

THE THREAD OF LIFE;

OR,
SUNSHINE AND SHADE.

CHAPTER X.—SHUFFLING IT OFF.

The day had been an eventful one for Hugh Massinger: the most eventful and pregnant of his whole history. As long as he lived, he could never possibly forget it. It was indeed a critical turning-point for three separate lives—his own, and Elsie's and Winifred Meysie's. For, as Hugh had walked that morning, down the rose-embowered lane in the Squire's grounds with Winifred, he had asked the frightened, blushing girl, in simple and straightforward language, without any preliminary, to become his wife. His shy fish was fairly hooked at last, he thought now: no need for daintily playing his catch any longer; it was but a question, as things stood, of reel and of landing net. The father and mother, whose important accessories, were pretty safe in their way too. He had sounded them both by unobtrusive methods, with dexterous plummets of oblique inquiry, and had gauged their profoundest depths of opinion with tolerable accuracy, as to settlements and other ante-nuptial preconcerts of marriage. For what is the use of catching an heiress on your own rod, if your heiress's parents, upon whose testamentary disposition in the last resort her entire market value really depends, look askance with eyes of obvious disfavour upon your personal pretensions as their future son-in-law? Hugh Massinger was keen enough sportsman in his own line to make quite sure of his expected game before irrevocably committing himself to duck-shot cartridge. He was confident he knew his ground now; so, with a bold face and a modest assurance, he ventured, in a few plain and well-chosen words, to command his suit, his hand, and his heart to Winifred Meysie's favourable attention.

It was a great sacrifice, and he felt it as such. He was positively throwing himself away upon Winifred. If he had followed his own crude inclinations alone, like a romantic schoolboy, he would have waited for ever and ever for his cousin Elsie. Elsie was indeed the one true love of his youth. He had always loved her, and he would always love her. "Twas foolish, perhaps, to indulge overmuch in these personal preferences, but after all it was very human; and Hugh acknowledged regretfully in his own heart that he was not entirely raised in that respect above the average level of human weakness. Still, a man, however humane, must not be governed by impulse alone. He must judge calmly, deliberately, impersonally, disinterestedly of his own future, and must act for the best in the long run by the light of his own final and judicial opinion. Now Winifred was without doubt a very exceptional and eligible chance for an briefless barrister; your sucking poet doesn't get such chances of an undisputed heiress every day of the week, you may take your affidavit. If he let her slip by on sentimental grounds, and waited for Elsie—poor dear old Elsie—heaven only knows how long they might both have to be single. It was a foolish thing to say the truth, face with naked facts. The naked—let her know she must—would out another husband and somewhere for her to go on earning her own livelihood, in maiden meditation fancy free, for the remaining term of her natural existence. Hugh could never help ending up a subject, however unpleasant, even in his own mind, with a poetical tag; it was a trick of manner his soul had caught from the wonted peroration of his political leaders in the first editorial column of that exalted print, the *Morning Telephone*. So he made up his mind; and he proposed to Winifred.

The girl's heart gave a sudden bound, and the red blood flushed her somewhat pallid cheek with hasty roses as she listened to Hugh's graceful and easy avowal of the profound and unfeigned love that he professed her. She thought of the poem Hugh had read her aloud in his sonorous tones the evening before—much virtuous in a judiciously selected passage of poetry, well marked in delivery;

"He does not love me for my birth,
Nor for my hands so broad and fair:
He loves me for my own true worth,
And that is well," said Lady Clare.

That was how Hugh Massinger loved her, she was quite sure. Had he not trembled and hesitated to ask her? Her bosom fluttered with a delicious fluttering; but she cast her eyes down, and answered nothing for a brief space. Then her heart gave her courage to look up once more, and to murmur back, in answer to his pleading look: "Hugh, I love you." And Hugh, carried away not ungraciously by the impulse of the moment, felt his own heart thrill responsive to hers in real earnest, and in utter temporary forgetfulness of poor betrayed and abandoned Elsie. They walked back to the Hall together next minute, whispering low, in the fool's paradise, indeed, for those two poor lovers, whose wooing set out under such evil auspices.

