ALTAMIRA; OR, SEVERED LIVES.

A STORY OF A WILD LOVE MATCH.

CHAPTER I.

Two ladies were seated in a great dim room, partially illuminated by fits and starts with gleams of firelight. The large windows showed a pale, dark sky, in which twilight was giving place to night, and across which the brown branches of the trees, rough with the buds of March, tossed wildly in a hurricane of wind, burdened with intermittent blasts of rain—rain that dashed fiercely against the windows a handful at a time, then ceased till some new cloud was ready to discharge its angry shower. Something fiercely personal and furious was in the storm. It looked and felt like something not addressed to the world in general, but aimed individually by some angry spirit of the elements at the people who lived here high up above the brawling Esk amid the brown wintry woods at Rosscraig House.

The drawing room was large, lofty and full of old-fashioned furniture, which would have enchanted a connoisseur. The two ladies, who were its only occupants, were scarcely discernible at first, though the firelight, gleaming about among the still life, caught here a green reflection from a wonderful cabinet of rarest Verni-Martin, and there entangled itself in the bevelled sides of a strange old mirror, used to reflecting wizards. It was more easy to make out these accessories of existence than it was to identify the two voices which occupied and reigned over this still and darkling chamber. They were in one corner of the room, near the fire. One, the prevailing voice, was soft, but strong, with the vigor in it of mature life, just roughened here and there by a touch of age, which gave it an aigre doux of distinct character, and came from an ample dark shadow in a great chair, turned toward the fire. The other, which gave forth only monosyllabic sounds of assent or wonder, sweet and tender, but feeble, belonged to a smaller person near the first, and facing her—whose countenance, turned toward the window, showed like a pale whiteness in the dark. This was the central light, the highest tone in the picture, except the pale gleaming of the sky from the windows, and the fitful red flash from the fire.

"Richard's story," said the stronger voice, "cannot be supposed to be very interesting to any but ourselves. If it is for mere curiosity, Mary—"

"Curiosity!"—there was a tone of reproach in the soft repetition—a reproach and an appeal.

"That was unkind. I did not mean it. I meant interest, friendship; but Mary, Mary, friendship is weak, and interest a poor bit feeble echo of feeling to them that are all bound up in one life as I have been in my son."

Here there was a little pause, and then the younger voice answered, faltering, "I have known him all my life. I have seen few men but him——"

This was preliminary to the story which old Lady Eskside had begun to tell when I opened to you, gentle reader, the door of this great dim room. She was deep in it by the time we shadows entered, among the shadows, to listen. And most of us can figure to ourselves what a mother would be likely to say of her only child—the child not of her youth even, which puts a kind of equality between mother and son, and brings them together, as it were, upon the table land of life, sooner or later—but the child of her mature age, and, therefore, always a child to her. What she said of him I need not repeat. The reader will make acquaintance with the man for himself, a different creature from the man as seen through his mother's eyes.

"Perhaps it is not a thing to remark to you," said the old lady, who was old enough not only to retain a Scotch accent, but to use occasionally a word peculiar to the North—"but, Mary, you are not a bit girlie unacquainted with the world. You will recognize Richard in this that he married the woman. God forgive me! I'm sorely tempted to think sometimes that vice is less deadly for this world than virtue. You know what most men would have done; they would have taken the girl as they would have gathered a flower, and neither she nor one belonging to her knew better, nor expected better; but my Richard, God bless him, was a fool, Mary, he was a fool! His father says so, and what can I say different? He has always been a fool in that way, thank God! He married the woman, and then he sent to me when it was all over, and nothing could be mended, to come and see, for God's sake, what was to be done."

"And you went?"

"I went after a struggle: I could not thole the creature; the very name of her was odious to me. It was a ridiculous name—a play actor's name. They called her Altamira. What do you think of that for Richard's wife? I thought she was some shopkeeper's daughter—some scheming, dressing, half-bred woman, that had made her scheme to marry him because his father was Lord Eskside—though Heaven knows it's a poor enough lordship when all is said. Perhaps we women are too apt to take this view; naturally, when such a thing happens, we think it the woman's fault, the woman's doing. But Mary, Mary, when I saw the girl—"

"You freed her," said the other, with a sighing sound in her low voice, "from the blame?"

"The blame!" cried the old lady, with some impatience; then, sinking her voice low, she said hurriedly—"the girl was no shopkeeper's daughter, not even a cottage lass, nor out of a ploughman's house, or weaver's house, or the lowest you can think. She was out of no house at all—she was a tramp. Mary, do you know what that means?—a creature hanging about the roads and fields, at fairs and races, wherever the roughest, and the wildest, and the most miserable congregate—that was Richard's wife."

"O, Lady Eskside!"

