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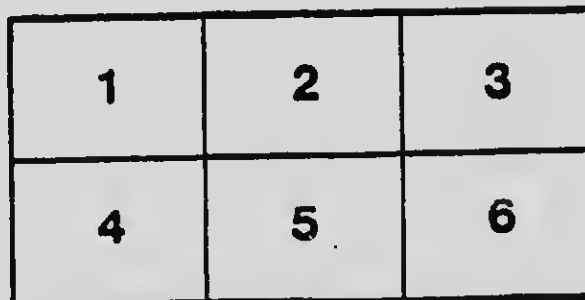
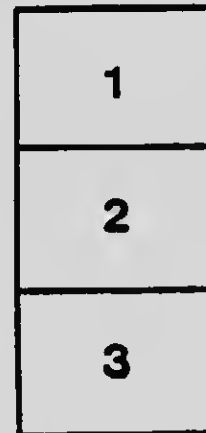
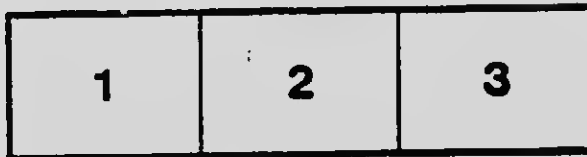
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THE ALIEN
A STORY OF MIDDLE AGE



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" . . . BROTHER, WHERE TWO FIGHT THE STRONGEST
WINS, AND TRUTH AND LOVE ARE STRENGTH."

AYLMER'S *FIELD*.

THE ALIEN
A STORY OF MIDDLE AGE

BY

F. F. MONTRÉSOR

AUTHOR OF

"INTO THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES" "AT THE CROSS ROADS"
ETC. ETC.

TORONTO
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PREFACE

IT is always cheering to put a quotation that one likes at the beginning of a book. So, at least, one makes sure that one good sentence lives between the two covers.

It is hard enough to some of us, however much we may believe in the ultimate triumph of goodness, to see that it wins; indeed, it often reigns from a painful throne.

Are truth and love strength? Yes, *verily*. But are they always the strongest? Do they indeed prove stronger than confusion and hate?

In the poem from which my quotation is taken, the curtain falls on desolation and tragedy. So it falls over and over again in life. That mysterious veil behind which mankind has tried so hard to peep, drops on apparent confusion.

The good lie stricken, the unjust flourish like green bay-trees, and the preacher's attempted consolation, which points to a probable balancing beyond that baffling curtain, fails to altogether satisfy us, who would fain see justice now.

PREFACE

In telling a story one can set forth that which eludes, while the dust of a struggle blinds the eyes. Perhaps that is partly why the telling of stories is so entrancing and refreshing an occupation!

We see each other under strange guises, we masquerade in ugly clothes, yet the soul of everyone is good, as the Maker made it; and because in very truth we are one, he who stands nearer to the consciousness of the eternal goodness is bound, by a bond which cannot be broken, to suffer for those who are farther off. There are plenty of loyal and honest souls in the world who do not philosophise about themselves or about other people, but who nevertheless win the game somewhat painfully, and with little sense of victory. There are others who, more consciously, take part in the fight. Yet the hands that help are most apt to bear on their palms the marks of nails, and the victory of a spiritual Saviour is not of a kind that can be handled or touched.

F. F. M.

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THE ALIEN:

A STORY OF MIDDLE AGE

CHAPTER I

"For weeks the clouds had raked the hills
And vexed the vales with raining,
And all the woods were wet with mist
And all the brooks complaining."

WHITTIER.

I CALL this "a story of Middle Age" because Esther Mordaunt was well into the thirties when she became involved in it; yet, in truth, every event has a long pedigree, and God alone knows when or where any story really began; as to when or where it shall end, why, there lies the question which sets us all a-wondering. Before ever Esther was born, the Fates had begun to weave that pattern that took such strange developments, such unlooked-for curls and twists in her middle age, and sometimes (especially when it rained) she fancied that the place she lived in was still more or less haunted by the ghosts of events that had happened long ago.

Applehurst was certainly a rather melancholy house, with an air of austerity about it. Yet it was not

romantic in appearance; nor had it the beauty of extreme old age. It had no grace of architecture, but only a certain amount of grim character, which redeemed it from the commonplace. It was very strongly built. It would stand square and solid in its uncompromising Georgian ugliness when Esther's warm and tender heart would be cold. It had harboured passions and tragedies that Esther had not dreamed of in her philosophy.

Applehurst stood within its own park. Beyond the park stretched the downs, and a chalky-white road lay like a white riband across the short sheep-cropped grass, and led to a still primitive village. Applehurst had always belonged to the Iredales. Mrs. Mordaunt, the present owner, had inherited it from her father, old squire Iredale (not, alas, of blessed memory), who had entailed it on her for life, remainder, on her death, to her eldest surviving child on attaining twenty-one, and, in default of children, to Curtis Iredale (who was the son of a distant cousin) absolutely. The surrounding country was typically English—not strikingly picturesque, but very good to live in. The hills were low and rather bare, but down in the valley the orchards prospered, and in spring the village and the lanes were garlanded in blossom. The oaks in the park were very fine, they looked upon the house as an upstart. They were in their glory long before the Georges set foot in England. When they were in full leaf the house was quite shut in, but in the winter, when their branches were bare, you could see the road from the front windows.

Autumn was dreary at Applehurst. The house faced north-east, and it was bitterly cold. The especial autumn of the year in which this story opens had been

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a remarkably gloomy season. Esther Mordaunt sat in a low chair by the fire in the big, cold drawing-room; a philosophical book lay upon her knees; the wind blew down the old-fashioned chimney in rainy gusts, and, whether from the chilling effect of damp or of philosophy, she shivered.

The room was so long that more fire was required to warm it, and the day was so depressing that youthful high spirits were required to fight against its gloom. Esther was not an habitually melancholy woman, but she was sometimes painfully aware that the more exuberant vitality of her girlhood had died down. She smiled where she would once have laughed, though, on the other hand, she sometimes laughed when she would once have waxed hotly wroth. For twenty years this house had been her home. It had seen her merry and impetuous, a hot-tempered Esther, who fought lustily with her Cousin Rebecca, but yet bore no malice. It had seen her very miserable, an Esther who secretly believed herself to be heart-broken. She had learnt since that hearts do not break, as a rule; they only crack, and are quite as serviceable as before. It had seen her pretty soft hair become flecked with silver, and her gaiety subside into a most saving sense of humour, while her once occasional flashes of intuitive understanding broadened into a lasting and mellow warmth of sympathy.

All this the grey stone house had seen, and much more besides.

Twenty-two years before the date at which this story opens, Mrs. Mordaunt had undertaken to help the orphaned children of a cousin of her late husband. She helped, as she did most things, effectively. She

made no promise of adoption,—the extent of her offer was that she should send sixteen-year-old Esther to a good school for a twelvemonth, and that she should do her best to chaperon the two elder girls, Rose and Lily, during a season in London.

“Rose and Lily!” Mrs. Mordaunt said with a comical grimace. “Good Lord! it was like their fool of a mother to give the poor children such names; what would she have done if they had turned out sturdy gipsies?”

But as it happened, the twins were remarkably pretty girls, and the end of the season saw them triumphantly married.

They were horridly afraid of their chaperon. They shrank from her sharp speeches, they clung together in a way which made the pretty likeness between them almost pathetic, but they were never awkward, and they were as fresh and as sweet as their namesakes.

Mrs. Mordaunt took pains to preserve their freshness: no one guessed how vigilantly she looked after them, but she drew a very long breath of relief when she had got them off her hands.

“They were charming, but the charm wouldn’t have outlived another season,” said she.

After that, she turned her attention to Esther, and invited her to Applehurst, in order that she might be sure what the child was like, before risking another journey to town. From this it may well be seen that “Cousin Rebecca’s” kindness was thoroughly seasoned with shrewdness. She was certainly no sentimentalist, nor was she likely to waste her benefactions.

Esther, fresh from school, half-shy, half-mutinous, walked into the long drawing-room and met Mrs.

Mordaunt's sharply penetrating glance. Mrs. Mordaunt had been beautiful when she was young; but Esther saw only a fat little old lady of a slightly oriental cast of countenance, who wore a hideous front of tight jet-black curls.

"Ah! You are not nearly so pretty as your sisters, my dear," said the old lady; and at that it was no wonder that Esther's spirit rose.

"No, indeed, I'm not. I'm ugly, and I don't want a season in London, and I don't wish to be married; so there won't be any use in taking me about," said she. Her soft blue-grey eyes brightened, and a bright pink colour came into her cheeks while she spoke. The old lady nodded, with a twinkle of fun.

"My dear, you should never waste a fib," said she. "You do not think yourself ugly by any means: on the contrary, I can very well see that you've quite a good opinion of yourself; and mind I don't blame you for that, for it's a thing that helps one through life. For the rest, I don't suppose you'll marry before you're asked to; and there's time at least for you to take off your hat and cloak, and drink some tea, before we need consider the point."

Estler, in after years, laughed whenever she remembered that first encounter, but at the time she gulped down furious indignation with every mouthful. She was aware that she had made a fool of herself, and that this horrid old benefactress was not the least angry, but only amused: that state of mind which it is most difficult for extreme youth to forgive.

She choked over her bread and butter, and fled upstairs, finding refuge at last in the big, countrified bedroom which her sisters, more fortunatc than she

was, had shared together. The burden of indebtedness (which had never troubled the gentle twins) was heavy on her soul. She wept hot, passionate tears of revolt, and despised herself because she fancied that she hated Cousin Rebecca, who was the one person in all the world who had held out a finger to aid these penniless girls.

And yet, in spite of that unpropitious beginning, in spite of two hot tempers and two quick tongues, Esther was in the end the only one of the three who really loved the old woman, who was never afraid of, though sometimes irritated by her, and who wakened at last some answering affection.

In spite of the protest, she had her times of gaiety—a short merry time which ended in mourning.

"No one should renounce the world before they've met it," Cousin Rebecca said. "I'd even go a step farther, Esther, and allow that to have had a bowing acquaintance with the Flesh and the Devil may add to the ultimate safety of man or woman. If you've been shut into a garden between high walls during the best part of your youth, you won't recognise the Old Gentleman when he wriggles through a gap, and he may startle and upset you very much one fine day. He has a partiality for convents, I've heard: dear me, yes! and the fact of the windows being so tightly bolted and the doors locked, makes it the more difficult to get him out."

Cousin Rebecca had never discoursed in that style to the twins, but she recognised that Esther, like the youngest prince in the fairy stories, was the possessor of the largest share of the family brains. She was heartily sorry (being, in spite of cynicism, not unkindly

disposed) when she also discovered that Esther had more than her share of "heart."

The girl became engaged to a charming and excellent, but quite impecunious, naval lieutenant. She paid no heed whatever to her old cousin's remonstrances. She was as wilful as if she had ten thousand a year of her own. The lieutenant was ordered to Egypt, and Esther and Mrs. Mordaunt returned to Applehurst—Esther in the highest spirits, and full of a cheerful defiance that laughed at worldly wisdom. The lieutenant was killed in action while defending the guns of the Naval Brigade, and, so far as Esther was concerned, darkness fell over the face of the earth.

Three months after Esther's sun went out, she interrupted Cousin Rebecca, who was totting up weekly accounts at the writing-table.

"Cousin Becky," said she, in rather a hard voice, "you've had me for a long visit. I've been staying with you for seven months. My sisters married at the end of one season. I can't do that now. I thank you very much for all you've done, and your great kindness to me, but I've been thinking—and I've come to the conclusion that I ought to be working for a place in the world now, since the place I meant to fill is gone."

"Cousin Becky" put down her pen and looked at the little cousin who had given her the most trouble of the three, and her heart softened to her.

"So far as I'm concerned, I'd be only too glad to keep you for the rest of my life, Essie," said she, "but I'm a gouty, cranky old thing, and I can't promise you much. I've given the best part of what love I was dowered with to the two I've cared for. I'm too old

now to conceive violent affections for new people, though I'm more interested in you than I expected to be. If you like to make this your home, you shall have a daughter's place, so far as it is in my power to give it. You must understand, though, that I shall be a poor substitute for the genuine article. It is not in me, my dear, to love another person's child, as the child of"— She stopped short, with rather an odd, quick glance at Esther, to whose pale cheek the colour had mounted.

"Oh, I can understand that," the poor child cried. "I can understand that a mother loves her children because they are his;" and then she hid her scarlet face on the old woman's shoulder. "Oh, I do want to see him once more! Oh, I do wish he had made me his wife first. Then, at least, they would have sent me something of his to keep, and I should have had my share of life. Now, I shall never, never be happy like other women."

"Well! Here's a pretty state of things. I wish I'd never taken you to London," said Cousin Becky ruefully.

She rubbed her nose, which was a trick she had when she was puzzled. "All the same, your happiness isn't wrecked for ever at seventeen," she muttered. "Go out into the sunshine, child. Go and consult the fresh air and the trees, and then let me know what you mean to do. I don't like nursery-governessing for you, and that's a fact; but I'm too selfish to alter my ways of living permanently for any young cousin, and, if you make up your mind to live with me, you must just take me as you find me here, and make the best of it—and precious dull that will be for you!

No, don't answer now. I don't believe in resolutions made in a hot room full of sentiment. Go out, go out, and take a long walk, and think well over all my disagreeable qualities, and remember that I shall not think any the worse of you if you refuse my offer."

Esther stayed out three hours, and then came in at the French window just when the sun was setting. "I've made up my mind," said she. "I won't run away from my trouble. I'll stay here and bury it. You see, Cousin Becky, you are rather fond of me, and there is no one else who wants me at all; and perhaps in time you'll get fonder still, and I—I am fond of you."

Cousin Becky rubbed her nose again.

"I don't know that you are wise," said she; "the people who hold that affection is the most important item in life seldom are. However, I'll own I'm very glad, Essie. You and I can have an occasional tiff without ill-feeling, and we can speak our minds honestly to each other. I almost fancy I should miss you, if you went governessing. Yes, I'm glad enough."

Well, that decision was made twenty years ago, and Esther was too loyal to regret it; yet there was no doubt that her old cousin was right, and that she had at times found life "precious dull." Mrs. Mordaunt went no more to London, and became more eccentric, as well as decidedly parsimonious, as she grew older. Her sharp tongue frightened away the few neighbours who might have been friendly, and Esther's sociable qualities had no scope.

The one break in the year's monotony was an annual visit from Curtis Iredale, who was now heir to the estate

of Applehurst, and a gentleman cordially disliked by the present owner.

Major Iredale had once come to the conclusion that Esther would look very well at the head of his table. He begrudged her to his old Cousin Rebecca. Though no longer young, she was a very graceful woman, with a distinct charm and style of her own. He admired her black-lashed eyes, and the pink colour that came easily when she was excited. Her silvery hair had the effect of powder; she sometimes looked as if she might have stepped out of a Gainsborough, but there was some force and a good deal of spirit behind her sweetness. As for her temper, it was of the kind that flashes, but never smoulders. Esther was of very mixed nationality. She had French and Irish blood in her veins, but her maternal grandfather had been a Scotchman, and she inherited her love of study, her pride, and all the qualities that gave backbone to her character from him.

The Major had been annoyed when Esther, having refused his offer, had added with a gleam of laughter: "And it is very thankful I should be that I don't want to marry you, for, if I did, Cousin Rebecca would never forgive me."

"I would undertake to tell her. You need have no fear of her. She can do you no harm," he had answered. He was, like many people of decided views, a trifle dense at times.

"Harm! Why, she has done me nothing but good all my life," Esther had cried indignantly. She was not a literal person; and was apt to be truer to the spirit than to the letter of a fact.

The Major shook his head; he was on the wrong

side of fifty, and he was a widower. His affection for Esther, though persistent, was not of a blinding or overwhelming description. He honestly considered her a very foolish woman, and he reflected that he should not be in the least surprised if, after all, that old witch did not leave her one penny.

Five years had gone by since he had proposed to her, and the episode had not interfered with his habitual visit. He noticed every year that Esther looked older, and that she was becoming worn and tired. He saw that her life was hard, and he could not understand that it was beautified by a real love for Mrs. Mordaunt. Not that he did not trust Esther, but because he was one of those people to whom it is well-nigh impossible to realise that another's loves and hates may be absolutely different from their own.

Major Iredale was expected on the evening of the day on which my story opens. Esther presently went out in the rain in order to find some related flowers with which to decorate the drawing-room in his honour. Every blossom was shattered and wet through, and she returned damped and disconsolate.

Then a telegram arrived. "Slight accident obliges me to put off visit," and her sense of depression increased.

She was not very fond of the Major, for she was a partisan, and was impelled by the warmth of her heart to side with her "Cousin Becky," but she was naturally inclined to hospitality, and she had seen no one of her own class, except an irritable old woman, for nearly two months. A fierce longing (such as she had hardly felt since she was a girl) assailed her. She longed for sunshine and change. One day was terribly

like another, and she was sick of the daily grind. She was sick of trying to wear a bright face, of studying to prevent the rust from gathering, of reading an endless succession of French novels aloud to amuse "Cousin Becky." She was sick of ordering dinner with a view to economy, and of eating it to an accompaniment of grumbles. She was not an idle person, and she was ashamed of self-pity, but it was hard work occasionally to hold "blue devils" at bay. When she was younger, they had talked in a different tone, they had been more insistent and violent; now they only murmured, "You will soon be quite old. Old like your old cousin. Already your youth has gone, and your capability for a wider life will soon be gone too. You've not lived enough. You've not had your share. Another ten years of this monotony will see you a duller, narrower woman than you are now."

"But I won't listen to these maudlin voices," said Esther. She spoke aloud, as people who live rather solitary lives are apt to, and she picked up her book again, and knit her brows over it.

Her will forced her volatile mind to attend, and she had just become really interested in the definition of happiness as "The working of the Highest Principle (whether intellectual or some other) in the best way," when the door at the end of the long room opened, and Mrs. Mordaunt hobbled in, and painfully, and with many wry faces, made her way to the fireplace.

Mrs. Mordaunt could not bear to be looked at, or helped, when gout twisted and crippled her. Esther consequently kept her eyes fixed on Aristotle, though her sympathy followed every painful step across the long room. Only when Mrs. Mordaunt plumped into

her leathern arm-chair, did Esther venture near with footstool and cushions, and then the old woman snapped at her.

"I wish you wouldn't pursue me with pillows, like a lady-companion! And, good gracious, child! what possesses you to read drab-coloured sermons? I never taught you to!"

"No, indeed! Your conscience may be clear there," laughed Esther. "But I'm not indulging in sermons, and my book can't help its complexion. It's as the maker made it, and its want of beauty doesn't affect its soul. Shall we go on with our novel before dinner?"

Mrs. Mordaunt grunted with a sudden spasm of pain.

"Can't you see I'm not in the humour for novels? The damp has got into my poor old bones. They ache like the Devil. Yes, yes, that's just what they do: they are making themselves as unpleasant as the remembrance of old sins, my dear."

Esther put her hand tenderly on the old woman's. She was never in the least afraid of Cousin Becky's temper.

"Why, you should remember your old virtues," said she. "And I could remind you of some."

They were silent after that. Esther bent again over her book, but Mrs. Mordaunt stared into the coals, not dreamily, as old people do, who see their past lives softened by the mists of time, but fiercely and eagerly.

Dinner was a very quick affair. Mrs. Mordaunt was too preoccupied to eat, and Esther's appetite failed for lack of company. They returned to the badly-lit drawing-room, where at last her companion's

mood invaded Esther's consciousness, and she looked up inquiringly.

"Why are you so restless, Cousin Becky? It must be because there is a storm coming up. I, too, felt very cross this afternoon. This room is dreadfully cold, and so dark that I see ghosts in all the corners. May I fetch a log of wood and some more coal?"

"You are always extravagant. Surely we two women do not need a fire fit to roast an ox," grumbled the old woman; but then some odd thought made her laugh suddenly and change her tone. "An ox, did I say? No, no, it's perhaps a fatted calf that you are preparing for. Well, well! do as you like, Essie. Heap the coals half up the chimney, if that pleases you."

Esther rose joyfully. She was surprised by the permission. A huge chest, lined and clamped with metal, and filled with coal, stood in the hall. Esther picked out some big lumps, and carried them to the drawing-room. Her fingers were long and slender. She had the artistic hands that are meant to do imaginative work. Apparently they had hardly fulfilled their vocation.

"Did you shut the chest again?" asked Mrs. Mordaunt sharply. Esther, who was kneeling on the hearthrug, arranging the coals, looked up with her pretty deprecating smile.

"No, I hadn't a hand free to shut with. I'll go back in a minute; but I was in a hurry to bring in some warmth, you see."

"Well, Essie, I'll own that you've done that," said Mrs. Mordaunt so gravely, almost tenderly, that Esther, who had expected a scolding, sat amazed, wondering

what strange mood possessed her cousin. At last she said, with a little start and shiver—

“Why, I believe it is not a storm, but it is something going to happen that makes us restless. Have you heard any strange news to-day?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that my dearly beloved heir and next-of-kin has put off coming to look after the state of the shoes he hopes shortly to step into,” chuckled the old lady; and Esther felt unreasonably disappointed.

“Is that all? I can’t think why you receive the Major, since you dislike him so much,” said she.

Mrs. Mordaunt chuckled again. “He is the Death’s Head at the feast, my dear! I think about my coffin when I see dear Curtis’s calculating eye noting how the paper is peeling in the dining-room, and how many holes there are in the drawing-room curtains. It is good for us old people to realise the approach of the inevitable; moreover, my heir has had a salutary effect on me. He has prevented my giving way to extravagance. I’m not going to save his purse. He may pay for new curtains himself, and the old ones shall last my time: that’s what I’ve said to myself many a time after his annual visitation. Oh, I should have done a great deal for the old place, if it hadn’t been for my Cousin Curtis, but I won’t patch shoes for his feet, Esther! I don’t like the shape of ’em.”

Esther sighed, and her spirits sank lower. Though she occasionally craved for a change to break the monotony of the days, she was very far from desiring—indeed, she nervously dreaded—the one change that seemed possible. Her thoughts turned to speculations on the life beyond the grave, but the older woman’s

were busy with the present. Cousin Becky was not speculative, she had a good grip still on this existence.

"Shall I come to your room to read you to sleep?" asked Esther, when ten o'clock struck.

She had fallen into a bad habit of reading aloud till late at night, for Mrs. Mordaunt was sleepless with the sleeplessness of old age.

"No, thank you. I've got enough to occupy my mind. I don't need you at all to-night."

An odd sense of estrangement touched Esther. The motherliness which lies deep in the nature of every good woman, had found some vent in care for this old cousin, whom, she secretly believed, she alone understood. Just now it seemed as if something strange, some shadowy presence, stood between them, but of course the idea was ridiculous, born of that oversensitiveness which is the bane of the unmarried.

"How independent you are. Well, if you won't have me, I'll go to bed. Good-night!" she said, trying to laugh.

Cousin Becky did not answer; she was hobbling across the room, muttering to herself, and thinking eagerly and deeply of other things.

CHAPTER II

ESTHER went to bed, but lay wakeful. All night long the wind blew, filling her room with ghosts. The old wood of the stairs and of the long corridor creaked. Footsteps seemed constantly passing up and down. Esther knew well enough that the North-Wester was responsible for these phantoms; but she never quite liked them. Her mind was sensible, but her nerves were too tightly strung. When the grey morning began to dawn, she was glad, and she got up to sit by the window and watch the welcome light steal over the fields and to listen to the stir of awaking life.

When she was younger she had been in the habit of going out at cock-crow, and running across the lawn, and into the field beyond, ostensibly to pick mushrooms, but in reality because she loved to taste the wonderful pure freshness of the early morning. Now she told herself that thirty-seven was too old for such pranks, and that they were apt to lead to twinges of rheumatism across the shoulders. Anyone can enjoy a sunset, but to enjoy a sunrise one must have the courage of high spirits. If a woman has children in whom her life has renewed itself, she can afford to spend her middle age in the same place which saw her girlhood; but if she has not, she is apt to be uncom-

fortably haunted by her own past youth, and would do well to eschew such scenes.

Esther by no means wished to step backwards, yet she was sometimes unwittingly depressed by the vision of the girl who had lived in this very same bedroom, and run about under those very same trees.

One sunshiny day that girl had run across the field to meet the postman, and he, being not only a postman, but a messenger of Fate, had brought her a newspaper which had looked like any other newspaper, but which had made the ground rock under her feet and the colour fade out of the sky. To this day she preferred skirting the field to going by the path; but she was ashamed of the unacknowledged preference. It was not likely that sorrow and she would twice meet at the same spot, nor was it possible that the sky would change colour and the world grow greyer now for any paragraph in any paper.

While she sat by the window on this especial morning, she noticed the figure of a man approaching the house by the footpath. He appeared first among the trees in the distance, his outline blurred by the constant drizzle of fine rain. Then he came nearer, and, leaning both elbows on the fence that divided the field from the lawn, stared unblushingly at the house.

Esther wondered momentarily who and what he was, for strangers were rare at Applehurst, but not being of an inquisitive turn of mind, she presently took up her Greek Testament, and thought no more about him. During these quiet years she had had an unusual amount of time for reading and pondering. Unusual,

for while we all profess to think for ourselves in this rather bustling age, comparatively few among us give our souls room to stretch in. We entertain so diverse and motley a company, that we can accord but scant and passing attention to each individual idea. We have such an immense bowing acquaintance with many theories, that we make but few tried friends among them. Fortunate is the person whose books have become so intimate with him, that even should their bodies be burned (an indignity unlikely to occur to the possessions of the true reader), their words can be recalled at will. Yet who so loves the spirit that is in a book, loves peacefully and comparatively unfruitfully; while who so loves the spirit that is made manifest in flesh and blood, lays hold on the two great teachers, Joy and Grief.

Esther did not guess that a milestone was reached, that her life was passing into another phase. Yet all that day a creeping uneasiness grew on her, and, as the week dragged on, it intensified. It dated from the evening of that long wet day on which the Major had put off his accustomed visit.

A mystery had crept into the house. But what possible opening could there be for anything mysterious in the simple or everyday existence of two women? Esther would have said of two elderly women. She scoffed at her own fancies, as, when she was a child, she had scoffed at her own foolish fear of the dark. The result of the discipline was no greater now than then. She had still felt (in spite of stern self-mockery) that wolves' heads were jumping at her from the wall, while with shut eyes she scampered up dark stairs to bed. She still knew that her old cousin was

in some strange fashion changed, though she assured herself that the idea must be born of groundless morbid fancy.

Yet, as time went on, it gradually became plain that Cousin Rebecca was elated rather than depressed. At first, indeed, Esther had more than once surprised her muttering to herself eagerly; shaking her head doubtfully, debating something with a painful intensity that was hardly accounted for by the explanation.

"My dear! I was just considering whether I would try a new cure for old age. That is what is the matter with me, you know. It was once considered incurable; but I hear there is a new young doctor at Bridge who can cope with anything."

Later, the doubt seemed no longer to trouble her, and a triumphant gleam shone in her black eyes. She forgot her gout, and there was such a renewal of life and energy about her (though Cousin Becky had never been languid) that it really appeared as if the elixir of youth had been found and swallowed.

The skies were still laden, the landscape still blurred and sodden with rain. It is terribly trying to the nerves to be shut up with one woman and a secret. Esther went for solitary walks through the dripping park, and Mrs. Mordaunt encouraged her to go with such cheerfulness, that she could not but suspect that her absence was a relief. The old lady had never been of an expansive or confidential turn of mind, yet Esther had certainly flattered herself that she was given some confidence in return for the warm love she had lavished—apparently she had flattered herself too much.

A slight diversion at last occurred in the shape of a letter from the Major, who announced that his ankle

was mending, and that he hoped, if convenient to his Cousin Rebecca, to pay his long-deferred visit to Applehurst on Monday week. Mrs. Mordaunt smiled grimly.

"He comes to visit Applehurst, not us, you observe."

"You are always unfair to the Major," rejoined Esther. "You twist the meaning of his sentences awry, and impute motives to him."

"Well, well—write to bid him come. But, if I am a little less than kind, my dear, be careful lest you err in the other direction, and live to repent it."

"I am too old to repent," said Esther; and she went with alacrity to see about making ready the spare room.

The furniture of Applehurst was ancient. It was also scanty. It belonged to a less luxurious age, when bedrooms were not furnished like sitting-rooms. Esther had contrived to make the guest-chamber (she always, in accordance with an old-fashioned usage, which is dying out, called it the "best" bedroom) cheerful, by filching on its behalf from left to right, from upstairs and downstairs. She had re-covered an easy-chair with her own hands. She had had a quaint grandfather's clock moved from what had once been the nursery, and a carved oak chest had been purloined from the hall. The warm crimson rug which graced the best bedroom had been bought with her own money, and the writing-table in the bay window had originally been in her own room. She had hospitable instincts, and loved to prepare for the comfort of any guest.

Great was her surprise and annoyance when, on opening the door of her especial kingdom, she saw it

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bereft of half its glories. The rug was gone. So was the writing-table. So was the easy-chair. She stood aghast; then called the housemaid, a red-cheeked, wide-eyed country girl, who loved her.

"Oh, Miss," Polly burst out—"oh, Miss, I know what you've called me about. Oh, Miss, I could 'ave cried when the mistress came wandering in here whilst you was out walking in the rain."

"'There's too much in here, Polly,' says she; 'why, Miss Esther has made it a Benjamin among rooms.' She bid me move the rug and the chair and the table to the room next hers, that she's been so taken up with last week. Oh, Miss, she's had pictures hung there, and she's bought a new jug and basin, but this room is what you've always took an interest in, and it went to my heart to move the things. Oh, Miss! it did seem a shame."

Polly's fashion of beginning her sentences with an ejaculation, like a Greek chorus, had always amused Esther, but at that moment she felt more inclined to cry than to laugh.

"It is all right, Polly," said she; "I had forgotten for the moment about this new arrangement. It is an excellent plan, I think. You need not wait."

But when the sympathetic Polly had gone, she sat down on the easy-chair that was left, and shook her head dolefully.

"My dear, you should never waste a fib," she said to herself, with a funny twinge of recollection. "Polly wasn't deceived. She didn't believe I had 'forgotten.' But what is Cousin Becky about?"

She sat for some time pondering, then, with a sigh, devoted herself to the putting up of the fresh muslin

curtains she had been hemming. The sun broke through the clouds at last and shone on her hair, while she wielded a big hammer energetically. She was surprised when the clock on the stairs chimed the hour. Five o'clock! Cousin Becky had been left to amuse herself all the afternoon.

Esther hurried downstairs, feeling somewhat guilty, and with explanations on the tip of her tongue. They were unneeded—the old lady was not alone. A strange voice assailed her ear as she crossed the hall. Across Esther's mind flashed the thought that her cousin's remark about the new young doctor had perhaps had more seriousness in it than she had supposed. She had taken it as a joke, but possibly the old lady had really hankered after him,—had longed for some new treatment, had suddenly wearied of her ailments.

"She might have told me," thought Esther, then chid herself for feminine pettiness, and opened the door.

The newcomer was seated with his back to Esther, and with his chair drawn close up to Mrs. Mordaunt. She was bending forward, and both her wrinkled hands were clasped in his. Esther drew a short, quick breath.

Their attitude startled her, and something else besides. Which of us, I wonder, has lived to middle age, and not known the strangeness of surprising an unfamiliar expression on a face whose every look we thought we knew? Some stranger brings it to the face of brother or sister we've loved from childhood. We rub our eyes, half-ruefully, amazed. But Esther had had little to do with sisters. The best part of her affections were twined round this cranky old woman. It was hard, indeed, that Cousin Becky

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should surprise her. One may fairly expect youth to play tricks, but that something should happen to age seemed so beyond the bounds of possibility.

The stranger turned, and his sombre eyes lit up with a smile. He was a square-shouldered, spare man, with something foreign and gipsy-like about him. His forehead was broad and low, his hair touched with white on the left temple, but jet-black elsewhere. He was tanned by a tropical sun.

"Is this my Cousin Esther?" said he. But Esther stood absolutely still and speechless.

Then Mrs. Mordaunt rose stiffly and slowly, resting one hand on the stranger's arm—she who never leant on anyone.

"Esther," she said solemnly—"Esther, this my son was dead, and is alive—was lost, and is found."

There was a dead silence, save for the unnaturally loud, unabashed ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Not one of the three could have found voice for a minute. It seemed to Esther almost as if God had spoken. Was it because Cousin Becky had (unconsciously) used the very words of the father in the Bible? Or was it because the divine passion of motherhood vibrated in her voice? Even afterwards, the doubts that commonsense raised were apt to shrivel at the bare recollection of that moment—illogically perhaps—but Esther was not a very logical person.

It was the stranger who first recovered himself and broke the tension. "We have taken Miss Mordaunt very much by surprise," said he.

Esther looked at Mrs. Mordaunt with a certain wistful dignity, which (being of exceeding alert observation) he at once appreciated.

"Yes. I am surprised—naturally," she said, "but my cousin will explain everything to me presently."

"I will leave you together," he answered. He was quick to take a hint. Then another strange thing happened. Cousin Becky, who had always been so fiercely independent, held him fast, and Esther saw that her fingers tightened on his coat sleeve with a nervous clutch.

The colour rose in her cheek. "No; I will go," she said.

The man laughed—a rather melancholy little laugh—and gently freed himself. "Oh, you'll see quite enough of me soon, mother." Then he walked through the French window on to the lawn, but paused a moment to look back at the two women. "Of course, I know one has no business to emerge from a grave—you must try to forgive that," he said to Esther, and so crossed the lawn and went into the field.

While he was in the act of opening the little iron gate, Esther remembered that she had seen him before from her bedroom window. They watched him out of sight, then Mrs. Mordaunt caught at and recovered something of her old self, albeit she was still oddly tremulous and shaken.

"My dear," she said, "give me a cup of tea, and drink some yourself, before we have any more scenes. Not that you made a to-do. It was entirely my fault."

Esther poured out the tea, but left her own untasted. Mrs. Mordaunt drank deliberately, hobbled across the room, settled her cap before the glass, and then returned to her arm-chair.

"Well, really, Esther, I wish you would say some-

thing!" she remarked at last, with an irritability which was reassuring.

Esther smiled with lips that quivered. "I don't know what to say, Cousin Becky; it's as if the world had turned topsy-turvy. It's so overwhelming. You've never told me anything about your son. I know that his portrait hangs in the library, and I have heard that he was accidentally killed when he was seventeen, and that his body was never recovered. That was many, many years ago, wasn't it? Long before I knew you. When—when did he come back?"

"It is fourteen days since I had his letter. I thought it was folly to believe in it, my dear—and yet I knew at once that it was true."

Again there was that unusual quaver in the usually strong, harsh voice. It made Esther jump up suddenly, and, kneeling on the floor, fling both arms round the old woman.

"Dear Cousin Becky. Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you trust me? Didn't you feel sure that I should be glad of anything that is a joy to you?"

Mrs. Mordaunt looked at her with an odd, painful eagerness.

"Oh, Essie," she said, "I'm an unbelieving old sinner. I've had to fight for my own hand, but I'm fond of you, child. I liked you much better than your sisters from the first; and I was sorry for you too, for I saw you'd heart and brains, and to my mind women are happier without too much of either. Yes, I've been fond of you. Will you stand by me now? They'll all swear against me, you know. That dear cousin of mine will put up his eye-glass, and take his oath that he'd know my boy better than the mother

who bore him, and the lawyers will come round asking questions, and I—I haven't the grit I had once. My nerve isn't what it was. I'm getting very old. What if I'm not up to 'em all? Will you stand by me now?"

Esther's arms clung more protectingly, but a great dread came over her. What was indeed the truth? Could it be possible that this man had once been the model for the sandy-haired, weak-looking youth of the portrait, or could it be that he was an utter scoundrel, intent on the cruellest of tricks?

"Of course I will stand by you, now and always," she replied. "But tell me more—oh, I wish I had known from the beginning."

"I'm too tired to be questioned," said Mrs. Mordaunt; and that in itself was an admission which filled Esther with tenderest remorse. "I didn't tell you because I hardly knew what to make of his letter. I didn't see how you could believe in it, my dear. Mind you, as I said just now, though my heart told me the truth, my mind wasn't satisfied—till I saw him."

"And directly you saw him, you were absolutely sure?"

"Ah! When I saw him," said Mrs. Mordaunt; and again Esther's doubts were awed into quiescence. "When I saw him! My dear, do you think a mother ever doubts? Remember, he was not a baby when he left me, but already almost a man. How could I be mistaken? He doubted! Silly, silly fellow! He thought, 'Perhaps she won't recognise me.' Do you know what happened? I just stretched out my arms. Such old arms to be blessed again. He stood there in the doorway (where you were just now) and said nothing—but I—I would have run to him, Essie, but my knees shook so that I couldn't; I could only hold

out my arms—that have been empty all these long years—and he had to come. Why, what's the matter? There's nothing to look sad about. No, no, to-day we should ring bells and — roast calves! We've mourned enough! Good Lord, we've mourned enough! I'll tell you more—but first just say again that you'll be on my side—you'll swear to be on my side."

"Yes, yes. Who should be, if not I, who am like your own child," said Esther, but then corrected herself, "Who love you as if I were your child."

She persuaded Mrs. Mordaunt to go to rest then. Was it indeed joy, or was it tragedy that had come into the old house? Esther could hardly tell, but she knew that the old woman's hands were hot, and her eyes over-bright, and tenderness and long, long habit of care overcame all other feelings for the moment.

When she was alone, she tried to think over what had happened, but she felt instead, which is fatal to meditation.

Esther was a person in whom people were naturally inclined to confide; she had heard many love-stories, for she was both sympathetic and honourable. Yet no love-story of young man or girl had ever so nearly touched her as did that description of the son's home-coming. The elderly grizzled son, and the old woman who had never spoken of him.

"So I held out my arms—that had been empty all these years."

"And all these years I never guessed that they felt empty," thought Esther. "But at least they are full now." Then she noticed that tears had fallen on her hands, and indignantly brushed them away. "As if I had any need to cry," she said.

CHAPTER III

“
But which Pretender is, and which is King,
God bless us all! is quite another thing.”

MAJOR IREDALE walked across the park which was one day to be his. He noted that the trees were terribly in need of thinning, and that the fences were out of repair. He had a bad opinion of Mrs. Mordaunt's land agent; but the old lady was obstinate, and he knew by much irritating experience that she would never listen to advice. It was a pity this knowledge did not prevent his offering it.

Major Iredale has been set before the reader in an unpleasing light, for he was a cause of irritation to Mrs. Mordaunt, both because he was heir to the estate, and because he had an arbitrary will which clashed with her own. As for Esther, her judgment was apt to be biassed by her affection; yet, for all his unpopularity at Applehurst, he was by no means an heir to be ashamed of. There is no doubt that he might have been the pride and joy of some old ladies. He was kind when he was given way to; chivalrous to weakness, honest as daylight. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth, and he was a fine-looking man still. His fifty years sat lightly

on his shoulders. His dark eyes were keen as ever. Mrs. Mordaunt had dubbed them "calculating eyes," but if it were true that they were ever sharp to note blemishes, whether in curtains or characters, on the other hand they had never been ashamed to look anyone in the face. For the rest, the Major's features were (like his cousin's) regular and well-cut. His mouth was hidden with a heavy black moustache, which was a pity, for it was a good mouth, expressive of self-restraint, and of some sadness too, which, had it been visible, might have softened the general impression of hardness. His voice was harsh, and his manner too dictatorial.

Squire Iredale had always been held up to the Major as a bad example and the "wicked man" of the family, but Mrs. Mordaunt liked to annoy her nephew by vowing she saw a strong likeness between him and that reprobate.

"My poor father was an eccentric sinner, and a bit of a bully," she would say. He had a loud voice, and bawled drinking-songs in a pot-house. He was also a fine rider and a first-rate shot. You are a fine rider too, Curtis, and I hear you preach sermons to your tenants. My poor father couldn't abide a Whig. You remember the story of his rousing Bob Hatch out of bed and chiveying him across Battle Down with a hunting-crop? A disgraceful story, you say? Well, someone told me you took away your custom from the grocer at Highbury on account of his having voted for the Radical candidate. Yes, there is certainly a resemblance."

"It only exists in your extraordinarily lively imagination, Cousin Rebecca," the Major would reply

drily; but, indeed, there were days on which he considered his cousin something worse than "imaginative."

And yet, for all her gibes, and for all his deep disapproval of her and her ways, it was not only self-interest that made him still pay his annual visit to Applehurst. The Major had been a prime favourite with old Mr. Mordaunt. In his youth he had spent much of his leave at Applehurst, had been flattered by the old man's consulting him about the management of the estate, and had grown tenaciously attached to the place and all belonging to it. In one sense of the word he was "attached" even to his Cousin Rebecca. She might flout his opinions, she might be, and was, to his mind, the type of all that a woman should not be, but he never forgot that he was her nearest male relative; he would have come to her aid in any emergency. He was a born Conservative, to whom the breaking of a long habit would seem almost like the relinquishing of a duty.

The October day was exquisitely beautiful, as October in England can be. The trees flamed with crimson and gold, the sky was blue with that wonderfully pure and dazzling blue that comes before and after heavy rain. The smell of burning weeds was in the crisp air. The Major followed the grass path under the beeches, looking sharply to right and left. The scene was full of colour as some illuminated missal.

"It's certainly a nice little property—or would be, if it were in better order," thought he.

Presently he descried Esther coming to meet him.

Her grey dress glimmered among the orange-tinted leaves; he was pleased to see her. The nice little property would always want something, a finishing touch of grace and sentiment, if she were not there.

His face brightened, and he quickened his steps, and greeted her with an evident pleasure that made her feel rueful, almost guilty, though it was certainly not her fault that she was the bearer of most dismaying news.

"I've come to meet you, because I want to talk to you, Curtis," she said. But he did not understand that there was an especial subject which she wished to broach, and the revelation hung fire.

"I am glad to see you, Cousin Esther," said he. (Esther was not, in truth, related to him by any tie of kinship, but he had always firmly insisted that they should count each other as cousins). "It was a good thought, and we might take the path to the left, which will lengthen the way to the house, eh? My hostess is probably not so very impatient for my company. By the bye, I was thinking while I came along, that, if she would only consent to be guided by someone who knows something about the management of land,"—and he proceeded to explain the alterations which might advantageously be put in hand, if so unlikely a conversion were to occur. He talked fluently, gesticulating slightly, laying down the law with energy. Esther, heeding none of the details of his advice, yet listened to him with compunction.

Every step was bringing them nearer to the house, and there, perhaps actually in the drawing-room, was this stranger, who was yet no stranger, but already of first importance.

"Of course I am aware that my cousin prides herself on her independence, and will listen to no suggestion of mine," went on the Major, winding up his remarks in that piqued tone which his "Cousin Rebecca" mischievously enjoyed rousing.

"Perhaps no woman is really independent; there is generally one person who can turn her world upside down," said Esther.

She wished to prepare the way for disclosure, to give him a hint of what was in store for him. But the Major brushed aside her delicate warnings with an impatient sweep.

"I do not want to turn anyone's world upside down. That, if you will pardon me, Esther, is an exaggerated expression."

Esther laughed almost hysterically. "You? I was not speaking of you, Curtis. No, you could not do that, indeed. I was speaking of someone else. Someone whom Cousin Becky loves. I have something to tell you."

They had nearly reached the house now, were, indeed, in the field on the far side of the lawn. The Major stood still, turned round, and looked full at Esther. "Why, my dear Esther, you are quite nervous," he rejoined. "Why did you not say before that you had something to tell me? You need not try to spare my nerves, as if I were a delicate lady. Come, we will sit on that log under the maple tree. Now, what is it?"

"Something has happened," replied Esther.

She came to a full stop, for that fact by itself was surprising to her. After months of monotony, after a life unnaturally quiet, a sharp turn in the road took her breath away.

Then she began again at another end of the story. "Curtis, do you remember Cousin Becky's son?"

"Perfectly," replied the Major. He frowned, as if the memory were distasteful. "Perfectly—for I do not forget faces. In that respect my memory is remarkably clear. I could swear to the identity of anyone with whom I have once conversed. I was but twenty-four years of age when I last saw Gatton, and he was a lad of seventeen. It is exactly thirty years since he died, but his figure is as clear to my mind's eye, as well, as yours is."

"What was he like?" cried Esther eagerly. "Surely he was not at all like the portrait that hangs in the library?"

"That picture flattered him," said the Major. "He was a sickly-looking youth, with sloping shoulders and a narrow chest. He was not a good lad, and I should say that he was rather below the average standard of intelligence. He was a thorn in his mother's side from the time he was in the nursery. He was a sneaking little coward, and he was afraid of her; but poor old Mr. Mordaunt pampered him. It was a case of 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.' Gatton was spoilt by his father from the time he could crawl."

"But his hair could never have been sandy," rejoined Esther.

"Pardon me. Sandy it certainly was. But may I ask what the colour of Gatton Mordaunt's hair has to do with us at present?"

"He was supposed to have been drowned in some Italian bay, was he not?"

"He was drowned. There was no room for reasonable doubt on that score. He probably went out too

far, the tide turned, and he was unable to swim back against it—or he may have been seized with cramp. He was never a strong swimmer. His clothes and his watch were left on the beach of the cove; his body came ashore many miles farther north, some days later. It was no longer recognisable, but was reverently buried by some Roman Catholic fishermen in the cemetery of St. Paolo. I recollect these details, because I was spending my leave at Applehurst when the news came. I had no home of my own, and my Cousin Rebecca and her old husband were good enough to make me welcome here. After Gatton's death I became heir to Applehurst, and my position was changed.

"Mr. Mordaunt became much more attached to me, but Aunt Rebecca seemed to nurse a grudge from that date. Mr. Mordaunt was an old man for his years. He could not have been more than seventy-seven when his son died, but he looked ninety, and he became feeble in mind after that. Cousin Rebecca was forty years his junior, I believe, and a masterful woman—as she is still. I never saw her shed any tears for Gatton. What grief she felt was probably tempered by relief, I should say."

"You would say quite wrong!" cried Esther. "I don't think you could ever have understood Cousin Becky in the least! She loved her son passionately, and has longed for him all these many years."

"Has she, indeed?" replied the Major drily. "Well, Cousin Esther, I fancy I've an inkling of what it is you are trying to tell me. Someone has been writing a letter purporting to contain news relating to Gatton's death, or possibly the writer has unearthed a grandson,

eh? Gatton was only seventeen, to be sure! but he was precocious in some ways, though backward in others. I shouldn't have thought my Aunt Rebecca likely to be soft about that kind of thing, but she is getting old—and one never quite knows”—

“A letter? Oh, if it were only a letter!” cried Esther. “He has come back, Curtis! No letter, but Gatton himself! Not that he is in the least like the person you describe, but then how should he be after thirty years? He is not feeble-looking, and he is as dark as you are. Of course, if he was only seventeen when he was drowned, he has had time to change. She is so happy—so excited; she is like another woman. Her eyes follow him about the room, and she gives way to him about everything, and that is the greatest miracle of all to me” (Esther's voice broke momentarily), “to see how she has changed and softened, and how she loves him.”

“Good God! Here's a pretty business,” said the Major. “How long has this been going on? When did this fellow first turn up?”

“I believe his letter reached Cousin Becky on the day on which you were to have come to us. She was very excited that evening, but I did not guess what was the matter. He came himself a week later.”

“You should have written to me at once. You should never have allowed him to hang about the place for a whole week. So my cousin actually believes that Gatton—Gatton who was buried when we were all young—is risen from the dead! She is not a simpleton either,” he added meditatively.

“She believes that he pretended that he was drowned. He has always lived in her heart.”

"Well, this means some trouble at the best—and at the worst"—

"What do you call the best, and what do you call the worst?" asked Esther sharply.

The Major, who always hardened at opposition, defined his position clearly. "At the best, this man is an impudent impostor who deserves whipping, if not hanging," said he. "And, since my cousin has taken it into her head that he is not an impostor, we shall have a fine to-do over the unmasking. At the worst, Gatton Mordaunt really has come to light again. If that were so, it would be a misfortune for all connected with him, for he was as thoroughly vicious a youth as it was ever my ill-luck to meet. It would be a black day for the property, and for the tenants, and for his mother, that saw him back. To my mind it is not in the slightest degree likely that the worst has happened. If Gatton had been above ground, we should have had trouble before now. But I've lived too many years in the world to say off-hand that the event is actually impossible. When I see this claimant, I shall know what he is, anyhow!"

His certainty recalled Mrs. Mordaunt's words to Esther's mind.

"They'll all swear against me! That dear cousin of mine will take his oath that he'd know my boy better than does the mother who bore him."

"You don't think much about Cousin Becky's feelings," she cried, with some heat. "You say that her only son's return is the worst that could happen; yet to her it is the very best! Surely, if she recognises him, that is a proof in itself. Is she the kind of woman to be bamboozled? Or are mothers in the habit of

taking strangers for their dead sons? Why, Cousin Becky is as shrewd and sensible a person as you'll meet in a twelvemonth; and about this she should know better than you."

"I fear the fellow has got round you already," said the Major in some consternation. "I am sorry for it, Esther. I hoped you had more sense. Whichever way you take the matter, if you put sentiment on one side (which is just what you never will do) this is troublesome news!"

He got up and walked towards the house; for he was prompt in making up his mind, as those people are who see all things at a direct angle and in a clear, dry light, and who are untroubled by side glimpses, or misleading effects of atmosphere. Only Esther tried to stop him, because, to her mind, as perhaps to most women's, happiness seemed an easily broken and perishable possession, and she was tender of her old cousin's late-found joy."

"Oh, wait! be very careful! She is getting old. Be gentle, Curtis!" Esther cried; but he did not heed, being not unnaturally impatient of such remonstrances.

Esther followed him, laughing ruefully. One might just as well say to the Fates, "Be careful, lest your shears cut someone's life in two!"

CHAPTER IV

"A lie, which is all a lie, may be met and fought with outright,
A lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight."

ESTHER followed the Major into the drawing-room, where sat Mrs. Mordaunt, upright, more alert than usual, and with the light of battle in her eyes. All traces of the weakness that had so touched the younger woman were gone now. Mrs. Mordaunt would never be weak before a foe.

"Well, Curtis, I'm doubly pleased to see you, for I've news to tell," said she. "You didn't expect that, I'm sure. We've been dead-alive for a long time! Your kind visits the only break in our lives, eh, Esther? But now we have news—fine, stirring news for you."

Mrs. Mordaunt was more prettily dressed than usual. She had a fine old lace scarf over her head, and lace ruffles at her wrists. That Spanish lace had not seen the light for many and many a long year. It smelt of cedar-wood and camphor. It gave Esther an object-lesson. A woman is a woman to her dying day, however old she may be. At seventy-five she may yet bring out her best, to signify her joy at the coming of her beloved, for she is seldom a materialist, her clothes are always symbolic to her.

"Esther has told me your news," rejoined the Major.

"And you congratulate me?" said she. "You have always disapproved of my management of my

own property. Old women are not fitted to be rulers, are they? They should confine themselves to being figure-heads, and employ a good prime minister. My prime minister has come at last. A little late in the day, perhaps—only just in time—but I've kept the place for him. No one has ever taken it—no, no—no one in the whole world can take the son's place."

"My dear Cousin," said the Major, "you will forgive my saying that this is a grave matter which requires impartial and matter-of-fact investigation."

He felt intensely irritated. Esther had been inclined to be sentimental; but her gentle feminine tenderness was as nothing compared to the fierce triumphant exultation of this old woman.

"Ah!" said she. "There are facts and facts, Curtis. But here comes one of 'em to answer for himself—here is my son." The door opened while she spoke, and the stranger strolled into the room.

The Major turned stiffly, put up his eye-glass, and then let it drop with a grim, contemptuous smile. Whatever he had expected to see, this man was evidently a surprise to him.

"Dear me! You were boys when you met last. You can hardly be expected to recognise each other," said Mrs. Mordaunt briskly. She knitted very fast, dropping her stitches recklessly.

"I certainly cannot pretend that I recognise you, sir," said the Major drily.

"Ah! you haven't my memory for faces, or perhaps I haven't worn so well as you, but I should have known you anywhere," replied the stranger.

The cool assurance of the remark warmed the Major's blood. "Cousin Rebecca," said he, "I do not wish to

speak to this (he made a wry face) gentleman in your and my Cousin Esther's presence. Perhaps you will allow me to show him the way to the library, where we can be undisturbed for a few minutes."

The old lady drew herself up. "My son must of course do as he pleases."

The stranger glanced at the clock. "It is nearly time to dress for dinner, but, if you'll kindly follow me, I'm at your service. I have not forgotten the way to the library."

He went out of the room first, and the Major followed with his teeth clenched.

The library was a gloomy room. The trees which, in the Major's opinion, so sadly needed thinning, had spread their branches too close to its windows, and the heavy flock paper was darkened with age.

Old Mr. Mordaunt had never loved books; though, when increasing infirmities had bereft him of the power for other enjoyments, he had taken a mild interest in bindings. Handsome, unappreciated volumes, clothed in purple and gold, lined the mahogany bookcases. They had seldom been opened. The Major recollected that he had once arranged a set of classics with his own hands on the shelf on which they had stood undisturbed from that day to this. Mr. Mordaunt had directed his labours from the red-velvet-coloured arm-chair with big wheels, that had now been pushed into a far corner. It seemed to the Major that his Cousin Rebecca had pushed all memories of her husband into the background. He disapproved her attitude. A widow should be a widow indeed, not a cheerfully independent person, who neither asks nor accepts protection.

The stranger lit a lamp and stood under it, with

the light falling full on his face. Behind him was the writing-table at which Mr. Mordaunt had been accustomed to sit, talking querulously, and holding a pen between palsied, shaking fingers. Over the writing-table hung the portrait of the only son of the house.

The Major glanced at that portrait, and was astounded at the impudence of the claimant. He had despised and disliked his Cousin Gatton with the thoroughgoing contempt of a healthy youth for a feeble degenerate type; yet he felt as if now—after all these years—he was in some strange fashion forced into being that despised boy's defender. This fellow was robbing the dead.

"There is no use in carrying on the farce with me," said he, in his strong, harsh voice, "because, unfortunately for you, I have a clear recollection of my Cousin Gatton Mordaunt—I need say no more."

The stranger following the direction of the Major's glance, looked quickly behind him, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"That portrait was never in the least like me," he said coolly. "I may as well own at once that it's damnably unlike now."

The Major laughed grimly. He could almost have fancied that the weak mouth and shifty blue eyes of the portrait smiled mockingly in reply.

"But thirty years is a long time," continued the stranger. "We are none of us what we were when I left England. This is not much like my mother nowadays either, is it?"

He thrust his hand into his breast-pocket, and drawing out a small leathern case, handed it to the Major, who opened it in silence. The case was worn and

stained, and the miniature within was faded. Mrs. Mordaunt was represented at that most unbecoming stage of a woman's life when she has lost the freshness of youth, but has not yet attained to the dignity of age. It was an over-laboured and vulgar production. The black hair was inartistically arranged in hard glossy bands, the black eyes were made to languish, the strong and vigorous character of the original was scarcely hinted at. The Major would hardly have recognised that the picture was intended to be a portrait of his aunt, had it not been for the belt set with Indian stones, which was faithfully and elaborately rendered, and which he had often seen her wear.

"How did you get this?" he asked shortly.

