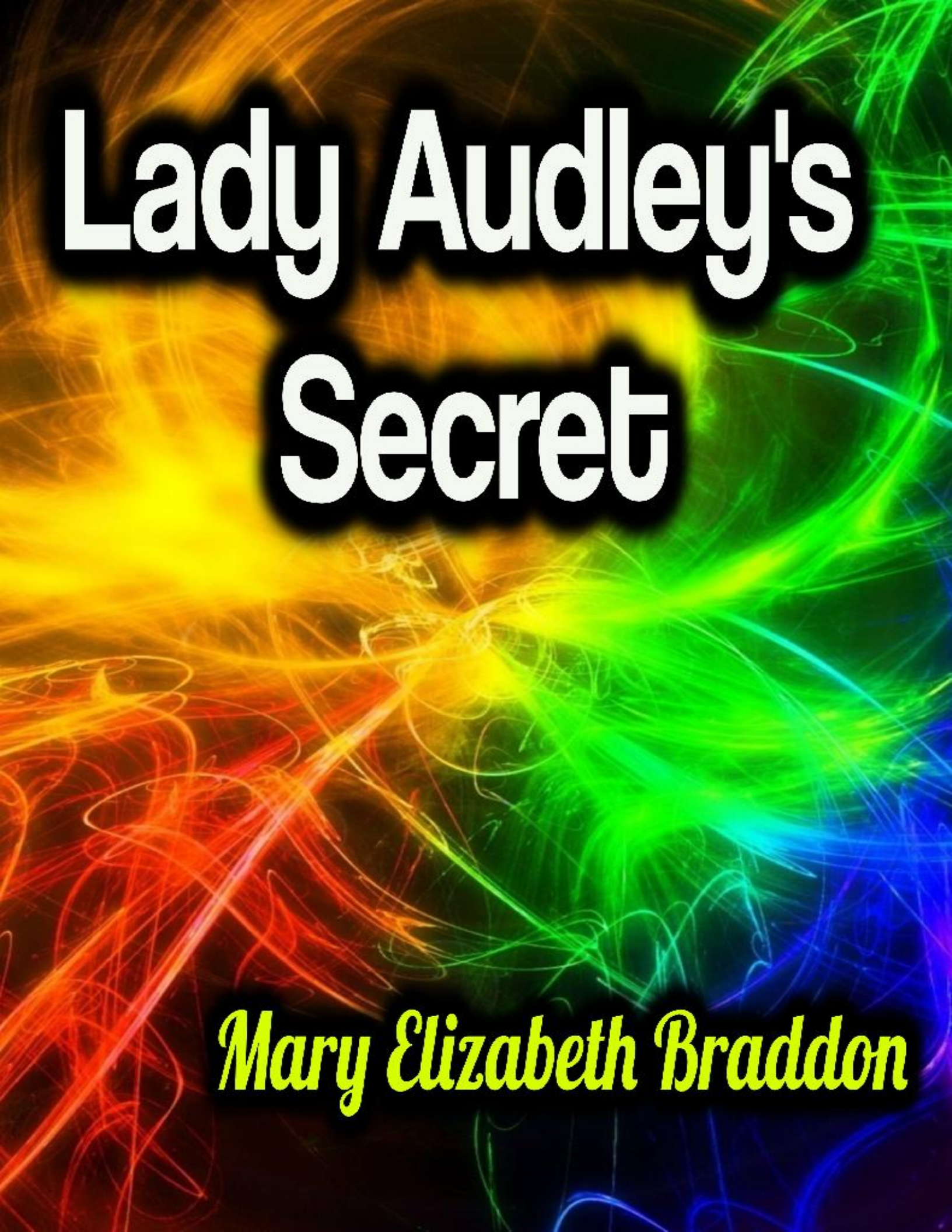
Lady Audley's Secret
Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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CHAPTER I.

LUCY.

It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thorough-fare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all.

At the end of this avenue there was an old arch and a clock tower, with a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand—and which jumped straight from one hour to the next—and was therefore always in extremes. Through this arch you walked straight into the gardens of Audley Court.

A smooth lawn lay before you, dotted with groups of rhododendrons, which grew in more perfection here than anywhere else in the county. To the right there were the kitchen gardens, the fish-pond, and an orchard bordered by a dry moat, and a broken ruin of a wall, in some places thicker than it was high, and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonecrop, and dark moss. To the left there was a broad graveled walk, down which, years ago, when the place had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand; a wall bordered with espaliers, and shadowed on one side by goodly oaks, which shut out the flat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter.

The house faced the arch, and occupied three sides of a quadrangle. It was very old, and very irregular and rambling. The windows were uneven; some small, some large, some with heavy stone mullions and rich stained glass; others with frail lattices that rattled in every breeze; others so modern that they might have been added only yesterday. Great piles of chimneys rose up here and there behind the pointed gables, and seemed as if they were so broken down by age and long service that they must have fallen but for the straggling ivy which, crawling up the walls and trailing even over the roof, wound itself about them and supported them. The principal door was squeezed into a corner of a turret at one angle of the building, as if it were in hiding from dangerous visitors, and wished to keep itself a secret—a noble door for all that—old oak, and studded with great square-headed iron nails, and so thick that the sharp iron knocker struck upon it with a muffled sound, and the visitor rung a clanging bell that dangled in a corner among the ivy, lest the noise of the knocking should never penetrate the stronghold.

A glorious old place. A place that visitors fell in raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there forever, staring into the cool fish-ponds and counting the bubbles as the roach and carp rose to the surface of the water. A spot in which peace seemed to have taken up her abode, setting her soothing hand on every tree and flower, on the still ponds and quiet alleys, the shady corners of the old-fashioned rooms, the deep window-seats behind the painted glass, the low meadows and the stately avenues—ay, even upon the stagnant well, which, cool and sheltered as all else in the old place, hid itself away in a shrubbery behind the gardens, with an idle handle that was never turned and a lazy rope so rotten that the pail had broken away from it, and had fallen into the water.

A noble place; inside as well as out, a noble place—a house in which you incontinently lost yourself if ever you were so rash as to attempt to penetrate its mysteries alone; a house in which no one room had any sympathy with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber, and through that down some narrow staircase leading to a door which, in its turn, led back into that very part of the house from which you thought yourself the furthest; a house that could never have been planned by any mortal architect, but must have been the handiwork of that good old builder, Time, who, adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another year, toppling down a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall, allowing a Norman arch to stand here; throwing in a row of high narrow windows in the reign of Queen Anne, and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I, to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex. Of course, in such a house there were secret chambers; the little daughter of the present owner, Sir Michael Audley, had fallen by accident upon the discovery of one. A board had rattled under her feet in the great nursery where she played, and on attention being drawn to it, it was found to be loose, and so removed, revealed a ladder, leading to a hiding-place between the floor of the nursery and the ceiling of the room below—a hiding-place so small that he who had hid there must have crouched on his hands and knees or lain at full length, and yet large enough to contain a quaint old carved oak chest, half filled with priests' vestments, which had been hidden away, no doubt, in those cruel days when the life of a man was in danger if he was discovered to have harbored a Roman Catholic priest, or to have mass said in his house.

The broad outer moat was dry and grass-grown, and the laden trees of the orchard hung over it with gnarled, straggling branches that drew fantastical shadows upon the green slope. Within this moat there was, as

I have said, the fish-pond—a sheet of water that extended the whole length of the garden and bordering which there was an avenue called the lime-tree walk; an avenue so shaded from the sun and sky, so screened from observation by the thick shelter of the over-arching trees that it seemed a chosen place for secret meetings or for stolen interviews; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned, or a lover's vow registered with equal safety; and yet it was scarcely twenty paces from the house.

