

‘The Gipsy-Boy’

Colonel Dorman, who commanded the – th regiment, stationed at Hounslow at the period when the principal incidents of this narrative took place, had acquired the hateful reputation of a Martinet, without any of the French general’s excellencies, either as a soldier or as a man, to extenuate the failing which rendered him obnoxious to his brother officers, and a terror to his gallant troops. He had entered early into the army; – his father had exerted all the interest he could command in favour of his son; and at the age of eight and twenty, Colonel Dorman was possessed of that rank and authority which had better become the hoary locks of a veteran than the youth of him who knew not how to distribute justice with an impartial hand, nor to discriminate between the good and the indifferent. Colonel Dorman about the same time married a beautiful young lady, his junior by three or four years; and he loved her passionately; but her haughty disposition, her insupportable pride, her love of ostentation, and her contempt of all that was not connected with high birth and riches, – these faults were calculated to alienate her friends from her, and to render her an object of fear rather than love to her dependents.

It was generally rumoured that she had been forced to unite her hand to that of Colonel Dorman against her own inclinations; – it had been reported that the affections of her heart were, in early youth, possessed by an individual whose suit had been rejected by her parents. Fame had been busy with the collateral incidents and extravagances of a love tale. Helen had in vain combatted against the stern resolves of an unrelenting father, but the burning tears of sorrow – the agonising sighs of disappointed affection – failed to touch his iron heart; and Helen was sent abroad, at the age of seventeen, to pass some time in France. Her mother alone accompanied her; and her distracted lover, who had a thousand reasons to regret the separation, was reported to have stained his soul with suicide. But no certain traces of his fate at that period transpired. Conjecture alone filled up this page, otherwise blank, in the history of Seaford – as the rejected youth was called. Helen returned home after an absence of eight months: the seared heart revived a little when surrounded by the adoration of admirers, and flattered by the encomiums of hypocritical crowds. Then came Colonel Dorman – the commands of a father – and a hasty marriage.

This narrative commenced with the statement that the regiment to which Colonel Dorman belonged was stationed at Hounslow. He had been there many months, when, one morning, an individual, whose appearance indicated a state of extreme indigence, although his person was cleanly, presented himself at the guard-room, and desired to be enlisted in the ranks of the regiment. The colonel was referred to; his conditional assent required the attention of the surgeon; and, to be brief, in a short half hour Harvey – as the recruit was called – became the servant of his sovereign lord the king.

The recruit soon completed his initiation in all the mysteries of the drill; and by his activity, his diligence, his good nature, and his respectful demeanour he speedily acquired the good opinion of several of his officers, and the attachment of his fellow soldiers. Add to this a certain

melancholy which oppressed him, -- a gloom, casting a dreary sunshine over all his joys, -- a tinge of mental dejection, --and then his gentlemanly manners, his refined conversation, his occasional bursts of lofty feeling, -- and the reader cannot wonder that the soldier Harvey became an object of interest as well as regard to his companions.

Time wore on; and Helen Dorman was soon to become a mother. It was now in the genial month of April, when all nature seems full of life and health, -- when the rude sway of winter has been overthrown by the revivifying energies of spring, -- and when the plants, the birds, and the heavens appear to welcome the glorious change. One evening the inviting loveliness of the weather induced Mrs Dorman to quit her solitary dwelling, -- we say *solitary*, because Colonel Dorman was too proud to allow his wife to reside in the barracks, and he had therefore hired a pretty and commodious house about two hundred yards from the town; -- but that house was frequently solitary of an evening, for the colonel often joined his brother officers at the mess, and remained there longer than his duty as a husband should have allowed him.

Helen walked out into the adjacent fields, and, unattended, roved at will amidst the verdant meadows. Presently a long line of black smoke, ascending from a valley which an intervening eminence concealed, met her sight; and the jovial laugh of men and women, and the cries of children, aroused her from the deep state of contemplation into which she was plunged. She reflected that she was so far distant from her own dwelling as to require an hour to reach it again; -- she noticed that the shades of night were beginning to fall around her, and she turned her steps in a homeward direction. But at the moment when this movement was resolved upon, she felt her gown pulled gently; she started -- and the glee of a little boy, who had thus succeeded in terrifying her, rang in her ears.

‘What do you require, insolent vagrant -- detestable urchin ?’ demanded Helen, sharply, while the cause of her alarm -- a child of about six years of age -- burst into tears.