"You may well say oh! As for me, if I had ever fainted in my life I would have fainted then. She was a beautiful creature; but the sight of her brought a sickness to my very heart. She was like a wild hunted thing, frightened to death for me and everything that was civilized—looking out of her wild black eyes to see how she could escape—shrinking back not to be touched, as if she thought I would give her a blow. Blame! you might as well blame a deer that it let itself be taken, poor, bonnie, panting, senseless thing! I blamed nobody, Mary; I was just appalled, neither more nor less, at the man's folly that had done it. Think of a son of mine having so little command of himself. The madness of it, for it was no question of making a lady of her, a woman that could take his mother's place. She had to be tamed first out of her gypsy ways—tamed like a wild beast, and taught to live in a house and wear decent clothes as she had never done in her life."

A low cry of dismay and wonder came from the listener's lips, and a strange pang which nobody knew of went through her heart—a pang indescribable, mingled of misery, humiliation, and a kind of guilty and bitter pride—guilty, though she was innocent enough. This was his choice, she said to herself; and that sharp and stinging contempt—more painful to herself than to the object of it—which a woman sometimes permits herself to feel for a man who has slighted her, shot through the gentlest soul in the world.

"I cannot tell you," said Lady Eskside, her voice sinking low, so that her companion had to stoop forward to hear, "all that I went through. She broke away from us and got back to her people more than once. Our ways were misery and bondage to her. At first she had to be dressed like a child—watched like a child. Her husband had no influence over her, and she was frightened for me; the moment she was out of our sight her whole mind was busy with schemes to get away."

"But what reason—what motive?"—began the other, faltering.

"None," said Lady Eskside. "Listen, Mary, there was one thing. She was good, as people call good; there was no wickedness in her as a woman. What wife meant, in any higher sense, she was ignorant of; but there was no harm—no harm. Always remember this, whatever may happen and whatever you may hear. I say it—Richard's mother—that can have no motive to shield her. She wanted her freedom, nothing more. She was not an ill woman; nothing bad—in that way was in her head. She would have put her knife into the man who spoke lightly to her as soon as look at him. She was proud in her way of being Richard's wife. She felt the difference it made between her and others. But she was like a wild animal or bird. She would not be caged, and there was too deep an ignorance in her to learn. There was no foundation to build upon—neither ambition, nor pride, nor any feeling that the like of us expect to find."

"And was there no love?" The voice that made this inquiry trembled and had a thrill in it of feeling so mingled as to be indescribable—bitterness, wonder, pity, and a sense of contrast more overwhelming than all.

Lady Eskside did not reply at once. "Often and often I've asked myself that question," she said at length; "was there love? How can I tell? There are different kinds of love, Mary. You and I even would love very differently, let alone you and her. With you there would be no thought of anything but of the person loved——"

"I am not at all in question, Lady Eskside," said the other, with the strangest delicate haughtiness.

"I beg your pardon," said the old lady, quickly. "You are right, my dear; there is no question of you. But still there are different kinds of love. Some think only of the person loved, as I said; but some are roused up into a kind of fierce consciousness of themselves through their very love. They feel their own individuality not less but more in consequence of it. This was that poor creature's way. Mixed with her wild cravings for the freedom she had been used to, and the wild outdoor life she had been used to, I think she had a sort of half crazy feeling now unlike Richard she was, and this became all the stronger when I came. "My dear," said Lady Eskside, suddenly, "the most untrained woman feels what another woman thinks of her far more than she feels any man's criticism. I have thought and thought on this for years, and perhaps I put my own thoughts into her mind; but I cannot help fancying that sometimes, though she did not understand me in the least, poor thing, she caught a glimpse of herself through my eyes; and what with this and what with her longing to be out of doors, she grew desperate, and then she ran away."

The listener made no reply. I don't think she cared to hear any excuse made for the wild woman who was Richard's wife—whom Richard had chosen instead of any other, and who had justified his choice.

"I stayed as long as I could, and tried all I could," Lady Eskside continued, "and then there came a time when I felt it was better for me to go away. I told Richard so, and I advised him to take her abroad—where she would have nobody to fly to. And so he did, and wandered about with her everywhere. I can't think but what she must have made some advance, in sense, at least, while they were so much together; but it takes a long time to tame a savage; it takes a long time to graft a new stock upon a wild tree."

"And you have never seen her again?"

"I saw her when her children were born. She was so far tamed then by weakness and by the natural restraint of the circumstances," said Lady Eskside, "that I hoped she might be changed altogether. And she would talk a little—not so much as that one could find out how her mind was working—but yet a little—enough to swear by, and her voice was changed. It lost its wild sound and took finer modulations. You know how particular Richard always was in all his ways—you remember his voice?"

The other drew back her chair a little. Somehow the sudden reference struck her like an arrow through and through. She tried with a choking, sobbing sensation to get out the word "Yes." Remember it! She seemed to hear it and nothing else, till her head ached and swam and there was a ringing in her ears.