At the end of this dark arcade there was the shrubbery, where, half buried among the tangled branches and the neglected weeds, stood the rusty wheel of that old well of which I have spoken. It had been of good service in its time, no doubt; and busy nuns have perhaps drawn the cool water with their own fair hands; but it had fallen into disuse now, and scarcely any one at Audley Court knew whether the spring had dried up or not. But sheltered as was the solitude of this lime-tree walk, I doubt very much if it was ever put to any romantic uses. Often in the cool of the evening Sir Michael Audley would stroll up and down smoking his cigar, with his dogs at his heels, and his pretty young wife dawdling by his side; but in about ten minutes the baronet and his companion would grow tired of the rustling limes and the still water, hidden under the spreading leaves of the water-lilies, and the long green vista with the broken well at the end, and would stroll back to the drawing-room, where my lady played dreamy melodies by Beethoven and Mendelssohn till her husband fell asleep in his easy-chair.

Sir Michael Audley was fifty-six years of age, and he had married a second wife three months after his fifty-fifth birthday. He was a big man, tall and stout, with a deep, sonorous voice, handsome black eyes, and a white beard—a white beard which made him look venerable against his will, for he was as active as a boy, and one of the hardest riders in the country. For seventeen years he had been a widower with an only child, a daughter, Alicia Audley, now eighteen, and by no means too well pleased at having a step-mother brought home to the Court; for Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father's house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in which she entered her teens, and had, on that account, deluded herself into the sincere belief, that for the whole of that period, she had been keeping the house.

But Miss Alicia's day was over; and now, when she asked anything of the housekeeper, the housekeeper would tell her that she would speak to my lady, or she would consult my lady, and if my lady pleased it should be done. So the baronet's daughter, who was an excellent horsewoman and a very clever artist, spent most of her time out of doors, riding about the green lanes, and sketching the cottage children, and the plow-

boys, and the cattle, and all manner of animal life that came in her way. She set her face with a sulky determination against any intimacy between herself and the baronet's young wife; and amiable as that lady was, she found it quite impossible to overcome Miss Alicia's prejudices and dislike; or to convince the spoilt girl that she had not done her a cruel injury by marrying Sir Michael Audley. The truth was that Lady Audley had, in becoming the wife of Sir Michael, made one of those apparently advantageous matches which are apt to draw upon a woman the envy and hatred of her sex. She had come into the neighborhood as a governess in the family of a surgeon in the village near Audley Court. No one knew anything of her, except that she came in answer to an advertisement which Mr. Dawson, the surgeon, had inserted in The *Times*. She came from London; and the only reference she gave was to a lady at a school at Brompton, where she had once been a teacher. But this reference was so satisfactory that none other was needed, and Miss Lucy Graham was received by the surgeon as the instructress of his daughters. Her accomplishments were so brilliant and numerous, that it seemed strange that she should have answered an advertisement offering such very moderate terms of remuneration as those named by Mr. Dawson; but Miss Graham seemed perfectly well satisfied with her situation, and she taught the girls to play sonatas by Beethoven, and to paint from nature after Creswick, and walked through a dull, out-of-the-way village to the humble little church, three times every Sunday, as contentedly as if she had no higher aspiration in the world than to do so all the rest of her life.

People who observed this, accounted for it by saying that it was a part of her amiable and gentle nature always to be light-hearted, happy and contented under any circumstances.

Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam. She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman, and apparently as pleased with the admiration of a toothless crone as if she had been listening to the compliments of a marquis; and when she tripped away, leaving nothing behind her (for her poor salary gave no scope to her benevolence), the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, beauty, and her kindliness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife, who half fed and clothed her. For you see, Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination, by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her. The boy who opened the five-barred gate that stood in her pathway, ran home to his mother to tell of her pretty looks, and the sweet voice in which she thanked him for the little service. The verger at the church, who ushered her into the surgeon's pew; the vicar, who saw the soft blue eyes uplifted to his face as he preached his simple sermon; the porter from the railway station, who

brought her sometimes a letter or a parcel, and who never looked for reward from her; her employer; his visitors; her pupils; the servants; everybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived.

Perhaps it was the rumor of this which penetrated into the quiet chamber of Audley Court; or, perhaps, it was the sight of her pretty face, looking over the surgeon's high pew every Sunday morning; however it was, it was certain that Sir Michael Audley suddenly experienced a strong desire to be better acquainted with Mr. Dawson's governess.

He had only to hint his wish to the worthy doctor for a little party to be got up, to which the vicar and his wife, and the baronet and his daughter, were invited.

That one quiet evening sealed Sir Michael's fate. He could no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman; than he could resist his destiny! Destiny! Why, she was his destiny! He had never loved before. What had been his marriage with Alicia's mother but a dull, jog-trot bargain made to keep some estate in the family that would have been just as well out of it? What had been his love for his first wife but a poor, pitiful, smoldering spark, too dull to be extinguished, too feeble to burn? But *this* was love—this fever, this longing, this restless, uncertain, miserable hesitation; these cruel fears that his age was an insurmountable barrier to his happiness; this sick hatred of his white beard; this frenzied wish to be young again, with glistening raven hair, and a slim waist, such as he had twenty years before; these, wakeful nights and melancholy days, so gloriously brightened if he chanced to catch a glimpse of her sweet face behind the window curtains, as he drove past the surgeon's house; all these signs gave token of the truth, and told only too plainly that, at the sober age of fifty-five, Sir Michael Audley had fallen ill of the terrible fever called love.

I do not think that, throughout his courtship, the baronet once calculated upon his wealth or his position as reasons for his success. If he ever remembered these things, he dismissed the thought of them with a shudder. It pained him too much to believe for a moment that any one so lovely and innocent could value herself against a splendid house or a good old title. No; his hope was that, as her life had been most likely one of toil and dependence, and as she was very young nobody exactly knew her age, but she looked little more than twenty, she might never have formed any attachment, and that he, being the first to woo her, might, by tender attentions, by generous watchfulness, by a love which should recall to her the father she had lost, and by a protecting care that should make him necessary to her, win her young heart, and

obtain from her fresh and earliest love, the promise or her hand. It was a very romantic day-dream, no doubt; but, for all that, it seemed in a very fair way to be realized. Lucy Graham appeared by no means to dislike the baronet's attentions. There was nothing whatever in her manner that betrayed the shallow artifices employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man. She was so accustomed to admiration from every one, high and low, that Sir Michael's conduct made very little impression upon her. Again, he had been so many years a widower that people had given up the idea of his ever marrying again. At last, however, Mrs. Dawson spoke to the governess on the subject. The surgeon's wife was sitting in the school-room busy at work, while Lucy was putting the finishing touches on some water-color sketches done by her pupils.

"Do you know, my dear Miss Graham," said Mrs. Dawson, "I think you ought to consider yourself a remarkably lucky girl?"

The governess lifted her head from its stooping attitude, and stared wonderingly at her employer, shaking back a shower of curls. They were the most wonderful curls in the world—soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them.

"What do you mean, my dear Mrs. Dawson?" she asked, dipping her camel's-hair brush into the wet aquamarine upon the palette, and poising it carefully before putting in the delicate streak of purple which was to brighten the horizon in her pupil's sketch.