"It was given to me by my mother (who had it taken expressly for me) just before I left England thirty years ago," replied the stranger. "It has knocked about with me ever since."

The Major stared hard and shook his head. "That is a lie," said he, "for you are not Mrs. Mordaunt's son."

If this claimant had, even in the slightest degree resembled Gatton, the Major felt that he would have listened with some appearance of patience. If, for example, he had possessed sloping shoulders and light-coloured blinking eyes, if he had stammered as Gatton had always stammered when nervous or excited; but the imposture was too bare-faced. It was impossible to accord it a polite semblance of consideration. Yet the next moment a flash of genuine unmistakable anger in his opponent's eyes startled him. Genuine indignation is singularly convincing; and why should a rogue mind being dubbed a liar?

The stranger made a quick movement to regain

possession of the portrait. The Major in his surprise recoiled; somehow the little case fell to the ground between them. A hinge broke in the fall, and the miniature, which had been fastened into the velvet lining, fell out. The Major stooped to pick it up. A scrap of paper, yellow with age, was gummed at the back of the ivory. He held it under the light and read the faded writing aloud, slowly and with difficulty.

"To my dear son. March 15th, 1863. 'Many waters shall not quench love.' Rebecca Mordaunt."

"That is mine," said the stranger gravely.

Somehow the anger that had flamed suddenly between the two men was sobered. The Major hesitated for a second, and then returned the case to him.

"No—that can't be," he said. "For it is her son's, and he lies in his coffin. How you have come by Gatton Mordaunt's property I don't know; but, since you have come by it, and since Mrs. Mordaunt believes in you, there is nothing for it but to take the matter seriously, and see it through. I do not know what other cards you may have up your sleeve, but I think you'll stand in the dock for this."

He looked again at Gatton Mordaunt's smirking portrait, and then at the brown, keen face of the man who stood before him. Somehow, impostor though he believed this stranger to be, he liked him better than he liked the memory of his cousin.

"Look here," said he, "the way you are going leads to the gallows, but you've not the look of the born gaol-bird. You are healthy and well made; and I don't think you are a coward. Perhaps the hunger of someone who hangs on to you has driven you to play a mad game; but it won't pay, man. Turn round while

you can! Go out of that door, and out of this house, while you've still the chance. Throw it up!"

An odd expression crossed the stranger's face, and then he laughed.

"Why, you're not a bad sort, Major," said he, "but I am not in the least hungry, thank you; and in all the world there is only one old woman who clings to me, and she's waiting in the next room."

And at that the Major was ashamed of his own impulse. It had been surely the acme of folly to appeal to a non-existent better nature; the sort of sentimental folly that a woman (such as Esther) might be pardoned for, but which was inexcusable in himself. He turned on his heel, and left the room, without deigning another word, good or bad.

Esther was anxiously waiting him on the landing upstairs. She had slipped quickly into her grey tea-gown, and was leaning over the balusters watching for the opening of the library door. It is the old-fashioned type of woman who waits anxiously—but in some respects Esther was old-fashioned. Her life had run in a somewhat narrow groove between high walls; there had been little scope for action in it; sometimes she had panted for more fresh air and a wider view, but, since that was denied, she instinctively made the most of what emotional outlet she had. All that concerned her old cousin was of vital importance to her.

"Well, Curtis, what conclusion have you come to?" she inquired.

The Major was still angry with himself, and he fairly snorted with disgust and contempt. "For cool impertinence I've never seen the fellow's equal!" he replied. "I must own that my Cousin Rebecca's assurance so far

impressed me that I expected that the man would at least bear some sort of likeness to her son, or to what her son might have become in the course of years."

"And does he?" asked Esther faintly.

"Does he?" shouted the Major. "Gatton—why Gatton was a spindle-legged, narrow-chested weakling. If a hundred years had passed, they couldn't have turned him into a swarthy rascal of this description. It is preposterous! I could hardly contain myself when my aunt turned to the beggar with her 'Here is my son.' Her son, indeed! I could have laughed aloud, if it had not been for her presence. I spoke my mind as soon as he and I were alone. If this were my house I should send for the police without loss of time; and so I shall tell Cousin Rebecca."

"Indeed, I hope you will say nothing of the sort," cried Esther with spirit. "After all, Curtis, she has as much (and more) right to her opinion as you have to yours. You cannot insult her guest in her house, whatever you may think of him."

"Insult?" cried the Major. "Good heavens, my dear Esther! If you saw a burglar rifling the old lady's drawers, should you stand on ceremony with him, and say it was 'insulting' to have him handcuffed?"

The sounding of the dinner bell prevented Esther's answer, and was something of a relief.

"Whoever is a knave, and whoever is a fool, we must eat," said she, attempting to smile, "and I begin to think that that's rather a comfort."

But the Major shook his head. "Pardon me," said he, "but it is impossible that I should sit down to dinner with that rogue. If he takes the son's place to-night, I leave this house."

His decision was unmistakable, and Esther did not attempt to argue the point. It wounded her hospitable instinct sorely to let a guest go away dinnerless, but she hoped, rather against hope, that her Cousin Becky's good sense might somehow avert such a catastrophe.

"I will go to speak to my cousin," said she. "You do not make the difficult position easier, Curtis, by trying to carry matters with such a high hand."

"I did not make the difficult position," said the Major, "and, if it depended on me, there'd be a quick end to it."

Esther descended the stairs slowly. The sudden rush of events and clash of wills almost took her breath away. The drawing-room door was open, and she caught a glimpse of the stranger and Mrs. Mordaunt standing together, he with his arm round the old woman's waist. The sight brought a lump to Esther's throat, and her steps lagged more.

The stranger saw her coming, and smiled appreciatively. He had lived in one of the Spanish republics of South America, and in that far-off world had at one time taken a not unimportant hand in a very stormy political game. He had come across English women out there (for, indeed, they are to be met everywhere), but he had seen no English ladies of Esther's kind.

"Your adopted daughter has the dignity of an old French miniature," he said. "The younger generation of women is not so graceful as she is."

"Is Esther no longer young?" said Mrs. Mordaunt, surprised. "Well!" as Esther came into the room, "and where is my dear nephew?"

There was no use in mincing matters. "He will not break bread in this house," said Esther, "if Mr.—"

she hesitated for a second, and the stranger helped her out.

"Why not Rip Van Winkle?" said he. "That binds you to nothing."

"Stays and takes the host's place to-night."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Mordaunt, drawing herself up, "that is unfortunate. Please ring the bell, my dear, and tell them not to wait dinner."

"Can nothing be done?" said Esther.

"Since when have I allowed Curtis to put a veto on my invitations?" said her cousin.

But the stranger interposed. "Never! I'm sure. But all the same, if it's a case of his going fasting away, I should prefer to be the one to beat a retreat—though only for to-night."

Mrs. Mordaunt frowned. "You? No; you stay with me, my son."

The stranger shook his head, and drew her closer to him.

"Why, I am conducting this campaign. Just trust to me, mother. I can very well afford not to behave like a ruffian;" and, to Esther's surprise, Mrs. Mordaunt gave way, though unwillingly.

"Please present my compliments to Major Iredale, and tell him that I will not put him to the inconvenience of going out to-night, seeing that the last train to town this evening left at 7.30, and the next is not till the small hours of the morning. The White Hart is uncomfortable—especially on fair nights," said Rip Van Winkle urbanely.

"And tell him from me, that the soup is getting cold, and we are hungry," added Mrs. Mordaunt briskly.

The Major received both messages in absolute silence, and followed Esther to the dining-room.

CHAPTER V

"Grant, I beseech Thee, Lord, that by the humility that becomes the creature, and by the pride Thy greatness demands, I may adore Thee always."—VITTORIA COLONNA.

THE stranger wandered out into the freshness of the sweet-scented night.

He had called himself "Rip Van Winkle," but, save in the matter of circumstance, he did not bear much resemblance to that easy-going ne'er-do-weel. He laughed to himself while he loitered on the lawn outside the dining-room windows. He had lost his dinner, but the Major's would certainly be salted with chagrin. It amused him to imagine how furious that gentleman must be over the polite message delivered by Esther. His laughter was slightly malicious, albeit he had expressed a genuine appreciation when he had declared in whimsical admiration, "Why, you are not a bad sort, Major!"

A vein of bitterness, not observable at first, for he was seldom morose or ill-tempered, tainted this man's character. It is small beer that turns sour, and yet, by some curious contradiction, he had some of the qualities of greatness. Perhaps it was a perception of this fact that often made women like him, for to them the "might-have-been" always appeals strongly. But his merriment died away under the quieting

influence of the hour. He looked up at the stars through the black hands of the cedar tree. He had not thought that he should ever stand on this spot again, and he shook himself with a curious dog-like gesture, as if he would fain shake off the crowding memories of his youth. Somehow the sight of the lawn at night was more than he could bear.

He jumped the fence and struck across the field. And while he walked, the smell of the English grass under his feet gave him the same sensation that had assailed him when the stars peeped back at him. He was not aware that he had ever been homesick during all the years that he had been away, but he had been born in this land, and its spirit spoke to him through all his keen senses.

An owl screeched as she flew by a-hunting. It was too dark to see her tawny markings, but he knew just how she looked, and he guessed that she lived in the ruined tower in the distance. He heard a bat squeak, and a rabbit scamper in a thicket to the left. He remembered that rooks used to roost in the elm to the right. A frightened hare started from under his feet, and tore away over the hill, as if all the furies were pursuing her.

The place was as it had been in his boyhood, but he had not realised how deep was the impression it had made on him, because boyhood is impressed unconsciously. Nor had he guessed that to revisit it would make him feel that, while this sweet English world was all alive with the shy eager life of little furred and feathered compatriots, he himself was a ghost belonging to other days, a ghost who had no business to return. A stream fringed with alders and

rushes ran at the bottom of the field. He stood still to listen to its voice. The rushes, betrayers of the secret of King Midas, rustled whisperingly and mysteriously together. It was natural that the old king should have unburdened his heart to them, for the sound of running water touches the emotions and relaxes the fibres of self-control.

The wooden bridge that the newcomer remembered, had rotted with age, and had been swept down the stream in bits. No violent repairs were carried out on this property: He crossed the stream by the stepping-stones, for the moon gave light enough.

On the other side a footpath meandered up a grassy hill, on the top of which was a ruined tower, once part of a very old church, which was said to have belonged to an abbey of which every other trace had long ago disappeared.

The stranger ascended the hill nimbly enough, but as he neared the tower, was arrested by the sound of a voice rising and falling in a monologue. He listened for a minute, then approached the building softly, and peeped in. The ruin was unroofed, but an altar, formed of three slabs of the yellow stone of the country, was raised under what had been the east window. On the altar a silver lamp was burning, and before it stood an old man, bareheaded. His shadow, thrown by the lamp-light, moved grotesquely along across the grass and nettles. He threw up both his hands, crying aloud, with an action which was as joyful and as free from self-consciousness as is the upward flight of a lark.

"Praise be to Thee," he cried, "Who art the Life of all the Living. Praise be to Thee for the joy of all

these Thy creatures who fly by night. Praise be to Thee for the rest of those who sleep. To Thy mercy we commend all those who suffer; to Thy infinite justice all those who sin. For ever and ever. Amen."

The passion of adoration was in the man's voice and gesture while he cried "Praise." The concluding sentences were like the fall of the lark to earth, and he dropped on his knees at the "Amen," covering his face with his hands—thin, nervous hands, the hands of poet or artist.

The stranger very gently drew back. He had seen many strange sights during the course of his life, but this struck him as among the strangest. He sat down on the grass a few yards away from the chapel and waited. Presently the old man came out and walked towards him, his chin tilted slightly. The stranger whistled a tune softly, in order to attract attention. His interest was very much alive just then.

The old man stood still and shook his head. "Is that you, Jan Steevens?" said he.

"No," said the stranger, "my name is not Jan Steevens."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the old man courteously. "I feared that you were setting traps, but, now that you have spoken, I know very well that you are not one of my poaching parishioners, nor of this countryside."

"I left these parts long ago, when I was a lad," rejoined Rip Van Winkle, "and went to see the world. I've lately returned, having seen enough of it; but, supposing I had been setting traps, don't you think it was just a bit risky to interfere?"

"There was no risk," said the old man. "Can you not see that I am blind?"

"Ah!" said the stranger quickly. "Then you have been here twenty-nine summers. It was in the fall of the leaf that I left England, and I remember that a blind parson was expected."

They walked on together by mutual consent; the blind man needed no help, but stepped along firmly and surely. They had talked for some time on many subjects before he said, "May I ask who you are?"

"I am the son of Mrs. Mordaunt, of Applehurst," replied the stranger. "For many years my mother believed me to be dead. I never meant to return to England. When I left I intended to cut the connection between my old self and my new self for ever. My old self was an undesirable sort of acquaintance, who had got into more than one scrape. I'm not at all certain that it wouldn't have been far wiser to have left him in his grave, but something drew me across the sea."

"Her longing for you probably did that," said the old man. "I am rejoiced that you have come back to her."

"Thanks," rejoined the stranger; "you are the second person who is glad I have come back. That is more than I expected. I had thought there could be only one, and, to tell the truth, I was doubtful even of her, for I was always more of a trouble than a blessing to her; but" — (his mouth twitched, for his mother's welcome had impressed him strongly) — "but she has missed me all these years. It's the kind of fact that staggers one. Perhaps, if I had realised it, I might have turned up before; but, so far as the old world was

concerned, I thought I was much better dead, and after the first five years it got very misty and far off. My real life was out there."

He pointed West while he spoke, for he gesticulated more than do most Englishmen, "And is buried out there—for I can't be alive in two places at once, can I?"

"Have you left a wife there?" asked the old man.

Rip Van Winkle nodded. "Oh yes,—in a grave, too," he said. "But I did my level best to keep her out of it. I held her as tight as I could, but—well, after all that, you know, there was nothing more to be done; so one day I woke up and remembered, and came back to England."

The old man made a quick gesture of sympathy. He was one to whom all kinds of people told all sorts of things. It was as safe to confide in him as to confide in the trees or the earth. His blindness set him in a place apart, and yet he had a peculiarly strong power of divining sympathy. It seemed as if God, in closing the physical channel by which ordinary men get in touch with their fellows, had quickened the spiritual insight. It was extremely difficult to most people to lie to him.

"You had been ill," he said.

"I had a turn of low fever, which ought to have finished me, but didn't. I don't know how you guessed that, but perhaps you hold converse with spirits? We lived in C——s part of the year, for I was a member of the Congress. But I never could stick to any town too long—I want to relapse into the other kind of life after a month or two of walls and ceilings. *She* understood that well enough. I've done a variety of things

in the course of my life, and I've done them all well, up to a certain point. The bother is, that, as soon as I'm settled in a groove, I sicken of it—sicken till I must change or go mad. It's like the wandering Jew curse. Yet, if she had stayed by me, I should still be in Venezuela."

"I think that you will find her again," said the old man, and the remark was so evidently free from cant, and so simply an expression of personal opinion, that the stranger could not be offended.

He had not spoken of the woman he called wife since he had landed in England. His mother had evinced strangely little curiosity on the subject. Her whole mind was feverishly possessed by the thought that she had got him back, and that she must keep him at all costs. For his part, he had not desired either to speak or to think of that "other life." But now, as he walked in the sweet dark night, he experienced a curious sensation of being spirit with spirit, rather than man with man. The barrier of space that he had set between past and present, seemed to melt; the underlying pain that was at his heart to find some expression. He described with characteristic picturesqueness and vividness how an epidemic of low fever had swept the forest district to which he had gone for freedom and change, and how his little son had sickened and died. He had done what he could, always with a hopeless sense of fighting something too strong for him, and then, being worsted, had laid himself down to die; but, owing to his "confoundedly wiry constitution," had found that he was at last getting better, he hardly knew how or why.

During the time that the fever was on him he kept

seeing his mother in the room, watching him with eager, longing eyes. Not old as she was now, but as he remembered her when he was a lad, strong and erect. He had not consciously thought about her for years. He averred that he had deliberately put aside and forgotten all that belonged to his boyhood; yet, when he came to his senses a lonely man, without wife or child, the vision that had so constantly haunted his sick fancy still appealed to his mind. He suddenly decided that he might as well go north, and see whether by any chance his mother was still alive.

Then he repeated again in rather awed tones, "The odd thing about it is that my mother knew me directly. She says she has waited for me, and that she could not die without seeing me. I should hardly have known her, she's very old now!"

"Her flesh is growing weak," said the old man, and he added, as if that were the simplest and most natural solution of the facts narrated, "so no doubt her soul went to yours, and led you to come to her."

Rip Van Winkle shrugged his shoulders. "At this time of night, and in present company, one may believe anything," he said.

Then his curiosity got the better of his manners. "I was always something of a night bird, but may I ask, sir, whether you are in the habit of taking these long nocturnal rambles?"

The old man pointed with his stick. "My cottage lies just in the hollow of the coombe there. We shall strike the old Roman road when we have gone through that gate at the side of the field. Then I shall only have a few yards more to walk, so you see I have not come so very far. Yes, I go often to the church up

there. It seemed to me a pity that no service should be said in it nowadays. A church should be always a church, as a priest is always a priest. Of course it is too ruined to be used for an ordinary congregation."

"But you must get tired. And is that sort of thing of much use?" asked the stranger gently.

One of his more amiable traits was a certain quick sympathy for anything frail, and this blind old man looked as if a puff of wind might carry him away.

"Of use?" said his companion. "Oh no; I had no idea of being of use exactly." He seemed momentarily puzzled, and, in spite of his simplicity, slightly embarrassed.

"It is only a—a luxury that I give myself. You see, if one is a real priest, one has the longing to express adoration for the others, has not one? That is part of one's calling. Now, the mystery of the world, and the beauty and the wonder of it, are so extraordinarily strong at night—you must often have felt them so—that one becomes restless with desire to be a mouthpiece for"—a bat whirled close to his head while he was speaking, and he stretched out his hand to it, smiling—"for all these His joyful creatures, as well as for one's self."

Rip Van Winkle gave a queer sidelong glance in his direction.

"I've met priests by the hundred," he rejoined. "Worse luck! for I don't like 'em, but perhaps they weren't real ones. Well, I shall know what is happening next time I see a light on that hill."

They had reached the road now, and stood close to the cottage in the hollow.

THE ALIEN

"Will you come in?" said the old man. "I could make you a cup of tea."

"I think not, thanks," replied Rip Van Winkle, smiling. "I had better be getting back to my diggings. Look here, sir, since you believe in the sort of thing (and I am not such a fool as not to know that you do), don't you think it might be as well to commend sinners as well as sufferers to Mercy, instead of to Justice? From your point of view they need it equally, eh?"

"They are one and the same," the other replied, and there was a ring of unusual decision in his voice.

"What, the sinners and the sufferers? Indeed, I am not so sure of that," said the stranger lightly.

"No, no. I meant Justice and Mercy," said the old man. "Being blind, I can never talk with great confidence about sinners. Indeed, I do not meet many of them. But I can see the Glory of the Lord."

CHAPTER VI

"Many waters cannot quench love."

MRS. MORDAUNT did not come down to breakfast. Esther, pale, after a sleepless night, found the Major in the dining-room. He pushed away his untasted coffee, and plunged into the subject uppermost in their minds, as soon as the footman had shut the door.

"So my cousin really intends to let this rogue take up a position in the house as her son?"

"Cousin Becky is absolutely convinced," said Esther. "Nothing will alter her opinion. Indeed, it would be absurd to suppose that having recognised this man, she should change her mind. The room next her own is ready for him. She will not hear of his staying another night at the inn."

"A wilful woman must e'en have her way," returned the Major. "In that case I must, of course, leave this morning. May I ask what you intend to do?"

"I can do nothing," replied Esther, "but wait on events."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the Major. "That, if you will excuse my plain speaking, my dear Esther, is nonsense. No one can really be neutral, and so you'll soon find. If you stay here, you countenance an imposture. If you pack up and go, you at least make what honest

protest you can in defence of justice and sanity. You are bound to be on one side or the other; either on the right or on the wrong."

Esther looked at him with troubled eyes. Although the Major often irritated her, yet at the bottom of her heart she respected him, and this morning she had been seized by a nervous horror. If the stranger were not her cousin's son, if some strange hallucination had possessed the old woman, then who and what was he? He must be wicked enough for anything in that case. What if he should steal into Mrs. Mordaunt's room at night, and murder her?"

"I—I almost wish that you were not going away," she said.

"I shall find lodgings in the village," he replied. "For there is no doubt that it is as well to watch the rascal. I must consult a lawyer, of course—but about you, Esther. It is preposterous that you should associate with this fellow. You will perhaps go to one of your married sisters? It might be advisable to let me take a telegram for you this morning."

But Esther's mood changed. The Major arranged matters too fast.

"No, no. How could I do that?" she cried. "Why, Curtis, you must see that I cannot desert my dear old cousin. If the man is an impostor, there is the more reason that she should have someone who loves her with her. If he is her son, then to be in his company will do me no harm; though, indeed, in no case could the company of even the worst of men do me harm," she added, with that rather innocent dignity, which had been preserved like the bloom on a peach, in a sheltered and walled-in place.

The Major almost groaned with impatience. "You are making a fatal mistake. I warn you that you will repent of it. I am sorry that I can do no more than warn."

But Esther was not sorry.

So the Major departed after breakfast, shaking the dust of the house off his feet; angry with the two women who would have none of his protection, who, left to their feminine perverse obstinacy, would be the natural prey of the adventurer.

Esther watched the dog-cart whirl away, with a sense of the last familiar bit of the old life having gone with it. Curtis Iredale had always before stayed a fortnight, and had always been a source of minor irritations to his hostess. Mrs. Mordaunt had always stood at the door to speed his departure, waving a sprightly farewell with undue cheerfulness. To-day she stayed in her room, and last night at dinner she had been suave and stately. It was altogether unnatural.

That evening Rip Van Winkle appeared in dress-clothes, and took the bottom of the table. Mrs. Mordaunt ate nothing, but sat very upright, watching his every movement, and drinking in his every word. She was absolutely greedy of his company, and to Esther the revelation was extraordinary. Behold, she had lived with this woman for years! Had nursed her when she was ill, had sat at her board, had been her only intimate companion, and yet all the time she had not known her. She shivered with the curious sense of spiritual loneliness, which perhaps few people quite escape experiencing at some time in their passage between the cradle and the grave. It was like the touch of death.

THE ALIEN

When dessert was on the table Mrs. Mordaunt turned to the butler. "Bid all the maids come to the dining-room, and do you call in Morgan and Green and Wilcox. I wish every man and maid servant on the place to be present. I have something to say to you all."

Esther's heart beat faster; she felt very nervous. There was a sound of banging of doors, and ringing of bells, and footsteps and whisperings. At any other time it would have taken longer to find the men. They must all have been in the servants' hall, probably discussing those coming events whose shadows had been cast on the house weeks ago.

Then the Major's words recurred to Esther's mind. "No one can really be neutral, and so you'll find. You are bound to be on one side or the other; either on the right or on the wrong." And, with the recollection, came a momentary indignation. It would have been fairer to have warned her that an official announcement was to be made. Esther was a warm-hearted and loving woman, but she was not a meek Griselda, and she rose from her seat with heightened colour, and with the intention of leaving the room.

But the old woman saw and understood, perhaps with some covert amusement, for she comprehended Esther very well, and was rich in the wisdom that knows how to deal with people, though there were not many whom she thought it worth while to trouble herself about.

"I know that my daughter will stand by me," said she, and with a swift relenting Esther went to her side. She had never before been called "my daughter."

So, when the men and maids trooped in, curious and expectant, Esther's slim figure was at the mistress's right hand, and the old woman leant on her as she rose slowly from her chair, fixing her little audience with her brilliant, fierce black eyes. The stranger was on her left; he had quitted his place at the bottom of the table, and she held his hand too.

"My friends," said she. "I have sent for you because I wish to tell you with my own lips that a great joy has befallen me in my old age. My son, for whom I have mourned these thirty years, has been restored to me. He is here; a stranger to you to-day, but very soon, I hope, no stranger. I shall die, knowing that he will come after me."

There was a low murmur of excited sympathy. When such a woman as Mrs. Mordaunt was for once bares her heart, even daws do not peck at it. Everyone was touched, and perhaps awestruck. The old mistress had made an immense sensation,—Esther's eyes were wet.

Then the stranger spoke. "Not one of you can remember me," said he, "though one of your names is familiar to me; surely there was a Morgan who was gamekeeper when I was a lad?"

"That was my father," said a young groom eagerly. "He *would* have remembered you, sir, but he died last autumn."

"Ah, well; I could wish for a few old friends, if I were a sentimental chap, which I'm not," said he, with a smile. "It's a risky business—returning after thirty years; one's bound to find more graves than—than live hands to greet one."

One of the maids sobbed here, and Rip Van Winkle

raised his eyebrows with an indescribable expression half-comic, half-pathetic. "I didn't mean to be doleful, for I'm not altogether too late. I hope there are yet many years during which I may stand at my mother's side—at her other side," looking across at Esther, "for her daughter must certainly keep her own place."

And at that the men and maids clapped, with a sudden outburst of enthusiasm, for Esther was very popular, and nothing that the stranger could have said would have won such prompt approval as his appreciative reference to her.

The housekeeper ventured on a hesitating "I'm sure we are glad to see you home, sir," and then they all went out as solemnly as they had come in; and as the door closed, Mrs. Mordaunt's eyes sought the stranger's. "That was very satisfactory," said she.

But the expression of satisfaction jarred on Esther. "You are both very clever! You know how to make disciples," she remarked; and then, for the first time, she recognised the likeness between Rip Van Winkle and the old woman. She was to recognise it again, and more unmistakably, before the night was many hours older.

Mrs. Mordaunt laughed. "Why, yes, Essie. That's true. I've always known the way to manage folk, though I've not always thought the game worth playing. But, my dear, there are no such fools as the clever fools, and that's what we two have been. Eh, my son?"

Esther followed them into the drawing-room very thoughtfully. She would perhaps have been hardly human, if she had felt no qualm at seeing herself supplanted; but her nature was wholesome and sweet,

and she was mollified by the man's ready recognition of her rights. The question that troubled her was not one raised by self-love. It was grave and big enough to shut out any petty jealousy.

"Who is he? What is he? If he is *not* her son, what does he not deserve?" Esther's delicate fingers clenched at that question. If he was not her son, he deserved to be hanged, at the least. The righteous indignation of a loving woman is apt to be in proportion to her love.

"I suppose you can no longer sing? I feel as if I would give a thousand pounds to hear you sing again," Rip Van Winkle said suddenly.

Mrs. Mordaunt was sitting by the fire, and he was standing on the hearthrug. Esther noted that every now and again the old lady stretched out a shaking hand, and just touched him secretly and surreptitiously, as if to make sure that he was really there.

"No. You should have come back sooner, if you wanted to hear me sing again. I'm much too old for that now. Esther, there, has some sweet notes in her voice, and she has an excellent style, because she is my pupil; but she cannot sing as I once could. I believe that that is because she is too good."

"I wish that I had heard you when you were young," said Esther, forcing herself to speak. "Do you remember what an impatient mistress you were, Cousin Becky? But I enjoyed the lessons you gave me, and to listen to you singing a Romany song always sent thrills down my spine, though your voice was really gone before I knew you."

"I can't teach; for I can't abide stupidity," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "No one but Essie could ever stand my

temper! I frightened her two sisters into matrimony within a year of their coming to me. They were pretty creatures, with gentle tempers and no brains to speak of. Essie couldn't bear me at first; but she was never afraid of me, thank Heaven! So here she is still. Would you like to hear *her* sing?"

"No, thank you. I am getting too old too," said Esther.

Rip Van Winkle, after one quick glance, forbore to press her. "Would you like to hear *me*?" he said. "I never learnt to read music, and I can only pick out a sort of accompaniment after a ridiculous fashion of my own; but I can make a noise! I made pocketfuls of money once by singing on a pier."

Mrs. Mordaunt nodded. "You had a fine voice, and your music never suffered from the restraints of virtue! Go on; I should like to hear you, anyhow."

He went at once to the piano, and began to pick out a curious weird tune, with one finger; then he found the chords, and then at last began to sing in a language Esther did not know. His voice was very beautiful, and the personality it expressed was many-sided and passionate. Esther had never heard any singing except Mrs. Mordaunt's that had affected her in the same way. But Mrs. Mordaunt had been already old when she had startled Esther's budding youth by that Romany song. This man's voice was not yet past its prime. Esther, in listening, forgot at first how much the likeness meant.

All sorts of emotions, which she had thought were decently buried long ago, rose and flung off their grave-clothes at the sound of those round liquid notes. The desires and ambitions and griefs of youth throbbed in

her again. The blood rushed to her cheek, and her eyes grew bright. The language which needs no words was thrilling through the room. No woman, no matter what her nationality, could hear Rip Van Winkle sing and fail to "understand." Esther's breath came quickly, and, when the music ceased she was ashamed of her emotion. What folly, to be so moved. The limitations of her middle-aged life were round her again. The everlasting primal instincts were silenced. Then it became apparent to her that, allowing for difference of age and sex, he sang as his mother had once sung, and nothing else that he could have done, no proof that he could have shown her, would have overwhelmed her with certainty as this music did.

She did not thank him; a conventional expression of pleasure seemed out of place. "There is only one other person in the world whose singing could make me feel like that," said Esther, with the absolute sincerity which always gave her dignity in a crisis, "and that person is your mother. I think I would rather not hear any more now, if you please. It is too exciting."

Rip Van Winkle got up from the piano and sat down gravely by the fire. He was a man of moods, apt to light up with animation, or to subside into silence, and even gloom, with equal suddenness.

Mrs. Mordaunt nodded, well pleased. "Yes, yes; he takes after me certainly," she said. "He was always very like me."

So the chilling, dividing doubt that every now and then stood like a bad spirit between Esther and the old woman she loved, melted once more. She believed with her heart rather than with her brain, and her

heart told her that the likeness was more than a mere trick of expression. Moreover, she wished to quiet these almost disloyal qualms.

"I am glad you have come back to her," Esther said, looking at the stranger, with soft eyes that were more pathetic than she knew.

He laughed uneasily and shifted his position. "I never brought anyone any luck yet," he said. "I don't know that I'm worth your being glad about."

That night Esther stole down the long passage to her cousin's room after midnight. Mrs. Mordaunt was seldom in bed till late.

"Cousin Becky," she said, opening the door softly, "may I come in and talk to you? I have hardly seen you alone to-day, and the times are so exciting just now. There is a great deal to talk about."

Mrs. Mordaunt was sitting in an arm-chair in front of the fire. She was a funny figure in a scarlet quilted bed-jacket, with an old-fashioned night-cap tied in a bow under her chin. She had a table in front of her, and on it was a cedar-wood box which Esther had never seen before. When she saw Esther, she started, and let the lid of the box slip from her fingers, and shut with a snap; then she deliberately opened it again, and beckoned to her visitor to come in.

"I don't need to shut you out, child," she said. "Come in, come in! What do you suppose I'm doing now?"

Esther drew up her chair, and, leaning her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her hands, and sniffed the scent of burning paper.

"I suppose you are burning secrets, Cousin Becky," she answered, smiling.

"I'm burning my son's old letters," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "I've treasured them these many years, but, now that I have him back again, I can well afford to let 'em go. Letters are poor food at the best. It's a bad plan to keep them when one's getting old, for someone must burn 'em at the last, and it's as well to save one's executor trouble, eh?"

The grate was choked with charred remains of paper.

"Oh, they were not all *his*," said Mrs. Mordaunt, following Esther's glance. "There are other ashes there too."

"Why, that writing is like your own," said Esther, staring at the thin packet in the old woman's hand. "Stop, stop, Cousin Becky, surely it may prove useful to you, should the Major dispute his identity."

But Mrs. Mordaunt had already thrust it into the fire, and only one half-sheet escaped by accident, and fluttered to Esther's feet.

"Keep this, at least," said Esther, picking it up.

Mrs. Mordaunt hesitated, glanced through its contents, and then nodded.

"You're right, Essie. It may be useful. You may read it, if you like. It was the letter he wrote to me before he went away."

The fragment was charred at one corner, and it was yellow and stained and blotted—perhaps with tears. Esther smoothed it with a very reverent touch.

"Cannot stand it any more. Much better I should cut the whole thing and go right away. I'm sick of the whole position, and, even if I hadn't got into that confounded scrape, I'd rather be off to try my luck in

a new country. It will be better for you, too, though you don't think so now. You must forgive me, mother; you will be better without me, you know.—Your affectionate son.”

But the signature was burnt.

“And that was the last letter you had from him. Oh, Cousin Becky, it must have been dreadful to get this,” Esther cried.

The reiterated sad words, in the boyish, straggling writing (that yet had such a look of Mrs. Mordaunt's) gave Esther (who would never be a mother) a heart-ache while she read them.

“Poor boy, poor boy!” she said. “How could he suppose you would be ‘better’ without him? Sometimes I think that, after all, we have the best of it, who've never known what it is to have children.”

The old woman sighed impatiently, and shrugged her shoulders while she took the little, old, worn sheet and laid it back in the box. “My dear, you were *meant* to have married happily, and had amiable and healthy babies,” she said. “It's one of the unfortunate dispensations of Providence, that the best women have got a way of only loving once. But, as to myself, I've no complaints to make. I don't approve of all the whining and puling that goes on nowadays. On the whole, we all pretty well reap as we've sown, it seems to me. There's no getting out of that, and, if your harvest stings your hands in the gathering, it's more dignified, at least, not to run crying to your neighbours.”

She sat very upright, nodding at the fire, remember-

ing, possibly, a bitterer harvesting than any Esther could imagine.

"I was a wild girl, and not cut out for a pattern wife, nor, for the matter of that, for a pattern mother either," she said. "I married with my eyes open (in fact, I can't call to mind the time when they were shut), and I knew that Mr. Mordaunt was a fretful old man, and that I was not, and never should be, in love with him. He was silly about me, because I was lively and good-looking, and because most men admired me, after a fashion. Now I hadn't the sort of conscience you have, Essie, but still I didn't consider it fair to marry for money, and then mope sentimentally, so I continued to be lively and good-looking, and that's the one thing I give myself great credit for. At least I never moped, because, having acted like a sinner, I couldn't have the happiness of the saints. There were a good many years of it; for I married when I was twenty-two, and I was fifty-three when I buried my poor old husband; and we quarrelled a good deal at one time, but I was amusing and lively to the last."

"Dr. Clayton once told me that you nursed Uncle Gatton most devotedly," said Esther.

"Dr. Clayton admired me very much," said the old lady cheerfully. "But it's true, I wasn't a bad nurse. I don't pose as a monster of wickedness. Your uncle was childish during the last five years, and we had long ceased to quarrel. As for devotion—well, I missed him when it was over. No woman, unless she's absolutely bad, can fail to miss anything she has taken constant care of,—and I had ceased to pine for liberty. And that was all—that was all. But now *he* has come back"—her voice changed and vibrated

curiously—"now *he* has come back, and though I am old, so old, yet the fire is still alive. There have been many waters, but it is not quenched. Perhaps nothing can quench that."

The flames in the grate leaped up and flickered. They were violet and pink and green, for the log was ship wood, and had good sea salt in it. They made Esther think of ships and oceans, and lands far away.

"I believe that your longing must have drawn your son home across the waves, Cousin Becky," said she, not knowing that she repeated the thought that another rather mystically-minded soul had given vent to.

"Maybe, maybe," rejoined her cousin. "They used to say that I was a witch when I was young and handsome. I remember when I was sixteen, someone told me that, if I'd lived a hundred years earlier, I should have been burnt at a stake. I was a woman by that time; but girls grow up much more slowly now, and some of 'em never are women at all, so it seems to me. I've often seen fortunes in people's eyes. I saw yours, Essie, when you first walked into my drawing-room. How pert you were, to be sure. But I knew you were not lucky."

"You are rather uncanny to-night," said Esther, laughing, but impressed by this curious revelation of a superstition that underlay all her old cousin's shrewdness and worldly wisdom. "Come now, Cousin Becky, you don't keep wax images with pins sticking in them, do you? You've never overlooked anyone?"

An odd expression flitted across Mrs. Mordaunt's face. "No, my dear," said she. "The wax images are melted now; but I was a good hater once, and to

this day," she added briskly, "I don't know that I'm above sticking an occasional pin into our dear Curtis, eh?" And at that they both smiled, for Mrs. Mordaunt never allowed a conversation to remain pitched in a serious key too long.

"All the same," she resumed (and she spoke as if she were exculpating herself)—"all the same, I do *not* wish Curtis Iredale any evil. I've often laughed at him. No one likes to have their successor poking round; but I don't hate the man, and I never have. He was bound to irritate me—he always did, and always will; but it's natural love for my own, not hatred of Curtis, that makes me act as I do. If I were a millionaire, I'd leave him an equivalent for what he loses by my son's return, I would indeed; but I've not the money to do that, and what I've saved and scraped together out of my income, must go to you, child. After all, Curtis Iredale has his West Indian property. He is quite rich enough!"

Esther listened in some surprise. It was unexpectedly good of Cousin Becky to have such compunctions about the Major.

"It's not spite, it's love," repeated Mrs. Mordaunt, with an eagerness that was a little feverish.

"Why, of course," said Esther. "No one in their senses would dream of thinking you spiteful because you are glad that your own son will succeed you, instead of a distant relative that you have never cared for. Yet, if you are sorry for the Major's disappointment, can you not leave a little less to me, and spare something for him?"

It was proof of the excellent terms on which the two women stood, and also perhaps of a certain uncon-

ventionality in both natures, that she could say this without embarrassment.

"Well, well, well!" said Cousin Becky, and a twinkle came into her eyes. "When I try to put my compunction into £ s. d., I find it isn't worth so much. I like you a great deal better than I like Curtis, my dear, so I can't do it. You're very disinterested. I suppose"—with sudden sharpness—"you won't marry him after all?"

"Come now! You told me long ago to wait till I was asked," said Esther, who fondly believed that Cousin Becky had never guessed that Curtis Iredale had once proposed to her. "But, even if such an unlikely idea as that of marrying an impecunious old maid were to enter his head, I wouldn't."

They looked at each other, both remembering a good deal that had happened since Cousin Becky had given that sage advice. Then Esther got up and kissed the old woman.

"I'm glad you gave me a real home, so that I wasn't tempted to marry for the sake of one," she said. "I've never regretted anything, you know."

Cousin Becky shook her head. "Well, you are made that way, child!" she said, "and, if you don't regret, that's something! If it had been Rose or Lily's case, I should have bidden either of 'em marry the second man who asked them, if they couldn't have the first,—and the third, if the second failed; but I doubted whether that would answer with you—it didn't altogether with me. Good-night."

CHAPTER VII

POSSESSION is nine points of the law. Esther recognised the truth of that proverb in the days that followed. Yet no man can really possess what he has not the strength to hold; and, if the rule of the house had passed to strange hands, it was because the strange hands had grip enough to wield the sceptre. She was a little perplexed at the changed atmosphere, at the sudden preponderance of the masculine element. Yet she did not hate the newcomer, for he was a man whom women liked. Moreover, he was chivalrously reverent to his mother's adopted daughter, instinctively turning towards her the best and most presentable side of a many-sided character.

These two middle-aged people, who were worlds apart in moral character, and separated by a gulf of experience deep as the gulf between Dives and Lazarus, that gulf that Father Abraham could not pass, were yet drawn together by the simple rudimentary fact that he was a very masculine man, and that she was a woman to the very tips of her fingers.

She called him Mr. Rip Van Winkle half-playfully, half-seriously, accepting his suggestion that that name did very well, because it committed her to nothing. He sometimes caught her watching him with a questioning intentness that rather amused than offended him. Perhaps she was trying to discover whether he

was good or bad, thought Rip Van Winkle. Perhaps she was weighing and appraising his character in the inadequate little scales that she kept in her violet-scented work-basket.

His accent was slightly foreign, and his clothes comfortable, but decidedly picturesque and un-British; yet, in spite of his "strangeness," he did not offend Esther's taste. Nor did he grasp roughly at power. It was always Mrs Mondaunt who thrust responsibility upon him, turning eagerly to him for advice, and following his smallest suggestion. His manner to her was tender and tinged by compunction. "I've been about as careless a son as you could find anywhere. I never even wrote to my mother for years," he said once. "And this is the result. It isn't fair, is it? but then what is? I've never been able to trace any symptoms of justice in the way in which the world is managed. Have you?"

Esther, who had been feeling sore that day, stood still on her way across the hall (she was carrying stiff autumn dahlias to decorate the rooms), and reflected a moment. "I don't know, for I've seen so very little," she replied.

Then a momentary envy touched her. He had seen so very much. One could read that in the expression of his black eyes, and in the ease with which he met all kinds of people. He had had the joy of a life of adventure, and now, now that he was a little weary of action, now that he had supped his fill, he happened to recollect that he had a mother, and behold, adoration was eagerly watching for him. Not the mild affection that had been hardly won, and wistfully made the most of by the adopted daughter, but warm love, which is a very different thing.

"No, I don't know that I've met justice," Esther repeated, but, being too good a woman to stop there, added quickly, "But I believe in it all the same."

"Well, I don't," said Rip Van Winkle. "So I may just as well do what my mother wants, and make her happy, anyhow."

And what Mrs. Mordaunt wanted was clear enough (though the *sequitur* puzzled Esther): she wanted him to be master.

He had been but a week in the house when Mrs. Mordaunt called Esther to her, and put a sum that surprised her into her hands.

"That is for the household expenses for the quarter, my dear," said the old lady. "Manage as you find best. For the future you can count on that every three months. It is more than we have been in the habit of spending, but he tells me that it is not a penny too much, and that he sees his way to getting more out of the land, and to stopping up some holes through which my substance runs to waste. He was always clever."

"May I do just as I choose with this?" cried Esther. "Why, Cousin Becky, I shall make you as comfortable as the Queen, if I may really manage it all my own way!"

She coloured with pleasure, for, to tell the truth, she had been grievously hampered and harassed by petty restrictions. Her old cousin had been apt to scold mightily if a penny too much were expended on milk or butter. Esther had mended all the linen and dusted the china because the house was under-servanted. Perhaps there was no hardship in that, and she was probably the

better for having plenty to do, but she had felt the pinch of a too rigid economy when she had been obliged to re-darn a tablecloth that was already more darn than linen; and there had been times when she had impatiently declared that she would rather fling a sixpence into the sea than have to look so carefully at each side of it.

"We must have better dinners and better fires now that my son has come home. He does not like that cheap coal, Esther. He says it 'sulks.' Don't order any more of it."

"I always hated it," said Esther joyfully.

"He says that I treat you abominably, my dear," continued Cousin Becky. "That I gave you responsibility without power, and that, if you had been a man, you'd have struck work years ago; but that women are eaten up by a false sentiment about self-sacrifice, which probably prevented you from remonstrating."

"Then he talks a great deal of nonsense," said Esther indignantly. She hated to hear blame cast on anyone she loved, as she loved Cousin Becky, and the truth of Rip Van Winkle's last-quoted remark stung her, and made her resent his championship. "What business is it of his? After all, I would rather you looked into things yourself; and I don't care about having it all my own way, and I don't see why we should suddenly become lavishly extravagant." Her change of front made the old woman laugh.

"Fight it out with him, if you like. Fight it out, Essie! but I shall interfere no more."

"But it is not natural! It is not like you to refuse to interfere. Why should *he* turn you into someone else?" persisted Esther. And there were tears in her eyes.

"My dear," said Cousin Becky, "I was someone else before ever you walked into my drawing-room. Do you suppose I screwed and saved when I and my world were young? No; I'd other things to think of then. In one's old age one returns to one's first love. Have you never heard that before?"

"It is beyond me—I don't understand," said Esther; but that, perhaps, was hardly true.

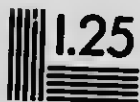
It was this little conversation that had helped to make her sore, as Rip Van Winkle had divined. His powers of divination were delicate as a tactful woman's. He had a genius for understanding people. Unfortunately this gift occasionally worked the wrong way; he could make for himself disciples with unusual ease, but he sometimes chose to make enemies. He knew how to send an arrow between the shafts of an adversary's armour with almost uncanny quickness, and his temperament was rather reckless than prudent. He had given a true account of himself when he had told the blind parson that he had done a variety of things in the course of his life, and had done them all well up to a certain point. He had a genius for organising. He could put the crooked straight, sort men right—the round into the round holes, the square into the square holes, and clear up a muddle with extraordinary nerve and facility. His grasp of a difficult situation was truly admirable in its intuitive sureness; but, on the other hand, it was equally true that, as soon as the wheels were oiled and the machinery running smooth, he "sickened" of the "job." He was a person born to fish in troubled waters; he was essentially the man for emergency, but not for times of peace and prosperity.

Mrs. Mordaunt's affairs were in a somewhat parlous



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condition when Rip Van Winkle appeared on the scene, and he devoted himself *con amore* to the task of disentangling them. He was a man who never kept personal accounts, but who was nevertheless quite capable of auditing other people's. He and Wilcox spent a busy morning in what was called "the counting-house," and Wilcox was much impressed by the new master. This quaintly named room was an annexe, built on to the house during the reign of the last of the Georges. It was used simply for business purposes, and was bare of ornament as a barn. It was here that the tenants had always paid their rents (when rents were more regularly paid), and it was here that, in bygone days, a yearly dinner had been given by the landlord.

The brick floor was uncarpeted, but the pale yellow of the walls was pleasant and light. Long wooden benches stood round the room, and there was one substantial wooden arm-chair for the master. There was also a heavy square oak table, at which Rip Van Winkle sat. Mrs. Mordaunt's husband had never occupied that chair; he had preferred his more comfortable and luxurious study. But her father had taken his rents in person, being by no means uninterested in his affairs, though not often sober enough to give them his whole attention. The bad old squire had, indeed, been a person of intense vitality, who had never in his life suffered from *ennui* or laziness, and this newcomer seemed inclined to hark back to very old fashions. Had anyone who had known the old squire been present, he might have traced a certain likeness between the past and the present occupier of the chair. Rip Van Winkle's curly, grizzled, black hair and low, broad forehead, for example, were surely not on an

entirely new design of Dame Nature's—she had made a man with just such a head before—but the lower part of the face differed from the original model. The old squire had possessed a heavy jowl and a hanging underlip; Rip Van Winkle had the mouth of an actor—you could see the old squire's character plainly writ; but Rip Van Winkle's would give you some trouble to decipher, and it was likely enough that in the end you would read what he wished you to read, neither more nor less.

Wilcox sat opposite the new master, staring at him in absolute silence, with his large, shaky red hands planted on his knees. Wilcox was an old-looking man for his years, and he had aged perceptibly during the last three or four months. The short stubby beard that grew under his chin was white, and his forehead was wrinkled with worry and perplexity. He had the character of being a "hard" man, and was hated by the class from which he had sprung. He had been inveterately penny-wise and pound-foolish; conservative, where he should have been open to new views; independent, with a surly, suspicious independence that would take no advice from anyone in broad cloth, but that was absolutely unbribable.

"Look here, Wilcox," Rip Van Winkle said, as he finally closed the books that lay between them, "this is a precious muddle, you know, and, on the strength of what we've just been looking into, nine men out of ten would count you a rogue."

Old Wilcox stared harder. His blue eyes were fixed in a puzzled, troubled gaze that was painful in its intensity. It *was* a precious muddle; he knew that well enough. Care had been riding him for months and

months, and yet, according to his lights, he had strained every nerve and done his best for the "old Missus." He had a miserable, hopeless sensation of floundering in the bog, and at the same time had been possessed by a sore jealousy of younger men, and a prejudice deep-rooted and unreasoning against the Major, who would fain have interfered. He would have been cut into bits rather than have wilfully defrauded Mrs. Mordaunt of a penny, and yet he had a dim consciousness of the hundreds of pounds that were lost to her through his bad management.

"I ain't a rogue, mister," he said slowly and heavily. "And yet I seems to be."

If the Major—nay, if any other than Rip Van Winkle had been sitting in judgment on him—he would have answered very differently, but he believed that this was indeed the rightful heir. How could he believe otherwise, when Mrs. Mordaunt said that so it was, and the Major said that so it was *not*? Either reason would have been cogent; together they were conclusive.

Rip Van Winkle smiled.

"But I happen to be the tenth," he said, "and I know that you are honest. We'll put our backs to it, and pull this straight, eh?"

And at that the old fellow suddenly and most unexpectedly came very nigh to breaking down. He made a queer noise in his throat that was suspiciously like a sob, and stumbled on to his feet. It was as if the Great Master Himself had declared him honest, and that against the tormenting witness of the perplexities that had constantly beset his poor old brains.

He blew his nose violently on a scarlet-and-yellow handkerchief of enormous proportions, and Rip Van

Winkle played with a sheet of paper and a pencil, and whistled a tune softly to himself.

"It's what they call hay fever, sir," Wilcox remarked presently. "My cousin's mother died of it. It comes on in fits, promiscuous."

Rip Van Winkle nodded gravely. "We've done enough for the present. I'll see you again after dinner this evening. We understand each other, eh?"

Wilcox muttered something in his throat, and walked across the room. The new master's grizzled head was bent again over the accounts, at which he was so "wunnerful clever," but the draught of the opening door blew the scrap of paper on which he had been scribbling almost to Wilcox's feet. The old man paused, stooped stiffly, and picked it up.

"Hullo, what's that?" said Rip Van Winkle, glancing up.

Wilcox looked at it for a minute silently, then he chuckled with slow satisfaction. "It ain't nothing but just a sort of pattern you draws when you ain't thinking of what your fingers is doing," said Wilcox. "And it's just the same scribble as the Missus draws when she ain't thinking about it. You'll see it on the edges of that book on the accounts six years back. Not lately, for it's six years since the Missus looked into things herself. It just shows whose blood you've got in your fingers, sir, for no one can help or hinder them natural tricks. The Major, now, might try till he was yaller, but *he* wouldn't have made that there pattern unconscious-like."

"Let's look. But it won't weigh as evidence, I'm afraid," said Rip Van Winkle.

He was amused and rather surprised that the muddle-headed old chap should have been so observant.

Wilcox folded the scrap of paper and stowed it away in his pocket. He had believed in Rip Van Winkle before, but from henceforth no amount of what he contemptuously designated as "Fool's jabber" on the other side, would weigh in the least against that proof which he had discovered for himself, and therefore thoroughly trusted and understood.

He lingered yet a moment longer, with the handle of the door in his hand. Rip Van Winkle frowned impatiently.

"That will do. I don't want you any more just now," he said.

Wilcox raised his hand with a gesture that was actually solemn. His belief in Rip Van Winkle had been touched by an emotion that had transformed it into something approaching to a religion. The dull, inarticulate worry of years, the haunting fear that he was managing wrongly, that he was too old for his post, the miserable, sore hatred of possible supplanters had reached a crisis, and been swept away.

"God bless you, master," said he, "and bring you into all your just rights, and prosper you in all you do, and confound every man as says otherwise or as works against you. Amen."

He had never in his life spoken so before, and when he got to the end of his speech he had added the "Amen" from an odd consciousness that the fervour which possessed him had given to his words the quality of a prayer. He stumbled out into the garden with an unsteady step, leaving Rip Van Winkle looking after him with a comically dubious expression. It was all very well to make disciples, but perhaps the master was not quite so sure that the Almighty was on his side!

Wilcox had been a very taciturn person, but now he went out and gave tongue to his belief with all the pugnacity of a fresh convert. Oddly enough, this reserved and silent old man was the first to set the tidings of Rip Van Winkle's return flying.

"Have you heard our news?" he'd say. "It's fine good news for us, though there is some will have their noses out of joint. The old mistress up at the hall has got her son home. Mr. Gatton, as was wrongly said to be dead. He's been kep' out of his own a many too many years; and I don't pretend to say how that was, but he is in his right place now. Good luck to him!"

It had been popularly, but erroneously, believed that Wilcox had feathered his own nest by plucking the tenants; but his purse-string as well as his tongue was somewhat loosened at present. He stood treat to those among the villagers who would drink to Mrs. Mordaunt's good fortune, and the number of Rip Van Winkle's adherents increased and multiplied. In the shepherd's cottage on the downs, in the scattered outlying farms, in the village where scarce a soul remembered the unpromising youth who had disappeared thirty years before, men and women, and even children, gossiped over his strange return, and not one but was on his side. The romantic has a stronger charm for our country people than one might imagine on a superficial acquaintance, and they sympathised with the old mistress at the hall, who had never been an unpopular landlady, although she had left undone many things which, according to modern lights, she ought to have done, and had even perhaps done some which she ought not to have done. Her father had been liked too, in spite of his drunkenness; but, as for

the Major, his virtues had never won for him much love. The Major had an aversion to letting outsiders (and there were few people, indeed, who were not outsiders to him) peep at any family skeleton, being by nature and habit both proud and loyal. He was proportionately disgusted when he heard that that same skeleton was dancing a jig (so to speak) in every public-house in the county.

Esther was almost equally disturbed by another result of Wilcox's loquacity.

That week no fewer than three sets of callers arrived at Applehurst, and they all came a-fishing. It was, indeed, no wonder that their curiosity was whetted; but Esther was offended by it. Mrs. Mordaunt, on the other hand, was sprightly and talkative, very ready to satisfy every inquiry, more hospitably inclined than she had been since Esther first knew her. A cheerful fire blazed in the drawing-room; there was abundance of cakes and fruit. The Worcester china tea-cups were all set out on a silver tray that had not seen the light for years.

"For I knew we should have company when the story had once started on its rounds," said the old lady, rubbing her hands with glee. "Bachelors are scarce in this county, my dear. The women come buzzing round one like wasps to a peach!"

"They have neglected us for so long, that I wonder that they have the face to come, or that you care to see them now," said Esther.

The remark was not quite fair, for the loneliness of Applehurst had not been altogether the fault of Mrs. Mordaunt's neighbours; but Esther was cross for once; her old cousin's unwonted excitement irritated her, and

her usual gracious hospitality deserted her. She poured out the tea and handed the sweet biscuits with secret wishes that the food would stop her guests' tongues. She was disinclined to discuss the great event, but the hostess more than made up for her deficiencies. Mrs. Mordaunt seemed indemnifying herself for her long silence about her son. She talked with an apparent unreserve that amazed Esther. Her short trenchant sentences made her hearers realise the situation, made them understand how the lad of seventeen had gone off in a fit of boyish despair and pique.

"He was in a bit of a hole," she said. "But, good Lord! to hear him, you'd suppose he'd fallen into the bottomless pit. That's where he thought he was, poor boy. It doesn't matter now what the trouble was. To tell the truth, I've forgotten the details. There was a girl mixed up in it, and a debt that he couldn't meet. I was angry. Why, yes, it's one's rôle to be angry about these things. Indeed, I made the most of my indignation. I wasn't for spoiling over much. To taste a drop of bitterness would do the lad no harm, said I. He was past the age when I could punish him, but it didn't seem to me wise to stand too much between him and the results of his folly. But as for despairing of him"—she laughed, with a sound in the laughter that was like a sob—"as for being 'better without him,' does one ever despair over a boy like that? That was absurd. That was his ridiculous boyish idea. And I let him go uncomforted. He went off wishing that he were dead. I had one letter. After that I heard from him no more."

"And he pretended to have been drowned?" said one of the visitors,

She was a stout matron, the mother of three roundfaced, healthy little boys. She shook her head over the story.