But when Hugh had left his landed prey at the front door of the square-built manor-house, and strolled off by himself towards the village inn, the difficulty about Elsie for the first time began to stare him openly in the face in all its real and horrid magnitude. He would have to confess and to explain to Elsie. Worse still, for a man of his mettle and his sensitiveness, he would have to apologize for and excuse his own conduct. That was unendurable—that was ignominious—that was even absurd. His virility kicked at it. There is something essentially insulting and degrading to one's manhood in having to tell a girl you've pretended to love her—that you only care for her to unsex one's self. It is practically quite otherwise to the man that is in himself, not for Elsie. He pitied his own sad plight most sincerely. But then, there was poor Elsie to think of. No use in the world in blinking that. Elsie loved him very, very dearly. True, they had never been engaged to one another—so great is the love of consistency in man, that even alone in his own mind Hugh continued to hug that translucent fiction; but she had been very

fond of him, undeniably fond of him, and he had perhaps from time to time, by overt acts, unduly encouraged the display of her fondness. It gratified his vanity and his sense of his own power over women to do so: he could make them love him—few men more easily—and he liked to exercise that dangerous faculty on every suitable object that flitted across his changeable horizon. The man with a mere passion for making conquests affords no serious menace to the world's happiness; but the man with an innate gift for calling forth wherever he goes all the deepest and truest instincts of a woman's nature, is—when he abuses his power—the most deadly, terrible, and cruel creature known in our age to civilized humanity. And yet he is not always deliberately cruel; sometimes, as in Hugh Massinger's case, he almost believes himself to be good and innocent.

He had warned Winifred to whisper nothing for the present to Elsie about this engagement of theirs. Elsie was his cousin, he said—his only relation—and he would dearly like to tell her the secret of his heart himself in private. He would see her that evening and break the news to her. "Why break it?" Winifred had asked in doubt, all unconscious. And Hugh, a strange suppressed smile playing uneasily about the corners of his thin lips, had answered with guileless alacrity of speech: "Because Elsie's like a sister to me, you know, Winifred; and sisters always to some extent resent the bare idea of their brothers marrying."

For as yet Elsie herself suspected nothing. It was best, Hugh thought, she should suspect nothing. That was a cardinal point in his easy-going practical philosophy of life. He never went half-way to meet trouble. Till Winifred had accepted him, why worry poor dear Elsie's gentle little soul with what was, after all, a mere remote chance, a contingent possibility? He would first make quite sure, by actual trial where he stood with Winifred; and then—and then, like a thunderbolt, from a clear sky, he might let the whole truth burst in full force at once upon poor lonely Elsie's devoted head. Meanwhile, with extraordinary cleverness and care, he continued to dissemble. He never made open love to Winifred before Elsie's face; on the contrary, he kept the whole small comedy of his relations with Winifred so skillfully concealed from her feminine eyes, that to the very last moment Elsie never even dreamt of her pretty pupil as a possible rival, or regarded her in any other conceivable light than as the nearest of friends and the dearest of sisters. Whenever Hugh spoke of Winifred to Elsie at all, he spoke of her lightly, almost slightly, as a nice little girl, in her childish way—though much too blued—with a sort of distant bread-and-butterish schoolroom approbation, which wholly misled and hoodwinked Elsie as to his real intentions. And whenever he spoke of Elsie to Winifred, he spoke of her jestingly, with a good-humored, unmeaning, brotherly affection that made the very notion of his ever contemplating marriage with her seem simply ridiculous. She was to him indeed as the deceased wife's sister is in the eye of the law to the British widower. With his easy, off-hand London cleverness, he had misled and deceived both Winifred and Elsie, which could no longer be denied. Would Elsie in her ultimate consequence at his conduct to Elsie, when she learned the whole truth, refuse to marry him?

Nonsense—nonsense. No cause for alarm. He had never really been engaged to Elsie—he had said so to her face a thousand times. If Elsie chose to misinterpret his kind attentions, bestowed upon her solely as his one remaining cousin and kinswoman, the only other channel for the blood of the Massingers, surely Winifred would never be so foolish as to fall blindly into Elsie's self imposed error, and to hold him to a bargain he had over and over again expressly repudiated. He was a barrister, and he knew his ground in these matters. Chitty on Contract lays it down as an established principle of English law that free consent of both parties forms a condition precedent and essential part of the very existence of a compact of marriage.

