UNDER A CLOUD.

A THRILLING TALE OF HUMAN LIFE.

CHAPTER XLL. AT FAULT.

It was from no dread of the consequence likely to ensue that Malcolm Stratton paused with the burning paper in his hand. He knew that he had but to drop it into the clear fluid beneath, for this to burst out the roof, extending right across, and so into a dancing crater of blue and orange flames. He knew too, that the old woodwork with which the antique place was lined would rapidly catch fire, and that in a short time the chambers would be one roaring, fiery furnace, and the place be doomed before the means of extinction could arrive. He had no fear for self, for he felt that there would be time enough to escape if he wished to save his life. But he did not drop the blazing paper; letting it burn right to his fingers, and then crushing it in his hand.

"There is no reason," he muttered, as he turned slowly back to his room. "It would be madness now, there is nothing to conceal."

He sank into his chair, and sat back jump in-I'll ketch him for you.' thinking and trying to piece together all that had passed since the day when, full of life, joy, and eagerness, he was ready to hurry off to the church. But his long con- cab insight." finement, with neglect of self, and the weary hours he had passed full of agony and despair, had impaired his power of arranging matters in a calm, logical sequence, and he had to go twice to his bedroom to bathe his burning head.

At last he grew calmer, and felt able to look matters in the face. The great horror had passed away, and in so passing it had roused him to action. There was work to he settled in his own mind how that was to be done.

He must find Brettison at once; and the great question was: Where could he be?

Here was a grand difficulty at once. Where would a man like Brettison be likely to sojourn?-a man who ranged through the length and breadth of the on over the bridge into South London? country in pursuit of his specimen.

In an ordinary way. But what would he be doing now, and what had he done?

Stratton shuddered, and pictured a strange scene, one upon which he dare not dwell; and leaping up, he took matches and a candle with the intention of going to his friend's room to try and pick up the side of the well-bred but worn-out screw clew there; but by the time he reached his door he was face to face with the first help they had had that evening, entrance was impossible.

Taking the lamp he entered the bath closet to try the old door at the end: but this was firmly screwed up again, and unless he broke through one of the panels, entrance was impossible that way.

Stratton returned to his chair, hesitating to take so extreme a course; and sitting down he tried to think out a likely place for Brettison to have gone.

As he thought, he called to mind various places where he knew him to have stayed in the past; and selecting one at haphazard-an old world place in Kent-he determined to start for there at once, perfectly aware of the wildness of the scheme and how easily he might spend his life in such a chase, but there was nothing else to be done. He could trust no oneget no help. It must be his own work entirely. Brettison was master of his secret, and there could be no rest for him until the old man was found.

Stratton's mind was made up and he hastened off to the station, caught a train, and in two hours was down in the old village, with its quaint ivy-covered hostely and horse-trough ornamented with the mossy growth that dotted the boles of the grand old forest trees around.

The landlady met him with a smile of welcome which faded after his questions. Oh, yes, she remembered Mr. Brettison,

and his green tin candle-box and bright trowel very well. He was the gentleman who used to bring home weeds in his umbrella; but it was a long time since he had been down there. It was only a week ago that she was saying to her master how she wondered that that gentleman had not been down for so long. But wouldn't

he come in and have some refreshment? No. Stratton would not come in and have some refreshment, for he went back and interrupted me-when was it? Two cry of bitterness and rage.

to town instantly. ventures ; all carried out in the face of the should have been spared. All the hopes here before from time to time. Why have her father's wrath. Brettison, old friend, feeling of despair which racked him; and and disappointments of that weary time, you hidden from me like this?" to fresh exertions in the morning, despair | when that wretched convict came, all my | slowly, "Why have you come?" bidding him, in the darkness of the night, remorse, my battles with self, the struggles

give up, and accept his fate. In course of time, Stratton visited every for I should have been asleep. place in England that he could recall as one of Brettison's haunts, but always with the