"Why, I mean, my dear, that it only rests with yourself to become Lady Audley, and the mistress of Audley Court."

Lucy Graham dropped the brush upon the picture, and flushed scarlet to the roots of her fair hair; and then grew pale again, far paler than Mrs. Dawson had ever seen her before.

"My dear, don't agitate yourself," said the surgeon's wife, soothingly; "you know that nobody asks you to marry Sir Michael unless you wish. Of course it would be a magnificent match; he has a splendid income, and is one of the most generous of men. Your position would be very high, and you would be enabled to do a great deal of good; but, as I said before, you must be entirely guided by your own feelings. Only one thing I must say, and that is that if Sir Michael's attentions are not agreeable to you, it is really scarcely honorable to encourage him."

"His attentions—encourage him!" muttered Lucy, as if the words bewildered her. "Pray, pray don't talk to me, Mrs. Dawson. I had no idea of this. It is the last thing that would have occurred to me." She leaned her elbows on the drawing-board before her, and clasping her hands over her face, seemed for some minutes to be thinking deeply. She wore a narrow black ribbon round her neck, with a locket, or a cross, or a miniature, perhaps, attached to it; but whatever the trinket was, she always kept it hidden under her dress. Once or twice, while she sat

silently thinking, she removed one of her hands from before her face, and fidgeted nervously with the ribbon, clutching at it with a half-angry gesture, and twisting it backward and forward between her fingers.
"I think some people are born to be unlucky, Mrs. Dawson," she said, by-and-by; "it would be a great deal too much good fortune for me to become Lady Audley."
She said this with so much bitterness in her tone, that the surgeon's wife looked up at her with surprise.
"You unlucky, my dear!" she exclaimed. "I think you are the last person who ought to talk like that—you, such a bright, happy creature, that it does every one good to see you. I'm sure I don't know what we shall do if Sir Michael robs us of you."
After this conversation they often spoke upon the subject, and Lucy never again showed any emotion whatever when the baronet's admiration for her was canvassed. It was a tacitly understood thing in the surgeon's family that whenever Sir Michael proposed, the governess would quietly accept him; and, indeed, the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer.
So, one misty August evening, Sir Michael, sitting opposite to Lucy Graham, at a window in the surgeon's little drawing-room, took an opportunity while the family happened by some accident to be absent from the room, of speaking upon the subject nearest to his heart. He made the governess, in a few but solemn words, an offer of his hand. There was something almost touching in the manner and tone in which he spoke to her—half in deprecation, knowing that he could hardly expect to be the choice of a beautiful young girl, and praying rather that she would reject him, even though she broke his heart by doing so, than that she should accept his offer if she did not love him.
"I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy," he said, solemnly, "than that of a woman who marries a man she does not love. You are so precious to me, my beloved, that deeply as my heart is set on this, and bitter as the mere thought of disappointment is to me, I would not have you commit such a sin for any happiness of mine. If my happiness could be achieved by such an act, which it could not—which it never could," he repeated, earnestly—"nothing but misery can result from a marriage dictated by any motive but truth and love."
Lucy Graham was not looking at Sir Michael, but straight out into the misty twilight and dim landscape far away beyond the little garden. The baronet tried to see her face, but her profile was turned to him, and he could not discover the expression of her eyes. If he could have done so, he would have seen a yearning gaze which seemed as if it would have pierced the far obscurity and looked away—away into another world.
"Lucy, you heard me?"

"Yes," she said, gravely; not coldly, or in any way as if she were offended at his words.
"And your answer?"
She did not remove her gaze from the darkening country side, but for some moments was quite silent; then turning to him, with a sudden passion in her manner, that lighted up her face with a new and wonderful beauty which the baronet perceived even in the growing twilight, she fell on her knees at his feet.
"No, Lucy; no, no!" he cried, vehemently, "not here, not here!"
"Yes, here, here," she said, the strange passion which agitated her making her voice sound shrill and piercing—not loud, but preternaturally distinct; "here and nowhere else. How good you are—how noble and how generous! Love you! Why, there are women a hundred times my superiors in beauty and in goodness who might love you dearly; but you ask too much of me! Remember what my life has been; only remember that! From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman: clever, accomplished, handsome—but poor—and what a pitiful wretch poverty made of him! My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty—poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations. You cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!"
Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there is an undefined something in her manner which fills the baronet with a vague alarm. She is still on the ground at his feet, crouching rather than kneeling, her thin white dress clinging about her, her pale hair streaming over her shoulders, her great blue eyes glittering in the dusk, and her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her. "Don't ask too much of me," she kept repeating; "I have been selfish from my babyhood."
"Lucy—Lucy, speak plainly. Do you dislike me?"
"Dislike you? No—no!"
"But is there any one else whom you love?"
She laughed aloud at his question. "I do not love any one in the world," she answered.
He was glad of her reply; and yet that and the strange laugh jarred upon his feelings. He was silent for some moments, and then said, with a kind of effort:
"Well, Lucy, I will not ask too much of you. I dare say I am a romantic old fool; but if you do not dislike me, and if you do not love any one else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?"
"Yes."

The baronet lifted her in his arms and kissed her once upon the forehead, then quietly bidding her good-night, he walked straight out of the house.

He walked straight out of the house, this foolish old man, because there was some strong emotion at work in his breast—neither joy nor triumph, but something almost akin to disappointment—some stifled and unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart, as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom. He carried the corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy's words. All the doubts and fears and timid aspirations were ended now. He must be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position.

Lucy Graham went slowly up the stairs to her little room at the top of the house. She placed her dim candle on the chest of drawers, and seated herself on the edge of the white bed, still and white as the draperies hanging around her.

"No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations," she said; "every trace of the old life melted away—every clew to identity buried and forgotten—except these, except these."

She had never taken her left hand from the black ribbon at her throat. She drew it from her bosom, as she spoke, and looked at the object attached to it.

It was neither a locket, a miniature, nor a cross; it was a ring wrapped in an oblong piece of paper—the paper partly written, partly printed, yellow with age, and crumpled with much folding.

CHAPTER II.

ON BOARD THE ARGUS.

He threw the end of his cigar into the water, and leaning his elbows upon the bulwarks, stared meditatively at the waves.
"How wearisome they are," he said; "blue and green, and opal; opal, and blue, and green; all very well in their way, of course, but three months of them are rather too much, especially—"
He did not attempt to finish his sentence; his thoughts seemed to wander in the very midst of it, and carry him a thousand miles or so away.
"Poor little girl, how pleased she'll be!" he muttered, opening his cigar-case, lazily surveying its contents; "how pleased and how surprised? Poor little girl. After three years and a half, too; she *will* be surprised."
He was a young man of about five-and-twenty, with dark face bronzed by exposure to the sun; he had handsome brown eyes, with a lazy smile in them that sparkled through the black lashes, and a bushy beard and mustache that covered the whole lower part of his face. He was tall and powerfully built; he wore a loose gray suit and a felt hat, thrown carelessly upon his black hair. His name was George Talboys, and he was aft-cabin passenger on board the good ship *Argus*, laden with Australian wool and sailing from Sydney to Liverpool.
There were very few passengers in the aft-cabin of the *Argus*. An elderly wool-stapler returning to his native country with his wife and daughters, after having made a fortune in the colonies; a governess of three-and-thirty years of age, going home to marry a man to whom she had been engaged fifteen years; the sentimental daughter of a wealthy Australian wine-merchant, invoiced to England to finish her education, and George Talboys, were the only first-class passengers on board.
This George Talboys was the life and soul of the vessel; nobody knew who or what he was, or where he came from, but everybody liked him. He sat at the bottom of the dinner-table, and assisted the captain in doing the honors of the friendly meal. He opened the champagne bottles, and took wine with every one present; he told funny stories, and led the life himself with such a joyous peal that the man must have been a churl who could not have laughed for pure sympathy. He was a capital hand at speculation and vingt-et-un, and all the merry games, which kept the little circle round the cabin-lamp so deep in innocent amusement, that a hurricane might have howled overhead without their hearing it; but he freely owned that he had no talent for whist, and that he didn't know a knight from a castle upon the chess-board.

