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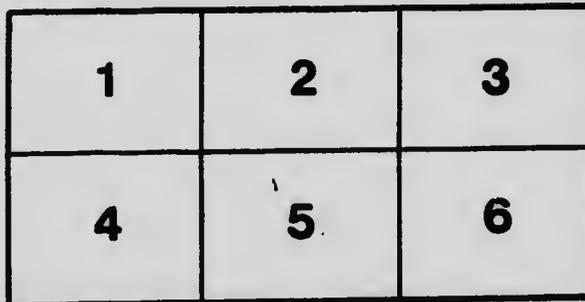
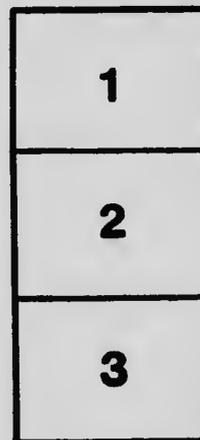
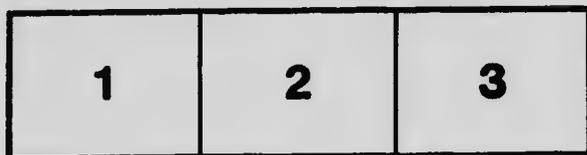
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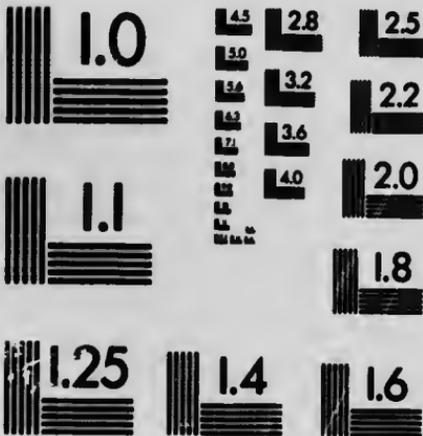
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THE
WORLD WELL LOST

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF

'PATRICIA KEMBALL' 'THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS' ETC.

He who for love has undergone
The worst that can befall
Is happier thousandfold than one
Who never loved at all ;
A grace within his soul has reigned
Which nothing else can bring—
Thank God for all that I have gained
By such high suffering !

LORD HOUGHTON.

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INSCRIBED
TO
THE TWO FAIR WOMEN
THE ONE OF WHOM SUGGESTED WHILE THE OTHER
STOOD FOR THE PORTRAIT OF
MURIEL

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THE WORLD WELL LOST.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. SMITH OF OWLETT.

THOUGH she had come without introductions and lived without friendships, few people were more respected at Grantley Bourne than Mrs. Smith of Owlett. Look at her character and conduct in what light you would, each was absolutely without flaw; and slander itself would have been hard put to it to find the undefended tract wherein to strike its sting. She lived well, as became a woman, say of sixteen hundred a year; but she lived with as little vulgar ostentation as sordid stint. If her establishment was simple it was of notable refinement, and she was both liberal in her appointments and punctual in her payments. Her place was considered by the local army of grumbling martyrs who had dedicated themselves to domestic service to be the most enviable place of all about; and though she kept no men-servants within-doors, her women were peaceful and contented, and generally stayed with her till they married. She subscribed generously to the local charities, but not so generously as to outshine her autochthonous neighbours; which would have been censurable in a new-comer and a mark of bad taste and defective breeding; and the clergyman and doctor could always count on her private aid when they went to her with their lists of misery and sickness, which money could remove and good food and wine alleviate.

Though lovely when she came, fourteen years ago, and handsome still for all her forty years and iron-grey hair, no one could accuse her of even the appearance of an indiscretion, not even though she had had her only boy educated at home under a non-

resident tutor; and with every man in Grantley Bourne to chant her praises, there was not a woman to sound a discordant note of blame. This was only justice; for she was singularly free in her own life from the vice of evil-speaking. Not a scandalous report could be traced to her as conduit or fountain-head; and no one had ever heard her prove her Christian charity and good feeling by decrying humanity in the abstract, or hounding down the sins of her neighbours in the concrete. She went to church regularly every Sunday morning, whether it rained or shone, and she performed all her other religious duties with perfect propriety and punctuality, but without excess; but she did not attend the missionary meetings or the school-feasts, any more than the local lectures or the cottage flower-shows, which occasionally broke through the deadness of life at Grantley Bourne and threw a washy kind of rainbow across its dull grey sky. She contented herself with sending her guineas and her children; but for herself she kept apart.

She never left home on any plea of business, change of air, paying visits to distant relatives, or the like. She had not been absent for a day, nor slept away for one night, since she first established herself at Owlett; and she was as unsociable in her habits as restricted in her area. She gave no parties and went to none; and though the people of the place called on her frequently, and brought her all the local news and latest gossip, because she was beautiful, interesting, a mystery—and safe—she rarely paid back a return visit; not oftener than once in a year or eighteen months; and no one could remember to have been greeted with: 'I am glad to see you,' or dismissed with: 'I hope I shall see you again soon.' It was but rational to believe that she had some good reason for this extraordinary reserve, which was not pride nor affectation nor yet that assumption of superiority known as giving oneself airs. Yet if she had, she did not give it. She never said that it was on account of her health or her principles, for this or for that. She simply declined all invitations whatsoever and gave none on her own side; and left the world to form its own conclusions why.

She occupied herself chiefly with her two children, whom she had educated with care under her own eyes; and she kept them as much as she could, without cruelty, from making friends on their own account with the children of the families about. She was not wholly able to prevent all intercourse, as witness the youthful familiarity between them and the Machells; but she did her best, and counted all ground gained as so much sorrow saved. As time went on however, and the little children grew into girlhood and

young manhood, it became more difficult to keep them thus apart from the neighbours. She had no reason to give why she did not wish them to mix with people of character and position every way as good as their own, and she had to conceal from them that she did not wish it; so by degrees it came about that the barriers were somewhat enlarged for Derwent and Muriel, and while she still remained close at home, the brother and sister went more abroad.

She was not a widow; and the children, when they first came, spoke often of dear papa—good papa—nice papa—who had gone away, they did not quite know where; but Derwent, who was then seven, thought it might be to Japan, and Muriel, who was five, nodded her sunny head in vehement attestation, and said: 'Yea, it was Japan—nurse said it was!'

Years passed but Mrs. Smith told her children as little as she told the world what had become of that fair-faced, kindly, sweet-tempered papa of theirs, whom they remembered as if he had been a prince in a fairy-tale, coming home in the evening laden with toys and good things, and giving each as many kisses as there were days in the month. She used to hear from him about twice in the year; but he only said that he was well, or had been ill; that he sent his best love to dear old Derwent, who was to be sure and learn to ride well and to stick to his Greek and Latin, and a thousand kisses to his sweet little Muriel, God bless her! And she gave no further particulars. For the last four or five years she had not heard at all, but she knew that he was well, she said, when the children questioned her; and she always promised them that he would come home some day. There were a great many photographs about the house of that handsome, bright and kindly face, with its patent vanity and as patent weakness running like a tarnished thread through the gold of the generosity, the kindness, the affectionateness, the sweetness, which were also just as patent. But there were none where the world could see them. They were all in closed frames in the rooms upstairs; each frame stamped with the family crest and motto; and the children were taught to hold them as too sacred to be shown. These portraits formed part of a certain domestic religion which went on in the father's name; and 'papa' was never spoken of to them by their mother save in terms of the most tender reverence, the most affectionate respect; and sometimes as a victim suffering for the sins of others.

The family had lived in London before they came to Grantley Bourne, but Mrs. Smith never gave the exact address. It had been at Kensington, vaguely; but Kensington is a wide district, and that intimation could scarcely be called precise. Still, there was most

the air of reticence than of mystery in all this; and as Mrs. Smith made no friendships she could scarcely be expected to give confidences. She had lived at Grantley Bourne, which was a quiet little dead-alive place in the Midland Counties, for fourteen years when this story opens; and as, during that time, not a human being had found occasion to fling a stone against her, though she had been watched with vigilance and had there been the chance would have been condemned without mercy—if she chose to live without friends and to give no confidences, to withdraw from society and devote herself to her children, this was not necessarily because she had any disgraceful secret to conceal. It is hard to credit an absolutely blameless woman with hypothetical sins after fourteen years of modest charities, domestic retirement, and practical inoffensiveness all round; and as the Vicar of the place, the Rev. John Oliphant, had said from the first that he believed her to be exactly what she appeared to be—a perfectly respectable and worthy lady; and as the Rev. John Oliphant was a man greatly esteemed by his parishioners, as a peaceful Christ-like man naturally would be, although perhaps somewhat wanting in that organized spirit of suspicion called knowledge of the world, his verdict carried the weight that it deserved to have, and Mrs. Smith was duly recognised, and labelled, and admitted, so far as she would accept admittance, into the society of the place.

Sir Gilbert and Lady Machell of Machells called on her; old Mrs. Perceval of the Manor called, and since her death her son Guy Perceval was often at Owlett; the two Misses Forbes of Tower—Dinah and Aurora—called; so did the Constantines from Sharpeley; so did the Brown de Paumelles, so soon as they had installed themselves at Paumelle House; and so of course did that bustling, active, keenly professional pair, Dr. Christopher Lucraft and his wife. These were the chief elements of which the immediate society was composed; and among all these families there was not one which set itself at cross-corners with Mrs. Smith of Owlett, or imagined that it was due to any fault of hers that her husband was in Japan while she was in Grantley Bourne.

The severest surmise ever broached was that he had run away with another woman, and that she had refrained from getting a divorce for the sake of her children; but many supposed, more charitably, that he had an appointment somewhere in an unhealthy climate, and that she had felt it her duty to stay at home with her little ones. By degrees conjecture concerning the personality and whereabouts of this unknown Mr. Smith wore itself threadbare; and by want of any solid point of contact the fact of there being a Mr. Smith at all dropped out of public holding altogether, and drifted

into the distance as a tradition which every one accepted and no one attempted to verify.

There were many finer places, but no prettier residence, than Owlett, in the whole district of Grantley Bourne. It was the perfection indeed of an English house of that kind which no one would raise to the dignity of a mansion nor dwarf to the humility of a cottage. The rooms were not too large to be homelike, and not so small as to be confined; the garden was not magnificent, but it was spacious and richly stocked; and, what with the care that it received and the sunny slope on which it stood, was always a fortnight in advance of every other in the neighbourhood. Machells, denuded as it had been by successive generations of spendthrifts till now it was the mere shell of a former fine estate, had still left to it a few ancestral oaks and elms and a broad stretch of lordly park, the like of which was nowhere else to be found. The Manor had a banquetting-hall and embayed windows, fountains and fishponds, 'pleached alleys,' and long straight grassy walks, and the most charming old red-brick walls where the peaches and nectarines grew like blackberries—all as befitted a Queen Anne house of the best fashion. Paumelle House, that brand-new stuccoed barrack with its forty bedrooms and lavish gilding, which the successful soap-boiler had built out of his gains, and where there were acres of 'glass' under which everything that could be grown was grown: these, the show places of the immediate neighbourhood, had each its own special charms; but for sweet, quiet English living, the sunny garden and picturesque house of Owlett were supreme.

Perhaps a hygeist would have objected to that high wall covered with ferns and mosses to the north, which held up the steep bank crowded with flowering shrubs and the lighter kind of forest trees, in that it checked the free circulation of air and made it too heavily sweet with the resinous odours of pine and fir and the mingled perfumes of mould, moss, and flower; to the trees that stood close round on every side, leaving only an open vista down the valley to the south; to the ivy and large-leaved 'elephant-creeper,' threaded through with roses and jasmine and elematis and honeysuckle, that grew over the house till not an inch of brickwork was visible. But the hygeist would have held up his hands with an axe in them, the artist would have thanked the Lord by making Owlett the *motif* of pictures which he would have sold handsomely at the private view.

It would have been too discordant if a place so beautiful had been tenanted by unlovely people—if the birds had not been worthy of the bower. Take the Brown de Paumelles for one instance; would they have suited this sweet quiet English home, so refined

and yet so simple, so pretty and yet so modest? He—short, stout, rubicund, shining; Brown by the truth of his parentage, de Paumelle from a small *terre* which he had bought somewhere in the south of Normandy for the sake of the title that went along with it—carrying ever about with him the sense of his present wealth and the reminiscence of his past calling; whose triple estimate of value was weight, size, price—what would he have cared for beauty that would not have fetched more than a beggarly five or six thousand pounds at the utmost in the market? And she—that timid, awkward, plain-faced little woman, with her high cheek bones and dust-coloured hair, who had withered under the weight of their acquired grandeur, not swollen to the size of their enlarged groove as he had done—how would she have looked as a picture standing framed in that flowery porch where Mrs. Smith so often stood looking down the valley that trended away to the south, watching, watching with those beautiful eyes of hers that were as sad as they were beautiful? She would have been no fit *châtelaine* for Owlett. Nor would their daughter Jemima, the mother retranslated—meagre, timid, colourless too, and with a curiously faded air for one so young, as if she had ‘wilted’ rather than ripened under the warmer sun and more generous treatment of their present—as if she had gone back upon the years when the Browns were but day-labourers, badly housed and worse fed, whose blood was half water and whose brains were not thoroughly vitalized, and who had not died of their misery and want as a proof of the amount of attenuation of which humanity is capable when tried. She, good and harmless as she was, would not have been the fitting genius, the natural nymph of the place, as she carried her poor little starved personality with prim decorum, conscientiously doing so many hours of exercise in and out the shrubbery walks where the lilacs flung out their rich scents and the laburnums dropped their golden blossoms, where primroses and sweet wood-flowers grew in a carpet for the happy feet that now ran lightly over the short smooth moss. Had they been there—he with his rampant vulgarity and flashy magnificence; they, the women, with their timidity and unlovely poverty of nature—they would have been as much out of place—well! as they were now at Paumelle House; though in a different way.

Things would have been no better with those hard, stiff, monumental Constantines of Sharpeley, for another instance; those types of the British Philistine unredeemed by one touch of poetry, one living spark of imagination; people who made war against the superfluous and had a dread of art and beauty as enervating to the intellect and leading weak souls to unknown dangers; people who made of life a tyranny and of virtue a rod whereby to smite the

bystanders. Had they lived in Owlett they would have torn down the creepers on account of the insects which they harboured and the dead leaves which they scattered; they would have had the black-birds shot because of the cherries, and all the little finches because of the peas; they would have caught the butterflies and moths that there might be no caterpillars next year; and they would have destroyed the big brown humble-bees because they make bad gardeners for those who love to be precise, and mix the colours of the flowers. No! those stiff monumental Constantines of Sharpeley would have been no more harmonious to Owlett than the Brown de Paumelles; and had they lived here they would have robbed the place of all its beauty, all its distinction.

Take the two Misses Forbes again:—Miss Dinah, like a grenadier in disguise, standing five feet ten, with a deep voice like a man's, and something that had long ceased to be down on her upper lip; Miss Aurora, at forty-five, and five years her sister's junior, full of the pretty coquetries, the sweet young playful artlessnesses of eighteen—as was indeed but natural to a creature called Baby still by her stalwart sister, and treated as a radiant thing just out of short frocks who had to be kept out of harm's way and protected, in spite of herself, against those doubtful lights which attract both moths and maidens to their ruin:—What would they have done at Owlett? Miss Dinah would have bred shorthorns in one part of the grounds and Miss Aurora would have put up lawn tennis and a toy tent in the other, where she would have sat in white muslin and pink ribbons and have served out tea in cups with butterfly handles and significant meanings, after she had skipped about with her racket, shaking her streaming curls and laughing shrilly at miss or hit alike. Upon which Miss Dinah would have appeared with her liney-woolsey petticoats cut clear above her hobnailed boots, her arms full of cabbages for her cows, and her sonorous voice calling out to the radiant thing in muslin:

'Well, Baby! what's the score now?'

To which Baby would have been sure to answer:

'Love all!' with a gush of rippling laughter, called by the profane by another phrase.

No! this pretty sheltered harmonious bower was not for the Misses Forbes any more than for the Brown de Paumelles or the Constantines.

If even good Mr. Oliphant had lived here, sweet-natured, pure, and simple-hearted as he was, he would have been as much out of place as the rest. Never knowing what went on about him, so long as he was left in his study undisturbed and his papers were not touched nor his books removed, his thrifty bustling old housekeeper,

Mrs. George, might have hung up the week's wash on the lawn and he would not have even seen the lines; and before twenty-four hours had passed the whole of his hens would have been squatting among the verbena and ignonette.

If Mr. Perceval had been there he would have cut down the ornamental trees in the shrubberies, to plant in their stead pines and blue gums for health; he would have levelled the bank for air, and have straightened every winding way; he would have dug up the flowers and have planted all manner of herbs for useful distillation; and he would have put up an observatory on the roof—as he had done at the Manor. All highly useful and creditable things in their way, but not suited to Owlett.

The Machells would have let the lawn go to grass, and would have cultivated only hardy perennials which wanted no gardener beyond a lad to give a day here and there of weeding and hoeing. And then my lady would have said, with that smooth air of hers which so heroically made the best of a bad business, that she disliked the present style of ribbon gardening, and masses of one kind alone in a bed edged round by a few sickly-looking leaves, and that she loved only the dear old-fashioned methods and growths. But her love, poor soul, would have been born of her poverty and high standing, which made life such a dreadful muddle and compromise at the grand old place which had once been the residence of minor kings and was now the refuge of practical bankrupts.

As for the Lucrafts, their ten noisy, ill-conducted children would have wrecked the place in a few hours, and all the loving care with which the house and grounds had been planned and kept by the former owner's dead wife, and with which they were kept still, would have been destroyed beyond redemption. No! Owlett, with its pretty fancies of arched trees and winding walks, of turfed seats and trellised arbours, its delicate growths set in the sunniest places, and its flowers of greatest fragrance blooming nearest to the windows of the house—sweet and dreamy Owlett would have been desecrated by the tenancy of any of these; but Mrs. Smith, beautiful, quiet, fond of beauty, refined, and her son and daughter, beautiful, quiet, fond of beauty and refined like herself, were, as all the world said, the very people for it. And there is a spirit in places as well as in persons, and one which demands as much harmoniousness of circumstance and use.

Standing away from the main road and hidden among its trees, Owlett was not an easy place to find for those who did not know the local map by heart. It stood full half a mile up a lane which led to nothing but itself; and which then, from a carriage road, narrowed abruptly into a mere grass-grown occupation path that

inally lost itself on the hillside behind. But though it stood thus apart and concealed, Owlett was full open to the sunny south and looked along the whole length of the valley to where the soft green hills sunk into the luxuriant plain of farms and fields, where belts of copeswood grew for the game and groups of finer forest trees for the birds; where pretty English villages with their peaceful churchyards slept in the sun, and the lordly mansions stood as centres of grandeur round which these minor atoms clustered; where no industry save that of agriculture made its gold out of ugly utility; but where all was quietness and beauty, with as few disturbing passions as exciting events.

The absolute quiet and retirement of Owlett, standing as it did out of the line of travel and as a spectator rather than an integral part of the landscape, suited one whose life was evidently withdrawn intentionally from the world, but who also had the artist's passionate love of beauty and as passionate sense of enjoyment. View and garden, background and accessories, all were perfect of their kind; and the pretty woman who lived among her flowers, like that Eve in the Eden who tended the Sensitive Plant, was the fit spirit of the place, so gentle, so unobtrusive, so reticent was she, keeping what secret there might be in her life as carefully as her house kept the secret of its existence from the world without, but never parting with her beauty, her sweet womanliness, her grace.

To judge by the outsides of things there could not have been a happier life than that led by Mrs. Smith of Owlett; always supposing that her unshared solitude, her unbroken retirement, was a matter of choice, and that it was by her own wish, uninfluenced by circumstances, that she neither invited visitors nor accepted invitations, never left home, made no excursions, nor even drove beyond a certain point, and lived this close and claustral existence which had almost passed into a proverb in the place.

What did she lack? She had sufficient wealth for need and superfluity alike. Though not notably robust, she was never ailing, and Dr. Christopher Lucraft had found both her and hers but unprofitable patients since she came to Owlett, and scarcely worth the trouble of courting. She had two handsome, well-principled, admirable young people for her pride and her companions, her hope and her support; and she was respected by every one who knew her. The world, which never looks deeper than the surface when the under-current has no dramatic interest whereby it may be amused, which does not care for sorrow unless it be sorrow that has a history—sorrow that might reveal a tragedy which would astound the explorers if only they could come to the true heart of it—after the first few years ceased to trouble itself about Mrs.

Smith's biographical possibilities, and contented itself with supposing her to be as happy as any one else, because she wore no placard, gave no sign through tears, complaints, or confidence, that the once fragrant garden of her life was now a desert, and that her day of warmth and joy had passed into the endless night of cold and sunless regret. As with some others who smile back into the eyes of those who smile on them, and keep their foxes so well hidden that the bystanders hear no echo of the stifled moan, so did Mrs. Smith keep her sorrow so carefully concealed that not even her own children knew what she suffered, or suspected indeed that she suffered at all.

But those who had known her in the old days when she lived at Kensington, and before she came to Grantley Bourne, might perhaps have guessed that all this seeming charm of life, this quietness which looked the very perfection of content, must perforce have another reading when they remembered her as she was then and saw her as she was now.

As she was then:—In one of the most charming of the smaller houses in that favourite locality which the wealthy middle class has made its own—a house furnished and arranged with three times the cost and luxury of Owlett, if scarcely with better taste—a house which was the centre of its own circle, where strangers longed to be received and of which the intimates were proud of their standing; the whole of the current gaiety of London at the feet of the beautiful young wife of the rich city merchant, for whose pleasure her husband spared no expense, and whose happiness was his main thought; that husband the junior partner of an old-established firm, the name of which was held to be as safe and honourable as the Bank itself—handsome, young, fond and faithful; two children beautiful as Italian 'amorini':—where was the speck on this exquisite fruitage of fortune? the canker in this fragrant flower of a smiling fate? Who can tell? Only this—that it all faded away in a night, and was as if it had never been.

One evening as the husband and wife were alone at dinner—strangely enough, this evening alone, before going to the Opera—with the little children in the room as their happiness before bedtime, and their mother dressed in that well-remembered dress of hers which became her so well—the black velvet with the dark crimson lines about the edges, and the pomegranate flowers in her hair; a friend—came to the house, who took Mr. Smith away with him in a cab, never to return.

Soon after this the house and effects were sold privately, and Mrs. Smith came down to Grantley Bourne, where her husband's uncle Louis, the head of the firm, bought Owlett for her occupation,

and kept her there on sixteen hundred a year. Since that evening she had not seen her husband face to face or alone, and for the last fourteen years she had not seen him at all.

And now, comparing her position then and her position now—the circumstances by which she was surrounded then and those wherein she stood now—would those who knew her then have said that her life now was as happy as, judging by outside circumstances, it seemed as if it ought to be—as if indeed it must be? Scarcely. A woman does not suddenly lose out of her life a husband whom she adores, and by whom she is adored, and not feel the sorrow of her widowhood; she does not suddenly abandon a circle of favourite friends and congenial companions, and not feel the dreariness of her solitude. But if she has, as Mrs. Smith had, constancy and courage, she can keep the temple of her mourning sacred from prying eyes and intrusive feet; and, carrying about with her the pale hope of a lustreless to-morrow, she can wait in silence for the future. The future. Yes, this was the keynote of her life. It was just waiting—waiting—for the present to pass; and then—the future.

CHAPTER II.

'DREAD SHAME.'

THE day was warm and fresh, full of sweet scents and luminous shadows; full too of that indescribable buoyancy and unshaped hope belonging to the early days of spring, which seem the earnest of some rare happiness to come; one does not know what, but surely of some!—surely days not to fall like unset blossoms fruitless from the tree!

Mrs. Smith was sitting between her two children on the garden seat beneath the tulip-tree on the lawn, knitting diligently in coloured silks. For this was one of her characteristics—she was never unoccupied. But that she was so still and self-controlled, people might have thought her industry feverish—taken as a charm to banish thought, rather than the spontaneous expression of an active mind and energetic temperament. The cause being what it might, the fact stood the same; and Mrs. Smith's industry was the theme of many eulogies. Her beautiful needlework of all kinds, her exquisite sketches and charming music—these last displayed to seldom as to have become almost traditional, and magnified

accordingly—were counted to her as virtues equal in moral importance to her charities and in personal grace to her perfect carriage and handsome eyes. Her needlework especially scored high for her in the estimation of her neighbours, and did more to propitiate the women in her favour than anything else that she did or was. Fine linen and cambric muslin are so eminently respectable! No woman can be doubtful whose hems are laid by a thread and whose stitching is as even as a row of seed pearls. And as Mrs. Smith's plain needlework was as perfect as her artistic, her darning as beautiful as her embroidery, the opinions which she gained on that head were of pure gold, and their value carried on to the other accounts.

Fourteen years ago she had been supremely lovely; and even now she was handsomer than many titular beauties in their prime. She was a woman of middle height and size, with a dead white skin like the petal of a magnolia, set off by large dark lustrous eyes which had something in them so deep and still as to be almost oppressive, something that made them look like sentinels always watching and on guard. Her abundant hair which had been coal-black, was now an iron-grey looking at a distance as if slightly powdered, and worn in the fashion of La Pompadour; her eyebrows were as level as if they had been ruled with a pencil; her forehead was low and broad; her nose high and finely shaped, with transparent nostrils that quivered easily; and her lips were thin, compressed, and firm. Her pale still face rarely lightened by a smile, and then by one how sad! never breaking into mirth, never darkened by ill-humour, was rather a mask than a face, save for those dilating nostrils which seemed to speak of a more eager and sensitive nature than that which she allowed to appear; but she was noticeably gentle in speech and manner, and, if reticent and reserved, neither hard nor unkind. In action she was pitiful, if sparing in word; and no one who came to her with a tale of distress or the appearance of misfortune ever left her unsoothed or empty-handed. But she said little; and if sometimes her fixed dark eyes looked as if tears might be stealing over them, her voice never quivered, and she was never known to allow herself the luxury of a woman's emotional sympathy.

Her children loved her with passion a little tempered with awe. She was a kind of goddess to them, whom they adored without approaching too near—a divinity at whose feet they knelt rather than a mother in whose arms they lay. And this because, good and true and devoted to them as she was, she held herself substantially as much apart from them as from the world. As has been said, what there was of sorrow or secrecy in her life she kept absolutely

to herself, and admitted them to no participation—not though both now were of an age to be initiated into the realities of their family life. The consequence had naturally been to throw Derwent and Muriel into still stricter companionship together, and to make their love for each other stronger and deeper than the ordinary love of brother and sister.

Of the two, Derwent was tall, dark, reticent, like his mother; proud too, like her, and as tenacious; with a dash of the father's vanity shot through the untried self-confidence of his youth—as was not surprising in a clever lad who has been educated at home; who is adored by his sister and treated with courtesy by his mother; who, if not quite the master of the house, is at all events the acting lieutenant and master in his degree till the rightful owner appears; who, so far as he knows, is at the top form in everything, never having measured himself with a rival, consequently never having found his level; and who knows no reason why he should not hold up his head with the best, and despise all who are not of the bluest blood and most stainless honour, as befits one with a name above reproach and a family history beyond suspicion.

Muriel, on the contrary, was like her father, with fair hair and a blush-rose face, large limpid grey-blue eyes, and a fresh mouth, fuller and softer than her mother's if with more firmness than her father's had. As she sat there by her mother's side, a piece of embroidery in her long fair hands, her face shaded by her broad-brimmed hat and her slight figure outlined to perfection in her close-fitting cream-coloured dress, with the dark red ribbon at her throat and the flowers in her breast, she was the ideal of an English girl of that kind which in youth demands nothing but books and flowers, home peace and family love, the sunshine in the summer and the crisp clear frost in the winter for its perfect happiness; but which has the potentialities of a womanhood strong if always sweet, capable of quiet self-sacrifice if not of showy deeds of dramatic daring—a womanhood infinitely loving, infinitely pitiful, but with affections not passions, and whose convictions would be the result of sentiment and reverence, of love and the 'right thing,' rather than of logic against feeling. With dignity, but knowing nothing of the ordinary woman's instinct for petty tyranny, she was one whom those given to her command would love but never approach with that familiarity which breaks down into contempt. Sensitive to beauty and alive to the grandeur of what the world calls success, achievement, and distinction, but personally modest, she would be ambitious for the men of her house rather than for herself; finding in the reflected lustre of her husband's fame, her father's honour, her son's success, a truer adjustment of things than any to be had

from her own direct glory. She was one too, who would always retain that fine and honourable reverence for men as the stronger leaders of life, which once characterized the noble womanhood of England—one who would always believe in the beauty of obedience, and practise the religion of duty. She was somewhat a rare creature to be found in the present day in this dear country of ours, where, yet once—long ago—the name of woman was synonymous with the gentler virtues, the purer graces of humanity. She did not want to become a medical student, nor to deliver lectures on doubtful subjects to mixed audiences; she did not think her womanhood a degradation nor modesty a sign of weakness; she did not despise her home in favour of ‘causes,’ nor find domestic life a humiliation, while coarse full-flavoured rank publicity gave the only zest to existence. She did not go in for woman’s rights, though she was strong on woman’s duties; and she neither drank dry sherry nor talked slang.

Of these two children of hers—the one so honourable and high-spirited, the other so sweet and faithful, and both so true—Mrs. Smith spoke the simple truth when she said one day to Mr. Oliphant: ‘They have never given me a day’s sorrow since they were born:’ unless she had added, as she might with pitiful earnestness: ‘save in the fact of their being born at all!’

As they were sitting now under the tulip-tree, Muriel, who had been reading English history in the morning, said suddenly after a long silence:

‘I have always fancied that papa is like Sir Philip Sidney, mamma—just such an honourable, high-minded gentleman—so courteous, so tender, so true.’

The handsome dead-white face did not move a muscle; only the thin nostrils quivered.

‘Your likeness is not a bad one,’ she said quietly. ‘Your father is, as you say, a perfectly gentle and fine-natured man’

‘I can just remember him,’ continued Muriel. ‘I can remember his coming home one day and bringing me that large wax doll which I have yet; and his kissing me one night at dinner, and crying when a strange gentleman came in. I don’t remember much more.’

‘That was the night when he went away,’ said Derwent.

They had said all this twenty times before, but the sweetness and pleasantness of the absent father, with what they were beginning to feel was a certain mystery about him, were of ever fresh interest to them;—a subject of which they never tired.

‘Yes,’ said their mother; ‘that was the night when he went away.’

'How kind he always was to us!' said Derwent. 'I remember how he used to ride us both on his knees, and the pretty little pony he bought for me!'

'He was a very fond father, and very generous,' said Mrs. Smith.

'Poor dear papa, how I wish that he would come home!' sighed Muriel, her eyes large and tender.

'He will some day,' said the mother, as she had said for the last fourteen years when the subject was discussed as now, and as so often it was discussed. She never checked them in their talk of their father, though she gave them no information.

'You will be having a letter soon, mother, surely! It is a long time now since you heard from him;' said Derwent with a yearning accent.

'Yea. I should think very soon now,' she answered.

'How delightful it would be if he said in it when he would be home!' cried Muriel. 'I wonder where he is now, poor darling papa! How happy he will be when he comes back! He will not know Derwent or me. Fancy how odd—a father not knowing his own children; but I am sure that I should know him if I met him anywhere!'

'It will be only for the first moment that he will not recognise you. Your faces will grow back to him after a short time, though you were such children when he left you,' answered the mother, always speaking quietly and continuing her work, not raising her eyes as she spoke, and so, not looking at her children.

'You will not be so much altered as we shall be,' continued Muriel. 'You are just the same as ever; only you dress your hair a little differently; but you are very little changed from your photographs.'

'I am stouter and grey,' she said.

'And handsomer, mother,' said Derwent lovingly.

'I fear that is rather the verdict of a partial judge than of a candid critic,' returned his mother, still intent on her work. 'Fourteen years—from twenty-six to forty—do not add to a woman's good looks.'

'Papa will not think so, mamma,' said Muriel.

'Whatever I am he will be content with me,' she returned; then she added in a voice that seemed to be artificially steadied: 'He loves me too well to criticise me too closely.'

'Poor mamma! what a life for you to have led, and papa too!' cried Muriel. 'How good you have been, and how brave! You never complain!'

'There is no wisdom in complaining when we cannot alter

things, my girl,' answered her mother. 'Your father was forced to leave us; and all that I had to do was to take care of you, and bear his absence patiently.'

'At all events, absence is not like dishonour,' said Derwent.

His mother laid down her knitting and calmly wound up her ball of silk.

'No,' she said in her quiet level voice, which to a keen observer gave the impression of something controlled, some strong emotion batted down under the hatches of a stronger will, quite as much as did her statuesque face with that one tell-tale indication alone left as a sign; 'absence is not, like dishonour, as you say, Derwent.'

'With the fearful things which happen every day now, I do not think that anyone can be too thankful for an honourable name,' the young fellow continued, lifting his handsome head with the proud little action habitual to him. 'No one knows now who is safe.'

'You are right, my boy; and yet if even the sorrow of shame were to come into a family it would have to be borne,' she said quietly. After a slight pause she added: 'And the erring member cherished and forgiven.'

'Mother! cherished! You cannot mean that surely,' cried Derwent, full of the pitiless scorn of wrong-doing natural to virtuous youth which has never known a temptation stronger than its principles, and which thinks that no one should fail because it has been able to resist.

'I said what I mean,' was her answer. 'Pity is sometimes nobler than condemnation, and a family must stand or fall together.'

'If ever I disgraced my family I should like to be disowned by them; and I should expect to be disowned,' he cried hotly. 'Our motto is, "Dread shame," and I for one have taken it to my heart.'

She looked at him straightly, firmly, quietly.

'If you were ever so unfortunate as to fail your own ideal and disgrace your family—and its motto—your mother at least would stand by you,' she said.

'And your sister,' said Muriel, slipping her hand into his.

'And I—I would not accept your self-sacrifice!' was Derwent's answer. 'A man should be the pride of his family, not its disgrace. I take my strength from my mother and sister!—bolster up myself by dragging them down!—never! If I ever did as you say, mother, fail my ideal, I would leave you and never see you again. And I am sure, from what I remember of him, that my father would say I am right!'

'Do not let us talk of such dreadful things, Derwent,' said Muriel, leaning forward and looking up into his face with her dear grey eyes full of love and admiration. 'It is a kind of sacrilege to connect our boy's name with disgrace, or dishonour, or anything like that—is it not, mamma? Let us talk instead of what you will do when you have got that place at the Viennese Embassy which uncle Louis has promised you. For you know, mamma and I have to come out to you, and you have to rise to be ambassador yourself some day!'

'If I believed all that you said, Muriel, I should expect to be King of England before I died,' Derwent answered with a little pretence in his deprecation.

He was a fine young fellow in every way, but he was only a man after all; and being a man, and not a saint nor a hero, a woman's unlimited belief in him, and love to correspond, came naturally as his deserts. He believed in himself too entirely not to accept another person's faith as his due; and he loved Muriel too fondly on his own account not to find her love for him a just tribute honestly rendered.

'Well, I daresay you would be if there was a revolution,' said Muriel laughing, but defending her position all the same.

'What do you say, mother—would you like to see me King of England?' he asked playfully.

'Better than ambassador or king if you will develop into a wise and understanding man,' said his mother; 'a man pure and honest for your own part, yet able to distinguish between a fact and a circumstance—able not only to forgive a fault, but even to love the motives which led to it, and to pity and respect the criminal.'

She spoke rather more slowly than was even usual with her, and she always spoke slowly; returning to her subject with a certain impressiveness that struck both Derwent and Muriel as meaning more than her words. And yet what could she mean?

'I think that would be hard for me to do, mother,' said Derwent. 'We are all only good for what we are at our best; and no reasoning can excuse weakness—the weakness of sin above all—nor make wrong right.'

'You speak as the young always speak,' said Mrs. Smith, putting away her work. 'Youth is hard; perhaps it ought to be so. It is only by experience and love that we come to that wider judgment which can see all round a thing, and which pities as much as it condemns—which pities more than it condemns.'

'If this is true I do not see where you place your standard of right and wrong, dear mother,' returned Derwent gently enough so far as she was concerned, but with the young dialectician's eagerness

for an argument; 'or of what use it is to have any standard at all. If a thing is not absolute it is relative; and the argument that virtue may change according to circumstance is simply an argument for vice, no more, and one that makes vice and virtue interchangeable terms.'

'You will grow into my position in time, my boy,' she answered quietly. 'Meanwhile, believe that I speak out of an experience greater than your own, when I say that, although we must at all times hold virtue absolute as you say, for ourselves, we may and must make it relative for others, and excuse in them the thing which we condemn in ourselves. These are things about which there is no arguing,' she continued, rising. 'They are parts of a knowledge which comes only in later years, and by increased experience—knowledge which you must take on trust till you get it for yourself. Do not come in yet, Muriel,' she said to her daughter, who also had risen; 'I am going into my own room. Do you stay here with your brother.'

She looked at them both with a loving look, which in any other mother would have been a smile, then walked slowly across the lawn; stood in the porch for a few minutes as if to examine the first little buds that were beginning to form, and so through the hall into her own room upstairs.

And when there the impassive mask fell, and her calm face changed into one of pinched, sharp pain. But even now she did not cry aloud, nor fling herself on her knees, nor shed tears, nor rave; she seemed to be afraid of losing her self-control even when alone. She merely stood by the table holding her husband's portrait in her hand—the portrait of that fair, weak, handsome face, so kindly and so pleasure-loving, so sweet-tempered and so vain, with the ambitious motto of 'Dread Shame' stamped in gold beneath the no less ambitious crest—an ermine holding a lily in its mouth. Her hands were tightly clasped and strained; her eyes were fixed and burning; and her thoughts shaped themselves into the unbroken words, which indeed were those by which her life was haunted:

'My love! my beloved! I will be true to you always—but my poor children, my poor ruined children, disgraced and destroyed for ever! But you, my love! you shall come to your throne, to your shelter, to your altar, where no one shall reproach you, and where you shall gain back your self-respect through love. My husband, my beloved—but oh! would that my poor children had never been born!'

CHAPTER III.

UNDER THE TULIP-TREE.

DERWENT and Muriel remained sitting under the tulip-tree where their mother had left them, discussing that mother's new philosophy. Derwent, full of the high-strung ideas of the godliness of honour and the degradation of moral weakness natural to his youth and true to one of his temperament, refused to receive it in any sense, as he said to his sister disdainfully; and he bombarded her with quotations, both Latin and English, to prove that he was right, and that his mother and the theory of forgiveness were alike wrong. But Muriel, whose womanly pity rose to that justice which stands higher than legality, said she thought that it might be the best thing under certain conditions.

'It is not to love honour less but mercy more,' she said, in answer to the quotation with which he finally sought to overwhelm her:

I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more.

'We have all so much to be forgiven that we cannot afford to condemn others; we condemn ourselves if we do.'

'But forgiven what?' Derwent answered. 'You cannot class a few childish misdemeanours with grave crimes, nor rank unimportant faults and shameful dishonour as things to be judged by the same standard.'

'Perhaps there is not so much difference between them if we take into consideration the power to resist and the force of the temptation. Wrong-doing lies in wilful yielding to temptation more than in the thing that is done,' was her sensible reply.

'Muriel! let me beg of you not to make yourself the apologist of wrong-doing or of wrong-doers,' cried Derwent, assuming his elder-brother air of authority; 'it pains me more than I can bear. It is what you said to me just now—sacrilege to hear your lips defend evil—sacrilege ten times over!'

'Well, darling, do not let us speak of it any more,' she said.

'That is not it, Muriel. Not speaking of a thing does not alter the fact of its existence. I want you not to think such thoughts, not to keep silent on them.'

'You know, Derwent, that I do not want to think differently from you in anything,' she answered very tenderly. 'And you

know, too, that I would not willingly pain or vex you by word or deed, anyhow or anywhere; don't you, boy dear?' lovingly.

He put his arm round her waist and gave her a boyish hug.

'I know that you are the sweetest little sister in the world, and that I am the luckiest fellow going in having such a mother and such a sister. But you see, Muriel, while my father is away I am the only man in the family; and,' superbly, 'it is my duty to take care of you in every way, and to prevent your taking up wrong notions as well as doing foolish things. Girls know so little of life!'—and he, the home-bred lad who had not tried his young wings yet half-a-dozen miles from the home-nest—he knew so much!

'Yes, dear, I see,' returned Muriel. 'Of course you feel your self responsible.'

'If only our father would come home,' said Derwent, with a sigh. 'You cannot think what a loss it is to a man not to have a father to tell him things. It has been the worst misfortune of my life to have been brought up away from him; I feel it more and more every day.'

'Yes, if only papa would come home, how happy we all should be!' echoed Muriel. Then she added tenderly: 'But after all, Derwent boy, you have not done so badly, brought up at home and without a father as you have been. Our boy is as good as the best to be found anywhere; still, if papa had only been at home—'

'Yes, if he had been! Muriel, I wonder where he is? I wish that my mother would tell us. I think I am now of an age to know—close on twenty-one. I do not like to press it, but I feel as if she is scarcely treating me fairly; for, after all, he is my father, and I am a man now.'

'She has some good reason, be sure,' said Muriel, looking into her brother's moved face with as much yearning in her own. 'I should not ask her if I were you, Derwent, if she does not volunteer. She might not like it; and if she does not tell she must have some good reasons.'

'Still, I ought to know; and I think she should confide in me more than she does,' returned Derwent. 'There are times when I can scarcely refrain from asking her point blank where he is and what he is doing; demanding to know by my right as a son!'

'Poor Derwent! it is hard, but you had better wait,' she answered; and then they drifted off into the old fond talk of what they remembered, and what they believed, and how he would find them changed, and the like, till the subject grew from a present pain to a past poem; and, not the father as he was at this moment, but the dear papa as he had been when they were children, filled their minds and hearts. And from this they wandered away to

Derwent's brilliant future at the Viennese Embassy, which they embroidered with all those pleasant fancies, that delightful nonsense of delusive hopes, which, to love on the one side and ambition on the other, seem such excellent good sense and so sure of fulfilment. For, as Muriel said, sagely enough: Some one must be the great man of the rising generation, and why not Derwent as well as another?

That Viennese Embassy was to do everything on earth for them all. Derwent was to rise by leaps, not steps, till he came to be H.E. the Ambassador himself somewhere; when his mother and Muriel would go and live with him; and the father would come too; and all would go merry as wedding bells—the true wedding bells not chiming even in imagination with the one—with the other perhaps as a faint and delicate echo striking through the rougher sounds of every-day existence.

While they were sitting there talking themselves into perfect happiness for the moment, if the roots thereof were planted in the shifting sands of nowhere, the lodge-gate opened and Wilfrid Machell with his sister Hilda came up the drive, walking. The Machells were all good walkers, as people generally are who live in the country without horses; and even Hilda, who was but a slight fragile kind of thing in her way—owing more of her strength to blood than to bone—was able to go distances which, to town-bred folk to whom two miles are one and a half too long, were simply appalling and might have seemed reprehensible. For that, too, is what your average reasoner does:—makes a Procrustes' bed of his own powers, moral and physical, and judges of the world in conformity therewith.

Muriel, who saw them first, her face being turned that way, cried out in a tone of frank pleasure:—

'Oh, Derwent! I am so glad; here are Captain and Hilda Machell.'

The blood came into Derwent's delicate dark face.

'Yes, so it is. Let us go and meet them,' he said quietly, getting up from his seat, not with a start and a plunge, but with perfect grace and self-possession a little tinged with vanity, as belonged to all his personality. Yet, his quietness notwithstanding, his nostrils were dilated like his mother's, and his eyes were bright and eager. Muriel rose too, in no wise disturbed, save that her blush-rose face, sensitive to all emotions, had a slightly warmer tint on its fair surface; and brother and sister went across the lawn to meet the other brother and sister come to visit them.

There were greetings of the usual kind. The men took off their caps, and the women shook hands but did not kiss. Captain

Machell's hard plain face lightened at least to the degree demanded by good breeding; perhaps about the small, deep-set, steel-grey eyes was a look that went a trifle beyond that degree, and a flush was under the thick and heavy skin which did not come only from the exercise of walking. But Captain Machell was a man who had cultivated the Englishman's stolid stoicism of mind and manner, of thought and bearing, till it seemed as if the ultimate perfection of humanity must be to be found in a lobster, say, or a tortoise, or any other thing with a heart and nervous system closely imprisoned in an outer case of bone or horn, or what you will, that gives no sign of feeling and that defies all endeavours to make it feel.

Hilda was of that odd kind of likeness to her brother sometimes found between two people of different sex, and where one is plain the other beautiful. He was thick-skinned, and mealy in both colour and texture; she was transparent, dark, pure white and red—gossamer to his granite. But underneath all her surface softness, perhaps she was capable of as much decision and self-sacrifice as he. At all events she was a Machell; and no Machell had yet been found wanting in will when the time for its use came. At the present all was latent, undeveloped in her. She was but a girl still in the schoolroom, and not 'come out;' it was early to speculate on her possibilities of character; and, to do her brother Wilfrid justice, he never did.