"Neither Johnny nor Albert would ever do a thing like that!" said she. "Arthur is more difficult to manage. He certainly has a peculiarly sensitive temperament; but no, Arthur would be too affectionate to give his mother so much pain. Arthur would never have the heart to go on pretending that he was dead for any length of time; though I remember once, after his father had caned him, that he locked his door, and lay so still for so long that I became terribly alarmed. You never know what bad result may not ensue from the shock of physical violence on a child's system. We forced the door at last, and there lay the dear little fellow fast asleep, with tears on his cheek. It was a lesson to me! I never allowed anyone to strike him again. That sort of rough treatment may answer with some children, but it is most dangerous to a boy like Arthur."

Mrs. Mason, inquisitive though she was about the heir's return, was apt to find any subject pale in interest beside that of the difficulties besetting Arthur's moral and physical constitution. But the other guest, who was not a mother, broke in impatiently with a sharp question delivered in a sharp voice, calculated to bring the conversation back to its starting-point.

"So the next thing you heard about your son was the news of his death? How did he manage about his clothes? I suppose he must have changed them on the beach?"

"Well, I fancy he could hardly have got to Marseilles in a state of nature," said Mrs. Mordaunt.

"Then the body they found and buried was not his at all?"

The old lady's eyes twinkled. "After much consideration I have arrived at that same conclusion," said she.

Esther began to grow nervous. She was aware that Miss Fairfax rubbed her Cousin Eddy the wrong way. Miss Fairfax was a lady who had inherited an abrupt manner, as well as a large fortune, from her father, who had made his money in coal. Her very dress irritated Mrs. Mordaunt, by its slight affectation of mannishness.

"She takes her deficiency for virtue, my dear," the old woman had once remarked. "But I assure you it's not at all the same thing." It must be owned that Mrs. Mordaunt's strictures were apt to be more trenchant than refined, and Esther had some cause for anxiety.

"Of course you forgave him, for men are always forgiven, and very bad it is for them," said Miss Fairfax. "But I think that he behaved abominably!"

"Well, well! Men do bad things sometimes, but they don't *say* so many abominable things as we do," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "I almost think that they've better manners, and, to my mind, it is easier to forgive doings than sayings! What's done amiss makes a clear cut, but what's said amiss makes an irritating scratch. However, that's a mere matter of temperament. As for forgiving my own son, why, to tell you the truth, I never so much as thought about doing that."

"You've not forgiven him?" said Miss Fairfax, frowning in some perplexity.

"Lord save us! No!" said the old woman. "But have some more tea, my dear. You and I talk two languages, eh? but we both like tea. Where was I when you interrupted me? Ah, I was going to tell

you how, having left his clothes on the beach, he got to Marseilles, and there embarked for Greece."

She plunged into the story of her son's adventures with a spirit and verve which made the recital well worth listening to. She was a most excellent *raconteur*. It is probable that she romanced more than a little. She was certainly not troubled by small scruples, and a less loyal woman than Esther might have wondered whether the old lady, who swallowed gnats so cheerfully, might not be capable of managing a camel too—on an emergency.

"We've given them a sensation and plenty to gossip about," said Mrs. Mordaunt when her guests at last departed. "They can't complain that they've gone away hungry. That's true charity, Essie! But how glum you look. You didn't help me much."

"I don't think you needed my assistance," said Esther, half laughing. "Why, how you talked!"

Mrs. Mordaunt hobbled restlessly about the room. She never could settle down peacefully nowadays before her son came in. For that reason, at anyrate, Esther was thankful when the man's step sounded in the hall. Yet the slight vertical line between her eyebrows, which always deepened when she was perturbed, showed itself plainly when he entered the drawing-room. It was noticeable that he entered as one who is at home, and master.

He smiled kindly at Esther. Then sat down near his mother in the chair that had come to be recognised as his.

"Well, I've had it out with Wilcox about those tenants in East Sheen," he said. "They've been treated scurvily. It was a d—d shame, mother. You'd no business to raise Green's rent on account of the

improvements he has made. The place was a pig-sty when the fellow took it, and it is tidy now. It is bad policy, too, to let Green go, for that kind of tenant is a rare bird. He is to stop on, and he is not to pay a penny more than his father paid. Wilcox will have to eat humble pie over that; but, on my soul, he has cooked the dish for himself."

"Wilcox assured me that I was bound to raise Green's rent," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "But, if you say otherwise, it shall be as you wish, my son. You've done the popular thing, anyhow. Popularity may be worth a few pounds to us just now."

"And what does my Cousin Esther think about it?" asked he, with a quick glance at her grave face.

"Oh, what does that matter?" said Esther impatiently. "You know what *you* think, and that is far more important."

"But I thought that you might be interested in the question of Green's rent, because Green, like every one else in the village, swears by 'Miss Esther,'" he rejoined, with unabashed good-humour.

Esther was conscious that she had spoken like a pettish girl.

"We have had a succession of inquisitive visitors," she said apologetically. "And I know that I am tired and hot, and I rather suspect that I am cross. I will leave you two to discuss radical changes, and will take myself out for a walk. I will go to see Mr. Joel."

Mrs. Mordaunt sighed with relief and contentment when the door closed and she was left alone with her son.

"I am very fond of Esther," said she. "But what a comfort it is to have you all to myself at last."

CHAPTER VIII

" . . . Sure some evil bodies,
Would it were here, that I might see its eyes."

The Saint's Tragedy.

ESTHER, too, drew a long breath when she was clear of the house. She kilted her skirts high, and went through the wet grass of the field with a certain enjoyment in braving its wetness. The gardener was burning weeds, and the smoke of a bonfire curled up in blue spirals through the still air of the autumn evening. Every now and again a crimson or yellow leaf floated gently to the earth. But the wind had gone down; the weather had been fine ever since the advent of Rip Van Winkle. The October sun threw long slanting shadows across the field. Occasionally a sleepy bird twittered, and a business-like shepherd dog was barking in the distance, as he marshalled his silly charges. Out-of-door sights and sounds have rest and health in them. They helped to restore Esther's equanimity. She loved this place wherein her lines had been cast. Her eyes rested with sympathetic appreciation on the fine show of scarlet berries in the hedge, the birds' harvest, and she paused at the washer-woman's cottage at the far end of the field to admire Mrs. Greenback's apples.

"It's a good fruit year, Mrs. Greenback," she said pleasantly.

Mrs. Greenback was pegging clothes on to a line set between two fruit trees. She was a large, handsome old woman, with a high colour and jet black crinkling hair, which was parted in the middle and waved low on each side of her forehead. She bore a slight resemblance to the mistress of Applehurst, and village gossip had once averred that the resemblance was not without cause. But that was a matter of ancient history, and Mrs. Greenback herself had never countenanced the story or made any claims on the gentry. She was Polly's stepmother, Mr. Greenback having married her when Polly was twelve years old. She had been a harsh stepmother, and Esther, out of sheer pity for the child, had taken Polly into service. Esther had spoken her mind very freely on the subject, and her strictures had had added force because she was not at all given to scolding her social inferiors. Mrs. Greenback had liked her the better for her wrath.

"Miss Esther, she have grit in her," she said. "But it ain't on th' top. It 'ull turn your spade when once you hit on it. Now, Greenback, he's mushy all through."

She always held Mr. Greenback in open contempt and derision.

She paused in her work to offer Miss Esther an apple.

"Mine are sweeter than what you've got up at th' 'ouse, Missy," said she. "Yes, it's a good fruit year. It ought to be that, now the young master has come back."

"He isn't very young," said Esther. "Why"—with a sudden thought. "You are old enough, and have been here long enough, to remember Mr. Gatton

before he went away. Should you have recognised him?"

"Maybe I should, and maybe I shouldn't," said Mrs. Greenback cautiously. "It just depends"—

"Depends on what?" asked Esther.

But she had learned by long experience of these country folk that nothing was to be gained by pressing for a reply that was not at once forthcoming. Mrs. Greenback returned to her pegging, and Esther went on her way unanswered.

Mr. Joel's cottage, with its white walls and golden thatch, seemed to smile at her with a very friendly aspect as she approached it. It was dear to her heart; it was associated with the honey of kindness and the fragrance of welcome. It nestled cosily in the hollow of the downs, which sloped down to the chalky road. The autumn dahlias nodded cheerfully to Esther over the fence. She could see that Mr. Joel was walking up and down the garden-path, gesticulating slightly, sometimes standing still in order to deliver himself the more emphatically. She knew that he was rehearsing his Sunday's sermon. His flowers were always his first audience.

"Let us not confine our efforts to begging, my brothers and sisters. Let us also give thanks. Let us for once turn from a too constant consideration of our own wants to the satisfying contemplation of His glory."

Esther, smiling at the characteristic exhortation, stood with her hand on the little wooden gate, loth to interrupt him. But he wheeled round suddenly, as if he felt her presence, and then she spoke.

"I must not interrupt the sermon, Godfather," said

she. "But let me come in and sit in the porch till you have finished. I will keep very still!"

She, in common with all the children, and most of the young men and maidens in the village, called him Godfather. When she had first known him, being then but a slip of a girl, she had made fun of the multitude of his spiritual children. But the title given in joke had become a tender habit. She was very fond of Mr. Joel; there was a very true friendship between her and the old mystic.

"Why, it is Esther!" said he. "Come in, come in! I am glad to see you. Very glad. But as for not interrupting the sermon, that *is* interrupted already. I could not possibly compose while you were sitting by. I should hear you keeping still. We will sit in the porch together, my dear. It is a most beautiful evening."

He frequently spoke as if he could see; indeed, his poorer parishioners believed that he was in very truth gifted with a kind of miraculous second sight.

"The parson, he don't look out through his eyes, but he have visions in his innards," they said.

"Have you heard the news? What do you think about it?" said Esther.

But Mr. Joel disliked being hurried into giving an opinion.

"I have heard plenty of news," he said. "Tom Langley has let his old father go to the Union. That's bad. Bad for the old man, and worse for Tom. Jane Magee has lost her place. She stole half a crown and a locket set with sham rubies from the farmer's wife at Hurst Farm. What is to be done with the child, Esther? She is only thirteen. I do not know that

an old bachelor like myself is the right person to deal with naughty little girls of thirteen."

"Nor an old maid like myself," said Esther hastily. "Don't ask me to undertake Jane, Godfather. I do not feel philanthropic to-day, or equal to any fresh perplexities!"

"Then I have met with Mrs. Mordaunt's son," said Mr. Joel slowly, "whom we all believed to have been drowned. She was in mourning for him thirty years ago, when I first came to Applehurst. She never lamented openly, therefore I felt that it would be presumption on my part to offer my sympathy in her grief. I know that she does not like my cloth, Esther! Yet perhaps she will let me congratulate her on her joy. For joy is not so proud as sorrow."

"That is true," said Esther. "While she believed him to be dead she never spoke of him—not even to me. And I was so dull: so densely, crassly stupid, that I did not guess how she longed for him. But now that he has come she can talk of nothing else."

"Your voice sounds sad," said Mr. Joel. "And I cannot allow you to call my dearest Godchild crassly stupid, for that indeed she is not!"

"I am troubled," said Esther. "And I do not altogether understand why. You have not answered my question, Godfather. Tell me, what do you think of this prodigal son? Do you believe him to be good or to be bad?"

Mr. Joel fidgeted uneasily. "I dislike discussing people," he replied. "You have more opportunity for judging than I." Then, when she said nothing, he was pricked by her disappointment. "But you do not usually ask idle questions, and you are no gossip.

Well, then, Esther, I will tell you this. I cannot presume to say off-hand of any man 'he is bad' or 'he is good'; but this man struck me as one who was unhinged, not quite his normal self. He had not been drinking; he was, I am sure, sober, in the ordinary sense of the word. But I believe that mentally and morally he is *not* sober. Something, some shock of great sorrow, or for all I know of great joy, has thrown him off the rails."

Esther frowned. Mr. Joel's delicate perception had perhaps apprehended a truth, but she had wished for a more definite solution of her difficulties. She did not catch hold of the clue he offered.

"I wonder whether I should go, or stay?" she said. "I am more puzzled than I have ever been before. Indeed," she added, "I've had so uneventful a life that I believe my power of decision has got eaten away by rust. The Major tells me that I ought to leave; but then he is convinced that this Rip Van Winkle is an arrant impostor."

"Major Iredale is a good man," said Mr. Joel, "but he is inclined to suspect anything or anyone made after a foreign pattern."

"Yes, yes," Esther agreed quickly. "Of course Curtis is painfully British. And this stranger is alien to us in many of his ways, though he is an Englishman born. He is wonderfully clever. He is very like Cousin Becky. That is why I believe in him. And she—she is absorbed in him. He has had the most curious effect on her. All her aches and pains seem to have been burnt away in the fire of her excitement. Yet there is no rest or peace in her love. I keep thinking about new wines being poured into old bottles.

The old bottles burst when that happens, don't they? I feel as if this could not last. It is wonderful, but it is unnatural. My Cousin Becky has always been a shrewd person, full of common-sense; but now it is as if she were—why, that is what you said of him—as if she were unhinged, intoxicated with the rapture of having him. Am I jealous, Godfather? It *is* rather hard to discover of how little account I have ever really been, compared to him. Yet I do not think it is altogether jealousy that torments me. It—it is dread.”

“My dear, I have never thought you a jealous woman,” said the old man gently. “Poor soul, poor soul,” he murmured to himself. “We try to slake our thirst at many streams. But in the end—in the end, surely, Thou wilt show us the water of Life? And after all, are they not all from one source, though they take many colours and much impurity on the way?”

Esther laid her hand on his knee to call back his attention.

“When I see that my Cousin Becky is relieved when I leave her alone with her son, why, then I begin to think ‘perhaps I had better go away.’ But again, when I see that her dear old hands shake, and her eyes get wild with anxiety in his absence; that she starts when she hears a shot in the wood, lest he should have been shot by accident; that she wanders restlessly about the house if he is late in coming in—why, then I think I must stay to take care of her.”

“And in my opinion you think well,” said Mr. Joel.

“But then again, Godfather—I would tel' this to no one but you—then again, the sense of something being

not quite right makes me shiver. Surely he is Gatton! He must be! I do not really doubt it. She could never be mistaken; she could not love him so much, if he were not her son. Yet sometimes they seem to me like two conspirators. They watch effects too much."

"Do not you try to turn your old Godfather into a father-confessor, my dear," said Mr. Joel; "and above all, never confess to anyone other people's secrets. You have decided to stay. Well, I am very glad of that. I incline to believe that Mrs. Mordaunt needs you, whether she knows that she does, or not. If you are perplexed, time may very probably bring enlightenment; but, if you fail someone to whom you owe gratitude, not even time (that does so much) can ever make that good. That is sound practical reasoning," Mr. Joel concluded triumphantly. "And now I wish that you would consider with me whether beer should be mixed with the sugar and water with which I feed my bees in the winter? But hush, do not talk too loud, for fear lest they should hear you. They are very easily annoyed."

Esther knew that no more opinions could be got out of him, and she turned with a smile to the consideration of the bees' food.

It was dusk when she left the cottage, but she left it feeling rested and refreshed. Mr. Joel looked at all things from the purely spiritual point of view, but it appeared to Esther that he was wise. Would not any gifts that time might yet bring, taste bitter, if she herself had been niggardly of faith and love?

Thinking of these matters, she walked straight up against Major Iredale, who stood at the bend of the

lane; his tall figure appeared almost gigantic in the gloaming; an unyielding grimness pervaded his whole aspect.

"You are late, Cousin Esther," said he. "These roads are lonely for a woman to be out alone in after dark."

"I know all the country people," replied Esther. "Not one of them would hurt me. It is only Cousin Becky's hares that need be afraid of some of them."

"A poaching set!" said the Major. "They always were, and always will be. As for you, you always were and always will be imprudent, if you live to be ninety."

"And indeed caution has nothing to do with age," Esther agreed with a smile. "If I live to be a hundred, Curtis, I shall still be of opinion that it is better to be too trusting than too suspicious. There are plenty of things that are quite worth risking broken limbs for, but, if you are over-careful, you get no satisfaction at all out of your fault."

The Major turned and walked by her side without a "by your leave."

"But unfortunately," said he, "the people who are ready to risk a break with such light hearts, are not particular as to *whose* limbs suffer."

He spoke with a severe gravity too heavy for the occasion. Esther was half-inclined to contradict what she considered an obviously false statement, but she refrained, for she knew by experience that the Major always insisted on carrying an argument to the bitter end; and her feminine intuition told her that his remark had been prompted by personal bitterness, with which there is never any use in arguing!

She tried to mollify him, for bitterness always woke the pity and sympathy of which she possessed a plentiful store.

"Since you *will* chaperon me home, as if I were still in my twenties," said she, "let us go by the beech walk."

But the Major was not mollified. His grievance was big and sore, and he was angry because Esther was not on his side.

Beeches are the trees of Arcadia! the trees of the Watteau pictures. They lend themselves to romance, but not to tragedy. The light falls soft and mellow between their shimmering leaves; they whisper tender and dreamy messages. But the Major stalked through the "lover's walk" as if he felt the beauty of the beeches was somehow an added insult, and presently he pointed with his stick to certain white chalk crosses, signs of condemnation. "The interloper is already instituting fine changes in every direction, I see," said he. "He has marked the very trees that I said ought to be cut down when I paid my annual visit this time last year. I remember you were against me. You indulged in a vast deal of sentiment then. How is it that he has over-persuaded you?"

"Was I sentimental? But it was not the trees I cared about; it was Cousin Becky. Dear me, Curtis, couldn't you see that?" said Esther, with a touch of impatience. "Was it likely I should support you or anyone else in doing anything she disliked? Nowadays she doesn't care two straws what is done or what is left undone, so long as her son gets his own way—and what does a tree here or there matter?"

She paused a moment, and then an idea came to

her. She was naturally hopeful, and she was fresh from the company of a man whose faith in the underlying goodness and generosity of his brothers and sisters was so vivid that it often seemed to create that in which it trusted.

"What *does* matter, what is really of importance, is that her last years should not be harassed by miserable lawsuits, that her new happiness should not be spoiled," she cried earnestly. "That is what I am anxious about now. She is very plucky, you know. She will be game to the last, but she is old; she is close on seventy-four. If there were any long uncertainty the strain would kill her. Think, oh, Curtis! do think about that."

Tears stood in her eyes, and the Major was not entirely unsusceptible to their effect. Esther's special pleading was hardly fair; but then he was not a man who looked for, or even greatly admired, impartiality in a woman. He smiled grimly, glanced at her sideways, and pulled at his heavy black moustache. He had a slow, seldom-reached, and rather unexpected sense of humour. It did not often show itself, but it was awakened now by Esther's eagerness.

"You remind me of the fable of the wolf and the lamb," said he. "A scamp comes to take my inheritance, and, when I venture on a feeble bleat of protest, I'm told that I am bent on killing my old relative, and that I'm a fierce and brutal character."

And, indeed, there was much to be said for that view of the case. The poor Major, who had the unpopular and unromantic side of the story, was by no means well treated; though he did not look particularly lamb-like.

"But if he is not a scamp, what then?"

The Major shook his head. "I remember Gatton."

"You are so sure you are right!" cried Esther. "But every day I see fresh proofs that you are wrong. At first I doubted too, but the man has little tricks of manner and expression that convince me hour by hour. Yesterday something irritated him, and I caught him swinging his foot to and fro just as my Cousin Becky does when she is put out. When he laughs, he tilts his head back exactly as she does. When he repeats anything that someone has said, he reproduces the manner and voice of the original speaker to the life, and so does she. When he describes something, he looks into space as though he actually were seeing the scene he is describing. Cousin Becky is the only other person I know who does that."

"You don't say so!" said the Major. "It's disgusting! So he takes note of my poor deluded cousin's peculiarities, and mimics them for your and the public benefit. I only hope that you will not be murdered, as well as robbed, by this peeping, acting vagabond. All that you have told me has certainly greatly increased my bad opinion of the fellow."

Esther stood still with heightened colour. "In that case I will tell you no more. Good-night, Curtis."

But at that the Major relaxed. "Come, come, Esther," he said, "don't rush off at a tangent. It would be a thousand pities that a rascal should succeed in putting you into a huff with me, who have always been your very true friend. Try to keep cool in this matter. Let us discuss it quietly and without prejudice. What is it that you wish me to do? You are anxious that I should not at once bring an

action against this fellow for false pretences; he is about as much like Gatton as he is like the man in the moon! But I should imagine that even you could hardly wish me to let him presently walk past me into the property without so much as winking an eyelid?"

Esther swallowed her indignation at being told to "try to keep cool" for the sake of her Cousin Becky's tranquillity. She reflected that although Curtis was irritating, it was true that he was a very staunch friend.

"Mr. Rip Van Winkle says that he has plenty of proofs to show to anyone who likes to examine them," said she, "but you, on the strength of a boy's recollection of poor Gatton, refuse to examine anything, while Cousin Becky naturally declares that, being absolutely convinced, she needs no testimony. I am not in a position to sift the matter. It is not my business to do that; yet it seems to me it might be sifted without actually going before the Courts."

The Major shrugged his shoulders. "I'm a plain soldier! Whereas our would-be prodigal son is a master and adept at the art of imposture. I should be glad enough to save scandal, but I candidly own that I doubt whether I am equal to the task of unmasking him unaided. You must 'set a thief to catch a thief,' my dear cousin. I fear I have not had the education necessary for the job."

Nevertheless he turned the idea over in his mind. In reality he had no low opinion of his own wits, and he was by no means desirous of entering on a possibly long and vexatious suit. Mrs. Mordaunt would, of course, back the claimant for all she was worth. She would doubtless have a pretty bill of costs to pay in the end, but that would be small consolation to him,

for she would squeeze the money out of the land (probably by a reckless cutting down of timber)—out of the land which should one day be his. Possibly other and gentler arguments, which he did not translate into words, also availed something.

"No, I have not had the education," he repeated; "but there's old Holdsworthy! He's a criminal lawyer and also a gentleman, and a distant connection of our own. If I had his aid in the investigation, and he were given every facility for full inquiry, the matter might be managed with a decent regard for appearances. I hate the public washing of dirty family linen."

"May I tell Cousin Becky that (after full inquiry) you will abide by Mr. Holdsworthy's opinion?"

"I ok here, Esther," said the Major, almost solemnly, "that man is not Gatton, and I am so sure of that fact that nothing and no one can ever convince me to the contrary; but I will withdraw all practical protest, if Mr. Holdsworthy gives the verdict against me, after full and fair investigation. He will, of course, have to employ detectives. I reserve my private opinion—that is unalterable. I make this offer only on condition that my cousin on her side shall in like manner abide by Mr. Holdsworthy's verdict, so far as practical issues are concerned. If she is so deluded as to believe to her dying day (in spite of adverse evidence) that the man is Gatton, that must lie between her and her God. It is a fair offer, and I won't go a step beyond it. She's suspiciously afraid of the law, eh?"

"No, indeed! Cousin Becky is ready to fight now. It is I who am a coward for her, and who dread seeing her put in a witness-box and bullied by lawyers."

"You're foolishly tender where she is concerned," said he resentfully, for a suspicion that in one direction Esther gave more than she got, always angered him unreasonably. "And, if the claimant were what he pretends to be, what then? I very much fear you'd be the worse off for him, Esther. Your services would be no longer required over there."

He pointed to the house, which they were now nearing, having left the beech trees behind. His words hurt Esther like a blow, and she winced. The Major had a wonderful knack of saying the wrong thing.

"My Cousin Becky has never hinted that my services are, as you so agreeably put it, no longer required," said she. "And her son is never anything but most kind and courteous to everyone. Yet I think you may be sure that I am not likely to stay anywhere where I am not wanted."

"You are very hasty, Esther," said the Major. "You need not be so angry. I have a reason for inquiring what your plans are, or whether you have in fact made any."

He paused deliberately and suggestively, but Esther would not ask him what his reason was.

They had reached the garden-gate, and she put out her hand and bade him good-bye. He held it fast for a moment. "I should never have suspected that *you* would side with the wolf, Cousin Esther, but I've no doubt that he wears sheep's clothing when he talks to you."

"I side with no one. I only try to stand by my Cousin Becky," said poor Esther. She pulled her hand away, and went in with a heavy and perplexed heart.

The Major, as he stood looking first at her and then at the ugly grey house, which he was very fond of, was heavy-hearted too. It was sad that Esther should be deluded; it was a shame that everyone should be against him, when he was so clearly and absolutely in the right; but at least he was spared the miseries of perplexity, and moreover he was upheld by a good old-fashioned simple belief in the ultimate triumph of honesty and righteousness. The ungodly might flourish like a green bay-tree, but their end must always be humiliation and defeat.

"The fellow may dance a while longer, but the noose is round his neck, and one day he'll swing in it," said the Major; with which consolatory thought he turned his back on the big house, and trudged off to the lodging in the village, from which he watched events.

Esther was late for dinner, but Rip Van Winkle was late too, so her bad behaviour was covered by his, while his flow of conversation covered her depressed silence. He knew instinctively when anyone who happened to be in the same room with him was, as he would have expressed it, "down on their luck." If he were friendly disposed, his fine tact was comfortably and unobtrusively at the sufferer's service; if he were *not*, he could be acutely and proportionately unpleasant; but where women were concerned, that last was seldom the case.

At Applehurst the mahogany was cleared for dessert. It was an old-fashioned custom, which Esther had at first laughed at, then loved and clung to. She liked to see the silver and glass and flowers reflected in the polished surface of wood. In a rather colourless life, she had seized pathetically on every bit of beauty or

grace, and made the most of it. When the servants had left the room she made an effort to speak. She had never before been nervous about saying anything to Cousin Becky, but somehow a growing sense of the extraordinary closeness of the tie between the old woman and the man who sat on her other hand made her shy. Esther held herself upright, and crumbled her bread between her slim fingers. Mother and son exchanged amused glances. Their dark-skinned, vivid faces—marked, had Esther had experience enough to read them, by passion, by a hundred experiences which were outside her ken—were of an utterly alien character to her own. She was almost pathetically unlike them. "Pathetically" because she loved one of them so well.

"Do you know, Cousin Becky, I find that Curtis is not so very disinclined to put off that terrible lawsuit, and to investigate Mr. Rip Van Winkle's claims 'privately,'" Esther said at last, and then she gave a somewhat softened account of her interview with the Major.

"Dear Curtis!" ejaculated Cousin Becky. "It's mighty condescending of him to take the trouble to prove to me privately, and, if possible, inexpensively, that I don't know my own son when I see him."

"It's a canny move on my good Cousin Iredale's part," said Rip Van Winkle. "For, if I bring overwhelming proof, as I can, of my identity, he will be warned in time, and save the cost of a useless struggle. It's always just as well to see which way the cat is preparing to jump."

So soon as dinner was over Esther pleaded a headache, and went to her own room. Mrs. Mordaunt

moved her chair closer to her son's. He glanced round the spacious, badly-lighted room.

"This dining-room would hold a regiment! It's rather big for two people," said he.

"It does not seem too large, now that you are sitting here," she answered.

He shrugged his shoulders, then began to explain to her some details connected with the management of the land. He was about to try a new system of manuring. He was anxious to let a portion of the property on the west side in plots and on long leases to the tenants.

He described at some length how the hay had rotted because there had not been "hands" to carry it; he was full of new ideas, and it was characteristic of the man, who was by nature a leader, that he had already to a great extent impressed his views on a most conservative and suspicious peasantry.

"Wilcox is heart and soul for me," he said. "The others are beginning to come round. I am to speak to them all to-morrow night at the 'Red Lion.'"

Mrs. Mordaunt heard him for a few minutes with a flash of attention, but his point of view was confusing to her; she shook her head and contented herself with listening only to the sound of his voice, and with watching the changing expression of his face.

"I cannot take in these new-fangled plans; but do just whatever you choose," said she.

"But I want you to understand. It is your property," he said. "Why, you used to be a keen business woman."

"Yes, yes, I was once," she owned. "I tried to fill myself with husks! They were hard and dry and

indigestible. Now that you have come back, I do not care about them. So long as you stay with me I want nothing else. Jasper, have you forgiven me?"

There was a kind of wonder in his look as he turned to her. "Why, mother, that is absurd!" he said; "I might say that with better reason, eh?"

"No, that would be more absurd," she answered. Then with a sudden change of tone, "Lord! what nonsense that woman talked this afternoon. I cannot abide middle-aged spinsters!—with the exception of Essie. Even she is high falutin sometimes."

"If I had never gone to America, perhaps I should have married a gentle English lady like Esther," he said musingly.

A fierce gleam came into the old woman's eyes. He saw it, and laughed.

"No, no. You need not be afraid! I am not in love with Esther. Mother, shall I tell you something?"

"No. I don't want to hear," said she. "My boy, I know that you have staked everything on one woman, and that you have been miserable, as I was. Don't tell me; I should curse her, and then you'd be angry. Besides, I like to pretend that you are all my own now. It can't really be for very long. Let me make the most of it. It satisfies me at last."

"Does a pretence satisfy you?" he said. Then he laughed. "That is because you are such a born actor, and so am I!"

"Ah! my son," she cried. "If you were to go, your going would kill me. *That* is true enough."

And so indeed it was!

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Esther was a younger woman she had often been troubled by curious and feverishly allegorical dreams. With middle age these visions had become more rare, but her sleep was fancy-haunted that night. She dreamt that she was kneeling in the cathedral at Bourges, and straight down from the lofty roof, with feet that at last all but touched the ledge of her prie-dieu, and with wings that glowed like crimson and purple fire, dropped an angel. The stained glass of Bourges had made Esther's brain reel. She had felt drunk with satisfaction once (long, long ago), when she had stood in that vast and stately place and gazed up at the pure, deep jewels of living colour. In her dream she experienced the same acute pleasure and the same giddy sensation while her eyes dwelt on the angel's wings; and that was perhaps why she could not follow what the messenger had to say. She was only dimly aware that his message implied blame to her Cousin Becky; and then something else distracted her. Though still kneeling in a devout attitude at her wooden prie-dieu, she was straining her ears to catch the murmur of two voices that reached her from below, and something in the sound touched her quite unreasonably, and moved her to warm expostulation. Perhaps there was a reminiscence of the Major in the stuff in

which the dream was woven. "Nobody who always lives in heaven can possibly understand or have the right to judge people like Cousin Becky and Mr. Rip Van Winkle," she told the angel, with that downright earnestness which characterises our behaviour in dreams. "To understand, you must have been in hell."

"Will you go there, Esther?" asked the angel; and, crying an answer aloud, she woke.

She sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, and laughed. How many years was it since she had been so ridiculously aroused? Not certainly during the last fifteen. At the time of the Egyptian war, when her lover was with the Naval Brigade, she had constantly been awakened from troubled slumbers by the sound of her own voice calling or weeping—but that was such ages ago.

Daylight was beginning to creep into the house. She opened her shutters, and now it was not of the past she thought, but of the present, and of the near future, while she looked across the park. Mr. Rip Van Winkle had undoubtedly widened her view, both literally and metaphorically. On the whole Esther rejoiced at that; she had grown weary of always seeing the same trees. There would be no use in going back to bed; she determined to dress, and secure a quiet time for reading, before the world was astir. She had become less studious of late, a backsliding for which she took herself to task with unnecessary severity, for, in common with many other women whose lives lack fulness, Esther was a trifle too apt to manufacture duties. She found the effort of concentration more difficult than it used to be, for, though she had loved

books, she had loved them as records of character (the impersonal had comparatively little charm for Esther), and just now the problems of humanity were appealing to her at first hand. She propped her heavy German tome on her dressing-table, and tried to read, but presently a creeping sensation that something was happening, that some danger or misery was at hand, compelled her to open her door and to peep out. The maids were not yet about. Esther shivered while she stood in the passage. Rip Van Winkle had talked of having the whole place heated by hot pipes, but she could scarcely imagine it thoroughly warm; for a certain damp chilliness seemed to her the inseparable atmosphere of these long corridors, the walls of which had in some bygone generation been painted blue, but which had now worn to a cold faded grey.

While she stood scolding herself for her foolishness, and yet lingering, peering down the passage, a cry, sharp and agonised, cut the silence, and rang through the house.

"Jasper! Jasper!"

Esther ran to the door of her cousin's room, her feet winged by terror. She ran so fast that she almost ran into the arms of Rip Van Winkle, who had heard the cry too, and emerged from his room in a queer Oriental dressing-gown, in which he looked more un-English than usual.

She stopped, panting. "Go! go to her. She is calling *you*," said she.

He shot one quick glance at her, then, seeing that there was no time to lose in words, he took unceremonious hold of her arm, and drew her with him into his mother's room.

The old woman was sitting bolt-upright in a huge four-poster bed. Her face, drawn and twisted by extreme pain, stood out sharp as yellow ivory against the heavy maroon-coloured bed-hangings. Her black eyes were wide open and staring, her hands clutched the coverlet, and she was gasping for breath. Esther trembled from head to foot. She was a patient and tender nurse when her cousin suffered from ordinary attacks of gout or liver, but this emergency surprised her, and she was unaccustomed to surprises. It was Rip Van Winkle, therefore, who took capable hold of the situation.

"Is there sal volatile anywhere at hand?" he asked.

Esther found her voice with an effort. "In the medicine-closet, over the wash-hand stand; but it is locked, and I don't know where the keys are."

He was across the room, and had forced the lock with a pair of nail-scissors before she had finished her sentence. There was laudanum as well as sal volatile in the cupboard, and he pounced on it at once, and administered sixty drops. Presently the sharpness of the agony relaxed, and the old woman, as she leant back on her son's arm, forced a faint, brave attempt at a smile with white lips.

"I—I thought my hour had struck, Jasper," whispered she, "but the pain has let go this time. That was a sharp squeeze, though—I shan't stand such another. If it comes back, I shall die. I don't want to die, now that you've come home. No—I don't want to die."

On her face terror was written, a kind of appealing

terror, such as Esther had never seen there before. The man saw it too, and answered very gently.

"It's all right, mother. It won't come back. You're not going to die. We sat up talking too long! That's what has played the deuce with you. You ought to pitch into me well, Esther." Esther had recovered her nerve now, and was busy lighting a spirit-lamp.

"I am going to fill my despised hot bottle, and put it to your feet, Cousin Becky," she said cheerfully. "You'll have to condescend to it for once." But when she passed Rip Van Winkle, who was sitting on the edge of the bed supporting his mother's little shrunk figure, she whispered that she would rouse the servants and send post-haste for the doctor.

"Very well, but be quick," said he. "She'll feel safer for seeing you about the room. Come back quickly."

He was reluctant that she should go. To tell the truth, he too felt safer for her presence. He was no coward, and his ready wit never failed him, as Esther's had momentarily failed her, but yet he did not like the situation. Poor old mother! he dreaded the possibility that she might die then and there, during Esther's absence. He had seen sudden death very often, but—perhaps because of the curious strain of gipsy blood in him—it always appeared far more horrible to die in a bed than to die out of doors from wound or misadventure. He understood the old woman's dread, and it seemed to him (and the curious fact can only be stated without explanation) that, if the mysterious flight of the soul were about to take place, it would somehow be advantageous that a good woman like Esther, a woman who presumably believed

in religious mysteries and was in touch with the invisible, should be present.

It did not take place just then, however. The pain passed as completely and suddenly as it had come. The deadly pallor softened into something less ghastly. On Esther's return, she found her old cousin dozing naturally, and, when the doctor arrived, as quickly as might be, the old lady actually woke to greet him with a joke. Esther even descried a triumphant glee about her, when Dr. Clayton complimented Rip Van Winkle on his promptitude.

"It was lucky that you lost no time," the doctor remarked, with a glance at the broken hasp of the medicine-closet, "and that you knew how to do the right thing at once."

"He wouldn't have been *my* son if he had fiddle-faddled at a crisis," said Mrs. Mordaunt from her bed, in a weak but decisive voice. She never lost an opportunity of driving a nail home in the fabric which she was building.

Dr. Clayton (he was a kind, grey-haired man, on whose broad, plain countenance goodness was writ so large that any child could read it) looked with slow, benevolent attention from the eager, wizened face of the old woman to the man who was now standing up, and rubbing his stiffened arm with a queer smile.

"There certainly could never be a doubt in my mind as to whose son you are, my dear sir," he said deliberately. "You resemble your mother in a marked degree. I have had occasion to observe in her that same excellent quality of readiness which you fortunately inherit."

Rip Van Winkle received the compliment pleasantly. He had charming manners "I only wish that every-

one were as sharp-sighted as you are, doctor," said he, and Esther knew that the old man was pleased.

Dr. Clayton was *not* sharp-sighted, but he was a steady friend, and being as a rule cautious in stating, he never changed his opinion in a hurry. She left Rip Van Winkle to finish making another ally, and went down to the library to wait the close of the doctor's visit. The attack had alarmed her, and she had been humiliated by her own helplessness.

What would have happened if Rip Van Winkle had not been at hand? While she was fumblingly searching for brandy, or ringing up the servants, her dear old cousin would have succumbed in the struggle, would have died unaided before her eyes.

"And she does not want to die," thought Esther, with an odd little pang of wonder that anyone after seventy years' experience of the world, should not have had a good deal more than enough of it. "I should always have felt that I had failed her, because she does not want to die." Her heart went out with warm, shamed gratitude towards the man who had known what to do, who had saved Cousin Becky from death and herself from remorse. "He is worth a dozen scatter-brained fools like myself," Esther told herself somewhat unfairly. "And I must certainly never have any doubts about him again."

Dr. Clayton found her in this humble and depressed mood when he came downstairs. He had known Esther for many years, and had a genuine respect and liking for her. He found it difficult to realise that she was no longer a girl, for, in spite of her silvery hair, she had kept some youthful characteristics. A certain child-like candour, for example, that

looked out of her soft eyes, would probably remain with her always, even if she attained to an undelimited old age.

The doctor was cheerful, both by natural temperament and from a sense of duty; his professional cheerfulness rather jarred on Esther. She looked white and shaken, acquiesced but faintly when he remarked how happy a thing it was that Mr. Mordaunt had returned in time to cheer his patient's declining years, and she sighed anxiously over his instructions. How should she ever persuade Cousin Becky, of all people, to subscribe to so many rules and limitations?

"I will do what I can, but she always will eat green cheese, and drink ale, and she swears at slops," said Esther. "And as to not allowing any excitements—why, doctor, when such thrilling events happen, how am I to *disallow* them?"

Dr. Clayton rose to go, but held Esther's hand for a minute in his large comfortable clasp. His funny old patient upstairs did literally swear, on occasion, in a fashion that vexed his good soul, and he was sorry for Esther. He was a devoted churchman, and oddly enough for a doctor, was apt to distribute tracts (though only such as were of an optimistic and consolatory order) as well as drugs. His common-sense had fortunately prevented his attempting the conversion of Mrs. Mordaunt.

"I am sure, from my long experience of you, that you'll manage about her food better than anyone else could," said he. "Indeed, it is impossible to get her to admit a nurse inside the house, and her strong will seems to show no symptom of softening. She expressed herself very vigorously on the subject of nurses. As to events—they are all in the hands of God. Take some port wine with your lunch, my dear, and remember

that it is faithless to allow yourself to become disheartened, and lowering to your system not to eat well."

"Oh yes," said Esther, laughing. Somehow the dual recommendation struck her as funny. There was a simplicity about Dr. Clayton's methods of doctoring soul and body that suited some cases very well, and he was popular with the village people, as he well deserved to be; but Esther had not the undoubting belief in his ability that she had in his good faith. She wondered whether she would do well to call in further advice, and then recollected with some relief that the responsibility no longer rested on her shoulders.

She went to the kitchen to give directions about food, then upstairs again to find the old lady asleep once more, and finally, while again descending the stairs, she sat down with her head against the banister, feeling dizzy and worn out.

It was in this undignified position that Rip Van Winkle came upon her, rather to her dismay. He greeted her with his whimsical, pathetic smile, as she hastily struggled to her feet.

"Why, Esther," he said, "do you think that we need to pretend to each other that we are not dreadfully tired, and depressed, and hungry? Why do you jump up and try to look cheerful? It adds so to the wear and tear of life if one keeps up too many polite appearances with the members of one's own household."

"Of course you are hungry," cried Esther. "I forgot that you had not yet had any breakfast. The day seems to have been endlessly long already."

"We began it with a catastrophe at four o'clock, and it is now half-past nine," said Rip Van Winkle, yawning. "Come. Let's eat and drink."

Esther had become accustomed to seeing him sit opposite to her at breakfast, but she had been all her life more used to serving than to being served, and the apparently trivial incident of his insisting on pouring out the coffee and bringing it to her, touched her ridiculously.

"I am absurdly inadequate to every situation to-day," she remarked, with a smile that tried to hide the sadness in her voice. "I don't even seem to be capable of pouring out your coffee."

The man made no reply, but kept glancing at her with quick kindly glances. He liked Esther, and somehow or other he understood her. The greyness of her life, with its too repeatedly struck note of sacrifice, her tenderness for his mother, her crushed-down capability for wider enjoyments, were all visible to him. The best love that he had to give had been already poured out only too lavishly, but he sometimes wished that he could carry Esther into a warm and sunny place, could show her the richness and glory of the world, with its many colours and its thousand sides. She would have enjoyed it so. And that he loved one woman did not prevent his liking many women.

"I don't mean to be impertinent," he began at last.

Esther raised her tired eyelids; she had been staring at her late shortcomings in the fire, and regarded him with gentle surprise.

"You are never that," she said gently.

"But," he persisted, "you don't seem to me to fully appreciate your own merits, and that is a pity. I happened to know what to do to-day, for I've knocked about so much that all sorts of queer bits of knowledge have stuck to me, and you didn't, but you followed my directions quickly and quietly, and I would rather have

you by me in a difficult situation than most of the women I've met, and I've met a good many of all sorts and descriptions."

"I think," Esther remarked, "that among the queer bits of knowledge that you have acquired, is the knowledge of how to say consolatory things to people, Mr. Rip Van Winkle."

He laughed. "Perhaps—and nasty things too, on occasion! But I am speaking the truth all the same. I can't tell you how much I have admired the way in which you have treated me. The position was full of difficulty. Only a very unselfish woman could have met it with any dignity. In my experience, unselfish women are extremely rare."

Esther, in spite of her thirty-seven years, could still blush like a girl, and she blushed now. "I am not really particularly unselfish," she said, and then stopped short. She was not in the habit of discussing her own sensations.

It had been a difficult situation, of course, but it occurred to her that it might have been an unbearable one. Rip Van Winkle's chivalrous consideration for her, and possibly his appreciation, had lightened the difficulties. His tact was as fine as a tactful woman's, but he was *not* a woman. Perhaps, for all her goodness, Esther could hardly have borne the intrusion of a genuine daughter. Then across these kindly thoughts shot another, disturbing and sinister. Esther was certainly attracted by, and she all but trusted her Cousin Becky's son, *but*—yes, there was always a "but," an illusive, hateful doubt, that she gave voice to now almost involuntarily. "But why did she call you Jasper?"

The words rose to her lips without premeditation,

but he had been expecting them, and he answered without any embarrassment—

“Ah, so you noticed that? Well, to tell you the truth, it is only in public that she ever calls me anything else. Jasper is, and always was her name for me.”

The faintest possible shade of amusement gave added frankness to his explanation. “I cannot remember that she ever spoke to me as Gattin in the old days, before I went away. She was not a demonstrative mother then; she shows her affection far more openly now than she did, but”—

“But she had her own name for you. I can quite understand,” said Esther softly. And at that the curious relish he sometimes took in acting hid its head and was temporarily scotched.

Esther was horribly ashamed of her suspicions. She would have been proportionately surprised had she known that at that moment *he* was horribly ashamed too.

His gipsy-black eyes had exactly that baffling expression in them that his mother's sometimes had when Esther bestowed on her those little tender attentions that were the natural expression of a very real admiration and love.

“Now I wonder what words this innocent and pretty lady would find to express her opinion of me in, if she did quite understand?” he said to himself. It struck him that Esther's vocabulary would be unsuited to the occasion, and the thought made him laugh a short, harsh laugh that brought the colour to Esther's cheek, and that yet did not alienate her, simply because it was so strangely like her Cousin Becky's laugh, that, as she said to herself, it was “enough to prove whose child he was.”

"But I do not know why you are amused," she said gravely. "I did not see that there was anything the least funny in what we have been talking about."

"No more do I, Esther," said he. "My boyhood wasn't particularly funny, goodness knows! It was tragic. I was a tragic young fool!"

"Then why did you laugh?" persisted Esther.

She was not usually inquisitive, but a desire to understand had taken possession of her, as it once took possession of mother Eve, when she stood in her sheltered garden and was offered that knowledge of good and of evil that led to labour, and sorrow, and love.

"Now why the dickens did I?" he repeated meditatively. "I think it might have been because that bit of rug (we want new rugs, don't we?) reminded me of a bale of carpets I once saw on the quay of Marseilles, and of a very funny story connected with them. Or," with a gleam of mischief, when she shook her head doubtfully, "it might have been for quite another reason. Because"—

"I did not ask you why you might have laughed," said Esther, "but why you did."

And at that he laughed again, and a whim seized him, or her candid eyes touched him, and he spoke the truth or at least part of it. "Why, then, it was because apparently there is just three yards of much-worn Turkey carpet between the place where you are and the place where I am. But in reality there is a gulf that is so broad and deep that it is sometimes—laughable to hear you trying to talk across it."

Tears rose in Esther's eyes, and she got up quickly, lest they should be seen.

"That does not make me laugh," she said; "I do not see any joke in that."

CHAPTER X

MR. RIP VAN WINKLE showed himself a valuable auxiliary in the sick-room, and Esther's gratitude increased. It is true that he was not so patient as she was, but then that mattered the less, because he could do no wrong in Mrs. Mordaunt's eyes, and because the very sound of his footstep was a joy to her. He could always amuse and interest the old woman, and, strange fact, he had authority, and could compass what the whole college of physicians might have essayed in vain—he could make her obey orders.

Esther got into a way of appealing to him in difficulties, and, had he disappeared into space again, she would have missed him more than she realised. She believed that without the strong stimulus of his presence her Cousin Becky would never have got on her feet again. As it was, she was up and about, and, to the casual observer, nearly as brisk as ever in a couple of weeks. Yet there was a change, or rather perhaps the further accentuation of a change that Esther had noticed before.

The wild excitement of the last few months seemed to have caused a kind of moral as well as physical break-up. Mrs. Mordaunt was feverishly fond of her son, but, when he was not by to absorb her every thought, she clung to Esther in a way she had never clung before.

She had been a very self-reliant person, and one who had always preferred to spend much time alone; but now she liked to have her adopted daughter with her, and would talk to her constantly of her past life, of her long yearning after her boy, of the unhappiness of the first years of her marriage, of the miseries of her uncared-for childhood and girlhood.

Esther's warm heart ached over these revelations. It was ancient history indeed. It had all happened (as Cousin Becky remarked) long before she was born, or even thought of. And yet what woman can ever hear of a badly treated child, without an indignant quickening of her pulses?

"Dear Cousin Becky, I think that it was wonderful that you should have grown up into such a good person," Esther said one day. "If I had had a childhood like that I know that I should have turned sour or melancholy. All this just proves what excellent stuff you were made of."

The two women were sitting together by the fire, just as they had sat on the eve of the prodigal's return; but Mrs. Mordaunt leant forward and patted Esther's hand with a demonstration of affection which she would hardly have shown then.

"No! I was never what *you* would call 'good,'" said she. "But I doubt whether you'd have survived in the circumstances. You're of a more refined make, morally as well as physically. Your father wasn't a drunkard, nor your mother a light woman. My father beat my mother once, and I stood by and screamed. I was ten years old. After that she ran away from him, and I thought her an injured martyr (though with a curious tendency to lies), but unfortun-

ately learnt to know better in the course of a year or two. It wasn't the sort of experience that goes to the making of the fresh, innocent type of English girl; but I was hardy, my dear, and I managed to enjoy life, in spite of some drawbacks. Indeed, I'm not at all sure, taking it all round, that I haven't enjoyed life a deal more than you ever have or ever will. Now that is a thing you can't understand. When I tell you these old stories you pity me from your standpoint, but, good Lord, Esther! I never worried my head when I was young. At least, not till trouble jumped at me and slapped me in the face, and then I slapped back as hard as I could. Why, I could sit and laugh sometimes when I see you puckering up your pretty white forehead (it's wonderful how you've kept your complexion), and getting a pain in your conscience over nothings. But," she added, "you have a sense of humour, my dear, and you have a heart, and that's why we are friends."

"Ye—es," said Esther, slowly. "You've been a good friend to me, Cousin Becky. I was a lucky girl to fall in with you. But now that I'm not in the least a girl any longer, I begin to suspect that I've not been much of a friend to you."

The old lady gave her a sudden sharp look. "Well, I never could make *confidantes* of other women. That wasn't my way," said she. "And mind, I never was such a bad sort, Essie, as to soil the ears of a girl with any story she had better not have heard. Moreover, *your* mother was a little saint (so I've understood), and, though you mightn't have guessed it, I thought a bit about her when I was doing the best I could for you and your sisters, and especially for you. Now, what

would an ultra-religious woman, with a highly developed conscience, say to this child now? I used to ask myself."

"Did you really?" said Esther, who was touched and rather surprised. "And did you try to say what she would have said?"

"I asked myself," repeated Cousin Becky. "But"—(with a sudden relapse from virtue) "d—n it all, my dear, I felt, from my knowledge of 'em, that she'd have said such precious silly things, that I really couldn't always follow her example!"

Esther laughed, in spite of a slight sensation of shock. Cousin Becky had always been apt to administer sudden cold douches, if the conversation appeared to her to be verging on the too sentimental, but her adopted child had not lived nearly twenty years with her for nothing. Some people, indeed, can be twice that time under the same roof, and understand each other no whit the better for bodily proximity; but Esther and her old friend had glimmering visions of each other's souls.

Esther was about to fight the battle of the somewhat roughly treated women with consciences, when a ring at the door bell interrupted their *tête-à-tête*.

"It is Curtis. I hear his voice in the hall. How mean of him to come when my son is out," said the old woman.

She clutched nervously at Esther, who replied quickly--

"You are not alone, dear Cousin Becky, but why should you see him, if you don't wish to? Let me say you are not equal to entertaining visitors yet. It is quite true."

But the old lady pulled herself together. "No, no, I do not show the white feather. Let him in. Let him in. He has come to look after the property that will not be his."

The Major had not set foot in the house, since the moment when he had cut his annual visit short. Esther knew so soon as he entered the room that he came with a distinct purpose. He shook hands very gravely with his aunt, and his gravity was undisturbed by her flip-pant—

"Well, Curtis, your visits have been few and far between of late as the visits of angels."

"I believed that you hardly expected or wished for them, Cousin Rebecca," said he. "But I was sorry to hear that you were dangerously ill, and I am glad that you have recovered."

Mrs. Mordaunt made an odd little grimace, and Esther interposed anxiously, "I don't know that it was quite so bad as dangerously, Curtis."

At the bottom of her heart she did know, but she frowned and shook her head at the Major from behind her cousin's chair. The old lady turned sharply and caught her in the act.

"Don't do that, Essie; I'm not a fool," said she. "And, as for my cousin, I can see that he is not going to be deterred by you. Sit down, Curtis; I'm pleased to see you. We always understand each other's plain speaking, don't we?"

The Major sat down deliberately. He had thought over and decided on what he intended to say, and it was certainly true that no hint of Esther's would prevent his speech. Yet it gave him a momentary pang of discomfort to note how indignantly she turned

from him, and drawing her low chair close to Mrs. Mordaunt's, threw one slender arm protectingly across the old woman's knee.

"She thinks that I'm bullying my cousin," he said to himself. "But I am not, I am giving her a chance to do what is right."

The Major's well-cut features looked stern, as the firelight played on them; yet his rather immobile face was marked with a certain hall-mark of honesty. One might guess that the man's irritating traits were surface characteristics. He might count the holes in his cousin's curtains, and the pennies in his own purse too often and too carefully, but he was not intrinsically mean. He was always absolutely certain that he was in the right, so far at least as opinion went, but he was unflinchingly honest. He was on the wrong side of fifty, and by that age, meanness, like self-indulgence or bad temper, will out. There is no longer any hiding its writing from those who have eyes to see. The more Esther looked at the Major the better she respected him; unfortunately, when he spoke, her respect vanished in annoyance and anger.

"I don't know whether you have always understood me, Cousin Rebecca," said he. "I am aware that you have not much liked me. It has troubled you to reflect that I must succeed you in the natural course of events, and you have resented any interest I may inadvertently have shown in the management of the land. This has become plain to me of late."

"Really," said Esther, "it is very unnecessary to"—
But Mrs. Mordaunt stopped her.

"Hush, my dear; Curtis is trying to lead up to something. We do not, as a rule, consider it good manners to drag out and descant on certain little

predilections, or dislike, which are usually taken for granted, but we will not distract him by interruptions."

"Yet, in spite of that," continued the Major (who was not in the smallest degree distracted)—"in spite of that, I imagined that you were acting in good faith, though under the influence of an unfortunate hallucination, when you welcomed this stranger whom you call your son. My not unnatural annoyance did not for one moment lead me to suppose otherwise."

Esther's indignant "I should hope not" passed unheeded.

"Yielding to Esther's representations, I determined that, if it were possible, I would avoid bringing an action against him."

The old lady nodded. "That was wise of you."

"And that I would investigate these claims privately, with the help of a lawyer. I am bound to allow that the claimant has been most ready to facilitate every inquiry, and that, so far as we have gone, the results of the investigation have greatly astonished, even startled me."

He came to a full stop. But this time no one made any comment. The silence became a trifle tense. To do him justice, he wished to say what he had to say as inoffensively as might be, but he could not speak otherwise than plainly.

"They astonished me for this reason," he said at last. "The claimant has produced an immense and unexpected amount of evidence, and it is evidence of a kind that points plainly to one conclusion. So far as we have gone the verdict of the lawyer is this, 'Either the claimant *is* the man he professes to be, or Mrs. Mordaunt must be consciously and deliberately aiding and abetting a fraud.'"

Esther started to her feet.

"How dare you!" she cried. "You have no business to come here to insult Cousin Becky in her own house."

The misery of the doubts that she herself had tried (not always successfully) to keep at bay, added passion to her denunciation. Esther could have been quite calm, if at the very bottom of her heart no traitor fear had ever whispered.

"If I were a man"—she cried, but the old woman interfered.

"Good gracious, child! You're quite silly enough as a woman. Don't heed her, Curtis. She has Irish blood in her veins; it boils suddenly at an insult. But you and I are cold and old; we can discuss our differences without heroics."

The Major looked steadily at her. Esther's attitude had hurt him, and there was a malicious little pin-prick in that bracketing of his age with Mrs. Mordaunt's which he did not consciously notice, but which was perhaps not unfelt.

"Cousin Rebecca," he said gravely, "I did not come here with the wish to insult you (as Esther most unjustly imagines) or to do you any harm. On the contrary, I came to say if now, at the eleventh hour, you repent, I will stand by you as best I can, because you are growing old, and because I am your nearest relative, and therefore your natural protector."

Esther standing between them, still angry, saw the sudden leap of laughter in her Cousin Becky's eyes, and in the midst of her wrath understood it, and smiled too. Who but Curtis would have used so unfortunate an argument?

"My wise Cousin, those are most excellent and appealing reasons," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "No doubt, if I were the villain you take me for, the recollection that

you are my next-of-kin, and that I have not long to live, would turn me from the error of my ways."