‘I meant no harm ma’am,’ said the little boy humbly: ‘don’t be angry; but please give me a penny, or else they’ll beat me, and say I am no use to them.’

‘Who will beat you, wretch ?’ enquired Helen, shrinking from the touch of the boy, whose hands and face were certainly none of the cleanest, and whose ragged garb proclaimed him to be the companion of poverty.

‘The gipsies, please your ladyship,’ replied the boy, as he stretched forth his hand, and pointed to the direction whence the smoke arose above the hill.

‘Oh ! You are with the gipsies, are you ?’ enquired Helen, hastily, while her tone became more kind, and her visage saddened, as she continued thus, -- ‘And do they treat you kindly ? do they beat you ? do you ever want food ? and do they make you beg ?’

‘What, ma’am ? – you speak so fast,’ stammered the boy, timidly, ‘that I can’t understand you.’

‘Ignorant – dirty – a vagabond – and perhaps a thief !’ exclaimed Mrs Dorman, as she placed half a crown in the child’s hand, and then immediately pursued her walk homewards.

Full of melancholy reflections – a prey to a thousand conflicting ideas, none of which were felicitous, – and reckless of the increasing dusk – she walked swiftly on, never turning her head, still she arrived at the door of her house.

‘Gracious heavens, my dear madam !’ cried the old female domestic who opened the door.

‘What is the matter, Angela ? What has happened ? Is the Colonel at home ?’ asked Mrs Dorman, whom the singular ejaculations and the lengthened visage of the servant had alarmed.

‘The Colonel is at home, and—’

‘And what ?’ demanded Mrs Dorman.

‘And –’ stammered the domestic.

‘Speak ! What is the matter ?’

‘The Colonel is –’ again began the servant.

‘Angela, I command you to speak; – speak, for God’s sake !’ ejaculated Mrs Dorman.

‘Is wounded !’ added the servant, finishing her own sentence.

‘Wounded !’ exclaimed Helen, and without waiting for any further explanation, she sprang past the domestic, ascended the stair-case with the rapidity of lightning, and entered her husband’s room, overcome with fatigue, with sorrow, and with uncertainty.

Colonel Dorman was in bed. His cheek was pale, and his eyes were lustreless: – he smiled, however, when his wife drew near.

‘It is nothing, my love,’ he said in a faint voice: ‘it is nothing. A few days and all will be well.’

‘You are wounded, Dorman !’ cried Helen, now really alarmed. ‘Oh, you are wounded; and I was absent !’

‘Never mind, Helen,’ said her husband; ‘I shall soon be well. Nevertheless, I wish you had been here; – and yet, perhaps, the sight of my blood would have unnerved you.’

The conversation with the little gipsy boy, – the reminiscences which it had awakened, – and her subsequent reflections, had saddened the voice and enervated the frame of Mrs Dorman; while

her husband mistook the emotions of his wife for anxiety on his account. It was true that she was annoyed at not having been at home to receive a husband who had always treated her with kindness, and who had been wounded in an affray the particulars of which she soon learnt.

It appeared that Colonel Dorman had, for some reason or another, – in fact he himself scarcely knew wherefore, – taken a great and unconquerable dislike to the recruit Harvey; and this aversion had been augmented by the rapid improvement which the new soldier had made in all the exercises of drill and horsemanship, by the attachment his fellow-soldiers entertained towards him, and by the popularity which he had almost unwittingly established not only in his own troop, but also throughout the regiment. The jealous, the proud, the tyrannical, and the conceited individual is always susceptible to these aversions: – noble minds, whose pursuits are just, whose ideas are formed from contemplation and reflection instead of from hasty decisions – and whose principles are incapable of sentiments derogatory to the character of the impartial and upright man, – cannot easily comprehend such littleness as that which influenced the mind of Colonel Dorman.

But to continue the adventure which caused the wound. The dinner at the mess-table was concluded, when Colonel Dorman strolled into the barrack-yard to smoke his cigar, as well as to enjoy the loveliness of the evening. Presently two soldiers drew near him, and passed by without taking the slightest notice of their officer. The Colonel called them back; – they started, turned round, and respectfully saluted him whom they had not previously noticed.

‘Ah, Mister Harvey,’ said the Colonel, in a low voice, while he dwelt with a certain ironical emphasis upon the *Mister*, – ‘Ah, Harvey, am I to suppose you guilty of negligence, or wilful disrespect?’

‘Sir,’ returned the soldier, ‘I apologise for what you may certainly deem negligence, but which was not premeditated.’