"Ah!" Lady Eskside paused, with a wondering sense that something was going on in the dark more potent than mere interest in her story. But after a while, as even a story which is one's own takes a stronger hold upon one than the emotion of another, however deep, she recommenced, going back to herself. "Her voice had changed wonderfully. She spoke almost like an educated person—that gave me great hope. I thought, what with the children and what with this opening of new life in herself, that everything would be changed, and my heart was moved to her. When I left I kissed the children, and for the first time I kissed her, and I promised to send her a nurse—an excellent nurse I knew of—and came home quite happy. You recollect my coming home, and how proud I was of the twins—the darlings. O Mary, Mary! little did I know——"

Mary put out her hand and took that of her old friend. She was too much moved herself to say anything. From this point she had a faint knowledge of the story, as everybody had.

"The next I heard was that she had disappeared," said the old lady; "disappeared totally, taking the babies with her. Richard went with me so far on my way home, and while he was absent his wife disappeared. There is no other word for it; she disappeared and no one has ever heard of her again. O, Mary, what news for us all! There had been some gypsy wanderers, some of her own class, about the place, we found out afterwards; and whether they carried her off or she went of her own will nobody knows. Sometimes I have thought she must have been carried away, but then they would not have taken the children; and sometimes I have blamed myself, and thought what I said about the nurse may have frightened her—God knows. We sought her everywhere, Mary, as you may suppose. I went myself up and down over all the country, and Richard went to America, and I cannot tell you where. We had the police employed and every sort of person we could think of, but we have never heard any more of her to this day."

"Nor of the children?" said Mary, drawing closer and holding still more tenderly her old friend's hand.

"Nor of the children—two bonnie boys—O, my dear, two lovely boys!" cried the old lady, with a sob. "I never saw such sweet children. You may fancy all I have said to my old lord, when I came home, about them; one was to have my property, such as it is, and the other the Eskside lands. A single heir would have been better, Lord Eskside said, in his way, you know—but he was as proud as I was. Two boys!—no fear of the old house dying out. We began to plan out the new wing we have always thought of building. O, Mary, now you will understand how I can never laugh when the gentlemen make a joke with my poor old lord about the new wing!"

"Dear Lady Eskside! but you must not—you must not break down—for his sake."

"No, I must never break down; and if I would I could not," said the old lady; "it's not my nature. I must keep up. I must stand firm till my last day. But, Mary, though it is my nature, I have to pay for it, as one pays for everything. O, the weary nights I have lain awake thinking I heard her wandering round the house, thinking I heard her at the window trying to get in. She knew nothing about Rosscraig—nothing; but, strange enough, I always think of her coming here. When the wind's blowing as it blows to-night, when the leaves are falling in autumn—O, Mary, have you never heard a sound like steps going round and round the house?"

"It is only the leaves falling," said Mary; and then she added, suddenly, "I have heard everything that the heart hears."

"And that's more than the ears ever heard tell of," said the old lady, "but, oh, to live for years and never hear that without thinking it may be them; never to see beggar bairns on a roadside without thinking it may be them; to go watching and waiting and wandering through your life, starting at every noise, trembling at every sudden sound—God help us! what is that; what is that?" she cried, suddenly rising to her feet.

"Oh, Lady Eskside!" cried the other, rising, too, and grasping her hand with a nervous shudder. "It is nothing; nothing but the storm."

The old lady dropped heavily into her seat again. "Sometimes I cannot bear it," she cried; "sometimes I cannot bear it! I get half crazed at every sound."

"The wind is very high," said Mary, soothing her, "and the Esk is running wild over the linn, and the storm tearing the trees. It must be the equinoctial gales. If you only heard them as we do, roaring and raging over the sea!"

For a few minutes the two ladies sat quite still, holding each other's hands. The storm outside was wild enough to impose silence upon those within, and while they sat silent, conscious of the strange stillness within and commotion outside, was it their imaginations that represented to them another sound striking into the roar of the storm? Who could be knocking at this hour? or how could such a sound be heard even in the onslaught of the storm?

What was it? what could it be? Now, was that the forlorn peal of a bell? and now a gust of cold air as if the door in opening had admitted the storm in person, which swept through the house like a mountain stream? and now a wild dash and clang as if the same door had closed again, shaking the very walls? Tighter and tighter Lady Eskside grasped Mary's hand, their own hearts beating loud over the storm, and then there came another sound ludicrous in its methodical calm, which startled them still more than the sounds they had supposed themselves to hear.

"Something has happened, Mary!" cried Lady Eskside, withdrawing her grasp and wringing her hands. "Something has happened! some one has arrived, and Harding is coming to let us know."

"He is coming to light the lamps," said Mary, making one desperate effort to throw off the superstitious impression; and she laughed. The laugh sounded something terrible, full of mockery and contempt in the midst of the always resounding storm; the echo of it seemed to breathe all around the room, calling forth diabolical echoes. In the midst of these Harding came solemnly into the room. He was an elderly man, who had been many years in the house, and was deeply impressed by the solemnity of his own position. He came in without any light and stood invisible at the door, another voice and nothing else. "My lady," said Harding, solemnly, "something has happened—something as is very mysterious, and we can't understand. Would it be a great trouble to your ladyship if we was to ask you to come down stairs?"