"It is no time for mockery," said the Major. "And you, Esther, do wrong to smile." Somehow Esther's smile stung him. "It is you who are strengthening this man's hands, Cousin Rebecca—God alone knows why. You are no dupe. You must have given him the portrait of yourself signed with your name, and *you* have produced the torn letter which is undoubtedly in his writing. You must have taught him the many facts he knows about the place, the people, your own family, and Mr. Mordaunt's family."

"But certainly, certainly!" said Mrs. Mordaunt, tapping her foot impatiently. "This is becoming tedious, Curtis. Do I not know; am I not ready to swear to the truths that you have just been enunciating? Yes, yes, *I*, and no other, gave my boy that portrait, which he has kept through more weary years than I care to number. *I*, and no one else, produced that letter which Esther saved from burning. *I*, long, long ago told him stories about his grandfather, to whom, by the bye, he bears some likeness now that he is no longer a boy. Your mutual relative, Cousin! You've some of the same blood in you as he has, though you repudiate him."

"Yet that man is not Gatton," said the Major slowly. He was not eloquent, but he spoke with earnest insistence. Beyond all his just anger at the trick which he believed was being played; beyond all his soreness because no one was on his side in this matter, was a genuine horror lest this woman, so near her end, should die in her sins. He could not persuade, but he could set the truth before her in unmistakable colours,

and his sincerity gave him a certain heavy dignity that was not unimpressive.

"You suppose that I am saying this for my own sake, and because I do not wish to lose what I have looked upon as my inheritance," he said. "But that is not so. When I heard that you were dangerously ill, I was sorry. More than that, I said to myself, I have not done all I should have done. If you had died, my silence would have been on my conscience, because, being angry, I would not speak to you again on this subject. If it were only a case of fighting for what ought one day to be my own, I should not have come here while you two are alone. I do not fight with women."

"Indeed, you had far better not have come. Do you not understand that this excitement is bad for Cousin Becky?" said Esther. "I do not see that your uncharitable conscience matters one jot in comparison with her health."

But Mrs. Mordaunt fixed her bright eyes on her accuser with a comprehending, if not a sympathetic, glance.

"Pardon me, Curtis—I do *not* indulge in foolish suppositions," she said. "I am not such an old fool as to credit people with purely selfish motives because they happen to be inimical to myself. I quite believe that you have come here to-day with the intention of fulfilling a (not altogether unpleasing) duty."

"At this moment," said the Major solemnly, "your son's bones are resting in their coffin in an Italian cemetery. Now, while I speak, your heart bears witness to the truth of what I say. This masquerader does not deceive you—has never for one moment deceived you. If your son Gatton could return from the dead to give his testimony, you would be afraid to meet him. Yet

soon you may meet him, for no one can live beyond the appointed time. Cousin Rebecca, it is not too late—yet.”

The old woman rose to her feet, leaning heavily on Esther's arm. The Major's earnestness seemed to have pierced the thin layer of her cynicism, to have reached an answering fire.

“I have but one son,” she said. “And he lives, and he shall come after me. I swear before God that he *is* mine. He is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone,—yes—and what is far more still, he is soul of my soul.”

“Then I have no more to say,” rejoined the Major.

He picked up his hat and went straight out of the room, without leave-taking. He was not convinced, for nothing could ever convince him against the evidence of his own senses, but he was momentarily staggered. He was an honest man himself, and therefore he involuntarily recognised unveiled truth when he met her. He had met her to-day, and had been struck dumb.

“And yet he is not Gatton,” the Major repeated obstinately.

He stood still for a minute at the gates of the Park, and, frowning, called to mind that his last sight of Gatton Mordaunt had been at this very spot. He saw again the narrow-shouldered, sandy-haired lad lounging against the gate-post and smoking. Poor Gatton had had a trick of always leaning against something, and he had smoked a great deal too much for his weakly health. The Major recollected speaking his mind pretty freely about a discreditable scrape in which Gatton had become involved. He could see still the way in which Gatton had regarded him, from between swollen, half-closed eyelids, half-defiant, half-frightened.

“You won't go and sneak to my mother, will you?” had

been the culprit's sole remark, and the Major could still recall his own boyish fury of indignation at the suggestion.

"I won't *what*? Why, I wouldn't touch your dirty affairs with a pair of tongs," he had cried. "If you were not such a soft idiot that to hit you feels like hitting a girl, I'd knock you down."

How many years had passed since then. Yet the Major still had a look of the uncompromising youth who had spoken hard things in his wrath, whereas absolutely no trace of Gatton could be descried in this robber of Gatton's name.

"He never could show fight," reflected the Major. "A poor creature! Spoilt and shielded by his doting old father, and snubbed and flouted by his mother, he certainly had a bad upbringing. I was too young to make any allowances then, and I never could stand a coward, but my cousin (whatever Esther may say to the contrary) was *not* a tender or affectionate mother. Though doubtless he must have been flesh of her flesh, he had not a spark of her spirit. Why, this impostor is more akin to her spiritually than ever her own child was. Hallo! Here he comes."

The stranger walked with a light step, which quickened when he caught sight of the Major. He lifted his hat as he passed, with an amused smile.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Major.

"Did you say something?" said the other, pausing for a moment.

"I've nothing to say to you—yet," replied the Major.

He took a good steady stare and walked on. "By Jove!" he repeated again under his breath. "*That* never occurred to me before! But he is like—there's no doubt about it, he is very like her."

CHAPTER XI

"Behold, we all die! and like the water we enter into the earth, to return no more for ever."—MÉNOT.

WHEN the Major had fairly gone, the old woman sank back in her chair, trembling with excitement. Esther crushed down her own indignation in order to soothe her.

"Dear, dear Cousin Becky, do not let us think any more about Curtis," she cried tenderly. "He is blinded by his prejudice. You are right, and he is utterly wrong. We won't let him disturb you again! May I get a book and read to you? Perhaps you will be able to rest then."

"No, no. What do I want with books?" said Mrs. Mordaunt! "Stories are all very well for such as you, Esther. You've never half lived. You get all your pretty ideas, your pretty high-flown fancies from them."

There was an almost fierce taunt in the harsh old voice. Esther shrank a little, but then sat down on the fender-stool and leaned her cheek against the wrinkled brown hand that had been so strong and capable in its day.

"You have taught me more than all the books that ever I read," said she. "But why do you put me on the other side of a chasm? Am I such a very dense and uncomprehending person? Am I so taken up

with high-flown theories? I think it is hard on me that you, too, should do that," cried Esther, for the remembrance of words that had been spoken before were in her mind. "And I want to come across."

Mrs. Mordaunt looked at Esther, and her mouth twitched, and her resolution wavered.

"No, no, child; as women go, you are very comprehending. But there are facts that you don't guess, and, if I were to tell you—well, Essie, just now I'm longing to tell you, but your garments are very white, my dear; they've never been smirched with smoke, you know, and"—

She muttered the end of the sentence, staring into the flames, with that fierce, eager light in her eyes, which was as different from the soft tenderness of Esther's as the glow of a furnace from the radiance of a lamp. Yet, next to her son, she cared for this woman who loved her; and she was getting old, and she had at last come to lean on sympathy heavily.

"Oh, bother the whiteness of my garments!" cried Esther impatiently. "I would rather that they were coal black than that they prevented you and me from touching each other."

"That is all very well," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "But, if I were just to tell you everything, how do I know what you might not do? You might find it your duty to go to the nearest magistrate, eh? or to Curtis Iredale? And then I should swear at my babbling old tongue, that wags looser than it did, and at your soft ways. And all the years we've lived together would count for nothing, and I should die cursing you."

Esther shivered. "But, Cousin Becky, how could

that possibly be? for he *is* your son," she cried. "I am sure—yes, quite sure of it."

And then she sprang to her feet.

"No—tell me nothing!" said she.

The old woman laughed bitterly. "Why, there is nothing to tell. I was joking. Your immaculate virtue is so easily scared."

Esther stood white and still by the mantelpiece. She knew that she had divined the truth. It did not seem to her that she had guessed, but rather that a veil had fallen and that she saw.

"Keep your pretty whiteness," said the old woman, and the loneliness of years was in her voice. "I'll hobble into my grave, as I've gone through my life, alone."

And at that Esther's cheek flushed, and she flung herself on her knees at Cousin Becky's side. "No, no," she cried. "I may be wrong! I *am* wrong! but I swear I'll never tell any living soul your secret. He is your son, Cousin Becky—but he is not Gatton."

"Thank God he is not," said the old woman. "Yes, he is mine, *mine*. He is the child of love and youth, not of despair and age. He has thrown off the grave dust, for he has plenty of strength. But Gatton I never loved; I do not want him to come back, though sometimes he comes, creeping in when my back is turned. That is only since I've been ill, and it is because he is jealous."

She shuddered, and Esther shuddered too, with a sense of horror that she could hardly account for. Terrible things must have happened long, long ago.

"I never thought to tell you," continued the old woman. "But somehow I am glad to to-day. I never trusted any other woman, but you are on my

side. It's odd it should be so, but I'll not say it is not a comfort."

"Try to make me understand," said Esther. Her voice shook. She was more shocked than Mrs. Mordaunt knew; but she longed pathetically to find justifications for her benefactress; to be able to declare to the judge who sat in her heart, "After all, this woman was no great sinner."

Mrs. Mordaunt's black eyes laughed suddenly. "Child," she cried, "how should you understand?"

"Because I love you," said Esther simply. "And have been to you what a daughter would have been."

Mrs. Mordaunt shook her head.

"No daughter of mine would have lived the life you've led here. I shouldn't have done it myself when I was young. What's bred in the bone will out—will out, my dear, one way or the other. Your father was a good man (though a fool where his money was concerned), and your mother loved her husband. Mine didn't and couldn't, and perhaps she wasn't altogether to blame for that, poor shallow little soul. Where she was to blame was that she deserted me; and where I was to blame was that I didn't own Jasper before the world. There's no blinking that. A woman is responsible for her own child before everything else in heaven and earth. She may be ashamed of herself, if she likes, but never of him—that is, if he is a fine healthy boy, such as my boy was, straight as an arrow, and with a pair of eyes—but there, you know what my Jasper is, and you can guess what he was. I am not going to speak to you about his father. I've never whispered his name to a soul. He has been in his grave nigh on fifty-five years. He was dead when I

married. It wouldn't do him any harm now if I were to tell you who he was, but I don't want to. My young lips kissed him, and my old lips shan't betray him.

"Jasper was born before I was nineteen, but my father knew never a word of my troubles. Perhaps, if he'd been oftener sober, he'd have had a suspicion, perhaps not. I got away to a cottage by the sea in Cornwall to the woman who had been my nurse, and there the child was born. I told my father I was ailing (which was a strange thing for me to be), and I scraped together money, and got what I could from him. He was a spendthrift when young, but a bit close-fisted when he got on in years. I came back well, but mad with anxiety, for nurse couldn't keep the lad on nothing, and not a penny more had I. Mr. Mordaunt met me the day I returned. Essie, I told him the truth before I let him take me, but he was so mad to have me that he married me in spite of it. He was bewitched, poor old man, by the sound of my voice singing, and by the glint of my eyes, and, if I'd confessed to every sin in the decalogue, it would have made no difference."

She paused for a minute, and then went on, with a certain dignity.

"I've told you what must have horrified you, so I will tell you something which is equally true and to my credit, that you may understand (if you can) that the old cousin you've been better than a daughter to, was not entirely to be despised. I had never been thrown with the kind of men who have any reverence for women. My father would have laughed at the idea, and my husband didn't respect me either—at first. In time he learnt to, but it was a hard fight.

All the years I lived with him I was a faithful and good wife. Probably that seems to you quite a simple and ordinary matter. For me it was neither easy nor simple. You may take my word for that. I was twenty-one when I married, and I was fifty-one when he died. In my own way I did the best I could."

Esther nodded. Her own sheltered, untempted life might give her little clue to the comprehension of this story, but she often understood with her heart what she did not understand with her brain.

"You were a stronger woman than I am," she said. "I should not have made a good wife to a man who had no reverence for women."

"No; but you would not have married him," said Mrs. Mordaunt. "You are hedged round with delicate instincts which guard you like guardian angels, my dear! Oh, I know that! I've not watched you for nothing. All the same, Essie, and mind I just say this as a warning, your guardian angels sometimes let strange visitants slip by 'em, and make a way to your heart, because you've a passion of pity in you. I hadn't such fine instincts, but I could see where downhill roads were bound to lead, and I pulled up for Jasper's sake. Mr. Mordaunt was ready enough to promise me anything before he married me, and, mind, I was wild with fear lest my boy should want for food. He would deny me nothing; he even swore that so soon as the child should be a year or two older, I might have him to live with me. That promise was never kept—perhaps it wasn't likely it would be. Still, I had money enough to keep Jasper in health and comfort, and I went to see him when I could, but always with difficulty.

"Gatton was three years Jasper's junior, and, after he

was born the difficulties increased. When Jasper was fourteen, I persuaded Mr. Mordaunt to let me have him on a visit. He was to be introduced to the household as the orphaned child of a distant cousin, and for months before he came I lived on the thought of his coming. He was as fine and big as Gatton was puny and miserable; my heart leaped with pride when I saw him. Yes, it did, Esther! for nature is stronger than men's laws. The boys hated each other like poison, and that was Gatton's fault. Gatton twitted my boy with being a poor relation and a hanger-on. I don't know where he got the idea from. From servants and gossips, perhaps. He was fond of the back stairs. Jasper knocked him down, and then repented and helped him up; but Gatton complained to his father, and Jasper was flogged. I was out that afternoon; if I had been in the house, it could not have happened. I was angrier than I have ever been since, or before. It's a bitter old story."

"It is horrible," said Esther.

"After that I saw that my son could come no more. It didn't do. Yet, when I didn't see him, I grew restless and hungry for the sight of him, and he for me. He had plenty of heart, poor lad, and, though he did not know then that I was his mother, he loved me better than he loved anyone else. One day (it was two years after that miserable, unlucky visit) I knew that he was ill. Jasper and I have often known facts about each other without any telling. I went to him, for flesh and blood could not stand the separation any longer, and I fought hard for his life, and I won it. If I had not been by him, he would have died. So, you see, I am responsible for him twice over; and whatever

sins he may have committed, poor lad, are mine, *mine*, and not his at all. If there is any justice in heaven, they ought to be on my head, and I hope that they will be—they surely must be—not on his. It would be unfair that they should be on his."

"And when you went to him, did he guess the truth?" asked Esther.

"One day, when he was getting better, he was ravenously hungry, and he was cross because he wanted a mutton-chop and I would give him nothing but milky slops. He swore at what I brought him (not that I minded that, my dear!), but then he was ridiculously sorry. He'd grown tall and thin, and was more of a man than when he quarrelled with Gatton, and he was horribly ashamed of having spoken so to a woman. That showed me how fast he was growing up! 'I'm an unforgivable brute to have said that to you,' he said. 'But I'm awfully grateful to you, really. You know I think you just as good and jolly as if you were a chap's own mother. It's very funny, but I was sure that you would come when I was ill, and that then it would be all right, and I should get better.' I couldn't bear his gratitude, so I just told him straight out, 'But I am your mother.'"

"I wondered whether I should lose his love then, but I didn't. He loved me the more, bless him! Yet I did him a wrong, Esther, and nothing can ever quite undo it now—not even though he shall have all that's mine at the last. You must never forget that. You must never judge him as other men are judged. All through his boyhood he never had his rights; he never had what other boys have. In his youth he was an Ishmael standing outside by himself. I was wrong, wrong! If I

had my life over again, I would go out with my boy at all costs, and work my fingers to the bone, and risk even his starvation, rather than be divided from him. I chose wrong, but I have repented every hour of my long life."

Esther sighed. This fierce old tragedy that had never really been dead, only locked out of sight, overwhelmed and almost frightened her. She suspected that it had another and even more tragic side to it. The lad who had had no place in his mother's home had been hardly treated, no doubt; her heart ached for him: but how about the lad who had had no place in his mother's heart?

"Did you never love that other child at all?" said Esther.

"I tried to do my duty by him, but I failed," said Mrs. Mordaunt sternly. "Jasper is mine. He has faults enough and to spare, but I understand them and him. If by chance I understood Gatton, why, then, I was ashamed. His father petted him; but, when we heard that he was drowned, I shed no tears. I knew that, had he lived, he would have been our scourge. An old man's child, born weak and vicious! What could you expect from such as he? My Jasper was gone too! Gone right away out of my life for thirty-five years, and that was Gatton's fault. I could not forgive him that. If Gatton had not hated and slandered my boy, I might still sometimes have seen him. The situation would not have become so impossible. But Jasper was driven away by his brother's malice. He was made sore and angry and reckless. *My* boy, whom I love. I waited and waited and waited, but he did not write. He wanted me to believe that he was dead. Perhaps he fancied that he had forgotten

me. Then he fell in love, and the woman filled his whole heart, as his father once filled mine. I don't care to think about that, there was no room for *me* then. But one day she left him desolate (that once happened to me too), and then he remembered his poor old mother, and he heard her calling to him across the sea at last, and so came home. There is no one now to bar the way. Gatton is dead, and Jasper is alive—thank God."

"Was it your idea, or his, that he should pretend to be your legitimate son?" asked Esther.

Her voice sounded hard and dry. The question seemed somehow of importance to her; and yet what difference did it make whether Jasper or his mother had originated the lie, since both were equally involved in it?

"Mine," said Mrs. Mordaunt promptly, nay, almost triumphantly. "He wouldn't have it at first, but I'd take no denial. I couldn't rest in my grave, Essie, if the Major were in the place of my son. This house came to me from my father, and it shall go to his grandson. That's *natural* law, if it isn't the law of the land. Jasper has never had his rights, but he shall have all that I can grasp for him at last."

"At last." She had reiterated those words over and over again, and she stretched out her fingers, and drew them in clenched, with a curious, eager gesture that struck Esther as almost uncanny.

Esther had been gathering her strength to protest, but a sense of the utter futility of argument robbed her speech of conviction. "You and Jasper are stealing from the Major, and you are stealing his name from your dead son," she said. "Nothing can make that right or just."

"Right, right?" said Mrs. Mordaunt. "But I *am* right at last, I tell you. All these years he has been defrauded. My boy has been a wanderer, and as bad as motherless. I let him go, and his brother turned on him, but now he shall have his own! What is mine is his. It shall be so, if I hang for it, Esther! *My* son lives. What have I to do with Gatton, who is dead?"

She was excited. Her voice rose shrill and high. The moral gulf between these two women might indeed be deep and broad, but, fortunately for perplexed humanity, there is more than one bridge by which we get in touch with each other.

Esther saw the old woman's shaking hands and over-bright eyes, and pushed aside every problem but one—how best to soothe and quiet her. Good and evil, right and wrong, these belonged to the everlasting; they could wait. But the call of bodily weakness was urgent, and it appealed to Esther's deepest instinct.

"Why, yes, Cousin Becky," she said. "Your son is alive and well, and now you have told me everything, and there is no secret between us. But, if we go on talking over such exciting subjects, we shall neither of us be able to eat one mouthful of dinner, and that won't please him. I am going to fetch a book and read aloud now, though you laugh at my love for stories."

She spoke lightly, but she felt strangely nervous, and she did not care to leave the room. She lit a candle and sat close to its light, reading from the first volume that she touched. Her voice, purposely monotonous, had often before now soothed her old cousin to sleep. As it happened, it was no story, but the sayings of Marcus Aurelius that came to her hand. Esther read

on and on, hardly knowing, and caring not at all what she read. Perhaps she really had some mesmeric influence, for presently Mrs. Mordaunt's eyelids drooped, and she nodded in her chair. Esther gradually let her voice sink lower and lower till it melted into silence, and the book of the wise man fell on her knee. His wisdom did not help her; it was too cold, and it applied to the wise and strong. It had no message for sinners. Perhaps, for all its calm, it was too hopeless.

The candle burned low, but Esther would not ring for lamps. It was so important that Mrs. Mordaunt's rare sleep should be undisturbed. The unusual flush had faded; she looked deadly white, and very old and feeble. Esther's heart yearned towards her—her kind, brave old protectress, who must have borne so sore and aching a longing with so cheerful a bearing, whose moral blindness now was, perhaps, inevitable, the result of long years of suppressed feeling.

"She is no longer sane where *he* is concerned," thought Esther. "Who can judge her? Not I—not I."

Her thoughts melted into that worldless cleaving to the only Power that knows, to which pitiful perplexity and glimmerings of half-knowledge drive us sooner or later. To care well for fellow-man or fellow-woman means, alas! such uncertainty, such groping in confused alleys, such flashes of bewildering enlightenment and repentance of rash conclusions. Hard to tread, marked with blood, and wet with tears is the way of love, the *Via Crucis* along which humanity awkwardly stumbles. Yet it is the road that leads to God.

The room was full of shadows. Esther wondered whether she might safely venture to poke the fire, so as to make them dance and shift. To her somewhat

overstrained nerves they had become weirdly oppressive, connected somehow with the tragedies that had been enacted in this place, and with the unfaced difficulties that lurked in her own mind. What should she say? How should she behave when she next met Mr. Rip Van Winkle? Was she herself criminal in that she had sworn to conceal this secret? These were dark questions, but as yet they hid in corners and were not pressing. Her imagination was too possessed by the tale she had heard, her painfully acute sympathy too alive for it to be possible for her to debate much as yet on questions of conduct.

Mrs. Mordaunt must have been little more than a school-girl when Jasper was born, and by the time that second uncared-for child came into the world, must have lived through a tragedy. She must have been disillusioned; must have known that her lover (that mysterious unnamed lover to whom even her old age was loyal) was dead; must have made up her mind to accept and make the best of a spoilt life,—and that, before she had completed her twentieth year.

Esther pictured Cousin Becky young. A gipsy-like, beautiful girl, with a bright wit and a sharp tongue, and, deep hidden under the wit and the sharpness, a passionate heart, whose courage alone saved it from despair.

“She must have stood quite alone,” thought Esther. “And what a cycle of experiences to have rushed through almost before she was a woman grown! Perhaps her emotional nature was exhausted. Perhaps that was why Gatton woke no maternal tenderness in her. Poor Gatton, for whom no one had one good word.”

Esther had got to this point in her meditations, peering backwards, trying to realise the how and why of past happenings, with a philosophy coloured by tenderness, when a sudden cry startled her.

Mrs. Mordaunt was sitting upright, wide awake; her eyes were staring; her finger pointed to a far corner of the room. "It is Gatton! It is Gatton!" she cried. "He has come back. But he is cold—ice-cold and wet. Don't let him come closer, Esther. Don't let him touch me."

Esther sprang up hastily. "No, no; Gatton is not here. You are still dreaming."

The old woman had risen to her feet. Her face was convulsed with terror. "Call my son Jasper," she gasped. But before Esther could call anyone, she tottered and pitched forward.

Esther laid her on the floor, and peeled furiously at the bell. The servants came running up. Esther tried to pour brandy between the colourless lips, and cut the laces of the old-fashioned black dress. She bade someone open the window, and the fresh air, snow-laden, blew into the room, making the lamp that had been brought flicker, the draught dispersing shadows and ghosts with its sharp, healthy breath.

Esther put her hand on the old woman's heart and bent her cheek to the still lips. "Fetch her son quickly!" she said, but she knew that it was already too late.

Cousin Becky's soul had fled. Jasper, for all his cleverness, and for all her love for him, could not call it back to the worn-out, deserted, little old body that it had so imperiously commanded, and that lay there so still and so quiet, resting very well at last.

CHAPTER XII

IT was the day of the funeral. Mrs. Mordaunt's body was carried out of the house in which she had lived so long, had reigned with such vigour, and abdicated, so unexpectedly gladly. Esther had sometimes seen this day coming in the far distance. She had known that in all human likelihood her Cousin Becky must die before her. But, now that it had actually come, it was utterly unlike anything that she had imagined. She had pictured herself chief, almost sole, mourner. Behold! another took that place by nearer and tenderer right. She had imagined herself overwhelmed with grief, but wondered now why she was not much sadder. Poor Esther! She woke from an exhausted, dreamless sleep, with the strange sensation of having lost all natural feeling. That scene in the library was still so present with her that she was dazed by its vividness. But she was dry-eyed and disinclined to weep. When her dear old Godfather spoke tenderly to her she shook her head.

"Yes, Cousin Becky is—was, I mean—very good to me, but I am not so sorry as you imagine. I believe I haven't really got much heart," said Esther. "It was a mistake to fancy I had."

Mr. Joel was staying in the house, at Jasper's entreaty.

"My dear child, an old fellow like me, blind and stupid, isn't much comfort. Shall we send for your sisters?" said he.

But at that Esther shook her head. "No—they didn't like Cousin Becky; I don't want them. She won't want them at her funeral."

She had not spoken to Jasper since the evening when his mother died. She had avoided him and kept to her own room, pleading a disinclination to see anyone, which seemed natural enough in the circumstances. Once, stealing at dusk to the room that had been Mrs. Mordaunt's, she had met him coming out, and it had flashed across her mind that *he* was more a part of "Cousin Becky" than was the worn-out shell that lay so still and aloof on the bed. He had looked pitifully at her sad, white face, and held out his hand to her, but she had not taken it, and he had fancied that she hardly saw him.

On the morning of the funeral she met him in the hall, with a set expression which he could not quite decipher.

"Are you coming with me, Esther? I shall walk by the footpath," said he. And Esther assented at once.

He might have committed all the sins in the decalogue, but he was none the less her Cousin Becky's son. It was fitting that he and she, who had really loved the old woman, should stand together at her grave, if never again.

There was no paraphernalia of gloom. Everything was as absolutely simple as Mrs. Mordaunt had decreed that it should be. The two fat grey horses that had

often drawn her heavy yellow-wheeled carriage, drew her coffin to its last resting-place. In accordance with her expressly stated desire, no one was bidden or encouraged to attend.

"I'll have no junketing over my poor old bones," she had once said. "Mind that, Essie!"

The churchyard stood on a hill, and a very few people, servants, villagers, and tenants, wound their way up to it. Mr. Joel met them at the lych-gate, and walked with his wonderful certainty and directness to the church. He knew his way about his churchyard as he knew it about his parish.

"We brought nothing into the world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out," he chanted in the clear tenor that had been very beautiful when he was young.

Esther quite unconsciously shook her head. "But Cousin Becky carries her secret out with her," thought she.

Later, when they stood by the open grave, the details of the scene impressed themselves with photographic clearness on her brain. She observed that her dear old Godfather's surplice was frayed at the edge, and that the light showed through the delicate darn that she had put into it with her own hands a month ago. She noticed the powdery flakes resting on Jasper's bared head, and that the Major, who stood opposite to her, had had a crape band put round his hat. She had been unable to pin her tired attention to the service in the church, but outside in the crisp, snow-laden air, a sentence reached her again, piercing the misty unreality that seemed to surround her. "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts." It could

never be anything but comfort to Esther to believe that He did indeed know.

The Major listened with an air of immovable soldierly respect and attention, but at heart he was annoyed. He highly disapproved of Esther's being present. He laid down very hard-and-fast rules about the right place for women, and he considered that they were out of place at a funeral. Nevertheless, since she had come, he was glad that he was standing by to give her his countenance and protection. She must have had a painful and exciting week, and he had seen that she was somewhat overstrained at that last interview with his old cousin, the remembrance of which was still painfully fresh. Then he faced the thought that the excitement of that scene had probably quickened the end. He never shirked facts, but he was certainly not morbidly self-reproachful on the subject. He had done what he believed to be right, and consequences were not his affair. There was a simplicity about the Major that was the very antithesis of the modern spirit of analysis. Yet he was sadder than might have been imagined. At the bottom of his heart he had really had a sort of conservativé affection for the old woman who had so flouted and jeered at him. It was a grave and awful thought that she had died in her sins. He never as much as glanced at the claimant. It would be unworthy of the occasion to be disturbed by anger during so solemn a service. He ruled his thoughts as he had ruled his regiment, with a tight hand.

The blinds were drawn up, and the sunshine was breaking through the yellow clouds, when the oddly assorted party returned to the house. They went into

the library, where Mrs. Mordaunt's lawyer read the will aloud somewhat nervously. She had constantly changed her lawyer, being apt to engage in hot disputes over fees. The present man had been summoned a few weeks before her death to make some alteration in the amount of a legacy to one of the servants. He belonged to a small country-town firm of no standing; he had some pretensions to gentility, but was over-awed by the Major's stern curtness and by Esther's gentle politeness. Jasper had flung himself into the arm-chair by the fire that his mother had occupied, and stared at the flames with an air of complete detachment. Esther sat between Mr. Joel and the doctor at the octagon table, with the lawyer and the Major opposite to her.

This room had been the stage of many strange scenes, but this seemed to her one of the strangest. She could not rid herself of the impression that Mrs. Mordaunt was still in it; was observing with her accustomed grim humour the too free-and-easy manner by which Mr. Robinson tried to mask his nervousness, the snub which the Major administered, and the doctor's professional cheerfulness. It was incredible that so lively a mind should be dead. Mrs. Mordaunt's savings, together with money that had come to her through her husband, were all that had been in her own power to will. Her savings amounted to a much larger sum than the Major had supposed possible. She had invested seven thousand pounds in a very profitable business, and these shares were left "To my dear adopted daughter, Esther Mordaunt, in token of my affection and gratitude." Two thousand pounds went to the Major, rather to his surprise than to his gratitude

or pleasure. The rest of the money (with the exception of a few legacies to her servants) was to be spent in the repairing of outhouses and cottages, in the renewal of farm instruments, and the general improvement of the estate of Applehurst. There was no direct mention of her son in the document; Esther guessed that she had been induced to evade writing Gatton's name, both because of a natural shrinking and because of a certain canniness that made her keep as much as possible within the letter of the law.

The servants sat in a row by the door, and old Wilcox, a little apart from them, turned watchful, suspicious eyes from one to another, as he listened attentively to the reading of the long-winded legal phraseology. He did not understand that the estate was already his master's. He feared that by some underhand dealing the Major and the lawyer had got the better of the situation. He could hardly rejoice in the one hundred pounds that had been left to himself, so absorbed was he by nervous fears lest his beloved squire should prove not sharp enough for his enemies, and by wishes that he would wake out of that gloomy fit of abstraction, and pay some heed to what was going on.

At the close of the reading the Major stood up and made a strange little speech that took them all by surprise. "I wish to state in the presence of these gentlemen," said he, "that there was an unwritten agreement between the late Mrs. Mordaunt and myself that we should both abide by a lawyer's opinion as to the validity of the claim of this gentleman, who has stated that he is my Cousin 'Gatton Mainwaring Mordaunt,' who was supposed to have been drowned in the Bay of

Naples in the year 18—. Mr. Holdsworthy has not yet concluded his investigations. For the moment, therefore, I do not make any further protest."

Jasper looked up quickly. "I am perfectly willing to release you from that agreement, which was informal, and not of my making or made at my instigation," said he.

"Unfortunately it is not in your power to release me," the Major said drily, and the snub was unanswerable.

Yet the man's speech fascinated him. The rogue was not merely bold, he was also impulsive. It ought not to be so difficult to unmask and overthrow him.

Mr. Joel frowned anxiously; he had a horror of aught that approached a quarrel. Dr. Clayton said "Tche-tche!" and shook his head. He thoroughly believed in Jasper; he liked and admired him. He was indignant on his behalf, and, as the three men presently crossed the hall together, he threw an extra amount of friendliness into his manner, because of the Major's snub.

Jasper opened the hall door for Dr. Clayton, who shook hands with him warmly when he went out. The Major lingered, then faced their host (who had no business to be his host) squarely.

"I am not satisfied. I do not pretend to believe that you are Gatton."

Jasper shrugged his shoulders with a gesture, half-impatient and wholly weary.

"But no one ever suspected you of pretending anything," he said.

"Therefore," continued the Major, "I am going to

make my own inquiries in Venezuela. Holdsworthy is getting old, and very slow."

Jasper laughed suddenly. The moment before he had been sick of this whole mad game, utterly dejected and downcast by reason of another story that had only indirectly to do with his claims on Applehurst. But the Major amused him, and his mood lightened.

"I shall be delighted to afford you every possible facility for inquiring into my affairs past and present," said he. "So you are off to South America? Well, I didn't live in a corner, you know. You'll hear lots about me. I hope you'll let me write a line, which you can carry in your pocket, to Dr. R—s P—I. You'll find it an immense help."

"And who is he?" said the Major.

"Oh, merely the President of a country that comprises between five and six hundred thousand square miles."

"Very well," said the Major, still eyeing him gravely. "I do not say 'thank you,' because, of course, you make the offer in your own interest, and to further your own private ends; but I see no reason why I should not accept it. I mean to find out all I can."

"Upon my soul!" said Jasper. "I wonder where the deuce my private ends were? I'd lost sight of 'em. You are at liberty to read my letter, if you like."

"Very well," said the Major again.

"It would be rather a waste of breath to give permission to most detectives," said Jasper, with a twinkle in his eyes. "But I doubt whether you were originally cut out for the work, Major. You see, you expect your villain to be always consistently villainous, eh?"

Esther missed this little scene. She had gone upstairs immediately the reading was over, for her head was aching, and the library oppressed her. She was thankful to reach her own room, a haven of refuge less associated with tragedies. She had to pack her possessions, but had not energy to begin at once, and sat in her chair by the window watching the falling flakes with dreamy eyes. She was roused at last by Polly Greenback, who came with hot water and candle, and whose eyes were swollen with tears.

"Oh, Miss!" she said, "I'm so sorry you are going away."

She drew down the blinds, shutting out the distant glimpse of the church and the churchyard where the old mistress lay out in the cold.

"Oh, Miss! couldn't you take me with you?"

"I would, certainly, if I had a house of my own," said Esther. "But I mean to move into lodgings in London, Polly, and I have no need of a housemaid. You can apply to me for a character, of course, and you are sure to get a choice of situations. Domestic service is the one line in life in which women can pick and choose. You will be in demand, you know."

She smiled encouragingly, though rather sadly. Her own services were not particularly required. Her own life seemed perhaps a little lacking in point just then.

"Oh yes, Miss. It isn't that I'm anxious about getting suited with a place," said Polly. "For the matter of that, Mr. Mordaunt has offered to keep us all on, and we all like him. It was that I'd like to stay with you, and, if you thought of having a

maid, Miss, I'm handy at my needle, and I'd try to give satisfaction. If you remember, Miss Esther, I was only twelve when I came here, and Mrs. Mordaunt took me because you spoke up for me, and said that, though I was small, I was sly, and that you could soon get me into the right ways. I had a rough home, but you've been the making of me, Miss."

Esther put her hand to her head, and tried to bring her mind to bear on the subject in hand. Polly's words woke her easily roused sense of responsibility. She did not like to think that the girl might stay on at Applehurst without her.

"I should advise you to go to another place," she said. "You see, Polly, there is no mistress here now."

"But Mrs. Barker is going to stay on, Miss, and so is the others. We've none of us had a doubt about Mr. Mordaunt from the beginning. There's been talk in the village (though folks is mostly on the right side), but we knew. That night when Mr. Mordaunt came to stay, and we was called up into the dining-room, and the mistress made that speech, we all of us noticed the first thing, that you was there, and the mistress leaning on you."

"But what difference did that make?" said Esther faintly.

Polly's kind, honest eyes regarded her with fond loyalty. "Why, Miss, it just made all the difference. When we got back to the kitchen Mrs. Barker says: 'I am sure, certain sure, it is all right, and that is Mr. Gatton as was drowned in foreign parts come back to his own. Because, if it weren't so, Miss Esther would never stand by and uphold him.' And, oh, Miss! that

was what I felt too, though it wasn't my place to speak out, and it was how we all looked at it (excepting Mr. Wilcox, who don't take account of women, and made up his mind later for himself): we all knew that you would never be upholding anything but what was right. I thought of how the things had been moved out of the best bedroom, Miss, and how you'd been vexed-like, and, if you had not been on one side of the old mistress, I for one should have thought for myself that perhaps we was all being deluded; but, seeing you there, made us all certain sure."

A wave of colour rushed over Esther's pale face.

"Oh, but, Polly—I might have made a mistake," she cried, and Polly's comfortable "Not you, Miss Esther," but perturbed her the more.

Esther was proud, though she had little vanity. Blame implied or outspoken was apt to affect her "the wrong way," or not at all; but what pride can stand unhumiliated before absolute confidence? Not hers, certainly. Had her integrity indeed been so unassailable? Had she not been bribed by love?

"And then, Miss, there's Harvey," said Polly, blushing in her turn.

Harvey was the Major's soldier servant. He belonged to Applehurst; his grandmother lived in the village. He had enlisted as a lad, but was now on the reserve list. When the Major came to Applehurst, Harvey always accompanied him. His soldiering had straightened his shoulders, and from an awkward lout he had become what Applehurst called "a tolerable well set-up" man.

"Mr. Harvey he says women have no call to form opinions of their own," Polly went on, but somewhat

interrogatively, as if she expected Esther to contradict this assertion. "He says that was the beginning of all the mischief Eve did in the garden. He says that if his master says a thing is so—why, so it is; and though it may be that you and the mistress 'tought' otherwise, yet you and the mistress being only females (but I hope you'll not think me rude, Miss Esther), your opinion can't carry no weight against Major Tredeale's."

Esther smiled in spite of her sadness. Harvey's bashful, red-haired countenance rose up before her mind's eye. She had known him as a taciturn or painfully shy person, with very respectful manners. It amused her to discover that, beneath all his apparent awe of Mrs. Mordaunt and herself, he had yet regarded both as belonging to a distinctly inferior species.

"But Harvey has nothing whatever to do with the question as to whether you shall stay here or find another place," said she.

"No, Miss; and so I've told him," rejoined Polly. "And, if you can't take me with you, here I shall stay, for all he may say to the contrary. For, you see, Miss Esther, to just give up the place because he tells me to, would be acting like as if we were promised to each other, which we are not."

"But I think you must be thinking of being promised to each other?" said Esther. She ventured on the remark timidly, for Polly was fiercely modest.

"Oh, Miss!" cried Polly, "I was never one to play with a man; but I'd like to stand off a bit and think. Mr. Harvey he has a temper, and he'll just never speak to me again, if I go against his advice now. But oh, Miss! it means a deal of givin' in, if one should take to one like him. I don't feel as if I knew which

way to turn. But I've never said a word to any but you, Miss Esther."

"I think I must change my mind and take you with me, after all, Polly," said Esther impulsively; but the girl's frank pleasure upset her composure; she sent Polly out of the room hastily, and, burying her face in her hands, wept at last.

Mr. Joel and Jasper dined alone together that night in the long, gloomy dining-room where Esther and Mrs. Mordaunt had eaten many frugal and hastily despatched meals. Jasper was by turns hilarious and gloomy, and the old man's delicate face wore a look of painful inquiry that deepened as the night wore on. He could not see how often the new squire's glass was filled, but he could hear that he was excited. He got up at last. "I never drink anything but water," he said. "I'm going out."

"Out? Where?" said Jasper. "Oh yes, I remember! You've a chapel on a hill that is chock-full of dreams and white wings. I stumbled into it once, didn't I? That was soon after I got back. All right, sir. Don't let me keep you. But one day, you know, there'll be a rush of hot wind, and a bad taste of dust in your mouth, and a broken stone, and no more angels—only moths and thistles, and you sitting on the floor and smiling the wrong side of your mouth. It always ends so. It's just the beginnings of things that vary, but there's a sameness about the end. *That's* dust and ashes. Dust and ashes. The rest is the game we play at, but the reality just waits. One wakes up in time, and there it is."

The old man turned to him with purest pity in his face.

"Come with me," he said; "I am awake, and you are dreaming bad dreams. The night will do you good. It's always better outside. It doesn't do to shut yourself up with trouble between four walls. She grows too big, and fills the place."

Jasper shook his head. "No; religion is *your* game! We can't play each other's part. Mind you, I'm not saying anything against it. It's played me some scurvy tricks; but, as games go, it seems to me as satisfactory as any—for the player."

He filled his glass once again. Mr. Joel hesitated sadly,—recognising a note of antagonism under the moderation of his host's speech; then he went out silently. He was not the kind that can compel. The very delicacy and acuteness of his perception made that impossible. His influence was never coercive. But he climbed the hill with a heavy heart as he went to his Chapel of Dreams.

And Jasper, left alone, filled his glass again. He was no habitual drunkard, as his grandfather had been, but he deliberately got drunk that night. That was one way of running away from blue devils. His old mother had suffered from their attacks too, but had faced them. She was, on the whole, a braver soul than her son (though his physical daring was unimpeachable); but then her son was not all hers after all—his father's blood ran in his veins too.

The butler nodded sagely when he helped the squire upstairs.

"The new master takes after the old squire in more ways than one," he said to himself.

The Major's speech had been much discussed, but the household believed vehemently in Jasper, and now

his very failings were accounted as fresh evidence on his side. For luck always followed this man. He was tragically unfortunate in big matters, but in the smaller chances of life his dice were apt to fall in doublets. He counted on that fact himself, and would always take a risk without a qualm.

Old Wilcox went home through the village after the reading of the will, muttering to himself as he went. Nothing would have induced him to touch his hat to the Major, who passed him on his way, and he even went so far as to attempt to chant in a queer, cracked voice—

“O Lord our God, arise,
Scatter his enemies
And make them fall.”

But the Major was not insulted. It never even occurred to him that the verse that seemed so strikingly appropriate to Wilcox, could have any connection with himself.

“*Her* enemies, my man. *Her* enemies,” he said in his sharp, incisive voice. “George IV. is dead, you know!”

“Oh ay, and so’s the poor old missus,” replied Wilcox. “But the master’s alive, in spite of their endeavours, and likely so to be.

“‘Frustrate their knavish tricks,
Confound their Politics.’”

“I fear you’ve been drinking,” said the Major; but therein he did his neighbour an injustice.

Wilcox was sober enough, and sad enough too, when he presently sat smoking by the fire, and ruminated over the day’s events. Perhaps no one, with the exception of Esther and of Jasper, had taken Mrs. Mordaunt’s death more heavily to heart than he had.

He had never, almost impossible as the fact may seem, gone farther than seventeen miles from the place in which he had been born and bred. His roots were deep in the soil. Applehurst was the world to him, and now a principal landmark of his world was removed. He pondered a good deal about what would happen in the event of his own death. In spite of the manner in which he had muddled over accounts, Wilcox could not imagine that the "place" would get on without him and the watch-dog—loyal affection that he entertained for Jasper, made him loth to leave his service.

He presently fetched a big, old-fashioned Bible that stood on a shelf in the corner of the room, and, spreading it open on his knee, smoothed out, with oddly gentle touches, some often-fingered scraps of paper.

"He said as no lawyer would take them as evidence; but I don't see why not," he said to himself. "It's the best evidence that ever I saw, and I ain't easily convinced nor bamboozled neither. But, supposing I was to die, who would make sure that they was brought forward?"

He was tired with his tramp up to the cemetery; his thoughts were confused, they seemed to tumble over each other; he could not sort or arrange them; but one idea stood out clearly at last. He would write to his son Ned. Wilcox distrusted all his neighbours in the village. He secretly despised, even when he treated, them; but blood is thicker than water—yes, he would write to Ned. Ned had gone to sea against his father's wish, and since then but few letters had passed between them; but for the last twelve months Wilcox had been pinning for news.

Perhaps it had somehow seemed to the old man that the squire's return was of good omen, more especially as he came from the very parts with which Ned's ship traded. If one wanderer returned, why should not another?

He once inquired of Jasper shyly, and with an effort—

"If I may make so bold, Mr. Gatton; have you happened across my son Ned, in South Americky?"

And Jasper, with that quick-witted good-nature that sometimes endeared him to people, had replied gravely, "Very probably. I've happened across hundreds of sailors at Punta Arenas and Port Limon. What is your son like?" And, having further listened to a somewhat vague description of a "middle-sized sort of chap with light coloured eyes of no particular colour," had gladdened and pleased Wilcox by the assurance that he distinctly remembered once meeting someone of that description, and that it might "likely enough" have been Ned.

He would have said the same if Wilcox had described a tall man with black eyes, or a red-haired man with blue eyes; but the belief that Ned and the squire had actually met, afforded great pleasure to Wilcox, and seemed to make the writing of his letter the easier and the more imperative.

"DEAR NED," he wrote—"This comes, hoping you are well, as it leaves me. I'm suffering from a pain in the 'ead and a fulness of the stomick, which leads me to think as I am not much longer for this world. Our old mistress was buried this morning, which looks as if it was getting nigh on time for me. I was in a deal of trouble, and things not looking up at onc time, and

the weather very contrary, but, owing to the return of Mr. Gatton, all 'as improved wonderful of late. Mr. Gatton says as he thinks he met you in furrin parts, more especial when he heard as the *Ocean Flower* trades in dry goods with Americky. Mr. Gatton was thought to be drowned, and was kep' out of his own many too many years by the Major, but is now come home; and there ain't no manner of doubt in my mind, nor could be, seeing as natural tricks come out, whether it's in dogs or men. But, as he says, he went by the name of Iredale in Americky, and had a deal to do with what they calls their Congress, which I take to be their furrin imitation of the Queen's Parliament. So, when you comes back, you'll meet him again, seeing that he's in his right place now, in spite of the knavish tricks which can't be brought home as yet, of them that is against him. Which, writing of tricks, I wish to say that you'll find them natural ones, that I mentioned above, enclosed in the old Bible, and, if I'm dead when you comes back, and there should be any further mischief made by the Major, who was always of an interfering nature, I desire that you produce them and help the right, as your father would have done, which is plainly your duty. For there ain't nothing I have at heart more than the family's good, though I could not manage to keep all straight afore he returned, he being too long away, and my years heavy on me. But he understood that, and treated me very handsome, which not many would have, for, as he himself said, he is one in ten. And I don't deny that it was a relief, and might have been otherwise, and we owe him a deal. And, that being so, I leave the bits of paper to you, for, as for him, he didn't make so much account of

them as I wished. They being proof positive to a thinking man. There was a deal more to say about the cottage, and the furniture and what I've got in the bank, which isn't as much as you might expect, considerin' the years I've worked; but I can't write no more now, for this is a long letter, and the pain in my 'ead is bad. So I beg as you'll act wise in all these matters, though that don't seem likely, seeing as you took after your mother, and was never clever. But I charge you solemn to carry out my directions in this, though you did go against me in going to sea. Which, if you do, you have my free forgiveness.—Your affectionate father,

JAMES WILCOX."

The writing of that letter took Wilcox a good three hours. When it was written, folded, and directed, he sat long, staring at it, as it lay on his knee.

It was the last communication that his son would get from him; he had a faint premonition of that, and yet it contained no expression of his real affection. He had never wished to express love before (except, indeed, many years ago, when he was courting), but illness and the approach of death, and the strangeness of the late events, had broken and softened him. He shook his head, sighed, then opened the letter again, and with stiff laborious fingers added a postscript.

"Not but what I don't mind your knowing that I thought a deal of your mother, though it don't do to set 'em up by saying so."

After that, he posted his letter, and his words flew over sea and land, charged as they were with a loyal care for Jasper, that was to have strange effect!

They puzzled their recipient terribly.

CHAPTER XIII

"If we would achieve a sure and satisfactory knowledge of the Divine, two things are necessary—God's guidance and man's company."—
RABELAIS.

ON the morrow, when Esther came down with reddened eyes, but feeling the better for her tears, her old "Godfather" met her with a perturbed face. "Esther," he said, "you must not stay here any longer. You must leave at once."

"But, of course," said Esther; "I only waited till the funeral was over. It would have been almost irreverent to speak of my own affairs before that, especially as Cousin Becky's son has always treated me with the greatest consideration; but I have arranged to leave to-morrow when you leave. There can be no question of my staying."

"I think you need not wait till to-morrow. Why not go to-day?" said Mr. Joel anxiously.

Though his charity was wide, he was yet sensitive about Esther. He was unconventional to a degree that made some people consider him a simpleton, but he was shocked at the idea of her being under the same roof with a man who drank. He had met his host on the stairs last night, and had experienced a thrill of indignation. His imaginative sympathy was great, but he had been born a poet and a saint.

"But, my dear Godfather, I cannot spread wings and

fly off at a moment's notice, like that robin," protested Esther.

She opened the dining-room window while she spoke, and scattered a handful of seed and bread-crumbs for winter pensioners.

"I shall only do that once more, and I've done it every winter day for years. The winter is not really on us yet, but there was a frost last night. Poor birds! I hope they won't miss me."

"It is not only the robins who will miss you; yet I should advise you to take advantage of this fine day for your journey."

"I have been housekeeper here for so long. There is a good deal to settle before I leave my keys with Mrs. Barker, and I have not finished packing," said Esther. "Besides, I must have a roof over my head, and my lodgings in London are engaged from to-morrow."

"Then come to my cottage," said Mr. Joel. "I see no difficulty whatever. Your old Godfather is a fitter host for you than this stranger; though, indeed, Esther, I would not speak hardly of him. Last week I passed by the bit of ploughed land that Green has reclaimed from the downs. I startled a bevy of rooks, and among them was a gull. I heard the sea-bird's cry as he rose into the air. That made me think of Mr. Mordaunt. He is as alien to us quiet country folk in thoughts and ways, as the gull is to the rooks who roost among our elms."

"Why, you are nearly as bad as the Major!" said Esther, trying to smile. "But for once I am going to be obstinate. To-morrow I shall leave my old home for ever and ever, but I will not rush away before then. I have to bid 'good-bye' to every corner of it, and besides"—she hesitated a moment, then added, pinning her own resolu-

tion by the words, "I have something to say to Cousin Becky's son that must, and shall be said before I go."

She spoke with decision. Esther had been wilful when she was young, and she had a will of her own still, though it had not been much exercised of late years, and had perhaps got a little out of repair. She had felt as if she had been blown hither and thither by her strong sympathies, by her grief, by her natural recoil from deception and wrong-doing; but at last she knew quite clearly what she meant to do and say, and there was always a certain largeness and generosity about her that made her shrink from any unnecessary distrust. Jasper was playing a bad part, and he was stealing from the Major, but it did not follow that she was unsafe under his roof. A man is no more bound to all the sins of the decalogue, because he has indulged pretty freely in some of them, than he is bound to all the virtues because he is a pattern of domesticity. That sounds a self-evident truism, yet it takes some learning to realise it, and learning of a kind that is not to be found in libraries nor bought at second-hand. One school there is where such lessons are taught, and where the price is paid in something warmer than coin of the realm.

Not even to her dear old Godfather could Esther speak of the story which had been told her. There was but one person in all the world to whom she might open her heart with no breaking of pledges, and that was Jasper himself. Jasper, whom she had been evading during these last miserable days, whose glance she had been ashamed to meet, as if she had been the deceiver and he the deceived. She would tell Cousin Becky's son that she knew everything, would implore

him, with all the persuasive power that she possessed, to give up this mad and wicked pretence. "Yet I never in my life could turn Cousin Becky one hair's-breadth from the way she meant to go," thought Esther, and then again, "But he is a man, and, if one throws one's heart into it, men are easier to persuade."

Jasper sent an excuse, and put in no appearance either at breakfast or lunch. In the afternoon Esther took her courage in both hands, and went to seek him. Some instinct led her to the kitchen-garden, or perhaps not instinct, but that fine observation of tiny traits that is often called by its name. Jasper loved the sun, and the walled garden faced south, and got all the warmth that was to be had.

The snow of the day before, and the early frost seemed to have passed like a dream. The sun had gained in strength, and the afternoon had been bright, with the touching fleeting brightness of autumn. Esther passed through the queer wooden gates (from which the paint had long ago peeled, leaving them grey), and a faint fragrance greeted her. This part of the old place had always been better kept than the rest of the grounds. It was an oasis of summer sweetness. Here were the latest blowing autumn roses, pathetically delicate, drooping now from the untimely snow of the day before. Dahlias too, and clumps of Michaelmas-daisies, wedged in amongst the fruit trees. The cheerful red and yellow apples had been safely garnered; it had been a splendid fruit year. The new master, it was said, had brought luck.

Esther's eyes lingered lovingly on every detail. They dwelt on the brick walls, once red, but toned by age into rich shades of russet brown and purple and

orange; at the quaint roofs of the black outhouses that rose above the wall, and were outlined sharply against the mellow evening sky; at the moss paths, that she would in all probability never tread again. In its autumn beauty, the walled garden was like a ripe and good old age. It breathed of peace. A sundial stood on a little plot of grass in the very centre. On summer days this was the hottest place in the garden, but now the shadows lay long and cool.

As Esther drew near, she saw that Jasper was lying face downwards on the grass, by the grey steps of the dial; his hat was off, his head resting on his crossed arms. She was momentarily frightened. A sudden horror seized her lest he should be dead; for Death, unannounced, had entered her home so suddenly and rudely of late that her nerves were somewhat on edge. A sharply opened door would startle her, a cry in the village street would bring back, ringing in her ears, the cry with which her old cousin had died. Then she saw that Jasper was but sleeping, and she sat down quietly on the steps and waited.

After a minute or two he stirred, raised his head, stared for a moment with sleep-filled eyes, then sprang to his feet with an exclamation of dismay.

Why, Esther! you should have kicked me," he said. "How could you have let me snore peacefully at full length in front of you?"

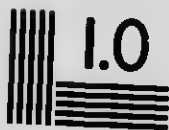
"I could not bear to wake you, because I have such a foolish dislike to waking anyone," said Esther gently. "Besides, I thought that you needed sleep."

Jasper had seen twenty times as much as she had, her instinctive little assumption of care for him was almost absurd, yet there is always a motherly element



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in a woman's feeling for a man, and she held in her memory a clue to *this* man's life. She knew of the bitterness of his disowned childhood and boyhood as well as of the wrong that he had done. In the end her pity had overcome her horror, but the conflict had been sharp. It had left her weary and very gentle, and it had absolutely swept away conventionalism.

"I leave to-morrow. I have been saying good-bye to the kitchen-garden," she said.

She kept her place on the steps, sitting with her back resting against the dial, and with her hands lying on her knees. Jasper got up and moved restlessly about.

"But it is a shame that you should have to go. That makes me feel as if I were a mean skunk, Esther. It never occurred to me that I should ever turn you out. It seems to me that this is more your home than mine, by a long way."

"It seems so to me too, sometimes," said Esther gravely.

"Yet I would never rob you, Esther," he said, with his sweet whimsical smile. "If the place had been left to *you* in case of my death, I would have remained in my coffin, or have disappeared again."

"I believe that," said Esther slowly.

Probably most people, knowing what she knew, would *not* have believed it! but she recollected that Cousin Becky had possessed a vein of chivalry too, and an occasional generosity that had not in the least prevented her from doing some very bad things.

"The truth is," she said firmly, though she turned a shade whiter while she spoke—"the truth is that it is no more yours than it is mine, and that no sentiment, and no affection for the place can alter that fact one bit."

"Hullo!" said Jasper. He gave her a long look, but Esther's eyes dropped; it was she who was ashamed.

"My dear Cousin Esther, you are not a fool," said he. "I've seen you coming round to me day by day, and week by week. Whatever you may have thought at first, you surely know now that I am her son?"

He stretched out his hand to her. A lean, capable hand, with a conjurer's palm, and an odd blue mark in its hollow. "That is my mother's hand, mark and all, over again—only a size or two bigger. I saw that you noticed it once, when I was carving a pheasant at dinner."

"Yes, I noticed it; but I no longer needed its evidence," said Esther. "You are my Cousin Becky's son. Every hour has borne some proof that has helped to convince me. You are *hers* all through, as she herself declared. Not only flesh of her flesh, but soul of her soul as well. Yet this place is not yours, and you know that; and she knew it, and I know it, too, at last, because she told me the truth just before she died."