With such transparent internal sophisms and another his own conscience; for every man always at least pretends to keep up appearances in his private relations with that domestic censor. But as evening came on, cigarette in mouth, he strolled round after dinner, by special appointment, to meet Elsie at the big poplar. They often met there, these warm summer nights; and on this particular occasion, a participating trouble, Hugh had definitely arranged with Elsie beforehand to come to him by eight at the accustomed trysting-place. The Meysies and Winifred had gone out to dinner at a neighboring vicarage; but Elsie had stopped at home on purpose, on the hasty plea of some slight passing headache. Hugh had specially asked her to wait and meet him. Better get it all over at once, he thought to himself, in his short-sighted wisdom—like the measles or the chicken-pox—and know straight off exactly where he stood in his new position with these two women.

Women were the greatest nuisance in life. For his own part, now he came to look the thing squarely in the face, he really wished he was well quit of them all for good and ever.

He was early for his appointment; but by the tree he found Elsie, in her pretty white dress, already waiting for him. His heart gave a jump, a pleased jump, as he saw her sitting there before her time. Dear, dear Elsie; she was very, very fond of him! He would have given worlds to fling his arms his bosom and kiss her tenderly. He would have given worlds, but not his reverberatory chances in the Whitestrand property. Worlds don't count; the entire fee-simple of Mars and Jupiter would fetch nothing in the real estate market. He was bound by contract to Winifred now, and he must do his best to break it gently to Elsie.

stepped up and kissed her quietly on the forehead, and took her hand in his like a brother. Elsie let it lie in her own without a remonstrance. They rose and walked in lovers gait along the bank together. His heart sank within him at the hideous task he had next to perform—nothing less than to break poor Elsie's heart; for her. If only he could have shuffled out of it sideways anyhow! But shuffling was impossible. He hated himself; and he loved Elsie. Never till that moment did he know how he loved her.

This would never do! He was feeling like a fool. He crushed down the love sternly in his heart, and began to talk about indifferent subjects—the wind, the river, the rose-show at the vicarage. But his voice trembled, betraying him still against his will; and he could not refrain from stealing sidelong looks at Elsie's dark eyes now and again, observing how beautiful she was, after all, in a rare and exquisite type of beauty. Winifred's blue eyes and light brown hair, Winifred's small mouth and moulded nose, Winifred's inquisitive and bashful blush, cheap as dirt in the matrimonial lottery. She had but a doll-like, Lowther Arcade style of prettiness. Maid-enly as she looked, one twist more of her nose, one shade lighter in her hair, and she would become simply bar-maidenly. But Elsie's strong and powerful, earnest face, with its serious lips and its long black eyelashes, its profound pathos and its womanly dignity, its very irregularity and faultiness of outline, pleased him ten thousand times more than all your baby-faced beauties of the conventional, stereotyped, ballroom pattern. He looked at her long and sighed often. Must he really break her heart for her? At last he could restrain that unruly member, his tongue, no longer. "Elsie," he cried, spouting her full in a genuine outburst of spontaneous admiration, "I never in my life saw any one anywhere one-half so beautiful and graceful as you are!"

Elsie smiled a pleased smile. "And yet," she murmured, with a half-malicious, teasing tone of irony, "we're not engaged, Hugh, after all, you remember."

Her words came at the very wrong moment; they brought the hot blood at a rush into Hugh's cheek. "No," he answered coldly, with a sudden revulsion and a spasmodic effort; "we're not engaged—nor ever will be, Elsie!"

Elsie turned round upon him with sudden abruptness in blank bewilderment. She was not angry; she was not astonished; she was simply failed altogether to take in his meaning. It had always seemed to her so perfectly natural, so simply obvious that she and Hugh were sooner or later to marry one another; she had always regarded Hugh's frequent reminder that they were not engaged as such a mere playful warning against too much precipitancy; she had always taken it for granted so fully and unreservedly that whenever Hugh was rich enough to provide for a wife he would tell her so plainly, and carry out the implied engagement between them—that this sudden announcement of the exact opposite meant to her ears less than nothing. And now, when Hugh uttered those cruel, crushing, annihilating words, "Nor ever will be, Elsie," she couldn't possibly take in their reality at the first blush, or believe in her own heart that he really intended anything so wicked, so merciless, so unnatural.

