

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEW YEAR'S EVE

It was New Year's Eve. The lamp outside the old gatehouse of the Abbey, lit to welcome the guests expected by her ladyship, threw its beams on a road hard with frost. The night was clear and still, and the moon was showing a bright rim over the western hill.

Browne's dog-cart came down the road and turned in under the archway. The sharp impact of his horse's hoofs could be heard long before the lights showed round the distant bend. Mrs. O'Keefe's brougham followed it in a few minutes. Then came a landau from the White House, and, finally, Turner's cart from the dark wood. The two carriages came out again and drove away. The light was put out and the full disk of the moon swung clear of the horizon.

The old dining-hall, with its vaulted roof and great open hearth, still wore its Christmas decoration of holly and ivy and mistletoe, and the air of festivity suggested by these accessories was repeated in the faces and manner of the diners. One would have said that none of them had a care in the world, and it was probably true that care was as far from every one of them this evening as it could be from nine people, all of whom had some experience of life and a few of them a long one.

Lady Wrotham sat at the head of her table, doing the honours royally. It was the last night of a year, which had opened for her with sorrow and had gone on to disappointment and loneliness. And now she was surrounded by her neighbours, and there was no feeling between her and them but one of good-will. On her right were Francis Redcliffe and Hilda,