

IN SUSPENSE.

Gente di molto valore
Conobbi, che in quel limbo eran sospesi.

I DIED in the latter part of the past year, 1882.

What I am about to relate has so little to do with myself that I don't think it needful to enter into details concerning that event. It is astonishing how much less largely it bulks in importance when one regards it in the past instead of the future tense. This, I have remarked, is a usual result of human experience. We continue to be greatly interested in those who have gone through the same vicissitudes, but familiarity lessens our respect for every event that has happened to ourselves. To a man who has committed a murder, for instance, the fact that he has done it takes away a great deal of its strangeness, so that he is disposed to wonder why other people should make such a fuss about a thing which, after all, is not so unusual. Death comes under the same law; there is nothing in it to be so excited about, we think, when it is over; after all it is only one in a multiplicity of events.

I came to the place I am about to describe, after having gone through various preliminaries unnecessary to dwell upon. It was, I believe, the fact that I belonged to the literary profession that determined my going in that special direction. I had never even imagined myself to be a great writer, but I was what people called painstaking and industrious, producing a good deal of conscientious work. As my works were chiefly in the daily press it does not surprise me that people here know little about them; indeed, even in the other world my reputation was chiefly at home, I might even say a local reputation, and when I travelled out of my natural surroundings I had always found that very little was known about me. The announcement of my name and the various other particulars on which I was questioned produced no sensation at all upon the personage who received me in the district of the eternal world to which I found myself allotted. I do not know why at the moment of appearing before him a recollection should have passed through my mind, by one of those freaks of fancy which defy investigation, of Dante's description of Minos in the 'Inferno,' and the somewhat ridiculous (it must be allowed)

manner in which that potentate indicated their future place to the souls whom he judged.¹ For the personage before whom I stood in no way resembled Minos. He smiled (though I said nothing) at the suggestion; for it must be allowed as detracting in some degree from the comfort of these regions that the greater number of the people you meet understand you without the necessity of any vocal medium of communication. Till one has got over one's earthly habits this is sometimes awkward enough. The official before whom I stood smiled. 'No,' he said, 'you perceive I have no tail to use in such a way; and as this is not penal, only reformatory ——' He smiled, and so did I. 'You will find abundant means of choosing the occupation that suits you,' he said. 'But I think you will find it pleasant to step into the Hall first and look about. You will see a good many persons of note, and they will all be glad to see you; for a person lately arrived, and bringing news, is always welcome.'

'Do you mean then that news is esteemed here?'

'Oh, as much as in any club smoking-room in the other world. The newspapers give only the exoteric view; for the other part we are obliged, I need scarcely say, to trust to the new-comers; they will all be eager to question you. You were connected with the press? Then you must know many things,' he added with a smile, 'that have never met the public eye.'

I was a little disturbed by this. 'I know very little,' I said, 'except in the nature of hearsay, attributing motives, and that sort of thing; the news themselves are all in print. The esoteric mostly consists in giving a bad interpretation to what is done, or suggesting an evil intention.'

'We all know that: and, knowing it, our curiosity is strong to ascertain the private tide of opinion. You will find much commotion among certain distinguished members of our community in respect to recent works of which they have been the subjects.'

'Ah, that, indeed!' I cried. How thoroughly I could understand this may be divined from the fact, that I had myself left materials for a biography which would throw much light upon the profession of literature and especially journalism, and about which I felt rather anxious that my representatives should make a proper use of them. I went in accordingly to the great Hall, very willing to communicate such information as I possessed.

¹ Cignesi colla coda tante volte
Quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.

There were few people in it. It was a very handsome spacious hall, with great tables covered with every kind of periodical and book. The walls were ornamented with frescoes, some of them very fine and spirited, though not of historical subjects, or any, indeed, that seemed to me very suitable for a great reading-room, such as this seemed to be. They were chiefly rural scenes, as hay-making, harvest-making, and such like, with some others from active life of a less rustic character; and I observed that the people about bore mostly the appearance of persons engaged in practical occupations, and whose time of repose was limited in duration. We addressed each other with the usual friendly salutations, and some inquiries were made as to the time of my arrival, the circumstances of my journey, and other such particulars, all of which I had pleasure in answering, as they seemed to have pleasure in hearing, there being, so far as my experience goes, an unusual amount of good feeling and kindness, and a ready interest in the experiences of the persons addressed which is often wanting in the earlier world. Many questions were put to me also, as I had been warned would be the case, about the state of affairs in that world, and demands made as to what were the real opinions of—my interlocutors paid me the compliment of saying—myself first: and then of persons likely to know, and who were able to judge on various matters of public importance. When I referred to the printed disquisitions on those subjects with which I perceived they were largely supplied, these were politely waved aside.