Hilda brightened and blushed too as she greeted Muriel warmly and Derwent shyly; and as Derwent held her hand in his and looked into her bewitching eyes, whatever was best in him came to the front, and he forgot both his vanities and his affectations in the poetic idealisation of a boy's first love. As for Muriel, she simply looked glad as at any other pleasant little event; and if her face had a warmer tint, it was more because her skin was of the kind to flush easily than because Wilfrid Machell, with his tall figure and rough-hewn face, was there. She had no special love for him in any way, and there was no reason why she should blush at seeing him.

Then they went back to the tulip-tree, in natural pairs, for the half-hour's talk which was to send two among them still deeper into the fool's paradise in which they had lately begun to live.

Young love nourishes itself on very little. If an eyebrow is occasion for a sonnet, a look, a smile, and half-a-dozen words on the merest trivialities are sufficient to make hope a certainty and the moment's pleasure earnest of a future lifelong and enduring rapture. Directness is the last thing thought of. When Derwent and Hilda were talking about croquet and Badminton, the favourite new novel and the poem of the season, whether gladiolus should

be pronounced gladiolus or gladiolus, they were talking of what nourished and represented to them Love as much as if they had mentioned it by name and dilated on their mutual feelings; but love in the vague and shadowy stage—the first flush in the east before the sun has risen—the tender little crumpled leaves breaking through the sheath before the husk gives way or the bud fairly opens. No one who had only overheard them, and had not seen their faces—his sparkling, earnest, ardent; hers soft, receptive, happy—would have suspected that they were in love; but an adept would have seen it, though only one of the two concerned would have confessed it if taxed with that strange sweet sin against rest and peace. It was Derwent who was beginning to confess to himself that he loved Hilda Machell. As yet the future was a mere dream, governed by possibilities of the kind to be translated into facts when good genii will take the place of those prosaic social considerations which now regulate the affairs of men. He was in the state wherein he longed to do some great deed that she might love him and be proud of him :—

Fighting up my way to fame—
 Fortune gain that you might share it—
 Make a name that you might wear it,
 And be proud to bear my name;

wherein he longed to be able to sacrifice his life for her, as the poor 'bold and lovely knight' sacrificed his for the Lady of the Land, well rewarded if only she would strew flowers on his grave and sit there in the summer moonlight, and be sorrowful and sad-hearted; wherein he found a special value in that moonlight, and ran great risk of taking cold by leaning out of his bedroom window in his shirt-sleeves, composing halting rhymes and dreaming romantic dreams, rather than going to his bed as a wiselike, douce, and Christian body should, when the church clock had chimed midnight. At the back of all this was a vision, faint and tenderly sketched in, of an exquisite English house with a lovely little person standing at the gate to welcome the husband's home-coming in the evening—a lovely little person called wife, and Hilda, and held as his own for ever—the money for the maintenance of this vision to be had by some miraculous advancement in the diplomatic service; means not clearly made out.

Hilda had not come into any such consciousness of her state as this; and was far yet from weaving intelligible visions or dreaming coherent dreams. Her condition was one to be summed up simply in these words: she liked being with Derwent Smith better than with any one else—because she did; she thought him quite the handsomest young man in the world, and the most

agreeable—not even excepting her brother Arthur, who came next; what other people called his vanity seemed to her only a proper manly self-assertion, and she would not like him to be different in any way from what he was; Muriel was the dearest girl that could possibly exist, and with such a pretty voice! so like her brother's!—and Owlett was the most charming place in all Grantley Bourne. She admired it so much! She was never happier than when she was there:—all for artistic love of the flowers and the trees, the picturesque house with its twisted chimneys and gable roof rising above the flower-hid façade, and that steep slope of varied foliage banked up by the old wall covered with mosses and rare ferns; it was only her artistic appreciation of all this which made Owlett so charming to her; in no wise because Derwent's image was intermingled therewith, and Derwent's presence was to be found therein. But the first stirring of a maiden's unacknowledged love is of all things on earth the most shadowy and self-deceiving—the tenderest in form and the purest in colour. So beautiful is it that it is almost a pity when it has to be exchanged for the fuller knowledge of a woman's riper passion.

As for Captain Machell—Wilfrid to his friends—for the last two years, whenever he had been down at Machells, he had gone to Owlett as often as he could find excuse or occasion. He had gone with the same feeling that a poor artist might have when standing before the masterpiece which he covets before all else in the world, but which by no possible stroke of good fortune can ever be his. No one read his heart underneath that cold manner and plain hard face of his; least of all Muriel, to whose thinking, innocently unjust, the rugged surface was the true evidence of the ungentle nature beneath. But Wilfrid was brave enough to acknowledge the truth to himself, and strong enough not to allow passion to overcome resolution, personal pleasure the duties of his position. A poor captain in the army with an empty purse now, a ruined estate and a fine old name for his inheritance, what right had he to think of love in marriage? unless he could find it in that rare gift of kindly fate—a woman beautiful, young, rich, and love-worthy all in one. He must marry money: he and his younger brother Arthur, and his sister Hilda. They must all marry money; and Mrs. Smith, though well off for one of her modest refinement of living, had evidently no fortune to give or bequeath that would disencumber Machells and restore the old family to its rightful position in the county. Muriel might be the very ideal of womanhood in herself, but another man must win and wear her, he used to think bitterly when the fever fit was on him more badly than usual; and like all

passionate people who nourish a secret sorrow, a hidden sore, he turned the knife in his wound with his own hands diligently, and because he was unhappy as things were, agonized himself for the things that were not. Yes, another man must win and wear her; and he must stand by, silent then as now, and take for his own share some wealthy heiress whom he could never love, because the Machells had been an untoward race and had gambled away fields and forests, and then gone to the money-lenders for mortgages on what they could not alienate.

In spite of the impossibilities however of coming out into the sunshine on this side of his life, Wilfrid often went to Owlett when he came down to the old place on leave. It was something to see the sweet face which he loved as he had never loved any other—a folly if you will; dram-drinking if you will; but he had a strong head, and could venture on dram-drinking without fear of being carried away into excess. After they had been talking for a little while on two or three profoundly uninteresting subjects, Wilfrid said, a little abruptly:—

‘By-the-bye, Miss Smith, did you know that Arthur has been ill? He is better now; but he has had a bad time of it, poor old fellow, by all accounts.’

Muriel turned her head quickly. She was pale, and a look of terror had come into her eyes.

‘Ill!’ she echoed.

‘He is better now,’ continued Wilfrid slowly. Her sudden paleness and that look of unmistakable terror struck him. ‘He is coming home to-morrow for a few weeks’ change of air, and he will soon be all right again, I daresay.’

‘I am glad that he is coming home for Lady Machell to nurse him well again,’ returned Muriel, her cheeks crimson, and her mouth relaxed into a happy little smile as suddenly as it had contracted into her mother’s pinched look of pain. Then, she added, in the manner of an apology:—‘We had not heard of his illness at all. Lady Machell spoke to us last Sunday at church, but she did not tell us.’

‘Because she did not know of it then,’ said Wilfrid, still looking at her intently; so intently indeed that she felt abashed and ill at ease, as if morally under the Inquisition. ‘Arthur told us only to-day how bad he had been. He did not wish to frighten my mother. You know what a good, unselfish fellow he is?’

Muriel raised her eyes on this. They beamed right into his, those great blue eyes, so bright and full of joy—eyes that no man living could have resisted had she used them for prayers—or promises.

'Yes,' she said, 'he always was, even when quite a boy; and most boys are anything but unselfish!' laughing lightly.

'I am glad that you appreciate him,' said Wilfrid coldly. 'For my part, I remember him more like a bumble-headed puppy than anything else. He has grown up a fine fellow enough; but for his boyhood—we will let that pass.'

'You are not very flattering to your poor brother,' said Muriel, secretly indignant but trying to be decorously hypocritical in the way of assumed pleasantness.

There was something about Captain Machell's face that oppressed, almost frightened her. It was so hard and forbidding; and those small, deep-set, steel-grey eyes, with their piercing looks, seemed to read her through and through. Yet why should they not? She was unconscious of anything to conceal. Arthur was nothing to her but a pleasant, well-bred, handsome young man whom she had known ever since he was a frank and kindly boy who never did cruel things to animals and had no special passion for dirt, who did not 'put upon' her because she was a girl, nor tease her in their childish games, but who was always ready to take her part when others bullied her—as ready as Derwent himself. And if she was sorry to hear of his illness and glad to see him again, why should Captain Machell look so grimly at her, and make her feel guilty and ashamed, in fault and frightened? She was so silly to turn pale and blush so easily as she did!—but she could not help it. It was part of her nature, and every one knew it. How often she had been laughed at for her April-day face, as Lady Machell used to call it when she was little, and tears came where paleness came now, and laughter for present smiles and blushes! These thoughts, or rather, not conscious thoughts but mental impressions, ran through her mind while Wilfrid looked at her so persistently, so grimly, that she cast down her eyes in trouble.

'And what was I, Miss Smith, when my brother was your *preux chevalier* whose boyish graces you defend so warmly?' he asked with a certain unpleasant sneer. Assuredly, if he loved Muriel, as he did, he took pains to make her think his feeling for her something very unlike love.

'You were always so much older than we were, we never dared to make you anything,' said Muriel, with as little disturbance of mind and manner as she could muster.

'I did not know that I had been so formidable—like a kite among the love-birds, I suppose?' he said with a short laugh.

'No, not formidable in that way; you were always kind,' she answered. 'But you were not our playfellow; and you know a very little difference in age frightens children from companionship.'

'I was of use, however, sometimes; as the day when I carried you home from Machells in my arms,' said Wilfrid dryly.

She lost countenance again. What was natural enough with a boy or a child was not pleasant to be reminded of now when she was a grown woman and he a man of the world who knew the meaning of words and the value of reminiscences.

'Yes,' she said shyly; 'when I had sprained my foot by falling over the rocks in the glen, and could not walk.'

'I carried you; and Arthur ran by us and occasionally varied the entertainment by crying,' he said a little contemptuously.

'He was only a little fellow then,' pleaded Muriel. 'And he was frightened because he had pushed me over the rock in play. He could not have been more than twelve years old then. I was only seven, and you were eighteen—were you not?—quite a giant to us little people!'

She tried to be playful and natural; but the playfulness was as forced as the naturalness, and the truest sentiment of the moment was constraint.

'All the same I remember that when I brought you home you kissed Arthur and told him that you loved him and he was not to mind; but I do not remember your kissing me,' returned Wilfrid, still in the same disagreeable manner, contemptuous, cold, reproachful all in one.

'Did I not?' said Muriel, trying to speak as if she were not troubled: 'what an ungrateful little monster I must have been!'

'No; you were only a woman in little,' he answered grimly. 'You loved best the one who hurt you—but who cried; and the one who helped you, you did not care for and scarcely thanked.'

'Do you think all women ungrateful?' Muriel asked, anxious to draw the conversation from herself.

'They are weak,' he replied. 'You are answered.'

'Would you have them as strong as men?' she asked again, feeling this endeavour at conversation one of the most difficult tasks that she had ever had to accomplish.

'No! they are best perhaps as they are. Men are but poor creatures at the best, and women are their superiors in some things—a few, that is, not many.'

'According to you, then, neither men nor women are worth much,' said Muriel, a little indignant at this blasphemy against humanity which has always found its adherents as well as its opponents.

'Not much. A clever horse and a good dog are worth more. They do not deceive and they are not ungrateful; which is what you cannot say of men and women.'

'Captain Machell!'

'Miss Smith!'

'How can you say such dreadful things!' she cried reproachfully. 'I would not think as you do for the whole world. It is fearful!'

'I am unfortunate in your disapprobation of my views,' said Wilfrid coldly. 'But women seldom see things in the same light as men. They prefer rose-coloured nonsense to the truth. Perhaps it is best for them; the strong meat that suits men is not, after all, fit diet for babes.'

'I do not think that universal contempt for all mankind can be the truth,' Muriel answered; 'and that dogs and horses are better than men and women.'

'I bow to your superior knowledge of the world,' said Wilfrid, with perfect breeding as to form and intense unpleasantness as to spirit. 'Shall I try to think that the world is made up of saints and heroes, and that sin and folly are words without meaning? Will that suit your views?'

'Not said in that tone; and besides, that is an exaggeration,' Muriel answered in her pretty, soft way, but not the less direct because it was soft. 'The world certainly is not made up of saints and heroes—I wish it were! but surely there is a little less sin and folly than you give it credit for. There is some good among us.'

He turned his eyes upon her, with a sudden flash.

'Perhaps,' he said, after a moment's pause, 'a few women live and there are not so bad; but they are so few—the exception would prove the rule.'

'What has made you such a misanthrope, Captain Machell?' Muriel asked. 'You used not to hold all these terrible opinions in old days.'

A slight twitch came over the hard dull face.

'Did I not?' he answered. 'It seems to me that ever since I knew the world I have thought as I do now, that life is a muddle, and humanity a gross blunder, and that the whole game is not worth the candle paid for it.'

'Oh!' cried Muriel; 'what a dreadful theory! I should not care to live at all if I held it.'

Again that slight twitch crossed his face.

'You would find many people to agree with you,' he said quietly; and then looking at his watch he called to his sister, 'Come, Hilda! it is time to go.'

'Yes,' said Hilda, brought suddenly down from paradise and landed in the desert.

She was too true a Machell however to dispute the necessary

arrangement of things, whatever it cost her; above all, too true a Machell to oppose her brother Wilfrid. The father's 'right-hand man,' the future head of the house and owner of the estate—so much older too than either Arthur or his sister—he had always been exalted far beyond the others, and had held with Hilda especially something of the position of deputy father, a kind of *petit papa* second only to the real thing. His will was law, and Hilda would as soon have thought of disobeying her mother herself, as of saying no to her brother's yes, or opposing her desires to his demands at any time or on any occasion.

'I have not said a word to Hilda yet. Must you really go so soon?' asked Muriel, laying her hand on Hilda's arm.

'If Wilfrid says that it is time to go,' said Hilda hesitatingly, looking at her brother.

What a curious underlikeness there was between them in spite of the superficial differences! For he was tall and square, with straight light hair of no decided colour, and small deeply set light grey eyes, a sallow skin and hard rude lips, and she was small and round in all her forms; her hair was a dark rich brown full of little curls and waves; her eyes were dark too; and her complexion alone would have made the fortune of one whose fortune was in her face. But there was the same expression underneath the modifications of size and sex; and though Hilda in her first girlhood was all sweetness and charm, she had potentialities, and she was not weak. She was very young yet—more than a year younger than Muriel—and not having achieved the magic year of eighteen was not formally introduced. The three girls of the neighbourhood stood thus: Hilda Machell not quite eighteen; Muriel not quite twenty; Jemima Brown de Paumelle, of Paumelle House, not quite twenty-one, but soon to be of age, and to be declared the heiress of all her father's houses and lands and stock and scrip, with becoming magnificence.

'I cannot wait long,' said Wilfrid a little ungraciously, as he sat down again, and Muriel began a talk with Hilda, chiefly about the ball which the Brown de Paumelles were to give on the fourth when Jemima should be of age, and all the countryside were to be invited to take cognisance of that fact by an act of notification of unparalleled magnificence.

'I saw Miss de Paumelle yesterday, and she said that the invitations would be sent out this evening,' said Hilda. 'I believe it will be a splendid ball; but I do not know yet if mamma will let me go or not.'

'Not go!' cried Muriel.

'Not go!' echoed Derwent.

If he had heard that Government had made a bargain with

the French, and sold the fee simple of the English crown for a consideration, his voice could not have expressed more dismay. A ball of the dimensions of that about to be given at Paumelle House was an event in a limited country society which no one would willingly forego: but without the presence of the one Derwent felt that it would be of no value to him, and that he would rather spend the evening in melancholy musings under the tulip-tree alone, than be where mirth and music only recalled too painfully the absence of her who of herself made mirth and music in his life, and without whom was only the pretence.

'You see, I have not come out yet,' said Hilda meekly; 'and mamma is naturally very particular.'

Muriel looked at Captain Machell.

'My mother knows best about these things,' he said, answering her unspoken appeal. 'Hilda is very young yet; there is plenty of time before her.'

'But there will not be many balls like this at Paumelle House,' said Muriel, standing on the old exhortation to seize the present. 'Of course Lady Machell knows best, but it seems such a pity—and when Hilda will be eighteen so soon—in October, Hilda, is it not?'

'Yes,' said Hilda, 'the twelfth.'

'Nearly six months' time,' said Wilfrid in his dry way.

'Oh, that does not signify!' cried Muriel. 'Captain Machell, plead for us with your mother!'

A sudden flash came from Derwent's dark eyes. What a darling that sister of his was, he thought; how sympathetic and how clever! Something kept him back from joining in any prayer or pleading—a kind of half-unconscious perception that it would be unwise to show much interest in the matter, and that if he did he would be more likely to damage than advance their cause against the authorities. But he looked at Muriel with a passionate meaning in his face that for the first time showed her the truth of things, and told her that her brother loved this pretty chestnut-headed friend of theirs, this daughter of the proud and penniless Machells, she on whose splendid marriage it was well known that father and mother and brother counted as a foregone conclusion, a certainty which nothing but death could destroy, and for whom in her secret mind Lady Machell had marked down rich Guy Perceval of the Manor—failing some prince from the clouds who would make still better settlements.

Had Captain Machell seen that look which enlightened Muriel and thrilled Hilda with a young girl's sweet assurance of supremacy in a handsome lad's affections, the chapter of events between

Machell and Owlett would have been ended on the spot. What Wilfrid had smothered in himself, baited down under the hatches of inexorable necessity and an iron will, he was not likely to tolerate in his sister; but the day of grace had not yet drawn to a close, and the gates of that misleading paradise still stood open. Suspecting nothing, and by the young man's very silence, wrought out as it was by love, kept in continued ignorance of that love, stirred on his own part by Muriel's pleading face and loving eyes, Wilfrid answered with sudden softness, and in its turn self-betraying graciousness:—

'I will do what I can to induce my mother to let Hilda go, if it will please you, Miss Smith. I daresay I can influence her if I try, and if I use your name. You are such a favourite at Machells that I am sure we would all stretch a point to please you.'

'You are very kind; thank you,' said Muriel with an embarrassment as sudden as his graciousness; for Derwent's face still disturbed her, and Hilda's pretty little pleased expression seemed as dangerous as his silent, but deeper and more passionate delight. And Wilfrid, not having the key, asked himself twenty times: 'Why did Muriel blush and look down, and suddenly become constrained when I said that she was a favourite at Machells? What did she connect with that? What did she think that I meant?'

He asked himself in vain. When he had reached the twentieth time he knew no more and had no clearer response than on the first.

Then they went away, and Derwent and his sister were left alone: and when they were alone Muriel went close up to her brother, standing a little apart facing the drive, but pretending to be looking at anything rather than Hilda Machell walking down it, and putting both her hands in his, said simply his name: 'Derwent!'—looking him full in the face.

He understood her.

'Yes, Muriel,' he said in a low voice; 'it is so. I cannot pretend to deny it, and I cannot hide it from myself any longer.'

'But, Derwent, dearest boy, they will never consent!' she exclaimed. 'They want money so dreadfully, and you know quite well that we are not rich, and, mamma says, never shall be.'

'Not rich now, and they would not consent now,' he said; 'but they will presently, my little sister, when I have made my name and position. If she will care for me enough to keep firm we shall conquer in the end.'

'But does she!' asked Muriel.

'I have not asked her yet, but I think she does,' he answered.

'Soft as she is—so exquisitely soft and gentle!—she has plenty of will when it is roused, and she is far too honourable and high-minded to break her word when she has once given it. It will all come right in the end, I feel sure of that, Muriel!'

'Oh, Derwent, darling, I hope so, but it is a tremendous risk that you are running; a fearful chance to stake all your life on.'

'Nothing venture, you know, my precious little sister,' he said, tossing back his hair; the vanity of his ordinary days broadened out into a finer form of manly self-confidence, of trust in his own energy and power by which he was to level the mountains and fill up the valleys. Why should he not, indeed? Courage, talent, hope, energy, faith, beauty—he had them all: what more was wanting wherewith to overcome difficulties and compel fortune to his service.

True: but up there, behind locked doors, the mother standing before the picture of her husband and their father, crying in her heart: 'My poor ruined children, disgraced and destroyed for ever! would that they had never been born!'

CHAPTER IV.

MACHELLS.

No one who had seen Machells could have doubted the truth of that general report which gave as much poverty as pride to the good old family so fast going to the dogs—poverty of such extent as made it incumbent on the young people to marry money if they would keep anything like a footing in the county.

For many generations a Machell had been the leading man of the neighbourhood, and beyond; but now the day of small things had taken the place of the lordly years, and retribution had trodden close on the heels of folly. As so often happens, this retribution had struck the innocent, not the guilty; the children's teeth had been set on edge by the sour grapes which not they but their fathers had eaten; and Wilfrid and Arthur and Hilda had to suffer for what the Sir Gilberts and Sir Wilfrids, now mouldering in the dust, had done before them. There was no money for anything but the absolute necessities of decent living; and the contrast between the past and present, what was and what ought to be, was in truth a tragedy of its kind.

Nothing was kept up even to the shadow of its former state; and

both within and without the slow progress of decay was like a death creeping over the whole surface of things. What had once been trim, smooth-shaven lawn was now a patch of meadow grass railed off for future hay; what should have been dainty flower-beds, delicately tended, in the quaint Italian garden, were now masses of common flowering bushes and hardy cottage plants which needed no housing nor bedding out, and were managed with such coarse care as they required by the one man and his boy who did all the out-of-door work of the place. The steps and balustrades, with the large Tuscan vases standing on them, were broken and crumbling; the fountain was choked and ruined—the Tritons without hands and the dolphins without tails; the fishponds were stagnant tracts of slime and duckweed, whence the carp and the gold-fish had long ago disappeared; the park was let out to the neighbouring farmers for grazing ground; all the available timber had been cut down, and none planted in its stead; more than three parts of the famous kitchen garden, where Lord Bacon was supposed to have walked and talked, had been given up to weeds; and the magnificent houses built by Sir Gilbert's father were closed because costing too much to keep up. They might have been a source of income however, had they been managed on business principles; but no Machell had yet farmed out his pines or his grapes, his early plums, his late peaches, his magnificent pears. The pride of the family, which had for its motto 'Break not bend,' had kept even step with its poverty, and money had never been raised by them save by the methods recognised as allowable among gentlemen—that is, by nothing savouring of trade. It was no disgrace to encumber the estate with mortgages till it was nearly swamped, nor to let out the park into grazing-ground. That did not come under the head of trade. Dealing with land is not trade. But to have sold peaches and grapes at Covent Garden would have been a degradation; and, if poor, the Machells had never been degraded.

The roomy stables and the paved yard where the kennels had been, the fine offices which made a small village in themselves, were becoming pitifully dilapidated for want of that little stitch in time which is as necessary with bricks and mortar as with needles and thread; but what could Sir Gilbert and my lady do with stabling for twenty horses, they who had only a basket-carriage and a cob, and whose kennels were tenanted by one old wolf-hound, sole representative of his yelping brethren? Spiders and bats, mildew and dry-rot, held the yard buildings which had once been as much part of the show as the maze and the fernery, the flower garden and Lord Bacon's walk, the vinery and stove plants, and the state apartments of the house, with their Lelys and Sir Godfrey

Knellers, their Vandykes and Sèvres vases. And the spiders and the bats, with their destructive surroundings, were clearly getting the best of it.

Within, things were as melancholy as without. The family lived in one wing, and that the smaller and less pretentious. Their two maids and a man represented the battalion of retainers which the former Machells had fed and housed; and the place which had feasted princes had now for its most frequent guest the traditional Duke Humphrey of the kitchen. The furniture was old and shabby, and only the most necessary repairs were done. My lady expressed herself everywhere as delighting in the subdued tones of old material, while despising the staring crudities of new stuffs. She even extended this predilection to that hideous drawing-room chintz of theirs, where huge bunches of port-wine coloured flowers on a sickly buff ground travestied nature and put art to shame; and she stood to her colours manfully, even when confronted with the newest theories and the latest dyes. She talked learnedly and æsthetically on woman's dress and the hideous vulgarity of modern fashions; and as her plain straight-cut black gown, with the black lace kerchief falling round her head and neck, like a small mantilla, became her to perfection, her style, necessitated by poverty, had its advantages, and for once want of money ensured harmony and grace.

Sir Gilbert also went in for simple living by choice. His wife's character had a certain compelling quality which had dominated his softer fibre for many years now; and the two made the best of the bad which they could not mend, and showed no blot which a censorious world could hit.

They had made an imprudent marriage in the days of their fervid youth when each had thought that life would be wrecked without the other; and that money and estate, the past and the future, the family name and the children's fortunes, might all go to the wall provided only they had love and each other. If they had found out that this was a mistake, and that young love and its rosy hours are of no vital value to the real happiness of a man—that youthful heartbreak is better to bear than debts and impecuniosity in maturity; while the solid things of life—the education of the children, the professions of the sons, the friends, including the husbands of good degree and satisfactory settlements, to be gathered round the daughters, the county influence, political power, and social supremacy given by the wealth with which an old name is surrounded—are the things for which rational men and women do well to renounce their personal inclinations and romantic dreams,—if they had found out all this, they did not give the world the benefit of the discovery, nor even acknowledge it to each other. They kept as

fair a front in this as in all else; behind the closed doors as before the face of man; and, save by their oft-repeated injunctions that their children must marry money, said no word by which it might be thought that marrying for love had been in their case a blunder.

Their children must marry money; and Lady Machell had already predetermined where. She had fixed her eyes on Guy Perceval of the Manor for Hilda, although Guy Perceval, with the Manor or without it, was by no means the man on whom Hilda would have fixed her own eyes for herself. He was small, plain, eccentric, pragmatical; a man given to 'views,' heaven help him, and with a passion for hobbies which he rode at a hard gallop and generally to death. He was never long fixed to anything, and had already touched the surface of all the sciences, and rearranged the universe as often as he had skimmed the pages of the last popular handbook. He thought this restlessness was a profound love of truth and ardour in the pursuit of knowledge, for which he ought to give God and his nurse thanks; he would have been nearer the mark had he called it fluidity of brain and inability to anchor or to grow. But then he had a rent-roll of fifteen thousand a year; and these were as fifteen thousand cherubim to hymn his praises, while a few insignificant accusing angels wrote down his small demerits.

If Guy Perceval was to be stalked for Hilda, Jemima Brown de Paumelle was marked down for Wilfrid. For the moment Arthur, the younger son, was left with a future undesignated; but my lady had her eye on a certain Helen Lawrence who was to be made the heiress of the family name and estates, while her two sisters would receive only younger children's portions. It would be a great match for him, for the Lawrences were pleasant as well as rich; but he was so handsome—so winning and charming in every way—that his mother thought the thing would not be difficult when the times were ripe. As as yet they were not ripe, Helen being only fifteen and Arthur just twenty-four; which narrowed my lady's cares to the task of prevention only, keeping off undesirables until she could advocate the claims of fitness.

As for Wilfrid, he had but to walk over the course whenever he chose to lift the stakes—stakes manifestly laid in his way by a beneficent Providence, as my lady honestly believed. She had a firm conviction that Providence gives itself a great deal of trouble about people of old name and good condition, and takes care to send them dock-leaves when they have stung themselves with nettles, and to provide rafts wher they have deliberately flung themselves from safe places into deep waters. Jemima Brown de Paumelle was to be Wilfrid's dock-leaf. There was no doubt about it. When he could or would make up his mind to ask her to be his shrinking and

reluctant wife, the fatted calf would be slain at Paumelle House in a jubilant assent, and everything would be arranged without a hitch between the parents. For the principals in this act of barter something else might be said.

With her keen perception of chances, sharpened to the utmost by her needs, and of the price to be paid for certain social goods, Lady Machell had called on the Brown de Paumelles as soon as they had finished and furnished their big barrack-like house with its forty bedrooms and acres of glass, and had fairly established themselves in the country with their appalling magnificence overflowing at all four corners. It was she who had opened for them the huis clos of the county families, who had been their steadfast friend and indefatigable chaperon. She helped poor timid little Mrs. Brown with words of advice as to her dinners and delicate suggestions as to her dress; she shored up her feebleness in public and enlightened her ignorance in private, while she did her best to manipulate the coarse-grained husband into tolerable shape, and to make the daughter less of a scarecrow than nature and a defective taste in millinery had hitherto made her. The Brown de Paumelles worshipped my lady, who was big and handsome, and, though proud and scheming, both kindly and gracious when things were not going wrong and men and circumstances ranged as she marshalled. Flying at higher game as she did, she never frittered away her influence on minor matters; so that the soap-boiler himself, made wary by success, was forced to confess that her friendship for them must be genuine and not for what she could get out of them, seeing that she got nothing and that the loan which, in the beginning, he had prophesied Sir Gilbert would ask for before the month was out, seemed no nearer now after three years of close friendship (?) than it was at the first.

The hand of his pinched and overweighted little daughter was a price which the wealthy parvenu was willingly prepared to pay for a life-long alliance with one of the oldest families in the county, even if under a rather mournful pecuniary eclipse. He loved his daughter truly—she who, with her mother, would have been so much happier had they never emerged from their modest eight-roomed villa at Clapton, never driven in anything more aristocratic than a four-wheeled cab, nor known a more costly dissipation than the upper boxes at the theatre, and a fortnight at Margate in August; and he thought that he was doing the best for her ultimate welfare in giving her to a powerful, fastidious, masterful man like Wilfrid Machell, with a known bad temper, a will hammered out of iron, and a place in the county which only those born and bred to the manner could rightly fill. In the same way Sir Gilbert and my lady thought that they were doing the best by their son when they

pressed on him as his wife a pale, limp, colourless little girl whose riches were to her as so much slavery, and whose title, when it came, would oppress her like a crime and make her ashamed of her unfitness before the very kitchenmaid and footboy—pressing on him as his wife a woman whom he could never love and who would never love him; who would exasperate him by her timidity, by her want of breeding, by her ignorance of his shibboleth all through; who would strengthen his natural spirit of domination until it became well-bred brutality, by her invertebrate acquiescence, her abject submission; between whom and him would not be a thought in common; and who, if they lived together to the end of time, would never be friends nor even intimate acquaintances. And all this ruin of two lives because the soap-boiler counted his hundreds by thousands, and Machells wanted a few loads of bricks, while that hideous old chintz, with its bunches of port-wine coloured flowers on a pale buff ground, was considerably the worse for wear.

But Wilfrid still hung fire. He knew that it had to be done; but, strong and resolute of will as he was, he staved off the evil day year by year, and could not bring his mind to it. He always said to himself that he would wait till he was thirty, and then he would. He was thirty now—just eleven years older than Muriel and six than Arthur; but he had not said those decisive words which Mr. Brown de Paumelle, as well as Sir Gilbert and Lady Machell, were so anxious to ratify. Old Brown, a little incited thereto by my lady's delicately veiled conjectures, thought that perhaps something would come out of the ball to be given on Jemima's coming of age. Partly for this reason, he resolved that it should be the most splendid affair of its kind that had ever been seen in the neighbourhood—Lady Machell promising for her own set in the county—hoping to make 'the Captain' see so clearly the difference between Paumelle House and Machells, and what money could do for his family that he would no longer hesitate to patch his stately rags with modern golden shoddy, albeit a little dirty in the earlier strands.

And Wilfrid too put this terrible ball before him as the spring-board whence he must take that leap by which he should restore the fortunes of his house and lose his personal happiness and private self-respect for ever. Yet, after all, what did it signify? he used to think, with that cynical disbelief in the higher things of life which runs through the stronger lines of modern thought. A few years more or less, and one thing is exactly like another. You marry with love and you grow into coldness; or you marry with coldness and you grow into tolerance—where is the difference? But money remains a fixed quantity; and a good cook is a great fact.

If only there had been no such person as Muriel Smith, the thing would have been done two years ago. But when a man has living within an easy walk of him the woman who, of all others, is his ideal of what a woman ought to be, it makes his marriage with one totally uninteresting and unsympathetic a difficult matter, and excuses the delay which, seeing that the thing must needs be, and that it is the dock-leaf sent by Providence for nettles is, to say the least of it, weak. Still, it had to be done; and Muriel notwithstanding, it should be done; and the ball on Jemima's coming of age would be the occasion when. But because he was sore and ill at ease with himself and life all round, because he was decidedly ill-tempered and, when he was in pain, not disinclined to pass it on, Wilfrid had as yet said nothing to either Sir Gilbert or Lady Machell of his intention to restore their peace of mind by his own matrimonial suicide. He meant to make them happy and gather his dock-leaf as was expected of him; but he would not give them the satisfaction of knowing his decision until the humour took him to announce his immolation. And up to this hour the humour had not taken him.

Sharp enough while it had lasted, that illness of which Wilfrid had told Muriel, when speaking of his brother Arthur, had not left any disfiguring traces on the handsome young fellow who the next day came down for a little fresh air and home enjoyment. It was as much an excuse indeed as an occasion, he said laughing, when his father twitted him with 'malingering,' and declared he had never looked better in his life: and Lady Machell, who secretly loved this boy the best of her three children, was not disposed to quarrel even with an attack of gastric fever, happily over, which gave her the unexpected presence of her darling for a few summer weeks.

They were all very happy, sitting on the bench set against the house facing the crumbling balustrade, the broken steps and the desecrated Italian garden. Sir Gilbert forgot his money troubles; my lady her matrimonial schemes and pinched resources; Wilfrid his approaching plunge; and pretty Hilda her vague dreams of a fairy future where miracles would be the rule of life, and Love, now creeping naked and barefooted through the world, would be clad in royal raiment and shod with silver slippers; while the thoughts and interest of all were centred in the new arrival.

In old days this boy had been called the flower of the flock, and the flower of the flock he was still. As tall as Wilfrid, he was more lightly built, and though as powerful, more graceful; excelling him in those games and feats of strength which require dexterity as well as force, though perhaps in certain things, such as lifting heavy

weights, putting the stone and the like, his brother would have distanced him. He was handsome too, where Wilfrid was plain; as handsome for a man as Hilda was beautiful for a woman; yet, as with Hilda, like but unlike his brother. His hair was of a bright brown, darker than Wilfrid's, fairer than Hilda's; his eyes were frank and as bright and blue as if they had been Irish eyes; his mouth was well shaped where Wilfrid's was coarse and heavy, and showed more tenderness, if less passion; in profile he was not unlike the young Nero, with a sweeter look and the outline of the chin less heavy.

He was, in truth, a fine specimen of the best kind of Englishman; one of a dominant race, and more likely to control circumstance than be controlled by it. With all his brighter temperament and greater tenderness of nature, he had his brother's indomitable will, and the masculine power of keeping a resolution when once made, and of not regretting consequences. He was emphatically a man in his own right, a man with his life in his own hands, rather than the son of a ruined baronet bound to work out his salvation by the law of social needs overcoming the rights of individualism and nature. He was the stuff of which iconoclasts are made—when the living God speaks.

After the first loving greetings were over, and the first questions about each other had been asked and answered, Arthur began on the people of the place, after the manner of those who return to the old home after a long absence. And after he had laughed at Baby Forbes and her stalwart Dinah, asked what new craze Guy Perceval had adopted, and what new sin the Constantines had discovered, he said:

'And the people at Owlett—how do they go on? Any change?'

He asked this in a careless voice enough, his face bent over Brian the wolf-hound who demanded his share of attention as arbitrarily as any Christian.

'No, no change,' said Lady Machell indifferently.

Neither Wilfrid nor Hilda spoke.

'If anything, Mrs. Smith is more of a recluse than ever,' said Sir Gilbert; 'but the boy and girl are really very creditable young people. He is a little conceited yet—he always was, you know; but she is charming.'

'She was always charming,' repeated Arthur quietly; 'and the world will soon knock the conceit out of him. It is only skin-deep, and, brought up as he has been, the wonder is that he is not worse.'

'The Brown de Paumelles are going to give such a splendid

ball, Arthur, on the fourth, when Miss de Paumelle comes of age,' said Hilda, with sudden animation. What a dear boy that brother Arthur of hers was! How wonderfully he read character! She knew of no one in the world who seemed to see things so clearly as he did; and how nice it is when people see things clearly!

'Yes, they are going to do the thing with great magnificence,' said Lady Machell. 'They are wonderfully liberal people and have excellent qualities.'

'It would not be amiss if old Brown had a few more h's tacked to his qualities,' said Wilfrid, with a sneer.

He hated to hear his mother praise these people, knowing as he did the secret meaning of her eulogies.

'I know,' said Lady Machell quietly; for she could not go so far as to ignore the bone and marrow of her own existence, and contend that an h more or less was an item of no importance in the religion of the gentry. 'He is not a well-instructed man undoubtedly, but he is shrewd and clever in his own way, and very good-hearted.'

'Ostentatious,' said Wilfrid.

'Do you think so?' was her calm reply. 'There are always two ways of looking at everything. In this case I prefer the more favourable.'

'But tell me about the ball,' said Arthur. 'I suppose you are all going.'

'Not Hilda, of course,' answered the mother.

And poor Hilda had some trouble in remembering that she was a Machell whose first duty was owing to appearances and the authorities.

'Not our little one?' cried Arthur in a tone of disappointment.

'I wish, mother, that you would let Hilda go,' said Wilfrid in his slow heavy way.

'She is too young, my dear,' answered Lady Machell.

'She shall stop at home with me,' said Sir Gilbert, taking his daughter's hand in his. 'That will be better than losing her roses before their time.'

'I should like her to go. I wish you would let her; to please me,' reiterated Wilfrid.

Poor Lady Machell, whose real reason was the dress, though she threw it on the six months' gap between now and the magic date of eighteen, was unaffectedly disturbed. Above all things she wished to please Wilfrid at this moment and to put him in good humour. But the dress! Money was horribly scarce with Sir Gilbert just now, and she dreaded any extra outlay. Still, it was risking a little to secure a good deal; and if Wilfrid would only see his

duty and fulfil it on that evening of the ball a new dress for Hilda might well be provided. After a moment's consideration her mind was made up. Turning to her son with her sweetest look she answered:—

'Do you really wish it, Wilfrid? Hilda is young yet, according to my ideas of the proper time for a girl's introduction; but because you wish it—certainly. I should be sorry to deprive you of the pleasure of taking your sister to her first ball.'

'Thank you, mother,' said Hilda prettily.

She was too well tutored to say more—to show a milkmaid's frank glee at an outing; all the same, her heart beat with a girl's natural excitement at the prospect of her first ball where the secret prince of her unacknowledged dreams will be; and she quietly stole her hand into her brother's, and gave it a tender little pressure—which pleased him.

'Thank you, mother,' he said with a softened look, holding Hilda's hand in his, and carrying to her the loving thoughts of Muriel which filled his mind as they had governed his actions. 'I accept the grace as you have offered it. Let it be personal, then; and I am your debtor.'

'Now, little one, how much sleep will you have between this and then?' laughed Arthur, who knew nothing of the undercurrent, and had not read a word of all that eloquent writing between the lines.

'Arthur, what a tease you are!' was all the reply vouchsafed; but she smiled and looked sweet; and her brothers, who loved her as such men naturally would love the only girl of the house—and such a pretty creature too!—were glad, the one that he had given her pleasure, the other that he had made her smile. Had it not been for Lady Machell's ideas of discipline, and the rather tight hand that she held on the rein, Hilda would have been spoilt by the three men of the family long ago. But there was always the mother to come in as the restraining influence and to pour cold water on the incipient flames of vanity and independence.

'If you could give a ball of only half the magnificence of this on Hilda's coming out!' sighed Lady Machell, thinking to drive in another nail.

'We came of age, Arthur and I, without the "customary festivities,"' said Wilfrid with his hard look.

'Yes; but a girl is different,' she answered. 'A woman's life belongs to society; you men are professional.'

'The profession of heir?' he asked; but, by the way in which he said it, he conveyed the idea of 'the inheritance of bankruptcy.'

'It would have been very delightful certainly if we could have

celebrated your coming of age, my dear,' returned Lady Machell quietly, ignoring his unpleasant accent. 'It was impossible at the time; just as it is now to give a ball to introduce Hilda to the county, or to take her to London to present her—as ought to be. These things seem unimportant matters to you: to us women they are of supreme moment.'

'You must make this ball her introduction, mother. It will be "all in the family," as old Brown would say, and will come to the same thing in the end,' said Wilfrid with intense scorn, supreme bitterness.

Lady Machell looked into his face, and an evident wave of emotion swept over her own. She did not speak for a few moments, but after a short time she rose, and said to Wilfrid huskily:—

'Your arm, my dear. I want to speak to James.'

Wilfrid rose too, and offered her his arm, and the two silently passed out of sight and hearing.

Then the mother spoke.

'Do I understand you rightly, Wilfrid?' she said in a voice which in spite of herself broke and trembled. 'Have you decided on making that step? Your father is so distressed for money that I do not like to ask him even for the trifle which we shall need for Hilda's dress. It is a humiliation to have to confess such a thing, standing as we do in the county; but it is true. Unless we can get money somehow, I do not see how we are to manage! Everything has turned ill of late. It is as if we were pursued by some evil fate.'

Tears were in her eyes, but she spoke with a certain well-bred dignity, troubled as she was. She was not of those who whine and whimper in misfortune; but nature will assert its rights in spite of birth or breeding, and eyes which will not let the tears fall are not always able to prevent their gathering.

Wilfrid laid his strong hand on hers, resting on his arm.

'Do not fret, mother,' he said grimly. 'It has to be done, and will be.'

'Ah, my boy, what a weight you have taken off my heart,' she cried. 'Your poor father! You have redeemed the family!'

'And the price?'—he could not prevent himself from saying, with the bitter cynicism that was habitual to him.

'I am sorry that it should be so heavy to you!' she returned. 'She is such a good, amiable, inoffensive little thing—you can do with her what you will—mould her into any shape that you wish her to take.'

'We will drop that, mother,' said Wilfrid hastily. 'For herself, she is the last woman in the world that I would marry

of my own choice; but, as you say, it is for the redemption of Machells, and I am willing to pay the price.'

'It will win the blessing that it deserves,' said Lady Machell, shaking out that fringe of piety with which successful schemers trim their manœuvres. 'An action which gives peace of mind to your father, places your sister in her rightful position, and restores the family to its old standing, must carry a blessing with it!'

'If you are made happier, mother—you and my father and Hilda—I have my reward. But, as you know, I do not believe much in blessings or curses following on one's actions outside their intrinsic wisdom or folly; and I can foresee no more blessing to follow on this marriage of mine than the payment of the money for which I sell myself.'

'Do not speak so bitterly, dear!' his mother pleaded. 'You do not wish to make me unhappy, Wilfrid?'

'No, mother. It is enough if one of us is unhappy. And I do not speak bitterly. I only look things in the face, and call them by their right names.'

'There are always two sides to everything, and two names for everything,' she said, as she had said before.

'Well, mother, you take the smooth and I will have the rough,' he answered. 'You may talk of a marriage between a man who sells himself for so much money to a woman whom he does not love, and a woman who sells herself for position to a man whom she does not love, as something worthy and that will bring a blessing with it—I cannot. I call it sale and barter; and so let it stand.'

'Assuredly,' thought Lady Machell to herself, as she pressed her son's arm with a gentle little touch that stood admirably for words, 'this dear boy of mine has an awful temper!—and knows better than any one in the world how to take the grace out of his actions. All the same, he will know before the end of his life that he has done well and wisely, and that money is a lasting good, whereas love—'

Here she sighed, and Wilfrid, thinking that he had wounded her, took her hand again in his, and said more cheerily:—

'Never mind, dear mother! You know I was never a very amiable fellow; and that soft speeches are not much more in my line than soft ways. All will come right, I daresay; and if I do not love her I will do my best to make her happy, and to supply by care what is wanting in feeling.'

'Yes, I know, I know, my boy,' his mother answered, lifting up her face and taking in the mistake. 'Only I do not want you to be unhappy, dear.'

'What does it signify?' he said. 'A few years more or less, and the whole thing is at an end: but the family will be redeemed, and that will not be at an end.'

'Thank God, no!' said Lady Machell fervently; and then James coming in sight, the talk between mother and son ended, and the question as to Brussels sprouts or curly kale began.

But Wilfrid was pledged now to make that decisive offer of himself to Miss Brown de Paumelle which my lady and the soap-boiler had so often hinted at together, and which each knew to be so ardently desired by the other; and, for the first time for the last thirty years, light was gradually coming into the Machell darkness, and the things which had been so long stunted and awry bid fair to be well-nourished and smoothly laid. This off her hands my lady felt that then she would have leisure to turn to the fit establishment of Hilda; but until she could dress and introduce her properly, how could she establish her? *Æsthetic* simplicity, evidenced in straight-cut robes and miniature mantillas, was all very well for a woman of her age and character; but *æsthetic* simplicity with Hilda would be both out of place and self-betraying. However, this difficulty was going to be smoothed over together with the rest, and in her own mind there was not a doubt that she could bring Guy Perceval to terms when it pleased her to open the negotiation.

'After all, I am glad that your brother pleaded for you,' she said to Hilda, kissing her; a rare evidence of affection from her. 'You owe this pleasure entirely to him; of myself, I would have kept you back till you had passed your eighteenth birthday.'

'I would have been content to do as you desired, dear mother,' said Hilda, sweetly. 'You always know the best.'