‘No finely rounded sentences, sir,’ ejaculated the colonel; ‘– I hate you learned rear-rank men!’

‘I answered a question, sir, in the language of our country,’ said Harvey, in an even but firm tone of voice, ‘and I cannot disguise my dialect or my phraseology.’

‘By the bye,’ cried the colonel, without appearing to notice this answer, ‘I am glad of this opportunity – I have somewhat to say to you; – your comrade many retire.’

Harvey’s companion withdrew, and the recruit remained alone with his colonel.

‘There is something singular in your manners,’ began the officer, ‘which pleases me not, you have the reputation, too –’ continued Dorman, with a contemptuous and bitterly provoking smile of irony, – ‘you have the character of being a fine and choice speaker, and a bit of a philosopher

in your way. Now your fine speakers and philosophers are never good soldiers; and I will not have the language of the mess-tale of your superiors aped in the canteen.'

'You say that I have the reputation of being this and the other, Colonel Dorman,' said Harvey, in an equally cool and contemptuous manner; 'but I will thank you to remember that I am not responsible for the reports which may be circulated with regard to me; and, I apprehend, that so long as I do my duty, it must matter little to my superiors – that is, to my officers, whether I can even read or write.'

'Oh ! So you would doubtless attempt to draw a distinction between your *officers* and your *superiors*,' cried the Colonel; 'as if the officers were only your superiors because they happened to be placed by military rank above you. Why don't you know, d—n your eyes, that a gentleman is always the superior of a low-bred clown ?'

'I don't exactly understand the definition of the word *gentleman*,' said Harvey, with an emphasis expressive of the deepest contempt for him with whom he was now engaged in conversation.

'Oh ! Oh ! That is your excuse is it ?' cried Colonel Dorman. 'Now, *Mister* Harvey, I beg you to understand that I am not accustomed to be dictated to, and I take the opinion of an *inferior* –'

'Of a subordinate, sir' said Harvey, by way of correcting his Colonel's distinctive allusion; although he was really at the time thinking of a far different topic, and his ideas, as usual, were reflected back to the events of past days.

'*Inferior*, sir, I repeat !' thundered the Colonel, 'do you dare to contradict me ?' – and he advanced towards the young soldier, as if he were anxious to intimidate him.

Harvey was aroused from his partial reverie by these last words. He looked around; – no one was nigh; and his pride, which he had long checked, his innate sentiment of pride caused him to forget the relative situations of himself and the individual whose purpose was evidently to insult him.

'Colonel Dorman', said he, 'I am sorry we should thus have come in contact. My intentions, upon joining this regiment, were to maintain a respectful bearing towards my officers; – but allow me to tell you that, although in the army you may be my superior, let us only divest ourselves of our uniforms, and of those emblems of distinction called epaulettes, swords &c., – and, as a gentleman, I am your equal.'

'A gentleman; ha – ha !' cried Colonel Dorman; – 'a gentleman ! A shoe-black, you mean, my good fellow !'

Harvey continued – 'and, Colonel Dorman,' said he, 'now that the banner is once thrown down between us, allow me to tell you that you act an unmanly part in thus venturing to insult one

whom misfortune *alone* has compelled to enter your regiment; –’ and, having uttered those words, Harvey’s manner became considerably excited, his cheeks were flushed, and the veins swelled in his haughty brow. He was a handsome young man; and his ire imparted to his appearances something majestic and sublime.

‘Insolent scoundrel !’ exclaimed the Colonel; ‘I will punish this absurd temerity.’

Harvey’s temper was ungovernable when his passion was once roused. He forgot all distinction and discrepancy of regimental rank between himself and Colonel Dorman; – he was insulted – deeply insulted, and, in an unguarded moment, ere reflection came to his aid, he struck his superior officer. The Colonel’s eyes flashed – he drew his sword and made a cowardly but desperate thrust at the offending soldier; but in another instant he fell wounded to the ground beneath the sword which Harvey also brandished in his hand.

Such was the history of Colonel Dorman’s dispute with Harvey, and the origin of his wound.