Indeed, Mr. Talboys was by no means too learned a gentleman. The pale governess had tried to talk to him about fashionable literature, but George had only pulled his beard and stared very hard at her, saying occasionally, "Ah, yes, by Jove!" and "To be sure, ah!"

The sentimental young lady, going home to finish her education, had tried him with Shelby and Byron, and he had fairly laughed in her face, as if poetry were a joke. The woolstapler sounded him on politics, but he did not seem very deeply versed in them; so they let him go his own way, smoke his cigars and talk to the sailors, lounge over the bulwarks and stare at the water, and make himself agreeable to everybody in his own fashion. But when the *Argus* came to be within about a fortnight's sail of England everybody noticed a change in George Talboys. He grew restless and fidgety; sometimes so merry that the cabin rung with his laughter; sometimes moody and thoughtful. Favorite as he was among the sailors, they were tired at last of answering his perpetual questions about the probable time of touching land. Would it be in ten days, in eleven, in twelve, in thirteen? Was the wind favorable? How many knots an hour was the vessel doing? Then a sudden passion would sieze him, and he would stamp upon the deck, crying out that she was a rickety old craft, and that her owners were swindlers to advertise her as the fast-sailing *Argus*. She was not fit for passenger traffic; she was not fit to carry impatient living creatures, with hearts and souls; she was fit for nothing but to be laden with bales of stupid wool, that might rot on the sea and be none the worse for it.

The sun was drooping down behind the waves as George Talboys lighted his cigar upon this August evening. Only ten days more, the sailors had told him that afternoon, and they would see the English coast. "I will go ashore in the first boat that hails us," he cried; "I will go ashore in a cockle-shell. By Jove, if it comes to that, I will swim to land."

His friends in the aft-cabin, with the exception of the pale governess, laughed at his impatience; she sighed as she watched the young man, chafing at the slow hours, pushing away his untasted wine, flinging himself restlessly about upon the cabin sofa, rushing up and down the companion ladder, and staring at the waves.

As the red rim of the sun dropped into the water, the governess ascended the cabin stairs for a stroll on deck, while the passengers sat over their wine below. She stopped when she came up to George, and, standing by his side, watched the fading crimson in the western sky. The lady was very quiet and reserved, seldom sharing in the after-cabin amusements, never laughing, and speaking very little; but she and George Talboys had been excellent friends throughout the passage.

"Does my cigar annoy you, Miss Morley?" he said, taking it out of his mouth.

"Not at all; pray do not leave off smoking. I only came up to look at the sunset. What a lovely evening!"

"Yes, yes, I dare say," he answered, impatiently; "yet so long, so long! Ten more interminable days and ten more weary nights before we land."
"Yes," said Miss Morley, sighing. "Do you wish the time shorter?"
"Do I?" cried George. "Indeed I do. Don't you?"
"Scarcely."
"But is there no one you love in England? Is there no one you love looking out for your arrival?"
"I hope so," she said gravely. They were silent for some time, he smoking his cigar with a furious impatience, as if he could hasten the course of the vessel by his own restlessness; she looking out at the waning light with melancholy blue eyes—eyes that seemed to have faded with poring over closely-printed books and difficult needlework; eyes that had faded a little, perhaps, by reason of tears secretly shed in the lonely night.
"See!" said George, suddenly, pointing in another direction from that toward which Miss Morley was looking, "there's the new moon!"
She looked up at the pale crescent, her own face almost as pale and wan.
"This is the first time we have seen it."
"We must wish!" said George. "I know what I wish."
"What?"
"That we may get home quickly."
"My wish is that we may find no disappointment when we get there," said the governess, sadly.
"Disappointment!"
He started as if he had been struck, and asked what she meant by talking of disappointment.
"I mean this," she said, speaking rapidly, and with a restless motion of her thin hands; "I mean that as the end of the voyage draws near, hope sinks in my heart; and a sick fear comes over me that at the last all may not be well. The person I go to meet may be changed in his feelings toward me; or he may retain all the old feeling until the moment of seeing me, and then lose it in a breath at sight of my poor wan face, for I was called a pretty girl, Mr. Talboys, when I sailed for Sydney, fifteen years ago; or he may be so changed by the world as to have grown selfish and mercenary, and he may welcome me for the sake of my fifteen years' savings. Again, he may be dead. He may have been well, perhaps, up to within a week of our landing, and in that last week may have taken a fever, and died an hour before our vessel anchors in the Mersey. I think of all these things, Mr. Talboys, and act the scenes over in my mind, and feel the anguish of them twenty times a day. Twenty times a day," she repeated; "why I do it a thousand times a day."
George Talboys had stood motionless, with his cigar in his hand, listening to her so intently that, as she said the last words, his hold relaxed, and the cigar dropped in the water.

"I wonder," she continued, more to herself than to him, "I wonder, looking back, to think how hopeful I was when the vessel sailed; I never thought then of disappointment, but I pictured the joy of meeting, imagining the very words that would be said, the very tones, the very looks; but for this last month of the voyage, day by day, and hour by hour my heart sinks and my hopeful fancies fade away, and I dread the end as much as if I knew that I was going to England to attend a funeral."

The young man suddenly changed his attitude, and turned his face full upon his companion, with a look of alarm. She saw in the pale light that the color had faded from his cheek.

"What a fool!" he cried, striking his clinched fist upon the side of the vessel, "what a fool I am to be frightened at this? Why do you come and say these things to me? Why do you come and terrify me out of my senses, when I am going straight home to the woman I love; to a girl whose heart is as true as the light of Heaven; and in whom I no more expect to find any change than I do to see another sun rise in to-morrow's sky? Why do you come and try to put such fancies in my head when I am going home to my darling wife?"

"Your wife," she said; "that is different. There is no reason that my terrors should terrify you. I am going to England to rejoin a man to whom I was engaged to be married fifteen years ago. He was too poor to marry then, and when I was offered a situation as governess in a rich Australian family, I persuaded him to let me accept it, so that I might leave him free and unfettered to win his way in the world, while I saved a little money to help us when we began life together. I never meant to stay away so long, but things have gone badly with him in England. That is my story, and you can understand my fears. They need not influence you. Mine is an exceptional case."

"So is mine," said George, impatiently. "I tell you that mine is an exceptional case: although I swear to you that until this moment, I have never known a fear as to the result of my voyage home. But you are right; your terrors have nothing to do with me. You have been away fifteen years; all kinds of things may happen in fifteen years. Now it is only three years and a half this very month since I left England. What can have happened in such a short time as that?"

Miss Morley looked at him with a mournful smile, but did not speak. His feverish ardor, the freshness and impatience of his nature were so strange and new to her, that she looked at him half in admiration, half in pity.