'All children do not give their mother credit for more wisdom than they themselves possess,' said Lady Machell a little severely. 'I have never had to complain of you, my dear.'

'And never shall have, mother,' said Hilda.

Lady Machell took her by both her hands and looked at her fixedly.

'Do you promise me that, Hilda?' she said with an earnestness that startled the girl uncomfortably and seemed to forbode some kind of mysterious evil, she knew neither of what form nor name. 'Do you promise?' she repeated with increased earnestness.

'Yes,' said Hilda; 'you are my mother, and it is my duty to obey you.'

'And a Machell never breaks a word once given,' said Lady Machell, releasing her. 'My little Hilda will not be the first traitress to the traditions of the family.'

'I hope not, mother,' said Hilda quietly; but her heart had sunk like lead, and she knew that she had run her feet into a noose, and set the seal to the charter of her own sorrow.

CHAPTER V.

'HER BLUSH-ROSE FACE.'

WHISTLING along the road, and cutting at the wayside weeds like any schoolboy, while Brian the wolf-hound ran on before, the sedater mortal of the two, Arthur, the day after his arrival at Machells, set out alone for Owlett. It was odd that, having been ill, he should have undertaken a walk which, though nothing for a Machell, was much for an invalid. Why had he not asked his mother to drive him over in the pony carriage!—it was Lady Machell who always drove. He had been a long time absent now—nearly a year; and one does not generally leave one's family the day after one's arrival—as a convalescent, too, from what might have been a fatal illness—to cut across country four miles away, telling no one where one is going.

Or why, if he must walk, did he not ask Wilfrid to walk with him? The two brothers had not always been good friends, certainly; but lately they had been on better terms than formerly. Perhaps the airs of authority assumed by Wilfrid in early youth had left a slight feeling in Arthur's mind which told against too much familiarity; but if so it was not acknowledged; and as manhood had placed them more on a level than they were as boys, and as Arthur had as much character as Wilfrid, if differently manifested, things had been greatly modified between them. Wilfrid's lordly supremacy had sunk into the simpler attitude of the mere elder brother and future head of the house; and the chronic rebellion of the other had passed into a natural assertion of equality which, as between twenty-four and thirty, no man could have resented.

Yes, he might have asked his brother to go with him to Owlett if he had not cared to derange his mother's plans by proposing the pony carriage; but he did neither. He preferred to go alone; though, had he been asked, he could scarcely have said why. There was nothing which he was likely to say to Muriel Smith that all the world might not hear; still less was it likely that she would say anything to him which might not be repeated to the whole family in the dingy drawing-room at Machells. For all that, he

would rather see her without mother or brother to watch her face or to read his. That sweet 'blush-rose face!' It had haunted him since he had last seen it as neither it nor any other had done before; as it had haunted Wilfrid for two years now. He could not banish it—in truth, he hardly tried. He had grown up side by side with Muriel, seeing her in the holidays when he came home from school, and fond of her as a brave high-spirited boy naturally is of a gentle and affectionate girl who is neither weak nor silly; but he had not been in love with her until last year. And then, when he had been down on leave for a few weeks, and had seen her in the full perfection of her girlhood, he had fallen in love with her as he had never fallen in love for any of the times when his fancy had been touched; and the passion held him, and would not leave him—tenacious as is all true passion.

He knew that this love of his would be called hopeless by the far-seeing, insane by the wise. The Smiths were not rich, and Muriel would have no fortune that a Machell could call fortune. He was poor, with no allowance beyond his pay, and, above all things, bound to marry money as the duty owing to his family. But deep down in his heart was that silent consciousness of the strong man which makes him feel himself superior to circumstance and the master of his own fate—as if he can win for himself those good things which he has not inherited, and so compel to be his servant that Fortune who has not cared to be his benefactress.

There was just this difference between Wilfrid and Arthur: the former could sacrifice his love to the necessities of his position, and when he had finally taken action never show where the wound was; but the latter would sacrifice his inherited traditions for the sake of his love, and carve out his fortunes for himself. The one was the strong man controlling his desires because of duty to society; the other the strong man dominating society and circumstance alike by the assertion of himself. They represented two great sections of humanity, two great differences of character—those who can force themselves to do what they do not like; and those who can force fortune to give them what they want.

The ladies were at home when Arthur reached Owlett. They generally were at home; for even Muriel, young as she was, and energetic if not feverish, had become a little infected with her mother's quietism, and had somewhat fallen into the same close home-keeping manner of life. But then she was the kind of woman, who, as maid or wife, is naturally fond of home.

Derwent was out, riding over to the Brown de Paumelles with the note of acceptance to their ball in his pocket. As Mrs. Smith had no valid objection to make to that acceptance which she could

have explained to her son and daughter, she was obliged to say yes, when they asked her what they should do? and might they not go? But she wished that they were not going. Somehow, though not superstitious, she was full of forebodings about this ball, and wished that she could have prevented the whole thing, so far as her own household was concerned.

When Arthur went into the drawing-room he found it empty. Muriel was in the garden under the tulip-tree, her favourite seat; and her mother was upstairs in her own room. He passed through the open window as he used to do when a boy, and went across the lawn to where she sat. She looked up and saw him; and her face beamed like something suddenly wakened into life as she rose and went forward to meet him. His too, though pale at this time from his recent illness, yet, flushed for the moment by his walk and the pleasant thoughts that had sent him whistling along the road like a schoolboy, was as bright as hers and less controlled.

He took her hand and held it for a moment; both silent; while their eyes looked into each other, smiling, happy, content—all life seeming to be fulfilled at this moment—no past—no future—only the glad and sufficing present.

'How glad I am to see you again looking so well!' he then said, his rich voice veiled with a tenderness as great as that which shone in his eyes, and hers.

And indeed she was more beautiful than she had been even last year; hers being that kind of beauty which is lovely in blossom, flower, and fruit alike—from childhood to old age—because a beauty which owes as much to expression as to form, and more to character than to colour.

'Thank you, yes,' she answered in a pretty soft confusion that was pleasant and painful to feel—perhaps on the whole more pleasant than painful. 'And you are better?' looking at him tenderly, then away from him shyly.

'Oh, I am right enough, thanks; had never very much the matter with me,' said Arthur, not wishing that Muriel should believe him weak and to be pitied. Pity from her would be very dear, certainly; but on the whole, he preferred that she should think him strong.

'Captain Machell said that you had been very ill,' she returned, raising her sweet eyes again to his.

'One's own people always deal in superlatives when one is away,' he laughed. 'I have had a slight pinch, but I soon pulled through, as you see.'

'You are paler than you were—and thinner,' said Muriel, in an unconvinced kind of way.

"Well I have been ill, you see; there is no denying the fact; only not quite so ill perhaps as they seem to have imagined at home. I am all right now."

"Yes, you have been ill indeed, I can see that! And you have walked all the way here to-day? How brave of you! But you always were brave—as a boy, even."

She said this with rather more feeling than she herself knew. Pity and admiration had swept down the barriers for that one betraying moment, and she showed her real self with more frankness than she had ever done before.

His face flushed with pleasure.

"I am glad that you saw anything good in me as a boy," he said, trying to speak with indifference. "To my own remembrance of things, I was an awful cub!"

"Were you? If you were, I suppose we all were much the same, and so could not judge of each other. For my part, I do not remember."

She smiled as she said this. She did not think that either Arthur or Derwent had been an 'awful cub.' Perhaps she herself had been silly and tiresome at times. Girls generally are so to boys. But she was not sure what she had been. She was not a very introspective person; on the contrary, she was one who knew what she felt rather than analysed what she was. Thus, her personality of to-day was not a very different thing from her personality of ten years ago, seeing that she had not spent her time in taking spiritual photographs by the way. No, she did not think that any of them had been cubs; neither the boys nor herself—but certainly not the boys.

"Girls are always angels," said Arthur, meaning that one girl was. "One would never apply such a word to them. It is only boys who are the nuisances."

"I do not think there is much difference between them," she answered, with the vague feeling of defending Derwent and himself. "Boys are stronger and ruder perhaps, and girls are gentler and not so frank."

"I do not think that you ever wanted frankness," said Arthur. "I remember you were always trusted when you said anything. And I never remember an instance where you broke your word or were caught out in a falsehood."

She blushed and looked down. It was pleasant to hear him speak of her so kindly; as pleasant as it had been to him to hear her say that he had been always brave, even as a boy.

"I had never any temptation to be deceitful," she said. "We were not afraid of anyone. I had other faults, if not this; do not

you think that every kind of character, like every age, has its own special faults?' she continued, anxious to get away from the subject of herself. Deprecation looked like an underhand asking for compliments, and she could not accept praise as her due.

'I do not think that women have so many faults as men,' Arthur answered, always meaning her. 'Certainly they are not so selfish.'

'Perhaps not,' she said. 'We are not tried as men are. They go into the world and we stay at home; and it would be hard indeed if we had the same faults as they. We have ours and they have theirs; and so with our virtues.'

'And, after all, humanity is the best thing we know,' said Arthur. He looked as if he thought there was nothing much beyond that especial bit of humanity before him at this moment.

'Your brother would say the worst, and make dogs and horses the best!' said Muriel, laughing.

'Oh, Wilfrid has always had a touch of the misanthrope in him,' Arthur laughed back in return. He is none the worse at heart for it. It is only a habit of thought, not a principle of action; and that makes all the difference, don't you know? He is one of the most honourable and generous fellows breathing when you can get below that rough kind of husk which he puts on:—I don't know why; for affectation I think—only that he is not affected.'

'It would be better if he were,' said Muriel; 'if his ideas are real, they are dreadful. If they are taken merely for show, that is another matter. But even then, why should he decry human nature as he does?'

Arthur pulled his moustache and laughed. He was not disposed to quarrel with Muriel for not thinking his elder brother perfection. He wished her to like him—would be very sorry if she did not—if she did not like them all indeed; but he would not break his heart if her liking for Wilfrid were, on the whole, more tepid than fervent, leaving her free to criticise and discern; in nowise like that blind uncritical devotion which in his heart—he being a Machell and one of a dominant race—he felt was the right kind of thing from a woman to the man whom she loved.

'And, after all, it is a foolish thing to pretend that dogs and horses are better than men and women!' said Arthur, pulling Brian's ears affectionately. 'They are invaluable in their way, but I confess I prefer my own species!'

'So do I,' said Muriel simply, patting the hound's head.

After this the conversation passed from Wilfrid and his misanthropy—this last including his exaggerated affection for animals—on to Muriel herself: the books that she had read, the rides that

she had taken, what she had thought of this, and what she had felt about that, all with an eagerness of inquiry which showed how anxious Arthur was to be abreast of her present state, and to know every step of the way that she had gone since he had last seen her.

And everything that she said, every opinion that she expressed, every sentiment and feeling seemed to him the perfection of what an English girl of the best type should think and feel. He had always thought Muriel Smith charming and beautiful; and since last year her manners, temper, and that fair flower-like face had possessed his heart as the dearest remembrance, the sweetest vision that he could conjure up. Now her intelligence fascinated him as much as the rest; and as he listened to her girlish views on this or on that, he said to himself that, what with her beauty, her modesty, her nobleness of nature, her quiet saintliness of life, that strange sympathy with himself which made her his sweeter echo—the woman to his man—and now her eminently just and true ideas, she was simply the perfection of womanhood; there could be none beyond and never had been.

By which it may be seen how far gone the young fellow was, when he could accept the crude ideas of an innocent and home-bred girl as true and just expositions of life; ideas with which a man of the world could sympathize; ideas which represented anything but her own innocent ignorance of things as they are and activity of imagination as to what they are not. Only love can make these morning clouds do duty for solid structures, and give intrinsic value to the sand of nineteen. But what would life be without this creative faculty—this power given by love of making morning clouds into solid structures? Grant that its dreams pass and its fancies fade. Grant that we create our own ideal and love that which does not exist outside our own belief—it is better to dream and to love, even though the moment has to come when we must wake and see, than to live without illusions and to die, never having known happiness. To each sweet its bitter; to the joy of loving, the pain of loss and the destroying touch of truth—but at all risks the joy of loving.

There is no more delightful hour in life than that of an unconfessed but mutual love. It was the hour which these two young people were passing now in the garden at Owlett. They were learning each other deeper and deeper by heart as the moments flew; and their companion and their teacher was Love. The world was an enchanted home where only beauty, and that inward blessedness which comes from youth and the first stirrings of true passion, are to be found. There was as little self-consciousness in her state as of self-torture in his. She had not stopped, startled by some

sudden revelation, to see where she was standing and to what sweet danger she was drifting; and he had not come out from the phase of feeling to that of calculation, from the happiness of loving for his own part to the torture of doubt for hers, or the misery of uncertainty as to the possibilities of the future. They were in the drifting stage, when souls let themselves go where the current of sweet waters take them; when they look neither before nor after, but are content to feel and forget to fear. Everything about them was so much added to their present store, their future garnering. The birds sang with a meaning which they had never had before; the flowers were messengers sent by nature to the loving; the sunshine was their happiness; the tender shadows were as that something lying unexpressed in their thoughts; everything seemed to speak to them one same language, which Muriel heard without fully comprehending and Arthur knew without analysing.

So the hour passed as if it had been an hour of music and poetry and beautiful pictures and stately shows; as if it had been the fulfilment of the whole meaning and glory of life:—as was it not?

As tender as Derwent's passion for Hilda, the love between these two was somehow more robust and purposeful; and, with all the hopelessness that seemed to be round it, when looked at as a fact not a feeling, had more practicability in the future. Muriel was more to be relied on by Arthur than Hilda by Derwent. Of the two she loved her mother better than Hilda loved hers; yet she would be more faithful to her lover if difficulties should arise between him and that mother. Hilda was a Machell, born and bred in the faith that the welfare of the family was to be preferred to individual happiness; and that the obedience of a daughter to her mother was as much a part of good breeding as of good conduct. She would not hold by her lover against her mother's refusal as Muriel would; but then Muriel would reconcile the two seeming opposites, and if obedient to the one would also be faithful to the other. Her simplicity of nature, her truthfulness and straightforwardness, would make it impossible for her to be treacherous or disloyal to either. Down in the depths of Hilda's nature lay that strong vein of the Machells which, in my lady, showed itself in such calm acquiescence in their broken fortunes as looked like choice and expressed itself in enjoyment, yet which also determined that, come what might, her children should marry money; in Wilfrid, in his misanthropy, his moral scepticism, and his ability to force his will and sacrifice his personal happiness to the social exigencies of his position; in Arthur, in his power to lead his own life, notwithstanding inherited circumstances, and his determination to master fate and compel fortune.

She was like her mother both morally and personally. Girl as she was, with all the romance in her as yet to the surface, before expediency had taken to itself righteousness or reason had demanded to be heard rather than feeling, she could not possibly be persuaded into an imprudence. She was her mother's daughter and her brother's sister; and when the time came Derwent would have to reckon with more than love.

But with these two in the garden listening to the birds in between words that meant everything to the soul and nothing to the sense, when once that die was cast there would be no going back for the needs of family position, the dread of poverty, or the like. What might be when that future for which this woman upstairs was waiting—had been waiting for all these fourteen years—should have come, that was another matter. Meanwhile the linnets and the thrushes sang in the branches of the budding trees, the sun shone, the flowers bloomed, and the luminous shadows went and came like Muriel's smiles and blushes, the tender light in his eyes and the sweet shy happiness in hers.

After a time Mrs. Smith came down from her room and joined them. The post at Grantley Bourne reached Owlett only late in the afternoon; and while Muriel had been sitting with Arthur under the tulip-tree, the postman had brought a letter for the lady of the house, that rarest circumstance of all in the life of Owlett. It was a letter which tried her composure as it had never been tried since she had lived here. It made her weep as she had not wept for years; kiss her husband's portrait with a passionate outburst which no one who knew her only as she was in her outward life would have imagined possible to one so self-controlled, so still. It made her now wring her hands as she thought of her children, now laugh hysterically and say 'My love! my love!' as she thought of her husband. It transformed her from the quiet Mrs. Smith of Owlett, as the world knew her, to the impassioned soul torn between two great loves, two contrary duties, as she alone knew herself to be. But she had to press her emotion back into the depths of her aching heart, as she had pressed it back for so long now, and to fix her face into the impassive mask habitual to her.

When she came downstairs, and walked across the lawn to where the two young people were sitting, no ordinary observer could have seen more than that she was paler even than usual, and that the circles round her eyes were darker. Only Muriel caught a something underneath the mask which was unaccustomed; and a look of anxiety crossed her own face as she met her mother midway on the lawn, and laid her hand caressingly on her arm.

'I did not like to disturb you, dear mamma,' she said tenderly, and as if in apology for her own happy hour and that unaccustomed something beneath the mask. 'Grant said that he had told you Mr. Machell was here, and I did not like to tease you by sending up to you again.'

'I was engaged, and could not come sooner,' said her mother, shaking hands with Arthur, but glancing from each to each with a quick look that shone like a lightning spark for just a moment, and then passed into that steady gaze which always seemed as if it sought to conceal something in herself by a forced attention to others.

What did that glance of hers suspect, and what did it see? What was there in his face, flushed and radiant in spite of the languor left by his illness, and what in Muriel's, soft and tender as music, which made her shiver in the sun as if this warm May day had been one of pitiless December? Whatever it was, it shook her ordinary statuesque stillness for a moment, for she shivered perceptibly, while a spasm flickered over her face, as she sat down on the garden seat and looked as if she were about to faint.

'It is nothing,' she then said to Muriel, in answer to her anxious 'Are you ill, mamma?'—'Only a little shivering fit; nothing more.'

On which Arthur suggested that she had taken cold; and Mrs. Smith said calmly: 'Yes, I think I have;' and shuddered again—this time artificially.

After this the conversation passed to uninteresting subjects; for though Mrs. Smith talked well on all the current topics of the day and had her own ideas on politics, and formed an independent judgment, and not a bad one, on books and current events—what were even the 'burning questions' of foreign diplomacy or home agitation, or the most interesting poem, novel, or memoir of the season, to two young people who had been wandering in an enchanted wood with only love as their guide? It was all very pleasant intellectually, no doubt; but men in love are not intellectual, and care more for silly little speeches and absurd little looks and blushes from the beloved than for the most eloquent disquisitions from any one else.

No, the glory of the day had passed now; the door of the temple was shut, and the music and incense had died—the one in silence, the other into ashes. But for all that Arthur still lingered. It was too great happiness to sit here in the Owlett garden, merely looking at Muriel's sweet face and hearing her soft voice, to abandon sooner than he need. So he stayed on till the servants brought out afternoon tea; and then, just as Muriel was pouring

it out, Derwent rode up to the door;—which made another excuse in his own eyes as well as in those of Mrs. Smith, which were not so easily blinded.

Handsome, picturesque, slender, dark, his young man's vanity no more offensive than the display made by a beautiful bird of his plumage, Derwent was an admirable foil, because such a direct contrast, to Arthur Machell. When Muriel looked at them both—the dear brother who had been her lifelong love, her playmate and protector, and that other, not exactly a brother, stronger, with more richness of colouring, more frankness of temper, more joyousness of nature, more power of command and fearlessness—she thought that she was more to be envied than anyone she knew for owning two such men:—the one as her brother, and the other—well, as her acquaintance; perhaps she might even say friend.

As for the two young men they met with strange cordiality. The Machell boys, as boys, had never specially affected Derwent. He was of a different nature and temperament altogether from them; and though he was manly enough in his own way, it was a way that was less robust than theirs, and which they despised as boys do despise differences. Then he had not been to school, and so was not up in schoolboy slang and traditions; and his sister was too much his companion; and his tutor was a prig; and, though they could not deny that he rode well to hounds, fenced with skill as well as with consummate grace, and was a dead shot, still they took exceptions where they could, and had never been quite cordial in the days of what Wilfrid called their cubhood. But for the last year or so, both brothers had veered round from contempt to admiration. Even Wilfrid, hard and grim as he was, excused Derwent's vanity, and upheld him as a fine fellow intrinsically in spite of his patent faults; and Arthur thought him immensely improved since he saw him last, and felt quite affectionately for him as he went across the lawn to meet him, and hoped that Muriel would be pleased to see his greeting.

Derwent, on his side, forgot that he had ever thought the Machell men, as boys, less than the heroes which it was pleasant to him to think that Hilda's brothers were. In the days when youth measures everything by its own self-made standard, finding the stronger coarse, the weaker effeminate, the more ignorant dolt, the better informed prig, he too had had his fling at both Wilfrid and Arthur; but now he met Hilda's brother with as much cordiality as was shown him; and whatever else might go astray, assuredly the friendship between the young men of the two houses would be safe!

A pleasant half-hour followed; but after this time Arthur, not being really strong yet, flagged suddenly; the false energy of excitement which hitherto had kept him up gave way, and his face was so pale, his figure so listless, that it was evidently impossible for him to walk back to Machells.

'I will drive you home, Mr. Machell,' said Mrs. Smith with ill-concealed embarrassment.

She was too true a woman not to be pitiful to a man's suffering and weakness, but all the same she did not want to be seen by Lady Machell driving with her son. Such intercourse as she had with her neighbours was, as has been said, on one side only; they came to her, she very rarely went to them; and with that letter in her pocket she did not wish to seem to be on terms of intimacy with anyone, least of all with a young man of the superior family—always the superior family, however poor.

'That will be very kind,' said Arthur, looking at Muriel. 'I hope that it will not derange your plans for the afternoon? But honestly I feel as if Machells was a very long way off;' laughing as he wiped his forehead and upper lip, wet with those self-betraying damps of weakness.

'No, it deranges nothing. I will take you with pleasure,' said Mrs. Smith mechanically, in her turn glancing at Muriel, and meeting a pair of wistful eyes that said as distinctly as a voice: 'And I too, mamma?' After a moment's pause she added slowly, speaking to Derwent with a certain feeling of taking shelter behind him from the dangers lying round her: 'Order the carriage, my boy. We can all go—you too.'

'Willingly,' said Derwent, dashing towards the house with alacrity, looking for the sunshine on his own account, and expecting to see Hilda for at least a moment. And he was his mother's refuge against the danger of an undesirable love affair between Owletts and Machells!

He was mistaken, poor boy. His mother took Arthur only to the second lodge, and there, looking at her watch, set him down with affected hurry, as if she had not time to drive through the shrubbery to the house. And in so doing she planted the garden of her young son's soul with weeds of bitterness and thorns of disappointment; such as only those know who are in that pitiable state wherein trifles are matters of life or death, making the soul godlike in its blessedness or the prey of the demons in its misery—that pitiable state which is called "being in love."

CHAPTER VI.

'I MUST WATCH AND SEE.'

Is for any reason—who shall say what?—Mrs. Smith wished to keep secret from Lady Machell the apparently insignificant fact that she had driven her invalid son home, there was little likelihood of doing so. As Arthur was shaking hands and wishing Muriel good-bye in the phaeton, the pony-carriage from Tower came in sight, and Miss Dinah Forbes, in a costume of such hybrid character as made her look like a man at a distance and not much unlike one near at hand, appeared on the scene. She was sitting very high in the small low pony-carriage, her feet planted firmly against the splash-board, holding the reins in her two hands like a coachman sawing at a hard-mouthed runaway horse, for all that her docile pony had a mouth of velvet, and would as soon have thought of jumping through the hoops of a circus as of going a step faster than it was forced to go. But it gave her the masculine air in which her soul delighted; and strong-minded as Miss Dinah Forbes was, she was not above the weakness of affectation in her own line.

She was driving Aurora, who made a striking contrast to her sister, dressed as she was in a pale blue muslin much frilled and flounced and with a deep red sash round her waist like a girl; a juvenile hat was set far back on her head, surmounting her multitudinous curls and puffs like an aureole of straw; and a string of coral beads was round her throat to match the sash;—such g'ring admixture of colours being part of the method by which she asserted her juvenility and called attention to a complexion which had once been like milk and roses, and was now like ancient wax.

'Well met!' said Miss Dinah in her deep bass voice, raising her whip by way of general salutation. 'And when did my friend Mr. Arthur return?'

'Yesterday,' said Arthur, as he came down from the one carriage and went to the other. 'How are you, Miss Aurora?'

Miss Aurora laughed and flirted her fan. She always carried both a fan and a smelling-bottle, even in winter. She had learnt how to use a fan with creditable dexterity, and she had a pretty hand and wrist; and of what use is an accomplishment or a beauty, if you do not let the world profit by your possession?

'I am quite well, thank you, Mr. Arthur,' she said coquettishly. 'And you?—a little pale, I think, but as beau garçon as ever.'

'Thanks; you were always good to me, Miss Aurora,' said Arthur gallantly; and Miss Aurora's face put on a look which a girl has when she blushes.

'We are old friends now,' she said with a kind of apology in her voice and manner, as if making an excuse for her too evident interest.

'And good ones,' said Arthur.

'Now, Mr. Arthur, if you are going to flirt with Baby I must interfere. I allow no one to flirt with Baby without my leave.'

'Suppose, then, I have asked it. It will make matters so much easier,' laughed Arthur.

'Oh! Mr. Arthur,' said Miss Aurora, covering all her face but her eyes with her fan.

'Upon my word you have not improved in modesty, young man, since you have assumed Her Majesty's uniform!' said Miss Forbes. 'Mrs. Smith, I hope you keep your daughter out of the way of such a dangerous young man as this! I shall look sharp after my little girl, and I advise you to look sharp after yours!'

On which she laughed that deep-bayed laugh of hers which always betrayed her whereabouts half-a-mile off; while Aurora put in her shrill treble notes as the *floritura*, and looked at Muriel in girlish sympathy—the two young things with their respective guardians denying them the harmless pleasure of their age!

Miss Dinah Forbes was the only person in or about Grantley Bourne who ever dared to take a liberty with Mrs. Smith. The impenetrable reserve which this last held with all the world acted as a fender that kept off undesirable familiarities of all kinds; but Miss Forbes, masculine, rough in grain, and, though quick-sighted enough, insensitive for her own part and indifferent to the sensitiveness of others, cared nothing for a manner which every one else was compelled to respect; and having the fixed intention of 'routing her up,' as she phrased it, whenever they met, effectually fulfilled her desire by generally making the lady of Owlett secretly angry and patently cooler than was even her wont. Mrs. Smith was not a woman who allowed herself the luxury of either likes or dislikes for her fellow-creatures. She cultivated quietism too carefully for that. But she had a feeling of physical repulsion for Miss Forbes that amounted at times to loathing. They were at the two ends of the scale of womanhood, and women are by nature intolerant of differences. To this coarse joke, this bit of horseplay so detestable

to a person of her nature, she deigned no reply. She sat there, looking straight before her, with no more sign of life than if she had been a mummy or a statue; but Muriel blushed deeply and with unaccountable distress; and the colour in Arthur's face was the reflection of her own.

'Oh, Miss Forbes, that is very cruel!' he said lightly, trying to laugh it off as something that had neither hidden sting nor secret meaning. 'I am sure Miss Aurora does not think so ill of me!'

'We will ask Muriel what *she* thinks,' said Miss Forbes, her keen eyes fixed on Muriel. 'Do you think Mr. Arthur Machell dangerous, my dear?'

'No,' said Muriel simply; but her face was still crimson, and still bore the same look of distress that had struck Miss Forbes as being odd and meaning more than it showed;—hence had been the spur by which her thoughts had been touched and her words set in motion.

'Perhaps it would be better if you did,' she said dryly. 'We are sometimes in the most danger when we see least of it.'

Before Muriel could reply, if indeed she would have replied at all, Mrs. Smith, bowing in her stiffest manner, said in a voice that only intensified that manner:

'I must wish you good morning, Mr. Machell; good morning, Miss Forbes, Miss Aurora. Home, Jones'—leaning back in her carriage and turning her head away from the group.

Whereupon Miss Forbes gave a man's ejaculation and whistled 'Phew!' between her teeth and her lips; and, rubbing her nose with her whip, said in a stage aside:—

'So that's the way the cat jumps, is it?'

Meanwhile the Owlett carriage turned and carried off its occupants, Muriel feeling that the day had suddenly darkened into night as it had already darkened for Derwent, while Arthur wondered why he felt his weakness all at once so much, and was so terribly 'run down' without extra cause.

'Now, Mr. Arthur, jump in and I'll drive you to the house,' said Miss Forbes, who noticed his sudden pallor, and whose heart was as good as her style was bad. 'You are looking awfully fagged, young man. What have you been up to, boy? No good, I'll be sworn! I never saw a more washed-out-looking individual in my life. Come, tumble in! You don't look fit for marching orders, any way.'

'I have been ill, but I can walk to the house, thanks,' said Arthur briefly. He too hated Miss Forbes at this moment, and in spite of his better knowledge ignored her good heart, and only recognized and resented her bad style.

'Nonsense; jump in, I say. Do you want me to bundle you in with my own hands? You can sit at Baby's feet; you're not the first young fellow that has sat there; or would like to be there if he only could get leave,' she added with a fond look at the once pretty and now faded doll by her side, who to her eyes was still eighteen; no more; fresh and frank, the envy of women, and the admiration of men, as she had been thirty years ago.

'It is a shame to load your beast with my weight,' remonstrated Arthur; but Miss Dinah, saying 'Stuff!' moved Aurora's skirts and made a place for the young man, who to avoid further parley took it, and so was carried a little ignominiously to the house.

'We have brought your young soldier out of all sorts of fire and danger, Lady Machell,' said Miss Dinah for her first greeting, as she strode into the shabby drawing-room where my lady sat in costume as usual, and pretty Hilda, bending over her drawing, spent half the time that should have been given to her trees of doubtful nomenclature, to surreptitious sketches of masculine profiles, which were a cross between Derwent Smith and a barber's block.

'Ah!' said Lady Machell looking at her son; 'what were they?'

'First, the perils of woman's eyes,' rolled out Miss Dinah; 'and then those of failing strength. I rescued him from the hands of our sphinx, the lady of Owlett, and her pretty daughter—and upon my life that young person looked superb to-day! She is almost as pretty as Baby; and that is saying a great deal; at least in my eyes. And then he looked like fainting; so I carried him off, and here he is.'

'I am much obliged to you, Miss Forbes,' said Lady Machell rather gravely, 'I do not know which would be the more disastrous of the two dangers you have mentioned; perhaps the former,' trying to laugh, but not succeeding in making her laugh natural.

'If you rescued me from one peril it was only to throw me into another,' said Arthur gallantly, putting on a devoted kind of look as he sat down by Miss Aurora, who laughed, and lightly touched her mouth with her fan, and said: 'Tais-toi, polisson!' with the idea that she was using the proper phrase for the occasion.

'Well, I don't know about that,' observed Miss Dinah with a sly wink. 'I saw sundry blushes, and all the rest of it, that would make me look twice where I look once now, if I caught them flying between you and Baby, I promise you, Mr. Arthur. You young men in Her Majesty's service are dangerous young fellows—for the

most part wolves, Mr. Arthur, wolves—and require a great deal of looking after.'

'Love laughs at locksmiths, Miss Forbes,' he said saucily; 'so where is the good of it all? Che sarà sarà! There is a fate in such things, and it is only wise to recognise one's fate!'

'Rather a dangerous doctrine to be preached in the presence of the young, Arthur,' said Lady Machell with a warning glance to Hilda, who, looking divinely innocent and unconscious, was secretly taking it all in as manna whereon her soul fed daintily. Love is so much more delightful than prudence to a young creature in that crude stage of mental being when feeling is the ruler of gods and men, and facts the helots at his feet!

But Arthur taking the hint changed the conversation, and, while the visit of the ladies from Tower lasted prevented it from falling again on the Smiths, where Miss Dinah would willingly have conducted it. For Miss Dinah, like many old maids of her stamp who have never known love on their own account nor even desired to know it, lived in a perpetual atmosphere of not ill-natured suspicion; and saw an incubating love affair if two young people of the opposite sex spoke together for a quarter of an hour, or looked at each other with more interest than they would have looked at two dummies at Madame Tussaud's. So far as this spirit of premature discovery went, she was the very Marplot of the place, and had nipped more than one promising affair in the bud by inviting attention to it in those early days of its existence when it could grow only in silence and darkness, and when to speak of it was to destroy it. But if she was a nuisance she was not malicious, and we learn to be thankful for small mercies in a life made up mainly of large cruelties.

At last the visit came to an end, and then Lady Machell's turn began.

'How did you meet the Smiths, Arthur?' she asked.

'I called there,' answered Arthur, feeling uncomfortably conscious of a return to boyhood, when disagreeable confession was sure to entail a scolding.

'You walked all that way in your present state?' she cried reprovingly.

'Yes, the day was fine, and I was tempted,' he said; so far disingenuous in that he had set out with the intention of going, but speaking now as if his going had been an afterthought.

'How could you be so imprudent?' she said with displeasure. 'A walk like that, and you in your state of health! It is enough to bring on a relapse. And to the Smiths of all the people in the place—the least desirable acquaintances we have!'

'Mother!' he remonstrated, while Hilda turned nervously to her drawing, and smudged her barber's blocks into so many tattooed New Zealanders.

'Surely they are!' said Lady Machell, lifting up her eyebrows. 'There is not a word to be said against Mrs. Smith, I admit. No one could have lived a more blameless life than her's has been ever since she came; still, there is something in her history that does not come to the surface; and they have no money.'

This last was a slip. It's difficult always to prevent the tongue from speaking of what the heart feels and the brain thinks; and the cardinal defect of families with young men and marriageable maidens came unawares to the front when Lady Machell spoke of the disqualifications of the Smiths of Owlett.

'Their want of money does not make them undesirable acquaintances, so far as I can see,' said Arthur drily. 'Seeing that they pay their way, live well, and do not borrow, we can hardly say that they want money. They may not be rich, like the Brown de Paumelles, for instance: but they are as well off as the Tower people, and no one hears them spoken of as specially wanting money.'

'Well, let that pass. All the same it was an imprudent thing of you to do, Arthur. The walk is a great deal too long for any one just recovering from such an illness as yours,' said Lady Machell, going back to her safest position.

'Not as it turned out, mother,' he answered with a creditable attempt at indifference. 'Mrs. Smith drove me home, so I had only the one way; and I think that did me good rather than not.'

'You can make it nothing but imprudent,' she repeated.

'I am sorry, mother, if I have made you anxious,' was his reply, getting up from his seat and going over to her; and when there, putting his arms round her and kissing her as he used when a boy.

'My boy!' she said fondly, passing her hand down his handsome face. 'You know that all I ever feel or think—or fear, darling—is for your own good. What other motive can I have?'

'None, mother. Do you not think I understand you?' was his reply; 'only—fear nothing; fear is waste of time.'

On which, not caring to trust himself to a longer discussion, he left the room as troubled at heart as both Hilda and his mother herself. She would never consent!—never!—neither she nor his father. If the love of which he had become more than ever conscious to-day was to be confessed and acted on, it must be in direct defiance to their wishes, and with the foregone conclusion of abandoning his profession and his family. Whatever else 'Her Majesty's uniform,' as Miss Dinah Forbes called it, may bring, it does not

bring much solid pelf; and unless he married money, Arthur knew as well as his mother that he could not marry at all, as things were. But the alternative of marrying money as the first necessity—selling himself, in fact, to a rich wife—was simply impossible to such a man as Arthur Machell. Better remain all his life a bachelor, he thought, with a deep flush on his handsome face, than commit an action which would destroy his self-respect for ever. No; if even he gave up Muriel, he would not do that other thing; if he sacrificed her love, he would keep his honour intact. But he would not give her up. Was no way open to him by which he could gain her and keep his self-respect? Was it absolutely necessary that he should be only a poor officer in the army and nothing else? He was young, strong, energetic, fearless. England was not the universe, and fair fortunes might be won in other quarters of the globe than Europe. He would be sorry to leave them here at the old house, but a man's life belongs to himself; and the best love to be shown to those whose name you bear is to be worthy of that name, and bring increased lustre to its setting. To hang about the mother's skirts, to give the father a helping hand in his gouty old age, is this all that a man is born into the world to do when there are others consecrated to the office and bound to carry on the business of the house and the succession of the family? He loved his own people—no man better—but he did not hold it his duty to moulder away his life in England that he might see them occasionally; nor yet his duty to continue in the army on starvation pay because no Machell had ever sullied his hands with trade, and commerce and the colonies were alike abhorrent to the family traditions.

He thought it all out, and he ended by deciding to wait until he was surer of Muriel's feeling for him: he thought, he hoped, he believed, but he was not sure; when he was, he knew what he should do.

Meanwhile, the rough jokes of Miss Forbes, striking so close to the truth as they did, gave Lady Machell ideas which she kept to herself, but of which she thought it would be as well not to lose sight when planning the possibilities of the future.

And yet she could believe nothing to the discredit of Arthur? She loved this boy so much—the flower of the flock as he had always been. He was the one of all her children the surest to do right; she could not doubt him. Still, the ladies of Tower had flung their little darts; which stuck; and though she hated herself for suspecting that Arthur, her pride and her delight, should be so lost to the sense of what was due to himself as a Machell, and to her as his mother, as to think seriously of a portionless girl like Muriel

Smith, yet for all that it was her duty to watch him closely; and now that she had had ideas instilled into her, to test their essential value. Wilfrid, who was not her favourite, was prepared to do his duty like an honourable man and a dutiful son; would her dear boy be less noble than his brother? Impossible! She would not believe it of him without proof; and she had had none yet. He had spoken of the Smiths naturally, without hesitation or forced indifference. She had watched him; and his face had not changed; and if he had had an unspoken thought she would have seen it. Was she not his mother who had studied him since his boyhood, and knew every turn of his mind, every feeling, every thought? Poor mother! How many others have believed the same thing of their sons, and insisted on the barn-door qualities of the bold and roving tassel-gentles which they have watched with such care and love! All the same, those ideas implanted by the ladies of Tower came again and again unbidden; and between sleeping and waking her last thought was: 'I must watch and see.'

CHAPTER VII.

HIS LATEST CRAZE.

HAD Guy Perceval had a good manner and a fine presence—that is, had he been what an American would have called a magnetic man—he would have been an invaluable possession to the neighbourhood, being the one landed proprietor at Grantley Bourne who took up new ideas and endeavoured to improve on old methods of living. But as he took up these ideas less wisely than warmly, and rode his hobbies straight against venerated prejudices and time-honoured superstitions, without allowing time for gradual change or growth—and as he was a small man with a thin voice, an ungraceful figure, a bad manner, and a nervous laugh—he gained no honour in his own neighbourhood, but fulfilled the fate accorded to local prophets, and was laughed at in proportion to his zeal and scouted in direct measure with his truth.

The only thing that kept him from absolute social excommunication was, that he was Mr. Perceval of the Manor, owner of a fine old mansion perfumed by a few historical traditions, and possessor of a rent-roll of some fifteen thousand a year. Being so grandly framed, his follies to some, to others his dangerous innovations, were excused in public and laughed at in private; and if he would not have been tolerated for himself alone, for the sake of his surround-

ings he was welcomed with effusion, according to the way of society and human nature in general.

He was an example in his own person of the worthlessness of intrinsic qualities and the power possessed by externals. He had zeal and intelligence;—which went for nothing because he was destitute of personal charm; but he had wealth;—and this was the ballast which kept the whole thing from capsizing. He might lay down the lines of a higher law and a wiser method than any by which the people of Grantley Bourne had yet lived; but if he laid them down in a high-pitched voice, his arm sawing the air like a pump handle, and his head thrown back so far that his face was foreshortened to a chin and two nostrils, of what good were they to a fastidious generation which demands to be amused if it consents to be taught, and requires to be flattered if it is to be led? The value of plain living and high thinking might be incalculable, but to be of any use this doctrine would have to be demonstrated by a more personable professor than Guy Perceval, and one whose demonstrations would not set your teeth on edge when he made them. And when he advocated scientific arrangements in ventilation, drainage, food, or the like, the people who had never looked to a stuffed chimney nor a waste-pipe, and had cooked and eaten by the light of nature and not according to the teaching of chemical analysis, held him as far gone as man could be whom it was not dangerous to suffer to be at large. They had not died of typhus, neither they nor their forbears; and it was just folly to try to frighten them now with a dust-bin here and now with a cess-pool there. Still, Mr. Perceval was Mr. Perceval, with pretty pickings to dispense among the faithful. Wherefore the poor made up a sham compliance which was the veriest sham possible, and the rich affected intellectual adhesion, but for various causes, always beyond their control, refused to follow his lead, and left him the barren honour of lonely supremacy in the ways of wisdom.

When he declaimed against the close foliage that made Owlett like a nest, and urged on Mrs. Smith to lay the whole place bare, replanting with pines and blue-gums if she must plant at all, she, who never argued, contented herself with saying quietly:—

‘I daresay it would be better, but I have not the heart to do it;’ listening as quietly to a rather bitter discourse on the evil of knowing the better thing and refraining from doing it. Wherein Mr. Perceval was decidedly in the right, but none the more obeyed.

When he talked of the sin of unhealthy marriages, people

thought him indelicate to introduce into that question any other considerations than those of love or money; and said that it would be very hard on the poor things who had scrofula or madness in their blood if they were not allowed to marry where they loved; and Mr. Perceval was talking on subjects which he did not understand and had better leave alone. When he made war against such superstitions as, that the poker draws up the fire and the sunlight puts it out—taking these as types—the housekeepers by rule-of-thumb tossed their heads, and said that practical experience goes farther than scientific theory any day, and though Mr. Perceval thought himself vastly clever, yet they could tell him that others knew better than he did with all his wisdom. When he established a night-school for the ploughboys and hinds, who had none during the day, the gentry thought him revolutionary and playing with edged tools which would give him an ugly gash one of these days; and when he gave Sunday afternoon lectures in his library on popular science and the lives of great men, even the good vicar looked grave, and said that he wished he had not made it Sunday; and every one knew that the vicar never said an ill word when he could say a good one and that when he whispered grey other folks might be expected to shout out black. The lectures however did not take. A few of the best, and some of the worst, young men in the place went to them for a short time; but the former were disappointed at the want of doctrine, and the latter at the want of fun. Between the two they came to an ignominious end for lack of listeners, and the neighbourhood was avenged and appeased.

Had Guy been a fine big fellow like Wilfrid Machell, for instance; but Wilfrid with enthusiasm and a belief in humanity; or like Arthur—given to causes, not deeds—he would have carried his points victoriously. But a mean-looking little fellow, who has only money and ideas, does not do much in the way of forming a new public opinion in the teeth of the old. Thus it came about that Mr. Perceval, representing Wisdom, cried from the housetops in vain, and got no one to listen to him save here and there a private friend, made into a disciple for motives of self-interest.

There was Lady Machell, for instance. She cared nothing for causes, but a great deal for Machells, and would have sold the most cherished tradition of her life for so much money down; but she was one who always showed herself a sympathetic listener, and who adopted such of Mr. Perceval's crazes as she could without expense or too much personal inconvenience. It was only for a time, she thought; when she had him safe as her son-in-law she would put an end to all this folly, and mould him into a more reasonable shape

than he had now. His crases came now from the fact that he had no wife to interest him and no wife's family to direct him. When a wise hand was laid on the reins, all would come right; and hers should be that hand.

She had fixed her eyes on him for Hilda; and when Lady Machell had made up her mind to win, others might as well make up theirs to yield. It had to be done; and a good will makes obedience so much easier. Hitherto however she had cultivated him with the most charming show of disinterested friendship, the most consoling assurance of sincere sympathy with his views and ideas. She was always ready to talk with him on his pet subjects, and she invariably cared for his ruling crase; and not the warriest fish in the matrimonial waters baited and angled for all round could have seen the faintest flash of her hook, so deftly was it concealed, so skilfully played.

Hilda was still in the schoolroom, and seldom appeared even at afternoon tea; which in general is licensed to include 'butter-cups.' Sometimes but rarely, she came down accompanied by her governess and on her way for her afternoon constitutional; but in general she was strictly hidden and kept out of sight like contraband. Her brothers, when they were at home, were allowed to take her for walks, as a treat; but as a rule she was never seen without her governess—an awful kind of woman who acted as the most admirable duenna; and her reputation for beauty, and what she would be when she came out, stood all the higher for her present careful obscuratation.

His best friend—this was what Mr. Perceval called Lady Machell. She was his most sympathetic listener—and he loved her with a really touching devotion; for if he had a restless brain, he had a steady heart, and was as affectionate in nature as he was hobby-horsical in mind. He had tried to interest Mrs. Smith of Owlett, but she only looked and listened and remained unmoved; and though Muriel was softer and more sympathetic, yet she was too young and had no influence. She might be his disciple, but she could not be his coadjutor; and he was looking now for women who would carry out his ideas, not only for girls who would believe in them.

As he drove to-day into the barren weed-grown sweep of Machells he came with a new discovery—the value of oatmeal porridge—milk and oatmeal porridge. The one had forty-nine constituent elements, the other was rich in phosphates. Oatmeal makes bone and muscle; milk gives roundness, a fresh complexion, sweetness of blood. Could porridge be introduced into England as a general article of food, the nation would be saved. He came now

with a bag of meal and strict directions how the porridge was to be made. He was a man for whom the universe is always new, and whose own last acquirements of knowledge are absolute novelties to every one else. What he had just learned, he thought that no one else knew; but he was liberal with his knowledge and imparted his discoveries freely.