way, he began to wander about town, Chance aided him at last; for one day | into vacancy. he had turned out of Fleet Street to go northward, and as he passed along the broad | "Could I, a self-murderer, assure myself ped out into the road to cross to the other God! I was spared from that." side, to an old bookseller's shop, where the man made a specialty of natural history he fancied that he heard a sound; but a "You know better, sir. Come, let us undervolumes. It was a shop where he and step faintly beating on the paving outside stand one another. I am reckless now." Brettison had often spent an hour picking seemed to accord with it, and he went on | "Yes," said Brettison coldly. out quaint works on their particular sub- musing again about Brettison, wondering . jects, and he was thinking that possibly the where he could be, and how he could conman might have seen Brettison and be able trive to keep hidden away from him as he to be within call to protect you, for what to give him some information, when there did. was the rattle of wheels, a loud shout, and

The driver yelled something at him in might be."

Stratton hardly heard it. He stood, rooted to the spot, gazing after the cab; for, in the brief moment, as he started away, he had caught sight of the pale, worn face of Brettison, whose frightened, scared gaze had met his. Then he passed without making a sign, and Stratton was gazing after the cab in speechless horror, for upon awkwardly placed that the driver half stood in his seat and rested his hands upon it with the reins, was a large, awkwardlooking deal box; evidently heavy, for the cab was tilted back and the shafts rose high, as if the balance was enough to hoist the horse from the pavement.

At last! And that scared look of the seat. pale-faced man, and the strange, heavy case on the cab-roof, with every suggestion of haste, while he stood there in the middle of the road as if a victim to nightmare, till the quickly driven vehicle was too far off

for him to read the number. Suddenly the power to move came back, and, dashing forward in the middle of the road, Stratton shouted to the man to stop.

"He won't stop-not likely," growled another cabman, who had seen Stratton's smoking his eastern water pipe. escape. "Shouldn't loaf across the-Here, sir," he cried suddenly, as a thought flashed across his brain. "Hi!guv'nor :

He whipped his horse up alongside of Stratton, who caught at the idea, and, seizing the side of the cab, sprang in, "Quick! Five shillings if you keep that

The wide road was open, and pretty free from vehicles, and the horse went fast, but the cab in which Brettison was seated had a goodstart, reached the cross street, and entered the continuation of that which he was pursuing. Stratton's man drove up as a number of vehicles were crowding to go east and west, and the flow of those from north and south was stopped by a stalwart policeman; while raging at the sudden

"All right, sir," came down through the do, a strange complication to solve; and little trap in the roof; "he'll let us go acrost directly, and I'll ketch up the cab in

They were not arrested much above a minute, but the interval was sufficient to give Brettison's cab a good start, and when leave was given to go, the case on the roof quite close. was invisible, and the question arose in Stratton's mind-which way had it gone?

He raised himself a little to peer over the horse's head, but he could see nothing, and turning round, he thrust up the

"Faster-faster !" he cried. "You mus overtake it. Faster!' "All right, sir," shouted the man hoarse-

ly; and crack! crack! went the long, heavy whip on one and then on the other between the shafts.

The result was a frantic plunge forward and though the driver dragged at and obstacle. Brettison's door was locked worked the bit savagely, the horse tore on again, and, without re-summoning the at a gallop for about fifty yards, with the cab swaying from side to side; then the tiny flash of equine fire died out, and the horse's knees gave way. Down it went with a crash. Stratton was dashed forward heavily against the curved splashboard, to which he clung and the next thing he saw was the driver rising from somewhere beside the horse, that lay quiet still now on it side, while shouts, the taces of people who crowded up, and the vehicles that passed on either side, all seemed dim, confused, and distant. Then bells of a curiously sharp, quick tone were ringing loudly in his ears.

> "Hurt, sir ?" "Yes-no; I think not. Quick, stop that cab," said Stratton huskily; but, as he spoke, he knew it was in a confused way, and that for his life he could not have explained what cab.

> "It's far enough off by this time, sir," said a voice beside him, "and if you ain't hurt, I am. Never went in training for a hacrobat. Here, Bobby, help us up with the fiery untamed steed. That's the seccun time he's chucked me over the roof. Wait a moment, sir, and I'll drive you on ; we his tare."