"My pretty little wife! My gentle, innocent, loving little wife! Do you know, Miss Morley," he said, with all his old hopefulness of manner, "that I left my little girl asleep, with her baby in her arms, and with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell her why her faithful husband had deserted her?"

"Deserted her!" exclaimed the governess.
"Yes. I was an ensign in a cavalry regiment when I first met my little darling. We were quartered at a stupid seaport town, where my pet lived with her shabby old father, a half-pay naval officer; a regular old humbug, as poor as Job, and with an eye for nothing but the main chance. I saw through all his shallow tricks to catch one of us for his pretty daughter. I saw all the pitiable, contemptible, palpable traps he set for us big dragoons to walk into. I saw through his shabby-genteel dinners and public-house port; his fine talk of the grandeur of his family; his sham pride and independence, and the sham tears of his bleared old eyes when he talked of his only child. He was a drunken old hypocrite, and he was ready to sell my poor, little girl to the highest bidder. Luckily for me, I happened just then to be the highest bidder; for my father, is a rich man, Miss Morley, and as it was love at first sight on both sides, my darling and I made a match of it. No sooner, however, did my father hear that I had married a penniless little girl, the daughter of a tipsy old half-pay lieutenant, than he wrote me a furious letter, telling me he would never again hold any communication with me, and that my yearly allowance would stop from my wedding-day.
"As there was no remaining in such a regiment as mine, with nothing but my pay to live on, and my pretty little wife to keep, I sold out, thinking that before the money was exhausted, I should be sure to drop into something. I took my darling to Italy, and we lived there in splendid style as long as my two thousand pounds lasted; but when that began to dwindle down to a couple of hundred or so, we came back to England, and as my darling had a fancy for being near that tiresome old father of hers, we settled at the watering-place where he lived. Well, as soon as the old man heard that I had a couple of hundred pounds left, he expressed a wonderful degree of affection for us, and insisted on our boarding in his house. We consented, still to please my darling, who had just then a peculiar right to have every whim and fancy of her innocent heart indulged. We did board with him, and finally he fleeced us; but when I spoke of it to my little wife, she only shrugged her shoulders, and said she did not like to be unkind to her 'poor papa.' So poor papa made away with our little stock of money in no time; and as I felt that it was now becoming necessary to look about for something, I ran up to London, and tried to get a situation as a clerk in a merchant's office, or as accountant, or book-keeper, or something of that kind. But I suppose there was the stamp of a heavy dragoon about me, for do what I would I couldn't get anybody to believe in my capacity; and tired out, and down-hearted, I returned to my darling, to find her nursing a son and heir to his father's poverty. Poor little girl, she was very low-spirited; and when I told her that my London expedition had failed, she fairly broke down, and burst in to a storm of sobs and lamentations, telling me that I ought not to have married her if I could give her nothing but poverty and

misery; and that I had done her a cruel wrong in making her my wife. By heaven! Miss Morley, her tears and reproaches drove me almost mad; and I flew into a rage with her, myself, her father, the world, and everybody in it, and then rail out of the house. I walked about the streets all that day, half out of my mind, and with a strong inclination to throw myself into the sea, so as to leave my poor girl free to make a better match. 'If I drown myself, her father must support her,' I thought; 'the old hypocrite could never refuse her a shelter; but while I live she has no claim on him.' I went down to a rickety old wooden pier, meaning to wait there till it was dark, and then drop quietly over the end of it into the water; but while I sat there smoking my pipe, and staring vacantly at the sea-gulls, two men came down, and one of them began to talk of the Australian gold-diggings, and the great things that were to be done there. It appeared that he was going to sail in a day or two, and he was trying to persuade his companion to join him in the expedition.
"I listened to these men for upward of an hour, following them up and down the pier, with my pipe in my mouth, and hearing all their talk. After this I fell into conversation with them myself, and ascertained that there was a vessel going to leave Liverpool in three days, by which vessel one of the men was going out. This man gave me all the information I required, and told me, moreover, that a stalwart young fellow, such as I was, could hardly fail to do well in the diggings. The thought flashed upon me so suddenly, that I grew hot and red in the face, and trembled in every limb with excitement. This was better than the water, at any rate. Suppose I stole away from my darling, leaving her safe under her father's roof, and went and made a fortune in the new world, and came back in a twelvemonth to throw it into her lap; for I was so sanguine in those days that I counted on making my fortune in a year or so. I thanked the man for his information, and late at night strolled homeward. It was bitter winter weather, but I had been too full of passion to feel cold, and I walked through the quiet streets, with the snow drifting in my face, and a desperate hopefulness in my heart. The old man was sitting drinking brandy-and-water in the little dining-room; and my wife was up-stairs, sleeping peacefully, with the baby on her breast. I sat down and wrote a few brief lines, which told her that I never had loved her better than now, when I seemed to desert her; that I was going to try my fortune in the new world, and that if I succeeded I should come back to bring her plenty and happiness; but that if I failed I should never look upon her face again. I divided the remainder of our money—something over forty pounds—into two equal portions, leaving one for her, and putting the other in my pocket. I knelt down and prayed for my wife and child, with my head upon the white counterpane that covered them. I wasn't much of a praying man at ordinary times, but God knows *that* was a heartfelt prayer. I kissed her once, and the baby once, and then crept out of the room. The dining-room door was

open, and the old man was nodding over his paper. He looked up as he heard my step in the passage, and asked me where I was going. 'To have a smoke in the street,' I answered; and as this was a common habit of mine he believed me. Three nights after I was out at sea, bound for Melbourne—a steerage passenger, with a digger's tools for my baggage, and about seven shillings in my pocket."
"And you succeeded?" asked Miss Morley.
"Not till I had long despaired of success; not until poverty and I had become such old companions and bed-fellows, that looking back at my past life, I wondered whether that dashing, reckless, extravagant, luxurious, champagne-drinking dragoon could have really been the same man who sat on the damp ground gnawing a moldy crust in the wilds of the new world. I clung to the memory of my darling, and the trust that I had in her love and truth was the one keystone that kept the fabric of my past life together—the one star that lit the thick black darkness of the future. I was hail-fellow-well-met with bad men; I was in the center of riot, drunkenness, and debauchery; but the purifying influence of my love kept me safe from all. Thin and gaunt, the half-starved shadow of what I once had been, I saw myself one day in a broken bit of looking-glass, and was frightened by my own face. But I toiled on through all; through disappointment and despair, rheumatism, fever, starvation; at the very gates of death, I toiled on steadily to the end; and in the end I conquered."
He was so brave in his energy and determination, in his proud triumph of success, and in the knowledge of the difficulties he had vanquished, that the pale governess could only look at him in wondering admiration.
"How brave you were!" she said.
"Brave!" he cried, with a joyous peal of laughter; "wasn't I working for my darling? Through all the dreary time of that probation, her pretty white hand seemed beckoning me onward to a happy future! Why, I have seen her under my wretched canvas tent sitting by my side, with her boy in her arms, as plainly as I had ever seen her in the one happy year of our wedded life. At last, one dreary foggy morning, just three months ago, with a drizzling rain wetting me to the skin, up to my neck in clay and mire, half-starved, enfeebled by fever, stiff with rheumatism, a monster nugget turned up under my spade, and I was in one minute the richest man in Australia. I fell down on the wet clay, with my lump of gold in the bosom of my shirt, and, for the first time in my life, cried like a child. I traveled post-haste to Sydney, realized my price, which was worth upward of £20,000, and a fortnight afterward took my passage for England in this vessel; and in ten days—in ten days I shall see my darling."
"But in all that time did you never write to your wife?"
"Never, till the night before I left Sydney. I could not write when everything looked so black. I could not write and tell her that I was

fighting hard with despair and death. I waited for better fortune, and when that came I wrote telling her that I should be in England almost as soon as my letter, and giving her an address at a coffee-house in London where she could write to me, telling me where to find her, though she is hardly likely to have left her father's house."