They were all sitting as usual on the garden-seat placed against the house, when the Manor dog-cart drove up. By virtue of her brother's presence Hilda too was there, and her governess was not—the prettiest young girl to be found for miles round; the meeting of brook and river making a perfect bit of present human scenery with the promise of lovelier things to come; and as yet unconscious of the charms that she possessed.

Lady Machell received Mr. Perceval in the manner of a favourite guest, with a fine shade of almost maternal tenderness shining like gold on the higher lights of her bearing. Wilfrid, to whom the owner of the Manor was especially distasteful—and always had been from the time when they were boys together, and the dwarf had beaten the giant in the class-room, but was only a clumsy little obstruction in the playground—treated him with a coolness which was certainly not polite, seeing what were my lady's designs: but Arthur, who was sweeter-tempered, was better-mannered; and between the two Wilfrid's sourness scarcely counted. As for Sir Gilbert, he was one of those quiet souls who never show love or hate, prejudice or passion, haste or regret, but who meet all the world with the same face, and neither betray when they are bored nor show when they are pleased; and Hilda thought every man stupid but Derwent Smith. She was in the age of dreams, and Guy Perceval was scarcely the knight whose coming would awaken her.

'What have you in that bag, Mr. Percival?' asked Lady Machell, after the formalities had been gone through. 'It looks like flour.'

'It is the best stuff in the world,' said Guy Perceval, thrusting the bag at arm's length into Lady Machell's face; 'makes the best bone and muscle going; is fuller of nutriment, richer in phosphates than any other food. It is a treasure; and will be just the thing for Miss Machell. I have brought you some to try.'

'But what is it?' she asked again, pleased that he had singled out Hilda for his special interest; not seeing that this was merely on account of her youth, and because he held her as an unformed immaturity who had to be made by food, like a bee in the pupa state, or an infant in the cradle.

'Oatmeal,' said Mr. Perceval. 'For porridge.'

'Oh!' said Lady Machell, who had been in Scotland.

The young men laughed.

'That horrid stuff, mamma!' cried Hilda in dismay, forgetting for a moment the teaching which inculcated silence and submission to the mother's will as the best breeding of the best born.

'It is very wholesome, I believe,' said Lady Machell, ignoring the laughter of her sons and the repugnance of her daughter alike, as she put her delicate fingers into the meal and rubbed the grains with quite a critical air.

'It is salvation,' said Guy. 'If we could get our poor and rich alike to eat porridge, we should be the finest nation in the world. No more rickety children, no more flabby muscles, or gelatinous bones; we should be the most splendid race that has ever lived; and a splendid national physique means national virtue and domination. We are the products of food. By food we may be made with narrow foreheads or broad ones, with dull brains or fine ones. Given good food, we have the like results in digestion, flesh, and intellect. The thing is as sure as a rule-of-three sum.'

'Is that your latest, Percival?' asked Wilfrid with a sneer. 'When I was last here I remember that the demoralization of England was in our system of drainage, and that our salvation was to be had by using tanks made after a certain pattern, and a peculiar kind of pipe.'

'The importance of one thing does not destroy that of another,' said Guy Perceval with perfect serenity. He was accustomed to buffets, and took them as part of the burden carried for truth's sake. 'Drainage is as valuable now as it was last year, and a fine food material does not touch the question of tanks and pipes. Oatmeal is not to supersede hygienic arrangements, but to help.'

'Yes,' said Lady Machell, glad of a word that she could echo and a rope that she could hold by; 'not to supersede, but to help.'

'The Scotch live on oatmeal,' said Wilfrid drily.

'And see what splendid men they are!' Perceval returned.

'Granted; fine brawny fellows enough; but I fancy not all the world before us. There are as good brains out of Scotland as in it; and an English gentleman need not take the odds from a Scotch laird,' was Wilfrid's disdainful rejoinder.

'Weight tells in the long run, and the average weight of the Scottish brain is greater than ours,' said Perceval.

'Good news for the elephants,' returned Wilfrid, with less logic than contempt.

'All reformers are laughed at,' said Perceval stolidly. 'Only do you try my panacea, Lady Machell. I am sure it would do you good, and Miss Hilda too.'

'Don't, Hilda. It will spoil your skin,' said Wilfrid.

'I don't think I should like it; but if mamma likes——' She looked at her mother with dutiful acquiescence, and Guy Perceval smiled in approval.

'Lady Machell will like,' he said in a tone of conviction, not unreasonably acquired. 'Boiled twenty minutes; plenty of salt; and then eaten with cold milk.'

'Thanks; yes, I will certainly try it,' said Lady Machell with admirable self-possession. 'For breakfast, you say?'

'Yes, and supper too, if Miss Hilda takes supper,' he returned, his face beaming with delight. Truly Lady Machell was the most sensible, the most admirable woman in the world; and the best mother! 'I have just taken some to Owlett, and though Mrs. Smith did not seem to be much moved by my arguments—a very wooden kind of woman that—Miss Smith promised to try it.'

'Oh!' said Lady Machell.

'She looks in such splendid health already,' he went on to say, 'I scarcely could say that she wanted to be improved. But she can try it, and at all events it cannot hurt her. What a beautiful creature she is!' enthusiastically.

Wilfrid frowned and Arthur flushed. Both thought Guy Perceval always disagreeable, but at this moment insufferable; and both longed for five minutes of savage life when they might tell him so.

'Yes, she is a pretty girl enough for those who like that style,' said Lady Machell with well-executed indifference. 'For myself, I prefer something crisper and more compact. Don't you think she is too tall? Those very tall girls are so rarely straight, and never strong.'

'But Miss Smith is as straight as an arrow, and seems to me in magnificent health,' said Guy, looking rather astonished. Muriel's beauty was a public confession in the neighbourhood, and to hint at a twisted spine seemed as strange to him as it would be to an artist were he told that Raffaele was decidedly coarse and had no true sense of beauty.

'Yes, at present: but I do not fancy that any of the Smiths have good constitutions. I always have believed, do you know? that Mr. Smith is in a madhouse.'

Lady Machell said this quite confidentially, but without a sign of faltering.

Guy Perceval changed colour.

'Yes?' he answered with evident agitation. 'I have never thought of that. Good heavens! if it should be so! A madhouse!—and that boy is certainly a little odd.'

'Very. He always was,' answered my lady quietly.

'Mother!' cried both brothers in a breath.

'What nonsense!' laughed Arthur. 'He is as sane as any of us here.'

'And saner than some,' said Wilfrid grimly.

'I do not say that he is out of his mind, my dear, but he is certainly odd,' repeated Lady Machell. 'And I should not be surprised to find that my idea is the solution of the mystery.'

Guy Perceval looked thoughtful. The shaft had struck in a tender place, as she meant that it should. Health was the great goddess whom he worshipped as the mother of all power and virtue; and he had moreover a profound idea as to the value of contrast as well as purity of blood in marriage. Muriel and he were an exact match, through unlikeness. Dark, small, stubbly, wiry himself, his wife should be, as she was, tall, fair, smooth-skinned, soft-haired: placid, while he was nervous and excitable; administrative, to his power of origination; and with that womanly quality, which the world would call devotion, but which he recognized as the 'following power'—whereby they would never come into collision, but be always as nature intended—the step in advance, and she dutifully walking in his shadow at his heels. She was his ideal realised. Of all the women known to him, Muriel Smith was the one whom he would wish to choose for his wife. Their physical tendencies would be so admirably counteracted, so beautifully balanced in the children! And then she was so sweet and charming personally. It was such a glorious chance that inclination and scientific fitness should unite at the same point—mark out the same person!

'I am sorry,' he said slowly, after a long pause; 'very sorry. She would make a charming wife; but, of course, if that fatal stain is in her blood, she would be impossible for any man of principle. No one who respected humanity could commit such a crime against posterity.'

'It is not true. I would wager my existence that it is not!' cried Arthur hotly. 'Madness in their blood? No!'

'You know nothing about it, Arthur,' said Lady Machell, with a sharp glance. 'It is not a crime of which I accuse them, but you must see for yourself that there is something in their history which does not come to the surface; and, as Mr. Perceval says, the young man is decidedly odd.'

'If it is so, it ought to be known,' said Guy slowly. 'How-

ever hard on the young people, it is only their manifest duty to society.'

He spoke firmly, but sorrowfully. It was the kind of thing that he would do for his fellow men, how great soever the cost to him personally; and it was what every one else ought to do. The advancement of the race was dearer to him than all else, and the perfection of humanity the favourite dream of his life.

All this time Hilda had not spoken, nor shown by face or manner that she took more interest in the conversation than if it had been about the evils of leaden water-pipes and the unhealthiness of impure gas. But in that active little heart of hers, which she concealed under such a meritorious envelope of quietness and submission, she felt as if she could have strangled Mr. Guy Perceval with her own two small hands; and never in her life had she gone so near to condemning her mother, whom at all times she feared rather than loved, and obeyed because she must, not because it was her pleasant duty to yield. How good her brothers were for their advocacy of those dear, sweet, charming Smiths, she thought. And yet she knew in her secret soul that, had they dreamed of how much she liked the Smiths, and how she found Derwent her prince among men, they would not have been quite so good, and perhaps would have gone even beyond her mother in dispraise and Guy Perceval in hardness of repudiation.

Showing nothing of these tumultuous troubles within, she sat and did her little duties of smiling when she was spoken to; of patting Brian's head when he laid his big paw in her lap; of playing with the white kitten in her arms; and looking pretty and unconcerned all round. And as no one reads riddles when they are written in hieroglyphics without a key, no one suspected that these nice little duties, performed with such charming simplicity of grace and girlhood, hid anything deeper than the superficial diversion of the moment, or served more as a blind than an expression.

'Pray do not go and proclaim throughout the country that the Smiths are all half-mad,' said Arthur hurriedly.

'I am as likely to be as tender of them as you,' returned Guy Perceval. 'I admire her too much to harm her.'

Lady Machell's lips narrowed to a thin line. She looked venomous and vicious, for the stake for which she was playing was heavy, and she could not afford to lose it. Still, she was wise and politic, and knew how to pay out her line.

'You mean Miss Smith?—or the mother?' she asked innocently.

'I meant Miss Smith, but I admire the mother too,' said Guy simply.

'They are both charming in their way,' returned Lady Machell; 'the daughter singularly so. But, for all that, were I a man I should not like to marry even such a pretty and amiable young person as Miss Smith unless I knew more about them than I know now; and especially who, what, and where is the father.'

'Yes, who and where is the father!' echoed Guy with a disturbed air.

'Whoever he is, he is a gentleman; and wherever he is, he is neither in a prison nor a madhouse. I would stake my life on that!' cried Arthur with unusual warmth.

Wilfrid's eyes turned to his brother; so did Lady Machell's. This passionate look, this scornful accent, were both so entirely foreign to his ordinary habits of temper and manner, that it was no wonder if they looked with inquiry and surprise, searching out the motive which spurred him to so extraordinary a display. Like many men of strong will and deep passions, he was good-tempered and not easily roused; with a great deal of surface-softness, and always more ready to swim with the stream in unimportant matters than against it. And to see him flame out so hotly on, as it would seem, such a commonplace topic as the personality and whereabouts of an unknown man was a phenomenon in the family which naturally astounded them.

'There is a good old bit of advice, Arthur, which you would do well to consider,' said Sir Gilbert slowly. 'It is, never to go surety for a stranger, else you will smart for it. I dare say you are right. It is more comfortable to believe good of one's fellow-creatures than evil; still, in this case, evil and good are both unknown, and one is just as likely as the other.'

'And another maxim is to hold a man innocent till he has been proved guilty,' answered Arthur.

Sir Gilbert smiled. He was a slow, heavy kind of man; but he had clear views, and was not foolish.

'A good legal fiction, my boy. I have nothing to say against it in its proper place as a legal fiction; translated into everyday life, it would be rather an awkward rule to work.'

'I am surprised to hear this from you, sir,' Arthur answered, stoutly but not disrespectfully. 'I have heard you say so often that the man who assumes more evil than is known of another, draws his own portrait, and condemns himself—also that suspicion is the curse of little minds—that I should have expected to find you on my side to-day.'

He smiled. 'Have I?' he answered. 'I daresay; and I was right. But there are exceptions to every rule; and if I were you, I would make one in favour of your mother's insight, and not be

quite so ready as you are to endorse this unknown Mr. Smith's unproved respectability.'

'Respectability?—yes, I think that he is respectable enough,' said Guy Perceval; 'but I confess that Lady Machell's theory has thrown a new light on the subject to my mind. Mad! That would fit on every side only too well.'

'It is a cruel thing to say,' Arthur returned without a sign of yielding. 'No one has the right to make theories of this kind simply to gratify curiosity. We know nothing of Mr. Smith, and have no right to assume anything. We have not an inch of proof of any kind; and all these guesses are silly or cruel—or both.'

'You are severe on your mother, Arthur,' said Lady Machell quietly; but her thin lips quivered.

He laid his hand on her own.

'No, mother, not on you,' he said; 'I am speaking of principles—not persons.'

'Your principles are very like persons,' she answered; 'but let us change the conversation. The truth concerning Mr. Smith can have no real interest for any of us; and whatever he is or may have been cannot possibly touch us in any way. How do your new dairy arrangements answer, Mr. Perceval? Are you as satisfied with them now as in the beginning?'

The diversion was effectual. No more was said of the Smiths; and after Guy had perorated for half an hour on his slate slabs and his glass pans, his patented churns and his machine-made cheeses, he got up and went away, more than ever convinced that Lady Machell was the choicest woman of the place and his best friend through and through; and feeling that he had performed an important service to society and the future by making her promise again quite solemnly that Miss Hilda's diet should be largely modified by the introduction of oatmeal.

Long before he left, however, Arthur had strolled off, fuming; leaving Wilfrid also fuming for two reasons where his brother had only one. For if this discussion derogatory to the Smiths had been distasteful to him, so had been Arthur's excitement; and he did not like his mother's manner and intentions towards Guy Perceval.

Ready to sacrifice himself for the good of the family, he thought how he should save his little sister; and could he? He despised Guy now as a man as much as he had despised him when a boy; and he was averse from the idea of Hilda's marrying him, even with all their poverty and all his wealth. And yet, fifteen thousand a year and a fine old Elizabethan house perfumed with historical tradition;—might not a few crazes on drainage and ventilation,

oatmeal porridge and domestic hygiene generally, be forgiven in favour of such sterling advantages? And if mean-looking and plain, the master of the Manor was generous and kind; and these are the long trumps which win the game in the end! But it went against him, how much soever he reasoned with himself and knocked sentiment on the head with the bludgeon of substantial interest. Hilda was as much like his daughter as his sister, and he felt something of a father's protection for her. He wanted to see her happy with a man of Guy Perceval's possessions and, say, Derwent Smith's personal graces; and this compromise between the two revolted him. He knew however that if his mother had decided on it, it would be done. Lady Machell, with her theories of womanly submission always admirably marshalled, had known how to establish her own unquestioned supremacy. Sir Gilbert had gradually gone down before her, and so had he, Wilfrid himself. She knew how to guide them all with a thread so silken, a touch so fine, that they never knew the moment when to refuse her hand until they found themselves brought to the point where she had decided they should be led. Her fish were landed before they knew that they were hooked; and when landed, what is the use of floundering? Still, he would try what he could do for Hilda, and see if it were possible to put spokes into the wheel which the lady mother had set a-going.

'Mother, you are surely not going to dose that poor child with this horrid stuff!' he said, when Guy had gone and Sir Gilbert had lounged off to the library, and he was left alone with his mother and Hilda.

Hilda looked up at him appealingly, gratefully. She hoped that her mother would be as much afraid of her son as she was of her mother.

'She must try it,' said my lady, her lips a trifle set.

'But why make her unhappy for the whim of that ass?' he said.

Here my lady did not look up. She was settling her dress, which was refractory and needed those sharp, short movements of her well-formed hands.

'I think it would be only good breeding to let her try it,' she repeated after a short pause. 'And it does young people good to accustom them to all things—even to things which they do not like. It makes them plastic and more high-bred.'

'I am sorry to hear you say so,' said Wilfrid stiffly.

'But it is your creed too, my dear,' she answered. 'Which of us can go through the world with that low-bred self-indulgence which thinks only of personal pleasure? We must all sacrifice ourselves to the higher needs of family and society. And Hilda will not be hurt by being thoroughly grounded in self-control. You

feel with me I am sure, Wilfrid, even if you are sorry to see her annoyed.'

'She is such a child yet—her initiation into pain need not begin so early. She will have abundance of sorrow and annoyance yet in life; we need not make occasions.'

Wilfrid spoke with strange softness. It seemed to him that his own immolation would lose half its value if it did not secure his little sister's safety.

'Women cannot begin too early,' said my lady. 'The life of a woman is all sacrifice, all self-suppression, from the cradle to the grave; and we cannot change the law of necessity for one child. If Hilda has no worse trial than to eat a mess of oatmeal now and then, to please an old friend and her mother, she will not have much to complain of; will you do this for me, Hilda?'

'I will do what you like, mother,' was the dutiful reply.

'But you do not like to be fed on porridge, little one, do you?' asked Wilfrid.

'No, I do not like it,' she said; 'but if mother does?'

'Habit teaches us everything; and you will get to like it,' said Lady Machell. 'And it will please Mr. Perceval.'

'I do not think Hilda cares much for that; do you, Hilda?' flashed out Wilfrid.

'I care more to please mother,' she answered, with the marvelous tact of a woman, feeling her ground as if by a sixth sense, and knowing exactly what to say to save herself from disgrace.

Lady Machell smiled approvingly. Wilfrid, who could not condemn her obedience, would neither smile nor approve. He was out of humour, consequently unreasonable; and would have preferred to see Hilda recalcitrant rather than submissive. If she had been, he would have rebuked her and taken his mother's part. Nothing more, however, was said; and the penance involved in porridge-eating was performed with grace by the well-trained little victim, who swallowed without a wry face, what, not having been bred to its liking, was to her the distasteful stuff whereby she was to elaborate bone, muscle, and brain-power. And she thereby proved to her mother, as so often before, how eminently fitted she was to the part that had been assigned her by a merciful providence and the keen insight of an unalterable maternal will.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEFT IN THE DARK.

AFTER this conversation, Guy Perceval determined to make it his business to find out, if he could, where the absent Mr. Smith was living; and if his health were as satisfactory as his morals, his sanity as assured as his status. As we have said, the world at Grantley Bourne had left off troubling itself about Mrs. Smith's non-resident husband. She had so firmly established her own position and gained her social certificate by her fourteen years of wise walking and blameless behaviour, that the mystery of her proprior's non-existence had ceased to interest it. But Lady Machell's little shaft had awakened in Guy Perceval that formless suspicion which is more or less dormant in all of us, and more or less ready to be aroused by a breath, shaped by a touch; and it had arrested him in that drifting state of feeling called euphemistically making up one's mind; that state wherein the sole thing wanting for the final decision is—opportunity with a dash of extra excitement. When this is furnished, the process will generally be found complete, and reason and inclination will be declared in accord, no matter how divergent in reality.

Now however, Guy, who was really conscientious and honestly desirous of transacting his life according to principle—translating theory into practice in other matters beside oatmeal-porridge and its phosphates—stood aside, and reflected. The pleasant state of unconscious desire in which he had been so comfortably cradled came to an end, and he halted; considered; knew what he wished; and finally resolved to learn what was wanting to his peace, and, when learnt, then to arrange the rest.

Full of this decision he drove over to Owlett a few days after that talk with Lady Machell, and found, as everyone always did find, that Mrs. Smith was at home.

If Mrs. Smith had a secret—as she had—no one could have betrayed less of its place and name. She was not one of those who whisk before your eyes the fugitive tip of a vanishing mystery, gone as soon as indicated. You cannot see what it is like. It was just the extreme tip that swept like a feather through the air; but you saw enough to know the fact of a mystery, and so far had the trail laid for you. There is a certain pleasure in baffling while exciting curiosity, to which the owners of secrets

are greatly given; but Mrs. Smith knew nothing of this hazardous pleasure, and lived with hers closely covered; so closely that not even that tip, vanishing and indefinite, was to be seen playing within her mouth like the Sign given by Owen Meredith. No one had ever caught her at a weak moment or an undefended place; and the cleverest cross-questioner had never penetrated an inch within the forbidden territory. She seemed to be always on guard, always prepared; and those who suspected most were forced to acknowledge that they had no anchoring ground anywhere, and that they were utterly at sea, floating vaguely in the vast ocean of unproved surmise.

Mr. Percival was determined to-day to surprise what no one had yet fairly stalked. He was full of the theory of madness which answered so well on so many sides that, left to himself, he would have declared quite positively it was so and nothing else. But having a glimmer of rationality and enough justice left in him to draw back in time, he hesitated till he could prove.

'A friend of mine, to whom I have often spoken of you, Mrs. Smith, has just written to me to say that he knows a certain Mr. Edward Smith; and asks me if it is your husband.'

He spoke abruptly, suddenly, as one springing a mine; but she neither started nor changed colour, nor was yet one whit disturbed. She only asked tranquilly:—

'Did you say Mr. Edward Smith?'

'Yes, Edward,' he answered briskly. Was he getting hold of that long-hidden clue—striking that cold scent then at last?

'Where did your friend know this Mr. Edward Smith?' she asked again.

'I scarcely know where exactly,' he answered, with a certain hesitation. If his masked battery was to open fire with a true aim, it would be horribly cruel;—scarcely up to the old saying of *Noblesse oblige* on which he had once given a Sunday afternoon lecture to three ploughboys and a deaf wheelwright. Still it had to be done. So he steadied his voice and fixed his eyes keenly on the impassive face before him, and said with as careless an air as he could assume:—

'My friend is one of the Commissioners in Lunacy, and said that he had met Mr. Edward Smith when on his rounds. I do not suppose in a professional character,' he added with a nervous laugh; 'excepting perhaps as a coadjutor.'

'No,' said Mrs. Smith, quite quietly: 'that Mr. Edward Smith cannot possibly be my husband.'

'I half thought not,' said Guy, drawing a deep breath. His shot and shell had not told. 'I have always supposed that your husband was abroad.'

'Yes!' said Mrs. Smith; and she said no more.

Guy Perceval was not to be discouraged at the first failure. He did not specially like the task to which he had devoted himself, but it was a matter of importance to him, and he thought his scruples in this case of less moment than his knowledge. If he had fired a blank shot in the first instance—taking a misleading road—he could hark back, and maybe find the right path before he had done, and hit the mark which he had set himself to strike.

'It must have been something in the shape of an accident, however caused, which has doomed you to this life-long separation,' he said with softening sympathy.

'Circumstances are so often our masters,' returned Mrs. Smith tranquilly.

'Which scarcely reconciles us to sorrow,' he said. 'I hold, as I suppose you know, the belief that most things in life are remediable if we only take the right way—health—happiness—fortune—all these things which we call chance, or fate, I say are generally within our own power to change or create.'

'Yes!' said Mrs. Smith again.

'Don't you think so?' he asked.

'Some things of course are, but others are not,' was her safe reply.

'Such as——'

'Such as death, for instance,' she answered, forced in to speech; 'or the obligations of business; or the choice which so many men are called on to make between their home and their profession, like Indian officers, naval men, and so on.'

She paused. It was seldom that she spoke, even at such length as this, and only when obliged.

'No man of such conditions should marry at all,' said Guy.

'No? That would be rather a hard law to make,' she said.

'A salutary one,' he answered. 'The first thing for us to do, if we wish to live well, and to become really civilized, is to stop all unwise marriages. If a family has madness, for instance, in it—he looked at her narrowly, but she went on working as calmly as before—still went on working quietly, when he added:—'or any great disgrace—the younger members ought not to marry. We should soon stamp out disease—and crime is the product of disease—if we could once establish this law. Don't you agree with me?'

'It would be useful,' said Mrs. Smith.

'It is one of elemental morality—one on which the welfare of nations, the condition of the future of humanity depends,' was his reply.

'Surely,' she said.

'And extending the principle, no man who is unable to live with his wife and family, should have a wife and family at all;' continued Guy, becoming warm. 'The anxiety of the separation is too much for ordinary constitutions, and the health of the whole group suffers.'

'Too often,' she said.

'But that touches you too nearly,' said Guy, with a ghastly attempt at smiling. His efforts at cork-screwing were not very successful so far; yet, like many other worthy souls, he piqued himself on a property which he did not possess, and being one of the least cunning of men, flattered himself that he was one of the most diplomatic.

'My health has not suffered,' she said.

'You have your compensation in your husband's success then—in his well-doing and happiness—such happiness as he can have separated from such a family?' said Guy. 'That is so like the sympathetic unselfish nature of a woman!'

Mrs. Smith's head was slightly bent over her work. Her thread was entangled, and for a moment she was too much preoccupied to speak. It was important that she should make that running perfectly smooth. Then she lifted up her head, but still drew her thread through her white soft fingers, so that she could not look at her companion.

'Yes,' she answered in her usual voice, sweet, low, and monotonous, without emphasis or faltering.

'I congratulate you,' he said warmly.

She bowed slightly.

'Thank you,' was her answer.

'The honour of the head of the house, the father of a family—nothing can come up to that!' cried Guy enthusiastically. It was such a relief to find that, so far from this unknown Mr. Smith being tainted with madness, with dishonour, with fault in any form, he was absent on some noble mission, working courageously in some great field, whence he would come some day radiant, and bearing the fruits and spoils of his years! He felt like a boy, glad he scarcely knew why; glad of his life, of the sunshine, of the day and of to-morrow. 'That is the ideal state of things,' he continued; 'the only solid foundation for family happiness and worth.'

'Yes,' she said when he paused. She had to say something, and she could not say less.

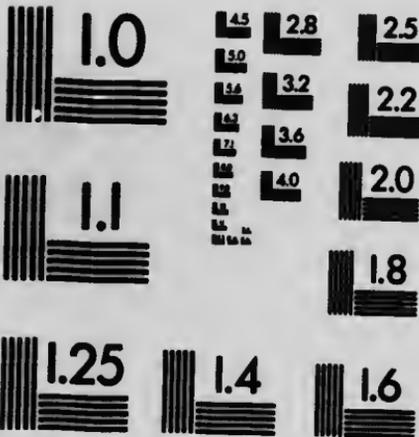
'Do you expect your husband home soon?' he continued. 'Will he have gained his medal, earned his discharge from the servitude of toil, the treadmill even of success?' he asked.

'The date is still uncertain,' she answered.



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'But he is coming?'

'Yes; he is coming.'

'We must give him a welcome when he comes—a real English welcome!' cried Guy, flinging up his voice.

'Thank you,' she answered; neither refusing nor accepting; then, the loophole being opened, she glided through it without either haste or affectation, and said quietly:—'Talking of fêtes, the Brown de Paumelles seem to be arranging one of extreme magnificence on Miss de Paumelle's coming of age. It promises to be quite an event in the neighbourhood.'

'And you will not break through your rule, and go to it?' he asked eagerly.

'My rules are not easily broken through,' she answered.

'But Miss Smith?—and your son?' by the grace of an after-thought.

'What do you say, Muriel?' asked Mrs. Smith, with the faintest little sigh of relief as her daughter came into the room, with her sweet and happy face full of the joy of love, but knowing nothing yet of its torment; sentiment and conscience in accord together, and passion, fear, and self-reproach, words without meaning to her soul.

'About what, mamma?' she asked.

'The de Paumelle ball. Mr. Perceval was asking me if you and Derwent were going. You are, are you not?'

'We agreed that we should,' she answered, shaking hands with Guy, and wondering why he kept hers so long and held it so closely pressed; his method of shaking hands being, in general, of that flabby kind which allows the companion's to drop out of the grasp without an effort to retain it.

But he was too happy to-day to be flabby. As he looked at her more critically than he had ever done before, and noted the bloom and softness of her skin, the clearness of her eyes, the freshness of her lips, and how white and shining were her small square teeth; noted too the innocence of her face, and the feminine strength that lay behind its girlish softness; he was angry with Lady Machell and himself, that she should have suggested and he adopted such a monstrous hypothesis as the insanity or doubtful condition anyhow of the father of so exquisite a creature as Muriel Smith.

'Then I shall have the pleasure of seeing you,' he said, his face radiant, but none the handsomer for its brightness.

She smiled.

'I am glad of that,' she answered simply; and Guy was glad that she said so.

He was the owner of the Manor, and a power in the place; she was only Muriel Smith, with a certain uncomfortable mystery about her father, let kind hearts and unsuspecting minds say what they would. Yet he was as grateful that she expressed herself kindly, and looked at him with her sweet and gracious smile, as if he had been the subordinate and she the royal lady whose favour conferred distinction.

'May I engage you for the first waltz?' he said in his high-pitched voice.

Muriel coloured, and for a moment hesitated. Guy Perceval was a good fellow enough in spite of his crazes now for blue-gum trees and now for oatmeal-porridge; no one could be found to deny his substantial worth of character, nor to doubt the sharpness, if some might the soundness, of his intellect; but as a dancer, and above all as a waltzer, he was simply execrable. He slid and he ducked, he hopped and he halted; he trod on his partner's feet and entangled his own in her train; he generally contrived to overset some unlucky couple against whom he cannoned, and not infrequently to overset himself and his luckless lady. His dances were chapters of terror in the book of the evening to the girls whom he engaged; and had he not been Mr. Perceval of the Manor, he would not have found a partner even among the wall-flowers, so utterly atrocious was his style. When therefore he asked poor Muriel, she naturally felt dismayed and disappointed as well. Down in the secret depths she had dedicated this first waltz to Arthur; and have we not spoken of the exaggerated proportions assumed by small matters, when we are in that state of bondage to imagination called being in love? Not to dance that first dance with Arthur Machell was to lose the flower of the evening. But how could she refuse Guy Perceval? She could not say that she was engaged when she was not. She had not those keen and shifty wits which are never at a loss for made-up excuses and reasons why, of more cleverness than truth. To her the truth was the truth, and not to be tampered with, how great soever its cost; and not even to escape from Guy and save herself for Arthur could she frame any of those small white lies which come so glibly from pretty lips when 'the straight way is disagreeable and crooked paths are pleasant.

With a distressed look to her mother she began: 'Thank you,' when Mrs. Smith said quietly:—

'I have just promised your brother that you should dance the first dance with him, my dear.'

'Oh! a brother is a movable feast. He counts for nothing,' said Guy. 'No; with me, Miss Smith; not with him—with me.'

'But if mamma has promised Derwent—' she said hesitatingly.

'You can give him the second. I must indeed have the first. 'You must give me the first waltz, the first galop, the first mazurka,' he added, rising in his demands as the consequence of opposition; which was his way. 'I must have the first of all three,' emphatically; 'and your brother and the herd may come in for the rest.'

'You are very kind,' said Muriel, more and more distressed, her eyes still turned appealingly to her mother. 'I do not think I can promise so many to one person.'

'I think you are singling out my daughter for too much attention, Mr. Perceval,' said Mrs. Smith, gravely. 'I am not fond of this kind of thing with young girls. It is bad for them in every way.'

'If you think that I could show her honour, I would dance with her all the evening!' exclaimed Guy enthusiastically. Muriel shuddered. 'Pray do not interpose,' Mrs. Smith, except in my behalf,' he continued. 'I specially request this; I have reasons.' He came near to her, and said below his breath, so that Muriel should not hear: 'It is to disprove something that I have been told. It is most important, I assure you!'

Mrs. Smith smiled faintly; an acute observer would have said a little contemptuously. It was as if she had said that she, who knew so well the importance of life, was not disposed to accept Guy Perceval's estimate of the value contained in a triad of dances. She, like everyone else at Grantley Bourne, had heard too often of that faculty of his for magnifying molehills into mountains, to be easily impressed with any chart of social Alps which he might present; but with all this, there was an under-current of something that was not contempt—a faint and passing flash of what?—of terror? It was however all so faint and vague, contempt and fear alike, that not even Muriel, who knew her, had detected the passing of the shadow; and to Perceval her face had been absolutely unchangeable from the first—so much so that he was half inclined to quarrel with her for her stolidity. She made just a moment's pause before she spoke; then she said:—

'You have doubtless some good reason, Mr. Perceval; I will not suppose it a mere young man's whim of the moment; still it is the kind of thing that I specially dislike. I have a great objection to my daughter being put *en évidence* in any way. My own manner of life must have shown you this before now.'

'For this once,' urged Mr. Perceval with characteristic tenacity. 'Trust my reasons, and let me beseech you not to refuse me.'

Mrs. Smith made one or two stitches in her work with marked care and precision.

'Perhaps I am foolishly sensitive about what is after all a mere trifle,' she said slowly, refilling her needle. 'It is really of so little consequence in any way!'

'Just so,' said Guy, in an odd tone of voice, glad to have his will but not much flattered at what was implied in granting it. 'Of no consequence to anyone but me—and to me of all consequence! So, Miss Smith, it is agreed on—the three dances that I have asked for and the first quadrille as well.'

'But Derwent, mamma!' pleaded Muriel.

This time Mrs. Smith made no sign. She had launched her little boat for rescue, and it had carried off nothing and saved no one; so now her daughter must do the best that she could do for herself. After all, taken by itself and without those consequences which she was afraid lurked behind, it was not a serious misfortune as life reckons its misfortunes; and if, like Hilda with the porridge, Muriel were never to know more humiliation than that involved in standing up with a bad dancer, and never have worse things said of her, and hers, than the ill-natured little sarcasms which would be flung at her head for carrying off a potential matrimonial prize for the best of the evening, she would be exceptionally fortunate, thought the mother, sitting there in her statuesque way, and shaping the flowers of a deadly nightshade, introduced for effect of line and colour into a bunch of ox-eye daisies.

So there was no help for it, evidently; and the bargain had to be concluded, with good will or bad. Nor would a social miracle be worked in Muriel's favour; nor was it likely that any such catastrophe as that Guy Perceval should have an attack of measles say, or fall downstairs and sprain his ankle, would come in to break through the network in which she was enclosed. She was caught and caged, and she must submit to her captivity seeing that struggling would not set her free. How little Guy Perceval, the master of the Manor, accustomed to think of himself as one who had but to throw the handkerchief wherever his fancy directed when he should make up his mind to give that Manor a mistress, imagined the dismay which he had created in this dowerless, fatherless Muriel Smith, by his pertinacious determination to do her honour! As he stood up to wish her good-bye, he repeated the various items of the engagement as a lesson not to be forgotten: the first waltz; the first galop—the coquette galop—poor Muriel! the first mazurka and the first quadrille at the Brown de Paumelles' ball: Muriel's heart sinking like lead as she said yes, and buried in that yes all her pride and more than half her

pleasure. No one in or near Grantley Bourne danced with so much grace, precision, lightness as she; and, like all healthy and natural girls, she was fond of dancing and particular as to the skill of her partner. To be doomed then to three round dances and one square with a partner whom a marionette would put to shame, was an infliction sufficiently severe in itself; but how much more severe when to this was added the loss of that other, and a certain uneasy consciousness that this other would not like it; and that the women would not like it; and that she would gain a great deal of envy, hatred, and malice, by being thus singled out by Mr. Perceval of the Manor for undue honour; she who only felt herself singled out for undue victimization!

But she was in the grasp of necessity, and the laws of honour had to be obeyed whether they were to her comfort or her disadvantage.

When Guy Perceval left, he left holding her committed to conditions which were symbolic to him of more than an engagement to dance four special dances at a ball. He had prepared the ground so far. For the rest he would not be precipitate. Those frequent and ostentatiously preferential dances with Muriel Smith would keep off other aspirants, he thought, standing on his rent-roll and personality as a rock which no one could overthrow. And then, when he had exactly determined all about Mr. Smith—which he would do when he demanded the daughter's hand of her mother before speaking to her himself—he would introduce her to the world as his choice, and thus put an end to the doubts and surmises which still crept about society. Yes, he would have everything cleared up, and precisely outlined, he thought triumphantly; and Muriel should be Mrs. Perceval of the Manor when the right time came. Meanwhile he would wait.

For her expression of satisfaction with the contract as it stood Muriel went up to her mother as soon as Guy had gone, and laying her hand on her shoulder said in a distressed voice:—

'Oh mamma! what shall I do?'

'Make the best of it, my dear,' said Mrs. Smith, not looking up.

'But I'm dancing! you never saw anything so dreadful!' cried poor Muriel. 'He literally makes himself the laughing-stock of the room; and he so often falls. Think, mamma, how terrible it would be if I were to fall!'

'You must try not,' answered her mother a little coldly; then more kindly: 'I know, my dear, it must be a great annoyance to you, but you see I could not save you. And after all it really does not much signify, one way or the other. Look at it in that light,

Muriel; against loss or death or sorrow where does it stand? And by the next day you will have forgotten all about it.'

'I do not think I shall, mamma; but I will try and not think too much of it,' said Muriel with pretty earnestness, but rueful all the same; and then she went away to find Derwent and confide her perplexities to his keeping.

Mrs. Smith would not have offered this commonplace kind of comfort had she known what was in Muriel's mind about those dances and the partner whom she had specially desired. Nor would she have shown herself so comparatively indifferent to the whole affair, had she not been absorbed in that great Something which was coming on them all. But, like most parents, she saw nothing of what was passing before her eyes, and the giants whose assaults she feared were only windmills on the horizon, while the real dangers were gliding at her feet unseen and unsuspected.

CHAPTER IX.

CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON.

If her mother were more philosophic than sympathetic, Derwent was full of wrathful compassion for Muriel's distress, and vowed hotly that he would prevent such desecration as this to which she stood committed, no matter what the cost. She should not make herself conspicuous by dancing so often with Guy Perceval, nor should she waste her grace and skill in dancing with him more than the one quadrille, which would not compromise her in any way.

He said all this with his head held high, and that ring of command in his voice which women who have never learnt the desolateness of independence or the lovelessness of freedom, do not resent in the men of their family—which they rather like indeed, and feel comforted and upheld thereby. Only, as Muriel did not wish to be dishonourable even to a bad waltzer and on such a trifle as an engagement for a few dances, nor yet to quarrel with Mr. Perceval at all, she put in a little word of remonstrance, and said:—

'But how can it be helped now that I have promised him, dear? It will make a scene; and no girl likes a fuss to be made about her.'

To which Derwent replied with the air of a professed duellist who knew the exact lines and limits of all things belligerent:—

'You may trust me, I think, Muriel. I shall protect you from annoyance, not put you into a false position.'

'Yes, I know dear,' she answered; 'I do trust you; but I do not want to be ungenerous, nor to break my word to Mr. Perceval. It is horrible to have to dance with him, I know; and I cannot bear to think of it—the first four dances!—and such a waltzer!—but what can I do?'

'You have put the thing into my hands, and you must do as I tell you,' said Derwent, superbly. 'You shall not dance with him more than that one quadrille.'

He said this in a rather loud voice, and the day was still, when sound travels far.

'Not dance with whom?' asked Arthur Machell, rounding the corner of the road with Hilda's hand in his.

Muriel blushed, and looked happy, confused, perplexed, distressed, all in one. Derwent's fraternal belligerency suddenly lost itself in a flush of soft delight; but he could not abandon the theme or the tone that he had assumed, unless he wished to betray more than he cared to show; so, after he had said all that good manners required him to say, he took up his parable and answered Arthur's question.

'Mr. Perceval has been engaging my sister for half the dances of the evening,' he said disdainfully; 'and she is afraid that I am going to forget myself and fight a duel about it, because I will not allow her to keep her engagement.'

'You are quite right, Derwent; I claim the first waltz, Miss Surril,' said Arthur.

She looked down and then she looked up.

'That is just what Mr. Perceval did,' she answered.

'That does not count,' said Arthur laughing; 'you owe me the first waltz, and I shall hold you to it.'

'I do not see how I can,' said Muriel with extreme embarrassment, and heroically preferring duty to pleasure.

'If you prefer Mr. Perceval, of course I have nothing to say,' said Arthur stiffly.

'I do not prefer him, but I have promised,' returned Muriel, to whom promises were sacred, and who really felt it was rather hard that Arthur should be displeased when she wanted so much to dance with him, and felt herself so ill-used by fate that she could not.

'I have told you, Muriel, that you may hold yourself free to make any other engagement you like. You are not going to dance with Mr. Perceval,' interposed Derwent with full fraternal authority.

'But if she wishes? It is a pity to interfere,' said Arthur still

stiff and unpleasant, and in his secret heart annoyed at Derwent's tone. It is such wretched taste for a man to assume this kind of command over a sister before other men! He was disgusted that Muriel's brother could be such a snob as to do it!

For all answer Muriel looked straight into his face; and her soft sweet eyes, dewy, tender, reproachful, pleading, brought him back from the harsh and uncomfortable state into which he was drifting through jealousy, and gave him his better and truer self once more.

'I see it all,' he said hastily; 'but you must throw him over. We shall have the whole neighbourhood chattering like so many magpies if you don't. I would advise you to this if you were my sister—indeed I would, Miss Smith. Do you think I would let Hilda here be attracted in such an absurd manner? Leave yourself in your brother's hands, and dance the first waltz with me.'

'Yes, do, Muriel,' said Hilda caressingly.

'Of course she will,' returned Derwent; 'and it will make it all right, Miss Machell, if you will give me the first dance—will you?'

Hilda's pretty face beamed. But she looked at her brother with a certain trouble.

'I do not know if mother will let me dance, but if she does—' she said hesitatingly.

'You will give me the first?'

'Yes,' she answered softly, still looking at her brother.

'Subject to my mother's approval,' put in Arthur a little awkwardly. He was glad to secure Muriel for himself, and so far grateful to Derwent for his advocacy: but Hilda's assignment to Muriel's brother was a different thing altogether; one that he did not cordially endorse for his own part, and that he knew would make the lady mother furious. It was the child's first appearance in public; and the first dance granted to the least desirable young man in the place, as the world and common sense count desirability, was an arrangement to which not even his love for Muriel could reconcile him. One's own sisters are so different from those of other men, he thought; and what he might do with respect to Muriel, Derwent was certainly not entitled to imitate towards Hilda.

'I do not think that Lady Machell will object,' said Derwent a little conceitedly; 'at all events, I regard it as an engagement.'

'But you must remember that this is Hilda's first ball, and my mother, who is strict, may not approve of her making an independent engagement,' said Arthur, while Hilda's face fell and Derwent's neck stiffened. 'Don't look down-hearted little one,' he added kindly. 'You are not going to be left as a wallflower all the night; but I think you had better leave the choice of your partners to the mother.'

'Very well,' said Hilda, choking back her tears with difficulty, but successfully; 'of course, mother and you know best.'

'But I shall assert my claim,' said Derwent.

'And I mine,' Arthur answered, drawing off the conversation from Hilda to Muriel.

'What a dreadful confusion it all is!' she said. 'Everybody engaged and everybody breaking their engagements, and no one satisfied with things as they are!'

'Not you? I am sorry for that. I am quite satisfied,' Arthur answered with emphasis.

'Are you tired, Muriel?' asked Derwent suddenly.

'No,' she said; 'why?'

'If you are not, we can turn back and walk a little way with Miss Machell and Arthur,' he answered.

'Yes, do,' said Arthur and Hilda in a breath; and the four young people ranged themselves in line, Muriel and Hilda in the middle, flanked by the brothers—exchanged.

This arrangement did not last long, for very soon—who knows how it came about?—the couples naturally separated, and Arthur and Muriel went on in front, leaving Derwent and Hilda to follow. How time passed none of them knew, for none took note. It was a moment of happiness snatched from life, a moment of perfect peace and security borrowed from uncertainty and doubt. Derwent, absorbed in his own delight, forgot to wonder why Muriel looked so divinely happy—Arthur Machell, so joyful, so heroic; and Arthur, absorbed in his, had not a thought of fear to give to Hilda, walking with such treacherous meekness by Derwent's side, listening while he recited sugary odes and sonnets and hummed through the airs of songs, each one of which pleaded a lover's cause and revealed a lover's case. It was all Arcadian; loving, youthful, innocent and yet dangerous; when, the demon of ill-luck being abroad, the pretty little fairy palace in which they were living came to the ground, as they suddenly found themselves face to face with Lady Machell driving Wilfrid over to Paumelle House, whither she was bound, to give Mrs. Brown some useful hints as to precedence and policy.

She drew rein as she came up to them, and stopped; a world of suppressed wrath visible on her face.

'What a lucky chance!' cried Derwent, who, without the faintest suspicion of any reason why Lady Machell should be wrathful at the meeting, did not read the signs which were plain enough to her own children, who knew better than he what was the estimation in which she held the Smith family. 'Lady Machell, you must settle this knotty point for us.'

'What knotty point?' asked my lady, uncomfortably disarmed. Derwent had that way with him belonging to the innocently vain. He took the good will of the world for granted, not seeing why it should be otherwise; and, just as this same world accepts us at our own valuation, so does it dance to the tunes which we pipe and answer as the echo when we demand.

'My sister has got into a difficulty,' said Derwent; 'and some of us are rather puzzled how to get out of it. I cannot say that I am, but I will be guided by your advice.'

This was touching Lady Machell on a weak point. Outside the restoration of the family to its original position, her greatest ambition was to be considered the spiritual Minerva of the district; the one woman whose judgment was never at fault, and who was capable of solving all difficulties whatsoever.

'What is it?' she asked again.