She had sprung up nervously at his first words. She rushed now before him down stairs—unable to reply, unable to question—as light as a girl of twenty, though three times that age—followed trembling by the other, who was not half so old nor half so full of life as she.

CHAPTER II.

Before I can fully explain what happened next and what Lady Eskside saw when she rushed down stairs, I am obliged to turn back for a few hours in the afternoon of this day, and for some miles, to a scene of a very different kind—a scene so opposed to the other in all its circumstances that it is strange to realize the close connection between them; though the two were so closely linked together as to be incomprehensible, one without the other. The village of Lasswade lies on the Esk, at a much lower elevation, and nearer to the sea, than Rosscraig House. It was, at the time I speak of, a much more primitive village than it is now. There was no railway near at that time, but a coach ran regularly on all lawful days, from the corner of Prince street to the Bull Inn in High street. But the aspect of Lasswade, though considered cheerful and inviting by its Edinburgh visitors, was very dreary on this March afternoon, when the wind blew a hurricane, and the rain now and then came down in torrents. Between these storm showers there came "blinks" of intermission, when people who loved to see what was going on came forth to their doors, after the fashion of the place; and it was this humble sprinkling of the population which, as many of them remembered later, witnessed the passage through the town of a still humbler visitor, a poor woman who arrived shortly before the darkening in a miserable condition enough. Two small boys accompanied her, wet through, splashed with mud and crying with weariness and with the buffets of the wind which blew them off their little legs. The woman was tall, wrapped in an old shawl of that indescribable no-color of which the vagrant class has a monopoly. Her damp clothes hung limp about her; her poor bonnet, wet and limp like her dress, clung to the dark locks which here and there escaped from their cover. She was a stranger, as her weary and bewildered looks testified, and the children who clung to her on either side seemed to confuse her still more by their whimpering weariness. This melancholy little group came over the bridge in one of the pauses of the storm, when a few people had strayed out to their doors to relieve the *ennui* of the wet and stormy day by a little gossip at least. Chief among these were Merran Miller, the blacksmith's wife, a woman too fond of hearing everything that was going on (people said) for the comfort of her house; and the old postman, Simon Simson, whose work was over for the day. When the stranger approached this knot of gossips and asked the way to Jean Maclarlane's inn they all answered at once, glad of an event, with directions on the one hand and remonstrances on the other. Old Simon pointed out the way with officious haste, contrary to the wishes of Mrs. Miller, who claimed that "it was no 'a house for an honest woman."

Jean Maclarlane's house was worse spoken of than any other house in Lasswade. Every disturbance that happened in the tranquil place came from that centre of disorder and lawlessness; and to lodge there or to propose lodging there was of itself a tacit acknowledgment of vagrancy, or at least an absence of that regard for other people's opinions, which is the first step toward respectability. It may be supposed, then, that the poor woman who openly asked to be directed to Jean Maclarlane's was as poor and as completely beyond all regard for the prejudices of society as it was possible to be. She went on without pause or hesitation, with an abstracted indifference of demeanor which perhaps was occasioned by mere weariness and discomfort, to the dreaded door. The aspect of the house was not encouraging, neither was the reception which the traveller received. In the poor little parlor, with its sanded floor, which was the better part of the establishment, two men, in wet coats steaming from the rain, sat before the fire talking loudly over their little measure of whiskey, while Jean's voice rang through the house as she went and came, in a continuous and generally angry monologue. The new comer came up to her timidly, holding back the children, and asked in a low tone for a room with a fire, where she and her children could rest. "A room to yourself!" said the mistress of the house; "set you up! are you better than other folk, that ye canna share and share alike? Sirs, this leddy's mista'en her road. She thinks she's at the Bull, where there's plenty o' parlors and private rooms and naebody to gang near them. Here's a' the private room you'll get in my house. Eh, woman, canna ye stop the mouth o' that grinning brat? It's cauld and weet? I can see that; but it needna deave decent folk. Sit aff from the fire and let the woman in, ye twa drunken brutes of men! What do you want there, dribbling and drinking and spending your wives' siller? Let the puir bit things get near the fire——"

"Jean, you're the greatest randy in the parish," said one of the men, getting up in time to save himself from the ignominious push aside which sent his companion, reeling, out of the way.

The new comer drew her little boys to the fire, took one on her knee and put her arm round the other, drying their little wet hands and faces with a corner of her shawl. They were subdued into quiet and comfort by the time that Mrs. Maclarlane's servant lass, Jess, brought them their tea, on a battered old iron tray, with coarse brown sugar and a jug of skim milk flanking the broken and smoky teapot. People in this poor woman's condition of life are not fastidious, and the miserable beverage warmed and comforted the humble travellers. After some time and much further parley with Jess, who was less peremptory and despotic than her mistress—though she, too, felt herself the superior of so poor a guest—the woman and her children were allowed to go up stairs into a dingy little bedroom, a poor exchange for the fireside, which, grimy as it was, had the comfort of warmth. Dear reader, your children or mine would—in our apprehensions, at least—have died of such treatment; but the tramp mother is saved from anxieties which trouble mothers in other circumstances. She did all she could for them, and which of us can do more? She had no dry clothes to put on them; but she was not afraid of taking cold. She put them both on the bed, where they soon fell asleep, and covered them with a blanket. They were damp, but warm, and rest was heavenly to their poor little wearied limbs. They were asleep as soon as their little heads touched the pillow; and then she sat down by the bedside—to think.

