

over. But there is a great difference between man and woman in this respect."

"So they say," I answered; "but I am never quite certain that these received sayings are always right. I distrust all generalisations."

"Do you see that pretty little church peeping up among the trees?"

"Yes. The situation, with the river laying it, is unusually fine."

"Would you like to see it? It has been perfectly restored. All the windows are of painted glass; and in those woods through which our path will lie you will, perhaps, hear the nightingale for the last time this season."

She looked at her companion.

"Yes, my dear," said the old lady; I thought, perhaps, a little too submissively.

"Or perhaps you would prefer to hear about the edible snails. They really are the same snails that are found in some parts of Italy, and the Roman soldiers must have brought them over with them, for they had a bath about here."

"I had rather see the wood and the church, and have a walk with you and Mrs. Percival."

"Come, then," she said. "It is rather a steep path from here to the moat, and from the moat we get into a path across the meadows."

She knew the old locality perfectly, and bounded down the path. Her elderly companion followed, not without some signals of distress.

"So you are still wandering about the country in this undefined sort of way?"

"Yes," I answered; "it is rather a 'Wilhelm Meister' sort of life, wandering about as one lists without the shadow of a moral obligation."

"I daresay it is very nice; but it is one so opposite to what we ladies lead, that it is difficult to give a clear presentation of it to one's mind. Do you know whom you remind me of, Mr. Hylton?"

"Who?"

"That scholar of Oxford there is such a pretty poem about, who went and lived with the gypsies, and was called the gipsy-scholar."

"You are the only gipsy I have seen."

"And I make a poor sort of Romany, I suspect, as I am a very sober-minded and unromantic personage."

"I fancy I am more like Wilhelm Meister serving an apprenticeship of some sort or other."

"I never could admire the immortal Wilhelm very much."

"Then you cannot really care," I answered, "for Goethe's philosophy or Goethe's life. I suppose he himself would say, in vindication of Wilhelm and of himself, that they were allowing their moral nature to work a self-development untrammelled by conventionalities, and so come to a true theory of being."

Her beautiful eyes had a sort of merry scorn in them.

"That sounds very grand, Mr. Hylton, and I think I have heard something of the sort before; but, reduced to plain English prose, it is only a wordy excuse for abominable selfishness."

"You are a little hard on me."

"O, I don't mean you. I do not put you down as anything so poetical as a Scholar-gipsy or a Wilhelm Meister."

"I think there may be a tendency that way."

"Possibly. But what I am thinking of is this: if we all took to going out gipsying, who is to encounter the real duty and dullness of life? Who are to keep the wheels of life going and look after the teaching, nursing, cooking of life—to speak of poor woman's pursuits alone—besides the more ennobling business of our lords?"

"I expect I shall have to get into harness one of these days; and though I don't profess to like work, I shall by and by do it."

"You see," she said, "my life has been altogether illusion and mirage. I was a wild self-willed girl when I married a man whom I simply worshipped, and the marriage-bond was sundered as soon as made. I am altogether a different being now. I can hardly recognise my former self. He could not have made me happy, if I had been then as I am now; we should, perhaps, have had our altercations, but on the whole have lived harmoniously."

"I hardly know," I said. "He was much older than you, and at his age the character becomes stereotyped."

"Anyhow," she said, "I feel that my loss has broken the springs of my life. All the freshness and colour have gone out of it. I have my dearest father to care for."

"And keep awhile one parent from the skies."

I have my poor people and all my duties. But I have to look to the skies for any real happiness. I recognise and submit to my fate, and even approve of it. I get very tired, and sometimes I think I feel my wings growing."

"Forgive the thought, but suppose you had lived to find out that the husband whom you worshipped were altogether an illusion?"

"I should not have lived at all; I should have died—have died of a broken heart. I did so very nearly as it was; for years my great grief hung upon my heart. Perhaps I wanted a great grief."

"Schubert, the musician, said that character could only be formed out of a great grief. That would suit you, Mrs. Edgeworth. He also proceeds to say that there is something poor and frivolous about natures that have not been subject to it; and that, I suppose, would suit me!"

"And I think you deal hardly with yourself, Mr. Hylton. If you are not satisfied with your-

self, I am sure you have an ideal that is better than yourself."