'Mr. Perceval called on my mother yesterday, and secured Muriel's promise for the first four dances—the first waltz, galop, mazurka, quadrille,' said Derwent, unconscious of the fragrant flowers of hope and design which he was crushing in my lady's soul at this moment. 'As, in the first place, Mr. Perceval is not a very satisfactory partner, and as, in the second, I do not choose that my sister shall be made conspicuous in any manner, I say that she is to break the engagement, and that I will take it on myself to tell Mr. Perceval that she has done so, and to give him my reasons,' emphasizing the pronoun. 'Am I right, Lady Machell?'

'Quite,' said my lady crisply; while Muriel looked up at her with a grateful face that was the Scylla to the Charybdis on the other side.

'I thought so too,' said Arthur, 'and so engaged Miss Smith myself, that she might have two champions instead of one.'

A heavy frown came over Wilfrid's face; it was a look of as much pain as anger—the look which makes a man dangerous.

'And to make it more complete, I have begged for the honour of Miss Machell's hand for the dance,' said Derwent superbly, looking supremely handsome and satisfied.

This was too much.

'Impossible!' cried Lady Machell sharply.

'Impossible!' echoed Wilfrid angrily.

Derwent looked from one to the other.

'Why?' he asked with genuine surprise. 'There can be no question of Mr. Brown de Paumelle dancing with Miss Machell; why then not I as well as another? We are old friends, Lady Machell, and the arrangement does not seem impossible to me at all; more especially in view of the coil into which my sister has been led.'

'A girl of my daughter's age makes no private engagements of any kind,' said Lady Machell stiffly. 'She is too young to promise even a dance without my consent.'

'Then I appeal to you,' said Derwent, laying his hand with boyish familiarity on Lady Machell's arm. 'Do you grant me the honour of the first dance with Miss Machell?'

'I intended her to dance with her brother Arthur,' said Lady Machell coldly. Had she not been afraid, and had Derwent Smith been in all respects profitable and desirable, she would have been touched by his manner. As things were, she hardened her heart against him, and what she would have smiled at as a charm in other circumstances, she now frowned on as an impertinence.

'But Arthur is engaged to my sister,' said Derwent.

'Yes, I have secured Miss Smith,' said Arthur with a smile to Muriel, who, looking at Lady Machell, said with a certain soft dignity that became her wonderfully well:—

'You must not let any engagement to me interfere with your plans, Lady Machell. And if I am to break my engagement with Mr. Perceval, perhaps I ought to sit out altogether.'

'I am not going to be thrown over in that manner,' laughed Arthur, his laugh a little forced. 'You have promised me the first dance, and I hold you to it.'

'I think you are all making a ridiculous row about nothing,' said Wilfrid savagely. 'Really, Arthur, the whole county will not stand aside to see whether you dance the first waltz, or the second, with Miss Smith. As for you, Smith, you have been a little premature, and more than a little inconsiderate, in securing my sister so long beforehand; but'—he shrugged his broad shoulders:—'It is of very little consequence, one way or the other,' he added after a moment, with disdain.

'It is annoying though it is unimportant,' said my lady quite as crossly as her son; then, in a low voice, she said to Arthur angrily: 'I should have expected more tact, Arthur, more judgment from you. When I trust Hilda to your care, I have the right to expect that you will take care of her, and not let her run into entanglements and difficulties of this kind.'

'I am sorry that you are vexed, mother,' said Arthur, taking his scolding with the pleasantest air of affectionate indifference. 'But, as Wilfrid says, are we not all making our frogs into oxen? and with a little disregard to Miss Smith and her brother? which is rather questionable on the score of good breeding;—we will not talk of good feeling.'

'It is yourself who are to blame,' said Lady Machell in the same lowered voice; 'you have been very foolish—very wrong, Arthur.'

'You are only a boy yet, and will never be anything else,' said Wilfrid with bitter contempt. 'You cannot see things which are plain before you, and you cannot give up what you wish to have nor do what you do not like to do.'

'Thanks, my elder brother,' Arthur answered with a deep flush. 'Now, mother, I am going, if you and Wilfrid think that you have lectured me enough.'

'But leave your companions,' said Lady Machell sternly.

'It depends on them whether they care to go farther or not,' answered Arthur with a certain steady pride which was just the feeling that his mother most dreaded to rouse in him. 'Are you tired, Miss Smith? coming on with us, Derwent?' he asked, turning to the two who had drawn out of hearing during the last low conversation.

'No,' said Muriel in a half-whisper to her brother. 'We must go home, Derwent; do not let us go on.'

'We will leave you now,' said Derwent, as if he were a king. 'I shall hold Miss Machell engaged to me, Lady Machell,' he added, flinging up his head.

'I will think of it. I promise nothing,' said my lady coldly.

'You will not teach Miss Machell to break her word?' said Derwent, returning to the charge. It was the kind of contest in which all his tenacity was roused, and where he was determined to have his own way.

'A child makes no promise,' she replied; 'and Hilda knows that she has done wrong to take on herself such an act of independence and disobedience.'

'She is not to blame,' said Arthur hastily; while Hilda stood with her eyes cast to the ground and her hands clasped in each other, the prettiest little statue of penitence imaginable.

'No, if anyone is to blame, it is I,' said Derwent manfully.

'Don't you think the discussion has lasted long enough?' said Wilfrid.

All this time he had not looked once at Muriel since the first meeting. He saw clearly enough how things were with her and Arthur; and to know that he had sacrificed himself for the good of his family, that his brother might profit by his pain and take up his discarded treasure, made the present moment hard to bear. For the instant he seemed to hate both her and him; to accuse him of selfishness, weakness, unfaithfulness, and her of coquetry and shameful scheming.

'Quite,' said Arthur good-temperedly; 'we will close it whenever you like.'

'Good-bye, Lady Machell,' said Muriel, taking Wilfrid's hint and coming forward. 'Good-bye, Captain Machell.'

She half held out her hand, but my lady was occupied with the throng of her whip.

'Good morning, Miss Smith,' she said coldly; and 'Good morning, Miss Smith,' Wilfrid echoed with even more coldness.

But Arthur, to make amends, took her hand and held it frankly in the face of both mother and brother, saying with a curious mixture of opposition and tenderness:—

'The first waltz, remember, Miss Muriel; and Guy Perceval cashiered!'

'And the first for me, Miss Machell,' said Derwent in imitation, shaking hands with Hilda and looking at Lady Machell.

'I am weary of the whole thing—such a set of children as you are!' said Lady Machell angrily, as she turned away her head, and added: 'Now Arthur!' as authoritatively as if he had been a boy.

The young man nodded carelessly, and the group melted away; Derwent and Muriel turning back to Owlett, Arthur and Hilda going on to Machells, and Lady Machell and Wilfrid bearing to the left for Paumelle House.

'It is a dreadful annoyance and confusion altogether,' said my lady after a short pause, when she was alone with her eldest son. 'What was Guy Perceval thinking of when he wished to commit himself in this manner with a girl of Miss Smith's questionable claims to distinction?'

'I suppose he has been smitten with a pair of blue eyes and a blush-rose face!' said Wilfrid with savage contempt. 'It is a way men have.'

'Absurd!' cried Lady Machell, whipping on the cob. 'Guy Perceval is far too particular to think of marrying into a family with the faintest cloud on its fair name; and say what we will, there is something uncomfortable about the Smiths.'

'Something unknown; no more,' said Wilfrid.

'Which is the same thing,' returned my lady. 'And then to think of that penniless boy having the presumption to engage Hilda!' she went on to say with increased anger. 'I have never known anything more insolent, more forward!'

'It was presumptuous enough,' said Wilfrid almost as angrily as his mother; 'we must look out and take care that things do not go too far in that direction.'

'Wilfrid, you do not think—surely——' she began.

'I think nothing, mother; I only advise you to look out,' he answered.

'She shall not go to the ball at all!' cried Lady Machell.

'Yes, she must go, mother. The child would be disappointed

else,' said Wilfrid, whose one soft place was his love for his little sister; 'but do not let her go far from your side.'

'It is too dreadful!—and after all my care! Such a mere baby as she is too!' her usual self-control swept away in a torrent of mingled anger and anxiety.

'I do not suppose there is even a boy-and-girl flirtation between them yet,' returned Wilfrid; 'and it is scarcely like you, mother, to jump to these conclusions. Still, a little extra watchfulness will do no harm; and Hilda is an admirable child—will never give you any trouble.'

'No, I am not afraid of *her*,' said Lady Machell with emphasis; then, touching the secret sore of her heart, she added: 'If Arthur were to make a foolish marriage, it would break my heart.'

'No; hearts do not break nowadays,' he said. 'You would be very unhappy, and your digestion would suffer, but you would get over it. Arthur would say that his would break if he were prevented from marrying any girl whom he might fancy. But neither his nor yours would go whichever way it turned.'

'I think I will speak to him about his excessive intimacy with those Smiths, and point out the infinite mischief that he may do his sister,' said Lady Machell, imagining that her battery was effectually masked.

'You will do no good. He has not always been easy to manage, good-tempered as he is. But if it will be a satisfaction to yourself to relieve your own mind, speak;' said Wilfrid, anger with his brother, contempt at the idea of a woman's interference in the affairs of a man, though even that woman should be his mother, sympathy of sex, and intense jealousy all traceable in his tone and manner; thinking to himself at the same time: 'It would do no good, but it would be a satisfaction too, to me were I to tell him what I think of his folly and how contemptible I find his boyish passion and selfishness!'

'If it is put before him in the true light—of the harm that it may do to his sister——' repeated Lady Machell, as if she had got hold of a charm.

'You can try,' was the grim response; 'but do not wonder if you fail. Men are sometimes impatient of dictation?'

'From a mother?' asked Lady Machell with a burst of pride.

'From a mother!' repeated Wilfrid steadily.

'Here is Mr. Brown de Paumelle,' said Lady Machell, in a tone of relief, as the fussy, rubicund, rotund possessor of millions and worshipper of rank, dashed through the elaborately wrought iron gates, all scroll-work and gilding;—his superb barouche and faultless greys nearly running into the shabby little shandran in which Lady Machell steered the badly-groomed old cob.

And, touching the hem of the golden garment, looking through the grand vista of coming success, she forgot the perplexities connected with those silly children at her back, and for the moment lost her trouble in her joy. But the Brown de Paumelles' ball was evidently to be the theatre of more than one important drama, and the apparently trivial question of a few dances given or refused hid more than it declared.

CHAPTER X.

REHEARSING.

SITTING side by side at a small round table, as if pressing together in mutual protection against the spaciousness and magnificence of their unloved grandeur, Mrs. Brown de Paumelle and her daughter were spending one of those quiet half-hours of gossip and needle-work, which were the only moments of happiness accorded to them in their gold-tormented lives. Sitting there together, talking of old times when they lived at Clapton, and before they had become 'swells,' as Jemima called the gentry; living back over the Wilsons and the Jobsons, and Miss Wilson's West End bonnet and Mrs. Jobson's ruby satin gown; over the discourses of their favourite minister—they had been Baptists then, when they were only honest city tradesfolk, but had fallen from grace so far as to be Church people now, when they were friends with the aristocracy and the owners of fabulous millions—and how that one on the deceitfulness of riches came home to them more now when they thought of it than it did then when they heard it, and how that other on the security of the saints was more comforting than under good Mr. Shepherd's fervid ministration than they found it now with Mr. Oliphant's colder doctrines; asking each other's advice as to what shade of colour should go there, and which was the best kind of flower to put there—they forgot for the time the sorrows of their success, and were once more plain Mrs. Brown and her daughter Jemmy, who was no 'catch' for any man, and of whose sacrifice for paternal ambition or aristocratic mendicinity there was no kind of possibility.

It had all come too suddenly. Old Brown had kept his affairs a close secret, even from his wife; and beyond the general assurance that he was doing well, and that an extra fiver would not break him, gave her no clue as to how matters stood with him. He meant it as a pleasant surprise on the anniversary of

their nineteenth wedding day, which was Jemima's eighteenth birthday, when he thought that he would gladden the hearts of the two women whom he loved with such affection as he had to give, but ruled despotically and admitted to no share in his confidence, by telling them that henceforth they were not plain city tradespeople as they had been, but real swells—a sight more real than half of those who had never been anything else. On that fatal morning—for it was a fatal morning to them, poor souls, if to him the dawn of his day of triumph—he fastened round the lean and puckered throat of his wife, who had never worn anything but the cheap gold chain which had been his 'engaged' present, a necklace of diamonds that must have cost some eight or ten thousand pounds; and to Jemima, who had indulged in no more magnificence than was comprised in a few strings of glass or stained wooden beads, one of pearls, scarcely less superb. He produced his papers entitling him to bear the name of de Paumelle added to their homely patronymic; and he showed them, emblazoned on a sheet of vellum, a coat-of-arms found for the occasion. And then he told them that they must leave Clapton that day week, and go down to Grantley Bourne, where he had bought a stunning estate, and built no end of a mansion, all furnished and ready for them to go into; and where they would foot it with the best in the county.

He told them of the families about, and expatiated on the people at Machells; on the future arrangements between whom and himself, accustomed as he was to foresee chances in business, he had speculated not a little. He had already got to know them slightly, and he knew enough to make that future with them a matter of some anxiety; but the intimacy which came afterwards was consequent on the arrival of the ladies, which also he had foreseen. He told them of their carriages and horses, their garden and their glass, and made it all rose-coloured and paradisiacal enough; and he meant it kindly, and to play the part of Providence nobly; but he crushed them all the same, and they never recovered from the shock.

From that time the old life which had suited them so well faded from them, and they were unable to reconcile themselves to the new. It was too grand, too large, too oppressive. They faded and dwindled as if under a blight, and clung together with painful tenacity as the sole friend each had. They 'took to' none of the great families with whom they were forced in contact, save Lady Machell, who made it her business to be taken to; for here the father again, utilizing that keen sense of comparative values got from twenty years' buying and selling and watching the markets and making

investments, soon found out the lines of demarcation between the first and second sets—the upper and the lower; and, when Mrs. Brown and her daughter would willingly have fore-gathered with the latter and left the former out of sight, warned them off the premises, and would have none of them. Their intimacy with the Machells grew, they themselves scarcely knew how. Lady Machell's secret wishes running on all fours with Mr. Brown de Paumelle's smoothed away all difficulties like magic; and when they had got over the stumbling-block of my lady and your ladyship—at first declared to be insuperable—and had found out that a human soul, like any other soul, was behind the barrier of her title, they supplemented awe with affection, and leaned on her as their sheet-anchor at such times as they were buffeted by strange influences, or assailed by unknown dangers.

As she was a woman of consummate tact and ability, she had felt her way through the labyrinth of ignorance, suspicion, fear, and doubt which made up those starved and scared little minds of theirs, with a skill that soon made her as entirely their master and possessor as was the husband and father himself. Between the two, the frightened, overweighted women had not an inch of private spiritual self-hood left. They were mere plastic lumps of clay to be manipulated at will by the hand of the artificer; machines to go as they were directed; and, when the moment came, victims to be led to the sacrifice without remonstrance or complaint. Utterly unable to resist, they bent their feeble necks to the yoke with pathetic humility, and were silent and sad and oppressed and uncomplaining; only clinging together like two lost things alone in a strange world, and forgetting their present gorgeous pains in the retrospect of their past modest pleasures, when they were left for a few moments to themselves, and suffered to drink once more of the sweet waters of freedom and mediocrity. They both knew that their days of home life together were numbered; and that these quiet moments too would soon be things of the past like Mrs. Jobson's gown and Mr. Shepherd's ministrations; but while they lasted they profited by them, and were contented and refreshed.

They were sitting now side by side at the little round table which they had placed in the bay of the window, so as to isolate themselves as much as possible from the cold grandeur of the huge room where they never felt at home nor looked at ease. The table was just large enough to hold their work-boxes and materials;—generally snippets of various stuffs and colours deftly arranged in their several paper wrappers. They were both neat to barrenness, methodical to mechanism; and this small space, where they had to

arrange themselves as carefully as so many bits of a puzzle, suited them exactly. It was not suggestive of waste as a larger table would have been.

They were busy over the new cretonne embroidery which gives striking results in effect at small outlay of trouble, and supplies inartistic fingers with designs already made and needing only to be arranged and finished off. It was work especially congenial to both; and they were almost as content as if they had been at Clapton. Their whole energies were devoted to settling their patterns; and for the moment their forty bedrooms and acres of glass, their carriages and horses and dinners and dresses, their supercilious men-servants who frightened them, and their fine ladies for maids who kept them at a distance and tyrannized over them, the coat-of-arms which had been found for them and was emblazoned everywhere, and the de Paumelle to which they could not get accustomed, and which made them feel as if in perpetual masquerade—all ceased to weigh on their minds, and they were once more Mrs. Brown and her daughter Jemmy, whose largest exercise of intellect went to the question of whether a rose should be put this side up or that—whose highest flight of happiness was in the completion of the bag or the cushion in hand—and whose widest stretch of extravagance was to use silk for the ground when cloth would have done as well.

'La, Jemmy, that will look splendid!' said Mrs. Brown with a smile of satisfaction at her daughter's taste, as she patted down the square of black silk with the flowers laid on it for trial.

'I think it will be pretty,' said Jemima with an artist's modesty, deprecating undue laudation. 'I hope that my lady will like it.'

'She's sure to,' said Mrs. Brown. 'She's a good creature, though she is my lady, and knows nice work as well as anybody.'

'La, ma, doesn't it seem strange, when we come to think of it that you and me should be so thick with a real lady!' said Jemima opening her eyes. 'If you'll believe me, it sometimes seems like a dream all through, and that we shall wake up and find ourselves back at Clapton just as we used to be.'

'So it does, Jemmy,' echoed Mrs. Brown; 'but,' with a sigh, 'there'll be no waking up at the old place for us, my dear! We're in for it now, and will have to go through with it. There's no chance of your pa losing his money. He knows too much for that; and so long as we are as rich as it seems we are, here we shall be; and,' with another sigh, 'there's no more to be said.'

'Well, I liked Clapton,' said Jemima with something like a quiver about her pale lips. 'I don't think I ever can cotton to this life, ma—only I'm not to say cotton; I forgot; my lady told me it was vulgar.'

'It don't much signify, my dear, between you and I,' said Mrs. Brown fondly. 'We're not fine folk when we are together, Jemmy, you and me; and a few slips here and there don't count.'

'Oh, ma, it is such a pleasure being with you alone!' said Jemima leaning over and kissing her mother. 'I'm never so happy as when I'm with you alone, all to our two selves, and none of the man and things about. I can't abear those men!'

'Yes, it's home-like then, my dear,' said Mrs. Brown with a fond hug. 'You see, your pa has made himself quite the swell—he's gone into it like life, as I may say; but you and me, we've been brought up differently, and it's harder for us. And we don't care for it by nature, as your pa does. If we did we should have taken to it better; but it's a little rough in the edges, as I may say, for us.'

'Very rough, ma!' sighed Jemima. 'If it was not for you I don't know where I should be!'

'You'll not have me always, my dear,' said Mrs. Brown, steady-ing her voice as well as she could, and turning away her face not to let it be seen that her eyes were full of tears. 'Your pa will find you a grand husband some of these days, you may be sure; and then you'll have to do without me, and I without you.'

'They might as well measure me for my coffin at once,' said poor little Jemima in a despairing voice. 'I never can live without you, ma! never! and not the best man that ever walked could be to me what you are.'

'I know, Jemmy, I know,' replied her mother, wiping her eyes; 'but you've got to do it, my dear.'

'Oh, ma, I'm sure that Captain Machell is thinking of me!' said Jemmy, on whom the truth long known to her mother was just beginning to dawn. 'It isn't from vanity—I'm sure it isn't—but there has been a deal lately to make me think so—little things mostly—but little things do as well as big ones sometimes; and then my lady is so kind to me! so wonderfully kind! She said to me only last time I saw her: "If you was my daughter, Jemima," she said, "we should get on so well together! I should never have a fault to find with you." And if that didn't mean the Captain, what did it?'

'Well, my dear, and if you was her daughter and the Captain's wife, would you be happy?' asked meek Mrs. Brown.

'Happy, ma! I'd never be able to look in his face, not if I was his wife a thousand years!' said Jemima shyly.

'But if he asks you? and your pa wishes it?' put in her mother earnestly.

'Oh, ma! I never!' was all the answer that the poor little girl could give.

'It will have to be, my dear,' said Mrs. Brown with increased earnestness. 'I know that your pa wishes it, and my lady too, and of course the Captain's own self. I don't wonder at his loving you, my dear; any man would; but you'll never be as happy as with your poor old ma; never; so don't you think it, for all that it will be grand,' wiping her eyes furtively.

'And is it really coming, ma?' asked Jemima, shrinking a little closer to her mother and hanging her head over her work.

'Yes, dear, if I can see straight ahead,' answered Mrs. Brown. 'Captain Machell intends to ask your pa for the honour of your hand; and then he'll speak to you yourself. And he's a fine man, my dear.'

'Too fine for me by half,' said Jemima, but not with displeasure, rather with timidity and a kind of awestruck admiration. 'I'm only up to his elbow, ma; and he looks at me in such a way sometimes that I daren't open my lips before him, and feel as if I couldn't say bo to a goose when he's there.'

'You must say bo to that goose, however!' said Mrs. Brown; 'else there will be a row, and so I tell you. Your pa has made up his mind, and so has my lady, and so has the Captain; and now it's only you, my dear, as has to make up yours; and that'll have to be done, if it breaks my heart—as it will!' she added in a lower breath, falling suddenly into piteous weeping.

Whereupon Jemmy wept too for sympathy, and said she could not, and she would not; but all the while felt that if she were asked she must; and that there would be as much chance of her saying no as of a lamb turning against a wolf and getting the best of the day.

While they were kissing and comforting each other, they heard the hall-bell sound, and a noise of doors opening and shutting; and in due course the gentleman-in-waiting announced Lady Machell and Captain Machell in a stentorian voice, as he flung back the folding-doors noisily and introduced my lady and her son.

'La, Jemmy, and your eyes are as red as red, and so's mine!' said Mrs. Brown in a whisper, as she got up and went timidly into the room to welcome her guests; while Jemima stole behind backs shyly, and did her best to screen her poor little white-and-red bedappled face from the keen eyes which saw all.

But Lady Machell was one of those women who never show that they see what it is desired should be hidden; and Jemima was made to feel by that subtle tact which belongs emphatically to good breeding that she was quite undiscovered, and her red eyes and tear-stained face unnoticed.

'I have come, dear Mrs. de Paumelle,' said my lady graciously,

'to see if I can be of any use to you in arranging the question of seats and precedence. Perhaps I am a little better up in the relative standings of our county families than you are. You see, I have lived among them all my life, and I know how sensitive some of them are.'

'You are very kind. I do feel strange to it,' said Mrs. Brown. 'It is different where you have been used to it all your days, and where you have come into it, as I may say, late in life.'

'You will soon get accustomed to it all,' said Lady Machell kindly. 'Indeed, you have already. I think you have learnt your neighbours with wonderful quickness. For it is a difficult subject, and a tiresome one.'

'I do not know whatever we should have done without you, Lady Machell,' said Mrs. Brown effusively.

To which my lady answered in her best manner:

'I am so glad that I have been of any use to you, dear Mrs. de Paumelle. From the first I was interested in you and your gentle sweet-natured daughter; and I felt for your strangeness—coming into such a compact little society as ours. It has been such a pleasure to help you!'

'You are very good, I'm sure,' said the meek-spirited woman humbly. 'I was just saying so to my daughter as you came in.'

'Now let us get through this question,' said Lady Machell with a pleasant smile. 'Would you come into the inner room, dear Mrs. de Paumelle?—we can arrange it better there by ourselves than if we were here. My son will amuse your daughter for ten minutes while we get this weighty matter settled.'

On which she rose and Mrs. Brown was forced to rise too, and follow her ladyship's lead as she swept into the inner room, leaving Jemima alone with the Captain, as a hen might leave her only chick under the wings of a hawk.

It wanted just a fortnight to the famous ball which was to be the springboard for more than one leap, and as yet Captain Machell had not essayed any of the tender follies which come like second nature to the man who has resolved to make a beloved woman his wife. The utmost that he had done in the way of love-making was to address Jemima in a certain familiar and masterful manner, as if she already belonged to him;—a manner which has great attraction for some women, chiefly of the self-abasing kind, and to which they yield more readily than to gentler methods of suing. It was all to which he could bring himself; for Wilfrid was not a hypocrite, though he was preparing to marry a woman for whom he felt more repugnance than affection, because she had money and his family had not. Now however he felt that he must in decency utilise the opportunity made for him by his mother, so he sat down by the

table near to Jemima, and leaning forward looked into the pale, frightened, freckled face that was bending over a paper full of what seemed to his masculine irreverence a mass of rags, and thought for a full minute what he should say. Making love was an art that had neither been difficult to him to learn nor hard to practise; but to-day not a trace of the old lessons remained in his memory; and had he been a schoolboy of seventeen, in the presence of his first queenly adora of thirty, he could not have been more at a loss how to begin, or how to go on after he had begun.

What could he say? Those small light hazel eyes, badly cut and expressive of nothing so much as fear and suspicion, wavering beneath ill-defined eyebrows faintly shaded at the beginning and then wandering off into a few sentinel hairs set at intervals along the bony ridge; that pinched and meagre nose, with its narrow nostrils and tendency to redden; those thin flat lips, and weak, sandy, colourless hair; that undeveloped figure where there was not one graceful line, one beauty to charm the artistic sense—how could he get up even the appearance of enthusiasm, of tenderness, of poetic idealization for such an unlovely creature, he thought, with mingled reluctance and self-reproach; and yet—it had to be done, and he must feign what he did not feel.

As for Jemima herself, she could not have defined her state of mind, if she had been paid for it, as she told her mother afterwards. She was fluttered and flattered, frightened and excited, all in one. She felt more than she saw, and was conscious rather than perceived; but surely it was not for nothing that Captain Machell leaned over the table like that, and looked into her face as if he liked to look there, thought the poor bewildered little soul to whom had not been granted the gift of discernment.

At last he spoke.

'What are you doing there?' he asked; and the commonplace question coming on the resolution to which he had been nerving himself, and the vague expectation that had been disquieting her, fell with a curious sense of incompleteness and mockery between them.

'Work,' said Jemima.

'Yes, I see; but of what kind?' he asked again.

'It is called cretonne,' she answered.

'How is it done?'

'You cut out the flowers, and stitch them around with silk. And it comes very pretty when it's done,' she said, a little abashed at her unusual flow of words.

'Some other things too might come pretty when they were done,' said Wilfrid, heroically.

'Yes, they do,' she replied simply; 'tattling and crewel-work does.'

With difficulty he suppressed a groan; but he took refuge in handling the cuttings which he took for rags; pretending to arrange them in artistic order, but failing signally to make any intelligible pattern out of them.

'If you please, you'll ravel the edges,' said Jemima.

She had watched him for some time in dumb agony, and at last could bear it no longer. Proud of, if oppressed by, his supposed admiration for her, and terrified of him personally as she was, the good condition of her snippets was of supreme consequence to her; and when she saw him pull the roses out of shape, and damage the tails of the birds of Paradise and the wings of the butterflies, her soul sank within her; but her very despair gave her courage; and she remonstrated, quaking at her own boldness, though true to the faith within her.

'I am afraid I am not very fit for your soft ways,' said Wilfrid, laying down the flowers.

'Gentlemen never can handle ladies' things,' said Jemima; and again Wilfrid suppressed a groan.

It was terribly up-hill work, and the point never seemed to be brought nearer.

'But you would be patient? You would not scold me if I were clumsy and awkward, would you?' he asked, trying to throw a meaning into his voice.

'It hurts me to see good material spoilt,' said Jemima; 'but I was never a great hand at scolding,' she added with simplicity, as a consoling assurance that he was to take to heart.

'I am sure you are everything that is good,' said Wilfrid.

She hung her head. This was coming a little nearer—was more on a level with her understanding, than those indirect phrases which might mean anything or nothing, and of which she was not keen or subtle enough to make anything.

'I don't know about that,' she stammered.

'Perhaps I shall find out for myself some day,' he returned.

She made no reply; but nervously hitched her chair nearer to the table, and fingered her silks awkwardly.

'Do you think you will ever let me? Would you like it?' he continued, his heart sinking.

'La, Captain Machell, how ever can I tell?' poor Jemima replied after a time, trembling, blushing, out of breath and overpowered. 'Ma knows me best. Ask ma what I'm like.'

'I can see for myself; you are good, and true, and gentle,' he answered.

Tears were in her eyes—tears of pure terror. Was this the beginning of the end? What a pity it was that he admired her so much! what a dreadful thing that he should be so much in love with her! She knew perfectly well that, as she had said to her mother, she never could 'cotton to him'—she would never be anything but, as now, mortally afraid of him; yet the idea of refusing him, should he offer to marry her, was as far from her mind as that a slave should reject the favour of a king, should he deign to show it.

'I doubt you think over well of me,' she said in a low voice after a time.

'Yes! do I!' he answered.

'I'm only a plain little body,' she continued, 'and it would be a pity if——' She stopped.

'If what?' he asked.

'If you thought more of me than I deserve,' said Semima.

'Could I?'

She opened her eyes in frank astonishment.

'Why, of course you could,' she said; 'I ain't a saint!'

Wilfrid was silent. At that moment Muriel's image rose vividly before him. He seemed almost to hear her low sweet voice; to see her fair blush-rose face; to be conscious of that mingled tenderness and dignity, that girlish grace and womanly strength, which made up her charm. When the vision passed, and he saw this plain, awkward, self-abased little girl by his side, this humble offspring of mediocrity and the commonplace—born to be the wife of some honest 'Arry, confidential clerk at two hundred a year, and destined for the future Lady Machell, and member of the proudest family in the county—his resolution failed him, and his courage sank.

'Not now,' he said to himself; 'I will wait for the evening.'

Surprised at his silence, she stole a look at him. He had covered his face with his hand; but she could see the thick and heavy lips drawn close and hard together, with a look of pain about them that went to her poor soft heart. Had she repulsed him? and was he grieving? She had not meant to do it; she had only meant to be honest, and not to let him think her too good for fear of after disappointment. She had not intended to give him pain. But she was far too bashful, too much afraid of him, to say all this. She only waited in trepidation, wondering what would come next, and wishing that her mother and Lady Machell would come in to break up an interview which was so full of pain and perplexity, of danger and darkness.

He took his hand from his face.

'Will you dance the first dance with me at your birthday ball?' he said suddenly; and Jemima gasped.

'Oh!' she cried, the same odd sense of incompleteness, relief, and disappointment falling again between them.

'You are not already engaged?' he asked with something like a frown.

Though he did not love her, and shrank from his marriage as a sacrifice which nothing but absolute necessity could have induced him to make, and nothing but the nineteenth-century religion of money-worship could have sustained him in making, yet he looked on her already as his property; and the Machells were a race which did not permit poaching.

'No, she answered timidly.

'Good; will you consider yourself, then, engaged to me?'

'If you like. But I am only a poor hand at dancing,' said Jemima.

'I can make you go. Trust yourself to me, and you will do quite well,' he answered.

'Thank you,' said Jemima humbly, and looked at him with a kind of fear and admiration of his inches which made him feel almost ashamed of his height, and breadth, and strength, all through.

She seemed such a poor little victim by his side! Sorry as he was for himself, he was sorry too for her, and spoke to her with strange softness when he spoke again; feeling for the moment ashamed of the part that he was playing, and almost hoping that for her sake something would happen to prevent the sacrifice from being completed. He would have been very angry if anything had; but for the moment his better feeling was true, and he hoped—but did not intend—that she should be saved.

His softer manner, however, frightened Jemima: almost more than his lordly ways of having and holding at his own will. While she was taken as by an irrepressible power, she yielded to the force of fate represented by Wilfrid Macnell, as she would have yielded to it under any other form; but when it came to softness of speech and tenderness of demeanour, to the courtesy of deference and the appearance of allowing her soul to be her own—on loan—then she felt partly as if on the edge of a snare, and partly was overpowered by a certain awestruck shame that one so much her superior should lower himself to her small stature—that one who was to her as a sovereign to a slave, should make believe to be her equal. On the whole, though, it gratified her if it frightened her. She was so sure now that Captain Macnell was desperately in love with her! For all her narrowness and ingrained

suspicion, the idea of being courted for her money had not crossed her mind; perhaps because in the midst of her perplexity and distress, her abject fear and submission, such sentiment as she had to give had been given to Wilfrid; and women do not distrust the man whom they love. Pride in her conquest ran side by side with terror of her conqueror; but she would rather have the conqueror than the conquest.

Soon after this Lady Machell and Mrs. Brown came back to the ill-assorted pair by the table; and this first faint essay at making love where none existed, this first awkward rehearsal of the pitiful drama to come, was brought to an end, much to the relief of all concerned.

My lady was the only one who was satisfied. For though she dared not question her son, neither was she told anything by his heavy and forbidding face, yet Jemima's was expressive enough; and, by what in her secret heart she characterized as underbred confusion, convinced her that something had been said, and that the game was advanced by so much.

The only thing that Wilfrid said to show how matters were with him was, when, looking straight before him as they were driving home, he suddenly exclaimed:—

'Mother, do not ask me to go there again until that evening comes. I cannot face it again.'

'Certainly not, my dear,' his mother answered kindly. 'You know that your wishes are always sacred to me.'

After this nothing more was said, and they drove home in unbroken silence on both sides; and partly for satisfaction at the position of affairs with Wilfrid, and partly because she loved him, and could not believe him guilty of the class immorality of loving unwisely, Arthur's delinquency in walking with the Smiths—engaging Muriel for his own part, and allowing Hilda to be taken by Derwent—escaped rebuke, and the harmony of the household received no check anywhere.

CHAPTER XL

'TIME WILL SHOW'

WHILE this scene was going on at Paumelle House, Derwent and Muriel were walking back to Owlett, discussing the tone and manner of Lady Machell and Wilfrid with the pained yet indignant surprise of young people to whom snubs and slights are rare

manifestations of Christian charity and polite breeding, and who know of nothing in themselves which should call them forth.

'What did it all mean?' asked Derwent, who, in his quality of man, was less clear-sighted than his sister as to the true aim of small social shafts and personal annoyances.

'I think that Lady Machell was vexed with you for asking Hilda to dance,' said Muriel not very profoundly; that part of the subject being plain enough to the typical meanest understanding.

'That was easy to see,' said Derwent with a superior air; 'but why should she have been? We may not be so old a family as the Machells, but we are in every way as good. By all accounts they have had odd people enough amongst them, while who is there to breathe a word against us?'

'Ah, but you see, dear, we are more obscure than they are,' said Muriel. 'We do not know all our relations, nor what bad things they may have done, but in a family like the Machells, everything is made public.'

'You cannot argue from a negative,' said Derwent; 'nor suppose things for which you have no kind of proof. We have nothing known against us, therefore we stand in a position of nothing to be known; while they have all manner of damaging pages in their family history. Therefore I cannot see why Lady Machell should be so much annoyed because I asked Hilda to dance the first dance with me. She knows nothing of what I feel, and the action by itself was simple enough.'

'Perhaps she is afraid,' said Muriel. 'She is said to be looking for a good match for Hilda, and it is just possible that she thinks our boy may prevent it, you know, if he is too much with her,' smiling.

Derwent smiled too.

'Perhaps she is right,' he said, the very simplicity and boyishness of his self-confidence robbing it of what would have been its offensiveness in a man. 'I feel sure that I could make her love me, Muriel; if indeed she does not do so already.'

'She is a dear little thing,' said Muriel; 'and so lovely! I thought she looked perfectly exquisite to-day; did not you?'

'I? she is more lovely than saint or angel to me,' he cried enthusiastically. 'I feel when with her as if in the presence of something beyond humanity. She is like a revelation when I see her, like a poem. She seems to transform the whole world, and to made everything beautiful.'

Muriel looked at her brother. There was no jealousy in her face, only an expression of faint fear—of sympathy which congratulated less than it dreaded.

'Ah, but, Derwent, they will never consent!' she said, repeating her first doubt. 'They want money so much!—and Lady Machell has a will of iron, as we all know, kind and good as she is in some things.'

'I will get money,' said Derwent. 'I will get both money and fame, and make myself worthy of her. Of her, no—no man could be that; but at least of her birth, and acceptable to her family.'

'You are worthy of any woman in the world, dear,' said Muriel tenderly. 'It is not for yourself, it is only the money where the difficulty will be; and perhaps our being simple Smiths, and holding no special position,' she added with her fine perception of the truth of things.

'Both money and position are to be won, my little sister,' he answered; 'and,' flinging up his head, 'I will win both!'

'You will, if anyone can; but these things do not come in a day; and will she wait for you? It seems so ungracious in me to put all these difficulties first,' she said with a sudden burst of loving contrition, which however did not affect her judgment; 'but I cannot feel sure, Derwent, boy, that this love of yours will be smooth; there seems to be so many obstacles, and I am so afraid of your suffering!'

'*Omnia amor vincit*; and what has been can be again, and shall be,' he answered. 'But you are quite right, my Mentoria, to put the scamy side outermost,' he added, smiling with the look of one who can afford to smile at danger. 'It only shows more distinctly what I have to do, and what I will do.'

'You will do all that you determine on; I am sure of that!' cried Muriel, her own enthusiasm catching fire by his; 'and when you have made your name and got a large fortune, how proud and happy Lady Machell will be to recognize you! She will not alight you then!'

'And how proud and happy I shall be to lay all—all at her feet!' cried Derwent. 'If I had the crown of the world it would be precious to me only to place on her head! No man ever loved as I do, Muriel!' he continued, boy-like accepting the fullness of his own sensations as the measure of the world's emptiness; 'no man could! And it is not a selfish love. Everyone is dearer to me than before—you, my mother, everyone! She makes me feel strong and great, as if I could not do what was mean or unworthy out of reverence for her, even if I had no self-respect and no regard for what is right for right's sake. There is no poverty in a love like this; and no cause for anyone, not even for you, my little sister who have always been so dear to me, to be jealous. You feel that, do you not?'

'Yes, I could not be jealous of what gave you happiness,' said Muriel, checking a sigh.

It was but natural that she should feel just a shade of pain at this intensity of love given to another by the brother who hitherto had been everything to her, and she everything to him. But Muriel was just and generous too; not selfish on the one hand, nor a moral coward on the other; and perhaps the secret knowledge that she had another Derwent in Arthur helped her to bear this outpour with resignation, and to accept as natural the fact that Derwent had dispossessed her from the highest place, which had hitherto been hers, to set Arthur's sister there in her stead.

'But I am sorry that Lady Machell was so cold and odd to day,' continued Derwent; 'it makes everything so much more difficult. I intend to dance with Hilda at the de Paumelle ball at any cost; but I wish that she had not been so evidently annoyed! I am afraid the poor little darling will suffer for it at home. And when I think that, Muriel, it makes me almost mad!'

'I do not believe that she is ever unkind to Hilda,' said Muriel. 'She is strict, but not harsh—at least I think not.'

'She has not a very good temper all the same,' persisted Derwent. 'Wilfrid is notoriously cranky; and so I fancy is she, much as I like and admire her. Sir Gilbert, Arthur, and my little angel are all amiable—but Lady Machell and Wilfrid!' He raised his shoulders and his eyebrows, and the pantomime was sufficiently expressive.

'Yes, these three are very amiable,' said Muriel with a sudden light on her face. 'I scarcely ever remember seeing Arthur in a bad humour when he was a boy; do you?'

'No,' Derwent answered with friendly indifference. 'He was always a good fellow; a thousand times pleasanter than Wilfrid!'

'Yes, he was,' she said; but Derwent was not in the least instructed by her radiant face and blither manner. He was so far from suspecting the truth, that no mere glimpse like this could give him its real outline. Besides, he would have been very angry and hurt and jealous had he known that Muriel was in love with Arthur. That he himself should love Hilda more than Muriel was natural and befitting; but that his sister should dispossess him in his turn for another would have been an injury, and her happiness would have been his sorrow. It is a state of mind common to those who have been spoiled by over-much love. They grow at last into looking on adoration as their right, and to think their part is done when they accept love graciously—to return it generously not coming into the programme.

'If my father had been at home, no such annoyance as this to-day could have happened,' said Derwent suddenly; after a long silence going back to the beginning of things. 'I felt at the moment that Lady Machell took advantage of my being so young and without a father to stand by me. It was ungenerous, but it was so.'

'She did not mean anything personal to you, I am sure,' returned Muriel. 'She was horribly cross, indeed rude, but it was rather to keep Hilda out of danger than to be unkind to you.'

'It is too late now!' said Derwent with a glow of triumph. 'I love her and she loves me—I am sure that she does! Did you see her sweet face, Muriel, when I wished her good-bye? It was like an angel's—like a seraph's—with that exquisite touch of sorrow on it which is the most divine thing in the whole world. A beautiful woman with those mournful eyes—that enchanting little sad smile which Hilda has sometimes—nothing is so lovely, so touching! It would take the heart out of her worst enemy, if indeed she could have an enemy! She is an angel, and more than an angel! Those lovely eyes! It was almost more than I could bear to see them when she looked into my face as I shook hands with her. Muriel! how I love her! It is sometimes absolutely pain—as if I should suffocate under it!'

'Poor Derwent!' said Muriel softly.

'No, not poor at all—nor to be pitied, dear! Rich, divinely rich,' he cried in a tone of exaltation; 'rich in the greatest treasures of life—Love and Honour!'

He said this just as they passed through the lodge gates of Owlett, and Muriel, slipping her hand into his, answered warmly:—

'Yes, you are rich, Derwent—we all are! Our beautiful old home, what a lovely place it is!' she went on to say, after a short pause. 'I always feel so happy when I come into the garden, and we are once more at home. I do not think there can be a lovelier place in England than Owlett!'

'Yes, it is a dear old place,' he answered; 'but,' drawing a deep breath, 'I sometimes feel it is nothing but a picturesque open-air prison, after all. I long to go out into the world, and to have something to do. This is not the life for a young man; and I feel it at times bitterly. Even with all that I have to leave, I should like to leave—not for ever, of course; nor for long; but for a time, and until I had done something.'

'Yes, I can understand that in you,' she said. 'Boys are so different from girls. You want to roam about the world, and we like to stop at home. It is only natural, and will have to be some day.'

'When my father comes home to take care of you and my mother, certainly! I should not like to go and leave you alone, you two. But my mother has always said that I should go into the world, and so has uncle Louis, when my father comes back. And that looks as if they expected him before very long, for I am nearly twenty-one now; and even that is old to begin life!'

'It would be dreadful for mamma and me to be alone without you or papa,' said Muriel. 'But if it is for your good I think you ought to go when you yourself feel that you ought.'

'How like you, Muriel!' her brother said affectionately. 'You are so good—the most unselfish girl breathing!'

'Am I?' she smiled. 'If you love me, that is all I care for.'

'All?' said Derwent, thinking of his mother.

'Well! I do not wish to be disliked by anyone,' said Muriel, laughing and blushing, but speaking with less directness and more evasively than was her wont.

And yet, had she been asked, she could scarcely have been able to say why she blushed and felt embarrassed, and did not answer Derwent more directly and to the point, because mentally she included Arthur Machell among those whom she wished always to like her.

The Tower pony carriage stood at the door as they went up, and told them that the Misses Forbes, one or both, were paying their trimestral visit to Mrs. Smith. For Miss Dinah, who was as remarkable for her method and the queer regularity with which she mapped out her life as for other things, made her rounds in the neighbourhood with unfailing punctuality; and save for absolute impossibility, through weather or affairs, called on each person so many times a month or a quarter, and exactly at such and such intervals. To-day was her Owlett day; which the children had forgotten, else they would not have gone out. They knew that their mother preferred them to be without visitors when she received visitors, and, loving her as they did, her will was their law and her desire ruled their liking.

'My pair of cherries on one stalk! two roses on one stem!' cried Miss Dinah, as the brother and sister came into the room bright and smiling, the very perfection of happy English youth, well dressed, well mannered, both so handsome and the one so fearless, if the other was only without suspicion, pain, or doubt. 'It does one good to see you both—and together. There is less danger in being together than with some others that I could name. Eh, Dimples?' with a sly wink to Muriel—had she been a man it would have been a nudge.

'I do not quite understand you, Miss Forbes,' said Muriel with

that certain soft dignity which was one of her greatest charms. But neither her soft dignity, nor Mrs. Smith's statuesque coldness, nor yet Derwent's more fiery pride and openly expressed displeasure, ever had the smallest effect on Miss Dinah Forbes. What she wanted to say she said; and if it were in her mind to rally people, as she called it, she rallied them, and did not trouble herself about the effect which she might or might not produce.

'Ah! that is all very well, Miss Slyboots—all very well indeed!' she answered; 'but I am too old a stager to be put off with chaff, or caught by it—and have had too much to do in looking after Baby here, to be easily hoodwinked. Don't understand me, indeed!'—she shouted out her usual roulade of laughter; 'that you do as well as I understand myself;—only you think it pretty behaved not to say so. And perhaps you are right. Young ladies should not be too knowing.'

'You are fond of riddles, Miss Forbes, I see,' said Derwent sarcastically.

'Yes, so I am,' she answered, choosing to take him literally. 'Do you know any good ones?'

'None but what you yourself have put,' he answered indignantly.

'What riddles did I set? I don't remember. -Baby, have you been giving conundrums to Mr. Derwent Smith?' she called out in her strong voice.