"Nor ever will be!" she cried, incredulous. "Why, Hugh, Hugh—I don't understand you."

Hugh steeled his heart with a violent strain to answer back in one curt, killing sentence: "I mean it, Elsie; I'm going to marry Winifred."

Elsie gazed back at him in speechless surprise. "Going to marry Winifred?" she echoed at last vaguely, after a long pause, as if the words conveyed no meaning to her mind. "Going to marry Winifred? To whom?" "To Hugh, did you really and answered outright, "going to marry Winifred and glassy eye; "and morning," Hugh Elsie; so I mean to marry her." "Hugh!"

She uttered only that one short word in a tone of awful and unspeakable agony. But her bent brows, her pallid face, her husky voice, her startled attitude, said more than a thousand words, however wild, could possibly have said for her. She took it in dimly and imperfectly now; she began to grasp what Hugh was talking about; but as yet she could not understand to the full all the man's profound and unfathomable infamy. She looked at him feebly for some word of explanation. Surely he must have some deep and subtle reason of his own for this astonishing act and fact of furtive treachery. Some horrible combination of adverse circumstances, about which she knew and could know nothing, must have driven him against his will to this incredible solution of an insoluble problem. He could not of his own mere motion have proposed to Winifred. She looked at him hard; he quailed before her scrutiny.

"I love you, Elsie," he burst out with an irresistible impulse at last, as she gazed through and through him from long black lashes.

Elsie laid her hand on his shoulder blindly. "You love me," she murmured, "Hugh, Hugh, you still love me?"

"I always loved you, Elsie," (Hugh answered bitterly with a sudden pang of abject remorse; "and as long as I live I shall always love you")

"And yet—you are going to marry Winifred!"

"Elsie! You and I were never engaged," she turned round upon him fiercely with hollow excuse! "Never engaged!" she cried, aghast. "You mean it, Hugh—you mean that mockery?—And I, who would have given up my life for love of you!"

He tried to assume a calm judicial tone. "Let us be reasonable, Elsie," he said, with an attempt at ease, "and talk this matter over without sentiment or hysterics. You knew very well I was too poor to marry; you knew I always said we were only cousins; you knew I had my way in life to make. You could never have thought I seriously dreamt of marrying you."

Elsie looked up at him with a scared white face. That Hugh should descend to such meanness, she moaned out in a dazed voice. "All—'but, Elsie, I've said it over and over a thousand times before."

She gazed back at him like a stone. "Ah, yes; but till to-day," she murmured slowly, "you never, never meant it."

He sat down, unmanned, on the grass by the bank. She seated herself by his side, mechanically as it were, with her hand on his arm, and looked straight in front of her with a vacant stare at the angry water. It was growing dark. The shore was dark, and the sea, and the river. Everything was dark and black and gloomy around her. She laid her hand one moment in her own. "Hugh!" she cried, turning towards him with appealing pathos, you don't mean it now; you will never mean it. You're only saying it to try and prove me. Tell me it's that! You're yourself still. O Hugh, my darling, you can never mean it!"

Her words burnt into his brain like liquid fire: the better self within him glowed and faltered; but he crushed it down with an iron heel. The demon of avarice held his sordid soul. "My child," he said, with a tender infection in his voice as he said it, "we must understand one another. I do seriously intend to marry Winifred Meysie."

"Why?"

There was a terrible depth of suppressed earnestness in that sharp short *why*, wrung out of her by anguish, as of a woman who asks the reason of her death-warrant. Hugh Massinger answered it slowly and awkwardly with cumbersome round-about, self-exculpating verbosity. As for Elsie, she sat like a statue and listened; rigid and immovable, she sat there still; while Hugh, for the very first time in her whole experience, revealed the actual man he really was before her appalled and horrified and speechless presence. He talked of his position, his prospects, his abilities. He talked of journalism, of the bar, of promotion. He talked of literature, of poetry, of fame. He talked of money, and its absolute need to man and woman in these latter days of ours. He talked of Winifred, of Whitestrand, and of the Meysie manor-house. "It'll be best in the end for us both, you know, Elsie," he said argumentatively, in his foolish rigmarole, mistaking her silence for something like unwilling acquiescence. "Of course I shall still be very fond of you, as I've always been fond of you—like a cousin only—and I'll be a brother to you now as long as I live; and when Winifred and I are really married, and I live here at Whitestrand, I shall be able to do a great deal more for you, and help you by every means in my power, and introduce you freely into our own circle, on different terms, you know, where you'll have chances of meeting—well, suitable persons. You must see yourself it's the best thing for us both. The idea of two penniless people like you and me marrying one another in the present state of society is simply ridiculous."