He fell into a reverie after this, and puffed meditatively at his cigar. His companion did not disturb him. The last ray of summer daylight had died out, and the pale light of the crescent moon only remained. Presently George Talboys flung away his cigar, and turning to the governess, cried abruptly, "Miss Morley, if, when I get to England, I hear that anything has happened to my wife, I shall fall down dead."

"My dear Mr. Talboys, why do you think of these things? God is very good to us; He will not afflict us beyond our power of endurance. I see all things, perhaps, in a melancholy light; for the long monotony of my life has given me too much time to think over my troubles."

"And my life has been all action, privation, toil, alternate hope and despair; I have had no time to think upon the chances of anything happening to my darling. What a blind, reckless fool I have been! Three years and a half and not one line—one word from her, or from any mortal creature who knows her. Heaven above! what may not have happened?"

In the agitation of his mind he began to walk rapidly up and down the lonely deck, the governess following, and trying to soothe him.

"I swear to you, Miss Morley," he said, "that till you spoke to me to-night, I never felt one shadow of fear, and now I have that sick, sinking dread at my heart which you talked of an hour ago. Let me alone, please, to get over it my own way."

She drew silently away from him, and seated herself by the side of the vessel, looking over into the water.

George Talboys walked backward and forward for some time, with his head bent upon his breast, looking neither to the right nor the left, but in about a quarter of an hour he returned to the spot where the governess was seated.

"I have been praying," he said—"praying for my darling."

He spoke in a voice little above a whisper, and she saw his face ineffably calm in the moonlight.

CHAPTER III.

HIDDEN RELICS.

The same August sun which had gone down behind the waste of waters glimmered redly upon the broad face of the old clock over that ivy-covered archway which leads into the gardens of Audley Court.

A fierce and crimson sunset. The mullioned windows and twinkling lattices are all ablaze with the red glory; the fading light flickers upon the leaves of the limes in the long avenue, and changes the still fish-pond into a sheet of burnished copper; even into those dim recesses of brier and brushwood, amidst which the old well is hidden, the crimson brightness penetrates in fitful flashes till the dank weeds and the rusty iron wheel and broken woodwork seem as if they were flecked with blood.

The lowing of a cow in the quiet meadows, the splash of a trout in the fish-pond, the last notes of a tired bird, the creaking of wagon-wheels upon the distant road, every now and then breaking the evening silence, only made the stillness of the place seem more intense. It was almost oppressive, this twilight stillness. The very repose of the place grew painful from its intensity, and you felt as if a corpse must be lying somewhere within that gray and ivy-covered pile of building—so deathlike was the tranquillity of all around.

As the clock over the archway struck eight, a door at the back of the house was softly opened, and a girl came out into the gardens.

But even the presence of a human being scarcely broke the silence; for the girl crept slowly over the thick grass, and gliding into the avenue by the side of the fish-pond, disappeared in the rich shelter of the limes.

She was not, perhaps, positively a pretty girl; but her appearance was of that order which is commonly called interesting. Interesting, it may be, because in the pale face and the light gray eyes, the small features and compressed lips, there was something which hinted at a power of repression and self-control not common in a woman of nineteen or twenty. She might have been pretty, I think, but for the one fault in her small oval face. This fault was an absence of color. Not one tinge of crimson flushed the waxen whiteness of her cheeks; not one shadow of brown redeemed the pale insipidity of her eyebrows and eyelashes; not one glimmer of gold or auburn relieved the dull flaxen of her hair. Even her dress was spoiled by this same deficiency. The pale lavender muslin faded into a sickly gray, and the ribbon knotted round her throat melted into the same neutral hue.

Her figure was slim and fragile, and in spite of her humble dress, she had something of the grace and carriage of a gentlewoman, but she was

only a simple country girl, called Phoebe Marks, who had been nursemaid in Mr. Dawson's family, and whom Lady Audley had chosen for her maid after her marriage with Sir Michael.

Of course, this was a wonderful piece of good fortune for Phoebe, who found her wages trebled and her work lightened in the well-ordered household at the Court; and who was therefore quite as much the object of envy among her particular friends as my lady herself to higher circles.

A man, who was sitting on the broken wood-work of the well, started as the lady's-maid came out of the dim shade of the limes and stood before him among the weeds and brushwood.

I have said before that this was a neglected spot; it lay in the midst of a low shrubbery, hidden away from the rest of the gardens, and only visible from the garret windows at the back of the west wing.

"Why, Phoebe," said the man, shutting a clasp-knife with which he had been stripping the bark from a blackthorn stake, "you came upon me so still and sudden, that I thought you was an evil spirit. I've come across through the fields, and come in here at the gate agen the moat, and I was taking a rest before I came up to the house to ask if you was come back."

"I can see the well from my bedroom window, Luke," Phoebe answered, pointing to an open lattice in one of the gables. "I saw you sitting here, and came down to have a chat; it's better talking out here than in the house, where there's always somebody listening."

The man was a big, broad-shouldered, stupid-looking clod-hopper of about twenty-three years of age. His dark red hair grew low upon his forehead, and his bushy brows met over a pair of greenish gray eyes; his nose was large and well-shaped, but the mouth was coarse in form and animal in expression. Rosy-cheeked, red-haired, and bull-necked, he was not unlike one of the stout oxen grazing in the meadows round about the Court.

The girl seated herself lightly upon the wood-work at his side, and put one of her hands, which had grown white in her new and easy service, about his thick neck.

"Are you glad to see me, Luke?" she asked.

"Of course I'm glad, lass," he answered, boorishly, opening his knife again, and scraping away at the hedge-stake.

They were first cousins, and had been play fellows in childhood, and sweethearts in early youth.

"You don't seem much as if you were glad," said the girl; "you might look at me, Luke, and tell me if you think my journey has improved me."

"It ain't put any color into your cheeks, my girl," he said, glancing up at her from under his lowering eyebrows; "you're every bit as white as you was when you went away."