We had now got back to the old castle. It was emptying fast of the Naturals. All the noisy life with which we had peopled it had died out, and we were leaving the grim reliquary ruins to the bats that nestled in the towers and the mists that swam up from the river. The neat well-remembered carriage was standing outside the balustraded gates, and I assisted the ladies to enter. Most of the excursionists had gone back by the special train. My friend had found me a vacant place in a friendly drag where he himself mounted the box. For a short time there was a merry conversation among the occupants, but as the evening shadows darkened we all relapsed into silence. The thought, what was I to do with myself? came with a sickening sense of care upon my mind. I dwelt on Mary Edgeworth's perfect features, on her silvery tones; but there was a difference as great as if oceans rolled and mountains rose between us. She was as sacred and inaccessible as the evening star that now began to glimmer through the umbrage of the trees by the river. Her parting words consoled me. I had said, in conventional phrase, "I hope we shall meet again;" and she had answered with prophetic voice, "I am sure we shall."

CHAPTER V.

Early next morning I received a short note written by Mrs. Blount. "I am obliged to go away, but my uncle Canon French expects you to dinner all the same at seven."

This is an odd sort of thing, this going to a house which you have never seen, and dining with people whom you do not know. My first impulse was to send off a note to decline. But I felt I must go on with my series of adventures and misadventures. I should go on pedestrianising so long as the fine weather held up. The clouds were threatening, and when the rains came down it would be time to shift the venue.

My postman came by train from Amesbury Station, according to a telegram which I had sent. Nobody need be at a loss to kill a morning in a cathedral city. Every cathedral city has a history; the cathedral itself is an embodied history. Then you may be sure that it has had something to do with the Wars of the Roses or with the Great Rebellion. I got through the day, and up to this present time I have a misty recollection of the painted glass and the rolling anthem.

I turned into the cathedral close. There was something about it which at once satisfied my æsthetic sense. There was a central space of green, along each side of which was an avenue of trees, now shedding fast the yellow leaves. There were large sleepy-looking houses about, with close-shaven lawns, chiefly ornamented with standard roses and basket beds of flowers. A servant in dark livery took charge of my traps and ushered me up-stairs. It was a large oaken drawing-room. No candles were lighted, and I should never have suspected gas in such a room. The ruddy blaze of a cheerful fire contented with the last red light of the westerling sun. An old-fashioned gentleman advanced, with the most beautiful eyes that I have seen in an aged face, and at once set me at perfect ease with his wonderful sweetness and benignity of manner. A tall handsome-looking army man and his elegant wife, son and daughter-in-law of the widowed canon, did the honours. One lady I was greatly struck with, who seemed the queen of the room. I understood afterwards that she was Lechmere, the wife of the lord-lieutenant, who kept together the society of the county while her husband was salmon-fishing in Norway.

There were no introductions, except to a rather plain man and a very acute-looking Cambridge man (who, I was told, was an inspector of schools), a well-known critic and writer of articles. I thought too, from the description of things given me by my friend at the fishing place, that if a county lady were to appear anywhere in the society of the cathedral town of Dorchester, it would be at the venerable canon's. I looked for her, feeling at the time that I had no right to do so, and it almost appeared a bit of fairy glamour, a hearing that could not be trusted, a seeing that could not be believed, when Mr. Gorst and Mrs. Edgeworth entered the room.

It was very touching to see the old canon meet the still older squire, and testify his thankfulness in that he had violated his rule about not going out to dinner. The erect man now bent, the vigorous man now feeble, marks of manly beauty gleaming through physical decay—such was Squire Gorst, and I could well imagine how once he could ride to his hounds. And blessings on that kindly canon—not only that his ready hospitality had welcomed the stranger within his gates—not only that the ecclesiastical cookery had left lay efforts far behind, but because it brought that beautiful face again before me, which had such power to elevate and purify, and gave me that formal introduction to Squire Gorst which is a sort of fetish in English society, absolutely indispensable in all our social arrangements! It was an exquisite happiness to me to see this eloquent face mantling with pleasure when I made that unexpected apparition of myself. It was almost hid from me by a mass of splendid flowers, grouped in the centre of the table, which made me savagely critical on the iniquities of an English dinner-table. But that marvellous evening it was not even the presence of my mistress which made the scene so memorable. Its interest mainly belongs to the most uninteresting person in the

room; that combative, cynical, self-contented inspector of schools whom I mentioned just now. He was a Fellow of Trinity, and as a Cambridge man I had learned both to respect and detest Fellows of Trinity. They have brain-power and industry; but each Fellow deifies himself and his order, and there is generally also a mixture of sharp worldliness, the echo of that perpetual question which mars so much of Cambridge study—will it pay? I happened to sit next to him at dessert, and he went off into quite a monologue about himself.