> "Too late," was all Stratton could think of then. "I could not overtake it now." And in a dim, misty way he seemed to be watching Brettison hurrying away with that heavy, awkward case which contain-

Yes, "he muttered with a shudder, "it nust be that."

CHAPTER XLII.

BY A RUSE.

years and more ago," sighed Stratton one the time glided on, with hope goading him all the madness and despair of the morning to conceal my crime -all-all spared to me;

A curious doubting sm:13 crossed his face | you come to take it now?" slowly at these thoughts; and, resting his same result; and then in a blind, haphazard | cheek upon his hand, with the light full upon his face, he gazed straight before him | heard or witnessed-that."

"How do I know that?" he thought. and pointed to the door on his left.

He looked sharply up and listened, for | "I had no such thoughts," he said.

"If we could only meet," he said, he sprang out of the way of a fast driven half aloud-" only stand face to face for ments, during which time he watched the hands again. I must go on to the end a regulator, I may make it gain a minute one short hour, how different my future other narrowly.

propose et Dieu dispose. We are all bub-

bles on the great stream of life." He haif started from his chair, listening again, for he felt convinced that he heard a sound outside his doors, and going across, he opened them softly and looked out, but the grim, ill-lit staircase and the hall below were blank and silent, and satisfied that he had been mistaken, he went back to his seat to begin musing again, till once more there was a faint sound, and as he listened he became conscious of a strange penetrating | for my actions." odor of burning.

Stratton's face grew ghastly with the sudden emotion that had attacked him, and for a few moments he sat trembling, and unable to stir from his seat.

"At last!" he said in a whisper: "at come for which he had longed and toiled | co once more began to scent the air of the so hard, he felt that the opportunity was about to slip away, for he would be unable to bear the encounter, if not too much prostrated by his emotion to rise from his

It was only a trick of the nerves, which passed off directly; and he rose then, firm and determined, to cross gently to first one and then the other door by his mantelpiece, where he stood, silent and intent, breathing deeply.

Yes; there was no doubt now: He was inhaling the penetrating, peculiar odor of strong tobacco; and at last Brettison must have returned, and be sitting there

Stratton drew softly back, as if afraid of being heard, though his steps were inaudible on the thick carpet, and he stood there thinking.

not answer my knock." And feeling now for years was to be my wife. Recollect your excitement-that I became alarmed, face with his friend.

A thought came directly, and it seemed pair. so childish in its simplicity that he smiled and was ready to give it up ; but it grew | that.' in strength and possiblity as he looked round and took from a table, where lay quite a little heap that had been thrust into my hopes were crushed, and-he fell." his letter box from time to time, four or five unopened circulars and foolscap missives, whose appearance told what they check, Stratton ground his teeth with were, and armed with these he opened his ed: door softly and passed out, drawing the outer door to, and then stole on tiptoe horror, distraught with the knowledge listened, almost as near as if I had been a downstairs and out into the dimly lit | that I was the murderer of her husband- | a participator in the little life drama which

> he said to himself, as he looked up and made her free." saw just a faint gleam of light at Brettison's

Stratton paused for a moment, and drew | defence, Stratton went on :-Brettison's door. Here he thrust in, one by my defense? one, three circulars, with a good deal of noise, through the letter-flap, gave the customary

side, as there was the click and grate of the | this?" latch, and the door was opened a little

the table, whereon the pipe stood burning | convict in my turn." slowly, while the unshaded lamp showed a dozen or so of freshly opened letters on | head fall upon his hand. the table, explaining their owner's visit

and, with a weary smile, came away from | it was mad, indeed." his place of defense.

"Your trick has succeeded, sir," he said come? I ought not to fear it now."

gasp, half-cry. singularly aged and bent since they had compelled to face them, and hear the old last stood face to face, "you have found man's reproaches, in horror lest they

me at last." Stratton's lips parted, but no sound dead, and no word to say in my defense. came; his emotion was too great,

sounds are heard outside these chambers- | discovered; but their imaginations had not even pistol shots."