'No, indeed!' said Miss Aurora with girlish gaiety. 'I want to hear some new ones for myself. Have you any, Mr. Smith? Oh, do tell them to me. I adore riddles!'

The young thing was far too simple to read between the lines when hieroglyphics were going on—too transparent herself to suspect underplay in others. That was the impression which she wished to make, as she shook her curls and held her fan before her face, and looked over the top at Derwent, as if setting riddles was a pastime with a delightful little dash of naughtiness in it, just enough to make it nice and endurable—from behind a fan.

'Do you think the guessing of riddles worth the trouble and time that it takes?' asked Mrs. Smith quietly, refilling her shuttle with the fine thread with which she tatted monotonous little cobwebs of rosettes and stars that grew by slow degrees into dainty antimacassars worth 'good money' had they been paid for at the lowest rate at which human handiwork is paid.

'Worth the time and trouble that it takes? Yes! It is a very good exercise of the mind—makes people bright and quick; and I am sure some of the papers which give them expect you to be as learned as a professor. Oh yes, quite worth!' was Miss Dinah's reply.

'Yes! For my own part, I have always held it an unprofitable labour. But tastes differ,' said Mrs. Smith.

'That they do!' said Miss Dinah laughing noisily. 'You like that fidgetting little needlework which would send me crazy in a month; and I like my farm for occupation, and patience, and guessing riddles for amusement. And, upon my soul, I think that I have the best of it!'

'It is wise to be content,' said Mrs. Smith coldly, revolted by Miss Dinah's vigorous expletive.

'After all, the most important riddles are those of character,' said Miss Dinah with a philosophizing air.

'Just so,' returned Mrs. Smith.

'Yes, character is the most important as well as the most interesting riddle of all,' repeated Miss Forbes, fixing her small eyes on her hostess with that keen look of hers which never faltered before innocence or anger, defiance or impenetrability, and which seemed as if it could pierce every outer husk whatsoever, and look right down to the soul within.

Mrs. Smith did not answer. She had assented once; that was enough for a woman of her reticence and paucity of words.

'For myself, I like studying character,' continued Miss Dinah. 'I like to make out what is real and what is artificial in a person—what is natural and what put on for a purpose.'

'Yes!' said Mrs. Smith; her favourite method of reply. 'And you think that as a rule you are successful?'

Her thin lips lifted themselves into the faintest trace of a sneer, and her nostrils manifestly dilated.

'Generally,' said Miss Dinah emphatically. 'I have a kind of dog's nose for all sorts of affectation, and know to a hair what is real and what is put on, as I say, for a purpose.'

'You are fortunate—rather, well endowed and gifted,' Mrs. Smith replied, her upper lip again slightly lifted. 'That is a discovery which few of us can boast of making.'

'I can,' she repeated with emphasis; and then there was a pause to point her assertion with more unmistakable distinctness.

After a few moments she went on with the subject in a different tone;—that odd mouthing manner of a person talking on abstract matters—philosophy for instance, or metaphysics, or the elemental roots of morality not as yet flowering into personal virtues or civic law.

'There is another riddle connected with character,' she said; 'the possible reformation of an evil doer, and the right or wrong of recognizing and receiving back in to society a penitent criminal. A difficult matter that!—a very difficult matter indeed!'

Mrs. Smith went on filling her shuttle.

'It is always a problem,' she said.

'And how much may you forgive—what crimes are comparatively venial, and what can never be overlooked.'

'It is a delicate distinction, certainly,' was the lady's reply.

'But one that I have set myself to make—that I have made, in fact; a Gordian knot that I have cut—a problem that I have solved,' said Miss Dinah grandiloquently. She liked a good rolling sentence, and in other circumstances would have made an orator. As it was, she spoke at the school feasts and farmers' meetings; and she spoke more to the purpose than any man in the place. And she knew that she did.

'Yes!' repeated Mrs. Smith, searching at her side for something belonging to her work-box.

'I have taken for an outdoor servant a returned convict!' shouted Miss Dinah. 'There! what do you think of that? A returned convict! Baby and I—two lone women—and a convicted criminal for our odd man about the place. Rash or wise? Right or wrong? Which do you say now?'

'That depends on the nature of his offence, and the character of the man,' answered Mrs. Smith slowly.

'He was a thief,' said Miss Dinah; 'he was caught in the act—red-handed, as the old books say, and sent to work out his ten years on the treadmill. He has come out a reformed character, so at least the chaplain of the prison certifies; and he wants work. If no one will give it to him, he must fall back on his old life; and then what will become of him? So I have plucked up a spirit—taken heart of grace—and engaged him at low wages as a kind of garden-help and general handy-man about the place. And not a soul knows his story but our two selves, Baby and me.'

'And now I and my children,' said Mrs. Smith with ill-concealed disdain.

Reticent as she was for her own part, the fluent babbling of others seemed to her one of the most contemptible things in the world; and had Solon himself talked of his own affairs she would have disputed his claim to wisdom.

'Oh! you don't count! You won't p—' cried Miss Dinah.

Mrs. Smith raised her calm eyes and looked her visitor full in the face.

'Why not?' she asked steadily.

Miss Dinah laughed; and while she laughed, a faint flicker, not so strong as to be called a spasm, passed over Mrs. Smith's face.

'Why not? Because you ain't chatterboxes like the mass of mankind. The people who can keep their own counsel can keep

other folks' secrets; and we all know how close Mrs. Smith of Owllett is, and that no one has found the way yet to make her talk!

She began with eulogy and she ended with condemnation. The closeness of Mrs. Smith, if admirable as a personal trait, was not helpful to the social life of Grantley Bourne; and Miss Dinah Forbes, with her love of strong interests and energetic action, born of the coarse vigour that characterized her, resented the fact that one of the few houses in the neighbourhood should be given up to a family who added nothing to the tepid little excitements of the place, and was mainly notable for giving no cause for tattle.

'Would you have everyone's affairs proclaimed on the housetop, Miss Forbes?' asked Derwent, who saw that his mother was bored, and so came forward to relieve her; also he never failed an opportunity for a brush with Miss Dinah on his own account. That coarse vigour of hers was as unacceptable to him as it was to his mother, and he held it to be a kind of public duty to put it down at all hazards.

'Well, young man, so far as my own affairs are concerned, you would be welcome to have them cried in the market-place, if it would give you any pleasure,' returned Miss Dinah with a loud laugh. 'They say that every family has a skeleton in its cupboard somewhere; but I'd give you leave to rummage all mine from now to doomsday. I think you'd be troubled to find even a stray bone,' laughing again. 'It isn't everyone who can say as much for themselves; but, thank God, we Forbes's have never been much troubled with these uncomfortable gentry.'

'People need not have skeletons, as you call I suppose disgraceful family secrets, and yet may not wish to have their names and affairs in everyone's mouth,' said Derwent haughtily. 'Love of retirement is not fear of detection,' he added with the air of one who has made an epigram and is pleased with his work.

'Neatly said, young man,' shouted Miss Dinah. 'Quite a copy-book heading, I swear!'

'And even you have your secrets,' continued Derwent, as if pursuing a victory. 'Witness this man whom, pardon me, you have so unwisely taken into your service. You confess yourself that you do not want the truth of things known here.'

'Why, you young monkey, is his disgrace mine?' cried Miss Forbes. 'Because he has committed a crime, and I want to help him to become an honest man again, and can only do so by concealing his history, am I to be twitted with a secret that would go against me to tell? What rubbish you talk! I should have thought all your logic and mathematics would have taught you better reasoning than that!'

'My reasoning is perfectly sound and logical,' returned Derwent. 'You tell us something as a secret in one breath, and then you boast you have nothing to conceal in the next. The very fact that you have been rash enough, and I will add a bad citizen enough, to take into your service a returned convict, is in a sense a skeleton; and you feel it to be so, else you would not be so anxious to keep it concealed.'

'You talk like a baby as you are,' said Miss Dinah contemptuously. 'Bad citizen, forsooth! And so a poor fellow is to starve, is he? and be forced to go back to a life of crime because he has once committed a sin which he has repented of and been punished for? If that is where your good citizenship lands you, I am sorry for you! I prefer my bad.'

'Which does not surprise me,' returned Derwent quite as contemptuously, but in a different way—the difference between a polished steel blade and a knotty oaken bludgeon. 'No person who employs a returned convict can possibly understand the ethics of good citizenship. The two things are incompatible.'

'Bah!' cried Miss Forbes. 'I like common sense and plain old-fashioned Christian charity better than a boy's new-fangled notions. Who pardoned the penitent thief, I should like to know? And what our Master did I think we may imitate, however humbly and at a distance we are forced to be. As for your ethics and fine words, I hold them just for what they are; and that is—bosh!'

'Abuse is not argument, Miss Forbes,' said Derwent coldly.

'Nor pedantry good sense,' she retorted. 'And you are very pedantic, Mr. Derwent Smith. You always were as a little fellow even; when you called a bee an apis, and spoke of its cells as hexagonal. Oh, I remember!—and you in black velvet knickerbockers!'

'I am sorry not to be so fortunate as to please Miss Forbes,' answered Derwent with an affected air.

'Don't talk nonsense, and don't say what is untrue,' she said rather coarsely; and all the more so in contrast with his superb affectation and ultra refinement of tone and bearing. 'You are not sorry at all; you dislike me as much as I disapprove of you; so there is no love lost between us, and no mistake to be made. And you know this as well as I do.'

'I differ from you,' said Derwent stiffly and with a satirical smile. 'I differ from you in many things; and above all in the impartiality with which you seem to regard vice and virtue, unless indeed it be to make an exception in favour of vice. That is not disliking you.'

'Well, I should try to live over it if it were,' said Miss Dinah

with a smile which, if it did not mean either love or pleasure, was yet not so bitter as his.

She and Derwent were always what she called 'sparring;' but in her quality as the elder, and consequently the more magnanimous, and with her substantially kind heart, however rough her ways, she bore no malice, and indeed secretly rather admired the lad for what she called his pluck than resented his boldness. But he, being young and proud, and somewhat narrow and over-sensitive, honestly disliked her, and let her see that he did.

'I make no doubt you would; and I too must endeavour to live over your disapprobation,' returned Derwent.

'I tell you what it is—you are a conceited and unchristianlike young fellow,' said Miss Forbes; 'but if you have any good in you at all, and I suppose you have, you'll come right in course of time; and when you have been rubbed down by the world more than you have been yet, I shall live to hear you pipe to quite another tune, I'll be sworn—and I shall be glad of it.'

On which she got up from her chair, calling 'Baby,' who was sitting within a few feet of her giggling to Muriel about 'Mr. Arthur,' as if she had been hailing a man-of-war, and making two strides of the space which separated her from Mrs. Smith, for which an ordinary woman would have required half-a dozen steps at the least. Then she shook hands with her calm, pale, statuesque hostess in her noisy pseudo-manly way; and, offering her hand to Derwent, said in her boatswain's voice:—

'No rancour, young man, and no offence! We must give and take knocks in this world, and keep our tempers if we lose our skins. You think me a fool and I think you a prig; and so we are quits. Good-day to you; and may you live to understand the beauty of that charity which believeth all things, and which hopes and forgives as much as it believes; and not hold yourself, as you do, as a kind of nineteenth-century St. George, sent into the world to fight with all manner of dragons and not to suffer the presence of sin! We must all suffer the presence of sin, my dear, and all forgive and forget; and pray God for our enemies as well as our friends. *He* maketh His sun to shine on the just and on the unjust—and *we* may well afford to be charitable to failure! So good-bye again,' shaking his hand which she had been holding warmly clasped during the whole of her oration; 'and forgive me if I have spoken to you too roughly. You see, I don't go in for smooth speeches myself, and you are aggravating. Good-bye. Don't come out. Well, if you must, give Baby your arm. By-by, Dimples. Have a care of sparks, else maybe you'll singe those pretty wings of yours some day.'

Which last words brought her to the door and to the portico.

Settling her sister in the carriage, arranging the dust-shawl about her knees, and seeing that the cushions were in the exact place for her best comfort, she mounted her own higher seat; where, planting her feet firmly against the splash-board, she took the reins with the air of a coachman driving four-in-hand, and, raising her whip by way of final salute, trotted off down the drive one of the worthiest souls and least lovable women to be found in the whole of the county.

Just now the unloveliness of her womanhood was a far more prominent fact to Derwent than the worth of her soul, and when he went back to the drawing-room he said fretfully:

'That odious woman! how I hate her visits? Why on earth does she come when she must see that we do not want her? And her crazy preachments about her convict gardener! Really, it would seem as if we were never to hear the last of the subject of criminals, and what we are to forgive, and all the rest of it. One would think we were a colony of felons!'

'You are out of temper, my boy,' said Mrs. Smith. 'Miss Forbes is right in her views on this question. If she had not fretted you so much, you would see that for yourself.'

'Never, mother, never!' he returned. 'You can never make me think it so much a matter of indifference, whether a man has done a crime or not, that he has to be forgiven. If crime is evil, the criminal must be judged; and with judgment is no mercy. If you take this away you, confuse the whole subject, and make right and wrong interchangeable terms. I cannot adopt your view, and never will.'

'Time will show,' said Mrs. Smith, something that looked like tears coming suddenly to her eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

'ROUGH BUT TRUE.'

THAT was Miss Dinah Forbes's description of herself.

'Rough but true,' she used to say with her horse laugh and masculine air; but, as Mrs. Smith thought and Lady Machell said, 'why rough?' To be true was all very well, but truth does not necessarily bring with it a voice like a boatswain's and a stride like a grenadier's, the abandonment of every distinctive sign and quality of feminine gentleness, and the adoption of a style of which the ultimate outcome was to make a good woman into a bad copy of a man, one of a true species into a hybrid.

That was Miss Dinah Forbes's weakness. Affecting to despise men as mere selfish animals, physically strong and morally weak, she yet offered them that sincerest flattery of imitation; and, while vaunting the superiority of women, got rid of all that was purely feminine about her as so much impedimenta in the noble strife between right and wrong—so much evidence of weakness and inferiority.

Nevertheless, she was a fine-natured woman, though she had the weakness of wishing to transact her life like a man; and with all her roughness of exterior, all her affectation of rude power and translated manhood, she did a good day's work in her generation, and was one of the most useful members of the Grantley Bourne society.

She went about among the poor, whom she helped to help themselves rather than pauperized by gratuitous charities—save with the old and feeble and overburdened; and to these she gave, she did not lend—she was a crutch for perpetuity, not only a temporary bridge thrown over a bad bit of road. She advocated education so far as reading, writing, and arithmetic went, and for boys and girls alike; but she insisted on plain needlework and some knowledge of domestic duties for the latter, and she counted more than the three familiar R's for the former vanity and vexation. She did not want her maids to be fine ladies, she used to say, nor her groom an educated gentleman; she wanted good honest workers who knew their duty and were not above their station. Within this limit then she upheld the schools; saw that the treats and tea-cakes were well managed and sufficient; and made the mothers of the Jacks and Jills who played truant, or were kept at home to mind the baby, smart for the feebleness of their authority or the selfishness of their ordering.

She lectured the farmers on their bad management in field and fallow, and tried to induce them to adopt new lights concerning subsoil ploughing, top-dressing, drainage, and the value of stiff clays when properly treated: lights which in general they rejected with a few epithets, that could scarcely be called complimentary, flanking Miss Forbes's name when they spoke of her over their pipes among themselves at the 'King's Head.' And she lectured the farmers' wives on their bad management in the house, and their ignorance of scientific methods in the poultry yard; and did her best to instil into them correct views on the boiling of potatoes and the uses of soup and a stock-pot, with the good of cleanliness in the pigsties, and of half-picked bones for the fowls. In a word, she bustled and preached and scolded and 'rallied,' and was the best abused and most influential woman in the place.

One day when she was driving in her pony carriage on one of her usual rounds, to call here on the Constantines and there on Farmer Pike, she came upon a worn, haggard, miserable-looking man, standing by the wayside, his hollow eyes fixed on the dusty road as if thinking. He was not a bad-looking man, but neither had he a pleasant countenance. His look was of the kind called furtive, one that never met his fellows frankly; but the face was not brutal; and as for that sidelong glance, it might be ingrained dishonesty and shiftiness, but it might also be timidity and nervousness; and Miss Forbes, for all her pseudo-masculinity, was woman enough to give a fellow-creature the benefit of the doubt when she could make one. And she gave this man the benefit of the doubt now.

She stopped her pony.

'I don't know you, and yet your face is not quite strange to me,' she said in her loud, full-bodied voice. 'Where do you come from?'

'Deane, my lady,' said the man. Deane was a village about ten miles off, of which the brother of the Tower ladies was the rector. 'And beg pardon, my lady,' he continued, 'but I know yours and the other lady's. You are Miss Forbes, sister of our rector.'

'Who are you, then?' she asked.

'Bob Rushton, my lady,' he said meekly.

'Bob Rushton!—Bob Rushton!' she repeated; 'what do I know of you? Oh, I remember! sent to gaol for stealing lead. And so you've worked your time out, have you, and are in the world again for another chance?'

'I have my leave,' he said.

'When did you come out?'

'Last week, my lady,' he answered, nervously plucking at his shabby cap.

'And I hope you have come back a reformed character,' said Miss Dinah severely, in the tone of voice which meant that she was sure he had not, but that he had better look to it if she were to get hold of him.

The man's pale face flushed.

'I hope so, my lady,' he answered; 'the chaplain he gave me a certificate to say so, and that I had learnt to love the Lord.'

'Don't my-lady me,' said Miss Forbes abruptly. 'We have only one lady here, and she's Lady Machell. I am plain Miss Forbes, and ma'am when you speak to me.'

He touched his short-cropped head.

'Beg pardon, my lady—leastways ma'am,' he said humbly.

'And as for your loving the Lord, I hope you will learn to

respect your neighbours' goods, which will be more to the purpose,' she added sharply.

'Yes, my lady—ma'am,' he repeated.

'And what are you going to do now that you are a free man again?' she asked. 'Let me see, what were you? a wheelwright, wasn't it? Are you going back to your old trade?'

The poor fellow looked down on the road, and up to the sky, but earth and heaven were both silent. He shifted his feet, and twisted his cap in his hands; then the tears came into his eyes, a little too readily for sincerity—or else for self-respect. Miss Forbes chose to believe the latter.

'That's just what I don't know' ma'am,' he answered sadly; 'for you see that's just where it is. I went to the old place, and tried if my old master, Giles Turner—you remember Giles Turner, my lady?—would have me back, but he wouldn't; and I don't know where to look for work.'

'Well, you must have something to do; you can't starve,' said Miss Forbes, energetically.

The man looked meek, as if the contingency were not quite impossible nor inadmissible; but he went on with his story.

'You see, my missis, ma'am, she has got a tidy lot of washing to do at the old place,' he said; 'enough as will keep her and the littlest child, eleven year old come Martinmas; but I don't want to live on her, and she didn't seem very fain of my going back to her anyway. And though I was sorry to leave my home when I had got it again, I couldn't stay along with her, and nothing to do for myself.'

'You certainly cannot live on your wife's work,' said Miss Forbes, with something like a snort. 'You must get something to do for yourself!—mind that.'

'But I can't tell where to get a day's work anywheres, ma'am,' he returned. 'You see, my lady, trouble sends a man down on his luck ever so far; and once a gaol-bird, always a gaol-bird, as they said to me at Giles Turner's, when I asked them for an odd job nows and thens.'

'There! you see what wrong-doing ends in!' cried Miss Dinah with something of a triumphant air. 'There is your good, decent, hard-working wife keeping herself and her children respectably, and you, who ought to be the breadwinner of the house—you who are the man,' contemptuously, 'have been the one to bring them into trouble. Oh, you are a pretty lot, you men!'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Bob Rushton, with an air of apology for being one of the inferior sex.

'Well, I cannot stay and talk with you any longer,' said Miss

Forbes sharply, as if it had been the man's fault that she had remained so long. 'Come up to Tower this evening, and I will see what I can do for you. And here—here is a shilling for you to get some food with now. I dare say you want it; you look as if you had not had a good meal for a month. Such wicked folly as it has all been; flinging away your good name and happiness like this!'

'Thank you, my lady,' said the ticket-of-leave man humbly.

He who would might fling hard words at Bob Rushton now. With his own self-respect had gone his claim on the respect of others, and under the name of contrition and religious humility the prison chaplain had broken down his manhood still more thoroughly—from shame thrusting him straight into abjectness.

'Well, come up this evening to Tower,' repeated Miss Dinah, as she drove away; and Bob Rushton said: 'Thank you, yes, I will, my lady,' and wondered what the goodness of the Lord was going to give him.

It gave him what we know—the place of out-of-door odd man and general helper, and so set the poor fellow once more on his legs, and gave him a chance which he had no right to expect.

But Miss Dinah Forbes had not Mrs. Smith's power of reticence. Though she was good and kind and generous, she liked that people should call her so; and, so far from objecting to her left hand knowing what her right had done, wished to have the world at large for her audience and applauders. To one after the other she whispered Bob Rushton's story in the strictest confidence, and under solemn promises of secrecy, till every person in the place knew all about him, and who he was, and what he had done; some saying that Miss Forbes was a brave, noble-hearted woman for befriending him, and others—the majority—that she was rash and foolish, and that nothing should have induced them to receive a returned convict into their establishments. But as people do not say disagreeable things to one's face, preferring rather to kiss one's hand openly and stab one in the back secretly, she did not hear what was murmured against her, only what was said for her; so lived in happy ignorance that almost every one of her trusted gossips had broken faith with her, as she had broken it with Bob Rushton, and that for one who commended her there were two who condemned.

Another of her characteristics was her fondness for talking to the working classes, because desirous to know their thoughts and the actualities of their lives. Her passion altogether was for realism; and she discarded social and intellectual idealities, as she discarded ribbons and bibbons and finery of all sorts. Here then was a new field for her to plough:—Bob Rushton's experience of prison life; the rules and regulations under which he lived; the

work that he did and the food that he ate; what he thought and what he said; and his fellow-prisoners—what they were like. It was a subject on which she was never tired of questioning him, and one on which, when his first shyness had worn off, he was never tired of answering. For by making every other person's crime positively black he fancied that he made his own comparatively white. It is a theory in moral shading, and the key of colour to be applied to action, which most people with dark spots in their own history cherish, and one which especially suited Rushton. He was too sincere to deny his crime altogether and fall back on the old pretence of mistaken identity or false swearing; and he was not strong enough to justify himself by any plea of necessity through low wages and the rights of man to equality in goods; he simply tried to throw it into low relief by the superior prominence which he gave to the sins of his fellow-convicts; and so far he was a hypocrite and a sham.

He told her all manner of graphic stories. There was the banker who had made away with everybody's money and ruined thousands by his mad speculations, and all that he might drive a four-in-hand, said Bob Rushton with contempt—that four-in-hand, which was only a symbol, being to him the aim and end of the whole matter. Then there was a murderer, in for life, a furious wretch who had killed his wife in a drunken fit, and who was the plague of the prison and the terror of the officials—always breaking out and getting punished, and with every punishment coming back a greater than before. Of him Bob spoke with something that was contempt—with unfeigned dread and horror—unfeigned, but all the same made the most of, and the sanity of the jury who brought him in guilty of manslaughter only, and did not hang him out of hand, gravely questioned by this amateur Beccaria. He would do for some of the warders yet, said Bob; and it would have been far better to have been done for himself than let good lives be taken that his might be saved for a few years longer. To which view of the case Miss Forbes heartily assented; and clenched her remarks with a sermon on the sin of blood-guiltiness, so vigorous in the picture of the hereafter which she drew, that Bob's blood ran cold for the dread lest stealing a few rolls of lead should come into the same terrible category.

He spoke too of a nice young fellow, a lawyer's clerk, who had got hold of the Stock Exchange—'beared he called it,' said Bob, proud of this little bit of genteel slang added to his vocabulary—and who borrowed without leave from his employers to meet his liabilities on that black Settling day when they have to be faced somehow. He was as nice a young fellow as ever stepped, said Bob

with effusion—a fine genteel lad who had hands like a lady, and who grew a couple of inches after he came in. But there he was safe enough for the next five years, and then where would he find himself?

'Ah, where indeed!' echoed Miss Dinah forcibly; 'the young fool!'

At another time he told her of that apocryphal baronet who floats about the lower strata of society—now driving a cab, now keeping a gin shop, and now to be found, by hearsay, working at the crax't and the wheel in prison—not the 'unhappy nobleman,' who is a concretion, but that abstract baronet whose daughter used to be in the Clerkenwell Penitentiary.

At another again, he told her of a real gentleman, a city merchant, who had betted on the Derby—'plunged,' lost, and then forged his partner's name to get him out of the mess. He, like the lawyer's young clerk, was also as fine a fellow as ever stepped, according to Bob; and the effusion with which he had spoken of the younger man redoubled when he came to the elder. He worked in Bob's gang, when his health would let him; but he was often ailing and in the infirmary, and the two had struck up one of those mysterious prison friendships which defy the authorities to check or prevent.

'Leastways not a friendship quite,' said Bob apologetically. 'We were pals there, but I knew the difference between us, and so did he. We were more like master and man, and would have been if we could.'

But save these two gentlemen thieves, for whom Bob had a special liking, he spoke of all the others as manifestly greater criminals than himself—he who had only stolen a few pounds of lead! So at least it seemed to him, and he did his best to make his view Miss Dinah's.

'Real gentlemen they are, some of them, ma'am,' he said to her one day when he was digging up new potatoes under her personal supervision; 'real gentlemen as ought to have known better; not like poor men without education.'

Bob was marked on the prison books 'imperfectly educated;' but he was sharp if no scholar.

'Two wrongs do not make one right, Bob,' said Miss Dinah sententiously; 'and even uneducated men know that murder and theft are crimes. You don't want to be able to read to know that so many pounds of lead are your master's and not yours, and that you have no right to take them; and that if you do, and are caught, you will be punished, and justly so.'

Miss Forbes never lost an opportunity for 'giving a dig,' as she

called it, at Bob. She was his salvation in essentials, but she liked to have him, and indeed all her protégés, well in hand. She did not approve of people who had done wrong forgetting their sins too readily. She would help them, but at the same time she would keep them humble; and she would make their repentance bitter, if in the end effective. Nevertheless, she was true if rough; and if a man would endure her manner was a faithful friend to him in matter. But there was no doubt about it—her manner was hard to bear.

A week or so after the introduction of Mr. Bob Rushton, the returned convict, into the service of Miss Forbes and the sacred precincts of Grantley Bourne, a small robbery was committed at the Constantines' of Skarpeley. They had certain well-bred fowls which they prized as worth so much actual money. They did not care so much for their natural beauty as for their artificial commercial value; and they were very wroth when, one fine morning, the week before the de Paumelle ball, they found the roost untenanted, and their perfectly shaped and feathered silver Hamburgs gone.

As robbery from the premises was not a usual occurrence at Grantley Bourne, there was naturally a loud outcry and a violent commotion; and though some gipsies had been seen prowling about the place—their encampment being in the lane past Owlett—even these general camels of local pilferings were suffered to go free, that the burden of the sin might be laid on Miss Dinah's doubtful penitent. There was not a shadow of proof that he had stolen those silver Hamburgs; and not the remotest reason why he should. He was well fed, so that he did not need them for meat; and he had not been absent from the place long enough to have sold them at the market town. All the same, the next-to-universal voice of the community accused him of the theft, and the majority made common cause with the Constantines in their prayer for his immediate dismissal. A kind of panic went through the place, and the demand for revolvers and knuckledusters, iron shutters and bells, mastiffs and life-preservers, surprised the tradesmen at the country town. They had not heard of any gang of burglars hereabouts to justify this formidable array of articles for self-defence; but folks who live in a very quiet, very regular country place, easily take alarm at anything unusual; and the robbery of a hen roost is to them as grave a matter as, to others accustomed to wild corners, the murder of a tax-gatherer, or the carrying off by bandits of a Sindaco—with his ears sent as the first instalment of his whole person in parcels, should the ransom fixed on be not forthcoming.

There were a few, however, who did not join in this outcry; and those few were among the most noteworthy. The Machells

did not. Sir Gilbert and Wilfrid, judicially minded as became the present chairman of Quarter Sessions and the future High Sheriff of the county, wanted evidence before condemning even a ticket-of-leave man of an unproved crime; and Arthur supplemented this judicial reserve by the more purely human sentiment, if oddly worded, that the poor devil was hardly treated and not given fair play.

Mr. Oliphant quoted texts which were more to the purpose of the pulpit than the police, and impossible to work in a community composed of shaky members, if they would have done well enough in a society of saints. Mrs. Smith said very little, according to her wont, but that little went to the belief that a man need not necessarily be bad all through because he had once, in a moment of weakness, committed even a crime: and Muriel pleaded eloquently for trust in human nature, dear child; as if human nature and high morality were synonyms, while evil was only an adventitious circumstance that crept in through undefended places and spoilt the original architecture.

But Derwent was implacable. It was an insult, he said, to all the honest workmen of the place to have this convicted felon, this rogue and vagabond, associated with them; and, whether he had committed this present theft or not, society at Grantley Bourne, representing respectability, owed it to itself to cast him out from its midst, because of his past iniquity. He was very hard in his righteousness, very unforgiving and immaculate. Even those people who thought with him said that he was really too severe and took absurdly lofty views. They wished the man to be got rid of, because it was inconvenient and disturbing to have him there; but when you come to requiring such a very high standard, and to showing such an almost fanatical severity—well, then they parted company, and thought Mr. Derwent Smith decidedly going too far. Still it is an awkward thing to do to tell a lad that he ought to overlook the fact of felony—shake hands with a returned convict—let bygones of crime be bygones, and no word of reproach to follow; and that—as he put it in his narrow and therefore unjust way—it really did not much matter whether a man had been a criminal or not; and that given that state of mind which it pleases silly people to call repentance, he may be reinstated in the good graces of the world, as if nothing had happened.

He would have none of this paltering with the eternal laws of right or wrong, he said with his archangelic air; and his mother and he had on this subject the only discussion which had ever in any way approached a serious disagreement—she inclining to mercy and generosity, he strict for condemnation and repulsion.

But the neighbourhood reckoned without its host, if it thought that Miss Dinah Forbes was to be moved by any representations that it could make. Being convinced, and justly so, that Bob Rushton had no more to do with the theft of the silver Hamburgs than she herself, she did not choose to sacrifice him to popular clamour, and stood by her black sheep gallantly. No representations stirred her; nor did any amount of hints that she would be socially blackballed if she did not yield to the wishes of the community. She was true if rough; and while she prodded Bob daily with the sharp prongs of invective and reminders of those unlucky rolls of lead, she defended him against his foes from without, and made his cause her own. And as there is a large latent fund of justice in the English character, and the pendulum of public opinion which has swung too far one way is sure to go back the corresponding beat the other, she knew that she had only to bide her time to be honoured where now she was condemned, and her constancy vaunted as a virtue in place of her obstinacy decried as a vice. That theory of action and reaction, excess and compensation, was a favourite one with her; and so far she was right. But if the beat goes too far, and you die of a broken heart before the pendulum swings back?—the theory will not have much comforting effect on your soul then.

This retention by Miss Forbes of her convict handy-man, and the certainty of the neighbourhood that he had stolen the Constantine fowls, and that they would all find themselves some night in bed with their throats cut, had an extraordinary effect; it brought Mrs. Smith to Tower out of her prescribed time for calling. She generally let months pass into years before she returned any visit: but she paid back Miss Dinah's the week after it was made—on the day preceding the de Paumelle ball; whereby she nearly caused the lady of Tower a fit of apoplexy from astonishment.

After she had sat there a little while—she was alone—she said with more show of feeling than she was accustomed to display:—

'I have been thinking a great deal about your protégé, Miss Forbes. Which prison did you say he came from?'

'Bindwood,' said Miss Forbes.

Mrs. Smith, troubled as she often was with a spasmodic kind of cough, put her handkerchief to her face. For a moment her breath failed her, and she could not speak. She conquered her annoying spasm, however, before long, and spoke again in the quiet way usual to her; but perhaps with a little more emotion than she would have cared to show if she could have entirely controlled it.

'I think you have been so good to keep your man against all the opposition that has been raised so suddenly,' she went on to say, fixing her beautiful eyes on her hostess, perhaps a shade less steadily than usual; 'but I think too, without departing from your principles, we might do something to lessen the discomfort of the position to you both.'

'No discomfort to me, Mrs. Smith,' cried Miss Dinah lustily; 'it don't affect me two straws what folks say of me. I know my own mind, and I do my duty so far as I know it; and I let the world rave its loudest and hottest as long as it likes. Hard words break no bones: and so long as I have a whole skin I don't mind about the rest.'

'You are quite right, and no one honours your independence more than I,' said Mrs. Smith; 'but the poor fellow himself might be better off under other conditions. Suppose we make a fund to start him fairly in life where he is not known? I would subscribe to it to the utmost of my ability. It seems to me such a pity to live in a place where a past disgrace is known; a new life in a new neighbourhood is so far preferable.'

'Certainly, in general, I quite agree with you; but not in this case,' said Miss Forbes. 'The man is as weak as a carrot. He wants keeping up to the mark by a strong hand; and I know that if I let go my hold of him he will drift back into evil ways in less than a month. No, I shall keep him with me, thank you kindly; and I shall brave it out. But you are very good,' she added, rising and shaking hands with Mrs. Smith warmly.

'I am sorry you do not see the thing in the same light as I do,' said Mrs. Smith, after a moment's pause, sinking back into her usual indifference and statuesque stolidity. 'Of course you are the best judge of your own actions. I only wished you to understand that I would be glad to help if you thought of sending your man away to some place where he was not known, and where his chances would be greater than here, where his story has so unfortunately leaked out.'

'For the reasons I have stated I think not,' answered Miss Dinah sturdily; and Mrs. Smith, making a slight bow, signified that the conversation was at an end.

Soon after this she left; and what she felt there was no one to see, nor what she did when she was alone in her carriage, and recognised that her effort had failed.

'Lord bless my soul, the woman has a heart, after all!' was Miss Dinah's commentary when she had gone. 'Well, there are wonders still to be met with!—that mummy proving herself a living woman! After this I shall believe anything of anybody, and despair of none.'

'Still waters run deep,' gurgled Miss Aurora girlishly.

'So they do, Baby; clever little thing that you are!' answered Miss Dinah admiringly; 'but for my own part I like more plain and straightforward characters—people that one can read without trouble, and that one has not to spend half one's life in making guesses at!'

'Ah! but everyone is not so straightforward as you, Diny,' said Baby.

And Miss Dinah, giving her a kiss, answered:—

'You are a treasure; and if I can make you happy and keep you well, I care for nothing else. Has your wreath come, dear, for to-morrow? How pretty you will look in it, and how proud I shall be of my little sister!'

Yes, this masculine, loud-voiced lady of Tower was undeniably rough, but as undeniably true; a warm friend, but in spite of her rude words, which seemed to express such heat and bitterness, a tepid enemy, and to be softened at the worst moments by an appeal to the human side of her. Neither Mrs. Smith nor Derwent understood her now; perhaps in the future they would, should occasion occur, when the realities of a character are of more avail than its graces.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROUDEST MOMENT OF HIS LIFE.

THE evening on which so much depended arrived in its course; the curtain drew up and the ball which was the prologue of the play began. It was the most gorgeous affair of its kind that had ever been given in Grantley Bourne; and as Mr. Brown de Paumelle said with swelling satisfaction, when assuring each guest that this was the proudest moment of his life, no expense had been spared to make it go as it should.

The flowers alone represented a modest fortune; and the heart of the chandler who had the honour of the de Paumelle custom sat lightly on its throne by reason of the forest of wax-lights which illuminated the fact of Miss Jemima's majority. The refreshments were had direct from London; as indeed were all the appliances, including the band, and those pretty little artificial bowers which were set in corners and at the end of passages as suggestive retreats for devoted persons. The champagne was dry and the claret had the velvet on; and Mr. Brown de Paumelle was careful to tell the

gentlemen when the time for refreshments came round how much each had cost per dozen; and that there was not a headache in a hogahead of either. He was careful too to tell, each in a confidential manner—as if to him alone—how much the whole affair had cost; but that he grudged nothing, his motto being to do a thing handsome or leave it alone, and so long as they were satisfied—but he said 'satisfized'—so was he.

Partly for Lady Machell's sake, and partly for idle curiosity, all the great people of the county who had been invited came; and the fine names which rolled through the rooms were as pleasant to the ears of Mr. Brown de Paumelle as was ever the smoke of incense to the nostrils of a god. He stood by the door of the first drawing-room, radiant, shining, ecstatic. He felt it truly, as he said it was, the proudest moment of his life; and he showed that he did. As name after name—some titles, some the names of the oldest families in the county—was shouted by the small army of footmen stationed at intervals from the hall to the drawing-room, till it finally came to the majestic groom of the chambers himself, the face of the retired soap-boiler grew more and more rubicund, his manner more triumphant, his heart more elate.

He was a small stout man, with a tendency to grow warm, and an inveterate habit of holding those to whom he talked by the arm. Ladies with short sleeves did not like it. His new black coat, evidently so new, shone in the light; his black satin waistcoat glistened, and his chain and rings and big diamond studs glittered and sparkled as he bowed and smirked, and rubbed his own hands with satisfaction after he had shaken those of his guests with effusion. In one thing only was he disobedient to the great goddess of form; he would not wear his white kid gloves, but kept them dangling in one hand or thrust into the bosom of his vest. He had once seen a young Frenchman do this; and the trick had taken his fancy, both as 'nobby,' according to his phraseology, and less troublesome to himself.

By his side stood his wife and daughter; pale where he was flushed; timid to his pride; shrinking, nervous, depressed, not self-confident, jovial, glad as he. Both were dressed in exquisite taste, so far as the mere style and material of their garments went; Lady Machell had taken care of that: but Mrs. Brown de Paumelle's dead-leaf and gold, and Jemima's white and silver, though made by Worth himself, looked more out of keeping with their meagre awkward persons than if they had been clothed according to their own ideas. These would have given them a 'full puce' for the mother, and a 'grass green' for the daughter, made by a local dressmaker after the most elaborate of the two figures in a fashion-

book, and largely trimmed with modern point. Do what you would with them, you could not bring them up to the standard. Their heads were dressed according to the correctest canons of the art; they had not a faulty point about them; down to their very shoe-buckles and their glove-buttons their get-up was perfect. And yet it wanted no magician to see, as they stood there, that they were mere clothes-horses-decked to order—well decked if you will—but none other than clothes-horses, when all was done. They felt themselves to be shams and out of place, for all that they had said one to the other admiringly: 'La! ma, how splendid you look!' and: 'La! Jemmy, you are lovely, my dear!' and just as Mr. Brown showed the pride that was in his heart, so did they show the trouble and humility that were in theirs.

Mrs. Brown looked as if she had been newly taken from behind a counter where she served her customers in silence and with meekness, and said 'Thank you, ma'am,' as she handed back the change; while poor little Jemima, with her huge bouquet of white flowers—so suggestive of the bridal bouquet, of which indeed it was only the forerunner—was the patient 'landlady's daughter' who attended to the lodgers with diligence, and even would herself have run for the supper beer to please the 'parlour,' who joked her so pleasantly. You could make nothing else of them. Trains and fans and rare old lace, diamonds and pearls, my lady's faultless taste and the deftest hands of maid and milliner to put her ideas into force, all failed to make them the things they simulated—all failed to bring them up to the mark, and transform them from the Browns of Clapton into the de Paumelles of Grantley Bourne. And they felt it, and knew it, and sank under the weight of their grandeur, like llamas crushed by carrying gold.

Lady Machell and her party came early. Had there been no ulterior object to gain, her substantially kind heart—substantially kind when not interfered with by ambition—would have made her careful to be in good time, that she might lend the strength of her presence to the unaccustomed hostess. As it was, she was doubly desirous to appear as the de Paumelle right hand—in part, to show the world in what intimate relations she and her house stood to all this wealth; in part, to support while compelling her son.

The group was a noticeable one; and the social gulf originally existing between the host and the guests was nowhere marked with more distinctness.

Sir Gilbert, my lady, Wilfred and Arthur, were tall, fine, majestic-looking people; and Hilda, though of a smaller type, had that nameless grace and beauty which are born of generations of

good breeding and refinement. The four towered above short, round, rosy-gilled Mr. Brown de Paumelle, his pinched and withered wife, his faded meagre daughter, as if they had been creatures of another race and sphere. Standing at the entrance to the gorgeous rooms, blazing with light and glittering with gold, the guests looked like the hosts, the hosts like some inferior creatures in masquerade who had been admitted by chance and were allowed to remain on sufferance. Sir Gilbert's quiet face—a sealed book where no one could read the closed pages—and Mr. Brown de Paumelle's, bursting with pride and alive with transparent exultation; the Baronet self-contained, at perfect ease, slightly shabby, and with not as many pence as this man had hundreds of pounds—and the retired soap-boiler, fussy, restless, newly minted, lustrous, but because of that newness rough at the edges and crude all through—what a contrast they made! It was as great as that made by Lady Machell, looking like some old time queen in her heavy, straight-cut, flowing velvet gown and superb black lace mantilla, stately, calm, gracious, and aristocratic to her finger tips, and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle timid, weak-eyed, ill at ease in her finery, and bent in at the chest with nervousness and conscious unfitness; as great as that made by Hilda, young as she was, also calm and gracious and aristocratic like her mother, and poor little Jemmy, whose rightful sphere was to be found in that eight-roomed house at Clapton, and her rightful owner honest 'Arry whose highest flight of ambition did not soar beyond five hundred a year and a confidential clerkship in the city. But money is our modern magician; and Circe to succeed in nineteenth-century society would have to bribe her lovers by gold, not wine.

Even Sir Gilbert, philosopher though he had become, according to the wisdom of an unlucky man who will not lose time or strength in useless regret, as he wandered about the rooms examining the pictures and ornaments on the walls—one arm behind his back, according to his favourite attitude—even he felt that all this belonged by the nature of things to him rather than to that other, and wondered greatly how it was that Providence had left old families to decay and set up soap-boilers in the high places in their stead. It was a problem to which just then he could not find an answer; but it held him, and made him feel uncomfortably sceptical of superior ordering.

Lady Machell, with Hilda close to her side, stood by Mrs. de Paumelle as her shield and sponsor; and Arthur talked to his little sister and made her smile—both furtively watching the arrival, to the one of her fairy-tale kind of prince, to the other of the woman who made all the world beautiful for him. Wilfrid, who had

spoken to Mr. Brown de Paumelle of his intentions, with regard to Jemima, and received his glad permission to 'sound her for himself,' stood as if mounting guard over the poor little girl who felt as if she should sink into the earth when the tall, largely-framed, arbitrary-mannered man bent down and spoke to her as if she was already his engaged wife, claiming her as his private property and his captive, as much as if she had been taken by his bow and spear. It was an hour of trial to all save Mr. Brown de Paumelle and Lady Machell. He was tasting for the first time the full fruits of his success; and she, having resolved, looked only to the good of the event which she had ordained, and put halting and regret as far behind as did placid Sir Gilbert himself.

The great people began to come. Mr. Brown de Paumelle shook hands with each heartily. 'Glad to see you, my Lord;' 'Hope you are well, my Lady;' 'Glad to welcome you to Paumelle House, Sir; the first time, and I hope not to be the last;' 'I hope you'll enjoy your evening, ma'am, and the young ladies, too; make yourself at home, and the more you're pleased, the more you'll please me;' he said, with honest hospitality running through his vulgar pride, and in his full-flavoured London accent. His wife said nothing. She only bowed to each incomer in the nervous, dislocated way of which no teaching by my lady before a pier glass could cure her; and Jemima made a timid little movement which courtesy accepted as the conventional 'reverence.' Brown had taken to it to life, as his wife said; and they were content to efface themselves behind his masculine courage and spirit, and to wonder meekly how ever he could do it; and la! but he had a way with him!

Together with the more distant families, those forming the immediate society of the place appeared with a punctuality which destroyed the ordinary calculation of the 'two-thirds.' No one was absent. Miss Dinah Forbes, in a plain black silk gown of a severe not to say androgynous cut, without an ornament of any kind, or anywhere, and no covering on her head save her short-cut grizzled hair, came leading in her sister Aurora in white gauze flushed here and there with pink and much bestrewed with flowers—to emblemize her name. They too wandered about the rooms, a little avoided by the neighbourhood because of that unlucky protégé who was sure to murder every living soul among them some of these nights, and who was regarded much as a mad dog would be regarded, wilfully let loose among defenceless folk. Little cared the stalwart Dinah for cold looks or hard words, wherever met with. She rather liked a row, she used to say hardily; and was not a meek Miss to be afraid of a cup full of hot water. Quite unabashed by her temporary unpopularity, she examined the pictures and the blue china, the

Japanese vases and the Venetian mirrors, which the upholsterer had supplied according to the direction of the art-decorator, and expressed her approbation or disapprobation in a stentorian voice like a showman; while Miss Aurora echoed her sentiments sweetly.

The Constantines from Sharpeley came, still conscious of those silver Hamburgs, and looking like people who have received a nervous shock and are yet objects for public sympathy. They were three gaunt daughters dressed precisely alike—not a ribbon nor a ringlet differing; one ungainly son; a father who looked more like a Methodist grocer than an English country gentleman; and a mother so prim, so thin, so dry, as to fill one with astonishment how she had ever found herself a wife and mother at all. They avoided the Tower ladies pointedly; but Miss Dinah did not choose to be avoided; so she went straight up to the group, and 'rallied' them to her heart's content.