‘Politics,’ said one of my new friends, ‘have very little interest for us. What we wish to know is the opinion of people who are able to form one.’

‘Majorities do not affect us,’ another said, ‘or who is in office or who out;’ at which there was a little laughter—as I judged, because he was a man to whom this had mattered much—‘for all good men are more or less of the same opinion,’ he added. This surprised me a little, as I was accustomed to believe that men equally good might hold very different opinions on the most important questions. But my surprise, as it arose in my mind, was divined, and I had soon a reply. The speaker had by times that look of perfect self-absorption and incapacity to receive external impressions which is the mask of statesmen. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘one must be here out of their range in order to be fully aware what is the vital point of all questions, and what is merely

secondary and accidental. There are men who even in the first world make the discovery, and that in different ways; some by reason of a natural fineness of faculty: but this it is difficult to keep in absolute proportion, and clear from prejudice and reasoning; and age has the effect, in some minds, of detaching them from the vulgar instincts which warp the sight; but in most cases they are compelled to disguise this enlightenment. It is one of the first advantages here that we are no longer obliged to disguise it, and, free from the warp of prejudice, dare fix our attention upon what is the heart of the matter. Consequently opinions biassed by political leanings or by interest, or by any sophistication of thought, are without value in our eyes. At the same time,' he added, 'many, in whom this warp of politics or interest exists, have yet in their hearts a just and entirely satisfactory estimate of the position, if their prepossessions would permit them to bring it out.'

This led to a great deal of conversation, which was evidently very agreeable to my new friends, and in which they conveyed to my mind a great deal of instruction and more new views than it was in my power to assimilate on the moment. This was put a stop to, however, by some one having the air of an official of the place, who came in with a look of great amusement on his face, and made some slight remark or other, which scarcely caught my attention, but which caused some of my friends to jump up very hurriedly, with looks of embarrassment and even alarm, and to take up tools and implements of various kinds which had been put down on the floor or the seats, and hasten away. The tools perplexed me greatly, for the persons to whom I had been speaking were all evidently people of the highest education and most philosophical views. The individual whom I have described as looking like an official laughed as he saw my wondering looks.

'They are always at it,' he said, 'instructing the world as in the preliminary stage. Habit, you know, it is said, is second nature; but they have the grace to be ashamed of themselves when they find it out. It was not necessary for me, you observed, to say a word.'

'It is a pity,' I said, 'that people of cultivated understanding should be set to the tasks of common workmen. Don't you think it is a great waste of material? They must be fit for something better than that.'

Upon this the official personage laughed more than before. He found my remark so comical, indeed, that he became like

Milton's image 'holding both his sides.' 'You are the best of all,' he said, 'ho, ho! You know all about waste of material. It is a pity that the Master of all did not first take your advice.'

Upon this I felt, though I could scarcely tell why, such a stinging sense of shame as I am not aware of ever having felt before. My folly and audacity came before me, not so much as guilty, but as ridiculous, which was worse; and the laugh of the spectator, who seemed to see through and through me, penetrated me with a sort of arrow of remorseless amusement. There was not, however, anything ill-natured in his laugh, though perhaps such enjoyment of another's weakness was not altogether amiable. At least, this was the aspect in which, being the sufferer, it appeared to me.

This was put an end to by the entrance of several other people, all fresh from work of various kinds, and all full of interest in the new arrival, and eager to learn what I had to say. It is true that many of them, like those I had first met, were so anxious to impress upon me their own view of human affairs and tendencies, that little time was left to me to say anything; but others were more open to information, which on my side I found myself very willing to give, rather liking, if I must tell the truth, the importance of my position as the sole exponent of what men were about. It is needless to put down here all the questions upon which my opinions were requested; indeed these questions were so changed by the way in which they were stated, the light in that region falling upon them in a different way from that to which I had been accustomed, that it took some time before, in most cases, I fully understood what it was about which my new friends were asking. They were all fully acquainted with what was said on these subjects publicly upon earth, but, feeling the limitation involved in intercourse with other minds carried on by reading alone, were all the more anxious to make out by personal intercourse the discrepancies thus presented to them. They took a wider and more philosophical view than that to which I had been accustomed; and though there were variations of sentiment, and all were not equally enlightened, there was a far more clearly defined sequence of events in life as they looked at it, than I had ever before been able to see.