" If I had drunk that when Guest came not struggle against my fate," he uttered a at last, looking upon me as a vile betrayer "Sit down! he said fiercely. "Why do minds for the reason of my despair, and This was an example of many such blind | night, " what an infinity of suffering I | you taunt me like this? You, have been | the cowardly act I had attempted to escape

"I have my reasons," said Brettison, was I not sorely tried? Surely, few

"You ask me that!" "Yes: You have hunted me for months prised that, stricken from my balance now, till my life has been worthless. Have as a man-a sane and thoughtful man-I

"Why should I take your life?"

Stratton could not suppress a shudder : ing man." highway-wishing that he could explain that I should have sunk into oblivion like but, as he saw the peculiar way in which The silence in the room was terrible for everything to Guest and bring other wits that-into a restful sleep, free from the the old man's eyes were fixed upon his, a what seemed an age before Brettison to his help, instead of fighting the weary cares I had been too cowardly to meet and feeling of resentment arose within him, stretched out his trembling hand and took battle in silence alone-he suddenly step- bear? No, no, no; it was not to be. Thank and his voice sounded strident and harsh that of the man before him. when he spoke again.

"Then, if you have any fear for your life, cling. you can call for help; that is, for someone we have to say must be for our ears alone." then he slowly withdrew his hand. Brettison did not answer for a few mo-

"I am not afraid, Malcolm," he said ; Brettison shook his head. passing, by no means complimentary; but I "No, he said, aloud, after a thoughtful and he seated himself calmly in his chair.

pause, "how can I say that? L'homme Then, motioning to another, he waited he said slowly, "and I have felt the until Stratton was seated.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I have been here from time to time to get my letters." "Why have you hidden yourself away?" cried Stratton fiercely.

"Ah! Why?" said Brettison, gazing at him thoughtfully from beneath his thick, gray eyebrows. "You want a reason? fight my own battle with all my strength," Well, I am old and independent, with a he said wearily. liking to do what I please. Malcolm Stratton, I am not answerable to any man

Stratton started up, and took a turn to and fro in the dusty room before throwing himself again in his chair, while the old man quietly took the long, snake like tube of his pipe in hand, examined the bowl to find it still alight, began to smoke with all last !" and, conscious that the time had | the gravity of a Mussulman, and the tobacsilent place.

"Forgive me," he said feebly ; "I was half mad."

"Yes." "How could I, crushed by the horror of having taken a fellow-creature's life, cursed

"Then have some pity on me."

by the knowledge that this man was-But you cannot know that." "Take it, boy, that I know everything," said the old man, resuming his seat.

"Pity for your folly? Yes." "Folly! You are right. I will take it that you know everything, and speak out now. Brettison-

a mighty effort he mastered his emotion. | door was open, that of your bath room me. I was in my room there, elate almost | but the angry tones startled me, and the beyond a man's power to imagine; in an- words grew so fierce-you neither of you

that Brettison might have been back before | that, two years before, my hopes had been | and was about to hurry round to your room, now unknown to him, he tried to think out dashed to the ground, and I had passed when a few words came to my ears quite some plan by which he could get face to through a time of anguish that almost plainly, and, in spite of its being dishenorunhinged my brain, so great was my des- able, I, in my dread that you were in dan-

"Yes," said Brettison, "I recall all drawn to the thin loose panel at the end.

face with the knowledge that once more piteous position in which you were placed.