"But they say traveling makes people genteel, Luke. I've been on the Continent with my lady, through all manner of curious places; and you know, when I was a child, Squire Horton's daughters taught me to speak a little French, and I found it so nice to be able to talk to the people abroad."
"Genteel!" cried Luke Marks, with a hoarse laugh; "who wants you to be genteel, I wonder? Not me, for one; when you're my wife you won't have overmuch time for gentility, my girl. French, too! Dang me, Phoebe, I suppose when we've saved money enough between us to buy a bit of a farm, you'll be *parleyvooing* to the cows?"
She bit her lip as her lover spoke, and looked away. He went on cutting and chopping at a rude handle he was fashioning to the stake, whistling softly to himself all the while, and not once looking at his cousin.
For some time they were silent, but by-and-by she said, with her face still turned away from her companion:
"What a fine thing it is for Miss Graham that was, to travel with her maid and her courier, and her chariot and four, and a husband that thinks there isn't one spot upon all the earth that's good enough for her to set her foot upon!"
"Ay, it is a fine thing, Phoebe, to have lots of money," answered Luke, "and I hope you'll be warned by that, my lass, to save up your wages agin we get married."
"Why, what was she in Mr. Dawson's house only three months ago?" continued the girl, as if she had not heard her cousin's speech. "What was she but a servant like me? Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder, than I did. You should have seen her shabby clothes, Luke—worn and patched, and darned and turned and twisted, yet always looking nice upon her, somehow. She gives me more as lady's-maid here than ever she got from Mr. Dawson then. Why, I've seen her come out of the parlor with a few sovereigns and a little silver in her hand, that master had just given her for her quarter's salary; and now look at her!"
"Never you mind her," said Luke; "take care of yourself, Phoebe; that's all you've got to do. What should you say to a public-house for you and me, by-and-by, my girl? There's a deal of money to be made out of a public-house."
The girl still sat with her face averted from her lover, her hands hanging listlessly in her lap, and her pale gray eyes fixed upon the last low streak of crimson dying out behind the trunks of the trees.
"You should see the inside of the house, Luke," she said; "it's a tumbledown looking place enough outside; but you should see my lady's rooms—all pictures and gilding, and great looking-glasses that stretch from the ceiling to the floor. Painted ceilings, too, that cost hundreds of pounds, the housekeeper told her, and all done for her."
"She's a lucky one," muttered Luke, with lazy indifference.

"You should have seen her while we were abroad, with a crowd of gentlemen hanging about her; Sir Michael not jealous of them, only proud to see her so much admired. You should have heard her laugh and talk with them; throwing all their compliments and fine speeches back at them, as it were, as if they had been pelting her with roses. She set everybody mad about her, wherever she went. Her singing, her playing, her painting, her dancing, her beautiful smile, and sunshiny ringlets! She was always the talk of a place, as long as we stayed in it."
"Is she at home to-night?"
"No; she has gone out with Sir Michael to a dinner party at the Beeches. They've seven or eight miles to drive, and they won't be back till after eleven."
"Then I'll tell you what, Phoebe, if the inside of the house is so mighty fine, I should like to have a look at it."
"You shall, then. Mrs. Barton, the housekeeper, knows you by sight, and she can't object to my showing you some of the best rooms."
It was almost dark when the cousins left the shrubbery and walked slowly to the house. The door by which they entered led into the servants' hall, on one side of which was the housekeeper's room. Phoebe Marks stopped for a moment to ask the housekeeper if she might take her cousin through some of the rooms, and having received permission to do so, lighted a candle at the lamp in the hall, and beckoned to Luke to follow her into the other part of the house.
The long, black oak corridors were dim in the ghostly twilight—the light carried by Phoebe looking only a poor speck in the broad passages through which the girl led her cousin. Luke looked suspiciously over his shoulder now and then, half-frightened by the creaking of his own hob-nailed boots.
"It's a mortal dull place, Phoebe," he said, as they emerged from a passage into the principal hall, which was not yet lighted; "I've heard tell of a murder that was done here in old times."
"There are murders enough in these times, as to that, Luke," answered the girl, ascending the staircase, followed by the young man.
She led the way through a great drawing-room, rich in satin and ormolu, buhl and inlaid cabinets, bronzes, cameos, statuettes, and trinkets, that glistened in the dusky light; then through a morning room, hung with proof engravings of valuable pictures; through this into an ante-chamber, where she stopped, holding the light above her head.
The young man stared about him, open-mouthed and open-eyed.
"It's a rare fine place," he said, "and must have cost a heap of money."
"Look at the pictures on the walls," said Phoebe, glancing at the panels of the octagonal chamber, which were hung with Claudes and Poussins, Wouvermans and Cuyps. "I've heard that those alone are worth a fortune. This is the entrance to my lady's apartments, Miss Graham that was." She lifted a heavy green cloth curtain which hung across a

doorway, and led the astonished countryman into a fairy-like boudoir, and thence to a dressing-room, in which the open doors of a wardrobe and a heap of dresses flung about a sofa showed that it still remained exactly as its occupants had left it.
"I've got all these things to put away before my lady comes home, Luke; you might sit down here while I do it, I shan't be long."
Her cousin looked around in gawky embarrassment, bewildered by the splendor of the room; and after some deliberation selected the most substantial of the chairs, on the extreme edge of which he carefully seated himself.
"I wish I could show you the jewels, Luke," said the girl; "but I can't, for she always keeps the keys herself; that's the case on the dressing-table there."
"What, *that?*" cried Luke, staring at the massive walnut-wood and brass inlaid casket. "Why, that's big enough to hold every bit of clothes I've got!"
"And it's as full as it can be of diamonds, rubies, pearls and emeralds," answered Phoebe, busy as she spoke in folding the rustling silk dresses, and laying them one by one upon the shelves of the wardrobe. As she was shaking out the flounces of the last, a jingling sound caught her ear, and she put her hand into the pocket.
"I declare!" she exclaimed, "my lady has left her keys in her pocket for once in a way; I can show you the jewelry, if you like, Luke."
"Well, I may as well have a look at it, my girl," he said, rising from his chair and holding the light while his cousin unlocked the casket. He uttered a cry of wonder when he saw the ornaments glittering on white satin cushions. He wanted to handle the delicate jewels; to pull them about, and find out their mercantile value. Perhaps a pang of longing and envy shot through his heart as he thought how he would have liked to have taken one of them.
"Why, one of those diamond things would set us up in life, Phoebe, he said, turning a bracelet over and over in his big red hands.
"Put it down, Luke! Put it down directly!" cried the girl, with a look of terror; "how can you speak about such things?"
He laid the bracelet in its place with a reluctant sigh, and then continued his examination of the casket.
"What's this?" he asked presently, pointing to a brass knob in the frame-work of the box.
He pushed it as he spoke, and a secret drawer, lined with purple velvet, flew out of the casket.
"Look ye here!" cried Luke, pleased at his discovery.
Phoebe Marks threw down the dress she had been folding, and went over to the toilette table.
"Why, I never saw this before," she said; "I wonder what there is in it?"

There was not much in it; neither gold nor gems; only a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head. Phoebe's eyes dilated as she examined the little packet.
"So this is what my lady hides in the secret drawer," she muttered.
"It's queer rubbish to keep in such a place," said Luke, carelessly.
The girl's thin lip curved into a curious smile.
"You will bear me witness where I found this," she said, putting the little parcel into her pocket.
"Why, Phoebe, you're not going to be such a fool as to take that," cried the young man.
"I'd rather have this than the diamond bracelet you would have liked to take," she answered; "you shall have the public house, Luke."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE FIRST PAGE OF "THE TIMES."

Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister. As a barrister was his name inscribed in the law-list; as a barrister he had chambers in Figtree Court, Temple; as a barrister he had eaten the allotted number of dinners, which form the sublime ordeal through which the forensic aspirant wades on to fame and fortune. If these things can make a man a barrister, Robert Audley decidedly was one. But he had never either had a brief, or tried to get a brief, or even wished to have a brief in all those five years, during which his name had been painted upon one of the doors in Figtree Court. He was a handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow, of about seven-and-twenty; the only son of a younger brother of Sir Michael Audley. His father had left him £400 a year, which his friends had advised him to increase by being called to the bar; and as he found it, after due consideration, more trouble to oppose the wishes of these friends than to eat so many dinners, and to take a set of chambers in the Temple, he adopted the latter course, and unblushingly called himself a barrister.

Sometimes, when the weather was very hot, and he had exhausted himself with the exertion of smoking his German pipe, and reading French novels, he would stroll into the Temple Gardens, and lying in some shady spot, pale and cool, with his shirt collar turned down and a blue silk handkerchief tied loosely about his neck, would tell grave benchers that he had knocked himself up with over work.