There were also many who spoke to me of matters personal to themselves; of books and works of their own for example, which they had left uncompleted, and of which they had no clear

information. Among these latter, ideas existed so very different from anything we meet with in the old planet, that they were very bewildering, and almost incredible to me, some being as desirous of the non-success of their own previous efforts, as others were for their acceptance and triumph. One, I remember, laughed, and hoped, he said, that a certain work might have got check in its popularity. 'When I wrote that I knew nothing about the subject,' he said.

'That is a very common case,' said another. 'In that preliminary world so little is known. The people there thought you an authority. I remember doing so myself in that curious chapter of existence. It was you who pointed out to me afterwards the flaws in your own reasoning.'

'Not difficult that,' said the first. 'It was all one flaw. Education is so poor, and the systems of thought; though I hear,' he said with a laugh, 'that the same idea prevails in a higher stage, of our methods here.'

The other laughed too with a sort of incredulous air, and I asked, for my information, whether the systems of philosophy taught here were different from those known on earth, or if it was an adaptation of ancient methods, probably influenced by a larger knowledge, which they employed. My companions were still more amused by this question, and assured me that they taught nothing here, 'except ourselves, perhaps,' they said, and pointed out to me the hod which one of them shouldered, while the other had a mason's mallet in his hand. They were at work building a house, and very healthy and ruddy they looked, with a fine air of activity and energetic life. I confess that I could not but feel the regret which I had before expressed to see men of cultivated minds engaged in occupations so strangely unlike the high training and culture they had received: but was checked in this thought by a recollection of their own amused estimate of that culture, and evident superiority to it in their own conception, strangely inferior as their present occupations seemed to me to be. They laughed still more as they perceived this thought in my mind (another evidence of the inconvenience to a person, unaccustomed to it, of this kind of transparency), and told me I should never be able to conceive, till I tried, the pleasure of getting a wall straight and making a perfect angle. When I replied that I could not help thinking powers much less cultivated than theirs would have suited such a purpose, they answered in the most cheerful and

light-hearted manner that education was a long process, and that they were far from being done with it yet. 'Housebuilding is an excellent corrective to philosophy,' one of them said; and 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are thought of'—said the other. I did my best, seeing that my ideas were so uncomfortably open to them, to make no comment in my mind upon this at all.

Here, however, we were interrupted by the entrance of a shaggy figure, with which I had been very familiar in the preliminary life. He was a large frame of a man, but had never been filled out or extended by such bodily exercise as his race required; and though his cheek had never lost the rustic red nor his mind the uncompromising expressions of a peasant, he had stooped and shambled somewhat, so far as concerned the outer man, in his mortal days. He seemed to me to have added a cubit (if I knew how much that was) to his stature, and the development of his physical organs had cleared up the cloudy face full of laughter yet of storms, with its frequent flush of wrath and those bursts of vituperation which always ended in the deep rumble of a volcanic laugh. It had not become a peaceful face even now, but was subject to such atmospheric variations as come and go on the hills, swept by sudden lights and shadows. He carried a spade over his shoulders and brought in with him a whiff of that upturned earth which the great Bacon held to be so wholesome, and a waft of fresh air as from the broad and breezy fields. He cast a glance at me, but said nothing for the moment, his eyes giving out a gleam of amused criticism upon my companions, who, I easily understood, were of an order very unlike himself—and retired to a chair, into which he flung himself with a long breath of satisfaction, like a man who had earned a moment of repose and was pleased to have it. I saw that he gave us a glance from time to time as he turned over the piles of books and periodicals on the table, but he did not make any approach till my philosophers had gone to the building of their house; then he came towards me, holding out a large and cordial hand.