How many processes get called by that name which have little enough to do with thought! The mother of these children had lived up to this time an almost entirely physical existence—that is, she had indeed gone through passions and miseries, and acted upon impulses which had to do with the more ethereal part of her being. She had been moved to despair, which is (I humbly suppose, not knowing) a sensation beyond the reach of any animal, save man; but never in all her life had she been moved before by a tremendous moral impulse, against her own will, and in contradiction to all that she believed to be for her own good and happiness. At other times she had eased the pain in her breast by sudden resolutions, sudden actions, all more or less like the instincts of an animal, to get rid of some burden or trouble which oppressed her. But somehow—she could not tell how—an entirely new tide had set in, mysterious and unaccountable, in her being. She had been driven by an impulse which she hated, which she resisted, which made her miserable, to do a certain act which her wild and uninstructed mind took to be justice. Long she had struggled against it, but gradually it had grown until it became too much for her and had driven her at last to the verge of the act which would make her miserable, yet would be right. What a wonderful moral revolution had been worked in a creature so untaught as to seem without any moral nature at all, before things came to this pass, I need not say. And now she sat down, as she thought—to think; not to think whether she would do it, but—which it was to be? Her mind was wildly made up, after many a conflict, to submit to the wild law of justice which had seized upon her against her will. She was about to give up to "them that had the right to it" one of her children. What she had to decide now was—which was it to be?

Poor soul! she had done much that was very foolish and much that was wrong (but that because she knew no better) in her life. She had been a trouble to many better people than herself. She had spoiled one other existence as well as her own, and thrown a cloud upon several lives—all without knowing much what she was doing—without meaning it—out of ignorance. Now here she sat, absolute arbitress of two lives more, able to determine their course almost as she pleased, yet as ignorant as ever—as little aware of the real character of her responsibility. If ever woman merited pity this poor woman did—not only to give up one of her children, but to choose which to give up. Her brain, so dull, yet so keen as it was, became, as it were, suffused with a mist of pain; her head grew giddy, a film came before her eyes; a sense of the intolerable overwhelmed her—that terrible sensation which makes your very being reel like a drunken thing, that you cannot bear that which you know you must bear, whatever happens. She put down her throbbing head into her hands. To keep silent for that terrible moment—not to cry out and writhe, as this sword went through her heart, was all that she could do.

She was a tall young woman, with a fine, elastic, well developed figure, looking about thirty, but not so old. Her features were very fine and regular; the great, restless, unquiet, dark eyes flashed out of deep caverns which seemed to have been hollowed out by pain or passion rather than by time. Any delicacy of complexion or youthful bloom which she had ever possessed must have been long gone, for her skin was burned to one uniform tint of reddish brown—the color of exposure, of health and vigor, but of that vigor and health which are purchased by all the severities of an outdoor life. No one could see her once without wondering over so much beauty accompanied by so little attractiveness. She had vagrant written in every line of her fine form and miserable dress. But notwithstanding this, there was that in her abstract look—always busy with something else than the thing immediately before her, in a certain careless calm of manner and indifference to all surrounding her—which, I think, would have made the most abandoned of men hesitate ere he offered any rudeness to this strange vagrant. She had a wedding ring on her finger; that was no great matter, for it is easy to show the world that ensign of respectability; but there was something more trustworthy in her look and presence, the passionless abstraction of her air. In her rough dress, with her outdoor look, her hard hands, her strange beauty, scarcely on the wane, she was protected from every shadow of insult by the stony purity of her looks. Such a woman might be miserable enough, but wanton never.

There were dreary, red curtains half drawn over the window, and the dingy blind was partially drawn down, leaving little light in the miserable room, even had the sky been bright; and it was now darkening toward night. It was the physical cold, I think—that discomfort which always makes itself doubly felt when the mind is weighed down with trouble—which roused her to the sense that what she had to do must be done quickly. She rose up and wandered, tottering round and round the bed, first to one side, then to the other, asking herself that heartrending question—Which? The children lay there in the pretty grace of childish abandon. One little fellow had kicked off unawares his muddy boot, which fell to the ground and startled her so that she put her hands to her panting side, and did not recover the shock for some moments. He was the fair child of the two, and lay like a little white angel with his dimpled hands stretched above his head in the perfect grace of infant sleep. The other was almost as dark as his brother was fair; his black, curly locks were ruffled up from his bold forehead, his little arms folded on his breast, his rose mouth shut close with unconscious resoluteness—though it might be but the mother's sick fancy which saw the expression on the little face. They were beautiful children both, with a general resemblance to each other, yet very unlike—one so blonde and the other so dark; one so delicately gentle in his aspect, the other bold and handsome, like a little gypsy prince. Poor soul! what words can I use to describe the agony of choice with which this unhappy woman hung over them? but she made no choice at all—how could she? Suddenly, in passionate, quick decision of her fate and his, she snatched the dark child into her arms—not because she loved him best, nor because he was the eldest, nor for any other reasonable motive under heaven. Only because the other—God help her!—had kicked off his boot upon the floor. In such a terrible choice what but the most fantastic chance, the wildest hazard, can tell upon a mind distraught? She caught him up to her with anxious care not to wake him, which contrasted strangely with the passion and misery in her face. Once having done it, nature itself demanded that no moment should be lost. She gathered him closely into her arms, wrapped her shawl round him, and, leaving the other on the bed, went swiftly and silently down the dark stairs and out into the night.