The sly old benchers laughed at the pleasant fiction; but they all agreed that Robert Audley was a good fellow; a generous-hearted fellow; rather a curious fellow, too, with a fund of sly wit and quiet humor, under his listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner. A man who would never get on in the world; but who would not hurt a worm. Indeed, his chambers were converted into a perfect dog-kennel, by his habit of bringing home stray and benighted curs, who were attracted by his looks in the street, and followed him with abject fondness.

Robert always spent the hunting season at Audley Court; not that he was distinguished as a Nimrod, for he would quietly trot to covert upon a mild-tempered, stout-limbed bay hack, and keep at a very respectful distance from the hard riders; his horse knowing quite as well as he did, that nothing was further from his thoughts than any desire to be in at the death.

The young man was a great favorite with his uncle, and by no means despised by his pretty, gipsy-faced, light-hearted, hoydenish cousin, Miss Alice Audley. It might have seemed to other men, that the

partiality of a young lady who was sole heiress to a very fine estate, was rather well worth cultivating, but it did not so occur to Robert Audley. Alicia was a very nice girl, he said, a jolly girl, with no nonsense about her—a girl of a thousand; but this was the highest point to which enthusiasm could carry him. The idea of turning his cousin's girlish liking for him to some good account never entered his idle brain. I doubt if he even had any correct notion of the amount of his uncle's fortune, and I am certain that he never for one moment calculated upon the chances of any part of that fortune ultimately coming to himself. So that when, one fine spring morning, about three months before the time of which I am writing, the postman brought him the wedding cards of Sir Michael and Lady Audley, together with a very indignant letter from his cousin, setting forth how her father had just married a wax-dollish young person, no older than Alicia herself, with flaxen ringlets, and a perpetual giggle; for I am sorry to say that Miss Audley's animus caused her thus to describe that pretty musical laugh which had been so much admired in the late Miss Lucy Graham—when, I say, these documents reached Robert Audley—they elicited neither vexation nor astonishment in the lymphatic nature of that gentleman. He read Alicia's angry crossed and recrossed letter without so much as removing the amber mouth-piece of his German pipe from his mustached lips. When he had finished the perusal of the epistle, which he read with his dark eyebrows elevated to the center of his forehead (his only manner of expressing surprise, by the way) he deliberately threw that and the wedding cards into the waste-paper basket, and putting down his pipe, prepared himself for the exertion of thinking out the subject.

"I always said the old buffer would marry," he muttered, after about half an hour's revery. Alicia and my lady, the stepmother, will go at it hammer and tongs. I hope they won't quarrel in the hunting season, or say unpleasant things to each other at the dinner-table; rows always upset a man's digestion.

At about twelve o'clock on the morning following that night upon which the events recorded in my last chapter had taken place, the baronet's nephew strolled out of the Temple, Blackfriarsward, on his way to the city. He had in an evil hour obliged some necessitous friend by putting the ancient name of Audley across a bill of accommodation, which bill not having been provided for by the drawer, Robert was called upon to pay. For this purpose he sauntered up Ludgate Hill, with his blue necktie fluttering in the hot August air, and thence to a refreshingly cool banking-house in a shady court out of St. Paul's churchyard, where he made arrangements for selling out a couple of hundred pounds' worth of consols.

He had transacted this business, and was loitering at the corner of the court, waiting for a chance hansom to convey him back to the Temple,

when he was almost knocked down by a man of about his own age, who dashed headlong into the narrow opening.
"Be so good as to look where you're going, my friend!" Robert remonstrated, mildly, to the impetuous passenger; "you might give a man warning before you throw him down and trample upon him."
The stranger stopped suddenly, looked very hard at the speaker, and then gasped for breath.
"Bob!" he cried, in a tone expressive of the most intense astonishment; "I only touched British ground after dark last night, and to think that I should meet you this morning."
"I've seen you somewhere before, my bearded friend," said Mr. Audley, calmly scrutinizing the animated face of the other, "but I'll be hanged if I can remember when or where."
"What!" exclaimed the stranger, reproachfully. "You don't mean to say that you've forgotten George Talboys?"
"*No I have not!*" said Robert, with an emphasis by no means usual to him; and then hooking his arm into that of his friend, he led him into the shady court, saying, with his old indifference, "and now, George tell us all about it."
George Talboys did tell him all about it. He told that very story which he had related ten days before to the pale governess on board the *Argus*; and then, hot and breathless, he said that he had twenty thousand pounds or so in his pocket, and that he wanted to bank it at Messrs. ——, who had been his bankers many years before.
"If you'll believe me, I've only just left their counting-house," said Robert. "I'll go back with you, and we'll settle that matter in five minutes."
They did contrive to settle it in about a quarter of an hour; and then Robert Audley was for starting off immediately for the Crown and Scepter, at Greenwich, or the Castle, at Richmond, where they could have a bit of dinner, and talk over those good old times when they were together at Eton. But George told his friend that before he went anywhere, before he shaved or broke his fast, or in any way refreshed himself after a night journey from Liverpool by express train, he must call at a certain coffee-house in Bridge street, Westminster, where he expected to find a letter from his wife.
As they dashed through Ludgate Hill, Fleet street, and the Strand, in a fast hansom, George Talboys poured into his friend's ear all those wild hopes and dreams which had usurped such a dominion over his sanguine nature.
"I shall take a villa on the banks of the Thames, Bob," he said, "for the little wife and myself; and we'll have a yacht, Bob, old boy, and you shall lie on the deck and smoke, while my pretty one plays her guitar and sings songs to us. She's for all the world like one of those what's-its-

names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble," added the young man, whose classic lore was not very great.

The waiters at the Westminster coffee-house stared at the hollow-eyed, unshaven stranger, with his clothes of colonial cut, and his boisterous, excited manner; but he had been an old frequenter of the place in his military days, and when they heard who he was they flew to do his bidding.

He did not want much—only a bottle of soda-water, and to know if there was a letter at the bar directed to George Talboys.

The waiter brought the soda-water before the young men had seated themselves in a shady box near the disused fire-place. No; there was no letter for that name.

The waiter said it with consummate indifference, while he mechanically dusted the little mahogany table.

George's face blanched to a deadly whiteness. "Talboys," he said; "perhaps you didn't hear the name distinctly—T, A, L, B, O, Y, S. Go and look again, there *must* be a letter."

The waiter shrugged his shoulders as he left the room, and returned in three minutes to say that there was no name at all resembling Talboys in the letter rack. There was Brown, and Sanderson, and Pinchbeck; only three letters altogether.

The young man drank his soda-water in silence, and then, leaning his elbows on the table, covered his face with his hands. There was something in his manner which told Robert Audley that his disappointment, trifling as it may appear, was in reality a very bitter one. He seated himself opposite to his friend, but did not attempt to address him.

By-and-by George looked up, and mechanically taking a greasy *Times* newspaper of the day before from a heap of journals on the table, stared vacantly at the first page.

I cannot tell how long he sat blankly staring at one paragraph among the list of deaths, before his dazed brain took in its full meaning; but after considerable pause he pushed the newspaper over to Robert Audley, and with a face that had changed from its dark bronze to a sickly, chalky grayish white, and with an awful calmness in his manner, he pointed with his finger to a line which ran thus:

"On the 24th inst., at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, Helen Talboys, aged 22."