'So ye have found your way here?' he said. 'Ye are very welcome! there's many that will be pleased to see you, for the way is a trifle confused, and every one does not just hit it. Well! and would you say they were wearied of me and my concerns yet in your bit little earth, where we seem to have made grand sport for the Philistines,' he added with one of those outbursts of laughter

which were so characteristic of him. His eye had all its old keenness, and I was a little alarmed to have to say my say upon this subject to the hero himself upon whom so many strictures had been made. 'Ah!' he said with another laugh, 'I see your difficulty. Ye have had a good deal to do with the sport in your own person. Well, well, we can understand that; it was all in the way of your trade.'

'We had all something to do with it,' said I; 'and you must know that it was, in a great measure, your own fault.'

'That I know very well,' he said; 'and I am not taking it, as ye perceive, in any tragical kind of a way. That bit of a world sets all things wrong in a man's head. There is so little of it, and ye think everything of it—till the moment comes when ye are set free, and the temptation is to think nothing. Ay, ay, it was my own fault. There is a great bitterness,' he said, stretching himself out, and with a stress upon the vowels such as I well remembered in him, 'and confusion and bewildering darkness in the thought, that just when a man is fully equipped and has his ideas matured, it is all to be turned into nothing, and the good of him and the harm of him lost for ever.'

'I should have thought,' said I, 'that to lose the harm of him would be always an advantage.'

'Ay, ye would think that, would ye? But I have a great opinion of the mental faculties. There is none of them that can be spared.' Here he began to laugh again. 'Not even,' he said, 'what you may call the literary-traitor faculty, which is just one of your grand æsthetic arts, if ye look at it impartially, and chiefly the outcome of the nineteenth century, with all its improvements; for to make out a true man to be a picturesque fiction and all his beliefs a kind of fungus-growth upon the skin of him, instead of a principle of life within, what is that but a high development of the grand Fiction and Lie of Life which is the present ideal? Ye will say I have had my share in establishing the hunt after it and making men's minds familiar with the thought that what is turned to the world is oftenest but Clothes. Ay, I agree to that. Ye see,' he added with a gleam of humour, 'I had not thought of it as applied to my own case.'

'I am afraid,' I said, 'it has been very disagreeable to you; it has given you annoyance?—'

Upon this he laughed again. 'That is a kind of thing,' he said, 'which has but a brief existence in this place; not that we

are any way elevated above the opinion of our fellows, but, as you will have found out, the existence of the sham, even in its unconscious—which is always its most dangerous—state, is little possible when ye have the clearness of vision that distinguishes our neighbours here; by which means delusion cannot long entertain, and even the flunkey has little means of turning his master into another nightmare and illusion for the further disenchantment of the world.'

'You are thinking of——' I said.

Upon this he fell a-laughing again, and answered, 'I have no animosity to man: nor does it appear to me in any other light than that of a keen piece of historical satire, what ye call the irony of fate, or, sometimes, poetic justice. But I would not answer for it if the Wife were to lay her hands upon him, who was never what ye call a very tolerant woman. Ye have all a hand in it,' he added after a moment: 'I am thinking I have had a certain affinity to Samson's riddle with which he dispersed into outer darkness all yon cohort of the light-minded—"Out of the eater came forth meat." I have devoured in my day; it is meet I should furnish occasion for some fine feeding in my turn.'

'You see,' said I with diffidence, 'there were many people who loved you well, but could not understand why you should have treated them and those belonging to them with such contempt. I am not criticising; I am but——'

He shot a glance at me from under his shaggy eyebrows which made me feel my smallness better than a thousand words, and at the same time made me fear that I, too, was to be dispersed like Samson's tormentors: for I had not yet acquired the faculty of seeing the thoughts as they arose. I was somewhat astonished therefore when he said nothing except, with a shake of his head, "'The sorrows of death encompassed me; the pains of hell gat hold upon me.'" And it was not till a full minute had passed that he added, 'When a man is at what he thinks the end of life, awaiting the moment when he shall be bidden to begone into the eternal darkness—and learns that he that thought himself a true man has been in his way as base, and blind, and ignorant as any: and of the nature of the tyrants and eaters of men's souls: and can make no amends, nor ever have his day's work over again!—— Yon Apostle with the bitter tongue, that has left but one utterance, and no more, I wonder what they thought of him in the church meetings and among the pious women—whom he was, no

doubt, civil to before the torrent broke. "Clouds without water," he says, "carried about of the winds; trees whose fruit withereth, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame." Yet he had a tender heart, and would have no man bring a railing accusation'

While I was trying with some perplexity to piece my thoughts together and make out what this meant, some one came bustling in who had a long shepherd's staff in his hand, and that sort of primitive wrap over his shoulder which in Scotland is called a plaid, and in which the guardian of the flock can carry a lamb when need is. He came in with a smiling air of one who is used to setting everything right, and laid his hand upon my companion's arm. 'What is going wrong?' he said. 'When you quote Scripture at this rate, and fume and march about (for the first speaker had been pacing the hall back and forward), there is evidently need of Me. Dearest fellow, what is going wrong?'