If any one had spoken to her or touched her I believe the poor, distracted creature would have gone mad or fallen into dead unconsciousness, for nature was strained in her almost to the furthest limit; but no one saw or interfered, or knew what was being done. She never looked at the boy again but held him fast and hurried on. He was a child of seven years old, but small and light; in her vigorous arms—she was as strong as a man, as light and rapid as a savage—he was as a feather's weight. She went away with him unnoticed, wrapping her poor shawl round him to keep him from the rain, through the muddy roads, in the storm and dusky twilight. Merran Miller, the smith's wife, shutting the door in the darkening, when the rain began to blow in, saw the dark figure pass, and said to herself that Jean Maclarlane had sent the beggar wife away; and O! what a night it was to travel, even for the like of her! "But what's come o' the bairns?" she asked herself; then shut the door and went in, and put on her kettle. The beggar wife and her bairns were no concern of hers.

"The beggar wife" went swiftly up by the dark Esk side, beneath the trees, that wailed overhead like spirits in pain. She was blinded with the rain, not with tears, for her eyes were dry and refused to shed more. Her limbs trembled under her, but her wild heart and purpose did not fail. After a time she came back again alone, without her burden. The dark branches still tossed against the pale sky, and kept on their passionate struggle against the elements, but the forlorn human creature who tottered along underneath, swift, but unsteady, beaten about by the wind, drenched by the rain, too miserable to feel either, had lost all sense of struggle. The lassitude of soul which comes after a great act accomplished was in her. She went like a ghost across the bridge, where no one now was visible, so much had the storm increased, and up the further end of the village street. Jean Macfarlane was sitting with her guests in the little room down stairs, drinking with them and filling the air with her loud excited voice and torrent of words. There was no one in the passage or stair to note the dark figure gliding back to the room which no one had cared to notice since she entered it. It was dark, but she required no light. The other child, he who remained, her only one, lay still as she had left him. She put down her face on his warm flushed cheek; she lifted him tenderly on her lap, and put on his little boot, and soothed him when he woke and cried in the dark, and clung to her. "Mother's here! mother's here!" she murmured, crooning to him, poor, wretched, hopeless soul, with the voice of a dove in her nest. Then she took him in her arms, and going down stairs stopped the dirty maid who was Jean Macfarlane's whole staff of service, and paid for the poor refreshment she had had. "You're no going on sic a night?" said the girl; "and whaur's the other wee laddie?" "He has gone on before," said the mother. "We are going to meet the coach at Loanhead." "Then you'll have to be awful quick," cried the girl, compassionate. "Poor wee man! what a night to be out in! Here's a piece to give them when you're in the coach; but, oh, woman, tak pity on the bairns, and bide till the morn. It's enough to give them their death."

"I cannot stay. Good night!" cried the stranger, passing out. The good-natured lass, though she was dirty, looked after her, shaking an unkempt head, and twisting up as she did so an elf lock which had fallen out of the poor hold of her deficient hair pins. "Eh, thae tramps, what an awfu' life!" Jess said to herself, comparing her own position with that of the wanderer, with a thrill of superior comfort and well-being. She paused to fasten up the refractory lock before she followed to the door to look out after the departing guest; but by that time the darkness had swallowed her up, and nothing was visible except the wild, sweeping rain, which came down in a sheet, visible across the blackness of the night like the warp of a sable web. "Lord save us, sic a night to be out in, and O thae puir weans!" cried Jess, with a grim tear in the corner of her eye.