She heard him out to the bitter end, revealing the naked deformity of his inmost nature, though her brain reeled at it, without one passing word of reproach or dissent. Then she said in an icy tone of utter horror: "Hugh!"

"Yes, Elsie."
"Is that all?"
"That is all."
"And you mean it?"
"I mean it."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, before you kill me outright, Hugh, Hugh! is it real; true? Are you really like that? Do you really mean it?"

"I really mean to marry Winifred."

Elsie clasped her two hands on either side of her head, as if to hold it together from bursting with her agony. "Hugh," she cried, "it's foolish, I know, but I ask you once more, before it's too late, in sight of Heaven, I ask you solemnly, are you seriously in earnest? Is that what you're made of? Are you going to desert me? To desert and betray me?"

"I don't know what you mean," Hugh answered stonily, rising as if to go—for he could stand it no longer. "I've never been engaged to you. I always told you so. I owe you nothing. And now I mean to marry Winifred."

With a cry of agony, she burst wildly away from him. She saw it all now; she understood to the full the cruelty and baseness of the man's inmost underlying nature. Fair outside; but false, false, false hard core! Yet even so, she could scarcely have believed the faith of a lifetime fought the universe—he to cast her off! Hugh in all his selfishness! He to turn upon her, the man for a Winifred and a manor house! Oh, the guilt and the sin of it! Her head reeled and swam round deliriously. She hardly knew what she felt or did. Mad with agony, love, and terror, she rushed away headlong from his polluted presence—not from Hugh, but from this fallen idol. He saw her white dress disappearing fast through the deep gloom in the direction of the poplar tree, and he groped his way after her, almost as mad and ashamed at the ruin he had visibly and instantly wrought in the fabric of that trustful girl's whole being.

One moment she fled and stumbled in the dark along the grassy path toward the roots of the poplar. Then he caught a glimpse of her for a second, dimly silhouetted in the faint starlight, a wan white figure with outstretched arms against the black horizon. She was poised, irresolute, on the gnarled roots. It was but for the twinkling of an eye that he saw her; next instant, a splash, a gurgle, a shriek of terror, and he beheld her borne wildly away, a helpless burden, by that fierce current towards the breakers that glistened white and roared hoarsely in their savage joy on the bar of the river.

In her agony of disgrace, she had fallen, rather than thrown herself in. As she stood there, undecided, on the slippery roots, with all her soul burning within her, her head swimming and her eyes dim, she had missed her foothold on the smooth worn stump, slimy with lichen, and raising her hands as if to balance herself, half unconsciously, on the tender mercies of the rushing stream. When she returned for a moment, a little later, to life and waters, eddying and seething in mad conflict round her faint numb form. Strange choking noises thundered in her ear. A What she drank in with her gasp was not air, but water—salt brackish water, an overwhelming flood of it. Then she sank again, and was dimly aware of the cold chill ocean floating around her on every side. She took a deep gulp, and with it sighed out her sense of life and action. Hugh was lost to her, and it was all over. She could die now.

She had nothing to live for. There was no Hugh; and she had not killed herself.

Those two dim thoughts were the last she knew as her eyes closed in the rushing current: there had never been a Hugh; and she had fallen in by accident.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

SEA MONSTERS.

Denzens of the Sea as Yet Unknown—
Strange Sea Monsters.

A few years ago a sea monster, corresponding in appearance to the famed sea serpent as often described (which is not saying that the creature was a serpent), was seen by Capt. Austin Cooper and the officers and crew of the *Carlisle Castle*, then bound for Melbourne. A description and sketch of the monster appeared in the *Argus*.