At this my friend gave him a keen, humorous look from under his eyebrows, and, with a laugh which broke out of the solemnity of his aspect very strangely, retired to his seat again, and left the new comer in possession of the field. He was a smooth, ready, vivacious personage, very well known, indeed, in the places whence I had come; the change of costume was more striking in him than it had been in the others. He gave me a smile and a white hand. 'The prophet is always vehement,' he said, with a little glance aside as if he and I had a mutual understanding on this subject and comprehended our friend better than he did himself. 'You are speaking, of course, of the biography? Very curious, very curious, my dear sir, the manner in which we are dealt with after we go. It is a kind of refined infidelity, nothing better; quite natural, you know, in our friend's legatee, but not at all natural in that dearest boy of mine, whose training was so different. It betrays a certain conviction that they are never to see us again, which is a mistake in every way. This will make it awkward for them when they come after us, more awkward than it had any need to be: awkward in their own feelings,' said the shepherd, rubbing his hands; 'though in our bosoms no offence dwells.'

'Yes, your lordship,' said the other, from his chair. 'Ye are just as badly treated as the rest of us, and have made sport for the Philistines, too.'

The shepherd hung his head a little, and then looked up with a benignant smile. 'Dearest R——,' he said, 'must have found they were making me dull. It was so; the beginning was respectable, most respectable: but the reader missed the bishop of his heart. I was getting a little tedious, a thing men did not expect from me. I do not blame my dear one; he knew if there was one thing more foreign to me than another that was the thing. He made a dash to my rescue. Unfortunately the dear fellow's zeal was superior to his judgment. It often is so in these warm-hearted natures; my jottings explain themselves, I hope—notes, mere notes; and when there are many people talking and one's self perhaps talking, it is possible the most of all——'

'One fails to catch,' I said diffidently, 'which voice it is that has spoken?'

He smiled approvingly, yet at the same time with an apologetic look. 'Yes,' said the shepherd, 'it is possible you are right. A great deal is always being said in society: you get the substance sometimes but not the manner of putting it—or, perhaps, the other way, the manner of putting it without the substance—which is, perhaps, the most seductive; and names are a snare. The eighteenth century was wiser with its asterisks. Nothing, I need not say, could be further from my intention than to wound people's feelings, or betray their indiscretions. Dearest R— has been incautious, very incautious. Impossible to lament it more than I do,' he said, folding his hands meekly and with a sigh: but there was in the corner of the shepherd's eye a twinkle—and the other burst into a laugh.

'He is, perhaps, not altogether so sorry as might appear upon the face of him. He finds in it an eternal warning to the blabbers, the men that are loose of lip and long of tongue. And if there had but been the voice of a prophet to do it, to clear the earth of the infernal vermin!——'

'Hush, hush, hush, hush!' cried the shepherd, with his hand upon the arm of him that bore the spade. 'These words, you know, in the presence of ——! You must remember the charge, "Swear not at all." But you were always given to strong language.' Then he went on, with a little laugh running through his words: 'Perhaps it may be a good moral lesson, as our friend says: but unintentional, entirely unintentional. I could find it in my heart to be angry with my dear one; but he meant it for the best. And such an accident is full of morals. Not to make jottings at all:

or to burn them; or, perhaps, to make them more full, so that no respectable clergyman may have it in his power to make you dull, and so tempt your affectionate relatives to interfere. Finally, to use asterisks as they did in the eighteenth century, in which golden age, dearest man, there were no misfortunes like ours. Yet dear Horace Walpole spoke plainly enough; perhaps the ultimate cause is hurry—Hurry! our friends will not wait!’