The stranger and child got into the coach at Loanhead, but they did not reach Edinburgh in that respectable conveyance. Somewhere in the outskirts of the town they managed to drop out of the coach, leaving the money for their fare on the damp seat, which their damp clothes had soaked. "A queer customer you, but an awful honest woman!" the coachman said, with mingled wonder and admiration. It was still scarcely night, though so much happened since it began to grow dark. The vagrant found her way to some haunt of vagrants such as I do not know and have no chance of being able to describe, and there passed the night safe from all search or possibility of pursuit, encompassed by securities and precautions which can only be made perfect by a class at war with society. She herself had done no crime so far as any one knew; but the instinctive suspicion of a race accustomed to shelter from the eye of justice kept her safe. Notwithstanding the hue and cry that was raised after her she went on her way as secure as any woman could be, and got back to England with her boy, and disappeared among the mysterious fastnesses of her class, not to reappear or be heard of for years. Poor soul! she had left no traces behind her by which she could be recognized. Even in Jean Maclarlane's house the instinct of caste was roused to cover her retreat. "A woman with a wean? Am I to remark a' the women with weans that come and gang afore my door—there's ower mony o' them, far ower mony? I've something better to do than to glower at women," cried the mistress of the place. "There was but one here—a real decent person, with twa bairns. She took them baith away with her, safe and sound, and got the coach at Loanhead," said Jess. "What like was she? How am I tell that never saw her but in her bannet? A' that I can tell you was that she sighed sair—mair like a moan than a sigh. She was a real decent woman," cried good-hearted Jess. And this was all her history and description—all by which she could be identified among others. The prolonged investigations that were made disclosed nothing more.

This thrilling story will be continued from where it leaves off here in the *Sunday Mercury* of to-morrow, November 29, which can be had at all the news depots on Sunday morning. The *Sunday Mercury* exceeds in circulation the combined issues of all the other Sunday newspapers, and "Altamira," the story of a wild love match, increases in interest with every chapter.

WALL STREET SIDE SCENES.

The Gold Premium and the Chances Connected Therewith—Facts Connected with the Importation of Bonds.

After a long period of stagnation the gold market has begun to attract attention in an unusually smart movement of the premium during the past couple of weeks. Thus, while the premium on last Saturday closed at 111¼, yesterday it closed at 111⅞. And this in the face of the following exhibit just published. For the ten months ending October 31, 1874, the exports from Great Britain showed a falling off in goods invoiced to the United States at pounds sterling, upon which it is presumed ad valorem duties were charged, of £4,691,417, of which £3,195,596 was in haberdashery and millinery. An undoubted satisfaction for the Dress Reform Association of this country! Here is almost $23,500,000 of dutiable imports less than the previous ten corresponding months. Add to this 735,406 tons of iron in various forms of manufacture, including 5,664 tons of unwrought steel, 21,000,000 yards of carpet goods and 640,000 of woollen cloths decrease in importation, and we have a very appreciable decrease in the demand for gold, not alone to pay duties, but to buy foreign exchange to meet bills abroad. And these facts seem to tell. It can be safely said that Wall street desires a higher gold premium. Conversation with some leading bankers yesterday developed the fact that a higher gold premium would stimulate trade; it would awaken the present lethargy and provoke exchanges. An excellent argument so far as it goes. The burglar who steals my plate provokes an exchange, too, because he dare not hold it, and he creates a market for new plate. This is about the position of the gold speculators. It is rumored in Wall street that the administration favor an advance in the gold premium, the object being to present this advance to the next Congress as an argument against the coming democratic majority. Whether this is so or not cannot be definitely stated, but this is sure, that the existing conditions of Treasury administration do not favor a lower premium, no matter what the desired policy may be.

Mr. J. P. Bigelow, Chief of the Loan Bureau at Washington, has just returned from Europe, bringing with him $10,000,000 government bonds as exchanges for new fives. This is not calculated to strengthen the premium on gold here.

An observation made to the writer yesterday by a leading banker of more than average shrewdness and quick comprehension deserves reproduction and might be framed with advantage. The reporter having submitted the gold movement and the reported importation of bonds, propounded the inquiry what he thought of such a situation. "Well," said he, "our gold market is like the Bank of England as a regulator. When the bank is losing specie it advances its rate of discount, and so draws specie to it; when it pays to import our bonds gold goes up and stops the importation." *Sic.*

THE WOOL TRADE.

Report of the Committee of the Trade to the Chamber of Commerce Tariff Revision Committee.

An adjourned meeting of the gentlemen engaged in the wool trade was held yesterday in the Chamber of Commerce, Mr. James Lynch in the chair.

A report of the committee appointed at a meeting of the wool trade held in October last was read by Mr. Strang, which was an elaborate statement of the present condition of the industry, the disastrous effect of the present tariff, and concluded as follows, which gives the recommendation of the committee of this trade to the Chamber of Commerce Committee on Revision of the Tariff:—

FAILURE OF PROTECTION.

These facts show most conclusively that the object ostensibly aimed at by the tariff of 1867—viz., the protection and encouragement of the wool growers—has most signally failed. The wool grower must be blind indeed if by this time he has not learned the lesson that he cannot prosper as long as the woollen interest does not flourish. Why should he not also understand that our industry cannot permanently flourish until it is relieved of the present heavy burden of obstructive tariff legislation? By helping the manufacturer he would certainly help himself and secure a better reward for his labor and investment than he could ever expect to derive from the illusive protection of any tariff. Nor need the wool grower fear that any reduction of duty on wool, or even the total abolition of all duties, could possibly diminish the value of his products by anything like what the present duty on fine wool amounts to. The immediate consequence of either of these changes would be an equalization of prices all over the world; wherever any considerable American competition should appear prices would advance; our manufacturer would reap the benefit of such relief, not so much from the diminished cost of his raw material as from the freedom of choosing the best source of supply for his various wants and from the enhanced price which his foreign competitors would have to pay for their wool.