Some weeks after this incident, Helen Dorman was seated in her apartment, pondering over the various incidents in her life, and infelicitously judging of the future by the events of the past years of her existence, – those past years, which had teemed with much grief and an occasionally gleam of bliss for her ! She thought of her early love – of her disappointment – and of Seaford’s despair. She reflected that Dorman loved her – that her heart beat not for him – that she had deep, mysterious, and tender ties connecting her with existence, – and that other links might soon reconcile her to that existence. In the midst of her reflections, a note was brought; – she hastily tore it open and read the following words: –

‘Helen, – I am condemned to die: you alone can save me ! Your husband – hated name ! – loves you; – he will grant your slightest request; your *will* must be his *law*. With difficulty have I obtained the materials necessary to make you aware of my approaching doom. Oh ! If there be yet one spark of early love – if there be yet in your soul one particle of that affection which was mutually felt, – oh ! save him who accepted a menial employment to be near you, -- save him whose tenderness for you has triumphed over all sentiments of pride, and whose permanent devotion to the early choice of his heart has never known change ! Under the name of Harvey I obtained admission to the ranks of the – th regiment of hussars; but I never sought an interview with you, fearful of compromising your peace and safety by the discovery of my real name and character. I was contented with the pleasure of beholding you at a distance, of watching your beauteous form as you walked amid the fields or on the heath, –that perfect and symmetrical form which corresponds with the faultless loveliness of your fair face. Surely such devotion as this deserves a thought – a sigh – a tender reminiscence ! surely such self-denial on my part will convince you of the delicacy and sincerity of my passion ! Tomorrow, I hear, your husband departs for London. His word is sufficient to ensure my escape; or you can arrange it as you know best. Else death will be my doom. Even in this gloomy cell, the remembrance of Helen gladdens the heart of the faithful but disconsolate

‘Walter Seaford’

The letter fell from Mrs Dorman’s hands, and she wept bitterly. The reminiscences and the reflections of years were now all collected and crowded together at the same moment in her agitated mind. Her ample and voluptuous bosom heaved convulsively; and her rosy lips, apart in the agony of grief, disclosed a set of white and even teeth which could not be surpassed. Again she seized the fatal epistle, and now noticed for the first time that there was a postscript. Her eyes ran rapidly over the worlds it contained, and which were written in French; and then with precipitate haste, she committed the letter to the flames. *‘Helène, il faut sauver le père de ton enfant !’* these were the words of the postscript: the emotions of the young lady were dreadful in the extreme until the letter was destroyed. While the paper was burning – the matter of a moment – her eyes wandered towards the door; but presently the tinder alone remained, and she became comparatively tranquil.

In the course of the day she had a long conversation with Colonel Dorman upon the subject of Harvey’s condemnation to death by the regimental Court-Martial which had tried him for the grave and serious offence of striking and wounding a superior officer.

The morning destined for the execution of Harvey dawned and the gallant troopers were under arms at an early hour. The gloomy face of heaven appeared congenial with the dark feelings of those who were about to witness the death of a fellow-soldier, – a fellow-soldier endeared to many of them by his urbanity and readiness to do a favour, and by the superiority of his intellect. But those honest and brave fellows, whose gallant souls were thus awake to the finest feelings of humanity, had no appeal against the justice nor the severity of his sentence. The very silence of the ranks was now more awful than it had been on any other occasion.

Presently one of the sentinels, who had been posted in the vicinity to the culprit’s prison-room, ran hastily up to the commanding officer, – for Colonel Dorman was in London, -- and spoke mysteriously in his ear. In a few moments the substance of the communication was made known: – Harvey had escaped.

The sergeant and corporal who had commanded the guard during the previous night exchanged significant glances, and smiled; and they knew in their own minds that they had now successfully founded their claims upon the gratitude of Colonel Dorman.

Only a week had flown away since the still unaccountable escape of Harvey, when Mrs Dorman was again walking in the fields adjoining her house; and again was she absorbed in deep thought; – but this time she was accompanied by her husband. They inadvertently took the same direction which Helen had pursued on a former occasion; chiefly, perhaps, because the pathway conducted them thus, and the partial dampness of the evening prevented them from walking upon the moist grass.

‘Harvey is far off by this time, I dare swear,’ said the colonel, desirous of saying something to break a long pause.

‘Indeed ! do you think so ?’ exclaimed Helen, starting, even as she walked, supported by her husband’s arm.

‘I hope so,’ said the colonel, – ‘since you were so afraid of his death being traced to my agency, however indirectly; and, really I must in justice acknowledge that the knave was provoked by me in the first instance.’

‘Never should I have had another moment’s happiness, if that man’s death had taken place through you,’ said Helen; and she then stopped short, fearful of exposing her emotions.

‘Poor thing ! your conscience is pure indeed !’ said the Colonel, who fancied that the solicitude of his wife was connected with himself.