Stratton ceased speaking, and sat gazing | all. wildly before him into the past. It was in a husky whisper that he resum-

I stood there, Brettison, mad with that my hand, wet with his blood, could ensued. There, I was with you in it all, boy "He will not notice that it is so late," never again clasp hers, even though I had |-swayed by your emotions, but ready to

window, where the drawn curtain was not | ing strength of mind and speech, now that | proposals, and as proud when I saw your he was at last speaking out openly in his determination to sacrific your desires and

a long breath before attempting to act the "It was horrible-horrible! There it gratification, must have meant finally a Into one of the station yards, or straight part upon which he had decided. Then, is, all back again before my eyes, and I feel perfect hell for the woman you loved. going on some twenty or thirty yards, he again the stabbing, sickening pain of the Then, in the midst of my excitement, there turned and walked back with a heavy, bullet wound which scored my shoulder, came the final struggle, as you nobly decided, business-like step, whistling softly mingled with the far worse agony of my determined to give the scoundrel up to the as he went, right to the entry, where, brain. I had killed her husband-the fate he deserved so well. It was as sudden still whistling, he ascended the stairs to escaped convict; and, above the feeling to me as it was horrible. I saw the flash his door, thrust in and drew out a letter- | that all was over now, that my future was of the shot, and felt a pang of physical pain, packet thrice, making the metal flap of the | blasted, came the knowledge that, as soon | as, through the smoke, I dimly saw you box rattle, gave a sharp double knock, and as I called for help, as soon as the police stagger. Then, while I stood there paralyzthen crossed the landing and went the few investigated the matter, my life was not ed, I saw you fly at him as he raised his steps, whistling still, along the passage to worth a month's purchase. For what was pistol to fire again, the struggle for the

Brettison sat in silence, smoking calmly. "That this man had made his existence double knock, went on whistling softly, known to me, shown by his presence that and waited a moment or two; and his supposed death was a shadow-that, then, as he heard a faint sound within, after his desperate plunge into the sea, he gave another sharp double rap, as a post- had managed to swim ashore and remain in there before me he lay, with the blood man would who had a registered letter, or hiding; the dark night's work and the slowly staining the carpet, on the spot a packet too big to pass through the slit. | belief that he had fallen shot, being his | where I had so often sat. The ruse was successful, and with beating | cloak; and the search for the body of a heart Stratton stood waiting a little on one | convict soon being at an end. You see all

> Brettison bowed his head. "Think, then, of my position; put

That was enough. Quick as lightening, yourself in my place. What jury-what in face to face with Brettison, who started an accident? It seemed to me too plain. back in alarm and was followed up by his | The world would say that I slew him in friend, who closed both doors carefully, and | my disappointment and despair. Yes, I

when I was forced to admit them, looking, "Well," continued Brettison, who looked I suppose, a maniac; for I felt one then, should discover the wretched convict lying Nature could bear no more. My wound "It will be an easy task," said Brettison, robbed me of all power to act, and I with a piteous look at Stratton. "No fainted-to come to, fearing that all was led them astray. They had found my There was an intense bitterness in those | wound and the pistol. It was an attempt Such a chance did not come in Stratton's last words which made the young man at suicide. Poor Guest recalled the first shrink, and as Brettison went on, "I shall | -I do not wonder. And they went away of the woman I loved, and sought in their I make no excuses to you now; but men in our generation have stood in such a dilemma. Can you feel surshould have acted as I did, and dug for myself a pit of such purgatory as makes "To save your own. You believe I me feel now, as I sit here making my confession, how could I have gone through He paused before uttering the last word, so terrible a crisis and yet be here alive, and able to think and speak like a suffer-

"Hah !" Malcolm Stratton's low cry. It was that of a man who had long battled with the waves of a great storm, and who had

at last found something to which he could There was another long and painful Commuter-Yes, it loses a minute or two pause before Stratton spoke again, and a week.

pariah among my kind."

"No," he said ; "we must never clasp

might have acted much the same." Stratton looked at him eagerly.

"Yes; my great fault in you is that you should not have trusted me."

There was again a long silence before Stratton spoke.

"I felt that I was alone in the world to

"And that strength was so much weakness, boy. Mine, weak as it is, has proved

stronger far." Stratton looked at him wonderingly. "Yes; how much agony you might have

been spared, perhaps, if you had come to me. But I don't know-I don't know. You acted as you thought best ; I only did the same, and, not knowing all your thoughts, I fear that I have erred." Stratton sat thinking for a few moments,

and then, raising his eyes : "I have told you all. It is your turn

Brettison bowed his head. "Yes," he said, "it is better that I

should speak and tell you." But he was silent for some time first, sitting back with the tips of his fingers

joined, as if collecting his thoughts. "You remember that morning-how I came to say good-by?"