‘They think,’ said the other, ‘that this generation—perhaps the meanest of all generations that have ever trod the earth—will have no recollection of the very names of us after a year or two, but will just drive on to destruction over every great roaring torrent of a Niagara that lies in their way with none now to give a warning, nor point out the whirl of destruction into which ——’

‘O-o-h!’ said the shepherd, drawing in his breath. ‘Dearest fellow! come; here we don’t take such a dismal view of affairs. I see great confusion myself, and a sad want of men to fill my place. Still, it is not so bad as that; twenty years hence, fifty even, we shall still be remembered. You were always too despondent; but it is a lesson of humility, not unneeded even here, to see one’s self set up before the world as a writer of slip-slop.’ The shepherd shivered a little and spread out his white hands. ‘Slip-slop!’ he said; ‘there is no other word. Dearest R—! how incautious, how indifferent to his father’s fame! To be revealed even in one’s bedchamber as capable of *that*.’

‘You may be sure,’ I said, ‘that it was an error of love—and that admiration and enthusiasm with which you filled all about you. They thought everything that your hand had touched must be excellent, the best of its kind.’

The shepherd turned upon me a beaming look of gratitude and approval. ‘Dear fellow!’ he said; but there was always a twinkle in his eye; ‘my friends were indeed too partial ——’

The other interrupted this with his usual laugh. ‘There is a depth of the flunkey mind,’ he said, ‘perhaps the most terrible abyss of all, in which the straw and rubbish become emblems of perfection, and the sweepings of a bedchamber turn to pearls and diamonds as in a fairy tale. Light-flying frivolities, exhalations of no-thought and an idle brain, or even a ball of common dirt flecked from the finger after some inimical passer-by, or vagrant vermin of a mongrel dog, will thus be laid up in jewelled cabinets and preserved for the edification of posterity, much

perplexed by its treasures in that kind! Whether that is the worst: or if a blacker still is the Jesuit-Iconoclast, the son of darkness, and father of slaves; the Ham-Benjamin that uncovers the old man's nakedness, notwithstanding that he had the double portion laid into the sack of him, and was the last—— One might say they were the two sides of that lying worship of heroes that puts to shame the true. Cynic-investigator valet, with his master "no hero" on one hand: and what may be called the Dustman-enthusiast, gatherer up of beard clippings, old rags, and relics—phantasmal heaps—'

Our benign companion had been listening sweetly with a slight shake of his head and a faint *tchick-tchick* now and then of indulgent toleration, but here he burst in with—'No, no; come now, come; not so bad as that. Dearest R—! He may have wanted judgment. To the best of sons, who never gave an hour's anxiety to his father, this quality may yet be incommunicable. He has saved me, as I have already pointed out, from the swathings of respectability in which my earlier biographers had clothed me. Can I say he has done ill, dearest boy? I suffer in the letter, but perhaps in the spirit——'

Then it surprised me very much to see approaching a maid, one of the servants of the place, who had been sweeping with a large broom at some distance from us, and who had made haste to remove, on their entrance, the traces of the soil which the boots of my friend and his pastoral companion had left upon the pure marble of the floor. Having ended that portion of her work she had taken a very long *plumet*, or feather brush, with which she had been clearing every trace of cobweb or other soil or accumulation from the corners and intricacies of the beautifully designed cornice. She came up to us now with this over her shoulder. She was of a stout figure, not handsome nor young, but with an energetic, lively look in her plain countenance which was not unattractive. She said good-humouredly, yet with a touch of disdain, 'You men have never the courage of your opinions. Before I came away, I took care to leave the results of my observation of my friends very clearly upon the record. I was content with no jottings down of chance stories like yours, my lord. I put it all on paper what I thought of them. In common society it is awkward, and might produce complications; but I think it has a fine moral effect, when you feel sure you will be out of reach, to let them know what you always thought of them. Eh? Oh, yes,

I hear you well enough; it is only the old habit of the trumpet that sticks to me.'

'Dear lady,' said the shepherd (notwithstanding the broom), 'women are always more ingenious than our duller sex; but is there not something cynical in your statement of the case?'