At that moment they passed the brow of the hill, and descended into a verdant valley, where a confused murmur of voices met their ears. To the right was a gipsies’ tent, and near it stood the small caravan or covered wagon in which the wanderers were accustomed to perform their short journeys from one station to another. A horse was nibbling the grass at a little distance. Before the opening of the tent a fire was burning; and a huge cauldron, slung from three stakes which were all tied together at the top, was simmering over the burning wood and peat. Helen suddenly experienced a dizziness and a languor, which her husband immediately perceived, and they were about to retrace their steps homewards, when a child issued from the tent, and ran towards Helen, imploring alms in a suppliant and whining tone. He was the same little boy whom she had before relieved; – but his appearance was considerably altered; for he was well-dressed and cleanly, and his personal beauty, which was great, could now be easily distinguished.

‘Begone, insolent beggar !’ ejaculated the colonel, brandishing his stick somewhat brutally over the head of the little child, who screamed and fell upon his knees.

‘Do not hurt him,’ said Helen. ‘Poor little fellow,’ she added with a sigh, ‘he is doubtless compelled to beg, or those he lives with will beat him. O heavens ! what a horrible – horrible life !’

‘Henry – Henry !’ said a voice from the tent; ‘come here, my boy and cease that disturbance.’

The boy rose to obey the voice which he appeared to know full well; but at the same moment the tall and commanding figure of a man issued from the tent.

‘Wherefore that noise ?’ demanded the stranger, as he advanced towards the spot where Colonel and Mrs Dorman stood.

‘What – Harvey – is that you ?’ ejaculated the colonel, as the countenance of the person met his eyes. ‘How impudent, sir, to compromise me and endanger yourself by remaining in this neighbourhood ! Is it thus that you keep your promise ? Is it thus that you act up to your pledge ? How have you dared to linger in the vicinity of Hounslow ?’

‘Chance threw me in the way of these gipsies,’ replied Seaford – for such was his real name; – ‘and there,’ he continued as he pointed to the tent, ‘I found a child whom a merciless mother abandoned to want, to infamy, and disgrace !’

‘And that child is here, I suppose ?’ said the Colonel, pointing to the little boy who stood near. ‘But what right have you to allow the condition of some stranger’s offspring to stand in the way of your performance of a solemn promise – a promise on the faith of which I more or less compromised myself, and was compelled to tamper with two of my own non-commissioned officers in order to ensure your escape ?’

‘That child is mine, sir !’ answered the individual whose life had been spared through the colonel’s agency.

‘Seaford – Seaford – is that, is *that* our child ?’ ejaculated Helen, now utterly thrown off her guard; and rushing forward. Under a maternal impulse, she caught the gipsy-boy to her bosom.

‘Seaford ! – damnation !’ cried the colonel, who now saw through the whole affair. ‘Helen – speak, I command you.

‘Spare me – spare me, and I will confess all !’ exclaimed Helen, throwing herself at her husband’s feet and stretching out her hands to heaven.

‘That explanation, madam,’ said the officer, in a subdued tone, ‘may come too late. Perhaps your journey to France, before I became acquainted with you,’ continued the now indignant man, labouring under a horrible convulsion of passion, ‘was only a pretence to allow you to seek a retired spot, and give birth to your illegitimate child !’

‘’Tis true – ‘tis true !’ cried Helen wildly; ‘but spare these taunts !’

‘Wretched woman – I abandon you ! stay with your lover – your seducer – your paramour; and together rear your little gipsy bastard !’ thundered the Colonel, as he turned away to depart.

‘Stay – stay, oh ! stay – only for one moment, I implore you !’ supplicated the wretched woman; and she fell senseless upon the cold ground, as if suddenly shot through the heart with a ball.

‘Speak – speak, dear Helen, -- I forgive you – Oh ! I forgive you – I forget all !’ said Dorman, as he knelt by his wife’s side. ‘come – open your eyes, love, and gaze upon me;-- only promise

never to see Seaford more, – and we will yet be happy. I will take care of your child – he shall pass as my nephew – and – dearest Helen –’.

‘She will never answer your entreaties, nor respond to your prayers,’ solemnly exclaimed Seaford: ‘her heart is broken !’

‘Great God ! ‘tis but too true,’ cried the agonized colonel; ‘the bitterness of my words, added to the dreadful disclosures of this day – and thine interference, unhappy man – all these have killed her !’