"The deuce she did!" cried Jasper, and then he laughed his harsh, sudden laugh. "Poor Esther! Well, it was a d—d shame to have told you. My poor old mother oughtn't to have done that. One shouldn't put burdens on such slight shoulders. That is why you have crept out of my way, eh? No wonder you look worn to death."

The unexpectedness of the reply left Esther speechless. She had fancied that Jasper might be angry—might possibly, and she had dreaded that possibility, have lied to her, and denied the truth of the story, or might (though this was difficult to imagine) be put out of countenance; but he was none of these things, and the odd part of it was that his sympathy was genuine.

The rogue, if rogue he was, was really rather sorry for Esther.

"It must have made it awkward for you," he said. "In fact, it *is* awkward. You ought to have no share in this sort of secret. I should never have told you. What do you mean to do about it, eh?"

And Esther, very sad though in truth she was, felt an absurd inclination to smile. The Major would have said that that last question was put out of sheer effrontery, but it did not seem so to her, and perhaps she was nearer the truth than he would have been.

"It is something more than awkward," she said at last. "I am not afraid of what Mrs. Grundy might say, if she knew that I know. That is a small matter. Yet, if you carry on this fraud it will be a heavy grief to me."

Her grave, tender eyes challenged his with candid directness. The tears that they had shed had purged their vision, and it seemed to Jasper that she had taken the situation in her slender hands with unexpected courage.

"You have said, 'One should not put burdens on other people's shoulders,' but no one ever yet did wrong without other people suffering. You put a burden on the innocent from the very moment that you sin. Why, think—think how it is always so. Didn't you suffer wretchedly for what your father did in his youth? Think of the miserable boyhood you had; of the cold, cold home that poor Gatton, whose very name you are stealing, had; of"—

"Gatton was a cur," said Jasper.

Then he was rather bitterly amused at his own words. His quick mind leapt from one point of view to another.

"And no doubt you are saying in your heart, 'And what are you, that you should blame him?'"

"No," said Esther, and she spoke with unexpected passion. "No! but I say, if that is true (and it is what *she* said), why, then, all the more was he the most injured. If such a boy as you were, a boy with all the makings of a man in him, needs his mother's love, and fails to be all he might have been for lack of it, how much more does a bad son need it?" She was not a woman who often spoke of her religious faith. But here on this last evening in the garden, with the remembrance of Cousin Becky's words still ringing in her ears, it happened that for one moment a veil dropped, and by the flare of that miserable old tragedy she saw the Christ stand, and knew what He was.

"Ah, one cannot guess what He meant," said Esther, "till one has seen sin so close that one's brain has reeled, and yet has loved the sinner; but, if a boy's own mother does not understand *that*?"—

She broke off short. That confused, half-expressed thought had involuntarily tried to shape itself in words, but it was not for Jasper. Then her eyes smiled through the tears that stood in them. "Poor boys! Poor little boys, who used to quarrel here! You were both wronged, but Gatton most. Don't you carry on the wrong, Jasper, for you were never *meant* to be a rogue."

Jasper stared at her, half-surprised, half-touched.

"If I believed that any moral 'intention' went to the making of us all, I should say that you were 'meant' to be a very good woman," he remarked, "and that you have excellently fulfilled the original design. But you were *not* intended, and ought not to have got mixed up with such people as my mother and me. She and I understood and belonged to each other, but you got *cast* for the wrong company. Why, what

have I said? Esther, in spite of all my sins, I never meant to be a brute to you. Why did that make you cry? Eh? Why have I made you cry?"

He sat down by her side on the steps, and repeated the question insistently. He was not afraid of a scene, and he really liked Esther. The tones of his voice were very gentle, and somewhere at the very bottom of his heart he had the grace to be a trifle ashamed. He was aware, with his keen appreciation of values, that one of her tears was worth more than all his kindness.

Esther drew a little away from him, and dried her eyes, quite simply and openly.

"It was because Cousin Becky once said almost the same thing to me, and because you remind me of her (as you always do)," she said. "But you are quite mistaken, and so was she. I have never regretted that I am fond of Cousin Becky. I will not believe that I shall ever regret having known you; and, what is more, though I've buried such a number of years in this place, I will not regret one stone or one flower in it, when I hear—as I shall hear—that the Major has it, and that you've gone honestly away."

"No. You won't hear that," said he. There was just a glimmer of amusement in his face. He liked this good and pretty lady immensely, but he wasn't prepared to do so much as that for her.

"Why don't you break your word, and go to the nearest magistrate and swear to what she told you?" he asked suddenly.

"*I?* I betray her? Why, I *couldn't*," replied Esther, recoiling. It appeared to her that there was a sort of diabolical mockery in such a suggestion from his lips.

"Then no more can I," said he. "*I*, for the matter

of that, made a promise too, and, after all that has been lost, it's a pity if nothing is kept in the end. She made a bad bargain, did my poor old mother. She made a compromise with respectability—compromises never pay—and she saved her good name, and the name of my precious scoundrel of a father, and for that she sold herself and me. It wasn't worth while. Nature was a bit stronger and more revengeful than she knew. She suffered for it, poor soul! She and I know how much. I am not going to throw away the price she got. We've played the game so well that there is no getting out of it now, except by telling the whole truth. Well, I *won't* tell it." And he added, with an assurance that was not in the least assumed, "And neither will you."

Then he took up the thread of the conversation again in the kindly and half-confidential tones that often marked his intercourse with Esther.

"You see, when I landed, I hadn't any plot in my head. I had no more intention of posing as Gatton than I had of posing as the man in the moon. When I wrote to my mother from Liverpool, I had no absolute proof that she was still alive. Mind, I believed that she was. I was so morally sure of it, that the belief drew me home, but I hadn't written to her for years and years. I said to myself when I posted the letter, that it might very well be that I was a fool for my pains, that possibly she was in her dotage, if not in her coffin, and that equally possibly she would not recognise me. I was only eighteen when I left England. You know I went off in a rage with her, myself, and everyone else thirty years ago. I'd gone to see my mother one day, and I'd been insulted

by a chicken-hearted, little whipper-snapper in this very garden—thirty years is a long time! But when she saw me again”—he stopped abruptly. Few things in his life, crowded as it had been with action and sensation, had touched him so much as had his mother's welcome.

Esther shook her head, half-wondering, half-smiling. "How you could ever have supposed it possible that she would not know you, is beyond my understanding!" she said.

"Oh, well, perhaps at the bottom I didn't suppose it," said he, with a laugh. "One doesn't always dive to the bottom of one's self, eh? Anyhow, from the moment we met she was mad to see me in the son's place. Nothing else would satisfy her. I doubt if she could have pretended I was anything less near to her. The time had gone by when she could fob me off as a distant cousin, mysteriously orphaned. That old disguise had never hung together very well; it had always a way of wearing thin. It would have been ridiculous to wrap myself in it again. I wasn't going to attempt it. So it seemed that the choice lay between blazoning the facts abroad or disappearing into space again; and then the third way occurred. You suggested it, you know."

"I?" said Esther faintly.

He nodded, with a twinkle of humour.

"Yes. At anyrate she assured me that you did; but I think that the suggestion jumped with her humour, and that she annexed it pretty quickly. Yet when you came into the room and first saw us together, neither she nor I were deceiving you. You remember how solemnly she spoke?"

"This my son was dead and is alive," Esther quoted in a low voice.

"And *that* was true," said he. "But when I had gone out through the French window, and left her to explain matters, what did you say to her?"

"I hardly remember. I was so confounded and startled. I believe I expressed my astonishment. I could only repeat that it seemed as if the world were turning topsy-turvy when her son, who had been to me only a portrait in the library, came walking into our life."

"Ah, that did it. She seized the idea, and gave no more explanation. I was 'Gatton' from that moment. When I came in, she was triumphant. She had met the difficulty. To tell the truth, the plan tickled me too, though it was risky."

"Though it was *bad*," said Esther sadly. "Though you injure yourself and the people who trusted you, though it forced you to string lie on lie, and to act a part to everyone with whom you had relations."

"I've never meant harm to the people who trusted me," he replied quickly.

That accusation apparently touched him; the friendliness of his tone disappeared. He sprang to his feet and began to walk about restlessly. But his thoughts had flown right away from this walled garden, and from Esther sitting on the steps of the sundial and trying pathetically to understand him.

"No, never! If harm has come it hasn't been because I've wanted to hurt one hair of their heads, but entirely because of the damnable perverseness of their consciences and the false standards of civilisation, with its priests and its churches, and its ridiculous systems and its unnatural restrictions. And we might have been happy enough!"

And what had priests, churches, and systems to do with the question on hand, thought Esther?

But then, with a swift change of mood, Jasper shook his shoulders, as a dog shakes himself. That queer little trick, that visible throwing aside of some haunting thought, had often amused her.

"But there is no use in whining, especially while apples are ripe and trees golden and red," said he. "What's carved on that dial, Esther?"

Esther found her voice with difficulty. He was, indeed, like his mother. Like her in his sudden revulsion from anything approaching to maudlin sentiment; like her in a certain underlying bitterness, and yet again in a keen relish for the gifts of Mother Earth.

"It says, 'I only count the sunny hours,'" Esther said. "And I think it must count very few."

"Ah," said he, "you've lived indoors too much, that's why you think that! You're under the curse of over-civilisation, you know. I shook it off for a bit, when I left Europe behind me. But I had some bad hours in this old garden. I can see 'em peeping at me now from behind those apple trees. Not that they were all bad. There were one or two good ones, and I've some cheerful recollections. I'm glad still when I remember that I thrashed Gatton before I left!"

Esther made no rejoinder to that remark, and perhaps he was half-ashamed of it, for he went on with a quick change of subject.

"Well, anyhow, nobody cared who my father was or wasn't, when I went on board the *Ariadne* at Marseilles. Have you ever seen Marseilles? It's like a great fair. The ships come in and go out; and

on the quay you hear all tongues and meet all kinds of rascals. You see great bales unladen, and hear the grating of the cranes, and the swell of the tide as it rises. The salt water in the harbor looks quite oily where it gurgles round the sides of the vessel. You long to be off. That sound of foreign tongues and of the sea pricks your blood and sings in your ears till you are drunk with the life in it. It's as well to be drunk a few times when you are a boy; it prevents you from being a prig when you are a man."

"Will you tell me some more? What happened next?" said Esther.

Sitting there on the steps of the dial, in this quiet place, where generation after generation of men, women, and children had come and gone, a longing seized her for further insight into this man's life. For such as Esther see many things through the eyes of others. They gain more than half their experience through their gift of sympathy, and the inherited instinct of love is strong in them, even though it may never bear its natural fruit.

And he went on with the story, for her quick appreciation and understanding made her an inspiring listener. He told her how he had worked his way in a trading vessel among the Greek Islands; he narrated vividly, throwing, as it were, into her lap uncut jewels of stories; all sorts of incidents, some pathetic, some humorous, some both.

While he recounted, she pictured him to herself; a lithe brown lad, in his sailor's jersey, with the gipsy eyes that could dance with fun and blaze with passion, with a mouth that was defiant and melancholy, and a quick tongue! She knew (without any telling) that

girls had loved him, and that he had tumbled in and out of scrapes. She knew, too, that he could sing with the voice that stirs and charms, and that he could dance with the best!

"I've the trick of languages," he said. "It's just a monkey-trick, that goes with a good ear and a gift of the gab. I never studied grammars, but I soon learnt to chatter Greek like a native, and later I picked up Spanish and Portuguese, and Italian and Russian. That helped me. I fell in with Lord —— while I was cruising about those blessed little islands. He owns the whole of one of them; but his tongue is remarkably stiff. It used to make me laugh to hear him try to turn it to any language but his own! Yet he had had twice the education I had. A lucky accident made me of use to him, and he took me into his service. I was interpreter at first, but after a year or two I managed more and more for him. You see, I understood the people. I wouldn't insult him by saying that he was like a father to me! but he was very good. I stayed on there till I was twenty-five, then the place seemed too unbearably small, and the longing to be moving on to something fresh got hold of me. All sorts of great people used to stay at that house, and among them the Spanish ambassador. *He* took me with him to Spain. I got on fast after that—faster than you would have thought possible for a man without family or interest to back him—but then"—He paused and looked dubiously at Esther—"then I tripped up over a woman's pocket-handkerchief," he said. "The woman was the wife of the ambassador, so it was an awkward stumble. It ended that chapter; but anyhow I was growing tired of it."

He was silent for a few moments, then left the pocket-handkerchief story untold, and made a jump in the narrative to his adventures in one of the Spanish republics of South America. These were exciting enough. It seemed to Esther that he had made history there, and the things he told her were to her as the opening of a sealed book.

Of plots and counter-plots, of revolutions and hair-breadth escapes she heard, and, listening, she saw the sun go down, but did not know that she saw it, and shivered with the creeping mist, but did not know that she shivered, because in spirit she was in the hot square of a Spanish-built town, where dark-skinned men were struggling desperately under a blazing sky. Negroes in cotton shirts and straw hats, fighting faithfully like obedient dogs, some on one side, some on the other. Mulattoes, half-creole, half-negro young Spanish officers in their gay uniforms, descendants, perhaps, of men who had sailed with Columbus. The white man ruling as ever—his print on the houses, the schools, the cathedral, from which a statue of Faith looks out over the blood-stained town. Poor Faith! hard tried in this turbulent city.

"But, you see, she's lifted so high," said Jasper, with his instinctive gift of description, "that she sees right over our heads (I was in the middle of the tussle round Guzman Blanco's statue) to the snow peaks of the mountains. And up *there* is another life altogether." Then he paused again, and smiled.

"I should think that you have heard enough; even *you* must be weary of listening."

But he read the question in her eyes, and something, he hardly knew what, induced him to answer it.

CHAPTER XIV

“Dark to me is the earth. Dark to me are the heavens.
Where is she that I loved, the woman with eyes like stars?
Desolate are the streets. Desolate is the city—
A city taken by storms, where none are left but the slain.”

WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT.

“ESTHER,” he said, in a voice that had dropped suddenly to a low, almost flat tone, “you remind me sometimes of—of the woman who was *mine*. Not that you are like her in face or figure. It is only, I suppose, because you listen with the whole of yourself, just as she did. Of course you are really worlds apart. She was born in a gutter, and you in a garden—besides, she was in love with me.”

“And she is dead,” said Esther softly. She had taken that for granted.

“No—not a bit of it,” said he. “She is alive enough to pull at my heart-strings, and that’s the mischief of it all!”

“Ah, then, that is *it*,” said Esther.

She sat very still in the growing dusk. Yes, that was “it”; that was the heart of the mystery.

“Oh yes, that’s it,” he repeated, with a dreary little laugh, for her phrase somehow amused him. “That’s what drives one to play the deuce, though at my age it oughtn’t to, I grant you that. One would imagine one might stamp it out in this other world, especially

as I am fond of this place, much fonder of it than I knew before I saw it again, but *that's it*. I'd tell you the whole story, but then, you see, good women don't understand sinners, and bad ones don't help 'em. If a woman could manage to keep the bloom on her goodness, and yet to understand a bit more, she might be—well, one doesn't know what she *mightn't* be in this queer world. I suppose you'll be shocked if I go on, and shocked at the wrong end of the story. Mind you, though Maravilla is wrong—utterly, horribly wrong,—she is the whitest, purest person I've met, and to have you or anyone alive drawing back her skirts from her is what I couldn't stand."

Esther glanced down at her black dress and smiled, a tired, sad, little smile. "I do not think that you need be afraid," she said.

Somehow it seemed to her that her garments had got a good deal splashed of late, both literally and metaphorically.

"Was Maravilla your wife?" she asked.

"No, worse luck! She was the wife of a rascally bar-keeper at A—a," said he. "One day I was passing down the street in which she lived. It was a little narrow alley, cobble-stoned and hot—hot as hell! There was a bit of a row going on, and a man had got stabbed. He was lying just inside the bar. His head was on Maravilla's lap, and she was squatting on the floor pressing her fingers against the wound, while a negro was tearing a blue shirt into strips to make a bandage. I noticed her, because she was pure white, among all those shades of black and yellow and olive. They were mostly half-breeds, all darker than I am, but Maravilla has a skin like a white rose, and grey eyes.

You'd say, 'She's pure Castilian,' if you saw her. How she ever came to be *there* is part of the miracle. She looked up at the negro—everyone was smoking, and I caught the glimpse of her face between clouds. Clouds are the right environment for angels, eh, Esther? Yet not tobacco clouds, perhaps. 'I can feel his life going between my fingers,' said she, 'Be quick! be quick!'

"The negro grinned—not that he was a bad fellow, but her anxiety struck him as funny, I suppose, and I tore the shirt out of his hands, and we bound up the wound."

Jasper paused. He looked away over his listener's head, as if he actually saw before him what he was describing. Indeed, while he spoke, the scene he recalled was so present to him that his vivid memory set before him even the pattern of the saffron-coloured blouse that the girl had worn, and the texture of her blue cotton skirt that was splashed with blood.

"I suppose that you saved the man's life?" said Esther.

"Oh no, he chucked it then and there," said Jasper. "And I don't know that that mattered much. A few years more or less don't make much odds, and we must all die. I was sorry, though, when I saw her face. Not that (as I found out afterwards) she had ever set eyes on the fellow before. He was nothing in the world to her, but just a fellow-creature, but she was so made that she couldn't help minding. I've seen her cry over a broken-kneed donkey."

"But, of course, she minded," said Esther wonderingly.

Jasper's eyes narrowed with the humorous glance she knew well now.

"Ah, *of course*, you say! My dear, good lady, 'of course' you would mind, if someone were to bleed to death with his head on your lap, and equally, of course,

you would mind, if he were to drink too much at your table, or ill-treat a woman in your presence, but where, if you please, was the 'of course' for *her*, who had seen brutalities for every hour of the twenty-four? She kept her tender heart because she was Maravilla. She was by far the greatest miracle I've ever seen! I knew that at once. She was seventeen then, and she had been Cesare Vivario's wife eight months. You cannot possibly have the least conception of what he was, and, fortunately, to tell the truth, nor had she. She did not come of respectable people, but Cesare married her because she had a remarkably sweet voice, and sang in a way that attracted men of all sorts to his beastly little inn. I remember hearing him grumble over the fee charged for the ceremony, but she was worth 'binding,' he said. She married him because she was told to, and because she knew no better. There was no question of sentiment of any kind between them. There *could* not be any more than between a satyr and an angel. I bought my 'miracle' from Cesare Vivario. I gave him a good round sum; more than all that she was worth from his point of view, and as much as was paid for the marble statue of Nuestra Senora de la Immaculada Concepcion, which you may see on the high altar of Santa Anna. I meant to teach her to love and be happy." His voice broke, and he laughed with an uncertain sound that brought a lump to Esther's throat. "But she taught me. She knew more than I did. That little girl, surrounded by shameless evil from her babyhood; which yet *she had never seen*, any more than a three-year-old baby sees it. She knew some things by instinct. God whispered them to her, I suppose. She had a genius

for the most wonderful, shy, gentle love-making. Mine was clumsy beside hers. She had ways that made one reverence her. I can't talk about them, but they were prettier than anyone else's ways, and quite original and distinct. They were a constant surprise to me."

"But she was another man's wife, and you bought her," said Esther.

Her sympathy seemed to herself like a crime.

"Before God she was *mine!*" cried Jasper, and the fierceness in his voice made her shrink. "Wife? she wasn't really wife to the creature who possessed her little white body, but who never so much as saw her soul. That's the other side. Ah, that's the other side of 'to the pure all things are pure.' Can't you see that? She was a slave, if you like, but what she gave to *me*, no one could buy. That wasn't for sale—I only won it because, in spite of all (and I was never a saint), I was still man enough to love her. Now you think I am contradicting myself, but that's because you don't understand.

"Yes, I paid Cesare money down (oh, he was charmed; never had he so profited by the madness of Englishmen), and I took her right away out of that pestilent hole, with my arm round her waist, and her eyes looking up at me, with a trust in them that was enough to make a man out of a beast. I swore I would make them smile before I'd done with her, and smile without the shadow of fear! I did, too! For a time at least I did! You can buy lots of queer shams. You can buy the outsides of most things created—but you can't possess souls by buying them. Not even the devil can manage that, though he's popularly supposed to, for by the time his dirty fingers close on them they are dead—or gone somewhere else.

"I bought Maravilla's freedom; I didn't buy my love's love. That she gave me as a free gift, and, if I'm not her husband in God's sight, why, it's because He doesn't see clearly."

Tears rose suddenly to Esther's eyes. "Ah no, He knows," she said. "Life is too difficult; one cannot bear the perplexity of it, if one is not sure that He always knows."

"And that is what she said," the man answered. "For she was religious too. Her religion was the curse that came on us, and it spoilt everything." His tone grew quieter and more hopeless; the sudden flash of passion had died. "It couldn't be helped, for she had a genius for it," he explained almost quaintly. "I've thought about it since, and I know it was bound to happen. There are people who have a genius for religion, just as others have for music or painting, or for being great generals or great rulers. It's uncommon, of course, but so are the other kinds. It's always stronger than its surroundings. You can suppress talent—*that* needs fostering to make it flower—but you can't suppress genius. It lays hold of everything and turns it to food. It doesn't matter where it is born, it finds its way and becomes strong. Well, my miracle had it! It had kept her what she was in a vile place. It grew amazingly so soon as she got into light and air.

"I took her away beyond the mountains. I never have been able to stand civilisation for too long at a stretch. And I wanted to take her to a place where we had the world to ourselves as Adam and Eve had it. That would be almost impossible in Europe, but there are huge tracts of land out there, where you may ride for days through a sea of grass, and never a human voice disturb the air, and where you may

plunge into parts of the forest where white men have never been, where the Indians still tread like noiseless shadows among the trees, not missionised and dressed up and deteriorated, but naked as they were born, except for a loin-cloth and a necklace of teeth. Well, there we went, and there we were happy. I taught her to swim, and shoot, and to sleep in a hammock of grass slung from a tree. I took care of her myself. You see, Maravilla wasn't over-civilised, and she was only seventeen. She took to the forest-life like a little wild doe. It was what I'd often dreamt of."

"It is very like a fairy story," said Esther under her breath.

"Very," said he. "And in fairy stories there are witches, enchanters, and horrible things that come out of the forest, are not there? Well, so it is there. There is a background of danger. One must keep one's eyes open. Here, in England, Nature is safe and kind, eh? You can play with her as if she were an old tabby cat; but out there she is a striped tiger, beautiful and fierce and never to be trusted.

"There is everlasting struggling going on in the woods. Even the flowers are not kind and harmless. The orchids twist and perch and swing and bloom on branches they are hugging to death. You break a twig of something that looks like a vine, and its milk raises a blister on your hand; you touch what you think is a leaf, and it gallops off on a hundred legs! The animals pretend to be vegetables, and the vegetables to be animals. Every living thing is trying to protect itself, with all its little might and main, and to get the better of its enemies, just as the people in towns do. Oh, the high woods of the Andes are not moral, they

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are not Christian, I assure you! Nature is opulent, and she is splendid, but she isn't good. Maravilla alone was good and gentle and kind. That's why she took one's breath away. She wasn't joining in the struggle. She wanted nothing for herself. But fairy stories are short. Ours came to an end.

"We were months away. We might be there now, but that one day news reached me of a revolution. It's odd how little you know here about our revolutions, and yet they are big enough! The dream broke like a soap-bubble, and back I went to the capital. Ah, you should have seen it! There were twenty thousand throats all shouting down the man they had idolised the year before. I met the head of his statue, carried on a pole, as I entered the city. I was glad to be back again."

His nostrils quivered and his eyes brightened. Esther shook her head.

"I think you are a born adventurer; but I want to hear of Maravilla, not of overturned governments."

"Ah, she hated fighting," he said. "I left her in a place some miles from the city, where she was quiet and safe, and there our child was born. When we were in the forest she had asked me endless questions. 'Why was I good to her?' 'Because I loved her.' 'Who and what made me love her?' 'Why, she did,' said I. But that didn't satisfy her. 'No, it is not something in me, because if it were, Cesare would have been like you. It is something in you that is very good. Where does very goodness come from?' Her questions amused me; I never tried to answer them; but after the boy came she asked me no more, she said she knew. 'Very goodness came from the everlasting mother and the child.'"

"I was taken up just then with those small matters of

war and administration that don't interest you so much, Esther; I hadn't time to spare for any woman, not even for her. I was a member of the new congress. For two or three years my hands were very full. It was then that Maravilla's genius for religion grew apace. She took to going to mass. I made no objection, for it seems natural to women to like saying prayers; then she was baptized, and so was the child, and I really did not mind that either—I had no idea what it would lead to, you see. I was not over-pleased when I heard of her going to confession, but that was because the priests there are a low lot, and because I knew too much about them. Yet badness could never have hurt my Maravilla. I was always sure of that! It took a houseful of saints to drive her nearly out of her mind and twist her conscience the wrong way!

“I didn't know what was the matter at first. She stopped singing, and she became grave and thin. Her eyes were always following me wistfully, and presently they got a frightened look in them, such as I hadn't seen there, since the day I took her away from Cesare Vivario. She was like a nervous child in one way; it was always difficult to her, to explain what troubled her. The monks and nuns, who used to overrun us, had been chased out by Guzman Blanco; but some of them have been creeping back lately, and there is a little hospital, a long yellow building, just at the foot of the mountains, kept by sisters, where Maravilla loved to go. She took them presents from our own farm, riding over on a good little black mule, with the boy in front of her. I knew well enough that she spent whole days there, and thought it just as well that she should, for she couldn't bear the city, and

though she didn't complain, it must have been a bit lonely for her at home. You'll say I might have thought more of that, but I've always flung myself into one thing at a time. We had such a honeymoon in the forest as no one else, I verily believe, ever had, since the first man and woman enjoyed themselves; but making love is only one bit of life, and after that I threw all my strength into pushing R—s P—l. Time flies fast when one is playing the game hard; but, when my boy was three years old, I suddenly felt I must have a holiday, and Maravilla's scared, haunted face shone out in the dark before me one night when I was sleeping in Caracas, and I determined to put the mysterious something right. Can you guess what that something was? Those d—d saints had perverted my Maravilla's mind; had made her believe that she was 'living in sin'—that was their expression." His face quivered in a curious nervous way. "Have you seen anyone sicken and pine away from slow poison? No, I don't suppose you have. I have, and more than once; but in this case it was a soul, not a body, that was infected with unnatural, miserable scruples, and no one could be punished."

Poor Esther, sitting there in that sheltered English garden, listening to this extraordinary tropical story, looking at the man's twitching lips and clenched brown hands, felt that her ideas were turning strange somersaults.

"Yet surely they spoke truth; it *was* a sin," she cried. And there protested her Scotch forefathers! and then, "Oh, poor Maravilla; it was hard on her!"

"It was hard on *me*," he answered, with a sudden anger. "*She* had the consolation of her religion, and

that is more to her than I am. I fought hard for her, but, mind you, I wouldn't hold her fast when her heart was turned away. I'm not a Cesare! There's just the difference. She left me, anyhow, and they took her into their convent, where I hear she sees wonderful visions. It wouldn't take much starving to bring her to that; but our child is dead, and I—I'm playing at quite another game in another world; and I'm sure I don't know why I've told you all this. It must be because something in the tones of your voice, when you are sorry for people, remind me of her."

"But that can't be the end. You'll see her again," said Esther, though with a qualm of conscience at her own words.

His answer startled her.

"I hope not. It's better she should be sewing at gold crosses, and fasting till she faints, and seeing virgin mothers and Heaven knows what besides, than that she should be tortured, and I should be tortured, as we were during the last months of her life with me. I've had enough of that!" He pointed to the red brick wall at the bottom of the garden. "If that were the kind of thing that stood between my wife and me, do you suppose that I should be here now, or that I shouldn't pretty soon have got her out? But that's not it! If Maravilla were sitting where you sit now, the barrier would be between us still, and besides that there would be the grave of our child, whom she deserted. I couldn't hold her so close but that it would always be between us. That's why I came away. I thought I might forget better in another world, and then my mother wanted me. But the strange part of it all is, that though, if she came to me to-morrow, I wouldn't

take her back, yet I can't forget, nor get away from her either, and never shall, so long as we are both alive!"

And Esther turned her eyes away from the pain in his face.

"She must be either very good or very bad to have been able to do it," she murmured.

"She's very good," said Jasper quickly. "But I can't forgive her goodness, and I don't want to! She has saved her soul at the expense of mine. Why, perhaps you'll say that was natural enough. My mother saved her own name, why shouldn't my Miracle save her own soul? And what are we all doing but struggling for ourselves in one way or another? But then, you see, I believed in her! She is different to all the rest. She was above the everlasting struggle! When the creepers push up high enough above the undergrowth, the flowers bloom in the light and air. She was like one of those flowers. So I thought! so I thought! Now, sometimes I think that I could kill her, though I'm longing for her—and that I know you can't understand. But how you are shivering, Esther! Poor Esther! what a shame!"

"I believe I am cold," said Esther blankly.

He jumped up, and held out his hands, for she was stiff, and got up slowly. "Why, your hands are like bits of ice!" he cried.

Esther's cheeks were pink, if her fingers were cold. Her opportunity was all but gone.

"I had meant to have persuaded you—I had thought of what I was to say, and now I can't: but *she*—your Miracle—would have been on my side. You talk of not forgiving her; why, she left you because she loved

you. It wasn't to save her own soul. You make a mistake, I think."

"And how should you know?" said he.

"Oh, I know," answered Esther, smiling. "It is rather a secret, but see, I tell you plainly, Cousin Jasper. A woman never does care for her own soul so much as she cares for the man she loves. But if she is good—very good, like your Maravilla, she cares for *his* soul more than for her happiness, or even than for his happiness—she can't bear that he should be doing wrong."

"Oh, hang it all!" said Jasper. For a moment he was almost boyishly rueful, half-melted by the "secret" laid suddenly in his hands, then his expression changed again and hardened.

"Look here, my dear, good lady," he said. "It is you, and such as you, who make a hash of everything in the world. It is you who love to build altars, and sacrifice bodies and souls to cruel gods in the desert. I don't believe it was Abraham—it was far more likely to have been Mrs. Abraham—who wanted to immolate their only son. She got possessed by the iniquitous idea. She put him up to it, you may be sure. She was horribly afraid of happiness, and thought the Almighty would be jealous. Maravilla was afraid of happiness too, and so would you be—and that is why you understand and uphold her. My poor old mother wasn't made on those lines, nor am I, and I wish—I wish that I'd had nothing to do with your sort, for we weren't meant to mix.

"My little son is buried, and there was no ram caught by the horns (that part of the story is a fable, I suppose); it's not true to life, anyhow. He called his mother, but she never came. I called to her God for once, but

there wasn't any answer—it wasn't likely there would be, but one acts the fool sometimes."

They walked towards the house, Esther saying nothing. She felt that she was inadequate to the occasion, as she had felt once before. Yet perhaps her silence was better than words.

When they got to the hall door Jasper turned and looked at her shamefacedly.

"Did I rant? Did I shock you?" he said.

She shook her head, "I am sorry. I can only be very sorry."

"You are very kind," said he. "But there's nothing to be done, you know. One's fate is one's fate, and mine's been unlucky. On the other hand, I've tasted life a good deal, and often liked the flavour. I daresay I shall get some more out of it yet. Esther, I get into blind rages when I think of some things, because I'm helpless. When one is bound by the cords of other people's conventions one wants to kick. But you must please understand that it is no use asking me to make sacrifices for conscience' sake, because from first to last I've always *been* the sacrifice myself!"

The next day Esther left Applehurst by the early morning train. She refused to let Mr. Joel go with her to the station. She wished to slip away as quietly as possible. Her farewell had been said the day before. Somewhat to her relief she did not see Jasper again before she quitted the house. Polly Greenback accompanied her, and Polly was comfortably unsentimental, triumphant at having got her own way, and frankly pleased to leave her native village behind. Polly tucked the rug round her mistress, and they drove along the well-known road to the village in silence.

When they reached the little station, the Major's tall figure appeared at the carriage door.

"Why, Esther," he said, "you never vouchsafed to let me know that you intended going to town to-day; but I heard of your intention from Mrs. Greenback, so I have come to see you off."

Esther could have found it in her heart to wish that he had not heard, but she hid her dismay and thanked him. It was not the Major's fault that she ached morally and physically. Then the station-master greeted her with a tightly packed bouquet of dahlias in his hand. The flowers were arranged in circles of colour—red inside, then a circle of yellow, then purple, and then crimson. He, too, was aggrieved.

"If you had only given us notice, Miss, all the village would 'ave been present," he said. "But I never so much as knew you was going by this train, till ten minutes ago. And this is all I can do."

Esther clasped the enormous bunch of badly treated flowers with both hands. "Indeed, it is beautiful, Mr. Carter," said she. "But I did not want all the village to bid me good-bye, because 'good-byes' are so sad. Some day I will come back. Then I shall run to find all my kind friends."

"Ah!" said Mr. Carter, sighing. "Them that goes off in a hurry, don't always come back. It ain't wise to trust to that, Miss. London is larger than Applehurst, I don't deny, and it may be that in some ways it has the advantage, but then again it's full of dirt, and it's full of wickedness. The squire, who 'as been in furrin parts, he says as he has never (not in all his travels) found a place that compares with this, when you take it all round."

"Come along," said the Major impatiently. "Have you taken your ticket? Second class? Oh, nonsense! You must certainly travel first, Esther."

He put her into the railway carriage, with Polly beaming by her side. Polly had a sovereign tucked away in her tight new glove. It had been given with an adjuration to look well after her mistress's comfort, which she also accepted in good part. Polly liked responsibility, and was as happy as Esther was sad. The sovereign was the more delightfully unexpected, because the Major was by no means in the habit of giving tips. Esther, with unusual docility, allowed him to take her affairs in hand, and to change her ticket. His voice seemed to reach her through cotton wool. She could not understand what he was saying. She was dimly aware that he was talking about plantations in Trinidad, and about how it would be easy to get from Trinidad to Venezuela. She did not respond, and he frowned.

"I suppose that you are still angry with me, Cousin Esther," said he, half-sadly, half-indignantly. "Yet that is exceedingly unjust." And then the whistle sounded, breaking into his protestation, and the train was off.

Esther leaned out of the window. She caught a last glimpse, through the trees, of the church, of the churchyard where her Cousin Becky lay buried. The Major left, was standing quite still, and very upright, pulling his moustache.

Then she put her hands to her head. "I daresay I've always done all wrong!" said she. "Polly, my head is splitting! I believe I'm going to be very ill!"

CHAPTER XV

"Thank Heaven here is not all the world. The Universe is wider than our views of it."—THOREAU.

"WE surely must be getting near the convent," said the Major. He was riding through a South American forest on New Year's Eve. It was the oddest New Year's Eve that he had ever spent. He had left the city behind him days ago. That most strange of cities, where men from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South, transact business together on the beach. That city built on a pass, where the river narrows between high rocks, and the town looks down to see "its ships come in." From there he had travelled up to the capital, where he had been entertained in the President's house, and had heard many strange and unexpected things about Jasper Iredale. Things that took time to mentally digest. Things that had to be turned over and over in his mind, as he rode, with an escort of five negroes, through the forest towards the convent settlement of Nuestra Senora de la Merced.

An intrepid little party of nuns,—there had been but seven of them, all told,—had gone, with the President's permission, into the almost untrodden wilds that lie between Caracas and the Orinoco country. Here

they had experienced as marvellous and adventurous a history as any that befell the first pioneers of Christianity, and here they had set about converting the Indians with simple and undoubting assurance.

The Major, as he pursued his way on and on and on through those never-ending trees, smiled to himself at the thought of how the nuns must have come by this same track for the first time. Seven absolutely fearless "sisters." Mounted, probably, on the strong, slender-limbed little mules of the country. Carrying their store of food, and, far more precious, their own especial relic, and their gaudy pictures, and their embroidered banners. Major Iredale had no sympathy with Catholicism, but his heart did homage to a courage and faith that he could very well understand, and which, happily, are not the monopoly of any one creed, but which flash out again and again, illuminating the world's story from generation to generation. The courage and faith which move mountains, and successfully attempt the impossible. High over his head creepers twisted and knotted themselves, and flowers blazed triumphantly, flaunting their victorious colours in the sun. The negroes chattered together, like monkeys, but the Englishman rode silently, trying to set his impressions in order.

Presently he paused at a clearing, where stood a little cluster of native houses. Houses whose simplicity might have pleased, nay, might even have shamed Thoreau himself! For they had not even the luxury of walls, but only four posts, and a roof of palm-leaves. The Major dismounted and, sitting under an orange tree, endeavoured to converse with two Carib Indians and a tall squaw. The squaw was arrayed in one

straight garment, that fell from her neck to her feet, a quantity of turquoise-blue beads, and a small gilt-framed, highly coloured picture of the Madonna, which depended from the beads like a locket. A girl of about twelve wore the same fashion of straight cotton gown, which showed her pretty round brown neck, and her slim ankles. She observed the stranger gravely, and pointed to the crucifix that hung at her waist. This was a converted family, all "Buenos Catolicos." The girl remarked softly, in bad Spanish, that she too was of the white man's religion, "just the same as he was." The Major nodded gravely in reply, though he had his doubts on the subject, and though, had he been in England, he would have hotly disputed the statement that any papist could be of the same religion as himself. He partook of Orvocado pears and ripe juicy oranges; accepting the Indian's hospitality, not with the quick-witted geniality that Jasper would have shown, but with a grave and dignified simplicity that gave satisfaction. His negro escort squatted on their heels a little way off, grinning and talking. Green parrots screamed above him, their wings flashed jewel-like among the branches. A huge butterfly—black, with orange spots—brushed by him. He could descry gleams of blazing crimson and yellow between the leaves. Only the Major himself looked indubitably English and European as he peeled his fruit with his pocket-knife, and inquired how much farther off was the convent of the good sisters.

And while he sat there, trying to understand the answer that the straight-haired little brown girl repeated over and over again—not laughing as a little negress would have laughed, but gravely and politely,

with a liquid accent which made her attempt at Spanish hopelessly full of vowels, and impossible to follow—while he sat there, behold, a very small old woman came tripping into the clearing from the other side. An old woman in a nun's dress with a black hood, with a face almost the colour of mahogany, and lined and creased like some withered fruit, and with brilliant eyes, which, in their wrinkled brown setting, reminded the Major of a toad's eyes, though the simile was perhaps ungallant.

"Behold the mother!" said the little girl, who was proud of the Spanish which she had learned in the convent school. Then she took a step forward and waved one slim brown hand. "Behold the great white traveller who eats with us!"

The Major got up, and took off his hat with genuine respect and admiration, as he reflected that so old a woman had taken so great a journey. Mother Therèsa's face lighted with keen pleasure at sight of him. She was not unlike the far greater "Therèsa" after whom she had been named. An intrepid spirit, full of daring as any knight of the Middle Ages, deeply, mystically religious, and yet with a shrewd glint in her eyes, which perhaps betokened the keenness of her solicitude for the advantage and advancement of her own especial little branch of the Church to which she belonged.

She read the letter of introduction which the Major produced from his pocket-book, with a bright smile. "We owe much to the President. We are a hundred times honoured," she said. "But even without this, you would be welcome. We are all brothers and sisters here in the forest."

Presently the Major was walking by her side to the convent, stooping now and then to catch the quick flow of her Spanish, for she was absurdly shorter than he was; indeed she was almost a dwarf, and though very active, her shoulders were oddly bent and not quite straight. The Iredales were notably good linguists, and the Major inherited that family trait, in so far that he could understand Spanish or Italian or French, and could speak with grammatical certainty, though with an uncompromisingly British accent. He felt slightly amused at the situation. He wished that his Cousin Esther could have been with him. He had never read much fiction, having been always of an unimaginative turn of mind, but it occurred to him that Esther would have said that this scene was like a beautiful poem. He was sorry that she could not see the gorgeous colours of the flowers and the sky, or hear the jabbering of the monkeys and the scream of the bright-winged birds, or listen to the marvellous tale that this remarkable nun was narrating with evident relish.

"So under the protection of our Lady, we set out. Ten of us are still left in the mother convent in the country near Caracas. There we have a hospital for children, and also a little "cocca nursery," where we grow the young plants. It is a pretty spot, and well cultivated and thriving. But we seven, all tough, oldish women, but not yet too old—I was fifty this year—were called to penetrate deeper into the interior, to win the souls of these dear wild children. We have been marvellously blessed."

The Major was surprised to hear that she was but just fifty, he had imagined her to be about eighty.

"But where did you sleep, and how did you live?" he asked.

"He spreadeth our table," said the nun. "But, indeed, at first our chapel was bare enough! We took our beli with us, and we made a clay and timber house, and fastened it at the top; and there we built our altar, and there we hung the picture of our dear Lady. She, at anyrate, had a roof over her head that first night. Of *us* it shall never be said that we found no room for Her and Her Child. After that, our own house grew under her protection. It is now three years since we settled here. You will see how wonderfully we have prospered. No sickness has touched our dwelling-place. Privation has done us no harm. We have been joined by five more sisters, all carefully chosen. Sometimes I think that our blessed Lady has a very especial favour for those who risk much, throwing themselves most completely on her protection."

"I am no Catholic," said the Major bluntly. "But I have never doubted that Fortune favours the brave."

"No Catholic?" said the old nun. "Ah, poor creature!" She crossed herself rapidly, muttering something which he could not quite catch. "But no doubt it is for that very reason that you have been sent to us," she went on, with brisk cheerfulness. "You will see, and one day you will believe. Of late, the most extraordinary miracles have been wrought from our humble house. That, at least, you have already heard? The track through the forest is widening, because of the many feet that have trodden it. Bare feet, that tread noiselessly, for our message is above all to the Indians, but afterwards the feet of

soldiers and priests and princes and travellers from all lands." A far-reaching ambition showed itself for one instant in the expression of the little thin wrinkled face. "I shall be at rest before that procession ends, but I have seen the beginning. But last week we entertained an emissary from the Holy Father himself. He came to investigate, for we are cautious, we are very properly cautious about accepting miracles. Yet this is a light which cannot be hidden. It shines like the star of Bethlehem. It is as if our dear Lady, whose servants were wickedly driven from the towns in '73, whose churches were robbed, whose very hospitals were taken from her, had been signally pleased to find the resting-place offered by true devotion here. She may yet forgive the country its sins, for the sake of the faithful. No doubt" (with a sudden change of tone) "you saw the account of our miracle in *El Iris de la Fe*—a very excellent paper!"

The Major shook his head. "I never read such publications. Who is this miracle-worker?"

Mother Therèsa considered for a moment. Though her tongue wagged fast, it by no means wagged at random. "She is one who has given up much at the bidding of the Church," said she. "The superior of the mother convent admitted her when she was in great distress of mind. She was then ill, exhausted, and unhappy. Later on, she, at her own strongly expressed desire, came here to me. She had been accustomed to life in the wilds, and she had learnt the language of the Indians, which was our great stumbling-block. I had many misgivings as to the wisdom of allowing her to be here for any length of time. She could never be a nun, for she has been married. Yet

the circumstances were very exceptionable, and are we not 'de la Merced'? In the month of August a child was born. I, who am well skilled in all matters pertaining to birth, sickness, or death, received the dear little one in my arms. Sister Dolorosa is as skilful as many doctors, and, with the blessing of the Virgin Mother, all went well. Our dear guest made a quick recovery, and from the moment that she was able to go about, our converts (of whom we had before made but few) poured in by tens, twenties, thirties! She proved to have the most wonderful power over the Indians. She led them like lambs! The children began to flock to our school (that was our best scholar whom you were speaking to under the orange tree). Our beloved chapel filled with worshippers. Then trouble came. The devil was no doubt enraged by our success, and endeavoured to overthrow us. A negro who came to us from one of the river settlements, brought with him a virulent disease. Not one of the sisters caught it, but it spread with terrible rapidity among our native converts. All day long, often all night long, we strove to fight the enemy. My heart was heavy, not only on account of the many deaths, but because our Lady was being robbed of her jewels. Those precious souls we had won for her and her blessed Son, were caught again by Satan. Our converts turned back to their old false beliefs, and that though I besought them with tears. It was then, at the blackest hour, that the miracle happened, and I tell you truly that I had no slightest expectation of it. Our guest often spends the night praying in the chapel, which is always decorated with flowers. One early morning when she rose from her knees—having, I make no doubt, been pouring out her

soul in supplication for the sick and dying—behold, the flowers on the altar turned to fire—crimson, yellow, and white, and in the midst of glowing, leaping flames, our Lady herself appeared with her Child in her arms. The Child held out a spray of flowers, white and transparent, but with pink inside (all living flame, remember), and beautiful, beautiful as the flowers of Paradise.

“‘With these you shall kill disease,’ said our Lady, ‘till the time of their flowering is over. When they wither in the forest, He shall pick you for Himself.’”

“Good heavens!” said the Major. “Are we in the nineteenth century or the sixteenth?” But he spoke in English, and Mother Therèsa either did not understand, or feigned a convenient non-comprehension.

“Yes, you are astonished,” she continued, “and as for me, I scolded the dear child when she came to me with her story, as I should certainly have scolded one of our own sisters, though, for that matter, it seemed to me that the vision might more fittingly have appeared to a virgin. But the next day, not our guest alone, but Sister Dolorosa, who is no young thing, but staid and sensible, saw Nuestra Senora de la Merced with the flaming flowers, and after that three other sisters saw her—yet she spoke to none but ‘El Maravilla.’ The Indians in the forest all call our guest by a name that means ‘wonder.’ Nothing else fits her so well. As for the blossoms, they grow in many parts of the forest. They are not uncommon. I will presently show you a bunch in front of the altar. But what I shall also show to you is something far stranger. I shall show you the sick healed, the lame walking, the blind seeing, at the touch of these petals in our guest’s hands. But you may be thankful that

you are in time to see this great sight, for, alas, alas, the time of the flowering is all but over, and already"—and to the Major's surprise tears glittered for a moment in her eyes—"already our dear guest is fading away, and can even now but lie on her couch, where the sick gather round her, and are cured at evensong. Hark! Do you hear our bell?"

"Ting, ting!" A sharp soprano-voiced bell sounded insistently through the trees. A turn of the steep, uphill track brought the Major suddenly to a new bit of scenery. He stepped out from amongst those countless trunks, with a sense of joyful relief. Behind him lay the mighty forest, wave on wave; before, and still a little above him, was the convent. He was on a spur among the feet of the hills, but beyond and behind the convent, rose great peaks, a majestic chain, snow-clad. How tiny the little human hive seemed, planted there in the midst of such colossal forces! Yet the pigmies bore the mountains, and make the deserts bloom. They cut down the forests, ay, and measure the distances between the stars that watch theirs. They die, generation after generation, with ridiculous, pitiful quickness, but their race goes on, and Nature yields more and more to her small coercive last-born.

The nuns' dwelling-place was made of wood, and was built in the shape of an E. It enclosed a garden, hedged with a crimson hedge. In the left wing of the building was a chapel, and a sturdy nun was pulling the clanging bell that hung in the little tower. The garden was full of flowers and fruit, and behind the convent were sheds, ample and palm-thatched. They had been run up in next to no time, like Aladdin's

palace! In the sheds were excellent little black donkeys and mules, also stores of maize and coffee. There, too, was the kitchen, with its primitive furniture of big stones.

Mother Therèsa looked at the place with proprietary pride. "All made in three years, under the blessing of our Lady," said she. "But come in, come in and eat and rest. We poor sisters are greatly rejoiced to receive a friend of the President's. Indeed, Dr. R—s P—l is a good son of our holy Church (different from his predecessor as light from darkness), and we have cause to be grateful to him. You will say that I said so; you will convey to him the most heartfelt humble greetings of the sisters 'de la Merced,' will you not?"

There was a shade of anxiety in her manner for which the Major could not account, but at anyrate he was welcomed with enthusiasm and entertained with the best that the convent could produce. He could not but feel kindly towards these sisters. They seemed simple and good women. They were all brown with the tropical sun, all, as Mother Therèsa had remarked, tough and oldish, all cheerful, nay, even merry. They were taken from the middle class, and, so far as he could guess, they were all Spanish.

Mother Therèsa sat opposite to him while he partook of food in the refectory. He ate with good appetite, and the little old woman observed him with keen attention. He was a heretic, and she firmly believed that unless "Our Lady" miraculously intervened to save his soul, he would suffer everlasting torment with the greater number of his compatriots. Spanish nuns are as uncompromising as were the followers of Calvin. But in spite of this fact she had every confidence in

his moral qualities. Mother Therèsa had the mind of a statesman! She knew quite well in whom she could safely trust, and with whom she must count her words. The air from the snow-clad heights came in at the big unglazed windows. There were rough shutters, that might be closed in case of a storm, but the Major felt as if he were sitting in a summer-house, rather than in a room. A rough table, two long benches, a picture of a blue-robed virgin, and another of the Pope, completed the furniture of the refectory, but outside lay the wonderful panorama of mountains, and the great tracts of almost unexplored land. The unexplored is attractive to most Englishmen. The Major wished that he were ten years younger; but he was glad that he had come. The old nun, who would talk so fast, rather worried him by her detailed account of the coming of the miracle-worker. He did not understand why she should be on the defensive; why she should take such pains to assure him that their guest was free as a bird.

When he had finished his meal, she made a sign to him to follow her. "You shall see for yourself," said she. "You keep silence when I tell you that the dear child was neither persuaded nor forced to stay with us. But you shall see! You shall speak with her as much as you choose, and as freely—you must wait only till the sick have gone home, till the miracle is over for the day." And the Major followed her, expecting he hardly knew what, but probably nothing quite so strange as that which he saw.

In the garden were shrubs full of flowers, and tall palms and mangoes and bananas. The generous and fertile soil repaid cultivation willingly. The air was

sweet with the scent of plants, which the Major looked on as hot-house plants. Gardenias and bougainvillas gave him a luscious greeting. Right down at the bottom of the scarlet-fenced enclosure ran a stream which rose in the mountains, for the nuns, like monks of old, had chosen their position well and carefully, and had sought for running water. The garden was the more exquisitely beautiful and delightful to the Major because he could walk through it easily, and he was weary of the long struggle through the undergrowth of the forest. Perhaps, equally from force of contrast, because he had seen nothing but dark skins of late, the fairness of the woman who lay under a star apple tree, with a blue coverlet under her feet, and a group of black-hooded nuns round her couch, struck him as extraordinary, and in itself almost miraculous.

Mother Therèsa put her finger to her lips, and led him round to the back of the couch, where he could observe, unseen by the little miracle-worker. He stood there, frowning heavily and pulling his moustache. He was shocked at the outrageousness of a scene that violated his common-sense, yet was, in spite of himself, half-impressed and not a little puzzled. By the Maravilla's side was a great bowl with a strange pattern on it. It had been made by the Indians, and it was filled with flowers. White, waxy flowers, blushing pink in the centre, with tender pale green leaves that grew in delicate spirals. The girl's own face had the waxen transparent appearance of the flowers, and there was a spot of bright pink in either cheek. Her eyes were half-closed, and she lay very still, with her small hands crossed on her breast. Her attitude

added to the Major's discomfort and disapproval. It reminded him of a monument on a tomb. It seemed to him to have in it a suggestion of death.

Gradually the garden was becoming full of people, and people of varying shades of colour. A negress with an affection of the eyes; a little olive-skinned lad, brought from the town, who was staying with his mother in the convent; a few half-breeds, partly Indian, partly negro; some jet-black miners from the silver mines; two priests from Caracas, one in his long robes and shovel hat, the other in vestments. Lastly, stealing in noiselessly one by one with a detached air, paying no heed to anyone except to "La Maravilla," grave, unsmiling, like denizens from another world, came Indians from the forest.

Presently a bell sounded one sharp note. Everyone (except the Major and the priest) fell on their knees. The priest went to the head of the couch, and lifting the wax image of the Mother and Child, held it poised on a sort of plateau that was covered with gold and black cloth, high above the Maravilla's head. The nuns chanted. The Major could not catch the words, but the plaintive sweet dignity of the chant filled the tropical garden. It seemed to take possession in the name of that Church whose branches have spread far and wide, whose adherents had once committed such unspeakable cruelties in the name of the Prince of Peace, and who had yet shown such devotion, so gay and fearless an embracing of martyrdom. Recollections, blurred by time, of stories that he had read when he was a boy in a prize copy of *The Conquest of Mexico*, were floating in the Englishman's mind. He felt as if he had been transported

thousands of years backwards in the world's history. He wondered that the Indians should trust these Catholics "after all that had happened." The whole scene was so mediæval, that to hear of tortures and burnings would hardly have surprised him. Maravilla sat upright suddenly. She plunged her hands into the bowl of flowers, grasping a huge cluster. Her eyes were widely opened now, and they shone like twin stars. The pink in her cheeks deepened. She wore a loose white cotton garment with wide sleeves. When she moved, the sleeves falling back, showed her arms thin as sticks, and the blue and violet veins of her wrists. Her languor seemed to have disappeared. One by one the sick and afflicted came to her, kneeling at her side under the placid-faced image of the Virgin.

Maravilla tore off the petals of the flowers till they lay in a little heap in the hollow of her left hand. Then she made the sign of the cross rapidly over them, and pressed them to the forehead of the patient, saying something, whether prayer, blessing, or charm, the Major could not distinguish, for her voice was little more than a whisper. No words could have adequately expressed the vigour of his silent protest; but at the same time he was struck, despite himself, with the rapt beauty of this dying girl's expression. This vivid sympathy that claimed relief from the pains and miseries that beset humanity, as if the suffering of each sufferer were her own, as if their perplexed appeal were hers, this absolute faith in the power of God to heal, a faith which seemed to fulfil itself, this surely was a phenomenon old as Christianity—nay, older, for surely the spirit that owns

sonship with the Divinity, and is also son of man, glimmered through the mists of the world even before the Christ of Nazareth lay in His mother's arms.

There was a glad ecstatic cry when the little lame boy let his crutches drop, lifting a bright exalted face to his mother, and walked, scarce leaning on her hand. Could that possibly be trickery? thought the Major. Then the chant rose up again, but Maravilla's eyes followed the boy with a somewhat wistful joy. She could not give her whole attention to the next comer—the colour faded, even from her lips. Mother Therèsa made a sign to the black-hooded kneeling figures, who rose with one accord from their knees, thereby shutting out the sight of the miracle from the Major's stubbornly heretic, yet pitiful gaze. They all sang something that rang joyfully and triumphantly through the pure, still air, something that was apparently familiar to their converts, for everyone joined in it. It echoed from all sides, and it apparently closed the proceedings.

"That is a sort of 'God save the Queen,' I suppose," said the Major. "It's high time for it, too! That girl has had about enough."

Four nuns lifted Maravilla, couch and all, between them. They carried her off in the train of the waxen Madonna. A fifth followed with the bowl, with its few remaining flowers, which were reverently deposited in the chapel under the image. The Major was left in the garden, where he stayed to see the world dipped, for the space of a minute, in dazzling liquid colour, before the sun disappeared below the horizon, with what seemed to him undue and undignified haste, and the stars rushed out.

CHAPTER XVI

"O mighty Love, O passion and desire
That bound the cord,
Enflame within my heart a ceaseless fire
To pray the Lord
All through the watches, patient without sorrow,
Till prime doth come of that to-morrow
Which hath no twilight grey,
But morn alway."