The Lucrafts came; always with an eye to business and that not too luxurious larder at home; he blunt and a trifle coarse, she bland, attentive, insinuating, but never forgetting to be her husband's fagleman, and vaunting his merits with rather too evident an air why, for the taste of most people. Then came in Guy Perceval with his chin in the air and his necktie awry; honest, if queer; bringing with him an able editor from London, whose ear he specially wished to gain. And then came in Derwent and Muriel Smith; and with them the interest of the evening began for little Hilda as well as for Arthur, and the half-hour of expectant watching ended. What signified the stream of titled nobodies, of well-known county families, of stray lions from London picked up by a few lucky hunters and paraded as treasures of which not half-a-dozen people in the room understood the value? The world and its fulness faded from his sight, or rather all fulness was concentrated in the sweet face that came smiling through the doorway, happy and loving and young—too young to live with fear, too loving to harbour doubt, too happy to remember pain.

As she came into the room—looking like some human flower in her soft flowing creamy dress, with the graceful run of her figure not distorted by the ungainly lines of superfluous millinery, and for all ornament blush-roses in her bosom and her hair—the band at the end of the drawing-room began the first waltz; almost as if they had waited for her before they opened the ball.

Something that was more than pain passed like a sickness over Lady Maohell, as she looked at her son when Muriel came up to their group by the door, and made her greetings to the hosts real and vicarious. She saw in his face what she had never seen there before—a purpose, a resolution, an undisguised openness of pas-

sionate love which showed her his heart as a flash of lightning shows the rock across the ship's path. And though Muriel was less demonstrative, and only smiled and blushed, and looked glad and shy and sweet as any other pretty girl might have done, yet in hers too Lady Machell read that subtle something which reveals itself as love, and knew that she had to combat here with truth as well as there with passion.

'Just in time,' said Arthur, offering his arm; and Muriel took it, looking at Derwent pleadingly and at Lady Machell in a pretty kind of deprecation of wrath, but with a whole world of shy delight in her eyes as she glanced up at Arthur, and walked before them all leaning on his arm through the rooms. They followed immediately after Wilfrid and Jemima; he crushing in his heart the despair and love and wrath which filled it, as a man might crush the serpent that was round his throat strangling him, but giving no sign that anything was amiss, and bearing himself in his hour of trial with a stolid constancy that was almost inhuman.

'And the same honour to me?' said Derwent to Hilda.

Hilda looked at her mother dutifully, and hesitated. Lady Machell looked at Derwent, and hesitated too. She then glanced round the room. No one was there whose interest she especially wished to secure for her daughter; and no one had as yet asked her to dance.

'Bring her back to me as soon as the waltz is over,' she said severely; and Derwent, radiant, answered 'Yes,' and left her with his prize, feeling much as a young king, lord of life and the hour, might feel when he had subdued his enemy and marked a victory on his banners. Hilda was on his arm—his for the moment—his by all the laws of youth and love: what more did he want? Scarcely yet the bolder joy of acknowledgment. We do not ask green buds to give us fruit, nor does a boy's romance demand a man's assurance.

Guy Perceval had not forgotten his engagement with Muriel. On the contrary, it had been a very vivid remembrance ever since it had been made. But at this moment he was in the inner drawing-room, talking with his able editor and The Earl on the possibility of breeding silkworms in Cornwall. Besides, he had not seen Muriel enter, and he hoped that she had not yet come.

Guy Perceval was young in years; at the age indeed when to dance with a pretty girl, secretly designed to be one day chosen as the wife of his bosom, counts as the most important affair in a man's life; but he was old in mind, and even such a significant fact as this initial dance with Muriel came far behind a ride on a new-found hobby. A conversation with an earl and an editor, on

the possibilities of breeding silkworms in England, was sometimes deserving a serious man's best attention; to waltz with Muriel Smith was only a sign; and he could transact the substance just as well some other way. Nevertheless, he broke off his conversation to keep his engagement, and by the time the waltz was half over came back into the throng, to claim the hand which he expected to find free—and waiting for him.

He looked round the first reception-room, but Muriel was not there; only Lady Machell standing by the side of her hostess, and introducing to her those of the guests whom she knew and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle did not. Sir Gilbert had wandered away into the card-room, where he was losing his five-shilling points with unruffled equanimity. He was a man who never knew how to manage his trumps, and whose long suit generally melted away in discards.

'Where are they?' asked Guy in his high-pitched voice.

'Who?—my boys and Hilda?' answered Lady Machell smiling.

'And Miss Smith,' he replied.

'Miss Smith? I believe she is dancing with my son Arthur,' said Lady Machell quietly.

'She was engaged to me,' cried Guy. 'I engaged her for the first waltz a week or more ago; and this is a waltz, is it not?'

'As you did not appear, I suppose that my boy, who is good-natured, took compassion on her,' said Lady Machell. 'It was the kind of thing he would do. You know how kind-hearted he is.'

'She should have waited for me,' said Guy with a certain uneasy displeasure.

He held to the supremacy of men and the devout attendance of women on their will as an article of faith that was of vital importance in the progress of humanity; and anything that savoured of feminine independence, not to speak of the new school of advanced females—the Shrieking Sisterhood, as some one called them—was specially abhorrent to him.

'Yes,' said Lady Machell, 'so she would had she been thorough. These half ladies never do the right thing.'

She said this in a lowered voice. It was treading on delicate ground to speak of half ladies in the hearing of Mrs. de Paumelle, late, old Brown's good lady living out Clapton way.

'I thought she would have been better bred than this,' said Mr. Perceval crossly. 'I am disappointed in her.'

'Are you? I am not. I never expect more than I find anywhere—certainly not in that quarter,' said Lady Machell, with the finest little flicker of disdain in her face and voice. 'Have you seen my daughter?' she then asked, as if glancing off from a disagreeable

and unimportant topic to one both important and pleasant. 'Her first ball! An event in her young life never to be forgotten, and one with which a mother can so well sympathize.'

'No,' said Guy looking round; 'where is she?'

'In the ball-room, dancing with young Smith,' said Lady Machell. 'Not a desirable partner you will say, in some respects, but undeniably one of the best waltzers in the room; and I was not sorry that the dear child should be well piloted in her first essay, even if I do not quite approve of the pilot.'

'Miss Machell is too well bred to do anything doubtful,' said Guy Perceval a little at random, but meaning to aim a shaft at Muriel, beneath his garland for Hilda.

Lady Machell smiled; a mother's smile of fond approval, mixed with a certain personal pride for the share that she herself had had in her child's perfections.

'I hope so,' she said; 'she has been brought up too carefully for doubt to cling to her in any way. She is "thorough," I am thankful to say!'

'Nothing is of more importance than a wise up-bringing,' said Guy Perceval, vaulting into the saddle; 'save in the first instance a stainless parentage. But just as a wise up-bringing can modify the evils of a disastrous pedigree, so can a bad education vitiate the best blood in the world, destroy the finest natural inheritance.'

'Just so,' said Lady Machell. 'And when you come to both combined—on either side—the bad and the good—'

The rest was expressed in uplifted eyebrows for the one part, and a smile for the other.

'Yes,' said Guy Perceval; 'exactly.'

At this moment the music ceased, and those of the waltzers whose chaperons were in the reception rooms came back for the conventional care and countenance. Among them Derwent Smith brought Hilda Machell to restore her honestly to her mother the instant the waltz was over, according to the agreement between them.

'I hoped to have had the pleasure of this waltz with your sister,' said Guy Perceval to Derwent, after he had looked round in impossible places for Muriel.

Derwent flung up his head and tossed back his hair.

'She has been dancing with Mr. Machell,' he said a little stiffly.

'She was engaged to me,' returned Guy.

'So she told me,' said Derwent; 'and she told me too of her other engagements to you, but I have put a stop to them.'

Guy Perceval looked at him in frank amazement. It was not anger nor disappointment; not any feeling so much as simple astonishment at the presumption of a youth like Derwent Smith thus daring to cross his path and controvert his will.

'Do I hear you rightly?' he asked. 'You have put a stop to your sister's engagements with me?'

'Yea,' said Derwent. 'You asked too much from her. It would cause her to be talked about; and I cannot have my sister talked about.'

'I think that I am likely to be as careful of your sister as you yourself,' said Guy rather hotly.

'Excuse me, but that is not very likely,' returned Derwent with supreme disdain. 'An ordinary acquaintance cannot be compared with a brother; and I cannot admit such a line of argument for a moment.'

'You admit?' said Guy Perceval scornfully, italicising the pronoun.

'Yes; I. And as I am responsible to myself for my sister, I am the best judge of what she ought to do.'

Derwent said this quietly enough, but with as much pride as if he were a king and the owner of the Manor a churl.

'She is of an age to judge for herself,' said Guy Perceval in his high voice, which trembled with anger.

'She is under age and in my care,' returned Derwent; 'and I distinctly forbid this frequent dancing with you, Mr. Perceval. It is my duty to protect my sister—and a duty there is not the slightest chance that I shall neglect!'

He looked so warlike and handsome as he spoke, so like a young St. George prepared to fight any number of dragons, that even Lady Machell found herself wishing that he had been rich and possible; while Hilda raised her pretty eyes to his face—when her mother could not see her—and thought him the supreme perfection of humanity in a dress coat and white kid gloves to be found on the face of the earth. She was not of the kind to abase herself before strength like poor Jemima, nor to reverence and love like Muriel; but she was pleased that her fairy-tale young prince should look beautiful and speak royally; and just now Derwent was looking very beautiful and speaking very royally indeed.

'Where is my son, Mr. Smith?' asked Lady Machell, partly to make a diversion, partly because she wanted to see her son set free from Muriel.

It was annoying that Mr. Perceval should have shown this silly preference so openly; but that might be got over. There was evidently no desire on the part of the family at Owlett to make

their game with the Manor for the stakes; Arthur's infatuation was more serious, and might have worse consequences. But really between her son, and the man whom she wished to make her son-in-law, the situation was embarrassing; and even her tact a little failed to show her the best passage through the straits.

'Arthur?' repeated Derwent. 'He is with my sister.'

He meant nothing by his words. He had no more wish that Muriel should be taken by Arthur Machell than by Guy Perceval, and no more idea that any sentiment was between them than between her and young George Lucraft, say. But in the state of feeling in which both Lady Machell and Mr. Perceval were, it seemed as if he spoke with intentional familiarity—intentional and impertinent too.

'Then will you have the kindness to tell "Arthur" that I want to speak to him?' said Lady Machell with well-bred disdain.

'And I too!' cried Guy Perceval, meaning war. 'If he knew of Miss Smith's prior engagement to me, he must answer for his conduct.'

'Do you think it is a thing worth making yourself or your true friends uncomfortable about?' asked Lady Machell in a low voice. 'What did we agree just now, dear Mr. Perceval? And you may be sure that Arthur meant no slight to you.'

'You have nothing to say to anyone but me,' said Derwent proudly. 'I alone am responsible for my sister's actions.'

'I do not argue with boys,' said Guy contemptuously.

Lady Machell laid her hand on his arm.

'My friend!' she breathed in a fine maternal manner.

'Let the discussion drop!' then said Guy suddenly. 'It is not worth another thought, nor all the words that have been wasted on it. Miss Smith is free from any future attentions from me. I have no desire to force them or myself; haughtily, 'on an unwelcome recipient.'

'I expected as much,' said Derwent, with aggravating equanimity. 'So now we understand each other.'

'Yes, now we understand each other,' repeated Guy Perceval; 'and I understand only what I might have expected, given the conditions.'

'Just so,' said Derwent, without an idea as to what the conditions were to which Guy Perceval alluded—accepting the phrase as meaning for his own part, that he would not like his sister to be connected with him anyhow, Muriel being infinitely too good for him, the Manor and that fifteen thousand a year notwithstanding.

Much comforted by this view of things, and elated by feeling that he had come out victor in the fray—and that too before Hilda

—with a graceful but undeniably affected bow to Lady Machell, including Hilda, at whom he looked with something that was not affectation in his handsome, pale young face, Derwent sauntered slowly up the room, leaving Guy Perceval offended for life, and sure to be the enemy of the Owlett family from now to the day of his death, should opportunities for showing enmity arise. He was a good fellow enough in some things, but magnanimity was not his forte.

The band sounded the first notes of a mazurka, and Derwent who was a welcome partner everywhere, and as fond of dancing as a well-constituted youth of his age should be, took on his arm a pretty little girl from London who was staying with some people in the neighbourhood, and for the moment forgot his sister and Guy Perceval, Arthur Machell and my lady—but never quite forgot Hilda—in the pleasure of the rapid movement, and the lightness and precision with which his partner 'did her steps.' If only this pretty little girl had been Hilda! he thought, with a sudden sigh that made his partner stare, and wonder if it meant that he found her too pleasant for his peace? She had graduated in Bayswater, where she knew Miss Lucy.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DIE CAST.

WILFRID had not been sorry to come to an end of the series of odd movements which constituted Jemima's ideas of waltzing; and which, had Paumelle House been the Trouville salon, say, would have caused 'inextinguishable laughter' among the bystanders. As it was, the guests contented themselves with that kind of thing which goes by the name of sniggering among vulgar people, and is set down as an 'aside' in stage directions.

He had done his duty; shown himself publicly as the principal man of the evening, so far as the Brown de Paumelles were concerned; the one who had the right to appropriate the heiress, and to whom the significant wink of old Brown, as he carried her off to 'open the ball,' was a thing to accept as part of the programme, not to resent as an impertinent inference and a vulgar familiarity; and now he might have a little respite from this public participation in his affairs, which perhaps was the most difficult to bear of all the trials to his pride. The most important moment had to come; but that at least might be transacted alone,

This initial dance over, he took Jemima into the conservatory, prepared to complete the sacrifice which had been begun. For it was a sacrifice on both sides; one where it would be hard to say which of the two victims was the more to be pitied. Perhaps it was Jemima. If she had not the personal repugnance to overcome which he had, and none of his regrets for a love that could not be fulfilled, and of which even the consciousness must be destroyed, yet she would find their married life the harder to bear; and she was the weaker. If he suffered the more actively, he had the larger amount of strength wherewith to bear his sufferings; and his gain would be the greater all through in their bargain of flesh and blood for money and position. Yes, it was the frail little woman who was the more to be pitied; but a marriage in which there are degrees of pitifulness, gradations of suffering, and where both are victims alike, is not one on which the gods can be said to smile, or where the congratulations of men ring true.

All this was beside the question now. The hour had come; the thing had to be done; and the sooner it was got over the better.

The one trembling, submissive, and abjectly miserable, the other hardened to his task and stoically resolute to fulfil his fate, Jemima and Wilfrid entered the conservatory—she in pain for what was coming, he knowing that this was only the beginning of a pain which would endure for both to the end of time. There was a garden seat in the conservatory, set in the darker part where the light of the central rose-coloured lamp did not penetrate, and under the shade of the lemon and orange trees.

‘Let us sit there,’ said Wilfrid; ‘we shall be alone there.’

Jemima made no reply. She was trembling too much to speak, and she felt as if she could scarcely breathe. She trailed herself along rather than walked, for her knees bent under her and her feet were like lead; but his strong arm upheld her, and almost lifting her from the ground, he carried her to the chair, where she sank down, a nerveless, ungraceful mass of distress which humiliated him to witness.

‘It is brutal,’ he thought; ‘she does not love me, and I cannot pretend to love her. She will accept me because she dare not refuse; but it is the submission of fear and of weakness.’

They were silent. Her evident terror touched him, and his main thought was how he could best soothe her. He took her hand in his and held it, if not tenderly yet kindly clasped. After all she was a woman, and he was a man to whom all women were in a sense sacred—if foolish; some for their beauty and others for their weakness, some for their charm and others for their sorrow.

'You are trembling,' he then said after a few moments, lowering his voice and speaking with unaffected softness. 'Are you afraid of me?'

'I am cold,' said Jemima evasively.

'Not afraid of me?'

She hung her head.

'Do you think you will always be afraid of me?' he asked. 'If we were together for a long time?—for all our lives?'

Still she said nothing. All her conscious thought went into the one unspoken cry:—

'Oh, if ma was here now! Oh, how I want my ma!'

'I am going to ask you to live with me always,' Wilfrid went on to say; 'to ask you, too, not to be afraid of me any longer, but to love me instead, and to be my good little wife, whom I shall care for and try to make happy.'

He could not say 'whom I shall love.' Even at this moment he had his reservations, his points of truth and honour, which he must keep sacred.

Still she said nothing. He only felt her poor little flaccid hand lie yet more limp and helpless in his, and heard a shuddering kind of sigh, like a person in a half swoon, which almost determined him to give up the whole thing from simple pity for her. But he thought of his mother, of Machells, of his resolution, his need; and he comforted himself with the thought—wilfully blinding himself to the truth—that he would win her to confidence in time, and make her happy at the end; that the marriage was a great social honour for her if a pecuniary advantage to him; and that, for the future gain all round, the present pain might well be undergone.

'Will you not speak to me?' he said softly and kindly. 'Am I really so very formidable to you that you cannot accept me as your husband? Do you dialike me so much as that?'

'I do not dialike you, Captain Machell,' said poor Jemima faintly.

'No? What is it, then, that will not let you speak to me?—fear?'

'Just it,' she answered.

'But fear of what?' he asked, feeling that he had gained something by making her talk. 'What do you think I shall do to you?—scold you?—ill-treat you?—what?'

'Nothing of all that,' she said; 'but——'

'But what?'

'You are such a swell, and so big!' said Jemima at last, with the courage of despair.

'Don't you like tall men?' he asked lightly.

'To look at, yes,' she answered; 'but ma and me, we are not swells, if pa is; and I'm so little!'

'Is that all?' he laughed. 'If you have no other fault to find with me, I think we shall soon get over this difficulty, even though I cannot reduce my inches to the standard of what?—five feet nothing?'

'Five feet and a quarter,' said Jemima.

'All tall men like little women,' said Wilfrid, with generous catholicity of assertion. 'And as for being a swell, as you call it, what are you? Look at yourself to-night,' lightly touching the costly string of pearls about the meagre little throat which he could have spanned between his finger and thumb, with space to spare. 'Look at the house—at this ball—the whole thing. Why, you are ten times more a swell than I am!'

'But ma and me, we don't like it,' was her piteous reply. 'Pa does, and you were born to it; but we would rather be quiet, and to our two selves only.'

'You shall live as quietly as you like when you are my wife,' answered Wilfrid. 'I hope that I am too much of a man to force my wife's wishes in anything. And if you like to be quiet and simple and retired, you shall be. That is no objection. Have you none other?'

Again she was silent.

'Speak to me,' he said, in a soft voice but an imperious spirit. 'Do you not know that this is the most important moment of my life—of both our lives?' he added by an afterthought; 'and that we cannot be too candid one with another?'

'I have no objections to you,' then said Jemima timidly.

'And you do not dislike the idea of being my wife? You will love me and be happy with me?'

'That is another pair of shoes,' she answered simply.

Wilfrid turned away his head and ground his teeth.

'Shoes that do not fit?' he asked after a time, and with a forced laugh.

She did not take his sorry joke. Fun was not a pronounced constituent in Jemima Brown de Paumelle's nature.

'At all events, let us come to a distinct understanding,' said Wilfrid, a shade of impatience mingling with the abnormal softness and kindness of his manner. 'It must be settled now at once and for ever. Will you accept me as your husband or not? You know me' (which she did not), 'and I know you. Do you think you can be happy with me, and that you will not regret your marriage? In a word—will you marry me?'

She glanced up into his face, her own pale with fear. The frail fabric of her confidence which had been so slowly growing in her mind was scattered to the winds at the harsher sound of his voice, the sterner look in his eyes; and she was once more the trembling little victim bound over by fate to become his bride.

'If you like me to,' said the heiress of millions in a scarcely audible voice, and after a long pause.

'And you will not regret it?'

'I will try not,' she said, her tears beginning to fall.

Her fear, humility, and weakness generally, again touched the heart and moved the pity of the strong man. He once more took her hand in his, as kindly as before, and drew her a little nearer to him.

'And I will try that you shall not,' he said gently. 'Do you think I shall succeed—dear.'

'Oh!' said Jemima, penetrated, 'I'll not be afraid of you if you always speak like that.'

'You are a good little thing,' said Wilfrid with a heavy sigh. 'I should be a brute not to do my best by you. So now we are engaged to each other, and in a few months' time are to be man and wife.'

He drew her still nearer and lightly kissed her forehead.

'I am sure I never thought it would come to this,' said Jemima with simplicity.

That light touch on her forehead seemed to have tranquillized rather than disturbed her. Yet it was the first embrace that she had ever received from any man, save her father; and she had always declared to her mother that she should die, she was sure she should, if ever a man kissed her. Her mother used to tell her quietly that she did not think she would, but that she hoped she would not be put to the proof; and now when she was put to the proof the mother turned out the better prophet of the two.

'Did you not? I did,' he answered. 'I knew it all along.'

'But I can't understand whatever in the world you can see in a plain little body like me to care for,' she continued.

'Heart goes before looks,' said Wilfrid with more truth than tact; 'and what I like in you is your nature, not your face.'

'There is not much to like in either,' said Jemima, with a faint sigh of deprecation.

'I think differently; and I understand you,' he said.

She shook her head.

'Ma understands me; no one else does,' she answered sadly.

'Then, if I do not now, I shall in time,' was his reply.

'And perhaps when you come to know more of me you won't

care for me so much,' she said, her tears beginning again to fall; for that something which was not love so much as the woman's natural pleasure in being won, and self-glorification in the fact that she had been sought, had been awakened by Wilfrid's love-making, tepid as it was, and the prospect of losing the 'joy which made her fear' overcame her.

Besides, the interview tried her on every count; and she dreaded its continuance and ending alike. To go back to the room as Captain Machell's engaged wife, believing that she should carry that fact plainly printed on her face, was a terror to think of. All the same, to sit here with him almost in the dark, her hand in his, his voice so low, his manner so subdued, her belief in his overpowering love for her so sincere, her fear of him in spite of her temporary burst of confidence so genuine—she who had never heard a word of love from any man, and whose sole experience that way had been confined to a giggling eye-flirtation with a young lawyer's clerk who had lived near them at Clapton, to be now the engaged wife of a future Baronet, standing six feet two in his stocking-feet—it was dreadful! Coming on the turmoil of the ball, and the dread nourished for days of what it would bring forth, it was more than she could bear. Her one sole desire was to be able to creep to bed, with her mother to bring her a cup of tea and sit with her for half an hour till she had cried herself to sleep. She was breaking down rapidly under the prolonged excitement of the interview; so she cried at the hypothetical misery of Captain Machell ceasing to care for her as an excuse for her general hysterical depression.

'You must not cry, and you must not doubt me,' said Wilfrid gently. 'Things will never come right if you doubt me, and they will not go wrong if you trust me.'

Still her tears continued; not quite silently. She was one of those peak-faced, mousy little women who snore when they are asleep and use their handkerchiefs noisily when they are awake.

'What can I do for you?' cried Wilfrid a little despairingly. 'Tell me what is the matter with you; I cannot comfort you if I do not know what is wrong.'

'I want to go to ma,' then said Jemima in a broken voice. 'I do feel so lost without ma.'

'Poor little soul!' he half sighed compassionately. 'Well, compose yourself—dear. Dry your eyes and wait here a moment quietly, till you are quite yourself again, and then I will take you back to your mother. Will it comfort you to rest on my arm?'

He put his arm round her attenuated little figure, and held her to him; and Jemima, with child-like gesture, yielding to the pressure, turned her face inward to his shoulder and laid her hand

on his breast. It was an action that claimed his protection and trusted in it—that filled him with a pity, a tenderness of compassion for her, as sorrowful as if he had been looking at the face of one dead. But it ratified and confirmed all; and as Jemima felt herself homed in that strong grasp, and knew now that she had given herself irrevocably, as before, when he kissed her, a certain peace and calmness came to her, and she grew quiet and almost happy in her sense of his strength and her faith in his protection.

Wilfrid kept an unbroken silence. His left arm was round her, his right hand covered and held hers, which she had laid against his breast. He felt her heart flutter, and heard her breath come in gusts and broken sighs that gradually fell into peace and regularity as they sat there so still and silent; but his own pulses beat as slowly, and his breath came as calmly, as if he had been holding in his arms a sleeping child, and not the overwrought woman who had just promised to be his wife, and in that promise had pronounced the restoration of his family and fortune, and the ruin of his happiness and her own.

And soon his mind wandered away to a thousand distant and irrelevant things, till he found himself thinking of Sturiel, and how beautiful she looked to-night, and what life would have been to him with her to share it, before he fully realised the dishonesty of his thoughts. Then he roused himself from his reverie as a man rouses himself from the temptation to commit a dishonesty, and with a checked sigh he bent his head nearer to his future wife, and said quietly:—

‘Well, are you recovered now?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, taking a deep breath and lifting herself into an upright position. ‘I feel more myself now, thank you.’

‘Let us go into the room then,’ said Wilfrid, who had withdrawn his arm and let her hand fall.

‘Ma will be sure to see it,’ stammered Jemima.

‘She will not be sorry to see it,’ he answered. ‘Come.’

He rose, smiling as pleasantly as he could, but in point of fact smiling as sadly as tears.

Jemima glanced up into his face. She knew of love scenes only what she had read in novels; but these told her that a great deal of kissing generally went on at such moments, and she quaked at what might be coming. She had no cause. Wilfrid made no sign. He simply offered her his hand, then drew hers within his arm; and so, talking about the flowers as they passed the stands, they slowly went through the central avenue of the conservatory on their way to the reception room—with Mr. and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle and my lady to understand what had passed.

At the door, coming in as they were going out, he met his brother Arthur and Muriel Smith.

The world is full of sharp contrasts. They make more than half the sorrow of life, but they give it more than half its colour, and the dead level of absolute uniformity would be but a dull kind of existence to everyone. Still, they are sometimes painful enough to the poor souls in torment, if those in bliss do not give themselves much trouble to compassionate their less fortunate brethren. It was such a contrast now when the two brothers met face to face, each with the woman of his choice on his arm—the one the engaged wife; the other the unpromised lover—the one so confessedly unloved, and, though taken, unvalued; the other loved as men of wholesome hearts and strong affections do love the one dear woman who is theirs by the fitness of nature as well as by the kindly chance of circumstances—but the one bringing gold from basement to garret; and the other bringing only her own sweet self for gain, and—what else for loss?

Strong, compressed, but with deep lines of pain in his rough-hewn face—Jemima ablinking, ungraceful, white where she should be red, and red where she should be white—Wilfrid looked at the two happy lovers standing framed in the doorway with a sudden burst of jealous anger that startled even himself by its hidden violence. The suppression to which he had been subjected for the last quarter of an hour made the reaction all the stronger; and 'love's shadow, hate,' fell on the woman whom he secretly loved and had been forced to renounce, with even greater violence than on that day of rehearsal when he had met her with his brother in the road and guessed the secret which he saw so plainly now.

For who could fail to see it, legibly written as it was in the look and bearing of each? Arthur, radiant, resolute, with nothing of the doubt or fear of love in the handsome face which gazed into Muriel's with a passionate devotion which he did not care to conceal—his eyes, grave yet tender, bright with the joy, soft with the sweetness of a man's hope risen into confidence so soon to be made assurance; and Muriel, half unconscious yet of her love as love; knowing only that she was happy, divinely happy, happy as the angels in heaven are happy, and feeling as if earth and this glaring glittering Paumelle House to-night were not much unlike heaven—but showing more than she knew by the almost unearthly sweetness of her face, by the tender darkness of her downcast eyes, by the faint, shy, loving smile that hovered round her mouth half revealing, half concealing, the secret of her soul—by her bashful manner at this moment to Arthur, bashful yet fond, not wishing to leave him, yet ashamed to be alone with him in the dim twilight of the

conservatory—yes, it was a secret easy to read; and the intention on Arthur's side was as patent to Wilfrid as its object.

But what could he say? Arthur was his younger brother truly, but he was a man, and one not very patient of interference. And how could he be even sarcastic to him for taking Muriel where he had just taken Jemima? The ball-room was oppressive and the conservatory cool and refreshing; the answer was too easy, if even he should allow himself to fling at his brother that much desired sneer hovering on his lips. And as just then other couples came trooping through the doorway, and the solitude which he had found so useful was invaded, his sarcasm would have fallen still flatter; and—he had no need to be afraid. He hoped that there would be no confession this evening; unless indeed it had already taken place; and if he could tide his brother over the immediate danger of the next few weeks, Wilfrid trusted to be able to do something for him—discounting some of the Brown de Paumelle millions, which should include professional advancement and personal banishment from England altogether. But for all this he could not resist saying something disagreeable. He could not bear to know that Arthur was profiting by his sacrifice, and not make them suffer somewhat; so he turned to Muriel and said in his coldest and most unpleasant manner:—

'You are fond of the dark, I see, Miss Smith. I should have thought the light more congenial to you. Is this good for you?'

'I do not call this dark,' Muriel answered coldly. 'It is cool after the heat of the ballroom.'

'So I imagine you two have found it,' said Arthur with a laugh.

'La!' thought Jemima; 'how can Captain Machell go on so at them when he brought me here his own self!'

'What lovely flowers you have here, Miss de Paumelle,' said Muriel to make a diversion; 'and how perfect that golden fern is!'

'Yes; pa spends a deal of money on all these things,' said Jemima with a little sigh. 'I can't remember the name of half of them, but they're pretty to look at, and some are beautiful to smell.'

'It is difficult to learn all those long Latin names,' said Muriel kindly; 'and greenhouse flowers seldom have any other. What a beautiful bouquet you had when we came in!' glancing at her hand and not seeing it now.

'Yes, it was handsome,' said Jemima. 'But it was bothering to hold when I was dancing. I was thrown against I go back.'

'I saw it—it was very nice,' said Muriel. 'He was one of the things I saw what it is desired they

should not; who never ferret out secrets and are not often confided in, not because they are without sympathy or cannot keep confidence, but because there is something in them naturally antagonistic to secrecy and not friendly to concealment. And now, having been kept in the dark concerning the proposed arrangements between the two families, and as Wilfrid, not being a very expansive lover, had not betrayed by his manner what was going on, he had not had the faintest idea of how things stood. Hence he stumbled on the trail without knowing, and rather wondered at the effect produced by what to him was a totally insignificant speech. For at the word 'bridal' Jemima blushed and hung her head, and by a natural instinct clung to Wilfrid's arm and seemed to ask him to speak for her. Drooping, conscious, oppressed, she suddenly collapsed, and both Muriel and Arthur felt embarrassed by her evident distress, and both looked to Wilfrid as if for explanation.

It was one of those moments wherein all the pain of life seems to be concentrated, when the soul goes down into the torture chamber and the heart is given up to agony. But Wilfrid was brave and could bear pain nobly.

'It was a true emblem,' he said in a steady voice and with a stately manner, looking full into his brother's face and then into Muriel's. 'Miss de Paumelle has done me the honour to promise to be my wife. Let me present to you—to Jemima—your future brother-in-law—to Muriel—and to you, Miss Smith, the future Mrs. Machell.'

'I am so glad!' said Muriel in her soft voice and with her sweet manner of frank sympathy, shaking hands with Jemima. Arthur, after one rapid look of astonishment, shook hands too, and said heartily:—

'I congratulate you both. I know what a good fellow you have chosen, Miss de Paumelle, and I feel sure that he has been as fortunate. But it has taken me by surprise,' he added in an undertone to Wilfrid; 'why did you not tell me?'

'I did not consider myself bound to ask your consent or to give you my confidence,' said Wilfrid with a haughty air and savage glance at his handsome unvictimized brother, standing there with the woman of his love on his arm; that woman for whose love, had it been possible, he would have given his own life. Then speaking rapidly he added in Latin: 'Do not play the fool, O my brother. Remember, marriage is more than beauty or a boy's fancy.'

'So you evidently think,' thought Arthur; but he did not say out his thought; he contented himself with replying: 'Thanks,' in an off-hand manner, and leaving the inference doubtful.

After this that painful silence of constraint which expresses so much more than words fell on the little group. Jemima crept near to Wilfrid, and Wilfrid looked down on her with exaggerated courtesy—a courtesy which he did his best to force into the likeness of tenderness. Muriel played with the fronds of a golden fern, her hand loosed from Arthur's arm; and Arthur pulled at his moustache according to the way of men when they are at a loss for words.

Then Wilfrid, turning to Jemima with that air of supreme regard for one person which is meant to pique another, said in a protecting yet deferential kind of way:—

'Shall we go into the drawing-room? Would you wish it?'

And on Jemima murmuring 'Yes,' he gave a grim smile to Muriel, and a warning look to Arthur, and with the heiress still clinging to his arm passed away from the two lovers, the current of whose thoughts he had turned, the confession of whose love he had arrested, and whose moment of opportunity he had destroyed.

For following immediately on his departure was Derwent's advent. He had been looking for his sister since the last mazurka, to tell her of the result of his interview with Guy Perceval, and that she was now free from his importunity for ever. And having found her he remained with her; till Arthur, growing impatient, thought that he might as well go back into the ballroom and get some of his social duties off his hands, as remain there to be tantalized and baffled. Securing Muriel for the dance next to this, he left her with Derwent while he went off to utilize the spoilt time; and in all innocence cut in, before a lumbering squire had got half-way across the room, and took possession of the youngest Miss Constantine, who did not care the traditional two straws for him, but who had eyes for the lumbering young squire, and aspirations.

CHAPTER XV.

AMONG THE FLOWERS.

MARTIAL and lordly, bearing himself as if the woman on his arm had been the woman of his loving choice and not of his enforced needs, Wilfrid walked through the crowded glittering rooms with his engaged wife clinging to him, till he came to the family group still standing together; his mother with her queenly presence and noble beauty, and his future father-in-law whom no art of man

could ever make other than the original soap-boiler of Fore Street; his sister, who might have been a young princess for birth and breeding, and Mrs. de Paumelle, who was to be his second mother, like nothing so much as the depressed and humble widow selling Berlin wools and hair-pins to the ladies of the village where her husband had been the Independent minister, and universally respected, if not followed.

The first two were talking together; what a contrast, and what a desecration! thought Jemima's affianced husband. Mrs. de Paumelle was looking wistfully up the room, watching for her daughter; and Hilda was listening to some advice from Guy Percival on the importance of cold bathing and light clothing, and the necessity of hanging all her skirts by straps from her shoulders, instead of by bands round her waist.

Lady Machell, on the principle of catching a heart at the rebound when sprung by vanity as well as love, had kept Guy near her, and had soothed him into even a happier frame of mind than he would have known with Muriel. For his perception of her fitness to be his wife was perhaps greater than his desire to be her husband; and certainly the annoyance that he had had about those dances had wounded his self-love more than his affections.

At a glance the three principals knew what had happened. Lady Machell read her son's face, and the Brown de Paumelles their daughter's. The Rubicon had been passed at last, the die cast, the game played out, and the stakes won. Money and the restoration of the old family to its fitting place in the county to the one; to the other admission into the sacred circle of the local magnates as one of themselves—an integral member, no longer a mere outsider barely tolerated for his wealth—and his daughter the mother of the future owners of Machells.

It was a proud and happy moment to at least two in the group; but to Mrs. Brown de Paumelle, with tears in her poor weak eyes as she whispered: 'God bless you, my dear;' to Jemima, with tears in her eyes too, as she clung to her mother and felt all her old repugnance to her present rampant riches and future titular splendour, all her old dread of her lordly lover recur, backed by the new shame of remembering that she had lain on his breast and been kissed by him—if only on the forehead, yet kissed; and to Wilfrid himself, knowing his own heart as he did, there was not much feeling of pride nor cause for congratulation.

What was wanting on the one side, however, was made up by excess on the other, and in this way the balance equalized itself. Lady Machell's handsome face became superb with the light of the proud content that beamed over it. She made no public demon-

stration, but her fine eyes flashed through a softening haze as she looked at her son, and her magnificent person was like that of a queen when she wishes to show a grace graciously, as she bent down to speak to Jemima, and whispered softly:—

‘My second little daughter! So you have really consented to make one of us!’

‘Thank you, Lady Machell,’ said Jemima, full of tears and trepidation, but blushing a little pleasantly too. ‘It seems the Captain would have me.’

‘Which shows his good taste, my dear,’ said Lady Machell heroically.

‘So I think,’ echoed Mrs. Brown de Paumelle, with more self-assertion than she would have dared to show on any other subject, as she turned a fond look on her daughter, whose hand she took secretly and pressed with a nervous little grasp that nearly did for poor little Jemmy, as she expressed herself afterwards.

Wilfrid, knowing what was expected of him, and prepared to undergo even the ridicule of the affair, if that too was in the bond, as he had already endured its pain, looking at his future father-in-law, said, in his slow, heavy way:—

‘Mr. de Paumelle, you remember our conversation yesterday? I am happy to tell you that your daughter has said Yes, and that our families are to be united.’

‘And I congratulate you on having the best little wife in England, let who will bring a better,’ said Mr. Brown with agitation. ‘And she’ll have a fine man for her husband, and one as’ll do honour to his name and education. And I’ll come down, as I said I would, Captain. I’m a man of my word, I am, and no one could ever say of old Brown of Fore Street that he sold worse than he sampled, and I’ll not begin the crooked game now, you may take your blessed oath of that!’

On which he shook hands with Wilfrid, chuckling noisily; hugged his pale little daughter, and slapped his wife on her back; nudged Lady Machell, as the one who had known all about it from the beginning, they having laid the lines and pulled the ropes between them; chucked Hilda under the chin, and called her ‘pretty dear;’ mopped his face and cleared his throat lustily, wiping his eyes between whiles; what there was of honest and human in his soul stirred to its depths, while the vulgar self-glorification of the successful parvenu flowed like oil over the surface of the whole man.

Now he had touched the summit of his worldly ambition. Let but the bells ring out next year for the birth of his grandson, the future heir of Machells—Sir Gilbert de Paumelle Machell—and he would not have a wish ungratified.

'What does it all mean?' asked Guy Percival of Hilda, looking slightly offended by these mysterious demonstrations, of which he did not understand the import.

He liked to be at the back of matters, and resented exclusion from social council chambers.

'I do not know,' said Hilda. 'It was all rather funny, I think.'

'Silly, you mean,' returned Guy shrilly, and Lady Machell heard him.

'My son has just taken us all by surprise,' she said, drawing nearer to Hilda, and speaking in an undertone to Guy.

'Why? What has he done?' he asked.

'Proposed to Miss de Paumelle,' answered my lady, smiling sweetly at the owner of the Manor.

Would he dialike the alliance, or accept it benignly? His mood concerning it was of interest to her.

'What a choice!' cried Guy, in a voice not quite so subdued as my lady's. 'I would not marry her for the crown of England!'

'No? She is, however, one of the sweetest natures you can imagine. I have never seen a more charming person when once you get through her shy and diffident manner,' my lady answered graciously. 'I assure you Wilfrid in choosing her has consulted his happiness as well as his affection. She will make him a perfect little wife.'

'Amiability and affection are good enough in their way,' returned Guy, 'and I am the last to deny their value; but they do not make up for the want of hæmatin in the blood and of lime in the bones. That young lady is one of a kind whom no man who knew his duty should marry.'

'We will feed her on oatmeal,' said Lady Machell pleasantly; and the bait took.

For the next ten minutes Guy Percival perorated; and by the end of that time he had talked himself into the belief that a course of phosphated and highly nitrogenous food might not only save the future Machells, but, even with this disastrous strain of Miss de Paumelle to intervene, might improve the race indefinitely.

Before an hour was over the room knew the secret of the evening. Mr. Brown de Paumelle whispered it in confidence to each of the superior guests, just as he had whispered the secret of what the ball had cost, and where he had got the supper and the decorations, the band and the appliances. Some laughed, and said that Captain Machell was a lucky fellow and my lady the cleverest woman out, and they supposed that old de Paumelle had made it worth their while, and would come down with something handsome. Some

looked virtuous and high-minded, and pretended to see in it a shameful bargain for so much money; in which they were not far wrong in fact, but as they guessed more than they knew, and their disapprobation was born of the Christian's favourite virtue of detraction rather than of high-mindedness, the close hitting of their chance shot did not score to the honour of their clear-sightedness. Some pitied Miss de Paumelle—poor, good, unpretending, little thing, as they called her—and said what a life she would have with that awful-tempered man, and that she was a great deal too good for him—between Captain Wilfrid and his mother the poor little thing would be crushed! And others, again, sneered at her and hers, and pitied Wilfrid, who however ought to have known better.

It made the staple of conversation for the next hour, and ran through the room like fire over dry grass; but the evening went on as if no such important event had happened, and Wilfrid gave no sign that he saw the knowing looks which were sent his way when he stood up in the next quadrille with his future wife, and bore his humiliation as if he liked it.

The music and dancing continued, and the young enjoyed themselves after their kind. Lovers hid together in unfrequented places, the girls where their faces were most in shadow, and the men where what they said had least chance of being overheard; incipient flirtations advanced a stage or were blotted out altogether; Hilda fell to the share of those elder sons who would make good matches; and Muriel danced with Arthur Machell when not with Derwent, and with Derwent when not with Arthur. As Derwent could not get Hilda, he did his fraternal duty to perfection, and prevented all aspirants for his sister's regard indifferently with Guy. Arthur did not count. He was Hilda's brother and a link. Besides, he was an old friend, and Muriel was safe in his hands. So Arthur thought; and Muriel was not disposed to question that view of things for her own part.

But if Derwent could not appropriate for the evening, as he would have liked to have done, the little queen of his poetic dreams and the object of his impossible hopes, he thought that he might at least be allowed to dance with her once more. He had been often near her, looking for chances; and he had more than once exchanged a few words with her in the ballroom, or a glance while she was standing by her mother, if Lady Machell, intent on soothing Guy, had been careful to ignore his presence—always with unexceptionable breeding—and Guy himself had only acknowledged it by a look of disdain which fell on Derwent as the traditional dew falls on the proverbial granite.

Seeing her now standing silently by her mother, with a wistful

glance turned towards the ballroom, and neither occupied nor amused, even Guy Perceval having deserted her for another conference with his able editor, Derwent resolved to try his fortune boldly. He was not likely to lose his chances in life for want of trying, nor to fail for lack of confidence in his power to win. Why indeed, should he be backward at this time or any other? Personally, and by-family honour, he was the equal of any. Among the best who was better than he? Even looking at Lady Machell, he said to himself, no one.

With his rather affected courtesy and supreme nineteenth century chivalry, he came up to where Lady Machell and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle were sharing the duties and dividing the responsibilities of the evening, and demanded the honour of Miss Machell's hand for the gallop just then beginning.

A number of people were standing about, who heard and knew that he had come up to ask Miss Machell to dance. Lady Machell was provoked; yet she did not like to offer a public affront to one who, after all, was substantially inoffensive and their quasi-intimate, if ineligible and a detrimental so far as Hilda was concerned. And it would have been a public affront to deny him her daughter in one breath and give her to some one else in another. Nor did she wish to punish the child by not letting her dance as much as she would. Also, she was too content at the moment to be severe, too satisfied to be watchful. She had brought the most important ship of the family fortunes into port, and she could afford a little latitude to the other. And—Guy Perceval was not in the room, and probably would not return before the gallop was at an end. And, even if he should—really, Lady Machell felt it was impossible to espouse his quarrel with the Smiths to such an extent as to cut them. Muriel had acted very well in the affair; so had Derwent; and no one was to blame but Guy himself for his folly. By-the-by, where was Arthur?

Hilda looked at her mother dutifully before she accepted; and Lady Machell, frowning with her consent for a moment by the question: 'Are you tired, Hilda?' said not too graciously, but not so disagreeably as might have been expected, or was likely to be noticed: 'If you are not tired, my dear, yes, you can dance with Mr. Smith; but do not fatigue yourself. You are sure you are not engaged?'

'Trust her to me, Lady Machell,' answered Derwent gallantly; 'I will take every care of her.'

And Hilda, looking at her card as if there might be a doubt about it, answered on her side:—

'No, mother, I am not engaged, and I will not tire myself.'

On which Derwent bore her off, and once more tasted the dangerous joy of holding in his arms the girl whom it was folly to love, yet whom he had set before him as his highest hope to win.

During this gallop, in which they made long and frequent pauses, Derwent said rather suddenly:—

‘When you are older and I am richer I intend to ask you a question—yes or no? Do you think your answer will be yes?’

‘That depends on what it is,’ she answered.

‘You cannot guess?’ was his reply, made tremulously.

‘No! tell me now,’ she said, with a pretty little coaxing way, a reminiscence of the nursery.

He took a bud of orange blossom from his waistcoat pocket. He had gathered it in the conservatory as an emblem.

‘Look,’ he said, slipping it into her small, white-gloved hand.

‘If you keep this for three years I shall know then that it will be yes. In three years’ time you will be of age and your own mistress, will you not?’

‘In three years and a half I shall be of age,’ answered Hilda.

‘I do not know about being my own mistress,’ she added discreetly; ‘mother will always be mistress.’

‘Would you be faithful to a lover whom your people—even your mother—did not like?’ asked Derwent abruptly.