"Yes, of course." "I started, and then found that I had forgotten my lens. I hurried back, and had just entered my room when I heard He paused-he could not speak. But by voices plainly in yours. My book-closet "Now think, and find some excuse for must have been ajar. I did not want to hear, "If I go," he said to himself, "he will other hour the woman whom I had idolized | thought of how you raised your voices in

> "There I was enchained; I could not re-"Then that man came, and I was face to | treat, for I had heard so much of the My mind filled in the blanks, and I grasped

ger, hurried into the book-closet and was

Brettison paused to wipe his brow, wet with a dew begotten by the agony of his recollections, before he continued :

"I stayed there then, and watched and cry out upon you angrily when I saw you The old man bent his head; and, gather- ready to listen to the wretch's miserable make bold stand against what, for your weapon, which you struck up as he drew

> "Yes," said Stratton, "I struck up the pistol as he drew the trigger; but who would believe-who would believe?"

"And then I saw him reel and fall, and

He wiped his brow again, while Stratton rested his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands, as if to hide from his gaze the scene his friend conjured up from

"Malcolm Stratton," continued the old Stratton seized and dragged it wide, to step judge would believe my story that it was man, rising to lay his hand upon the other's head, "you were to me as a son. As a father loves the boy born unto him, I swear I felt toward you. I looked upon you as then stood gazing at the bent, gray-headed, know they might have called it manslaugh- the son of my childless old age, and I was weak old man, who had shrunk back behind | ter, but I must have taken his place-a | standing there gazing at you, face to face with the herror of that scene, while, with Stratton ceased speaking, and let his crushing weight, there came upon me the knowledge that, come what might, I must "Put yourself in my place, I say. summon help. That help meant police; Think of yourself as being once more young | and, in imagination, I saw myself sending Stratton did not speak, but gazed and strong-the lover of one whom, in a you to the dock, where you would perhaps, fiercely at the trembling old man, who look- few short hours, you would have clasped from the force of the circumstances as you ed wildly round as if for some weapon to as your wife, and then try and find excuse have told me you might-stand in peril defend himself, but shook his head sadly, for my mad action-for I know now that of your life. But still I felt that there was nothing otherwise that could be done; and, "Yes, mad indeed," muttered Brettison. slowly shrinking back, I was on my way "Well, I need say no more. You know to perform this act of duty, when I heard may ketch 'em yet. Don't do a man out of quietly. 'Seventy-two! Has the time so much, you must know the rest. They a low, deep groan. That drew me back, came to me, fearing I had been killed-rob- and, looking into your room once more, a Stratton uttered a harsh sound-half- bed and murdered. They found me at last, mist rose between me and the scene, my senses reeled, and I slowly sank down,

fainting, on the floor." (TO BE CONTINUED.)

She Had Him Guessing.

The intellectual young lady looked over her glasses at the average young man and asked, suddenly:

How oid would you take me to be? I wonder, said he to himself, whether she wants to be rated five years younger on the score of her looks, or five years older on account of her brains? Darn these advanced women, anyhow!

One Habit Corrected.

"I don't know whether I will be able to break him of all the habits I do not like," said the engaged girl, "but the first one I stopped for him was just as easy." "Wnat habit was that?" asked the other

"The habit he had of proposing to me two or three times a week.

A Wall Street Character.

Jack-Going to the fancy ball? George-Can't afford a costume. Got a threadbare coat? Of course.

And an old pair of baggy trousers? Certainly. Well, put them on, and go as a million.

Where Time Is Valuable.

Friend-Your watch is a trifle slow, isn't

That's easily fixed. But I am afraid that if I touch the or two a week, and then some day I'll arrive at the stration too early for the "I have put myself in your place often," | train.