On Sept. 11, at 10½ A. M., the third officer of the British steamship *Nestor*, then in the Malacca Straits, announced a shoal. Surprised to find a shoal in such a well-known track, Capt. Webster watched the object and found that it was in motion, keeping up the same speed as the ship and retaining about the same distance as when first seen. "The shape of the creature," said the Captain (in an affidavit before Donald Spence, acting Law Secretary to the Danish Supreme Court at Shanghai), "I would compare to that of a gigantic frog. The head, of a pale, yellowish color, was about twelve feet in length, and six feet of the crown was above the water. I tried in vain to make out the mouth," he proceeded, "but the mouth may have been below water. The head was immediately connected with the body without any indication of a neck. The body was about forty-five or fifty feet long and of an oval shape perfectly smooth, but there may have been a slight ridge along the spine. The back rose some five feet above the surface. An immense tail 150 feet in length, rose a few inches above the water. This tail I saw distinctly from its junction with the body to its extremity. It seemed cylindrical, with a very slight taper, and I estimate its diameter at four feet. The body and tail were marked with alternate bands or stripes, black and pale yellow in color. The stripes were distinct to the very extremity of the tail. I cannot say whether the tail terminated in a fin or not. The creature possessed no fins or paddles so far as we could perceive. I cannot say if it had legs. It appeared to progress by means of an undulatory motion of the tail in vertical plane."

It may be remembered that in 1873 a monstrous cuttlefish was encountered by two fishermen in Conception Bay, Newfoundland. When attacked, the creature threw its long arms across the fisherman's boat, which it appeared to regard as a veritable object of prey; but one of the fishermen out of the tentacle with an axe, on which the cephalopod withdrew, apparently regarding the man's action as unfair. This tentacle was twenty-five feet in length; and as the fishermen considered that it was out off fully ten feet from the body, the entire length of the tentacle must have been about thirty-five feet. They estimated the body at sixty feet in length and five feet in diameter.

In 1861 the French war steamer *Alceste* encountered a monster cuttle at sea about 120 miles northeast of Tenerife. The crew got a nose around the body, but unfortunately it slipped to the tail, which it pulled off. The weight of this little bit of the creature was found to be over forty pounds. It was estimated that the body was 60 feet long and the weight not less than 4,000 pounds.

The most remarkable account of a sea monster of this kind was that given by the Captain and officers of the *Pauline*. It was sworn to on oath by George Drevier, the Captain; Horatio Thompson, chief mate; John Landells, second mate, and by the steward and a seaman.

On July 8 we observed three large sperm whales, one of which was gripped round the body by two turns of what appeared to be a huge serpent. The head and tail appeared to have a length beyond the coils of about thirty feet, and a girth of eight or nine feet. The creature whirled the whale round and round for about fifteen minutes and then suddenly dragged it to the bottom head first.

Five days later the same creature, or a similar one, was seen about two hundred yards and heaving, darting along the surface, head and tail out of the water. Only Capt. Drevier and one of the seamen saw this. But a few minutes later, the Captain, raise its neck and head above the water to a height which they estimated at sixty feet.

Some ten years ago Commandant Villeneuve and the officers of the French man-of-war the *Lendro* saw a creature corresponding in appearance with the sea serpent raised rapidly along, the head slightly above the water, and with a sort of mane streaming backward, while the back of a long body could be seen under the water. A creature exactly answering to this description was seen by Major James Harding, then an officer in the King of Vigi's army, passing within a few yards of his canoe, and swimming towards a small island outside Suva Bay, known as the home of the Big Snake. Captain the Hon. George Hope of the British ship *Fly*, when in the Gulf of California, the sea being unusually calm and transparent saw at the bottom a large marine animal with the head and general figure of an alligator, but the neck much longer, and with four large paddles instead of legs.

My own belief is that some, at any rate, of the stories relating to supposed sea serpents are to be explained by the theory that there still exist creatures such as Capt. Hope described—long-necked reptilian forms akin to the *Dolichodeiros* of former ages. Such creatures would present all the characteristics recognized in the so-called sea serpents. Their paddles would enable them to advance without perceptible undulation (which the sea serpent has been observed to do, and which no actual serpentine creature could do). The great objection to this view has been that we find no fossil plesiosaurs in tertiary strata. But this objection loses its force when we note that the chimera (a connecting link between the sharks and the sturgeons) is closely related to forms existing in the secondary era, while a trace of any of those forms has been found in the intermediate strata down to our own time. The chimera certainly existed, or it has been seen captured, and is accordingly a fact of the present century. It is argued that the sea serpent is a modern being.