CONCLUSIONS.

Facts, indeed, as well as sound reasoning, call loudly for the abolition of all duties on wool, and in the light of past experience it is clear that neither the wool grower nor any other special interest ought to plead any injury as likely to result in our country from a policy that has had the most encouraging effect in all other parts of the civilized world. No perfectly safe and solid ground will be reached until wool takes its permanent place on the free list, and this must be the goal of the manufacturer as well as of the wool grower—in fact, of the whole people.

While desirous of urging these views upon all that take an interest in the question, and particularly on our lawmakers, we, nevertheless, cannot overlook the fact, that the great battle of free trade in raw materials is not likely to be fought out on the narrow ground with which we have here to deal. We consider the damaging effects of our wool tariff, however, so far beyond anything that is inflicted on other raw materials and chief articles of commerce, and we regard the necessity of relief to our suffering industry as so pressing, that we feel ourselves compelled to counsel an approximation at least to sound and safe principles.

The arguments alleged against a total abolition of duties on wool are based on the apprehension—

1. That the government cannot as yet spare the revenue derived from the article;

2. That a sudden release of wool from the whole of the existing high rates of duty might of itself prove a change so violent as necessarily to occasion serious disturbance to the very interests we desire to see benefited; and

3. That a complete abolition of the duties on wool would justify the demand for lower duties on woollens, and thus raise questions that could not be decided in a short time.

Admitting, for the time being, the validity of these arguments, and despairing of securing at any early day what seems to us the wisest and best solution of the problem before us, we are compelled to seek some solution not chargable with the above objections.

It will be remembered that our instructions from the Chamber of Commerce directed us to suggest such mode of relief as would not interfere with existing rates of duty. If we are to be limited to such proposals we can make no other suggestion than that of changing from specific duties and from specific and ad valorem combined to purely ad valorem duties, adjusted according to the average rates resulting for each class from the calculation above referred to. (Appendix B.) The objectionable features connected with a division of the article into classes would in that case, however, necessarily remain untouched. If amended only to such limited extent our wool tariff would essentially remain what it now is, an ill-digested and incongruous law, and an impediment to the permanent prosperity of our manufacturing interest, as well as to that of the wool growers. The benefit to be expected from such a modification of our tariff would be so insignificant that we cannot with any degree of earnestness recommend it. We believe, however, that we comply with the spirit of our instructions if we report as the result of our investigation:—

1. That any effectual amendment of our wool tariff must include a considerable reduction of the present duties on fine wool.

2. That such amendment must consist in the establishment of one uniform ad valorem duty on all wool, so as to do away with all classifications.

3. That an ad valorem duty of twenty-five per cent would, in our opinion, be a just rate—a rate that would give certain relief to our suffering interests, and would, at the same time, yield sufficient revenue to the government.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

JAMES LYNCH,
L. J. STIASTNY,
F. O. STRANG,
D. A. RIPLEY,
G. SCHWAB,
JOHN T. WARING,
ABRAM MILLS,
} Committee.

NEW YORK, Nov. 27, 1874.

The report was adopted and the committee continued to supervise the printing of the report and its distribution.

The meeting then adjourned.

FIRE IN GRAND STREET.

Just previous to noon yesterday a fire broke out on the second floor of No. 191 Grand street. The building is occupied by Edward Kelly as a boarding house, and is owned by Cruger & Co. Before the flames were put out they and water had destroyed $1,500 worth of clothing and furniture, and had injured the building to the value of $1,500. The cause of the fire is unknown.

SUDDEN DEATH.

Alleged To Have Been Beaten.

Coroner Eickhoff has under investigation the case of Mary Ann Hill, a woman fifty-eight years of age and born in Ireland, who was found dead in bed in the basement of premises No. 457 West Twenty-eighth street. Some persons in the place allege that some four months ago deceased complained of having been beaten in an alleyway, but failed to state by whom the violence had been inflicted. By direction of the Coroner the body was sent to the Morgue, where Deputy Coroner Leo, in order to determine the true cause of death, will make a post-mortem examination.

MARRIAGES AND DEATHS.

Married.

BEHRINGER—VAIL-COLBURN.—On Thursday, November 26, at the home of the bride, by the Rev. James S. Bush, GEORGE F. BEHRINGER to MARIE VAIL-COLBURN. No cards.

HART—RENN.—On Thursday, November 26, 1874, by the Rev. M. Riordan, at the Church of Our Lady of Mercy, BERNARD J. HART, of Brooklyn, to M. ANNIE RENN, of Haverstraw, N. Y.

LINDLEY—STILWELL.—On Tuesday evening, November 24, at the residence of the bride's parents, by the Rev. Bishop Foster, D. D., EDWIN G. LINDLEY to ELLA V., daughter of Richard E. Stilwell, all of this city.

RAYMOND