—*The Heptameron.*

THE night had come with a suddenness that reminded the Major of a stage night. He was alone with his thoughts under the stars. He paced up and down between the flowering bushes (night blowing blossoms were opening now, white and heavily scented, and their lovers were coming to visit them), and his mind sifted the strange impressions of the day.

Well! no doubt it had all been theatrical, the kneeling, chanting nuns, the priest holding aloft the Madonna's image, the great bowl full of miraculously blessed flowers. He strongly disapproved. He objected to ecstasies, religious or otherwise. His sturdy English Puritanism shrank from the emotional and exotic. But as for the girl herself? He would have staked something on her purity and good faith. She was not what he had expected her to be! Nay, more, when he thought about Jasper, his condemnation was softened by the knowledge that this was the kind of woman that rogue had loved! He smoked steadily.

He was glad to have plenty of time in which to think. The Major was essentially a man of action, but of late he had perforce possessed his soul in solitude. The experience had done him no harm. He called to mind, between the puffs of his pipe, his first meeting with his Aunt Rebecca's son—he was morally convinced now of the relationship—and how he had felt that the man had good stuff in him. Then he turned over again all that Dr. R—s P—l had told him, all that had been said of the part Jasper Iredale had played in the revolution, and of the President's strong personal friendship for him.

The Major had listened very attentively, sometimes begging his host to repeat a sentence of which he had not quite caught the drift. He acquired a respect for this grave, grey-haired man who, unlike the majority of his predecessors, was no soldier, but who nevertheless was fighting a hard fight, on his own lines, for the welfare of his country. The President's dislike of pomp was sympathetic to the Major, to whom any display appeared childish. He sympathised, too, with all that he heard about the putting down of sinecures, the stern checking of extravagance, the entirely new but not altogether popular attempt at conducting government after a highly conscientious fashion. The Major even understood R—s P—l's piety, for he was religious himself, though after another fashion. He became alive to the importance of winning the better class to a sense of their responsibilities, the better class having apparently given up politics as a bad job. All this he strove to understand, for in every reform, and in every effort, it appeared that his compatriot had been the President's earnest ally and supporter.

“Mr. Iredale knows how to win and manage all

kinds of people." It did not surprise the Major to hear that. "He is unbribable." He smiled rather grimly, but made no adverse comment. "He might be anything! Nothing that he could do would surprise his friends." He assented drily. "Or even his enemies," he added.

"I recognised Mr. Iredale's extraordinary talents long before I came into office," the President said. "I knew him when we were both comparatively young men. I was again much thrown with him during the struggles of '87. He disappeared suddenly that year, and was neither seen nor heard of for months. He returned on the day of the riot in '89, and supported me with great vigour and loyalty. It was greatly owing to his influence, to the speech which he made in Congress, that my resignation was unanimously returned to me. A most unhappy circumstance occurred later. The woman with whom he lived, left him, and went to the missionary nuns of 'La Merced.' His boy died of a low fever, and Iredale was for months out of his mind. I did not know this at the time. On his recovery (if he recovered) he left America without a word of warning to anyone. No one has had any news of him from that time till now, when I learn with real satisfaction that your business in Caracas is connected with him, when I receive a letter in his handwriting. You can doubtless explain much."

The Major had been silent for a minute, and then had replied guardedly, "Mr. Iredale has apparently recovered his health of mind and body." He had been careful to refrain from implying that he considered Jasper Iredale a rogue, and his caution arose from no motive of policy (though as a matter of fact it happened

to be a politic suppression), but merely from an instinctive pride which was at once national and family. The man was an Englishman, and in this strange land had, so far as could be seen, borne himself boldly and uprightly. For the honour of his country the Major would fain cover a fellow-countryman's delinquencies. He had also, alas! Iredale blood in his veins, and, for the honour of that name, there should be no unnecessary blazoning of disgrace.

"Yet he must be bad enough!" thought the Major. "And is he any the more to be excused because he has the capability of good? Or does not that capability rather add to his guilt?"

The Major had reached the bottom of the garden now; he was walking by the hedge of scarlet hibiscus. He stood still for a minute to listen to the distant howl of a monkey, and the yell of a wild cat. Then he turned again to the consideration of this perplexing rogue. He had seldom, during the whole course of his well-ordered life, vexed his own soul by any prolonged study of moral problems. He had of course met bad men and good men, sheep and goats. The sheep were indubitably blessed and the goats damned. Jasper was a goat. And yet? It worried him that his thoughts should show so foolish a tendency to end in a query. He exclaimed impatiently. Was he becoming as soft as a woman—as soft as his Cousin Esther?—in that sneaking appreciation, of some likeable qualities, was making him over-lenient to a person whom he had every reason to despise? At the recollection of Esther he smiled, saying to himself, as he had said more than once before, "How she would delight in all this strange scenery! How it would impress her!" He did not

know how much he was himself impressed. A rustle on the other side of the hedge attracted his attention.

"Hullo, who goes there?" said he. Then he strode across the tiny stream and peeped over.

A man on the other side grinned at him, showing a glint of white teeth in the starlight.

"I am ver' delighted to meet Major Iredale. We two, are just two white gentlemen 'mong all dese black niggers."

"You have the advantage of me, sir," said the Major stiffly. "For I do not know your name."

What was more, he doubted the whiteness, and was offended at the bracketing of himself with this fellow, who, he observed, did not walk like a European, and whose pronunciation had a negro flavour about it.

"My name, Mr. Cesare Vivario," said the man.

The Major frowned. Where had he heard that name before?

Mr. Vivario opened the little wooden gate set in a gap in the hedge, and crossing the stream, stood at the Major's side.

"Dey know how to be comfortable, dese nuns," he said, with a slight sneer; "dey choose well. Plenty water, plenty fish, eh?"

"They have chosen a hard life," said the Major, and the man agreed, with a somewhat subservient change of tone.

"Oh yes. Yes, dat true. Dat what I say. Dey choose a hard life. Dey ver' brave people. So, did you see the Miracle, Major?"

"I saw a dying girl," said the Major gravely. "I am not a Romanist. I do not believe in their miracles."

"No, no; you too wise for dat! You don' like priests," said Mr. Vivario. "Well, now I tell you a

laughable, funny story 'bout a priest an' a nun. Dey don' always say prayer. Dey"—

"No thanks," said the Major curtly. He could not, for the life of him, refrain from snubbing the man.

Mr. Vivario's broad smile faded. "Oh, ver' well! But you look over de hedge, and commence first to speak to me," said he plaintively.

The Major laughed. "Why, so I did!" he owned. "I thought you were an Indian from the forest. I'd no idea that there could be 'another white gentleman' at t'other end of nowhere."

The man was apparently appeased, though his long narrow eyes had rather a queer look in them, as he glanced sideways at the Englishman.

"You've got my name very pat," said the Major. "How's that, eh?"

"It same name of someone I know extremely well. I and Mr. Jasper Iredale, who was ver' great man and friend of the President, was mos' intimate friends. I am important gentleman in Ciudad Bolivar too. I keep first-rate house. You heard of me? No! But I heard of you. I hear you go take long journey to see de convent in de forest. I see you walk about de street in Ciudad Bolivar. You settle how you go up de river, and den right 'cross de forest. You pay your niggers too much; dey ver' pleased 'bout dat. I don' walk so quick, Major! I got bad leg."

He sat down on a log by the stream. The Major had half a mind to walk on and leave him, then owned to himself that he was not playing the detective particularly well!

"You seem to have taken a great interest in my affairs," he remarked drily.

"Yes, yes; dat quite true," said Mr. Vivario cheerfully.

"I take much interest. You English, so you got no religion. You not sick, no? but you take long journey, dat cost money, to see de nuns. Dat ver' interesting fact. I clever, sharp gentleman. I know all 'bout it. Now I tell you true, because you and I we all 'lone 'mong black trash."

He paused, but the Major made no response. Now that they were close to each other without the intervention of the hedge, the Major could see that Mr. Vivario was a mulatto. He had Italian as well as negro blood in him. His lips were thick, but his complexion was olive. He was not languid like a creole, but on the contrary, restlessly alert. He had no morals (judged at least by European standards) and no pride; but he had a good deal of vanity, and he was capable of hate.

"One day a sailor come to my place. He got a letter from his old papa. Mr. Wilcah, Wilcoh—some name like dat. He sit and read and read it till his head nearly come off tryin' to understand. I say, 'What de matter? What it all about?' He got a paper too. I look at de paper. I know who dis is in one minute. It my and de President's friend! It Mr. Jasper Iredale!"

He pulled out a greasy, much-thumbed English local paper, and smoothed it out carefully. The Major took it out of his hand, and, striking a match, looked at it. Jasper's face stared back at him from the printed page, half-humorously, half-defiantly, with the expression which was so like Mrs. Mordaunt's, that the Major seemed almost to hear his old aunt's mocking voice ringing again in his ears. How could he ever have been so blinded as not to have seen the truth at once?

"Romantic Story in Real Life" was printed in large letters above the picture. Under it was—"Gatton Mainwaring Mordaunt, The Long-lost Heir."

Mr. Vivario read the inscription with gusto, and with a vile accent that irritated the Major almost beyond endurance. "I and you, Major. We know perhaps some more dan dis," said he. "Yes. P'raps we know, or p'raps we don' know. Dat just how it comes 'bout."

The Major had travelled many hundreds of miles, with the express object of finding out all that he could about the claimant to the Iredale property, but now that he was confronted by someone who was evidently itching to sell him information, an unreasonable disgust took possession of him.

"What on earth have you to do with the matter?" he asked curtly.

Cesare laughed, though he secretly resented the Englishman's tone.

"S'pose—mind I only say s'pose—I bring you letters dat he write in his own writing, dat tell you jus' all 'bout who he is, an' where he come from, and all he ever do in all his life. How much do you pay?"

"Mr. Iredale never wrote such letters to you," said the Major.

"Never wrote to me? Jasper and I we near friends. He write to me every week," said Cesare, "or to my wife—dat all de same."

"Ah, you sold your wife to him. I remember now," said the Major. "I heard that story in Bolivar." He looked at the specimen of humanity before him. He thought of the white Miracle he had seen, and his lips tightened. He could forgive his cousin *that*. "You seem to be a good hand at selling, eh?" he said.

"So how much do you pay for de letters?" persisted Cesare.

The Major fought for a moment with the impolitic

desire to bid this mean little scoundrel take his dirty bargains to the devil. "I'll tell you that when I see what they are worth," said he. "Have you got them by you?"

He was conscious that he was not so disappointed as he should have been, when Mr. Vivario shook his head.

"I bring dem all safe. I not got dem dis minute, Major. You can trust me. I"—

"No, no," said the Major, with a smile. "I can pay you if it's worth my while; I couldn't do more than that, I'm afraid. Good-evening," and so saying, turned on his heel and strode back to the convent.

The guest-chamber of the nuns was a sort of annexe to the original building. It was partitioned by wooden screens which formed three rooms, with one common roof. The Major had a partition all to himself, with a table, chair, and bed. His bed was covered with mosquito curtains, and over it was fixed a black wooden cross. He was a very honoured visitor, and great efforts had been made to provide him with luxuries. The other guests slept on the floor. Yet in spite of these favours he did not sleep. He sat by the unglazed window, and looked out at the night. Through the screen came a murmur of voices. Two Mestizoes were talking together of the Miracle. The Major reflected that he was the only man of purely European blood in the settlement, yet the nuns were undoubtedly treated with respect,—perhaps, indeed, with greater respect than would be accorded to them in the cities. He wondered whether the waxen images, the music, the bright banners, were a necessary first stage in teaching. You teach a child by coloured picture-books, he reflected, and yet his own religious feeling was revolted by

an appeal to the senses. The Miracle-worker herself was like a beautiful picture. She was a visible sign of purest love and pity. The man who had rescued her from Cesare Vivario was not utterly to be condemned.

"Ting, ting!" There was that bell again. The pious sisters were holding midnight service in the chapel. He had been apt to consider such acts of supererogation as foolish at the best, but some things which he had seen and heard since he had been in South America modified a judgment which, though often one-sided, was always single-eyed. Perhaps the grosser vices of a coloured population were best protested against by an absolute asceticism. One cannot drive off some devils with kid gloves on one's hands. Moreover, our measuring of time is often, after all, arbitrary. Here was a phase of life far enough removed in reality from the phase he had left behind in England. Perhaps the grown-up remedies of the nineteenth century were not suited to these "dear wild children" of Mother Therèsa. What a wonderful little woman Mother Therèsa was, to be sure! But she was as masterful in her way as had been that other old woman, who had been no saint at all, but a terrible pagan. The Major was himself a religious man; he possessed a simple and manly code of belief that was quite untouched by modern doubts, but he had never before come across this enthusiasm of religious fervour, or perhaps it had never forced itself upon his notice. The last thing that swam before his mental vision that night was Maravilla's face, and, oddly enough, something in its expression reminded him of Esther.

The next morning he woke at four, and went out early. A negro was hammering away, grinding coffee

between two stones in the funny primitive kitchen. The Major drank the coffee in the garden, and there Mother Therèsa came to him.

"The dear child is very weak," she said. "One of us was with her all night. She heard your voice yesterday, and it excited her. You shall presently converse with her, but I also would very gladly talk with you, and ask your advice. I learn from the President's letter that you have lately seen Mr. Iredale."

The Major pulled at his moustache to hide a smile. Though he did not read character with the intuitive quickness which had characterised his Aunt Becky, yet he was no fool. He was very well aware that this old lady leaned on no one's wisdom but her own, and least of all on that of a heretic.

"I cannot imagine that my advice would be of any conceivable use to you," said he, in his slow, laborious Spanish. "But perhaps, before we go any further, it is fair to tell you that I have no right to hear any story connected with Mr. Iredale's affairs, on the ground of friendship. I am not his friend."

Mother Therèsa looked a good deal surprised.

"But at least you are not his enemy?" she asked sharply.

The Major was silent for a minute, then he replied slowly and gravely, being in truth somewhat astonished at his own statement.

"No. I am not his enemy. But I am certainly his opponent."

Mother Therèsa shrugged her shoulders. She did not waste time in unravelling the mystery. What she was anxious to do, was to explain to this Englishman the exact position of herself and her convent towards

"La Maravilla," and in such a way that he should be convinced that no blame attached to them. The Major, in himself, might be unimportant enough, but he was a compatriot of Mr. Iredale's, and he came from the President. Mother Therèsa had spent some sleepless nights meditating on the President's possible wrath. "One enemy is too much," she said wisely to herself, and she was quite aware that the enmity of Jasper Iredale might be of dangerous quality.

"I can speak openly to you, who are an English gentleman, as well as a heretic," she said. "To be quite frank then, I wish it to be very clearly understood that we had no intention of kidnapping this dear lady. Had he not disappeared so suddenly, and so without trace, I should have sent word to Mr. Iredale when his child was born. I believe that he does not know of the little one's existence. She came before the time, and we hardly expected to keep her, but by the mercy of our Lady she lived, and has thriven. She is the treasure of the convent." A momentary tenderness softened the shrewd old face. "The barren woman hath many more children than she that hath a husband," said Mother Therèsa, "but they are children not after the flesh, but after the spirit. They cost some pangs too! My daughters here cannot bear to contemplate the idea that this babe, born under the roof of our Lady de la Merced, may possibly not be dedicated to the Spiritual Bridegroom. It is seldom that my daughters are disobedient even in thought."

"So I should imagine, Madam," said the Major.

"But I am old, and I have seen the world as well as the convent. There are many sides to life. I am

determined that this child's father shall at least be told where she is. If he wishes that she should be educated in a convent school, well and good. In that case I shall myself take her to the Nuns' school near Caracas, and he must of course make proper provision for her. If, on the other hand, he desires to bring her up outside the Church, let him come to fetch her. By the time he reaches us, the Miracle will be over. She will not live many more weeks."

The Major frowned.

"You say you speak openly to me. Then I am at liberty to speak frankly too. I can give no opinion as to the rights or wrongs of your behaviour in regard to Mr. Iredale. That is entirely his business—and hers. I have nothing whatever to do with it. Neither have I any word to speak about his child. But one thing I will say. That poor girl, whom I saw yesterday, is dying. It is shocking, to my mind, to see a dying woman turned into a show, and surrounded by half-worshipping, ignorant poor creatures."

He spoke with the arbitrary decision which had so often irritated his old cousin. Another strong will was apt to rouse the Major's.

Mother Therèsa's eyes sparkled. It was many years since anyone had ventured to use such a tone to her. Then she rapidly made the sign of the cross, and muttered something below her breath. Finally she answered him with a sweet and dignified smile.

"You cannot understand; you do not know what you say. Our dear guest is indeed very near the next world. Nothing that we can do can hold her. She is longing, with an even too great impatience, to depart. Yet during these last weeks more than forty

people, suffering from divers diseases, have been restored to health, not by, but through her. It is as if, with the door open, she pauses on the threshold, and some strange healing power comes through. I, an old woman, who have spent the greater part of my life in prayer, whose knees are worn with kneeling, humbly own that I do not comprehend these things, nor see why this flood of light should have come through her. Have you so fasted and prayed, have you so meditated on spiritual matters that you are better qualified to judge?—that you can say, 'This is shocking and blasphemous'?"

The Major shook his head. "What fasting I've done has been entirely compulsory," he remarked, with an amused recollection of a certain campaign among Afghan hills—"and modified by tobacco."

Mother Therèsa rose briskly to her feet. The glimpse of the religious enthusiast was over.

"And so you will carry all that I have said to Mr. Iredale (even though he is not your friend), and we, poor sisters, who are the humble friends of every human being, without distinction of class or colour, will be ever grateful to you," she said. "And now you shall come with me, that you may speak with our guest, as I promised."

The Major followed silently.

La Maravilla lay in the verandah. She craved for air, and suffered during the hot hours of the day, when she was obliged to be indoors. It was cool and fresh now, but she seemed to the Major to be just a shade more fragile than when he had last seen her, to have faded a little since yesterday. La Maravilla was nearly twenty-one years of age, and

she had been the mother of two children, but the look of eternal childhood was in her eyes.

The Major sat down beside her in the wooden chair that had been placed for him. She put out a small hand and touched him.

"You are English. It is good even to touch an English clothes," she said. "Please speak, for I die to hear your English tongue."

"Well, yes. I'm English," said the Major slowly. She waited eagerly for more, but he had apparently nothing further to say. He had journeyed for miles with a view to extracting information from the woman whom he had thought of as the mistress of an adventurer, one who would probably be open to bribes. He was absolutely dumb before Maravilla.

"I will then speak first," she said at last. "But I would with much more great pleasure hear you. Yet I also haf some to say." She spoke with pauses between each sentence. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Our Lady has sent you to me. Late I haf been so much affrighted. I feel some bad near by to baby. Will you please at her look?" She pointed to the wooden cradle at her side. "She is most wonderful beautiful."

The Major cautiously lifted the net that covered the cradle, and peeped. A small, dark head rested on the pillow. A brown, healthy baby flushed with sleep, a plump, doubled-up fist crammed as far as it would go into the soft red mouth, lay sleeping cosily as a dormouse in its nest. He had expected to see something angelically fair, something that partook of the marvellous. He dropped the mosquito net with a smile. He did not consider this brown little brat in the least

beautiful, but somehow her commonplace humanity was something of a relief to him.

"Why, she is not like you?" he said.

"No. She like him," said Maravilla. "She wonderful clever too. She laugh so merry, like sunshine, and she frown and she squall so loud, and kick; ah, how she kick! She angry like a storm! and next minute it all done, and sun again. I cannot hold her no more, because she so alive, and my arms are got weak. She always in someone's arms—not mine. Dat almost could make me cry; but when she sleep, I pretend she mine again. It my treat when she sleep. But I will be dead soon—quite soon, I hope. So it ver' good you come. Now you will tell to Jasper how you find her here. He must come find her. But I want she should be a nun. It safer so for girls. I gif her 'Rebecca' for her name, because he tell me once it is how his mother is called. So I says perhaps he will be pleased. Do you believe perhaps he will be pleased?"

The Major cleared his throat. Here was an opening made for him. But instead of taking advantage of it, he examined the sole of his boot in silence for a minute, and then remarked gravely and decidedly—

"But at your age you've no business to hope to die."

Maravilla's great eyes melted into a smile, that was again for his English tongue, and English manner. All Englishmen were good in her sight.

"You don' know what you talk about," she said. "But I like ver' much to hear you speak. It don' matter what you say. You don't know any part of all of it." The absolute candour of her reply robbed it of rudeness.

"You were fond of him, eh?" said the Major. Maravilla laughed very softly, like one who laughs at a child's question.

"Ver' fond of Jasper? Why, he is the life of me, and I die for wanting him. But I will not make my life to sin, do you see? I was ver' ignorant. I did not know till I was taught. D'recly I know for sure, I go away. But it not ver' long now. Jasper is a great man." She waved her arms with a curious suggestion of indicating illimitable greatness. "He ver' beautiful too. But he gif his soul to me to keep. It must not be by me it get black on it. No, no, not after once I know."

"Upon my word," said the Major, with his slow smile, "I don't think that you smirched the whiteness of my cousin's soul."

But Maravilla paid little heed to what he thought. Indeed, in spite of her fragility and gentleness she had always been unsusceptible to other people's opinions, save where Jasper was concerned. Even while she had accepted the teaching of the nuns with eagerness, she had carried it to its logical conclusion on her own initiative. Mother Therèsa had recognised with astonishment, and finally with reverence, a spirit which, though utterly different in character, was as strong as her own.

She thrust her hand into the bosom of her loose bodice, and drew out a packet of letters enclosed in a saffron-coloured case, which was embroidered with purple flowers.

"Will you please take?" said she. "When I heard how you was come, I said to me, I will gif to him my letters from Jasper. You see, before I went to Jasper, he wrote to me many letters, in his so funny

Spanish, which, when he speak, is like a Spaniard, but when he write, will make you smile. It take me hours of great joy to read his letters, for I was not a great scholar. At first he write round and big for me, but soon I learn. Ah, soon you learn what you like best in all of the world! Is it not so? After I was his, I learnt to speak his English, and I lof it greatly much better than the language which was before my own. He tell me 'bout many things when he write. All kind of things. So I know 'bout his mother; but when I read I don' understan' all of it. He tell me how he quarrel with his brother too—he called Gatton; an' he ver' bad. Later he write less 'bout what he did, an' more about me. Here are six letters, but one I mus' keep. One I keep, make seven. Now look, I would have all buried in my coffin, but it shock all of the nuns, and, since you come, I believe our Lady means me to gif them to you to take to him. So one bit alone I keep, an' presently I say, 'I will finish to make my shroud,' and in it I will sew one bit. Sister Dolorosa, she ver' good, an' she seem to think I should not so want his words in my grave. But our Lady she know, for she not a nun. So take—but say I do not send my lof, because it has never stopped away from him."

She held out the packet, but the Major shoved his chair back hastily with a gesture of refusal. He could not, for the life of him, receive those letters, warm from lying on Maravilla's heart.

"No, no; you are under a misapprehension," he cried. "The fact is, I came here to find evidence against him. I am no friend of—of the man who was your friend."

He was hardly prepared for the effect of his words. Maravilla gave a startled cry, and shrank from him, the pupils of her blue eyes dilating, till the eyes looked almost black.

"Then you are bad!" she cried. "Then you must not come near my baby! I thought you was his friend. I said much, much to you, because you have the beautiful, funny English tongue like Jasper. But now I don' understand. I don' know what you are now! Last night I dreamed of wickedness, and all to-day I have felt a snake watching us! but I thought *you* was ver' good."

She looked at him as if he were the devil in disguise. She made horns with her fingers across the cradle. She was so terrified, that the letters, which he had refused to take, slid unnoticed from her grasp, and fell on the floor.

The Major, poor honest gentleman! could not soothe her. The delicate overstrained nature, that could mount into the seventh heaven of ecstasy, was liable to be submerged in a hell of terror. A nun, hearing the frightened exclamation, came hurriedly into the verandah. She eyed the Major with stern, reproachful glance, and he stood up ruefully.

"I'm not so bad as all that, little lady, even though I am not Jasper's friend. I will give him your message," he said.

He was half-amused, half-sorry. He left Maravilla panting like a startled bird, white and speechless. But, as he turned out of the verandah, he came suddenly on Cesare Vivario, who was crouched behind a post, and nearly hidden by creeping bougainvillas. His narrow, oriental eyes shone among the yellow flowers. They were fixed steadily on Maravilla.

"What the devil are you about? What are you skulking here for?" the Major cried roughly.

The mulatto cringed instinctively; then apparently thought better of it, and blustered, "I just as good as you. What you doin' 'ere, sir? Dat" (with a laugh) "was my wife anyhow, even if de baby is his! I and Jasper Iredale, we very intimate once, and I say to him"—

But the Major, not pausing to hear more, strode rapidly out of the convent garden and up the mountain path. The scent of the flowers sickened him. He felt as if they all hid snakes. Later on, he remembered that he had never bidden Mother Therèsa farewell, and he returned to take leave of her. The verandah was empty when he came back. The packet of letters—but he did not think of them—was gone; and so was Cesare Vivario. But Mother Therèsa came out to meet him with a disturbed face.

"Our guest has been light-headed for these last three hours," she said. "She must see no one this evening."

"I am sorry," said the Major. "I beg you to believe that I am not in the habit of frightening young women. I said nothing that should have alarmed her; yet somehow she was alarmed. I will, if you please, tell you exactly what I said."

He repeated his own words as accurately as he could, omitting all that Maravilla had said about the letter which she wished buried with her. He could not have betrayed that tender little confidence to nuns! Mother Therèsa listened with keen attention, then shrugged her shoulders.

"It was not you who frightened her," she said. "It was some spiritual terror which seemed for a moment

to take your shape. What do we know? Where angels come, there the devil, envious and wrathful, will try to enter too. She is very ill. It is near the end. But now I must tell you something which is not pleasant to tell. Someone, I cannot make out whose is the evil tongue, has spread a report that you—how shall I say it?—that you insulted our Miracle. You must go away quickly and unobserved."

"Indeed, I will do nothing of the sort!" said the Major. "I shall go as I came, openly. I can guess who has scattered dirty stories about. It is that half-baked fellow who was sneaking behind a post this morning. What is that to me?" He was angry. Once again he and the Mother Superior measured forces.

"You asked my advice merely out of politeness this morning, Madam," said he, with his rather grim smile. "Well, I will give you a bit of it now. Set all your dogs at Mr. Vivario, and drive him off."

The old woman shook her head. "My friend," said she, "we are hedged round by the angels of God, and we are sheltered under the very especial protection of our Blessed Lady. Yet if the poor sisters of 'La Merced' were to set their dogs at anyone, even the most vile, their safety would be gone. I thank you most gratefully for your warning. I did not know that the man was here. As for you, you will, of course, act as you please, but I think that you will be gentle enough to do as we entreat, and to leave us, unobserved, by a path which Sister Dolorosa is waiting to show you. We have entertained you with our best, though our best is humble; you will doubtless be generous to overlook our deficiencies, and you will remember that we

are but women, and that we dread lest any violence should befall you."

"I not being under especial protection, eh?" said the Major.

He was obliged to give in "of his gentleness," but it went sorely against the grain. He left the convent by the back way, unwillingly following Sister Dolorosa, who risked far more than he was aware of, and he met his escort some miles farther on. They reached one of the tiny settlements on the shores of the Orinoco in safety, and there the Major went on board a steam-tug and steamed to the Port of Spain in the Island of Trinidad, where he was under the British flag again, and where his adventures in that mysterious, half-explored forest of the mainland seemed very far off and mystical.

It had been a curious experience, and he had certainly not behaved as he would have expected himself to behave. He felt that he would hardly dare face his lawyer! Not only had he shrunk from prosecuting inquiries, not only had he refrained from asking that mad little saint a single question, but he had actually refused evidence which had been almost thrust upon him. The flash-light of the extraordinary had been thrown on his character, and he was perturbed and ashamed at what it revealed, though he did not meditate long on the revelation, being a person who never analysed his own sensations.

The Major had friends as well as sugar plantations in Trinidad. He stayed a month on the island, but never told anyone of the strange little convent among the Indians, of the wonderful Miracle, and of the reason why he had gone to Venezuela. He intended to relate

that story to his Cousin Esther, who liked romance, but he had no wish to speak of it to anyone else. He could not help wondering at times whether Maravilla were still living, and, oddly enough, he came once more in touch with the "Fairy story" before he set sail for England.

He was standing on the quay of the Port of Spain waiting for his steamer. He stood very erect, watching the lazy coloured crowd with disapproving attention. He hated loafers, and it seemed to him that everyone loafed in Trinidad! Presently a negro detached himself from a chattering group, and came up to the Englishman. The Major recognised the fellow in an instant. This was one of the five who had been his escort through the forest, and one who had been left perforce at the convent, on account of a badly bitten foot. The Major pointed to the foot with his stick.

"You told me that it was so bad that it would have to come off! Did the Miracle cure you?"

The man shook his head with an unabashed grin.

"Psho! She not cure any more! She dead! She die two days after you go 'way. She buried in de nuns' burying-place. All de Indians come to her funeral. De monkeys follow too—but long way off. Dey 'old up leaves for books. Dat quite true. When she die it grow dark, and all de birds put dere heads under de wing, and all de wild"—

"Nonsense! She was wonderful enough without that," said the Major sharply.

CHAPTER XVII

"A friend may often be found and lost, but an old friend can never be found, and Nature has provided that he cannot easily be lost."—DR. JOHNSON.

THE turn of the year had come, and passed. In the country the twigs of the hedges were beginning to show a warmer, redder colour, and were full of crimson-tipped buds, but nothing was in leaf yet, for Spring was unusually late in coming, and the east wind blew with nipping sharpness.

Esther was in London, where it was still wintry and dark. She had always disliked March (it was a month that had once brought her ill-luck), but this year she felt especially unfit to meet its boisterous greeting. She was recovering from a serious illness, and her strength was as wavering and uncertain as the pale, glimmering sunshine. She stopped by a barrow on Westminster Bridge, to buy a pot of tulips, but they were heavier than she had expected, or than flowers used to be, and she was glad to rest for a minute, leaning against the stone parapet, and holding her golden treasures (that had the effect of sunshine in their ruddy pot) clasped close against her black cloak, shielding them instinctively from the wind. She never wearied of the view of the Houses of Parliament, and of the grey river, and though she had now been nearly five

months in London, she was still fascinated by the endless procession of people flowing for ever over the bridge.

She had made for herself an abiding place in St. Thomas's Mansions. Her tiny flat was filled with mementoes of Applehurst (for Jasper had insisted on sending her the furniture from her old room, as well as everything that could by any stretch of courtesy be considered hers) and with gifts from her married sisters, who were kind and eager to befriend her, but a little annoyed, because Esther would go her own way and would take no advice—even on the matter of clothes. The sisters' presents, bran-new and expensive, clashed with the worn things from Applehurst. But that could not be helped; the old and the new could not be expected to amalgamate at once.

Esther was trying hard to make her flat home-like, but "home" presupposes the presence of someone one loves, and she missed her old cousin more now than she had at first. There was Polly, to be sure, and Esther had cause to be thankful that she had brought Polly with her. She had broken down with an attack of rheumatic fever, and had been carried by her own desire as a paying patient to the great hospital, at which she now looked with something of the sensation of an escaped prisoner. The nurses had been capable and the doctors kind, but the loneliness of the private ward had oppressed Esther; she had had a horror of dying in that huge place, and had presently struggled back to convalescence, and, as soon as might be, had got away, attended by her eager, faithful Polly, who waited on her with a zeal quickened by jealousy of the professional nurse.

Now the two women were established in a topmost flat, where—thanks to Cousin Becky's savings; thanks to darned linen and skimmed supplies of coal—Esther was her own mistress and dependent on no one. Her illness had left her thin and delicate-looking. It had turned her hair, that had been grey before, snow-white. It had done something else. It had made a break between the old life and the new. A river flowed between her and the years which had passed; she could see them in truer perspective now.

Those exciting last weeks, lit up by that tragic flash of joy that had so transformed her old cousin, were no longer in such fierce relief as to throw all that had gone before into forgetfulness and shade. Esther pondered much over her Cousin Becky, now that she stood a little away from all that had happened, now that longing and joy, perplexity and anxiety were somewhat stilled. Perhaps she understood the old woman even better than when they had lived together: she certainly loved her no whit less because of the revelation that had been made. Yet the revelation had left its mark on Esther. She was an older woman because of it.

Her flat suited her well just at present. She could not have borne a too intimate contact with her own kindred, and yet was not strong enough for complete loneliness. The stream of passing people whom she watched with sad kindly eyes soothed her, and she liked the absence of enforced routine. She liked to have her cup of coffee in the morning at odd hours, to eat her lunch in a restaurant, to dine or not to dine as the mood took her. She had been physically weary of a too regular and monotonous life; she rejoiced now in a very mild form of Bohemianism.

Her sisters said that Esther had grown peculiar probably from contact with Cousin Becky. Neither of them grudged her the legacy; "Heaven knows she worked hard enough for it," said they. But they considered that the fact that they had not been left a penny, absolved them from punctiliousness in regard to the expression of their opinion about their late cousin. They were, at last, at liberty to declare what they had always felt, that she was a terribly coarse old person, and that she had frightened them to death when they were under her charge.

Esther became so hot in defence of Cousin Becky, that, perhaps, it was as well after all that she had chosen to plant herself on the wrong side of the bridge, and that the Thames flowed between her place of abode and that of her sisters. They could be very good friends at a reasonable distance, but she felt, with more amusement than sorrow, that there was no picking up dropped threads.

Rose was happily married and had a large family of girls; Lily was childless, and had slipped into chronic invalidism. The pretty likeness between the twins had faded, but they were still fond of each other.

Esther took a wistful interest in Rose's girls, but was unexpectedly shy of them. She had been so accustomed to being with a much older woman than herself, in whose eyes she was still young, that though she often called herself "old" she yet became confused when the younger generation accepted her at her own valuation. Besides, to tell the truth, Rose's children were, unwittingly, a trifle patronising.

"Poor dear Aunt Esther is very nice, and she must have been quite pretty once," they said; "but her

dresses might have come out of the Ark, and she buys at all the wrong shops, just from not really knowing about anything at all. It's just the same with her reading. Mother says she was a great reader, and she must have had time enough, living all alone with a cranky old lady, but she isn't what you'd call 'up in books.' She has only read what nobody ever talks about, and there really doesn't seem to be much use in that."

Esther would have smiled over that comment, for happily her sense of humour was still alive; she would also have half-agreed with her niece. She was sometimes aware that she did not altogether know her way about, that she was a little lost, more than a little bewildered, in this new world. Even the tenderness that was inherent in her seemed at a discount, for there was no one near her who needed her especial care, and for general philanthropy she had no desire whatever, and, just at present, no strength.

A sister of the poor passed her as she stood resting. Esther smiled and nodded. She knew where the sister came from; she had been to the little hospital full of waifs and strays, who had been too roughly buffeted by the waves of this troublesome world, and had been mercifully drawn into the quiet haven. The sisters' work was beautiful. She liked, nay loved, the sisters themselves, but she shivered at the bare thought of becoming one of them. What would Cousin Becky's pupil do among devoted church-workers? How could she possibly exist in their dear, narrow little set? How utterly bored she would be by their services and their fastings, their mild adoration of Father this and Father that, and how depressing to be shut up with the exclusive companionship of her own sex!

"Their goodness would make me horribly wicked," thought Esther, with a sigh, and she picked up her pot and went on again. She mounted the last flight of the stone stairs that led to her flat rather wearily. To her surprise she saw, on reaching the top, that her front door stood open, as if by magic.

"Why, Polly, have you been looking out for me?" said she. But it was not Polly, it was the Major who stood on her threshold.

Esther started so that she nearly let her flowers fall; then greeted him with a brightness which shone through moisture. It was not so much the man himself, as the associations that clung round him, that moved her. He saw her start, and a hope that had long roots, though it was always nipped when it showed its head above ground, sprouted afresh.

"Curtis! I thought you were looking after your plantations in Trinidad," said Esther.

"I have just come home," said the Major. "Polly recognised me, and invited me to wait for you. I hope that you will consider that she acted rightly?"

"Of course, of course!" cried Esther. "You need not ask that."

But the Major had by no means forgotten how he had once shaken the dust of Applehurst off his feet, and left Esther standing by her Cousin Becky's chair with the aspect of an indignant guardian angel. Esther would fain have ignored past anger, but he was a person who liked to dot his i's and to state clearly and precisely where he stood.

He waited still in the doorway, which he blocked entirely, so that she could not lead the way into her sitting-room.

"Tell me—before we go any farther—are you friendly with me again?" said he.

"Yes, yes, indeed I am," said Esther. "I have not so many friends in the world that I should be in a hurry to quarrel with such an old and true one. Besides, perhaps you were rather badly used."

"I was indeed," said the Major, "and am, for the matter of that. I am glad that you acknowledge that fact at last. My poor old cousin swindled me, and you sided with her; because you are not always just, you know, Esther, although you can be generous. Well, at least she had the grace to leave you an independence! To tell the truth, I feared at one time that your play-acting gentleman might have laid his fingers on that too." He made way for her at last, and Esther, as she took him into her sitting-room and made him welcome, felt half-annoyed, half-amused. How like Curtis the last speech was! How infallibly did he always manage to rub her the wrong way.

"On the contrary, he used his influence in my favour," said she. "But you must not say 'your play-acting gentleman,' please. I do not like it."

"I beg your pardon. But you always stood up for him, didn't you?"

"Because I could not but see that he was her son," said Esther. "But oh, Curtis, don't let us discuss it all over again now! I don't want to. I am so tired! I don't want to quarrel or argue about him any more. Life is difficult, and I have made mistakes. Perhaps you were more in the right than I supposed. Let us leave it there."

"No, I can't stop at a 'perhaps,'" said the Major bluntly, but then he softened.

"What made you so ill, Esther? How disgracefully thin you've grown! I was shocked to hear that you had been taken to an hospital. What were Rose and Lily about? It is not at all fitting that you should live by yourself in an attic on Westminster Bridge. I believe you have been subsisting on nothing but buns and tea. That is the kind of thing women do when they are left to themselves."

"That reminds me that it is time for tea," said Esther. "And you must certainly drink it with me, whether you approve of it or not."

The Major watched her with grave attention, as she moved about the room, laying the cloth, and putting out the best china, which he remembered at Applehurst. Her room was daintily pretty, and it was full of character, in spite of its smallness. He wondered why a woman with so pretty a gift for the homelike should be so unwilling to take possession of the home which he was ready to offer. Did the young sailor-lover of her youth stand between them still? Was she wedded to a dream for ever? The Major was impatient of such sentimental folly. Esther often made him impatient, though he was so fond of her. He was constantly possessed by the desire to prove to her how very foolish she was, to tilt against shadows whose power he felt, and at the same time despised.

Polly brought in the hot water with a beaming face. She liked to see "company." She was hospitably inclined, as all thoroughly good servants are.

"I wonder how, and why, you make any room look homelike?" said the Major.

Esther smiled a little sadly. "Do you know that that is a very pretty compliment?" she said. "It puts

me in good conceit with myself, and I had been feeling rather forlorn."

The moment the words had crossed her lips she regretted their utterance. They gave the Major his opportunity. If only she had not been so physically weary, so craving for sympathy, she would have guarded her tongue better. She was handing him his cup of tea while she spoke. He caught her wrist, and held it fast in his right hand, and put the cup on the table with his left.

"Now, Esther, why should you be forlorn?" he said. "Here am I, who, as you very well know, am eager to take you back with me to make my house a home, which it is not at present, and which it never can be while there is no woman in it. I am quite aware that you do not feel for me that sort of ecstatic love that you felt once in your youth; I do not expect that. At our ages it would no doubt seem that such an expectation would be as absurd for me to entertain, as for you to fulfil." He paused a minute, his voice sounded rueful. "But," he went on, with renewed cheerfulness, "is there any just cause why we should not make each other exceedingly happy? I know that I do not invariably agree with you. I see that you are inclined to throw away substance for shadow. I see that your views on some subjects are impracticable and high-flown, but that does not prevent me from loving you, does it?" He could not quite manage to say, "Why, then, should it prevent you from loving me?" but that was so clearly what he meant that Esther answered the unspoken words.

"Oh, Curtis, it is not that! No 'views' ever yet prevented people from caring for each other."

The tears were in her eyes and in her voice. She was lonely, and his little speech about the house that he could never make into a home had touched a deep-seated instinct.

"Then what is it?" he asked bluntly. "See here, Esther, if you were eighteen and I twenty-one, I should not press you like this. I should say, 'She doesn't love me, and that's the end of it,' but when I consider that"—

"I am afraid that that is the only thing to be said, even now that my hair is white," said Esther. "Some people go on being foolish all their lives, Curtis."

She drew her hand away. Her fair skin marked easily, and his strong fingers had gripped her wrist harder than he knew, and left a red impress on it.

"Why, I believe I hurt you!" said the Major. "I am very sorry, Esther; I did not know I was rough—but you are so easily hurt."

She shook her head. "No, no, that did not hurt me in the least," she said. "But, Curtis, if—No, I cannot explain!"

For once he caught her meaning without an explanation.

"You think that if you and I were married I should always be hurting you without meaning to, eh? But you are wrong, quite wrong. You make a mistake. I like you so well, Esther, that I should soon learn to be full of tact. And as for you, though you are hasty sometimes, you are not one of those tiresome women who nurse grievances and fancy themselves misunderstood. If you were not blessed with a very sweet wholesome nature, you could never have kept the peace, nor have lived so comfortably with my poor old Cousin Rebecca. I saw that well enough."

"Did you?" said Esther. She felt half-inclined to laugh and half to cry, but his chance, if for one moment in her weakness he had had one, was gone. "It was easy to me to live peacefully with Cousin Becky, because I loved her. Sometimes I wearied of the life at Applehurst, but it was my own choice, and I always felt free to be myself with her. I should not be good or sweet if I were married to you, Curtis. I should feel imprisoned — even though I am quite certain that you would always be kind and fair and in the right, and that if I wasn't happy it would be entirely my own fault."

"Esther," said the Major solemnly, "are you bitten with this modern craze for freedom? But you are not naturally a self-sufficing woman. I can see so much, though you think that I understand nothing at all. You owned you felt forlorn just now, all alone in this ridiculous attic! Well, old age will come on you as well as on me. You will feel much more forlorn then."

"Do you suppose that I don't recognise that?" cried Esther. "That I do not often and often shiver, when I remember the loneliness of old age and death?"

For a minute she seemed to herself to stand face to face with a cold spectre, which she did in very truth dread. The premonition of the loneliness that must attend impaired powers, when her interest in many-sided life would perforce wane with her intellectual and physical failure, always depressed her. There would be no one to warm and cherish her, as she had warmed and cherished the old woman in whose service her youth had passed. But that chilly ghost, though it haunted, should not make a coward of her!

"Then if you recognise it," said the Major, "will you not be sensible for once? You and I might face old age very comfortably together. As for Death, I humbly hope that I need not fear him. I am sure you need not."

The simple faith that he expressed woke Esther's sympathy. Never had she liked the Major so much as at that moment, but she shook her head.

"I cannot be sensible after your pattern. You must just be content to let me be as foolish as Heaven made me, Curtis—please." Her grey eyes laughed, for his "for once" had amused her.

The Major was slow to relinquish a desire.

"You still think about that poor Naval chap who was killed in Egypt nearly twenty years ago," he said slowly, though he was aware that he had no business to trespass on such delicate ground; "yet, Esther, you were only boy and girl, and in heaven there is no marriage or giving in marriage."

"Only boy and girl!" said Esther; "and that time is very, very long ago! Yet he taught me not to take second bests for best, and I do not regret the lesson. The people who have never learnt it, live in a land where there are no mountains."

The Major groaned impatiently. "I don't understand you when you talk like that! I'm not poetical! I only see with regret (and you must forgive me if I speak my mind too plainly) that you allow an utterly false, though pretty, ideal of faithfulness to a dead man, to possess you to the exclusion of that which life offers."

A flood of colour rushed over Esther's face, and then left her white.

"No," she said. "It is not that now. It might have been once, but I've outlived dreams."

"It is not that," repeated the Major. To tell the truth, he was considerably surprised. So surprised, that it took him a minute to digest her statement. "But if not that—then"—

"Then you must ask no more," said Esther. "And you must leave me my mountains, even though you think that they are made of moonshine, and that they will prove cold comfort in my old age!—as probably they will."

Her voice dropped into rather a sad tone at the last words. The Major frowned, then, rather to her surprise, held out his hand.

"That's over," he said. "I will ask you no more, Cousin Esther, now that I am sure that it is not a ghost who is standing between you and living men. But one thing I will say, for my conscience pricks me! I ought not to have spoken to you as I did of forlorn old age. I was wrong. There is too much fear in the world nowadays. Some folk fear death, and more fear life; but as for you, you know better than to be afraid of anything that comes from God."

"But I am not so good as all that!" cried Esther, with a gasp.

"You know better," persisted the Major, calmly disregarding her protest. "And what is more, you'll be justified in the end. Now I wish that you would offer me another cup of tea, my dear Cousin, for this has become stone cold! I am not going away directly. I wish to hear your plans for the future, and I see no reason why you should not consult me about that investment which you wrote me word you were meditating.

I am a far better business man than are either your brothers-in-law."

"You are very kind and good," said Esther warmly "and there is no one whose advice on the subject would so unhesitatingly take."

"Yes, you are very amenable to advice, on subjects about which you care very little," said the Major. But that was a trait in Esther which he liked. She did not, like Mrs. Mordaunt, scout his aid in all directions. Only where her affections were concerned, she took her own way.

There was a touch of the untamable in her, despite her gentleness. Her crabbed old cousin had understood that well enough.

"Esther can't marry anyone," she had said. "Lots of women can! and it's a pity, for her warm heart will make her horribly lonely; but she has just got the quality that makes it unsafe."

CHAPTER XVIII

"God be merciful to us sinners, for to the Lord Thou hast already been sufficiently merciful in making them good."

Psalm 134.

THE Major drank his second cup of tea, and gave his advice on matters pertaining to money. Esther wondered whether any rejected suitor had behaved just so before. She hoped that his behaviour proved that he was not much hurt. He disapproved of her having accepted any gift that came from Applehurst, and he shook his head at the sight of the familiar cream-jug.

"It would have been wiser not to have taken anything from him, Esther," he said.

And Esther forgave the unasked-for opinion, for the sake of the persistent and obstinate kindness. After all, it is a bad plan to measure everyone by one's own little pocket-rule, and a great deal may be forgiven to a friend whose friendship survives the refusal of love. She was anxious to avoid speaking of Jasper; but it was impossible to avoid what the Major was bent on discussing.

"I hear that the fellow is behaving oddly. He sees no one. He has been shut up alone at Applehurst all the winter. He rides a good deal, but he doesn't hunt. That is bad policy. Yet he's clever."

"Very, I should think," said Esther.

"You know that I've been out to Venezuela," continued the Major. "I told you of my intention when we last met at the station, but you did not seem greatly interested. I supposed that that was because you were angry with me."

"Indeed, I must have seemed a very bad-tempered person," said Esther, laughing. "But anger would never make me indifferent! I know you told me something, but my head was hurting me so much that I could not take in what you were saying. I was idiotic, not uninterested!"

"If I had understood that you were ill, I should have got into the train with you," said the Major. "However, there is no use in considering now what ought to have been done. I left England two days later, and I told the world in general that I was going to visit my property in Trinidad. I had an introduction to R—s P—l, who is at the present moment President of Venezuela. Who do you suppose supplied me with that?"

Esther guessed quickly, "Jasper himself!"

"Yes. You are very sharp-witted; I do not know how you managed to jump to that conclusion, but so it was. All that he said about his life in South America is strictly true. He is actually a man of mark. He is no common adventurer. He is a public character, and is well known out there."

"That does not surprise me," said Esther.

"He went by the name of Jasper Iredale."

She nodded; she was perhaps more deeply interested than she cared to express.

"He is not a poor man. He has turned over a good deal of money."

"I can well believe that, for Cousin Becky was a sharp business woman."

"Ah, she was inclined to be too speculative; though, as it happened, her speculations turned out well," said the Major. "He is a bit of a gambler too. Not a gambler at cards, but a gambler in a big way."

"So I should guess."

"You seem to have guessed a good deal. Now, Esther, how much, may I ask, do you know? Oh, now you are angry! I ask too many questions—that is what you are going to say. Very well, I will tell you something. The fellow's baptismal name is Jasper, that is, it is if my cousin ever had the decency to have him baptized, which I fear is open to doubt, and that is the only name he has any right to. He is my cousin's son, but, as I have always maintained, he is no more Gatton than I am! And this, I can very well see, is no news to you. He is not the child of poor deluded old Mr. Mordaunt, who, we may conclude, was very successfully cheated!"

"No, Mr. Mordaunt was not cheated. He knew all about it," put in Esther hastily.

"Oh ho! and so did you!" said the Major. And silence fell between them. Her cheeks burned like fire.

"I must ask one question," he said at last. "And I believe that you will give me an answer, not because we have been opponents in this affair, but because I am always your friend. By what right did you keep such a secret as this? Thank Heaven you are not much of an actress! but how on earth could you have brought your conscience to consent to the covering of such an imposture?"

Esther hesitated for a second. He was not the keeper of her conscience, and it was on the tip of her tongue to ask in return, "By what right do you question and judge me?" but she forbore, perhaps because, having refused the Major his one impossible demand, she was anxious to grant any and all minor claims.

"I swore to my Cousin Becky that I would not betray her confidence," she said; "she told me the truth just before she died. She was lonely, she wanted to tell—I—I wanted to be close to her. You see, I loved her."

The Major shook his head. "You were wrong, Esther."

"If you had given your word that you would keep a secret, you would have been silent too, whoever suffered. So you ought to understand."

"If"—it is a big 'if,' he said bluntly. "I should never have made such a promise. No man would have been such a"—He checked himself, and swallowed the obvious end to his sentence. But possibly, after his own fashion, he did understand pretty well!

"And for all you know," he remarked, pulling his moustache, "I may just have been drawing you on the subject, and shall now make use of what you have let slip."

But at that Esther laughed. "I may be a fool according to your views, but I am not so great a fool as to suppose that. That is the kind of stupidity I am not liable to! If I could imagine you capable of playing me that kind of trick, you would not be sitting there, calling yourself my friend."

The retort was spirited, and it conveyed a compli-

ment. The Major, at the bottom of his heart, liked it. She trusted him, anyhow, and he was sometimes conscious that he admired what he was pleased to call Esther's failings, more than he admired other people's virtues.

"Well," he said, "I never suspected the truth till the day on which I last spoke to Cousin Rebecca. I suppose I was stupid, and so was old Holdsworthy, but some ideas do not connect themselves readily with people one has known almost from one's boyhood. I have always been aware that Cousin Rebecca had many faults. A sharp tongue, an aggressively independent spirit, and an unfeminine way of looking at life." (Esther's foot tapped impatiently.) "But such a solution never occurred to me till after I had left her. I wish that I had thought of it sooner! even an hour sooner. I should have taxed her with it. She should not have gone to her last account with the sin of deception on her soul."

"She would never have confessed to you," Esther could not refrain from interpolating; but he went on, unheeding her remark.

"It was not a welcome idea. I do not relish seeing our name smirched by the discovery of this scandal of ancient history, and it alters my position and renders it extremely difficult. So long as I believed the claimant to be a bare-faced impostor, who, in some unaccountable manner, had bamboozled my cousin, it was my clear duty and pleasure to unmask him! When I unwillingly recognised that she could not possibly be a dupe (and in fact the rôle of dupe never seemed to suit Cousin Rebecca), I was justly angry with her, and it appeared doubly my duty to fight against

her extraordinary infatuation with a gipsy-born rogue but now that I know that this man is her son, although her illegitimate son, it is another matter. I hate to expose family skeletons, and to foul my own nest!"

"She would have done better to have trusted you," said Esther, to whom trust came easily. "If she had told you the whole story, you would have helped her."

"I beg your pardon, Esther," said he, "I should under no circumstances have helped her to call the jack-of-all-trades Gatton, and I doubt whether she would have relished the only aid that I would have given!"

"Then what shall you do next?" said Esther, and here indeed was the difficulty.

"If we all had our deserts, the fellow should be laid by the heels in gaol for this business," said the Major, "and I shouldn't be surprised in that case if you had to bear witness against him, whether you liked it or not, my dear Cousin! You may remember that I advised you to leave Applehurst long ago, when he first arrived on the scene. If you get mixed up with that kind of people, you must expect unpleasant consequences, but—wait a minute before you interrupt me—I am slower than you are sometimes. I've been slow at catching the right end of this story. What if, while I am still thinking what to do next, the bird flies?" He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "What if a letter went by this evening's post, and he got it to-morrow morning, and was warned in time, and out of the country before I have turned round?"

Esther glanced at the clock too, and then at the Major. Her heart beat fast.

"The letter might fly, but he wouldn't," she said.

"That," said the Major, "would depend on what was in it! No doubt if it merely mentioned that I had a suspicion of the truth, he might choose to brazen it out. But it might venture on further statements, supposing, of course, that it was penned by a very indiscreet and too kind-hearted person, who was absurdly ready to give him a last chance. It might warn him that, having at last got on the right tack, our investigations have not been entirely unfruitful. My poor cousin managed cleverly; but I hear from Holdsworthy that there is a woman still living near Lyme Regis who was the playfellow of the boy Jasper, and the daughter of my cousin's old nurse. She knows the truth about him. The boy was born in her mother's cottage. She can be induced to give evidence."

Esther sighed. "It would be horrible to have all that dragged into Court, but I do not believe a threat will induce him to run away. It ought to, perhaps! But there is something unaccountable in him." She leaned forward eagerly. "Curtis, we cannot throw my Cousin Becky's story to the public!"

"We cannot back him up in this bare-faced lie," said the Major.

But she felt that she and Curtis were no longer viewing the matter from opposite poles. Each had mentally moved an inch nearer to the other. She ventured a step farther.

"It is very difficult to put my meaning into words," she said, frowning, "but I do not believe that any sane motive made Jasper do the extraordinary things he has done. People called Cousin Becky eccentric. She was the cleverest and the shrewdest woman I've

met, with plenty of hard common-sense as a rule. Y in spite of her shrewdness I know that she was swayed at times by gusts of strong bitter feeling—of passion perhaps—of something I never quite understood.”

“Are you trying to find excuses for them both, Esther?”

She shook her head. “No. I am only trying to understand and to explain. There would be no use in writing such a letter of warning as you suggest. It would appeal to his reason, would it not? It would make clear the fact that he would do wisely to escape. But it was not the reasonable part of him, which prompted his journey to England, and his mad pretence at being Gatton. I do not believe that any ordinary consideration of prudence will have the least effect on his conduct.”

“Any more than any ordinary consideration of morality, eh?” said the Major drily. But he remembered what Jasper’s friend had said to him. “After the woman left him, and his son died, he was for months like one mad.” “He is a very queer fish,” he said, “and I don’t think he is a very fit subject of discussion with you, Esther; but there is no sense in telling half a story. When I was in Venezuela, I found the one person to whom this man seems to have been entirely unreserved. She was in a convent on the edge of a great forest.”

“You cannot make her bear witness against him!”

The Major bit his lip. “So he told you about her, too? He has been very communicative to you. No, I cannot do that, because she is dead.”