'Probably there is a great deal that is cynical. I never was a person moved by gusts of passion like our friend here, or fond of that little pinch in passing which was a pleasure to you. I was always a downright person. I was never done full justice to. Government used to take my help and pick my brains, but never offered me a C.B. As for their pensions, I scorned money—in that way. Even my parents never did me justice: and for my friends, when I was a notability they fawned upon me. I was determined there should be no mistake about it. I can't pretend, like you, that I never intended it. There was, however, one mistake I made,' she said, reaching up at the height of her *plumet* to destroy a cobweb—('how quick these spiders spin!—faster than any of us; and need no publisher). There was one mistake, and I am delighted to have done it in such good company.'

'What was that, Harriet? I always thought you a very honest woman; saying your say perhaps not always with the highest wisdom, but in a serious, straightforward way, grappling with the naked truth of things.'

'That has rather an immodest sound, and I should object to it if I had been an American. The mistake I made was the same as that which one of you has already pointed out: that I never thought I was likely to meet these people again; and here am I caretaker of this hall, and right in the way of every one of them! It gives me a little shock when they come in as they all do, though it is rather humbling to perceive that most of them have forgotten all about it, while I remember every word. That is confusing. Of course it is done on purpose. I am here on purpose; and in the curious change of circumstances it does me a great deal of good. You, now,' said this plain-spoken lady, touching me on the arm, 'you don't recollect who I am. Oh, yes; I can see into your mind, remember. You are asking yourself, Who is she? And I was a great light in my day; but I have been longer here than these two, and even the fuss that was made by all my friends about whom I spoke my mind, has died away. So will the fuss about you too die away.'

'And then we shall be judged on our merits,' said the gentle

shepherd. 'In a good hour! but probably we shall all have passed on before this to a higher sphere, and will not even hear of it. What matter? We cannot, my dearest friends, go on thinking for centuries of what happened in the course of sixty or even eighty years. You were both octogenarians, I think? What vitality! Now I must go back to my few sheep—they may stray if I linger longer in this delightful intercourse. You don't know yet, dear fellow, what you are going to do?'

'Not yet,' I said; 'but surely, I must say it, this is a dreadful waste of material—to put men like you into occupations that ——'

My friend took up his crook and with a benignant smile waved his hand to me. 'One dear flock is like another,' he said; 'and then the blessed peacefulness of it—no rivals, no promotion. An obstinacy of going astray, perhaps, to which my experience, however, finds many parallels; but no complications. Dear innocents! I draw in health and vigour every day.'

'But you,' I said, looking at the prophet; 'you who ——'

He drew himself up with one of his cavernous laughs, bursting, with a rumble of echoes, from his deep chest; strong, vigorous, unimpeded, a model of his kind. 'I have gotten back,' he said, 'to the original of my race. I till the soil that is truth incarnate in its solid, silent way, and deceives no man. The shadows and the phantasms are departed, gone back into chaos whence they came. There is now no contradiction between thoughts and things. The red earth is kindly, there is health in the smell of it. And I am thinking there's still better to come.'

So saying he waved his hand to me and went out with a step that rang like a trumpet. I was left alone with her of the broom; her whole mind seemed to be set upon the dislodgment of a nest of spiders which seemed to have twisted their filaments round and round the open work of the cornice. She was on tiptoe reaching up to them, and I thought civility required that I should offer to do it for her. Whereupon she turned upon me with a half-indignant air.

'Have you not heard yet what your own work is to be? You will find that enough for you without helping me; not but what it was kind enough,' she added. 'Oh! I know what was your profession. But I am one that would give the Devil his due.'

'You are talking of —— a fabulous personage,' I said.

She stopped and looked down upon me, though I was tall and she was dumpy; such was the constitution of the woman that she looked down. 'Oh! you think so,' she said; and then, with the utmost contempt of which the gesture was capable, stood up on her toes again, and stretched upwards at the full length of her arm towards the cobwebs on the roof.

It was at this moment that the official, of whom I have previously spoken, approached me with what seemed a sort of warrant in his hand. I may mention that I was by profession a critic; I had brought many men to the ground that were better than I; I had helped some reputations, but marred many. I was rather renowned for slashing articles. The man in office approached me with a malicious smile in his eyes.

'You will take this to the kitchen department,' he said.

I was allotted to ——. But why need I disclose it? Would it make my brethren spare a dart, or mitigate a spiteful sentence? No! so I refrain from any attempt at a moral. Also I must allow, as happens invariably in that place which is the first step in moral reformation, that, when I had become accustomed to it, I did not dislike my new occupation at all.