storm had burst upon him, and, strange to say, he was calmer than he had been since he had no tragedy to disturb the even tenor of his life.

"Here!" and he placed her in an armchair, "let me go and get rid of Chetwynd. He must be wondering at our absence."

But she clung to him desperately: "Tell me, tell me, John, what your trouble is. What did you mean by your reference to her?"

Before he could reply the door opened and Edith entered.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Never was interruption more inopportune. To her father, as it relieved him of the pressure of his wife's question, it was less unwelcome than to her mother, but their child so far had never witnessed a scene between them. Their married life had been as near the ideal as perhaps it possibly could. There had been times when slight differences had taken place, but these minor things had been known to Edith.

Her mother was the first to recover her self-possession, and with a woman's ingenuity she saved the situation by accentuating it in another direction.

"That young man Barking has upset your father," she said.

Edith coloured. She recalled his familiarity of the morning, and his late visit to the house that evening.

"I don't see why father should be annoyed by him," she remarked, with the tone of a question in it. "I consider it was very rude on his part to detain papa, when he knew he had a guest. That young man wants a decided snub, and he will get one from me the next time he dares to address me. Father, dear, you are too kind to him. He is a nasty, common person, who is inclined to take liberties at the first opportunity."

Mrs Langthorne sighed. "I think I will retire now."

"See to your mother, Edith," Mr Langthorne said, as she passed out of the room. "I will say good-night to Chetwynd for you. Is he still in the drawing-room?"

"Yes," and she half hesitated; then without a word, she followed her mother.

"I am very sorry, Chetwynd. My wife came into the library and she has had to go to bed, she is not at all well."

The young man was all concern at once. "I trust it is nothing serious. It is so very sudden. Mrs Langthorne was so well a minute ago." Then he saw the troubled look upon the other's face and refrained from saying more.

"Oh, nothing serious, Chetwynd. I have sent Edith upstairs with her so she will be well looked after. You will have a whisky and soda before you go?"

He rose at once. "Oh, no thanks. I won't detain you, for I think you will be anxious to see to Mrs Langthorne as well. Can I do anything—I mean, can I go for a doctor?"

"Thanks, no. It is nothing more than a slight faintness."

"Eh —you will say good-night for me?" he ventured.

"Certainly, Chetwynd. I don't think my daughter will come down again tonight."

He looked disappointed, but his face brightened for it dawned upon him that the mother's indisposition afforded him an excellent excuse for calling again next day.

"And I will not, under the circumstances, press you for an answer to the quest I put to you in the drawing-room. I mean in reference to our engagement."

"That is very kind of you. Another time would perhaps be better. You are sure you won't have something before you go?" He was anxious to cut short this interview. He wanted time to think, to grapple with the suggestion that troubled him there and then to say: "Yes, marry my daughter when you like."

The two men shook hands, and Mr Langthorne walked with him to the front door. He stood on the steps and allowed the cool air to beat upon his hot, flushed temples.

There was no doubt in his mind now that Barking was determined to play the game of blackmail. It seemed to him that his course was to consult a good lawyer and act upon his advice. Then he wondered what the full price might be that his tormentor required. Langthorne was a rich man. Twenty thousand pound, or even fifty thousand would have made no material difference to him. It would not mean a single servant less, or foregoing one of the many luxuries he enjoyed, but his common sense told him that the demands of the blackmailer, when once conceded, grew rather than diminished. Yet Barking had been brought up in poverty; a sum like £10,000 would be a fortune to him. Would he take it and leave the country? It was a possible solution.

He turned into the house, a worn, miserable man. This had been his sanctuary. Now his wife's suspicions were aroused, maybe his daughter's. What lies would he have to tell in order to put them off the painful subject?

He bitterly regretted that a morning of acute agony had wrung from him so unhappy an admission as he had made.

"And all this in less than twenty-four hours," he repeated to himself, as he sat down in the library. "And God only knows what the next few hours may bring."

He took up the 'Times.' Then he put it down again. There were the evening papers too. He shuddered as he looked at them. Perhaps in those sheets lay the story of his crime. By this time the discovery might have been made. There was no guarantee of the truth of Barkings story, or of his protestations as regards his safety. "Unless some relief comes, this will drive me mad," he said.

Every man, however good he may be, has yet a better man dwelling in him, which is properly himself, but to whom he is often, alas! unfaithful—but this does not describe Mr Langthorne's case. His conscience was his one and sole tribunal. He was a man prepared to do right at all costs, so far as he himself was considered, but his very conscience bade him pause where it involved other people. Left to himself he would have surrendered and told the tale of his past in all its bitterness rather than suffer the indignity of being blackmailed, but the thought of his wife and daughter deterred him.

"Why cannot I bear the weight of this alone—why must my crime press on others?" he asked fiercely. "Is there no solution to this? Am I to drag on a miserable existence to a dishonoured grave?" Then another thought came into his head. "Why not end it all? One shot from a revolver—a few drops ——"

He rose to his feet with his heart beating quickly. The law could not follow him out into the Great Beyond. His wife and Edith—they would be rich. His blackmailer would get nothing. "I am not afraid of death God, the Judge of all, knows all, and he is just."

There was a medicine cupboard in the library. His affairs were all in perfect order. There would be the blow of his death and the consequent sorrow. He thought of this as he opened the little oaken cupboard and took out a bottle round which was a flaming red label "Poison."

He smiled grimly, as he handled it. "Yes, yes," he murmured, thoughtfully. "I must make it as easy for them as I can. Better to say I am suffering from sleeplessness."

He scribbled a note. He wished to convey the idea of an accident, and that death was caused by an overdose. He read the letter through calmly and nodded his approval. "That will do."

"Yes, it will be a great sorrow to them, but it saves them from a much greater one, did they only know. He was surprised at his own calmness now. "It will be regarded as another case of severe mental strain, with a verdict to correspond," he muttered.

"Now for it," he said. "Now for the great secret."

"Father!"

It was a terrified whisper; before he had time to turn round his daughter had seized the bottle. "Father! Father!" she could only sob, while she clung desperately to him.

(To be continued.)

Preferential Joe.

Among the lighter features of the "Elector," in its new form, is a song to the air of "John Anderson, My Jo," which ought to become popular at election time. It runs thus:—

Joe Chamberlain, my Jo, Joe,
When we were first acquent,
You were a rising Rad. Joe,
On great reforms intent.
But now you've turned Conservative,
And boss the Tory Show.
You're really quite phenomenal,
Joe Chamberlain, my Jo.

Joe Chamberlain, my Jo, Joe,
You uttered scathing words,
About the Land and Church, Joe,
And the wicked House of Lords.
On Education you were wont
To fulminate but oh!
You've swallowed every blessed word,
Joe Chamberlain, my Jo.

Joe Chamberlain, my Jo, Joe,
Before you turned a Knider,
And got the Empire on the brain,
You were a staunch Free trader.
But now you're in for Zollverein,
Protectionist—What, ho!
You're Mr Seddon—Armageddon,
Preferential Joe!