“Dead! His Maravilla is dead!” said Esther in a whisper to herself. She put her hand before her eyes

"Go on, Curtis," she said aloud, "I should like to hear about it all."

And the Major went on, telling the story of his travels somewhat baldly.

"I am not inclined to papistry, but I suppose there may be saints everywhere. I started with the expectation of meeting a very different kind of person."

"And you met a miracle," said Esther, with a faint smile.

"The Indians from the forest, the half-breeds from the small stations on the Orinoco, came to be cured of disease. I never in my life have seen anything so outrageous. They held a sort of idolatrous mass, and strangers flocked to it from miles round. Yet it is impossible to suppose that she was a fraud. Having seen her, I could not suppose it. It was an extremely puzzling sight. I saw her twice. The first time I got no chance of speaking privately with her. The second time she greeted me with a delight that was almost saddening — because of my English tongue, and because she fancied that I came from the man she loved. I felt bound in common honesty to explain that he had not sent me; that, in fact, I was very far from being a friend of his. That finished the interview! She was horrified! She shrank away from me as if I were the devil, holding up two fingers like this." The Major smiled ruefully at the recollection. "And afterwards I was hustled out of the convent by a back way! The nuns made a fine to-do. They said that if the people believed I had done anything to alarm their Miracle I should be killed; but I was not afraid of that. I could hold my own against a parcel of natives, I hope. The poor thing died two days after

that. I was sorry to hear it. I do not understand religious ecstasies, but I could see that she was very good. Having seen her, I incline to think that he must have a streak of something not all bad in him. She gave me a message for him. She told me to tell him that a child was born after she left him. That it was her hope that he would allow his daughter to be brought up as a nun. That she named her Rebecca, believing that that would please him. That when she herself should be dead, he must come to see his child. That she did not send her love, because it had never stopped away from him."

The Major pulled his moustache. He had repeated Maravilla's words in the flat, uninterested tone that an Englishman is apt to take refuge in, when he fears a suspicion of sentiment.

"But that baby won't be a nun," he remarked. "She's like her grandmother. And if I'd needed any further proof as to whose son the fellow is, why there it was in the cradle before me."

"Oh, I wish I had seen her!" cried Esther; "I wish I had been with you."

She had not that indiscriminate love for all very young creatures that seems to be in the nature of many women, but she was moved by the thought of this special baby (who was so like Cousin Becky that even the Major saw the likeness), who was the child of a Maravilla—and of Jasper.

"Have you given him the message?" she asked. "Do not threaten him. Just give him her message, Curtis."

"You may do that, if you will," said the Major. "And you may tell him that the child's mother has

died. I don't care to. I'm not the right person to do it. I don't want to make an assault on the chap's feelings. So long as he clears out, it doesn't matter to me why he clears out. There was an old Mother Superior at the convent who had a great deal to say too. She also sent him messages. I did not promise to deliver hers, however. I cannot say that I understood all the ins and outs of the story she told me. The upshot of it was that she wanted him to understand that in the first place she had never kidnapped their 'Miracle'; and in the second place, that she was not anxious to assume the responsibility of his child."

"There seems to be a good deal to be conveyed to him," said Esther doubtfully.

"But mind, Esther," said the Major, "if he has any decent desire to prevent the raking up of his mother's story, there is only one course open to him, and there is one thing that he must do. Put this strongly. He must leave a written confession addressed to me, explaining who he is, and who he pretended to be. I shall (not out of any undue leniency to him, but for the sake of my family) then endeavour to hush the matter up, and to step quietly into possession of my own, without dragging this disreputable affair into the Courts. Holdsworthy is of opinion that this may yet be possible. But I am no Don Quixote. I must possess a guarantee that he will not turn up again and give us all this trouble once more, the next time he happens to be sick of his life, and in the humour for masquerading as someone else."

"He will never write that confession," said Esther. "And after all, Curtis—is it fair? You are suggesting that Jasper shall throw himself entirely on your honour,

relying on your spoken word to me that if he does so you will 'endeavour to hush the matter up'; while you on your side"—

"Put no confidence whatever in his," said the Major. "Yes, that is what I suggest, my dear Cousin. I am sorry it offends you. But, you see, those are the only possible terms between him and me. I am an honest man, and he isn't."

The words hurt Esther, because they were incontrovertible. That Jasper had been hardly treated, that he was naturally brave and chivalrous (adjectives not usually linked with dishonesty), that his curiously mixed character had the capability for greatness in it, were all facts that flashed into her mind, but which, after all, were not to the point. There was no equality between him and honest men.

"I suppose that that is true," she said. "But your clear appreciation of the fact won't incline him to virtue. When he has refused your terms, what will happen next?"

"I shall bring an action against him, and Holdsworthy is now of opinion that I shall win my case. There can be no hiding of scandal, or screening of my cousin's memory then. We shall be in for a wholesale washing of the family linen in public! and neither you nor I will much relish that."

His face looked sad, as well as stern and worn, as the firelight played on it. He expected Esther to protest, but she was silent, and her silence softened him.

"I will say to you what I shall not say to anyone else, and you may believe it or not, as you please," said he. "I'm fond of Applehurst; I've looked forward to

possessing it ; but since I've known that that man is her son, and that her heart was set on his having it, I would rather not touch it with a pair of tongs. You'll at least do me a good turn if you make sure that we are too late to clap him into gaol."

"Of course, I believe you," said Esther ; "but, Curtis, if—if you feel like that, why take any action at all? Why not leave everything alone?"

"Because he is not Gatton," said the Major, and the words that he had reiterated so many times had a certain solemnity to-day that impressed her—"because he is not Gatton, and no amount of feeling makes any difference to facts ; and as for me, I have never subscribed to frauds, nor taken any part in lies."

It was getting dark.

"We have nearly talked the sun down," Esther said. "Look what a red London sun!" She walked to the window and looked out. She was rather glad that the kindly dusk hid the trouble in her face from the Major's keen eyes.

"It has not gone down on our wrath, has it, Esther?" he said quaintly. "But how about that letter? The post goes in half an hour. I will sit here while you write it, and I will post it for you on my way home."

"It will be very difficult," said Esther.

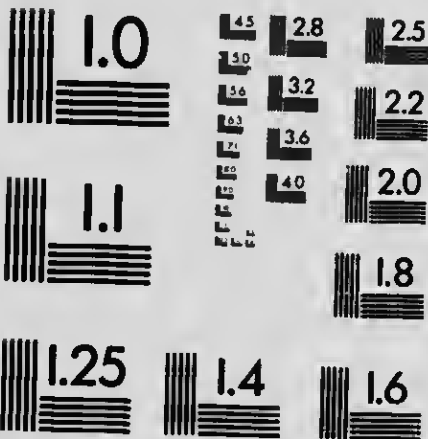
She had done a good many difficult things in her life, but she wondered for a moment whether she could write to tell Jasper of the death of the woman he loved, with the Major sitting by.

"Tell him what that girl said," said the Major. "I do not wish to. I should feel as if I were hitting him below the belt. And for the rest"—



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"No," said Esther firmly. "I will have nothing to do with the rest. I will write to give him Maravilla's message, because he told me about her, and because I am his friend. But I cannot warn, or threaten him, in the same breath."

"Then I will do that part of it," said the Major. "Perhaps I shall do it more effectually. Will you kindly bring me a sheet of paper and a pen?"

Esther brought him her little brown writing-case, and lit a candle. The Major wrote at the tea-table. She could hear the scratch of his quill as he penned his unmistakable meaning, in his upright, thick handwriting."

"You will put out your eyes. You had better draw your chair up to the candle," he said once, glancing up.

But she sat by the window and scribbled her difficult note by the last rays of daylight. Then she fastened it and took it to him.

"I have done it," she said. "But there is no such thing as 'breaking' the shock of sudden news. It does not matter how it is put."

The Major took the pencilled note, and turned it over in his hand. He saw a wet mark on it.

"You are too sorry for him, Esther," he said. "And so you call yourself his friend? I doubt whether he's deserving of that."

"He is my Cousin Becky's son," said Esther.

"Which makes not a jot of difference to his deserts," said the Major. "Your sympathy is too much enlisted on the side of black sheep."

"Ah! The white sheep start with such an immense advantage in being born white!" cried Esther.

She looked down from her fifth-storey window, and

watched his upright soldierly figure crossing the street. He posted the two letters, and went on his way towards the house that was not home. He was a man in whose integrity one could trust absolutely. No fit of despair would ever upset the balance of his mind, no bitterness warp his sense of right and wrong, nor would love ever cause him to do bad or mad things.

"A woman who loved him would be very safe," thought Esther. But she knew that she could never have been that woman, not even when she was young.

CHAPTER XIX

JASPER walked up and down in the library at Applehurst with a very dirty missive in his hand.

"This is to warn him who is called Mr. Gatto Mainwaring Mordaunt, that there is one who knows all about him, and has in my own possession the letters he wrote to Mrs. Vivario before she went away with him. Which same letters are worthy at the present of some moneys. The person who writes this understands that quite well. Major Iredale, without any doubt, will if offered, pay five hundred pounds to get them with much great pleasure. The person who writes is more ready to give you the first chance to buy, if you will come with the necessary moneys to the above address, or will send good messenger. This is no cheat. You will know the minute you look that the letters are genuine and worthy of all the moneys asked. You will be sorry if you do not buy, for the other side will. Nothing under five hundred pounds will be taken."

The reader made a mental note of the address at the top of the letter. It was written from an alley near Bishopsgate Street, E.C. Then he tossed the anonymous production into the fire, and watched the spidery, pointed writing on the blue foreign paper crackle and

burn. It was an attempt at blackmail, and by no means the first that he had received. It gave him food for reflection. He believed that no one in England, with the exception of Esther, so much as knew the name of Maravilla. Someone had tracked him across the sea. Someone from that other life. It was within the bounds of possibility that the someone was really in possession of his letters. But if that were so, it pointed to the fact that Maravilla was dead. He did not believe that, if she were living, she would part with the least scrap of his handwriting. Though he was sorely angry with her, he never for one moment imagined that any human being could or would dethrone him in her heart. He had been jealous, but not of humanity. He knew better than that.

"Then Maravilla is dead!" he repeated to himself. But he had been aware of her death before that dirty little letter added its evidence to his own intuition. He had known it one night (it was on the 4th of January) while he stood by the tower on the hill looking out on the moonlit, snow-clad world. No visible spirit had come to him. No white-robed angel had dropped from the star-spangled sky, through the still frosty air, to his side. Yet all at once the "something" which he had told Esther "was always pulling at his heartstrings" had snapped, the passionate longing that had possessed him for months had turned cold and died. "Maravilla is dead," he had said, and had stopped for a while bareheaded. Then had gone wearily home, and had slept fast and long. That was two months ago. To-day he repeated his words with a kind of awe. He was superstitious; he put faith in presentiments, though it was characteristic of his para-

doxical nature, that a kind of contradictory common sense often prevented him from acting on them, though they were backed by some tangible evidence. Since that January night there had been a change in the new squire. The sharp edge of his reforming energy had turned; the reins, which he had held with such wonderful ability, sometimes dropped a little slackly in his fingers. He was not quite so popular as he had been at first. Odd stories about him were afloat in the village. Yet the fascination which he undoubtedly had for those with whom he came in personal contact, still held good. The servants at Applehurst remained devoted to him. Dr. Clayton, in spite of his naturally mild temper, would ponderously snub anyone who said a word against him; and old Wilcox blessed him with his last breath. For Wilcox had caught a chill at Mr. Mordaunt's funeral, and had died with his hand in the squire's.

"You knowed I was all right, for all that them added sums went agin me; but no one else would have knowed," Wilcox had kept repeating, with growing thickness of speech, and with eyes fixed with an almost painful worship on Jasper's face. At the last reiteration he added, "You know, and so God 'ull know."

Jasper for his part had found nothing to say on that occasion; but that mattered little, for his presence was all that the old fellow wanted. Wilcox paid no attention to Mr. Joel, who knelt at one side of the bed and repeated the Lord's Prayer aloud. Only when the blind parson got to "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive"—he interrupted. His stiff lips smiled slowly. His gaze still rested on Jasper.

"That's good for 'im," he said. "Bless 'im, 'e knowed," and so died.

Mr. Joel followed Jasper out of the cottage.

"You must have been extraordinarily good to Wilcox," he said.

"Oh no, I wasn't. I only grasped the fact that the poor old chap was honest enough—but muddle-headed to an almost incredible degree—and a jealous old ass, too," said Jasper. "It was tragic in a way. He was so horribly in dread of being cut out by new-fangled men. That's what made him morose. His 'addled sums' gave me no end of trouble, but I wouldn't turn him off in a hurry, for it's a pity to throw away faithfulness."

Mr. Joel's thoughtful old face shone with sympathy.

"You stood for God, to that man," he said; "and rightly so. For you made him understand what the Divine forgiveness is, which looks not at the sins of the Old Adam, but at the growing Christ within."

"I!" said Jasper. He was half-dumbfounded, half-amused at this unexpected representation of himself. "Not I! I don't pretend to be religious. But knocking about in the world has taught me to see, at once, who is worth taking trouble for, and who is too rotten to use. I've never made a mistake in my man; but mine is a practical, not a moral view, you know."

Then an odd painful expression flashed across his face. Perhaps he recognised his own unsoundness at that moment, for he turned away abruptly. Mr. Joel sighed as he heard the quick, light footsteps receding up the street. His liking for Jasper was stronger than he could reasonably account for, and that in spite of the scene that had shocked him on the night of the

funeral. All men approached as "voices" to the blind parson. But the voice of this prodigal, from over the seas, had echoed in his heart with singular persistence from the time when its owner had walked by his side in the night. He saw none of the outside details pertaining to the people he met; he never knew what they wore, nor how they looked, but he had often a singularly clear perception of how they felt. Jasper was to him always as one haunted by a miserable dream, wrapt round in a cloak of unhappiness.

The winter had been long and hard, but when the snow melted and the roads became more passable, Mr. Joel turned his face in the direction of Applehurst. The place looked cold and blind and desolate, for hardly the windows were shut, and Jasper lived in one corner of the house. Mr. Joel could not see its desolation but perhaps felt it. He lingered, though the maid who opened the door repeated, "He told me to say that he's not at home, sir."

"Are you sure that Mr. Mordaunt will not see me? I've had a long walk," he said wistfully.

"He's that queer just now, sir," said the woman, moved by a sudden desire to confide. "I wouldn't say it to no one but you, who've known the family these last twenty-five years, but the house is a deal more lonesome than it was in the old lady's time, and goodness knows, we were quiet enough then. Mr. Parkyns, who was butler here, couldn't stand it no more, and left. Mr. Mordaunt just shuts the door on every living soul."

Mr. Joel sighed and was turning to go, then paused again, arrested by the sound of a voice.

"But your master has someone with him," he said, "I hear him talking."

The woman lowered her voice mysteriously. "Sometimes he doesn't speak for days," she said, "and then again he will walk up and down, up and down, and talk to himself half the night. The old mistress used to be that way too, before the rheumatism laid hold on her."

A faint colour came into Mr. Joel's delicate face. "Tell Mr. Mordaunt that I should take it as a great favour if he would see me on particular business," he said.

But, when the maid had gone on her errand, he cast about in his mind for a plausible reason to back his statement. What particular business could he produce? Jasper was an energetic landlord. There was now no cottage whose roof needed mending, no floor through which the damp soaked. He was ashamed of his intrusion.

The maid went into the library nervously. Jasper was walking up and down like a caged panther. When he turned sharply and looked at her, she was frightened, though she did not know why.

"Why do you disturb me?" he said.

"It wasn't me, sir—it was Mr. Joel," she stammered.

"I am out," said Jasper shortly. He stared gloomily at Anne, but he was not thinking about her in the least.

"I'll say so again, sir. I wouldn't have troubled you, but that Mr. Joel said his business was particular, and that he'd take it as a favour if you'd see him."

The library door was open, and while she spoke, Jasper caught sight of the patient, white-haired old figure waiting in the hall. He woke suddenly out of his black fit, and went out quickly with hands outstretched.

"Why, Mr. Joel," he said; "come in, come in! I did not know that you were standing there."

Mr. Joel had not yet provided himself with an excuse, so he came in apologetically and shyly. The host led

the way into the library, and wheeled up the arm- that his mother had once occupied, and in which had died.

"Don't apologise. You are welcome. You c away ghosts," he said. He pushed the old man ge into the chair, and poked the fire.

Mr. Joel held his thin, long-fingered hands to blaze; a painful wistfulness shone in his face.

"You are very kind," he said. "Sometimes I v much that I could see. I should blunder less."

It was the first and last time in his life that he expressed the wish aloud. Not one of his parishion had ever heard such a speech cross his lips. C before Jasper, before this man, who was alien to in many ways, he broke down the barrier of ge uncomplaining dignity that had always guarded infirmity. And he broke it down for no private er He did not say to himself, "Thus, and thus only, ca win confidence." He spoke simply and without fo thought, but took the right way, because his hand, that of a little child, was held close in God's grasp.

"To my mind it would be better to be dead, than be maimed," said Jasper. The keenness of his sens and his conscious joy in them, made him pity infirm intensely. "But the world is full of maimed creatur who have been caught in traps. This morning I kill a hare who had wrenched her thigh out of joint in iniquitous arrangement of wire and steel. I won't ha such things on this place. I've told the keepers so. invented a trap myself years ago, that kills outright, soon as the poor beast is caught. That's well enough I'm not squeamish about killing."

"I heartily agree with you," said Mr. Joel. "I shou

like to examine your invention. The unnecessary suffering that we inflict on our dumb brothers and sisters is a black fact. 'Deliver us from evil,' we say. Well, there is an evil hiding in our hedges, spread out on our downs, lying in wait in our woods."

His mind had reverted to a frightened shrill chirping that he had heard, while he had walked over the short grass of the downs, one spring morning. He had put down his hand, and felt three terrified goldfinches, caught by the claws to a limed twig.

"Oh, we shall not be delivered from it," said Jasper. "We get a sentimental fit every now and then, but a certain amount of cruelty or brutality, or whatever you like to call it, went to the making of the universe, and it is no more to be got rid of than is the air or the water. As for the trapped creatures, sometimes they free themselves, with a bit torn off, and sometimes they don't. At last the keeper comes and knocks 'em on the head, and there is an end of that. Or else he is a bit too slow (being taken up with his own affairs), and they dash out their own brains against the wires, and there's the end again!"

He stared into the fire, but he was no longer thinking about the hare he had had mercy on that morning. "They haven't as much choice as they fancy," he said. "One's end is settled on the day one is born. It's like one's shadow. It shapes itself and grows with one's growth. It's always there, though you don't always see it. But one fine day it will stand in front instead of behind, and you will look into its eyes, and recognise that it is quite an old acquaintance. It lay in your cradle when you were a baby, and ran behind you when you were a boy, and grinned when you kissed

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your love, and followed still when you tried to make a fresh start in a new land. 'Ah, ha, mine enemy!' you'll say, and after that you'll say no more, for you'll be as dead as a door-nail, you know. You can't look too long into the eyes of your fate, can you?"

The old visionary smiled, for he, too, had pondered on that day which comes for every son of man, when Death shall stand in front, and, looking in his eyes, we shall know—at last.

"Perhaps you'll be wiser," he said, "and see him as a friend, whom you've called your enemy. But I think you live too much alone, if you'll forgive an old man's impertinence, and perhaps this place is too small for such as you. Yet it goes against me to say so, for an energetic landlord was much needed, and the good you've done, shows what you may do."

"Oh, I play the part very well," said Jasper, with the sudden smile, and the air of confidence, that won him hearts. "But to tell you the very truth, I'm getting dead sick of it! The Major would make a better landowner than I, in the long-run, for he would stick to it."

"But this is more than a game," said the old man. "This," he waved his hand towards the window, against which the wind was beating in eddying gusts—"this is your natural heritage."

"Of barrenness and storm, eh?" said Jasper, and he went to the window, and, flinging it open, leaned out. The grey skies hung low over the March landscape. It was bitterly cold still. He could see the long low sweep of the downs, and the chalky white road that led to the village, through the bare twigs of the trees. He had come from dazzling blue skies, and brilliant sun-

shine, and the darkness of the English winter had impressed him. Yet he loved the place, even while he wearied of it.

"It should have been my heritage," he said, "But there's a drop of 'wandring' blood in me. My bones won't go to the fattening of English soil, I'm afraid. Listen! Who is coming through this storm across the park?" His hearing was extraordinarily fine and quick, quicker even than that of his blind guest. No one else, except perhaps some Indian trapper, would have heard the distant footstep; but presently one of the dogs began to bark, and then the postman came in sight, holding his head down, half-blinded by the gale.

Jasper went to meet him, and returned with two letters in his hand.

"I don't know the writing," he said. "But this one is very much alive. There is something that matters in it." He laughed at himself the next moment. "That sounds mad. But it is a queer fact that I always know, before I open a letter (and my mother had the same faculty), if it contains anything important."

"It is from Esther," said Mr. Joel.

"What, are you second-sighted too?"

The old man shook his head. "No, but I recognise the scent of orris-root that clings to Esther's writing-paper."

"Then my presentiment is wrong," said Jasper. "For Esther cannot have anything very important to say to me."

His expression softened. He was fond of Esther. She was to him as the embodiment of the charm of

England; that restrained pure charm of grey skies and hidden sweetness and freshness, of sober-suited singing birds, and thick, treasure-hiding hedges. The melancholy that had so possessed him of late, would perhaps have been partially routed, if she had been still in the house.

He opened the letter and read it through twice. Then stood long silent. At last Mr. Joel spoke in an anxious voice.

"Again I must ask your pardon for my intrusive questions. But I am very much attached to my dearest godchild—to Esther. I fear from your silence that some trouble may have befallen her. Is she well?"

"Well? I suppose so," said Jasper. "She chose between me and heaven, and she preferred heaven. She has what she chose—and it's over. Well, I was sure of it!"

Mr. Joel's delicate old face showed painful distress.

"I do not understand," he cried. "What are you saying? You are speaking very wildly of Miss Mordaunt."

Jasper stared. "Why, I was not even thinking of her," he said, with his short laugh.

He walked to the window again, and stood gazing out with unseeing eyes. His face was white under the sun-burn. Maravilla's message affected him strongly. No one in the world had ever had so strong a hold on his affections as she had had. It seemed to him that it was part of the irony of fate, that when his first youth was over, he should have flung his whole heart into the lap of this little saint, who had deserted him for God, and that, even yet, her voice should reach and follow him.

"She sends me a message; but shall I go?" he said; but he asked it, not of his guest, but of the wind that was still blowing tumultuously through the room.

Mr. Joel held out his hand. "I will bid you good-bye," he said. "For I am sure that the news you have had is strange and important, and you must wish me away."

Jasper shut the window and turned round; his eyes were dazed, his mouth was twitching with a whimsical smile.

"Upon my soul, it's a bit of a toss-up! I don't know what I am going to do," he said. "But good-bye, sir." He watched the blind man with growing intentness.

"If he goes away without asking me a question, I'll throw up everything else, and be off to Venezuela," he said to himself. "If he is inquisitive, I'll stay and be a country gentleman till I die."

Mr. Joel walked to the door, and then stood still. It was a mercy that the east wind was no longer racketing through the room, but he still felt as if restless, unshriven spirits were holding a carnival in the place.

"I do not wish to ask any impertinent question," he said gently, "and I think I need not say that I will not chatter about your affairs, but"— He hesitated, and a rather sardonic gleam of fun broke suddenly through the gloom of his host's expression.

"Go on, sir," said Jasper. "Do not hesitate to say whatever you wish to say." "The parson will do it," he added to himself.

"But I will wish you wisdom and a right decision, and the counsel of the Most High," said Mr. Joel, and he left the room.

Jasper screwed his lips into a whistle as the door shut.

"There's no counting on Joel!" he said.

Then his eye fell on another letter that had been blown, still unopened, to his feet. He stooped, picked it up, and read it with a changing countenance. It was from the Major, and it was short and to the point.

"SIR,—I write to warn you that we have found certain proof as to the illegality of your pretensions. It appears to me just possible that you may have some desire to prevent the publishing of a story discreditable to the late Mrs. Mordaunt, as well as to yourself.

"Should this be the case, I would, on your leaving England within the next three days, and on the receipt of a written confession addressed to me and witnessed by two witnesses, use my best endeavours to prevent the whole matter being made public. In the event of your appearing in England again, or giving any further trouble, I should consider this engagement cancelled, and should produce your confession.

"In making this offer I am actuated solely by the desire to screen my late Cousin's, and your Mother's, memory, but I should strongly advise you to accept it.—Yours faithfully,

"CURTIS IREDALE."

Jasper pulled himself together. The dreaminess went out of his eyes.

"I'm d—d if I will," said he.

CHAPTER XX

LONDON requires to be known before she can be loved. Her beauty is not of the kind that strikes the newcomer at first sight. She is, to tell the truth, something irregular of feature. She has the charm of a fascinating plain woman. When you have once learnt to admire her, you admire her for ever, but at your introduction you perhaps compare her unfavourably with cleaner and brighter beauties.

Jasper had made acquaintance with many capitals, and as he wended his way eastwards the dulness of the people's clothes, the smudgy dinginess that blurred, and the indescribable odour of poverty that pervaded all things, struck him as extraordinarily depressing.

Presently he reached a part of the town where the Jewish element was strong. Here limpets and mussels were sold in barrels, and queer little second-hand shops displayed dirty sponges and old bibles, satin slippers that had once been white, and sham diamonds that had not the ghost of a sparkle left in them.

He turned up a dark alley blessed by a flowery name, and peeped into an uninviting court. The neighbourhood was unsafe after dark, and the police

went through the court three a-breast; but he had been in queer places before now, and he was physically fearless. He shrugged his shoulders and plunged in. Apparently all the inhabitants were asleep. He pushed open a door on the right and cautiously mounted some rotten stairs, avoiding rubbing shoulders against a suspicious black wall. At the top of the stairs was another door, at which he tapped. A stout foreign-looking woman in a coarse black wig opened to him, and greeted him with cheerful affability.

An ear-piercing noise was let loose as the door opened. On entering, he found himself in a small, close room surrounded by birdcages, the occupants of which screamed and whistled and chirped from all sides. Here were macaws, bright of feather and harsh of tongue. Here goldfinches in heart-breakingly small cages. Golden canaries trilled shrilly, and larks sang their souls out. Bullfinches hopped sadly from perch to floor and back again, and a fierce raven had the air of some captive, untamed robber chief.

Jasper took a seat on a table in the middle of the room, and entered, with that readiness which characterised his dealings with womankind of every description, into an animated conversation with his hostess, who was a Pole, a fact which he shortly discovered, consequently addressing her in her own tongue.

In answer to a question as to where and how he learnt to understand her language, the sound of which actually brought tears of pleasure to her eyes, Jasper narrated a wonderfully vivid and interesting tale about a Polish anarchist who had somehow or other got shut up in a Spanish prison, where he had found her, and

from which he had subsequently obtained her release. She was a beautiful girl, he said, and he had been at once reminded of her by his present companion. Esther was not the only woman who found this man's stories singularly entrancing. The stout lady of the wig, who had herself been both lovely and romantic once, listened with glistening eyes. She enjoyed his description of the horrors of a Spanish prison, she clapped her hands over the escape, and Jasper talked as if he had nothing else in the world to do, and as if he had no thought in his mind but how best to amuse and interest her.

The melancholy that had lately enveloped him was gone with the need for action. He was chattering and smoking gaily when the door opened again, and Cesare Vivario slid into the room. Then his manner changed suddenly. He believed that he was safe in this strange place, now that he had the woman on his side. He was probably right.

"Ah, Cesare," he said. "Where is the property which you have stolen?"

The mulatto looked old and pinched and abject. Now that he was face to face with the Englishman he was afraid of him. He had lately been ill with ague, and his dark skin had a curiously grey tinge. He made a sign to the woman, who shook her head, as she stood rather behind Jasper. All of which by-play Jasper saw out of the corner of one eye, and his spirits rose.

"I haven't a penny in my pocket," he remarked. "D'you see?"

He was wearing a very rough blue serge suit. He turned out all his pockets one after the other. There

was not so much as a handkerchief or a pipe in them, but in the last there was a pocket revolver, which he kept in his hand, and which Cesare Vivario eyed with some appearance of indignation.

"What you take me for, Mr. Iredale," he said, "dat you come like dat? I your ver' good friend. I write in a frien'ly way. I and you, we strangers in a horrid, cold wicked place."

"Where did you find my letters?" said Jasper.

"It private business, I should say," said Cesare, with some dignity.

"I've no objection to this lady's presence," said Jasper, with his quick, bright smile.

The lady nodded to him and moved to the door, against which she set her broad back.

Jasper asked himself whether it were possible that Cesare had the letters about him; if so, whether he should quickly possess himself of them, and so settle the matter out of hand? Could he trust enough to his rapid alliance with the woman to ask her? He risked it, speaking in Polish.

"I do not know," she answered. "I have nothing to do with this business. He is only my lodger. I do not like it, and the sooner you are out of this house the better. I won't have any fighting. If there is a tussle you may get the worst of it; there are four men in the room below. I am glad you have no money, and that your clothes are not worth very much, but still they are too good. Settle your affairs quickly, and I will get you out by another way over the roof."

"Show me the letters. I will give you a pound a-piece for them because they were hers, and then I'll burn them because you've touched them," said Jasper.

THE ALIEN

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He loathed the man, and took no trouble to conceal his loathing. Cesare glanced side-long at him, malevolent, but cowed.

"Oh, you burn because I touch?" he said. "No odder reason? No? You so ver' good gentleman, you don' steal, no? You tink I show you dem? I show you copy. Ver' nice copy."

He took a greasy packet from his breast-pocket and handed it to Jasper, who glanced through it with a poignant sensation of miserable and angry disgust. In spite of the easy way in which he could make friends of every sort and description, in spite of the outspoken manner in which he would often express his opinion, and the apparent frankness with which he would describe incidents that he had witnessed or taken part in, Jasper was, and always had been, reserved where his own affections were concerned. That the fingers of this mulatto should have defiled that which he had written to the girl he had honestly revered and considered as his wife; that words that could only have been written to her, and written in the high summer of love, should have been pored over with evil intent, and copied in this vile hand-writing which he hated, made him feel literally sick with hot indignation and a sense of sacrilege. His head swam for a second. It was on the cards that he might spring at Cesare's throat—then he mastered himself and flung the letters back.

"Yes, it's ver' nice copy," he said, with a laugh. "Well, Cesare, a pound a-piece, eh? And you bring the originals of these letters to the hall of the Norfolk Street Hotel this evening. I will give you the money then. You'll be quite safe in a public hall, you know."

"A pound? You ver' fond of your joke," said Cesare, with a smile that wavered between insolence and propitiation. "I say one hundred pound each. I get so much easy from Major Iredale, I tell you true. He talk a great deal to me in Venezuela. 'You ver' sharp, clever man,' he say; 'you help me and I help you.' Dat quite plain and right to arrange between two gentlemen."

"Then why on earth haven't you gone to him?" said Jasper, and as he spoke, the thought flashed into his mind, "But perhaps you have." It was more than possible, it was quite probable that Cesare was intent on a double game, and was disposing of his booty to both sides at once. Jasper covered his eyes with his hand for a second, trying as he did so to call to mind the exact number of the letters which he had written to Maravilla before she came to him. He knew the look of them, for they had lain in her work-basket, under the little garments she stitched at for their boy. They were always in a saffron-coloured case, which was worked with purple and white blossoms. He had laughed at her one day for keeping her love-letters in a basket, and she had said—

"But so they are within reach of my hand."

The first had been such a letter as might have been written to a patron saint, and laid with flowers on a shrine. Not at all the kind of thing anyone would have expected Jasper Iredale to write. In the second, of two weeks later, he had told her of past ambitions and hopes, but had ended by saying that these were all as nothing to him now, that they had become thin as shadows, and of no value. In the third he had answered some question she had asked him, and had written of

his childhood and boyhood, to this poor child whose youth had been cast in much worse places than his. He had described England to her;—a safe, cool country where you could plunge your hand into a green hedge and never fear anything worse than the sting of a wholesome thistle!—where you could tread the green grass bare-foot, and pick small delicately tinted flowers;—a place where Nature showed herself more placid, gentler, less brilliant than in South America.

Then very tenderly he had explained to her why he had left that "safe place," why the mother country had been but a stepmother to him, and her homely charm had vexed him with a sense of loss. He had told her of his mother, who had never owned him (though he did not blame, because after all he loved her, and it was far easier to blame circumstances or the law), and he had said that he had counted himself excused for some sins because of the bitter inheritance that had been his, but that, having known Maravilla, he counted himself excused no longer.

Ah, that was the letter which would go against him. Now he came to think of it, Cesare had shown him no copy of it. Probably it was reserved for other uses. And at that thought the bitter and defiant anger which had driven and possessed him like an evil spirit, swept over him again with fresh force. Not because of his sins, but because of that which was good in him, had he been entrapped. In his heart of heart he knew that his love for Maravilla had been infinitely the best thing in his life, and it seemed to him that a mocking Deity had ruined him through that. He dropped his hand, and his expression was hard and set.

"I have remembered," he said; "there were seven

letters. I do not wish to bargain with you. I will give you twenty pounds for each of them, when I have them all in my hand. But you have produced copies of six. If you have already taken one to the Major, you will not get a penny out of me for the others. And in that case I will certainly kill you, my dear Cesare, and then at least I shall have done one good deed of which I shall never have cause to repent. I will only give you till to-morrow at this time. If I have not the letters before then, I shall know that you've tried to cheat me according to your nature. I shall not be much surprised, but you will have been foolish, for in the first place you will never get a larger sum from the Major than the hundred and forty pounds I offer: and in the second place, even five thousand pounds would be no use to you when once you are in your coffin. That is all I have to say to you."

He spoke in a low clear voice, for when he was angry he never raised it. Then he got off the table and turned to the woman.

"Will you show me the way out, Madame?" he said. "I give you a great deal of trouble, and you are very kind, and I have nothing for you in return—but my thanks."

The room had a skylight that opened on to the roof. Madame put a wooden stool on to the table, and proceeded to mount it with great agility and to scramble through the window. She was wonderfully light-footed in spite of her size. Cesare stopped Jasper, who was about to follow. His face was ashen.

"But I have never seen more dan six letters," he said. "I never steal de case. I pick it up! Just where it lay on de floor. I swear to you dat dere were just de six in it. I swear to you by"—

"It doesn't matter what you swear by," said Jasper. "Those are my terms. I will give you one hundred and forty pounds for the seven letters, or not a penny for six, but you shall be paid in either case."

He did not for one moment believe that Cesare had never possessed the seventh letter, and yet it was the fact. It lay in a very safe and quiet place. A place far enough away from streets and towns. No thief would touch it, and no unloving eye decipher it. It was quite safe! sewn into Maravilla's shroud.

"In the next house lives a friend of mine; I will take you through her room, and out at the back, but you had better not come here again," said the lady of the black wig.

Jasper smiled to himself while he followed her quickly and deftly between chimneys. Adventure had been as the breath of life to him, and he had frequently got out of somewhat strait places by the aid of women. They had always liked him, and not without reason, for he was good to them.

Ten minutes saw him clear of the network of shady side streets where foreign tongues predominated. He struck into the main thoroughfare again, and slackened his pace.

As for the mulatto, he collapsed in a shivering heap on the floor, and the parrot screamed derisively at him. He could bully by letter, but not in person, for his nerve was gone.

"He will kill me. He will certainly kill me. He is mad enough to do anything," he moaned, and he rocked to and fro, crying.

He too considered that God had been hard on him. Cesare's God was a somewhat easily biassed deity, a

kind of Oriental potentate surrounded by saints, who had his ear, and who were themselves open to bribes in the shape of candles or even flattery. It was not a high conception, but it was perhaps not his fault that bribery and extortion were indissolubly connected in his mind with government. And apart from that orthodox "religion," which he had never quite cut himself loose from, and which he certainly intended to turn to on his deathbed, he had a strange superstition about the girl whom he had picked up on account of her voice, and with whom he had gone through the marriage ceremony in order to "bind her," when he found that she caused money to flow in wonderfully fast. He had thought her not quite right in the head at first. She was innocent to an extent that argued idiocy; yet she had filled even Cesare with a sense of something supernatural. He would not have parted with her for a small sum, because she proved to have a really extraordinary attraction, but the price Mr. Iredale had offered was one that far surpassed his wildest dreams, one that only the maddest of Englishmen would have given. Cesare had not been shocked by the proposition; it roused neither resentment nor jealousy in him! Judged by Western standards, he was a very conscienceless individual. The girl had always shrunk from him, and (except from a trade point of view) she was not to his taste, and even sometimes made him vaguely uncomfortable. He had parted with her willingly, but no sooner had he done so than his superstition about her gathered strength, and he knew that he had parted with his luck.

One misfortune after another fell on him. A man was killed in his house on the night of her departure.

Then he got into trouble with the authorities, and into the hands of the Jews. Finally he was forced to leave the town. He set up his bar in a street of —, that blazingly hot seaport where sailors from many lands were enticed like silly flies into his parlour; and where Major Iredale had landed when he first arrived in Venezuela. Here again ill-luck pursued him. He fell ill of a disease that still crippled and twisted him. It was during his illness that he heard of the miracles that were being worked in a far-off convent in the forest, and so soon as he was fit to travel he started on his pilgrimage, inspired thereto by three motives. He wished to be cured of the lameness that still troubled him. He wished to repossess himself of the "Maravilla," and he scented a possible source of profit to himself in the affair of the disputed inheritance.

The journey had been long and difficult, but he had got hold of Jasper Iredale's letters with an ease which was almost disquieting. They had, as it were, dropped into his hands, and they contained at least two sentences which were evidence of the invalidity of the writer's present claim. That was very well! but Maravilla died before he had had the chance of propitiating her; or of being cured, and on his return home Cesare found that his house had been burned to the ground.

The two facts hung together in Cesare's mind. He believed that had he made friends with Maravilla, his house would not have been destroyed. The accident appalled him. It was a malign interference of the Supernatural. His creditors were pressing, and he lost his nerve. He went on board a merchant ship (her captain was a friend, and offered him a free passage), and he presently landed in England very cold,

very out of heart, and with very little silver in his pocket.

He had at first intended to carry his evidence straight to Major Iredale, but two motives deterred him. He feared doing that which should still further displease those "powers" who were so evidently on the side of Maravilla's friends, and he had contracted a strong personal dislike to the Major, who had wounded and trampled on his vanity. Cesare was sore about the colour of his skin; he resented being considered black. Here, too, was tragedy! Here, too, cause enough for pity, though perhaps only one, pure as Christ, could understand and pity such as Cesare, and yet take no hurt.

He had no sense of shame in attempting to blackmail Mr. Iredale; that was only a matter of business. He had the letters, the other man had the money. He had intended to sell his wares as he had sold Maravilla, for all they would fetch, and to drink Jasper's health amicably afterwards—for he had liked him better than he had liked the Major. Yes, that was how he had meant to arrange everything! It should have been a transaction between friends. True, if driven to it, he had had some idea of showing that he had companions and allies in the house, but the pistol and the woman, between them, had prevented that demonstration, and now Cesare himself was threatened and coerced.

"He is wrong--but he will certainly kill me," he moaned again. "I can never make this Englishman believe me, because I am not of his colour! and because the Madonna is against me. And I am hungry and I am very ill and very cold."

He shivered, and, as he shivered, he saw the shadow of the coffin which Jasper had spoken of, dance before him on the bare floor. He knew that he dared not go to the hotel with the six letters. Then desperation seized him.

"I must sell to the other side," he said. "But it is the Englishman's own fault—and the devil's."

Meanwhile the Englishman, walking rapidly through these side streets, struck into the main thoroughfare again and slackened his pace. Though he had hated the episode of the letters, he was mentally the better for having exerted himself. He had no doubt that Cesare would turn up during the course of the next day, and in the meanwhile his busy brain turned to the consideration of his next move. The prick of pain was always poisoned where Jasper was concerned. He resented it passionately and actively. Calamity may make a saint more saintly, but its effect on a sinner appears startlingly the reverse of beneficial at times. Though one writes "appears" advisedly, for while some happy souls reach their kingdom of heaven by a comparatively short cut, nay, are apparently born within its peace and never wander far from it, others seem impelled, by the very constitution of their spiritual nature, to experience the extremes of thirst, and to plunge through a tormenting fire. Jasper's flames scorched other people as well as himself, but there again they followed a law which makes us rub perplexed eyes occasionally, but which, Heaven knows, is universal enough. Not for nothing was it written that the Divine Man descended into a hell where others burned and thirsted.

The chain of Jasper's reflections was broken by the

sight of two women who were standing in front of him. One was a Sister of Mercy, the other a taller, slenderer figure that he knew well. They were both looking into a toy-shop window. He was singularly disinclined to meet Esther Mordaunt at that moment, but she had seen his reflection in the glass of the window, and she turned impulsively towards him with outstretched hands.

"I did not expect to see you here," she said; "but I am glad that we have met."

"You haven't become a nun, have you?" asked he, eyeing her straight cloak and severely plain bonnet in some dismay.

Esther laughed. "No, indeed! I am nothing half so good! I am a regular fraud. I have only been with Sister Eunice to see a crippled child to whom I promised to take a doll. Now I am on my way back to my flat. I am dressed like this because it is safer to be dowdy in this part of London. But you are masquerading, too, I think."

She glanced with some amusement at the rough blue suit, which made him appear more foreign than usual. Esther could never manage to look anything but a lady, whatever might be the fashion of her clothes, but Jasper could always thoroughly assume the rôle for which he was dressed, because he was a born actor. She coloured as the words escaped her lips. It suddenly struck her that "masquerading" was a word far too appropriate to have applied lightly.

"Will you walk home with me, Jasper?" she said.

"Will I?" said Jasper. He had noticed her blush, and he was a little bit amused and a trifle ashamed, — an attitude of mind which Esther often induced in him. "Will I, indeed? Why, yes, if you will let me,

Esther. Perhaps I, too, have been engaged in presenting dolls to poor little crippled children!"

He walked by her side because she had asked him to, and because, in spite of all the bad and mad things he had done, he would have gone many steps out of his way rather than hurt Esther's feelings. Yet he would have preferred to have avoided her, and she realised that fact before they had gone three yards.

"He is afraid lest I speak to him about Maravilla," she thought. "He need not be alarmed! I did not live all those years with his mother without learning when not to dive below the surface. Or is it that he supposes that I shall ask him whether he means to take the Major's warning? But I should not be so silly as to question Cousin Becky's son too much!"

Then she said aloud, "I am so tired! After all, I would rather drive home by myself. You will let me be very changeable, won't you, Jasper? Look, there is a hansom. Will you put me into it? I believe I am too weary to walk!"

"Is that so?" said Jasper. Then as she nodded, smiling frankly, he noticed how white and thin she had grown, and that she did really look thoroughly worn out and depressed. He signalled to the driver of the hansom.

"I am staying at the Norfolk Street Hotel for two or three nights. I came up to see about taking out a patent for a trap I have invented. When that bit of business is concluded I shall go back to Applehurst," he said somewhat defiantly.

"I hope that your patent trap will be a success," said Esther. "You are certainly very clever!"

He helped her into the hansom. "And you are

certainly very good, Esther," said he. "Much too good to be walking by the side of the likes o' me, even for five minutes."

But he was relieved when she drove off, as she very well knew that he would be. Somehow he could not have borne Esther's companionship just then. She woke his conscience, or at least disturbed its slumbers, uncomfortably, and too late.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE Major went back to his house in Orchard Street and waited on events. He did not intend to wait too long. If Jasper chose to take no notice of his warning, he meant to act, and to act soon. Yet there is no doubt that the zest he had once felt in the pursuit of justice was turned to weariness. Blood was very much thicker than water where the Major was concerned. From the moment in which he had learnt whose son the claimant was, he had been unable to subdue an inclination to save Jasper's wrong-doings from exposure. From the time when he had spoken with Maravilla he had been further possessed by a growing, scarcely defined desire to save Jasper himself. His sense of kinship was strong, but he had no near relatives. The Iredales were dying out. The contemplation of that last fact depressed him as he sat in his large stiff sitting-room. He was not fond of children, yet he would certainly have liked to have had a son to carry on the name. He had married very young; his wife had died in child-birth, and the baby had lived but one short hour. Since poor Annie's death, Esther had been the only woman for whom he had felt any tenderness. If Esther had but had the sense to marry him ten years ago, he reflected, she would not only have done a wise thing for herself and

for him, but the race might have been perpetuated and it was a race worth keeping alive.

Two or three portraits hung on the walls of his room. The Iredales were a black-browed, rather handsome family, with melancholy eyes and bad-tempered mouths. They did not enliven the scene. A square mahogany writing-table stood by the window. The Major sat by it, in a characteristically hard, plain chair, and opened a pile of letters which had awaited his return to England. His room was solidly furnished, and it was upholstered in maroon leather. With the exception of the portraits, which were inherited, not chosen, it had not a single beautiful or interesting thing in it, but it was always carefully swept and garnished, for the Major was well served. He had a way of returning to his London quarters suddenly, but with the full expectation of finding everything ready for him. He had his clearly expressed fads, and he treated any disregard of them on his servants' part as tantamount to their having given warning. Yet he was seldom left seryantless. Though not a popular master, he was an absolutely just and a very dependable one. It never occurred to him to greet any member of his household on his return, and he was apt to snub any expression of interest; yet he had in one or two instances proved himself practically kind. His habits were almost ascetically simple, the whole trend of the man's nature being the reverse of self-indulgent. He had the reputation for being close-fisted, but he was on various philanthropic committees, and his somewhat fidgety economies were perhaps prompted rather by the contempt of extravagance than by the love of money. He had worked for many years laboriously

and systematically, though without enthusiasm, for the good of his kind.

He wrote for an hour or two, carefully replying to all the notes that required an answer. They were all on business, for he had no friendly correspondence. When his writing was finished he leaned back on his chair with his hands resting on his knees. Illness was so foreign to his nature, that the fact that he was so indulging himself was noteworthy. Esther always declared that his ceaseless industry was one of his most trying peculiarities. He was apt to consider it blameworthy to be five minutes without visible employment, and what he considered blameworthy in himself, he reproved in other people, which was a pity, for his strenuous conscience had quite enough to do in its own domain.

Yet for once his imagination was active, and a sadness that he could not put aside, coloured his meditations. Many strange ideas had been knocking for entry lately, and when one is past middle age, new ideas are apt to bring a certain amount of pain, rather than exhilaration, with them. We open the door so eagerly when we are young, we are so very ready to greet possible angels, but when we are old it creaks on its hinges, and perhaps we are a little shy of disturbances. The strange thoughts were all somehow connected with Jasper's Maravilla and with Esther Mordaunt. Esther had always been a rash woman, and she was always biassed by her strong and wilful affections; Maravilla was a little fanatic, whose fantasies were repugnant to his common-sense; and yet in both dwelt that uplifting and idealistic love that is perhaps the strongest power in the world. The Major had been a Christian

all his life, but it dimly dawned on him that Maravilla and Esther stood nearer to the spirit of Christ than he.

"But for all that they couldn't keep the fellow straight," thought he. "As for me, I haven't tried to! Yes—I tried once. When I first set eyes on that chap I advised him to get out of the scrape while he still could. Well, there is no use in preaching. If I could do anything, I believe I would"—

A knock at the door interrupted his meditations. Someone wished to speak to him. A foreigner, who would give no name.

The Major was secretary to a society that befriended strangers in London. It was illustrative of the thoroughness which marked all that he did, that though he seldom, if ever, gave alms to these applicants, neither did he ever refuse to sift any case that came before him.

"Show him up," he said.

Then, vividly recalling the convent verandah, the yellow and purple flowers glowing in the sunlight, in glided the serpent of that garden, which always seemed so dreamlike and allegorical, so wrapped in a glamour, and saturated in an atmosphere of the more or less miraculous.

The Major fairly started when he saw his visitor.

"What is your business?" he said bluntly. His keen eyes noticing, while he spoke, that Mr. Vivario was several degrees shabbier than when they had last met.

"You not remember me, Major? No?" said the newcomer, with a nervously ingratiating smile.

"I remember you perfectly well," said the Major.

This man with the thick negro lips, and the narrow quick eyes, with the olive skin and the curly black hair, with the cringing manner that could yet be impudent, actually (though he would have scouted the idea of being so affected) set the Major's nerves on edge.

"Ah, den you remember when you and I walk in de garden of de nuns. You remember what you say to me. 'You jus' find out all 'bout everything for me, Mr. Vivario,' you say. (You very careful man, Major.) 'Den I pay you what de evidence is worth to me.' Dat all right. You not pay before you see. You not de one to buy what you English call 'de pig wid de poker,' heim?"

The Major frowned. He was not even amused by the pig. But he was a scrupulously just person, and he was anxious to call to mind exactly what he had said.

"Since dat time, my pore wife 'ave died," Cesare proceeded glibly. "But before she die, she and I we talk long while. She say I ver' good, kind husband to her. She sorry she left; she done better to stay wid me. She gif me all de letters Mr. Iredale wrote to her. Dey jus' cram full of all you want. He ver' silly some ways. He write like mad when he write to her. He clevere fellow, but he ver' great fool as well."

"So you stole the letters that Mr. Iredale wrote to her?" said the Major.

He was disgusted and angry. Angry with himself as well as with this shameless rogue. He knew in his heart of heart that he could not, for the life of him, make use of Jasper's love-letters. It was impossible! As impossible as it would be to listen behind a door or to peep through a keyhole.

Mr. Vivario let the aspersion pass, for he was in a hurry to get to business. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out something that was rolled up in a silk handkerchief. He unrolled it carefully, and displayed before the Major's sternly disapproving gaze that same saffron-coloured case which Maravilla had offered to entrust to cleaner hands! This time Cesare produced no copies, but the original letters. He did not fear lest Major Iredale should snatch them suddenly. He had not kept a bar "For all Nations" for nothing! He was untrustworthy himself to the last degree, but he knew perfectly well whom to trust and whom to fight shy of.

"I will not buy from you," said the Major shortly.

"You—no—buy!" said Cesare. He was sick with hunger, and at those words despair took hold of him.

"You no understan', Major," he said desperately. "You tink I no play fair? You tink dese no true letters? Pshaw! I show you evairy one. You look well. Dey no cheats. Dey Jasper Iredale's ver' own writing. Dey almost rags, but dat 'cause she keep read, read, read! I know how she read de letters he write!"

He took them out of the case. Poor worn sheets, tear-stained and much handled. The Major turned his head away. He loathed this business.

"I read jus' all what he write!" Cesare went on anxiously. "You see I not able to invent what he say. An Englishman he write quite different to what I write to a woman. He begin—

"My Maravilla,—I call you by that name because'"—

"Have done! Shut up!" said the Major. "I don't wish to hear them. If you read another word I'll—I'll kick you out."

"You tink dey no good? You make great mistake," said Cesare.

The room was spinning round with him. He was afraid that he was not choosing his words well; his English was beginning to desert him. If the Major refused to buy, what should he do? He was madly anxious to get away from England now, to get out of the reach of Jasper Iredale's arm. He had no confidence whatever in the protection of law; he believed that Jasper would kill him. He was also pressingly anxious to eat.

"I tell you quite true," he cried piteously. "If I take dem to Mr. Iredale, *he* know dey are worth much, much moneys."

"Take them, then," said the Major. "You may tell him from me, that I am handicapped—being an honest man—but that he had better buy and burn them."

"I tell him dat?" began Cesare. He laughed with a weak uncertain laugh that was nearly a sob. "I tell him? No tank you. He kill me." Then his voice broke. "I tell you I'm *starving*," he said in Portuguese.

The Major gave one sharp look at the man, then turned his back on him. He walked to his desk, meaning to write an order that should serve to provide Mr. Vivario with bread and coffee. He was not easily deceived, and he felt pretty sure that that last statement was true. But Cesare imagined that the Englishman had refused to listen to that final despairing plea. A hot sick rage possessed the mulatto. He hated the Major far more than he hated Jasper, who had bought his wife, and threatened to kill him. Jasper was, at least, human, though; Cesare went in fear of his life because of him; but the Major was impenetrable, coldly

contemptuous, a creature one could not move, who seemed callous, even to his own advantage.

The Major's desk was covered with papers; among them lay a ten-pound note which he had been about to enclose in an envelope when Cesare was announced. A savage look came into the narrow eyes of the foreigner. Hunger spurred him to a sudden insane determination. There was a spring, quick and noiseless, like that of some wild animal, then a muffled cry. The Major felt a sharp pain right through his back, a bitter salt taste in his mouth—then advancing, overwhelming blackness. He reeled and fell forward on his face.

The mulatto pulled out his knife, glanced swiftly round the room, buried it in the pot of an indiarubber plant which stood in the corner, and smoothed the earth over it. Then he wiped his hands on the Major's coat; grabbed at the ten-pound note, and tucked it carefully away; ran swiftly downstairs, and out of the house.

"He would not buy, but he has paid," said he.

Esther dined with her sister Rose that same evening. She was driving to Grosvenor Square while Cesare Vivario was hurrying down Orchard Street with the Major's note in his pocket and the Major's blood on his hands. It was just as well, she reflected, that Jasper had not walked home with her, for, as it was, she had barely had time to change her dress and reach her brother-in-law's house in good time for dinner. Esther was sometimes an unpunctual person, because the interest she took in the present moment made her forget the moments to come. She had *les défauts de ses qualités*, a fact which the Major had more than once pointed out to her.

Rose's dinners were rather dull and formal affairs,

but Esther had had so little gaiety in her life, that almost any form of entertainment amused her. Rose glanced across the table at her once or twice with surprised appreciation. Esther was still "distinguished looking," she thought, though, when a girl, she had not been nearly so beautiful as her sisters. Esther's black-lashed grey eyes lit up and shone with fun, and she was evidently entertaining her neighbour. She took a fresh and original view of most things, and her views were not so narrow as are those of most women who have lived almost exclusively with their own sex—perhaps because Mrs. Mordaunt had in some respects been more like a man than like a woman.

"After all, I shouldn't wonder if Esther were to marry yet," Rose reflected. "I have always thought Curtis Iredale half-inclined to admire her, though Cousin Becky jeered at and snubbed him so unmercifully. I will ask him to meet her next week."

She put her plump arm into Esther's as they stood together after dinner.

"Have you seen anything of Curtis Iredale lately?" she asked.

A shadow crossed Esther's face. "Why, is it not odd that I've been unable to chase away the thought of him?" said she. "I'm possessed by a most absurd presentiment that something has happened to him! That he has been drowned, or run over, or shot, or that something of that kind has befallen! Battle, murder, and sudden death come into my mind to-night in connection with Curtis! Yet he is quite the last person to meet with an accident, for he is always so 'on the spot.' He would laugh at my ridiculous fancies! I do not know why he should haunt me!"

Rose laughed comfortably. "Well, you don't seem depressed by his misfortunes, whatever they may be."

"But I should be depressed if anything were really the matter," said Esther frankly. "I like Curtis. He is the kind of man one has a great respect for—though he irritates me."

"I do not see why you are irritated," said Rose. "Of course, poor dear Cousin Becky always made a point of contradicting him; but then she disliked his being her heir. I am sure that he was always sensible, and always in the right."

"Just so!" said Esther. "If he had occasionally been in the wrong one could have put up with him better!"

Rose on the subject of "poor dear Cousin Becky" always made Esther angry, but she repented of her sharp words the moment that they had crossed her lips. The Major's steady and loyal friendship rose up and rebuked her.