"There's nothing like being an inspector of schools," he said, "after all. There are bad points about it, no doubt. There is always a certain amount of drudgery in going over elementary matters so constantly with children. Thus you see the certificated teachers always at first regard you as their natural enemy. By and by, however, they come to like you better. You really begin to be interested in watching the progress of education. Then you go wherever you like, and book Government with the expenses. Then you come to know the whole of the county, and the squires and parsons regard you as one of themselves. There are compensating mercies, besides quarter-day, even for H. M.'s inspector of schools. I don't mean to say that I should not enjoy doing nothing better; but as this work is to be done, I do it, and get what enjoyment I can out of it. All real work you know, so the moralists tell us, ought to have an element of fag and grind and unpleasantness about it, to be worthy of the name."

"Well, I am a leisure man myself," I answered; "and, in fact, I have never been very much anything else. But I begin to think I ought to be doing something. I should not at all mind grinding up the first four rules of arithmetic, and some geography and grammar, and going about the country to examine the little beggars about it."

H. M. Inspector laughed, and seemed to take it as a capital joke, and the deacon coming round he took another glass of the Dean's port, and said something that brought him into the current of the general conversation.

I could hardly believe my ears when, some time after, the inspector of schools came up to me and said,

"Would you really like something to do in my line, Mr. Hylton? I am looking out for a man that would have to do very much the same kind of work that I am doing myself. We inspectors of schools have got to employ men under us for a time for a special purpose. The Government are collecting all the information they can, with a view to future legislation. We are consequently wanting men who will be called Inspectors of Returns. It is only for a couple of years, and only two hundred a year; but it is said, though of course, I cannot guarantee the statement, that in future the full Inspectors will be selected out of the Inspectors of Returns."

If ever there was music in my ears, this proposition made such music for me. In my solitary rambles I had been forced to think. I had been thinking of the future; and once or twice when I woke up in the morning I found that future weighing on me like a nightmare, although the brightness of morning had never failed to chase the shadows away, although the fresh trust of youth in a controlling Providence had quenched despair. The delightful feeling which I felt at the moment was not the feeling that I was dropping into a pleasant kind of berth, suitable to a man whose banking-book was in such a deplorable condition, but the novel sensation that I was really finding something to do, that somewhere I had a niche in the world where I might fill my appointed place and do something useful—a sensation that superinduced that other novel sensation of self-respect procured by internal self-congratulation. And somehow or other the thought of Mary Edgeworth mixed itself up with the whole. The thought flamed into sudden life and purpose when her glorious voice filled the old canon's house with music, and made me vow a vow that there was no time I would not wait, nor work I would not work, if only I might link my fortune to the golden hope that entered my heart. It was quite a new sensation to me to find that there was some living being with whom I might link all the dormant powers and aspirations of my nature; whose presence was to me an intellectual stimulus that stirred up all my energies, and at the same time gave me a sense of rest and peace and unutterable happiness. From which state of mind it may be concluded that I was beginning to be very much in love with Mrs. Edgeworth. I don't profess to be a superior kind of man—the man who can guide and elevate and develop a woman's nature, and all that style of thing. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that I want a deal of guiding and elevating and developing myself; and I could worship as a divinity an angelic woman who would do this sort of thing for me.

Presently H. M. Inspector said to Mr. Gorst, "My friend, Mr. Hylton, is coming into the neighbourhood of Amesbury to look after the Government returns of schools. I have been telling him how good the country people are to an inspector; and as he is going to be one of us in a sort of way, I am sure you will extend to him the same sort of kindness."