A man was shouting "Special Edition. Speci-al!" down the square. One of the guests turned to Esther with a smile.

"Once upon a time—long ago now," said she, "my mother and I used to fly to the window when we heard that ominous sound. The Egyptian war was going on then, and my brother was fighting."

"Ah," said Esther softly, "and he came back to you safely, I know. If he had not, you would not have told me that with a smile. Well, you were lucky!"

"Oh, dear, yes, he came back without a scratch—but he suffers terribly from gout nowadays," said the lady. "Thank goodness there is no war going on now. How you keep listening! Probably it is only another murder in the East End."

"Only!" said Esther.

"Well, the newspaper boys trump up murders to sell their papers. There is no use in being harrowed by them. Why, you look quite shocked! You must be very new to London!"

"I believe it does sometimes shock me," said Esther. "But do listen! What does he say?" 'Startling Stabbing Affair in a Fashionable Locality.' Rose, do you hear? Shall we send out for a paper?"

"No, my dear," said Rose. "That we certainly won't! I am sure we do not wish to read about horrors, even if they are true, and probably the man is shouting lies."

"Anyhow, such dreadful things can't possibly have anything to do with us," said Esther's niece.

Esther felt an odd little motherly softening towards the girl, as the young, fresh voice delivered that cheerful statement. She, too, had felt once that "very dreadful things" could not possibly happen to her.

"No, it is not the least likely that anyone we know is hurt," she agreed. "But as for 'dreadful things' having nothing to do with us, why, anything that happens anywhere"—then she broke off her sentence, and laughed at herself.

Certainly this was neither the time nor place in which to say what was in her mind. Besides, the little niece's eyes were fixed on the door, and the little niece's ears were listening to a hum of approaching voices on the stairs.

For whose voice does she listen? Ah, now I see. "Dear me! what a very dull young man! How can Minnie find him exciting enough to blush for, and what a lovely colour the child has!" thought Esther,

and so put aside her presentiments and partially forgot them.

As she drove home that night, the East End and the West, her meeting with Jasper Iredale in that funny rough suit and in his worst mood, the little niece's partiality for the youth with a low forehead and a weak chin, were all jumbled together in Esther's mind. The many-coloured pageant of life was deeply interesting to her, and probably would be till the day of her death. But she thought no more of the Major till the next morning, when somehow the sight of the newspaper recalled her fears. She opened it, and her eyes fell on the paragraph headed, "Startling Stabbing Affair."

"An extraordinary incident occurred in Orchard Street yesterday evening. Major Iredale, a gentleman well known in philanthropic circles, was found by his soldier servant (who served under him in the Afghan campaign) lying face downwards on the floor of his sitting-room, quite unconscious, and having lost much blood from a severe knife wound in the lower part of the spine."

Esther pushed away her untasted breakfast and called Polly.

"I am going at once to Orchard Street," she said; "Major Iredale has been terribly hurt! Look here!"

Polly read the paragraph with genuine dismay and grief.

"Oh, Miss, and he was here only last Tuesday, drinking his tea and sitting in that chair as comfortable as could be!" she cried, and tears stood in her eyes. "He was such a strong gentleman. It don't seem as if it could be true! And he was such a kind gentleman," she added.

Perhaps not many people had realised that at bottom, under his too dictatorial manner, the Major was "such a kind gentleman."

"So he is, so he is!" said Esther; "but he hasn't been kindly treated! Call a hansom, Polly. I will go directly to ask how he is. It is all I can do!"

She was remorseful, as well as shocked and sad. Her sharp little speech to Rose pricked her.

"He'd tell you, you should drink your coffee, Miss Esther, before you go out in the east wind," said practical Polly. "He was such a sensible-spoken gentleman, and always such a one for taking care of you."

Esther gulped down her coffee with a shaky and forced laugh.

"Don't keep saying 'he *was*,' Polly," she cried. "Probably he is better now. They make the worst of things to—to sell the papers, you know."

The hall door of No. 118 Orchard Street opened as Esther's hansom drew up. She was surprised to find that she was expected. The Major's soldier servant came forward to meet her.

"He's kept saying all night that he must speak to you, Miss," he said. "And that you'd be sure to come when you heard the news. If you hadn't come by half-past ten I was going to send for you. He don't feel nothing now from his waist down. But he can talk quite clear. He don't like having a woman nurse about him. He don't think it right. It puts him out terrible. So we've just sent her off. I does for him much better than she, anyhow, for I knows his ways."

"Then he can't be so very ill," said Esther hopefully. "People are not so set on having their own way if they are very ill."

Yet when she saw him her heart sank. The Major was lying in bed, with the bedclothes very neatly and carefully disposed. He lay very straight and still, and his face was quite bloodless. His eyes were bright and eager, but they looked sunk, and his mouth was pinched. He turned his head slightly when she entered.

"Good-morning," he said. "It is good of you to come. I'm sorry I haven't been able to shave."

Esther sat down on the chair by his bedside and tried to smile.

"Why, Curtis, what an extraordinary misfortune to happen to you! I am much sorrier than I can say!"

"Yes," said he. "I knew you'd be very sorry. You always are sorry for people who get worsted. But I've been thinking about it all night. Perhaps I shan't be worsted—in the end."

"Of course you won't. You will get better," said Esther. She tried to believe her own words as she spoke.

"No. I am dying," he answered. "We talked about death, do you remember? But there is not time to talk about it now. It was for something else that I sent for you. But no—I did not have to send, did I? You came of your own accord. I hope that was it, Esther? I told Harvey you would come."

"Yes, I came as soon as I had read the news," said Esther.

Her voice choked. She was thankful she had followed her impulse at once. The Major had many a time told her she was too impetuous, but perhaps it was as well that no chidings of his could change her character. He would have been more disappointed than she knew, had she not come.

"That's right," said he. "Will you put your hand

under my pillow, please, and pull out a packet you will find there?"

Esther did as she was bid. She was a little surprised when she discovered a saffron silk case full of letters. Had the Major always treasured these, she wondered? Were they the letters of the girl-wife who had died so many, many years ago?"

"What do you wish me to do with them?" she asked.

"They are not mine," said the Major. "They are his, you know. That woman who reminded me of you, wanted to give them to me to take back to him, but I wouldn't. Then that rascal came here and offered to sell them to me, but I can't do that kind of thing. I can't buy a man's love-letters. I've been thinking all night (oh, I said that before), so I waited for you, Esther. There is no one else I would trust them to. He forgot them, I suppose. There they were, lying on the floor. I made Harvey pick them up and put them under my pillow. I'm evidently meant to have them, eh? It's strange. The whole of life's strange when one is near the end."

"Who stabbed you?" whispered Esther. She leaned close to him. Her voice sounded strained and unlike itself. "Curtis, it was not Jasper who has done this?"

The Major's white lips smiled, the old grim, stiff smile.

"Why, you've turned the colour of this sheet, Esther! No, it was not Jasper. He is not so bad as all that. He would not stab a man in the back, I believe. We'll give him credit for not caring to do that. We'll give him as much credit as we can, it's the best chance. Take these to him, please. Say I sent them to him, and that if he has a shred of honour

left he'll do as I bid him now, and come here to me while I am still alive, and write what I would have him write. If he hasn't, he will just make his escape without a confession, or brazen it out and be damned. I began to think about him in the forest; and then I went on with it all night. He is our kin, anyhow, and one should try"— His voice sank.

Esther could not answer for a minute. She was dumb before this momentary glimpse of the Major's innermost self. Then she spoke with difficulty.

"I will take the letters to him now; and I will give your message word for word. I believe he will come. I—I can't say what I feel about it."

The Major opened his eyes, which had closed wearily. He saw tears in hers.

"Are you pleased with me after all—for once, Esther? he said. "You usually take my Cousin Rebecca's part, you know. But that fellow is not Gatton; I was right there."

"You were quite right," said Esther.

"Yes," said he. "I've that satisfaction"; but his eyes looked wistful. "You are sorry, Esther, I see. I don't know that I want you to be sorry for me!"

"Oh no," said Esther. "I'm sorry for the rest of us, for myself. You mustn't die, Curtis! It is such an impossible idea."

"I shall not go before I'm called," said he. "Say good-bye to me before you go."

She was standing with the letters in her hand. She stooped suddenly and kissed him. "But it is not good-bye," she said.

"Thanks," said the Major. His lips twitched. "For once you have done what I wanted, Esther."

CHAPTER XXII

"The best of what we do and are,
Just God forgive."

THE Major's words echoed in Esther's brain as she went out again. "For once you are doing as I want." And again, "Perhaps I am not worsted really." No, assuredly he was not. He compelled from that bed, which she shrank from thinking was his deathbed, as he never had before. When he was well and strong, his surface peculiarities, his petty economies, his want of tact, his laying down of a somewhat detailed and rigid law, were evident, and often exasperating enough; his failings were of the kind that go before to judgment. But now, now, who could so much as remember them? The strong, brave soul had been laid bare for once. It showed itself as it was.

"He is much too good to pity," Esther repeated to herself. There was a lump in her throat as she thought of him, but yet even then it was not of him that she thought most.

"When she got to the hotel in Norfolk Street she asked if Mr. Iredale were in. That was a slip of the tongue which she could have bitten out for its stupidity, when the porter replied that there was no Mr. Iredale in the house.

"I meant to say Mr. Mordaunt," said Esther, and at that moment Jasper came to the door, and looked at her, smiling over the porter's shoulder.

"You are in excellent time, Cousin Esther," said he, though in truth he was considerably surprised. "I've just ordered breakfast. You had better come into the coffee-room and have some."

He instinctively behaved as if her appearance there were the most natural and likely thing in the world. Even at that moment Esther felt grateful for the ready and comfortable tact that could take possession of a situation at a moment's notice. He led her straight into the coffee-room, and made her sit down opposite to him at a little round table, while he poured out coffee.

"But I don't want it," Esther murmured.

"Never mind," said he. "Pretend to eat and drink. That's all right. No place is more private than a public room. No one will pay any attention to us if you sip your coffee now and then. Besides, you are shivering, and it will pull you together. Well, what has happened? I don't really suppose that you've merely come to pay me a polite, cousinly call, you know."

"Jasper, do you know that the Major has been stabbed?" said she.

He nodded coolly.

"Oh yes; I saw that in last night's paper. It's startling, isn't it? It's not the sort of thing that one would ever expect to happen to such a highly respectable member of society. I am—you wouldn't think it, perhaps, and of course he wouldn't believe it—but I am rather sorry that he has been hurt. I should like to go to Orchard Street to ask how he is, but he would imagine that it was a gratuitous piece of d—d cheek

on my part, so I can't. Have you had any news of him this morning?"

"He has been hurt mortally," said Esther. "He sent you a message. I have just come from him. He asked me to take this packet to you."

She handed the little case of letters across the table. Jasper's expression changed as he recognised it.

"The scoundrel!" he said. "So he sold them to the Major." He looked through them quickly, and there was a hard sound in his voice as he added, "and my good cousin has kept back the most important one."

Esther's eyes flashed indignantly. "Do you dare say that?" she said. "Are you, after all, too bad to know honour when you meet it? I never thought so till now."

The stern and bitter disappointment in her tone startled him. So perhaps did the look in her face. It was Esther's Scotch grandfather who reproached him through Esther's grey eyes just then.

"Hush! You've no right"—he said, and then his glance fell. "So, after all, he didn't keep one back? Well, I beg his pardon—and yours." He laughed a miserable, harsh, little laugh that hurt her. "And shall I apologise to Cesare too, while I am about it? So *he* didn't keep one back either, and I swore I'd kill him for it. (Drink your coffee, Esther, and don't look as if we were discussing tragedies.) But, at any rate, Cesare must have sold them."

"I think not," said Esther. "I hardly understood when the Major was telling me the story an hour ago; but I know that he said, 'I can't do that kind of thing. There they were lying on the floor. I made Harvey give them to me.'"

"Then Cesare tried to sell them, and failed again," said Jasper. "He's not a lucky rascal! And then—Good Lord!—it must have been that scum of the earth who stabbed the Major!"

"Yes," said Esther. She was still white and stern. She hardly understood why the strong tide of her feeling brought the next words to her lips. "Yes, it was that 'scum of the earth' who stabbed him; but for a moment I feared lest you had done it."

He pushed back his chair sharply. "I am not so bad as that. Confound it, Esther! You couldn't have thought that of me."

It was as if, seeing the reflection of himself in her clear eyes, he had unexpectedly seen a monster. He shuddered with real horror.

"I am not like that," he repeated.

Esther's face softened. "No, you're not. *He* said so too. He said you would never stab a man in the back. But how was I to be sure, when you have come so horribly near being everything that is bad?"

She put her hands before her eyes. The vision of what this man might fall to, since he had already fallen so far, had met her more than once—had haunted her night-watches, had invaded her very prayers, had been to her like some evil and horrible spectre. "And you might be so very good," she said.

They were both silent for a minute. Then, "Well, I believe I supposed that in a sort of way you were my friend," he said bitterly. "But you have given me harder measure than did my enemy."

Esther did not defend herself. Somehow it did not seem worth while to do that.

"I will give you the Major's message," she said.

"He said, 'Tell him that I sent the letters, and that if he has a shred of honour left, he'll do as I bid him now, and will come to me while I am still alive, and write what I would have him write. If he hasn't, he will just make his escape, or brazen it out and be damned.' That is all I came to tell you."

Jasper got up, walked across the room, and put the letters in the fire. He would not glance at them again, and he could not have kept them, because the bitterness of Maravilla's desertion stung him almost to madness if he dwelt on it. Even Esther scarcely realised that, for Esther could understand a woman's conscience better than a man's passion. He had made up his mind as he crossed the room, and she saw decision in his face.

"Will you have some more coffee? No? then we may as well be going," he said. "I'll see you into your hansom, Esther."

She did not dare ask him what he was going to do. She had done her uttermost, and she knew that she had strained what friendship he had for her to its limit. Strangely enough, Esther, who was the most tender of women, had in this last resort played her part sternly, while the Major, who was a stern man, had acted with a generosity that was quixotic. Again that flash-light, which only shines now and then, had been turned on the depths of both their hearts, and had made secret-places manifest.

Jasper called the hansom, and she got in.

"Good-bye, Jasper," said she. But he would not take the hand she held out.

"No. You think I might be a Cesare. You shall not touch a possible Cesare," he said. "You were

wrong, though! I am going to see the Major at once. Of course there is nothing else to be done. The game is his now."

"Thank God!" said Esther.

But when she got home her heart ached in spite of her gratitude. She thanked God, indeed. Yet one pays for most things that are worth giving thanks for. That day Esther felt as if she had paid a pretty heavy price.

The Major had paid too; for Cesare's knife had done very effectual work. He was a bad patient, but as he had clearly ascertained that the end was certain, it appeared to him that he might as well do what he chose with the hours that remained. The lower part of his body was paralysed, but his brain was still unclouded, except for a weariness, which made him now and then rest from thinking, just as when in good health he might have stopped reading if his eyes had begun to ache. It was possible that he might quicken Death's steps slightly by this last exertion of will and mind; but there was no harm in that. He did not trouble himself with speculations as to what was coming—not even now, when he lay close to that veil which should soon part to let him through. His nature was unspeculative, and moreover, he had still one thing to do, and his whole remaining energy was bent—a little feverishly—on accomplishing it.

He was propped up on pillows when Jasper came into the room. The outline of his square shoulders showed gaunt and thin through his nightshirt. His features were already curiously sharpened by pallor.

"So you've come," he said. "Get a chair and sit quite close to me, for I can't talk loud."

Jasper did as he was told. He was never awkward, and seldom apparently abashed; but at that moment he would have given a good deal to have fairly escaped that interview. He would have shirked it, but for the fact that shirking was not numbered amongst his vices. The sight of physical suffering always moved him, although he was not, as he had once said, squeamish about death.

"This is uncommonly bad luck," he said in an oddly subdued and gentle voice. "If events were ordered justly, that fellow's stiletto should have been between my shoulder-blades, or mine between his. You had really nothing whatever to do with it."

"You've enough on your hands without murder," said the Major. "Do you suppose that you will still be able to play at being Gatton Mordaunt after that fellow is caught?"

"I believe that I could," said Jasper. "But I'm here to throw up my cards, so there is no use in remarking that I believe I yet might have produced some trumps if"—

"If you were quite consistently rogue enough, eh?" whispered the Major.

Jasper looked up suddenly. "I burnt the letters," he said. "Thank you. I don't suppose anyone else would have sent them back to me. They might of course have been useful to you. Having burnt them, and so accepted your generosity, there is an end to my claims on my mother's land."

The Major accepted the tacit confession without comment. Neither man cared to waste words.

"I don't suppose there is much use in my saying that I wish this hadn't happened," Jasper said.

"You'd have drawn the line at that yourself, eh?"

the Major whispered back. His steady eyes, in which his ebbing life seemed centred, rested on his late opponent with an expression that had neither enmity nor friendship in it.

Jasper dropped his head on his hands. "There are some things left that are too bad for me to do," he said. "I do draw a line somewhere—though you mightn't think it!"

For once he knew himself to be at a disadvantage. His was the kind of cleverness that rises to an emergency, and the kind of temper that is easily stimulated to a ready-witted defiance. A spice of danger usually exhilarated him, a rash enterprise tempted him. His faculties were, as a rule, never more at his command than when he was apparently cornered. Yet he felt defenceless now. He was disarmed before this man who was dying.

"I told you to give up this mad pretence before (I always knew you were not Gatton), but you wouldn't listen. She never listened to reason either. I didn't guess then that you were really her son. Yet you are like her. Esther always saw the likeness. I ought to have guessed. But one does not entertain such ideas about the women of one's own family, and so old a woman."

A quick anger flashed across Jasper's face. He lifted his head.

"I will hear no word against my dear old mother," he said. "You cannot possibly judge her. You are in a position to slang me if you like, uncontradicted. Stick to that."

"But I do not wish to slang you. That was not why I sent for you," the Major whispered. "I am not your enemy. You are a near kinsman, after all."

Jasper's lip twitched. "Though I've no business to be." He tried to smile, but not very successfully. "I shouldn't have had the check to claim kinship just now, sir," he said.

"A fact remains a fact, whether you claim it or not, which is fortunate for plain men like myself," the Major said. The dry remark seemed wonderfully characteristic at that moment. "But if you had told me the truth, I think I should have done what I could for you. I think so—and one does not make mistakes about oneself, when one is dying."

"You could not have done anything," said Jasper. "I wasn't in any need of alms, and I wouldn't have taken them from you if I had been. I've not forgotten that you thought I was hungry, or that someone belonging to me was starving, and that you bade me throw up the game! I wasn't hungry! but I nearly threw it up at your bidding! I'm sure I don't know why, except that it struck me as unexpectedly and surprisingly good of you to try to give a rogue a chance. Afterwards you riled me, and then I was in for it, and in the humour to do mad things. They were a sort of relief, and"— He checked himself. He would not tell the Major how his mother had worked on him.

"If you had told me, I should have left the place to you in my will," whispered the Major. "I am older than you are, and it is possible that you may yet marry and have children. I have absolutely no other blood relation. The Iredales die out with me, as you know. Esther Mordaunt is my cousin by courtesy, not by blood. You would have had to wait—but you'd have got it, or, if I outlived you, your children would have got it. That can't be done now, because you've claimed

Applehurst as Gatton Mordaunt, whom you no more resemble than I do." He paused for breath then. "It's about this that I sent for you—wait—till I can go on," he said.

Jasper stared at him, half-perplexed, half-overwhelmed. Then he laughed suddenly—a harsh self-mocking laugh.

"Upon my soul—if I've got one—this serves me perfectly right! But I am glad you can't leave the place to me, Major! I don't think that even my skin, which should be thick enough by this time, could stand such a heaping of hot coal!"

"You speak like a raw boy. And you a grown man!" the Major whispered. He had sipped some water that Jasper had held to his lips, but his weak voice seemed to add intensity to the reproof. "What does it matter what you or I think we can stand? We have to do the best we can before we are relieved. We were not consulted as to where we should be on duty, nor how. Why should we be? That's not our business."

The whole radical difference between the two men was implied in that speech. Jasper's quick intelligence grasped that fact at once.

"Ah, you take life as a soldier," he said.

"And you as a rebel," said the Major. "But I am right."

"If there is any General, perhaps you are. You'll soon know, anyhow," said Jasper.

The Major's prompt reply moved his admiration. "Soon? I know now."

He rested for some minutes before he spoke again. Jasper hated listening to his laboured breathing; he had never known time move quite so slowly.

"So, since I can't leave the place to you," the Major said presently, as if he were continuing a sentence, and had forgotten the interlude, the clash of their opposing views, "I've left it to Esther. I have advised her, in a letter that she will read when I am dead, to sell it. The responsibility of land would lie too heavily on her shoulders. She'll be better without it, but none the worse for a little more money. Now"— He made a movement as if he would have raised himself, but failed. Jasper, who had put his arm behind the Major's shoulders to lift him, was fairly transfixed by his bright stern gaze. "Now— are you rogue enough to give her any trouble, or are you not?"

"I'm not," said Jasper.

"Then take a pen and paper—it's on my desk; I made Harvey put it out ready for you—and write your confession. The property must be clearly *mine* to-day, that it may be clearly hers to-morrow. No, not to-morrow. The doctors give me a day or two yet. But let there be no mistake."

Jasper arranged the pillows carefully, then turned his back on the Major, escaping for a moment from the insistent coercion of that strong spirit in its fast weakening flesh. He sat down at the Major's desk, took up the pen, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You are too much for me—after all," he said. "You've won the game, for I can't rob Esther. That is over the line."

"I thought as much," said the Major. "I knew there was a line somewhere. I told you so."

A whimsical humour lightened Jasper's face. "But you play with loaded dice, and you make the very

most of 'em," he said. "For if you weren't dying, I wouldn't give in so meekly."

A smile touched the Major's lips. "The generalship is undoubtedly excellent," he muttered. But that murmur was too low for even Jasper's quick ear to catch, neither was it meant for him. Only perhaps the General heard—the General whom this loyal soldier had never doubted.

For five minutes there was no sound but the scratching of Jasper's pen. Then he looked up.

"One thing only I bargain for. We'll keep my mother's name clear. I confess that I wrongfully pretended to be Gatton Mainwaring Mordaunt, the son of Rebecca and Gatton Mordaunt, who to the best of my knowledge and belief was drowned in the year 18—; that I fraudulently laid claim to the estate and lands of Applehurst, which were left by the late Jasper Iredale to his daughter, and to her eldest son surviving; but I have not said that she was my mother, and I shall not own that she was in the plot. It must be my own unaided iniquity."

He came close to catch the Major's answer, the paper on which he had written in his hand.

"Of course. We have usually managed to take care of our women," said the Major. "I said—we are kinsmen."

Jasper put the paper in his kinsman's hand. His black eyes were suddenly dimmed.

"You *are* a good sort, sir," he said. "But—how furious my poor old mother would be with you! If you and she meet in the next world, I think that you had better not tell her about this."

But possibly the Major thought the meeting unlikely.

"Ring the bell, please," he said. "Harvey and Mr. Holdsworthy will witness your signature. Then it will be done."

"They are waiting, are they? You were pretty sure you'd get your way! Well, that's the way to get it," said Jasper.

He set his face like a flint and stood very immovable while the old lawyer came rather nervously into the room, and putting on his spectacles, read that very remarkable document, with little grunts and gasps of amazement.

The Major cut short any comment that might have been made. "I'm very tired," he said. "You'll do me a last kindness, Holdsworthy, if you'll witness that paper, and have done quickly with the business."

Harvey signed his name under the lawyer's without reading.

"You should never sign anything that you don't thoroughly understand," said Jasper. There was a harsh, mocking sound in his voice.

"It's all right, sir," said Harvey, "if the major says so."

"Bring it to me," said the Major. "No one is to touch it again till I am dead."

He and Jasper were alone again. Jasper put the paper in the Major's hand.

"There!" he said. "I am done for! You have got your way. You and Esther, between you."

"Put it under my pillow," said the Major. "You can be safe out of the country before I die, can't you?"

"Oh yes, I can easily be out of it. It doesn't much matter," said Jasper.

He had suffered a sharper shame than might have been supposed. The way out seemed likely to be a near and quick way. It was strange that the Major, who had never been very apt at reading people's thoughts, read Jasper's at that moment.

"But not by too short a cut," he said. "Will you shake hands with me—after all, Cousin?"

"Oh, if you like," said Jasper, with his odd smile. "But you know if you thought you were going to live, you wouldn't do it."

"I wouldn't with Gatton. But I always knew you were not Gatton. They speak well of you out there. And that girl in the forest is good—not what I expected to meet." His voice sounded sleepy. Then he roused himself again suddenly. "Why, man—I don't understand all this. You're not bad enough for your part. Turn round. Start fresh."

"It's a bit late, and I've nothing to start for," said Jasper. "There's only one thing I want. I should rather like to see Cesare caught."

As he spoke the sound of a harsh voice shouting in the street arrested his attention. He threw up his hand. "Listen! that's it," he said.

"Special Edition. Special. Arrest of the West-End Murderer, Cesare Vivario. Harrowing Details. Fierce Fight with the Police."

Jasper listened with a fierce exultation in his eyes, which softened as he turned again to the figure on the bed. "Cesare Vivario is caught," he said.

The Major's eyelids were closing. From the moment that he had gained his point, the tension had relaxed.

"Cesare Vivario? He had something to do with it. How was it?" he murmured.

"He stabbed you in the back," said Jasper. "But if you die, he'll hang for it. Well, good-bye, Major. If it had not been for me, you wouldn't have been stabbed, —but"— He hesitated a second; it was extremely difficult to Jasper to express penitence. "But I am sorry," he said. "And I've done what you wanted."

He took the hand that lay on the counterpane very gently in his, but the Major's grasp tightened on it unexpectedly, and he opened his eyes again.

"Oh, you are sorry, eh?" he said. "Then don't you desert. None of *us* have ever been cowards. You're not that, I believe, anyhow."

Again the voice outside came in at the window. The Major frowned as if with an effort of recollection.

"That fellow and I—we are sent for—yes—sent for. God be merciful to—us."

The last words were so low that Jasper, stooping, scarcely caught them. He went out with his head bowed. The Major's record was a very different one to Cesare Vivario's or, for the matter of that, to his own; but at last, what else is there to say?

They were calling still in the street when he got out. But he did not buy the paper. He walked on, looking straight before him, with unseeing eyes. For the moment the hates and wrongs, the injustice and bitterness of the world, seemed to melt into nothingness. At the end—at the very end—there is only one's soul, and God who made it.

But the Major shut his eyes and dozed peacefully. He was in no pain. The creeping numbness that had laid hold of his legs, left his brain unclouded till very near the end, but he was tired and sleepy. He paid no attention to the doctor's visit. He only roused himself

to say that he did not wish for any more leave-takings. "There was no more to be said or done."

Esther came each morning to the door to inquire how he had got through the night, but he expressed no more desire to see her, though he liked to hear that she had called. He slept constantly, and troubled himself about nothing. His was no deathbed repentance, but rather a loyal belief, that had never been seriously shaken, in the righteousness of the Judge of all the world. He insisted on winding his watch for himself every night. But at last—it was the third night after Jasper's visit—his fingers were unable to do it, and Harvey wound it for him.

"Give it to Miss Mordaunt when she comes to-morrow to ask after me," said the Major. "Tell her not to forget to wind it every night. Esther is apt to be rather careless over small matters," he added sleepily. "But I am sure"—Then he realised Harvey's presence, and left the rest of his sentence unfinished.

In the morning he was gone; his spirit had passed away while his body slept. Harvey, his red hair wildly ruffled, his eyes swollen, met Esther at the door the next morning.

"He couldn't wind his watch last evening, Miss, and to-day he don't need a watch," he said. "I don't know what minute it was he died. It was between the hours of three and four; but he went so quiet, without a sound. He said you was to be sure not to forget to wind it every night."

The characteristic injunction seemed to bring the Major very close to her.

"I shall not ever forget," said Esther.

CHAPTER XXIII

"We establish sovereign good not by taking and receiving, but by giving with both hands."—RABELAIS.

"AND so, dear Godfather, having told you everything," said Esther, "I would very much like you to tell me what you think I had better do next."

She sat once more in the porch of Mr. Joel's cottage. It was summer-time, and the garden was full of the soothing sleepy sound of humming bees. Three years had passed since the Major had died, since Cesare Vivario had been sentenced to death, and since Jasper Iredale had disappeared, leaving no trace behind him.

Esther's eyes rested on Mr. Joel with a pleasure that was mixed with sadness. He was but four years older than when she had last seen him, but the four years had aged him perceptibly. For herself, she felt as if twice four years had elapsed since the day when she had walked across the park to consult her old Godfather on the advisability of staying with Mrs. Mordaunt or of leaving Applehurst. Yet she knew that to Mr. Joel she was just the same. He added no wrinkles to the image of her that he saw with his mind's eye.

"You know that the Major advised me to sell Applehurst," said Esther, looking in the direction of her

old home. "He left a long kind letter for me, full of most practical and detailed advice. It must have been written just before that wretched man stabbed him. I do not think that he had any premonition of misfortune, but he was always such a very careful and provident person. He began his letter by saying that he had been making his will, and that he had left me the property, which was undoubtedly his, in spite of the absurd claims of his Cousin Jasper. I was so struck by the fact of his writing 'my Cousin Jasper,' instead of 'that impostor' or 'that rogue.' It was very good of him. I never half-appreciated his real goodness. Well! I always took his advice about anything that had to do with money, and so I did as he counselled. Yet I feel as if I had been disloyal to the old place, in letting it go to strangers."

"But that is finally done. You do not want an opinion about that, Esther?"

"Oh no! That was 'mere sentiment,' as Cousin Becky would have said. I am so glad to talk to you again, Godfather, that I talk nonsense."

She seldom spoke of Mrs. Mordaunt to anyone nowadays. She could not talk of her to people who had not loved her, and there had been but very few who had! Contact with the world had made Esther both more conversational and more reserved than she had hitherto been. She had more small change at hand and gave her gold less readily. But here in the cottage porch she met with her old self again.

"I dreaded coming back. I should have shirked it but that I wanted to see you; but now I am glad I have come," she said.

"I am sure that I also am very glad," said the old

man gently. "I have longed to speak with you again, Esther, for your letters, delightful as they are to me, suffer from the fact that I cannot read them to myself, and that you are naturally constrained by the knowledge that a third person must come to my assistance. Yet I cannot travel in trains, or face the bustle of a strange town. Too much noise perplexes me; I feel like a lost child! I am getting very old, you see. But I think about you often. What do you do in London? Have you made many friends? I hope that you have, for you would be unhappy without people to care for. I used to think that your life with Mrs. Mordaunt was too solitary for so young a woman. Do you see much of your sisters? You were cut off from your own family when you were a girl."

"Yes," said Esther. "Rose and Lily never liked Cousin Becky, and I soon learnt to love her. That divided us, and it couldn't be helped. I often see them now, and I have grown fond of Rose's children, especially of one niece, who has had a rather unlucky experience, and who has been out of health and spirits lately. She is perhaps going with me to Spain this year. Oh yes, I have plenty of people to care for; but"— She was silent so long, that anyone but Mr. Joel might have wearied of waiting for the end of the sentence, but he took life without hurry, which was perhaps one reason why he was told so much. "But though one can get on very tolerably with general interests, and though I believe it to be far safer to divide one's eggs, and to put them into as many baskets as possible, and though at my time of life I certainly ought to have learned some prudence, yet I am sorely tempted to do a thing which prudence and

common-sense forbid! This is where I want your opinion, Godfather."

Mr. Joel looked rather frightened. "Why, Esther are you thinking of marriage?" said he.

Her laugh reassured him. "You forget how old I am!" she said. "No! I never in my life asked anyone's advice about that. I knew my own mind there. Yet it is one of the responsibilities of marriage that attracts me."

"Ah, you want to adopt a child," said Mr. Joel. An expression of sympathy came into his fine old face. The motherliness of unmarried women often struck him as slightly pathetic. "I know that you would be very good to any lucky child whom you undertook to mother," said he.

Esther shook her head. "No!" she said. "Not to any child!—that is where you make a mistake. I'm not philanthropic! I have never reached that pitch of impersonal universal benevolence which better women attain to! I wish I had. I am not really fond of any child! But"—she was glad that Mr. Joel could not see her face—"but a child who is like my Cousin Becky. A child with black eyes and a black temper. A child who hates some people, and loves some people, unreasonably much. I could be fond of her. And, perhaps, since she has no mother, and since the people she has been with have found her very naughty, and since she has been a rather unhappy little soul, I might at least bring some sunshine and warmth to her. Do you not think that to give someone a happy childhood is worth something? It might make a difference to the rest of her life."

"It might indeed," said the old man, but his face was troubled. "And where is this child, Esther?"

"In Spain," said Esther. "She was born in a convent, in a very wild part of South America. It was a sort of little mission-station belonging to Spanish nuns. Her father took her away from the convent, and put her under the charge of a nurse, an old negress, who was devoted to her, and who worshipped her. When she was four years old (she is nearly five now) he came to the conclusion that she was getting spoilt; she is apparently a rather imperious and self-willed little lady, and he took a flying journey to Europe, and left her with a Spanish lady, with whose own daughter she was to be educated. He paid very handsomely for her upbringing, and considered the matter settled. But three months ago he was seized with a suspicion that she was unhappy. He is an erratic father, but I believe that he really cares greatly about her. He pounced down suddenly, and without any warning, on the Spanish family, and found the child neglected and miserable, and apparently looked upon as incorrigibly wicked. Then, being at his wits' end as to what to do next, he wrote to me. This is what he says"—

She drew a letter from her pocket, and turning over the first sheets, read the last page aloud: "There is no reason why you should be troubled with my troublesome little girl: but you are fortunately sometimes unreasonable. She is very like my mother, which would win your heart, and a little like myself, which you might perhaps manage to condone. Sometimes, but rarely, she has a look of her own mother, but she will never be a saint—of that I'm convinced. At present she's a little sinner. You could do wonders with her if you cared to try. I'm sure I don't know why you should try, but I think you will. You might

tell her that 'she wasn't meant to be bad'! I have money enough to provide amply for her. She would, of course, be no burden on you pecuniarily."

"And you are going to Spain?" said Mr. Joel.

"I was going abroad in any case."

"I cannot but see that there are many objections to be urged," said he, shaking his head doubtfully. "To begin with, your sisters will be naturally surprised, and not pleased."

"They have both married rich men," said Esther. "Even supposing that some of my own money went to this child, no injury would be done to them. Indeed, neither Rose nor Lily would think about that. So far as affection goes, I should not take from them, in order to give to this little Rebecca (did I tell you that she was christened Rebecca?), though perhaps I might pay to her some of the great debt which I owe to her grandmother."

"The situation would be difficult. How should you explain your connection with the child? Let us look at the matter from a worldly point of view, my dear," said Mr. Joel, whose attempt at worldliness brought a smile to Esther's lips.

"I should give no explanation," said she. "For that is entirely my own business."

"Ah, you have not changed much!" said he. "You are my rashest, as well as my dearest, godchild still. But, Esther, what you said before is true. It would not be prudent (I do not even feel sure that it would be wise, though wisdom and prudence are not always indivisible) for you to undertake the care of this child. The blood in her veins is very wild blood. The older I grow, the more plainly I see that one does

not gather figs from thistles. I see it even here, in this small village world."

"But that is just the strongest argument on my side," cried Esther quickly. "If the child has wild blood in her veins, she needs a double share of love, and who else would care for her as I could care? Of course I know that I am rather old to have the charge of her. I am not used to children. I should make dozens of mistakes. All those reasons may hold me back. Yet we should start with a tie between us, and what other ties has she? Even though I may do badly, who in the world is there who will certainly do better?"

"My dear, I was not thinking of what might be best for her, but rather (very naturally) of what is best for you," said Mr. Joel.

He sighed. The remembrance of Jasper was painful to him. "I liked him! We could none of us help liking him, for he had fine qualities. I was sorry for him too, even when I heard the truth. Yet, Esther, he behaved very badly—even criminally. There is a fatal flaw in the man, and the fact that he is so likeable makes him the more dangerous to other people's peace. The child resembles him, you say?" He laid his old hand on Esther's as she sat beside him. "I should not care to see you break your heart over that alien's child."

"Our hearts do not break very easily, dear Godfather," said Esther. "We inherit endurance, you know."

She sat there thinking, believing that she was making up her mind, that she was weighing pros and cons in an equal scale.

"If I were to take that little girl, I should hope for

great things from her," she said. "You see, I have always known that my dear Cousin Becky was mentally a bigger person than I am, and, with all her faults, I love her better than any other woman whom I have met. Had she had the chance that I might give to this Rebecca, what might she not have been? Yes, I should hope for great things, but, before I decide, I wish to face the possible worst. It is quite true that if one lets oneself care much for anyone (and I should think it wicked presumption to venture to take charge of a child whom I did not feel I could care much for) one gives a hostage to fortune. One lays oneself open to a possibility of pain. I am rather a coward, Godfather; it is just that that has made me hesitate. One does not hesitate when one is young, because one does not know what paying means. Perhaps that's as well! The world would never go on if it were otherwise. But this thing, if I do it, I must do it with my eyes open, and therefore if it is not successful I must never (even to you) complain. That is why I must consider well. There are many objections, of course. Oh, Godfather, Cousin Becky told me such miserable stories of her childhood and girlhood! Jasper told me such bitter things about his. The tragedy of their lives seemed to be always haunting Applehurst. I knew that it was a melancholy house, and full of sad ghosts of past misdeeds, even before I knew what the ghosts were. But if wrong and misery can echo so long, surely goodness and happiness have power too?"

"Surely, surely," said Mr. Joel. "But, Esther, I think that you have decided. It is your old Godfather's blessing, not his advice, that you really want."

"Is it? No, I have not yet decided," said Esther. "But give me your blessing, anyhow, before we go in. It has done me good to consult with you."

"The blessing of the Giver of all good gifts be with you," said the old man solemnly. "That in giving, you may be blessed."

"Thank you," said Esther. "Your blessing is like the sunshine and light, Godfather, which helps the sap to rise in all these summer flowers. How glad flowers look!"

"Sunshine and light! Sunshine and light!" repeated the blind man dreamily. "I can feel them, you know, and I can hear the stir of life. Sometimes I fancy that I hear the plants growing. When no one is about I put my ear close to them to listen. But whether I hear or not, they grow."

The listening expression in his face had become more intent of late. He had been forced, by increasing ill-health, to give up his regular duty, though his many godchildren came to him at all hours of any and every day. He still paid surreptitious nightly visits to the chapel on the hill, whenever he could summon strength to get so far. No one could break him of that habit. It seemed to Esther that he had grown more mystical; that in truth he was always waiting for some whisper from the Invisible. She stayed three days with him in the little cottage in the dip of the downs. But they talked no more of Jasper or of her future plans, but only of village affairs, and of bees and flowers. She saw that even to hear about the outside world wearied and confused him now, and "After all, one must always decide for oneself in the end," thought she. Yet it had done her good to be there.

Esther had been slightly morbid about Applehurst. It was salutary to see it again, and to see it filled with a large happy family of commonplace boys and girls. They were, she owned to herself, cheerful and noisy enough to exorcise any number of gloomy ghosts. It was salutary to go about the village, and to revive those homely interests that had played a healthy part in her daily life. Mr. Carter told her that she "looked but pecky, yet no worse than was to be expected, considering where she had been." She missed Wilcox's surly greeting, but was introduced to several new members of the community. At every turn she noticed Jasper's improvements. She noticed, too, how strong had been the impression he had made on a by-no-means-impressionable folk. He had understood them, had taken them the right way from the beginning. His remarks were quoted as, though Esther was not old enough to verify the resemblance, his grandfather's sayings had once been quoted. He had played at being the squire, he who had no birth-right; yet it had not been all a comedy. Deep-rooted in his nature was a love of the soil he sprang from, that had been no pretence, but veritable instinct.

To Esther's immense relief the strange story of the once disputed inheritance had been successfully hushed up. Jasper's confession was still in the hands of the trustees whom the Major had appointed; it would never become public property. Yet it had been with a very sore heart that she had entered into the possession of her legacy. She had dreaded the probable questioning of the villagers. To tell the truth, though it is an unheroic truth, that fear alone had been almost sufficient to prevent her revisiting Applehurst for four

years. The first conversation she had on the subject of the claims of the quondam squire considerably surprised and startled her. She went to see Mrs. Greenback on the day following her consultation with Mr. Joel. Mrs. Greenback (less reticent than her neighbours) broached the subject that had been tabooed.

"So the Major came in for the old missus's property after all, miss," said she.

"It really was the Major's property from the moment Mrs. Mordaunt died," said Esther. "My aunt had not the power to leave Applehurst where she chose. It was entailed on Major Iredale, by the old squire's will. I cannot explain the whole business to you, but there is no doubt whatever that Major Iredale was entirely in the right."

"He always said as the master wasn't never poor Mr. Gatton," said the washerwoman. "But lor' bless you! we knew that much anyhow; leastways some half-dozen or more of us old ones knew. Why, I remember Mr. Gatton well (a poor miserable crittur he was!), and I never was of the opinion that he could have growed into the squire! No, no; I laughed in my sleeve at that. But there! blood's thicker than water, Miss Esther, and who should come after the missus but her own son? That wasn't so difficult to see neither!"

Esther drew a long breath. "Do you mean to tell me that at least half a dozen old people believed that the squire was not Mr. Gatton—but that you all held your tongues?"

"Ay, to be sure!" said she. "An' why not? Poor old missus! It weren't likely she'd want Major Iredale takin' the place of her own flesh and blood. When

once I got to understand that the law would have the better of our squire, if ever it was allowed as he wasn't Mr. Gatton, I kep' my tongue behind my teeth, so as he should ne'er be prevented coming to his own by any chance slip of mine. Oh, and he knew that well enough too, and trusted us old ones quite merry like. 'I'm not afraid of your memories, Mrs. Greenback,' says he one day, and he laughs as careless as running water. Some folk half trusts, with an eye on you to see as the trust ain't misplaced, but the squire, he'd put his life in your lap (like Sisera did with Jael) and trouble no more about it! I'm sorry he's gone! You may say what you will, Miss." Esther had said nothing, being absolutely struck dumb with amazement. "You may say what you will, but the law is one thing and Natur' is another. You can't drive Natur' out for good. If you turn her out o' the front gate and the flower-garden, she'll come through the pig-sty and the back yard, and she'll come back muckier than she was when you druv her out. I've seen that times and again. There's a many things I've seen and thought of as I've stood at my tub washing the family's linen."

She nodded towards the big house as she spoke. She was often unconsciously dramatic. Esther felt as if Mrs. Greenback had played the part of Greek chorus to the drama that had been enacted.

"I hope that you have got the new family's washing, Mrs. Greenback," she said, with a hasty change of subject!

"And that I have, Miss. There's plenty of 'em all told up there. There's the master and missus, and seven boys and six girls, and six servants. It's a good haul, and more than I can do single-handed at

my years. A big family's good for the place, I'm not denying that. Since the squire's been cheated of it, it's better sold than empty."

"He was not cheated," said Esther.

"And so you say, Miss, and you should know best. I hope I knows my place better than to contradict the quality. Yet it can't be denied, anyhow, that it's a sad pity such a nice gentleman was druv and inveigled out of his own."

Esther lingered still at the washerwoman's door. The little strip of garden, fenced off from the park by a wooden fence, was full of sweetwilliams and pinks. She waited while Mrs. Greenback picked a bunch for her, and while she waited, she contended with an almost irresistible desire to take the familiar way across the fields.

"The new family has gone for a picnic to Hurst Wood," said Mrs. Greenback, who kept a sharp and somewhat critical eye on the new family's doings. "One would think that there was trees enough in Applehurst park for 'em to stare at, but some folks always likes the taste of other people's pies better than their own. There'll be green stains on the young gentlemen's breeches, and Miss Agatha has dirtied two holland skirts already with the sticky stuff that comes out of them fir trees."

"Why, that's all the better for you," said Esther, laughing. "I am going to trespass. Don't tell tales of me, Mrs. Greenback." And she turned into the park.

Applehurst had put on all its summer bravery. Esther wandered from the path and greeted old friends again. Here was the place where one could

stand knee-deep in bracken. The fresh, pale green curling tips rose with their beautiful backward spring all round her. Here was the dip of ground where grew the tall plummy grass she loved. She turned aside to find the nook where "lords and ladies" forgathered, and she picked her fill of generous, ragged robins, of which one may "cut and come again. Here, too, was the sow-thistle which she had plucked for her tame rabbits, and there the strangely scented orchid, that curious flower that seems of character so unlike our other shy English hedgerow beauties. Esther paused to admire the purple spotted blossoms with their exotic brilliant splendour. Mrs. Greenback, she knew, made a mysterious drink called "Salep," from the orchid roots. Orchids reminded her of Mrs. Mordaunt and of Jasper.

It was five o'clock, but it was still hot. Esther was just thinking that she would rest for a few minutes among the bracken, when she descried two other trespassers a few paces in advance. Polly Greenback was sitting among the fronds. Her hands were clasped round her knees; she was sitting bolt upright in a very unyielding posture. Her hat was slightly tilted back, and she stared straight in front of her, not daring to blink, lest the tears which filled her honest brown eyes should fall, and be taken as signs of grace. Harvey was literally at Polly's feet. His red head shone in the midst of the cool greenery. Through the stillness of the summer evening his words reached Esther's ear.

"She'll bid you come to me, Polly. It's for my wife I want you, and you were meant to be a wife; she can't gainsay that. You are very fond of Miss Mordaunt—yes, I know; but you'll be fonder of me,

that's but natural. You are already, only you don't know it yet."

Esther turned her back on them and went softly away, making a *détour* to avoid hearing any more. Polly's reply was doubtless a vigorous dissent, but Polly had been listening all the same. Esther had wondered that the girl had volunteered to lodge in her stepmother's cottage, while her mistress stayed with Mr. Joel, but she had applauded the sensible resolution, being most unwilling to leave her maid alone in a London flat.

"I've made it up with my stepmother, Miss," Polly had said, "and I should like to see my poor father again. Stepmother, she smacked me too hard and too often when I was a little one; but she didn't mean so bad by me after all. One can't keep up ill-feeling for ever." To Esther's amusement she had added, after a thoughtful pause, "And poor father *is* too soft, Miss. To marry a too soft man makes the wife hard of tongue and temper, leastways among working folk like us. I wouldn't marry a man like poor father for the world."

"Well, she certainly won't," thought Esther. "Harvey does not seem likely to be too soft. But, oh dear! how I shall miss Polly."

That episode, which she had so unwillingly spied upon, added to the sensation of loneliness that seemed borne in on her by the very beauty of the summer evening, which was so full of life and love. How odd it was to think that she should be a trespasser here, in her old home. Had the Major been less decided in his recommendation to her to sell, would she ever have had the heart to cut herself loose from the place?

Esther was grateful to him for that last bit of advice. It had been very wise. "He generally was right," Esther said to herself, but in spite of that once damaging fact, she thought of him tenderly now. She wished that she could meet him, as she had so often met him, on his way up to the house from the station. Somehow she believed that she should not be at all scared, were she to encounter the Major's ghost. He had been so true a man, so absolutely honest, that she fancied that she should recognise his spirit at once were it to revisit the earth. "Some people one would certainly not know without their bodies," she reflected. "Cousin Becky, much as I loved and love her, I can imagine, might be unrecognisable to me. There was a good deal in her that I felt that I never fathomed. Perhaps that was just why she was so fascinating. Jasper, too"—

But here her meditations were cut short, for there, coming towards her under the trees, was the man to whom her thoughts had just flown.

Esther was so startled that she caught her breath and stood quite still watching his approach. Yet even at that moment she noticed a change in him. It *was* Jasper. Yet it was not quite the Jasper whom she had known.

"I have startled you," he said, when he got close to her. "I am sorry, Esther. I am only in England for a day or two. I came here to see you. I made a rush over to London, but found that you had left your flat and were staying with Mr. Joel. So I followed you here. Mrs. Greenback told me that you were in the park. I struck down to the hedge instead of following the path, because I remembered that, for some unknown reason, you used to like to shirk that path."

"It was very clever of you to have noticed and remembered that," said Esther. Her remark was flat and feeble, but her surprise at seeing him was too great to express, so she took refuge in this side issue.

Jasper smiled. At anyrate, it was his old smile. "Let us sit down on the grass," he said. "Did you suppose that I was my ghost?"

"For a moment—yes," said Esther.

"No; I'm alive again," said he. "I once played at having come out of a grave, eh? It was a bad game. I'm very much ashamed of it now. I had been badly hit, and I think that I was possessed by seven devils."

Esther looked at him with the grave, steady look that he remembered of old. "Well, I think so too," she said. "What are you doing now?"

"I was for Dr. R—s P—l, as you know," said he. "I am not for this half-Indian soldier who has proclaimed himself dictator. Caracas has been running with blood again, and what do they care? What can you do with these self-interested"—He stopped short. An expression she knew well came into his face. "Esther, you must think it a pretty farce, when I am virtuously indignant."

"No," said Esther. "I think that you are yourself again. Go on—tell me about these things that are happening in the world you come from."

So he told her, in a few short sentences. The story was not so full of colour and poetry as some he had once recounted for her interest and amusement; perhaps that was because he was "living" again, because, being in the thick of the struggle, he saw it, less as a whole,

and not so picturesquely. But to Esther, the curt, stern phrases conveyed a good deal.

"I believe that one day you will be President of Venezuela, and I believe that you will make a good one," said she.

"No; before that day arrives I shall be lying somewhere with a bullet through me," he said. "But, after all, that's not a bad end—a better one than I deserve."

"Don't!" said Esther, with a little cry of pain.

"Why, I didn't mean to make you unhappy," said he. "On the contrary, I came partly that I might tell you that you and Major Iredale between you saved me from worse things than bullets." He spoke with effort. This second coming back was very painful to him. "Esther, I never knew what a blackguard I had become till the moment when you told me that you thought that I had stabbed him. That woke me up, with a shock of horror. Then I should have ended the matter that night, as a bad job past mending, if it had not been for him. You see, I owed him something, and he trusted me to pay it, and so—well, that's enough of that. I suppose you partially understand?"

"The Major would be glad," said Esther. "I don't believe he himself had any idea of how good a man he was—but he would be glad."

"I came here to say that I am grateful to you, and to him," said Jasper. "And I came to speak to you about my child. Will you take care of her for my mother's sake? There is no one else to whom I could so willingly and safely trust her. I want her to be English, as you are,—thoroughly and completely English, you understand."

A faint smile touched Esther's lips. Would the child of Jasper and Maravilla be ever thoroughly and completely English, she wondered.

"If she were only a boy, I should risk difficulties (though I'm hardly cut out for a nursemaid) and keep the child with me; but I can't do that with a baby girl! She's devoted to me, poor little soul! She trots after me like an affectionate puppy dog, and clings to my legs to prevent my going away. When I leave her she storms like a small volcano. She is sick with the strength of her feelings—sick with temper, they say. I found she'd been beaten. I said my say—I wished there had been a man in the case, for someone ought to have been thrashed—and I took her away, and now she is with the old negress who had her before. Dinah spoils her, but what was to be done? I won't trust her with anyone else in a hurry—unless it's with you, Esther."

"Perhaps—you must forgive me if I am saying the wrong thing, Jasper; but it is rather obvious that perhaps you might marry out there, and so keep your child with you, and solve the difficulty."

He shook his head. "No. I can't do that. Mara is mine! I am not going to let her be bullied by a stepmother, who would consider her own brats, if she had any, on a higher level than the child of my—Miracle. Besides—well, there's another reason against marriage." He debated for a moment whether he would tell her more. Then—"I am perfectly sane now," he said. "But for some months after Maravilla left me I was out of my mind. And once before, when I was a lad, I went off my head—with rage, I suppose—after a scene that I needn't tell you about."

Gatton's misdoings were laid on my shoulders in pretty broad stripes on that occasion. When I came to myself it seemed to me as if the old grievance of my boyhood had somehow joined hands with the new grievance of my manhood. Yet it was my mother who really drew me home. I should not speak to you of these ugly subjects, Esther; but that it is better to give a confidence wholly, if one gives it at all. You will have the responsibility of my child, therefore it is fair that you should know."

Esther knew better than to make any comment on this revelation, as she saw him look away from her while he made it.

"You take it for granted that I shall take her," she said presently, in uncertain voice.

Jasper turned to her with his sudden smile. "Why, yes; I am sure that you will. I won't pretend that I don't know that, Esther. A pretty handful she'll be, too! But you will be very good to her."

"Oh, I don't know," said Esther. "I am not at all so sure. And how am I to bring her up? Is she to work for her own bread and butter some day, or will she always have money to spare? What do you wish her to learn? Am I to talk to her about you? What am I to tell her about her mother?"

"You may teach her what you like," said he. "To sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam, or the study of science, or to win at hockey. You shall have a free hand. I don't believe in responsibility without power. She won't ever have to earn her bread and butter, nor even her sugar and jam. She shall never, if I can prevent it, cost you a penny out of your own pocket. I don't want you to be her governess. Get anyone you

think fit, to stuff her little head with whatever you think proper. Tell her what you like about me, so long as you make her clearly understand that I am her father; that I always think about her; that I've not given her up, even to you; that she is the nearest possession I have; that she is mine, and I am hers always. I'll leave my character in your hands. I dare say it will come out far better than might be expected. About her mother"—his voice changed. "Some day I will tell her that story. No one else can. Esther, will you do this thing? Will you take care of my child and of Maravilla's now, and yet give her back to me some day? It is a great deal to ask of you; but you see you have done a great deal already. The people who give the fullest measure are always asked for more."

"Yes. I'll do it," said Esther slowly. "For your mother's sake, and for your own too, Cousin Jasper. She shall be *your* child; I will be loyal in that. Yet I think you are giving me something too."

They got up and walked slowly back to Mr. Joel's cottage, discussing plans as they went. The vigorous, practical side of the man showed itself now. Esther glanced at him once or twice, wondering whether his daughter would ever catch a glimpse of that other side of him, of the reckless, melancholy, and whimsical passion that had cost so much.

When they got to Mr. Joel's gate their hands met.

"No. I won't come in," he said. "I can't meet the old chap. There's another thing I can't do, Esther, though I should like to. I can't manage to thank you—because there is too much to thank you for. You'll be good to my child, I know. She has her mother's

blood as well as mine in her veins, so perhaps she won't turn out badly. There was a great sowing of dragon's teeth here once, and yet it looks pretty peaceful now." He looked round at the English landscape, softened at that hour by the evening haze. "There is nothing in the world so beautiful as England," he said; "but I shan't own so much as a grave here. Well, Esther, you have been very kind to Ishmael, in spite of his having been cursed from the beginning. By the bye, my daughter won't have the name she was christened by. She sticks to being 'Mara.' Her little tongue can't get round Rebecca. I only hope that the name, that means bitterness, won't be too appropriate."

"No, no," said Esther quickly. "God made Ishmael as well as Isaac, and thistles as well as vines. They *can't* be cursed in the end."

"Did He?" said Jasper. He held her hands very fast for a moment in his. "You should know best about such things, Cousin Esther. Perhaps you will prove right. If you do, you'll have helped your prophecy, which is the way of prophets. Good-bye."

He strode away, taking the path across the fields by which he had entered into her life five years before. Esther watched him out of sight, then turned with gladness and sorrow in her heart, but with no touch of fear.

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