"He must come and stay with me exactly as you have done. You must make Amesbury Hall your headquarters, Mr. Hylton, whenever you have anything to do in our part of the county."

Thus it was that in the course of a few weeks I was a guest of Mr. Gorst's and Mrs. Edgeworth's. I do not know how it happened; but

when I went to my pretty chamber and lay down that night, there stole over mind and body a sense of delicious restfulness and peace. I had always been a wanderer and wayfarer, unknowing the care either of sister or mother; and, though not without glimpses of better things, to which I have hardly done justice in this scanty narrative, I had led the inconsequential, careless, selfish life of a mere idler about town. I contrasted that ignoble existence with one so full of plan and purpose, of order and beneficence, like Mary Edgeworth's. She wanted to know what I was saying about Amesbury, and under that pretence she taught me my business as Inspector of Returns, which required more skill and method than I had looked for. Very puzzled indeed did the worthy station-master look when he met me and Mrs. Edgeworth walking about the fields; he merely touched his hat, however, and appeared to plunge into an illimitable train of thought.

She was so very dear to me. I felt that a false nature was disappearing, "as a serpent throws its skin," and that my true self was coming into conscious life. I did not like to tell her what I thought and felt. This new life, not only of my pleasant stay at the Hall, but of my quickened nature, would be shattered if she should be astonished at my presumption—should wonder how I had misconceived the nature of her feelings. There was something in her of the clever house-keeping elder sister's advising attitude towards her collegian brother. There were some wretched worldly thoughts that made themselves felt in my unstable mind. It was rather early to fix myself at three-and-twenty. I might meet some one whom I might like better. Then a widow, despite the child-wife theory and the very peculiar history, was a widow; and I had thought, in the rare moments when I ever thought, that I would never marry a widow. I had better think it over again, and, as Lord Dundreary says, speak about it to her in a year or two. But I soon blushed for the meanness of such thoughts. It seemed to me that a happy chance had come to me, a turning-point in life, and I should be like the base Judean who threw away "a pearl richer than all its tribe" if I should lose the glorious chance. I have known aged men who with wet and weary eyes had mused over the glorious possibilities of their youth which waywardness or selfishness had thrown away. "Now don't you be blind, old fellow," I said to myself, in that easy conversational tone which I occasionally adopt when in my own company. "You are not to postpone, or dream, or shilly-shally. Approach the deadly imminent breach, and it will lead into a garden of Paradise. Make up your mind clearly, worthily, irrevocably, and act on your decision. Try as a man, and if it is against you, take your fate as a man. At least you will not have the remorse that you lost by your own fault—lost what might give a richer colour and higher meaning to your life. And suppose you should win? There was the thought of that fine old place, the goodly estate, the horses and hounds. But I bless myself in the recollection that for the time I lost sight of these in thinking of Mary herself. Would it be possible that the treasures of that heart and mind could ever be mine?

"Ah," I said to myself, "there are some people who have to accept the wealth, the greatness, the happiness, of this life. They have never deserved, they can never repay, all the blessings that have been showered on them. They can only live a life of thankfulness and love." I could not but whisper to myself, too, that there was a fate which was leading up to the consummation of my life, so marvellously strange had been this "chapters of accidents;" only I have heard of stranger chapters still. Certainly I shall have a story to tell Sir Henry.

At last a day came when I sat by her side, in the old oaken library, in the firelight glow. I think she knew the sense to which my words had pointed, and she did not interrupt me. "I am only a good-for-nothing fellow, I am afraid: an idle man, a bit of a scamp, a good deal of an ignoramus. But I think I have one merit—that of being able to appreciate excellence and loveliness when I see it. And I really have one thought now before my mind,—that as the years go on I may ripen into the power of bearing a worthy part in life—that there is something in the world that I may win and wear. It may help me if I only thought that you watched my work—that you gave me sympathy and regard, and, let me tell you now, though I feel I am venturing my all in making the admission, that I do look forward to a time when I hope to make myself worthy of telling you of my love."

I took her hand in mine. I thought it would be withdrawn, but it was not. I sought her eyes, but they were downcast, a tear trembling through the lashes.

"Perhaps," she said, very quietly and simply, "I do not think that you are unworthy now."

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