‘That depends too,’ she answered in the same sweet childish way as before.

‘If you loved him?’

‘If I loved him; yes, I suppose I should,’ she said prettily.

‘And could you love a man who loved you and had no title, no wealth, and who had to conquer fortune for himself?’

All this was said while they were walking arm-in-arm round the room, running the risk of being seen through by sharp-eyed and experienced watchers, but thinking themselves as far from discovery as the ostrich does when it hides its head in the sand and leaves out its fluff and feathers.

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Hilda. ‘I do not think that I should care for money or title, or anything like that.’

At this moment, perhaps not; but as time went on and she knew the world better, and understood more clearly the relations between society and her own nature, she would.

‘Could you live simply for the sake of love?’ he asked.

‘Yes, of course I could,’ she answered. ‘I could do anything for the sake of love. We live simply now; but I love the father and mother, and we are very happy.’

'You will keep that orange blossom,' said Derwent, his hopes soaring high.

'Three years and a half? Yes.'

'And if you do not wish me to ask that question, you will return it?'

'Yes,' she said; 'but,' looking up with her eyes wide open, and speaking with the sweetest and most child-like simplicity, 'I shall keep it.'

'You are an angel!' murmured Derwent, strongly moved.

Still looking into his face, she asked with pretty surprise:—

'Why? Because I am going to keep a dear little flower, and answer a question three years hence?'

'I am to blame. I am dishonourable,' said Derwent to himself. 'She is too innocent, too child-like to understand me. She is an angel of purity and I must not disturb her. I must leave her in her innocence and trust and wait.'

What Hilda thought she did not put into plain words. It would have been difficult. The thoughts of seventeen, even with six months added, are never very clear; and those of the child-girl, excited, fluttered, and a little frightened at what she was doing, were singularly confused. She was proud of her first essay into the independent life of womanhood, while always remembering that she was a Machell and her mother's daughter, and neither now nor ever the real owner of herself. She was as much in love with Derwent as such a girl naturally would be with such a youth, but half ignorant that this was love, and half desirous, half afraid, to learn the truth. She had a distinct consciousness that what she was doing and saying now would have excited the wrath of even her father—of even her brothers: what her mother would have said and felt she did not care to realize; yet she did not feel that there was any real harm in it all. She believed that this was making love, but she was not quite sure, not being well versed in the science even theoretically, but quite willing to accept it, if indeed it were love-making—though so strictly brought up, nature breaking out according to the proverb, and the discipline of the pitchfork of no avail when touched by the living force of youth and love; and all these thoughts and feelings made up a confused whole whence not much clearness could be extracted anyhow.

But the moment was pleasant; and as youth cherishes its moments as if they were eternities, the two young things played at rehearsing the great drama like children as they were, accepting unopened buds as the mature accept ripe fruits, and building their castles in the clouds with as much satisfaction as if they were palaces of stone and marble. It was the dawn of promise with

them, not the day of fulfilment; and they were content with their shadows for substances and their hopes for realities.

While this was going on, Arthur and Muriel, in the garden among the flowers and in the moonlight, forgot the ball and its social exigencies in each other and their love. They had passed through the conservatory to the terrace before the banqueting-room, but they seemed to be too near the house there, with its noise and glare and movement; and almost unconsciously they found themselves in the rose-garden, just then in its perfection of early bloom. They were both silent; but it was that silence of lovers which is more eloquent than words—that silence which does not separate so much as bring hearts nearer together. It was as if each knew of what the other was thinking—as if each felt with and as the other.

Arthur stopped and broke off a rose. It was not an unopened bud like Derwent's orange blossom, but one in the moment of perfection—a blush rose just between bud and flower—neither confined in its calyx nor fully blown. It was an unconscious bit of symbolism in both cases. He held the rose for a moment to his face, then said in a low voice, fuller of meaning in tone than word:—

'I want you to pick one for me. Will you?'

'If you wish it,' she answered, her voice veiled and uncertain.

'Do you know what I shall think if you do?' he asked.

She tried to laugh, but her laugh died away in the attempt.

'That I have given you a rose,' she said, with the boldest effort at subterfuge which perhaps she had ever made in the whole of her transparent life.

He covered with his the hand resting on his arm.

'And what more?' he asked.

She was silent, bending her head over the flower which she had plucked, and which was in her disengaged hand.

'Yourself, Muriel? your love? will you give me that as well as the rose?'

Still she did not speak. She could not. Joy has its trouble as well as sorrow, love its pain as well as grief. Only the nightingales sang in the far-off woods and the trees hard by; the moonlight shone pure and tender on the earth; from the house came streams of music softened by the distance; and the two standing there among the flowers seemed as if miles and months away from all human life save their own.

'Speak to me,' he pleaded, and of all the music floating about his voice was the most melodious to Muriel, of all the beauty in earth and sky her face the loveliest to him. 'Muriel! tell me that

you love me! My darling! do you not know how much I love you! how I have waited for this moment and tried to learn from you if I might speak or no? My darling, have I any hope? or have I deceived myself? Tell me, Muriel; tell me now at once. You do not know how terrible this suspense is to a man.'

His voice had broken a little towards the end. He did not think that he had deceived himself, but true love is always timid, and her silence troubled him.

'I will give you the rose,' said Muriel presently, in a low voice.

'And your love with it?'

Her head bent lower. Then she lifted it up.

'Yes,' she said, and laid her hand on his arm.

He caught her to his heart.

'Now I am strong enough for the fight!' he cried. 'Now nothing can conquer me or shall separate us. Give me the rose, Muriel. My Muriel, my own, my love, my wife! It will be my sacred treasure now and for ever.'

She put it into his hand, and he kissed it boyishly; then took her face tenderly between both his hands and kissed her, and Muriel felt as if she had come for the first time to the knowledge of the true meaning of life. And perhaps she had.

The ball was at an end now for them, and its circumstances interested them no more than the actions of so many marionettes. The world and all that it contained was comprised in the love confessed between them. They forgot the dances to which they might or might not be pledged—forgot, she on her side Derwent and Guy Perceval, Lady Machell's cold looks and Wilfrid's dark ones, her mother at home, and the father whose coming she so earnestly desired; he, on his, the difficulties that were to be overcome and the opposition that he should have to encounter; they knew only the moonlight and the song of the nightingale, the flower scents that swept through the air, and the eyes that looked into each other's; the beating of his heart against her hand; the troubled breath and sweet emotion—so strange, so sweet—that checked her words and lowered her voice till he was forced to bend his head so near her face that his lips touched her full, soft hair, and he felt her breath on his forehead as it went and came in happy sighs. Even when the music ceased for the grand event of the evening, the supper, they were at first conscious only of a deeper feeling of content, and a more entire isolation as they still stood face to face in the rose-garden—their enchanted world.

But love itself has to come back to real life, and ecstasy must give way to conventionality and routine. The cessation of the

music, at first so restful, finally awoke them to the fact that they must go in if they would not be remarked; and after more vows made and passionate declarations repeated—those declarations which never tire either in the saying or the hearing—they turned away to the house, and, passing through the conservatory, left Elysium for the dull prosaic world of common life and indifferent acquaintances.

The supper was, as has been said, the grand event of the evening. Mr. Brown de Paumelle took in The Countess, and The Earl took in Mrs. Brown de Paumelle; Lady Machell was on Mr. Brown de Paumelle's other hand, and Hilda was separated from her mother by Guy Perceval. Wilfrid and Jemima had the minor places of honour in the middle of the table, and Lady Machell had told off a certain Lady Emmeline Herbert to Arthur as their *vis-à-vis*. But, for her first drop of bitterness in the cup of her success, Arthur proved himself a defaulter, and only when all were seated arrived with Muriel on his arm, and something in the face of each which went like subtle poison to the roots of his mother's heart. This was no time, however, for enquiry or dismay. If sufficient to the hour is its evil, so is its joy; and Lady Machell was eminently a woman of orderly arrangements and things in their right places and at fitting times. This sorrow must wait; for the present her life was full.

The supper ran through its appointed course, and it is to be hoped that those who ate it liked it; for, as the proud host said with swelling satisfaction, it had cost a tidy sum from first to last, and no expense had been spared to make it perfect of its kind.

But the moment of moments came, when, flushed with triumph and a little also with wine, more rubicund and elate than ever, more thoroughly old Brown the successful soap-boiler of Fore Street of his early days, and less than ever the pretence of the county gentleman of his later ones, the host got on his legs, as he phrased it, and began his speech—the speech which was to crown the glad achievement of the evening. It was a speech made in bad English and worse taste; but the Machells bore it without wincing. He thanked his noble guests for the honour they had done him in coming to his humble abode, and he hoped that he should often welcome them there again; and a friendly welcome was worth more than a fine spread, said Mr. Brown de Paumelle, with affected depreciation of his velvety claret and dry champagne. He assured them of his pleasure in seeing around him so many noble names, and, not forgetting the ladies, so many pretty faces. But they need not blush. He was always fond of the ladies, but his own good lady was opposite, and he must mind his p's and q's, else somebody would not like it. Then he said that one of the ladies there, his own dear

daughter, and as good as she was pretty (here Mrs. Brown de Paulmelle wiped her meek eyes, and Jemima hung her head over her plate and crumbled her bread diligently) had just consented to take herself a lord and master for life, and he was proud to be able to say that in a few months he would be connected with one of the finest families in the county. He looked full at Wilfrid when he spoke, and winked jocularly at my lady. He then called on the company to drink, 'Health and long life to the young couple,' no daylight and no heel-taps.

All through he had said 'they was,' and 'you was;' once he thundered out at the top of his voice, 'which I were;' and he persistently dropped his h's where they were vital, and tacked them on where they were superfluous.

The well-bred gentlefolks crowding his table and accepting his hospitality looked at each other sily and laughed; some sensitive women coloured, and wished that he would sit down and not make such a dreadful exhibition of himself. Arthur wondered how Sir Gilbert and his mother could stand it, and hoped below his breath to Muriel that Wilfrid liked it: and Guy Perceval took Lady Machell down from her pedestal, and saw her as a commonplace person after all, to countenance such an alliance as this; but Sir Gilbert and my lady and Wilfrid himself sat with the stoical dignity of North American Indians at the stake, and not so much as the flutter of an eyelid betrayed what they suffered.

When the speech was finished Sir Gilbert got up, and in a few cold and quiet words made himself the spokesman of the thanks and congratulations which he was sure all the rest offered heartily; and with the health of the host and hostess the thing came to an end, and the tables broke up. The guests buzzed noisily to each other their comments on the whole affair, and the frightful vulgarity of making after-supper speeches at all; the band came back to their places from their supper; and the dancing began again as if it had never ceased. But the life of the evening had gone. The tide of departure set in, and one by one all the great people slipped away, with the consciousness of having performed a Christian act of neighbourly kindness which they were free to rejoice was at an end.

Lady Machell was one of the first to go. She pleaded Hilda's youth and her own headache when the terrified invertebrate hostess almost clung to her gown in her prayer that she should remain, and carried off her party, some out of weariness, others out of danger.

But not even her generalship sufficed for perfect safety; for Derwent managed to take Hilda to the carriage, pressing her hand with perilous tenderness as he wished her good night and whis-

period: 'Remember!' and Arthur put the crowning-stroke to his misdeeds by taking Muriel to hers—the two carriages standing in the rank before the door close together, and the Smiths' foremost—keeping his mother waiting while he bent forward to kiss her hand, saying: 'My darling! tell me you love me again!' more like a schoolboy than a man of the world, and to the great danger of being overheard.

Then they all drove to their respective homes, all absolutely silent. The Machells were divided between weariness and satisfaction; the Smiths were full of lovely dreams and brilliant hopes. Brother and sister sat hand in hand, happy in their silence till they reached home, when both sighed, looked at each other, and smiled. It was too new with each to speak to-night, but both meant to tell the other to-morrow, the one that Hilda understood him, the other that Arthur loved her. Then they passed into the half-darkened hall, the evening at an end.

There their mother met them, coming out of the drawing-room to the side. Her face was pale, her eyes dark and glistening still with tears, but a wonderful light lay in them—the light of a woman's eyes who has seen the man whom she loves; and her lips were slightly swollen, reddened, parted, and smiling. She took a hand of each, and looked into their young bright faces, her own passionately moved between joy and something that was not joy—moved as they had never seen it before.

'My dears,' she said, in a clear ringing voice, the servants standing about, 'your father has come home.'

CHAPTER XVI.

AT LAST!

How once more! How strange it all was to the weary long-time exile, and how strange he was to them—to the children above all! Was this the dear, gallant father to whose coming they had looked as the return of a king to his own? whose memory they had cherished as the one sacred poem of their lives—the one undimmed and lovely picture of their childhood? They remembered him as he was then, and as he had been when those numerous photographs, all in different moods and attitudes, had been taken—as he was when he had sat for that miniature which hung in the mother's room, enclosed in a Florentine mosaic frame, always locked, and

which, as children, they had been allowed to see as their reward when they had studied diligently and been specially good.

He had had long dark hair then, falling in a picturesque way about his small head; he had had the daintiest moustache on his upper lip, and the curliest, softest fringe of whisker like masculine ringlets down his cheeks; now his hair was a dull, cold iron-grey, and if not cropped close to his head, yet short and straight, and his face was clean shaven. But that face itself, how changed! The portraits and their own remembrance gave the skin fair and delicate as a woman's, the features beautiful and refined, if always to the readers of faces weak and unsatisfactory; now the sallow, sodden flesh hung in bags under the eyes and about the jaw, and was deeply wrinkled everywhere; the eyelids were swollen, the eyes sunk and bloodshot; the mouth, which used to smile so readily, and of which the pleasure-loving lips were once so flexible and full of fun, full too of kisses for the little ones, and of that kind of general benevolence for all the world which springs from supreme content and personal happiness, were now drawn, compressed, and marked with painful lines of suffering and reticence; the manner, so frank and joyous, with the same undisguised vanity in it that ran through Derwent's, had become nervous, timid, and, as it were, unnaturally prompt to answer and keen to attend. This gallant father of theirs, this exiled king came back to his own after such long years of absence, had the air of having been under strict rule, as if it had been his duty to obey sharply, and to efface himself and his own individuality under the heavy weight of general discipline. With this strange reminiscence of past pain was also a certain manner of relief as of one having escaped from thralldom, which was not happiness as yet, and still less ease.

Also he seemed unaccustomed to things which to the children, as to all ordinary English gentlefolk, were as second nature; and he looked neither at them nor at the servants straight in the face. He looked at his wife, but only at her; and at her more as if seeking counsel and even protection—as if gathering courage and taking heart from her steadfast, calm, and resolute face—than for the mere love of looking at her. There was a distressing manner of almost abject humility about him; and it seemed as if the sweet service of love and respect which it was his right to receive from the children, and theirs to render, pained rather than delighted him; and beyond all this, he showed the most astounding ignorance of the events which had taken place in the world during the last fifteen years or so. He knew absolutely nothing. Had he been one of the Seven Sleepers awakened, or Rip Van Winkle with his fifty years brought

down to fifteen, he could not have been more cut off from the current life of history as it had flowed during that time.

When Derwent at breakfast the next day—the day after the night of his arrival—the day after the night of the ball with its fragrant memories for both the children—chanced to speak of something that had happened ‘about the time when Metz surrendered,’ and, turning to his father, said: ‘I forget the exact date; do you remember, father?’—he answered nervously: ‘No; I do not remember. What about the surrender of Metz?’ and looked at his wife as if for help.

‘What about the surrender of Metz?’ repeated Derwent. ‘Do you mean to say that you have not followed the history of the downfall of the French empire?—that you know nothing of the greatest event of modern times?’

His manner expressed his surprise; it was something indeed more than surprise.

‘You see I have been away for so long,’ said the father in a tone of apology, gathering his breakfast-things together and piling them on his plate as if to take them away. ‘One loses the lay of things easily.’

‘Were you not able to have English newspapers sent to you?’ asked Derwent. ‘Mother!’ reproachfully; ‘why did you not send out papers to my father? You always knew where to find him.’

‘They would have been of very little use, else I should,’ answered Mrs. Smith calmly.

‘No,’ echoed her husband, as if glad to catch at the word; ‘of very little use where I was; of none indeed, I may say.’

‘But where on earth can you have been all this time?’ asked Derwent. ‘We have often asked my mother, but she would never tell us.’

‘Why make you anxious, Derwent?’ said Mrs. Smith. ‘When your father was in danger was it not better that I alone should bear the anxiety, instead of saddening you and your sister at your ages?’

‘If you did not like to tell us at the time, I do not see why you should not have done so after, when he was safe again,’ said Derwent. ‘It seems so strange that we did not know where you were,’ he continued, turning again to his father—‘that we were told nothing about you; and stranger still that you should have come in this unexpected manner, as if you had dropped from the clouds. If you had known that my father was coming home like this, mother, I think you might have told my sister and me. It is scarcely fair on us—on me; for at least we are his children.’

He spoke sorely. He had long secretly resented his mother's unbroken reticence concerning this dear father of theirs, thinking both himself and Muriel badly used to be kept in such dense ignorance; but himself especially, as the son and heir and representative of masculine supremacy generally. There was something in it all that troubled him; and the manner and personality of his father, now that he had come home, troubled him still more.

'I have been a long way off,' said the father evasively. 'There was no use in telling you all my stations.'

'What my mother knew, I had the right to know also,' said Derwent a little stiffly.

'You heard my reasons,' put in the mother with a pleasant manner—a manner strangely different from that air of icy self-control to which she had accustomed the children for all their lives. Now she was caressing, almost playful; acting her new part with the same perfection and thoroughness as she had played her old; and mistress of herself and her aims now, as she had been then.

'They were kind, mother; you always are kind,' Derwent answered; 'but for all that I think them inadmissible. You treated me as a child, and I am a man.'

'To a mother her son is always a child,' said Mrs. Smith with a light laugh. 'It is so difficult to realise the passing of time and to know the exact moment when one's son ceases to be a child and becomes a man. And you are not yet twenty-one, which might perhaps have been a halting-place.'

'Well, now that it's all over, and you have not been scalped by the savages nor eaten by the lions, you must tell us your adventures,' said Derwent, looking at his father, his humour sounding a little unnatural.

The man glanced at him with evident uneasiness. Mrs. Smith turned with a responsive smile to her son, with an untroubled look to her husband. Her face seemed to promise volumes of history and adventure for the young people's pleasure.

'Yes, dear papa,' said Muriel, slipping her hand into his. 'You must tell us of your travels. How much you must have seen, moving about as you have done! Have you made any collections? brought home any curiosities? When will they come?'

'No,' said Mr. Smith, shifting his feet and rearranging his breakfast-things; 'I have no collections. At least,' he continued, covering his mouth with his hand and looking down; 'those which I made have got lost.'

'What a pity!' cried Muriel. 'What were they? where were you last, papa? and were they from Africa, or where?'

For some inscrutable reason Derwent had fixed on Africa as the scene of his father's wanderings, and of course what he had believed Muriel had believed too.

'I cannot tell you of these past years just yet; I will some day, but not now,' answered the father, speaking nervously and looking to his wife.

'Your father is too glad to be quietly at home once more to care to remember all those dreadful wanderings and experiences for the first days,' said Mrs. Smith with a pleasant smile. 'He would rather forget them and think only of you and home. He is tired yet, and you must curb your impatience, my child. Is that too hard a trial? I do not think you are either impatient or inquisitive, my Muriel.'

'It was foolish of me not to understand that; and the travels will come in for the long evenings when you are rested, dear,' was Muriel's loving response.

'Yes,' said Edmund Smith with a constrained air; 'for the long evenings when I am rested.'

'Did you ever come across Livingstone, father?' asked Derwent, who seemed a little cruelly determined to press him. Yet the lad was not naturally cruel, and he had loved the remembrance of his father with an idealizing idolatry equal to Muriel's.

'No,' he answered. 'Has he returned?'

'He is dead,' replied Derwent slowly, fixing his eyes steadily on the African traveller who did not know the fate of the king of African travellers. 'Did you not know even that?'

'I had forgotten,' he answered quickly.

A sharp flash of pain passed over the boy's face, but he still looked across the table steadily and curiously. There was no love in his eyes now; no tenderness, no pity; only a stern and watchful inquisitorial expression, the look of one who suspects wrong and is determined to find out where it lies.

'The restless furtive eyes, always glancing here and there, looking at nothing straightly save that one dear woman who looked ever at him with so much love, so much devotion in her beautiful face and tender smile, turned away uneasily at the questioning gaze in the young fearless face which followed his with the stern enquiry of roused suspicion and hard determination to know the truth, evidently hidden now.'

'Well, my boy,' he said after a time, with a weak attempt at playfulness; 'shall you know me again?'

'I should know you again as you are, but I should not have said you were the father whom I remember,' said Derwent slowly. 'I cannot see a trace of the father whom I recollect so clearly and

whom we have in the photographs and my mother's miniature of you—nor a trace of the manner, nor the man whom I remember.'

'No?' he answered.

His accent was not pleasant, but perhaps not so much displeased as troubled.

'Fifteen years have made as much difference with your father as with yourselves and with me. But we remain the same people substantially, in spite of all outside changes,' said Mrs. Smith, that sweet and playful smile which hitherto had been so rare that the children scarcely recognised it as belonging to her, coming again about her lips. Was she too changing as much as he?—were they going to lose both mother and father as they had hitherto known them?

She looked at her husband fondly—her eyes soft and warm with that tender, half-maternal love which a true woman feels for the man whose life that love of hers can bless—for the man who has come out of the fight maimed and wounded, and who, in his sorrow and humiliation, is infinitely dearer than the lusty conquerors full of pride and glory; that tender, yearning, self-devoted love which accepts the burden, no matter how heavy, if by accepting it the beloved can be relieved and set free; which bears on its own heart the cross of his despair, and asks, as its sole reward, the privilege to bless.

'Yes, I suppose we also are altered out of all knowledge,' said Derwent coldly.

'Out of all knowledge,' repeated his father a little emphatically.

He wished to convey, without expressing, the sense of a displeasure which Derwent was not surprised that he should feel.

'You will soon learn us, darling papa,' said Muriel, meaning that love would teach him as it would teach them.

He pressed her hand, still held in his own, and turned to her with a pathetic half-timid smile, his eyes full of tears.

'Dear, dear papa!' she cried, taking his hand between both her own and raising it with tender reverence to her lips.

A deep flush came over the man's face. He drew his hand away with a repelling gesture.

'Don't do that!' he cried sharply.

Muriel's eyes dilated and in their turn filled with tears. Why should she not kiss his hand in token of the reverent love righteously carried by a daughter to her father?—and such a father!—a man so good, so gentle, so noble-minded, so honourable!

'You have been so long unaccustomed to home life and all its ways that it comes quite strange to you, dear, to be caressed,' said

Mrs. Smith, laughing. 'Your father has not been accustomed to have a nice little daughter about him of late,' she continued, speaking to Muriel in a tone and manner completely foreign to her usual self, and which grated on Derwent as if she had suddenly appeared in masquerade. 'He has to learn how to be loved again. We must teach him, children.'

'Yes,' said Muriel with a half sob, so full of pity for that dear papa in not having been homed and loved for so long—so full of desire to make it up to him now by loving him so much, by making him so happy! She put her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Somehow this morning she had become like a little child again.

'Own dear, dear papa, you must be happy now,' she said laying her fresh cheek against his. 'We will all be happy; how can we be otherwise, when you have come back?—but you the happiest of all.'

'This is too much. I do not deserve it,' said Edmund Smith in a half-suffocated voice, and for a moment he seemed as if he would have turned away, or have repulsed her again as he had done before; but the impulse, if it existed, passed, and he took her in his arms with a feverish kind of fervour, a mixture of gratitude and humiliation in his love inexpressibly painful, and as strange as painful in a father embracing his child after a life-long absence.

Mrs. Smith rose and went over to Derwent. She looked anxious but resolute; he was pale, his dark eyes watchful, fixed, his lips a trifle set, his whole face with a certain latent sternness underneath a very evident pain, that showed his mother both the extent and the character of the conflict within. If she could but break it all down now at once and for ever!—if she could but subdue him, and charm those unformed but roused suspicions to rest!

'Go and kiss your father, my dear,' she said in a soft whisper, hanging over him and smoothing his forehead as she had not for more years than he could remember; not since that father had gone away. 'You are but a child yet; kiss him, dear.'

He looked into her eyes as she bent over him—eyes that pleaded for her husband with her son—eyes full of love for each, full of infinite pity for each—but that expressed her determination to stand by the man whose ruined life she was giving both herself and her children to build up again. His own, dark and sorrowful as they were, flashed back something which told her that her prayer was useless, and that the future had a pain and peril before it which, if she had foreseen, she had scarcely counted on as so inexorable as she found it.

'No mother,' he answered; 'I cannot.'

'My boy! why?' she urged.

He gave her a long, long look, half reproachful, half grieving.

'You know better than I why,' he answered; 'but you know that my instinct is right, and that I ought not.'

'You ought!' she returned firmly; but she still caressed him, smoothed his hair, kissed his forehead, hung over him—this calm, cold stately mother of theirs, who had kept herself so far apart from her children, seeming to fear the very expression of their love and her own as something that would break down her strength and make her way still more difficult than it was already—now hanging about him like a gushing girl, her caresses embarrassing him more than they cheered, and almost unwelcome in their warmth!

'Mother! can you say that to me!' he answered with the proud little action habitual to him.

'I can—and do. You are his son. Go to him, Derwent, think what he has suffered, and welcome him home, my boy. He is your father, and he loves you.'

'No, I cannot,' he said again. 'He is not the father whom I knew. He is some one whom I do not know. Mother, I cannot welcome him!'

'Derwent!' she pleaded.

'Dear mother, let me go! I am one too many here,' he said pressing her to him with a nervous strain.

Then he put her gently but resolutely from him, and with one look at Muriel abruptly left the room, knowing for the first time in his life the torture of suspicion of his own and fear of the truth.

This father of theirs who had returned like a thief in the night, what was he? what had he done? whence had he come? where had he been? The mystery which of late he had begun to feel hung over him had suddenly consolidated into absolute certainty of something concealed and to be concealed. But what was it that had to be concealed? It must be something shameful, for we do not conceal our honours, thought Derwent, as he paced through and through the shrubbery walks, suffering as he had never suffered in his life before—suffering as he had never expected to suffer. This beloved father, whose return had been so anxiously expected, so longed for, so desired, coming now with the atmosphere of what?—about him!

The boy could not say what that atmosphere was. His knowledge of real life was slight yet, and he had only the instincts of pride and purity to guide him. But these told him that something was gravely amiss, and that the exiled king of his own and his sister's love was but a sorry kind of pretender—the god of their tender worship but one of that race of veiled prophets for

whom reverence is in proportion to ignorance, and for whom knowledge destroys respect. It was a terrible experience to him, poor fellow; the falling of more than a youthful house of cards; and he might be forgiven if he made the most of it as his form of self-respect, and in the repudiation of his father's secret fault, whatever it might have been, unconsciously plumed himself on his own integrity, and carried out the motto of his family from honour into cruelty.

But what can virtuous youth be save cruel? It is only experience which creates sympathy; and none but those who have passed through temptations can fairly appreciate the difficulty of resistance—or the pitifulness, rather than the shamefulness, of failure.

CHAPTER XVII.

'WHAT DOES IT MEAN?'

'CONSTANCE, I cannot bear it! That child's innocent love cuts me to the heart. It makes me blush and tremble, and feel as if I profaned her by allowing her to love me! And yet there is something in Derwent that is even worse to bear. I, who am his father, and who loved him so much in olden days, and have loved him so much through all this sad time—to see him turn from me as he does—to see him eye me as he does—oh wife! wife! it is hard!'

It was Edmund Smith who said this when he and his wife were alone after breakfast, in her private sanctuary where not even business was suffered to disturb her—which neither the children nor the servants dared to invade. He threw himself on his knees before her sitting on the low chair by the window, where she had passed so many hours looking down the valley to the open country beyond, thinking of him, picturing his return, and this hour which had now come, when she should hold him once more clasped to her heart—that refuge which should never fail him—that throne whence he should never be deposed—that altar whose sacred fire burning in his honour should never be quenched.

Passing his arms round her waist, he buried his face in her lap, sobbing hysterically. Whatever his life might have been during these fifteen years, it was one that had destroyed both his nerve and his manhood; one that, as with Bob Rushton, made tears flow too readily because self-respect had become too difficult, and that had sent him back to his home less the husband and father returning to

his own than a shamed and saddened penitent creeping to a place if not forbidden, yet substantially forfeited.

She lifted his head and drew it gently to her bosom. The infinite tenderness of her touch, the womanly pity that was in it, the womanly passion of love and sympathy and honour that she conveyed by look and gesture sank like balm into his heart; and as she passed her hand caressingly over his face and head—as just now she had caressed her son—it was like a charm for the sweet sense of peace and rest that it conveyed.

'You must not think of the past, my darling,' she said in her sweetest voice; and she could make her voice like music when she chose. 'It is done with—all its sorrow and its mistake. If you failed, dear, you failed for a noble motive, and you have expiated a boyish error by a man's suffering.'

'Yes,' he said with a shiver; 'it has been suffering, Constance! But so is this.'

'No, this has to be happiness to you,' she answered again, tenderly. 'It is strange just at first; and you have come back to us with your poor heart sore and sensitive. A few days' quiet and habit will accustom you to it all, and then you will begin to feel at home and your real self. This self is not the real man'—lightly but lovingly—'you will have to discard it.'

'Ah, Constance, if I had only been worthy of you!' he cried, breaking down again into weeping.

Poor fellow! it was all the same to him, whether it was love or reproach, care or repugnance; each stung him equally, and each overcame him equally.

'You are and were only too good for me,' she answered. 'What sent you wrong was your very love for me. My silly childishness that did not see we were going too fast was that which was most to blame. If I had looked into matters as I ought, I should have seen it all in time, and perhaps I might have prevented the end of all! Do you not believe, Edmund, that I have thought of this, and remembered my own faults and follies bitterly enough?'

'Not a word of that!—not a word!' he said. 'You were always what you are now, an angel, just as our Muriel is. You had nothing whatever to do with it; it was my fault only. Let the blame fall where it is due—on my miserable, miserable head.'

'You shall not blame yourself so much, dear,' said Mrs. Smith. 'You were more sinned against than sinning. You did what you did for me and the children, not for yourself. And I say again, I should have seen more closely into matters. If I had, I might have prevented what came by drawing in in time.'

He raised his head and looked at her.

'Do you think so?' he asked. 'We did go too fast, Constance—awfully fast! Could you have prevented it, dear?'

'Yes. I was the most to blame,' she said firmly.

He seemed to consider, to reflect, for just a moment.

'No,' he then said with a curious air of conscious magnanimity. 'You were not to blame; it was only I; but what you say is true. Certainly I did not do it for myself. However wrong, it was for my wife and family, not myself. It would be false to say the contrary. For myself, I could have given up everything when I found out how I stood. I was a man and it did not signify for me; but I could not bear the thought of seeing you in any worse position than what you had held; and to deprive the children of their rights—no! that was impossible. But still, all this was not for myself; that I may say with truth and confidence.'

While he had spoken a soothed, it might almost be called a self-satisfied, expression had stolen over his worn and haggard face. The vanity which the sharp discipline of these long years had only pruned not killed, was ready to reassert itself at the first warm breath of praise; and in proportion to the depth of his past humiliation would be the strength of his future self-justification. It was her knowledge of this characteristic—which she saw as sensitiveness, tenderness of soul, impressibility by affection—that had helped his wife in her determination to restore him to his own esteem. She knew that it could be done; and when done she knew that he would be happy as in the olden times; and to make him happy again was the one sole aim of her life now, as it had been the one sole hope of all those dreary fifteen years.

'So that you have no need to blame yourself so bitterly, my dear; no need to lose your self-respect or to feel that our love goes beyond your deserving,' she returned. 'You loved much, and you sinned through that love; but the motive was good and true,' she repeated warmly; 'and God judges by motives, not by actions. You have paid your debt to man.'

'I feel that God has forgiven me long ago,' said her husband simply. It was as if he had said that his fault, whatever it might be, had been too insignificant for the Almighty to take much cognizance of. 'It was more an offence against man than God,' he added; 'and as you say, Constance, I have paid my debt there—to the full!' with a bitter emphasis, as if he had paid more than his due, and was the one injured rather than guilty.

'Just so,' said Mrs. Smith; 'that is the way in which to look at it, dear.'

'But when the children come to learn the whole story—as they must some day—I cannot bear to think of that!' he cried, changing

suddenly from his more complacent mood to that of the deep and blank despair which for the moment was the more habitual. 'It would have been far better to have made me dead, Constance, as I suggested, and to have discarded me for ever, than to have brought me back to them what I am. What will they feel—what will they think of me when they find it all out? Ah, that will be my trial, if you like!'

'They will feel and think as I do,' said his wife lovingly. 'They will have learned to know you then, really as you are; and knowing you, dear, they will love you so much that they will understand you and the whole affair, and be able to separate the chance deed from the true self. Is that so hard to do for one we love?' she asked, bending her head and kissing his forehead.

'Not hard for you, for we loved each other—did we not, Constance? But to them? They are young, and do not know either life or me.'

'You are their father,' she said.

'And perhaps the disgrace of the father will come upon them more terribly than even the ruin of the husband to my wife—my loving, faithful, but also beloved wife!'

He looked up into her face as he said this. He meant to remind her that if she had loved him so had he loved her, and that so far he had claims.

'They must not feel it so bitterly; and Muriel shall not, and will not,' said Mrs. Smith with emphasis. 'They must bear it as both you and I, the father and mother, have had to bear it. We are all one family, and you are our head; we must stand or fall together. There was never any question with me, darling, of making you dead. Did I not promise you for better and for worse?—and did you expect me to fail you when that worse came? No! not even for our children, much as I love them, and feel for them!'

'Ah, yes—much as you feel for them. You know you pity them, Constance. You know that they are to be pitied,' he cried quickly.

'Yes, they are to be pitied for many things,' she answered quietly.

He dropped his arms from her waist and made a movement as if he would have got up from his knees; but she brought him back to her bosom, and went on speaking as if without that interruption.

'They are to be pitied for the loss of the dear father for all these years. Think what a fine and manly influence you would have been over our boy!—what a help and support to him and to

Muriel, too! That has been the worst trial of all to me, with respect to them.'

'I think I should have done Derwent some good,' he said, with a pleased air. 'And Muriel too.'

'Every good,' she answered.

'But you have done well by them, wife,' he said. 'I ought to thank you for this too—for your care of my children.'

'I taught them to love and respect their father as he deserves,' was her reply.

'Will they always?' he said.

'Always.'

He took her hands and kissed them; and still kneeling by her side, with his head on her bosom and his arms round her waist, he presently sank into a light slumber from very weariness and exhaustion, while she bent over him and watched him with tears in her eyes, as a mother might have watched her child.

Changed as he was, with all the beauty, all the gallant grace, the gay good-humour and young man's pride crushed out of him, he was still the man whom she loved and the man who loved her—the man for and to whom she was prepared to sacrifice the whole world—her children and his with the rest. She had no blame for him. Whosoever might condemn him—man, the law, society, his own conscience when it spoke louder than his vanity—with her he should know nothing but the love which soothes, the respect which restores. He was her lover, her husband, and she would never be other than the adoring woman on whose fidelity and affection he could rely as men rely on the sweet services of nature and the unchanging glory of heaven.

So she sat and watched him, feeling only that infinite pity and protection of the woman for the man who takes refuge from sorrow and himself in her arms, no matter what crime he may have committed nor to what base level he may have sunk in the esteem of his fellows. For of all things high and great and strong, the love of the loving woman for him who needs her, and whom she can help, is the greatest and the noblest and the best.

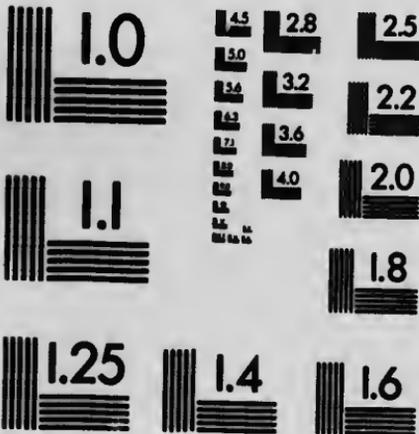
Meanwhile, Derwent and Muriel in the garden, where she had gone to find him, discussed this dear father of theirs who had returned so unexpectedly, and at such an important moment in the life of each—though neither knew as yet what had happened to the other; that Derwent's boyish love had passed like an awakening breath over Hilda's young life; that Arthur had asked Muriel to give herself to him for ever; and that Muriel had promised that she would and meant to keep her word.

Muriel spoke of dear papa with frank affection, and some-



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thing of her mother's womanly pity, if with less than that mother's knowledge why he should be pitied; but Derwent spoke coldly and with reserve, showing that his heart was sore and his thoughts not wholly pleasant; indeed, not pleasant at all. It was their different mode of testifying to the same thing—the father was not what they had expected him to be, and not as they had remembered him; but Muriel was sorry and sympathetic, Derwent was suspicious, disappointed, and revolted.

The girl saw that something was wrong with her brother, but she did not ask him what it was. She had been too well tutored in the arbitrary little ways of fraternal domination to try and force his confidence. She knew that it would come in time and by itself; but she also knew how to wait.

At last Derwent said in a constrained voice :

'How fearfully changed he is, Muriel! I can scarcely believe that he is the same father whom we remember in London. There is something about him that pains me more than I can say. He is so strange—he does not look one straight in the face—and he has forgotten so many of the ordinary habits of a gentleman. Did you see how he cut his bread in his hand, just as the common people cut theirs?—and why did he put his cup and saucer on his plate, and make that odd movement as if he were going to take them all away? My mother stopped him just in time, else he would.'

'He has been so long among savages, it is only natural that he should forget these little forms,' said Muriel. 'He will be one of the first to see and laugh at his mistakes when he has got accustomed to things again.'

'But where on earth has he been for all these years?—what has he been doing?' cried Derwent impatiently. 'I cannot understand how it is that he knows nothing of what has taken place in England—in Europe indeed; not even the downfall of the French empire, or the death of the emperor. Where can he have been?—what can have happened to him?'

'We shall soon know all now,' said Muriel. 'When he is a little rested he will tell us of his travels and adventures, and then we can understand him better.'

'Shall we? Has he been honestly travelling?—if he has, with what object?'

Derwent spoke passionately. A half-formed suspicion was beginning to dawn on him, but he did not dare yet to put it into words.

'I do not understand you,' answered Muriel steadily. 'Has he been travelling? of course he has! And as for the object, it may have been business, or exploring, or excavation, or something like that.'

'If business, we should have heard something; and if exploring, he would have published what he had done and where he had been; and so with excavation. It is none of all these, Muriel—at least, it is not business that could be spoken of.'

'What makes you speak like that, Derwent?' she asked. 'If you do not understand papa, I am sure I do not understand you!'

'I can see that I pain you, Muriel, but I think it my duty to be frank,' said Derwent with his lofty air; 'though I cannot tell you quite what I do mean, for I scarcely know myself. I am disappointed—bitterly disappointed in my father; there is something in it all that I do not understand—a secret, a mystery of some kind kept from us, and I want to fathom it, but cannot.'

'Why do you think so, dear? Why fancy things that do not exist, and torment yourself for nothing?' she asked again. 'He has been so long away that he scarcely knows where to begin. But we shall hear everything soon. You may be sure of that.'

'We shall never hear all, never know the truth!' cried Derwent, flinging back his hair.

'Derwent! you should not speak so of poor papa!' cried Muriel warmly; then, seeing how pale and agitated her brother was, that soft heart of hers warmed to him as well as to her father, and she put her arm through his caressingly as she said tenderly: 'My dear, what can I say to comfort you? How pale you are! Oh, why have you made yourself so miserable, and all for a mere fancy!'

'Neither you nor anyone else can comfort me if——' he began; then he hesitated. His suspicions had made his father a slave-dealer in Africa. It was all and the worst that he could think of; but it was so bad that he did not like to give it the vitality of words, or to say even to Muriel what it was that he suspected.

'If what?' she asked.

'If anything has been wrong with my father,' he answered, his lips quivering and his nervous nostrils widely dilated.

'Wrong about papa? What could have been wrong? Ask your own heart—how could he have done anything wrong? He may not like to tell us all that has happened to him; but wrong—no, darling! I can never believe anything against papa! Poor, dear papa! Just come home after such a long absence, and you think evil of him. Oh, Derwent, that is not like you!'

Tears came into her eyes as she spoke. She loved her brother truly; but at the moment she pitied her father even more than she loved Derwent.

'You know, Muriel, that I was as eager to see him as you were, and that I have always loved him as much as you have—as much as

any son could love a father! But now that he has come, I am as sure as of my own existence that something is not right, and that my mother did not tell us anything about him simply because she could not—because she dared not. If I find it out—and I will, that I swear—I will go away and never be heard of again.'

'And leave mamma and me?—and break our hearts? Is that what you mean to do, Derwent?'

'My own heart would be broken first,' he answered. 'I could not live through it here! To have anything come out against us in this place where we have lived so long, and held our heads so high—I could not bear it, Muriel! Fancy the Machells hearing anything, or Hilda—Lady Machell forbidding her to speak to me again, and she herself feeling that she would rather not! Impossible! I should go mad!'

'Derwent, don't! How can you say such dreadful things!' cried Muriel, trembling. 'I do not believe a word of it all—not a word; but it terrifies me to hear you speak like this! What can come out against us? How can you talk so wildly? Dear, look at things more rationally, and be yourself again!'

'I am rational, I am myself, and I do look at things fairly; and it is because I do that I foresee all this evil and sorrow,' said Derwent firmly, if still as passionately and excitedly as before. 'And I tell you again that I would leave this place for ever—I would never come back, never see one of them again! If the day ever comes when Lady Machell will have the right to say that my father's son may not presume to love her daughter, from that time my fate is sealed and everything is over. I am only sorry for what I said last night—for having got her promise as I did.'

'Are you engaged to Hilda?' the sister asked in a low voice.

'Not exactly, but almost. We understand each other,' he answered; 'and if all goes well here at home, that will go well too. If it does not—'

His voice broke; he stopped, and turned away his head. In another moment, had he continued speaking, he would have burst into tears. He was only a youth yet, and Hilda was his first love.

Muriel clung closer to his arm, with a caressing gesture, but she did not speak. For the moment she forgot the cause of all this unhappiness, and only pitied the misery. It was no longer her father who was vaguely suspected of evil-doing, but her brother who was breaking his heart as the prophet of his own despair.

'I would not leave you, Muriel,' then said Derwent, laying his hand on his sister's and looking at her fondly; 'I would take you

with me and we would live always together, friends and companions to the last!

Muriel, who had been looking up at him while he spoke, suddenly crimsoned from neck to brow, and turned away her eyes, even more troubled than he himself had been. Had he said this yesterday morning she would have joined hands with him, and have agreed to be his Ruth, following him wherever he had chosen to go. She would have felt that now, when mamma was rewarded for her long years of constancy and consoled for their pain, her own place was with her brother whose companion she had always been, and whom she alone could make happy. But since last night—how could she promise to go with him? to give up all for him? She was not her own to give away. She no longer belonged to herself; she was Arthur's; and she did not think that Arthur would hold her so lightly as to allow the transfer, even to her brother. Nor, much as she loved that brother, did she wish to make it.

Derwent saw her blush and troubled looks; and the embarrassed silence which came instead of the ready response that he had expected, fell on his heart, sore as it was with disappointment and foreseen despair, like acid touching a wound.

'Good God, Muriel, why do you look like that!' he cried. 'You turn away from me—you do not say that you will come with me—you have not a kind word for me any way. Are you too going to prove false to me? What is happening! It seems as if the whole world had gone wrong since last night.'

'Nothing is going wrong, and no one is false to you, dear,' she answered in a low voice; 'but I have something to tell you.'

'What can you have to tell me?' he asked suspiciously. 'More mysteries? and you making them?'

'Do not speak as if you were angry with me,' she said, beginning to tremble again.

'No, I am not angry, but I am hurt,' he answered. 'I never expected that you would have had a secret from me; and I am surprised—that is all.'

'Derwent! don't! I could not tell you before,' she pleaded. 'Arthur Machell spoke to me last night.'

'Well?' he answered, half indifferently.

He had so little idea that Arthur Machell could have anything to say to his sister beyond the merest outside facts of life—so little suspicion that things stood as they did with them—that Muriel felt she must be straightforward and explicit, and that hints and timid suggestions would be worse than useless.

'He asked me to marry him,' she said softly.

It was hard to confess so directly this young love, even to her brother from whom she had never yet had a secret; but it was the best way; and like one sharp and sudden pain it saved her from longer moments of suffering.

'Marry Arthur Machell?—you cannot, you shall not, Muriel!' he cried, dropping her hand and facing her.

'Why not?' she asked with a little start and half-frightened look.

'With no money on either side?'

'We can live on very little,' was her vague and not very rational reply.

She had not considered ways and means yet. Besides, to a girl in love, the man whom she loves is in himself a mine of wealth, representing as he does all the riches of happiness and the treasures of good fortune to her.

'And with my father?' he asked.

'Yes, with papa,' she answered more steadily. To shift the ground from vague and in their very vagueness terrifying and perhaps unconquerable circumstances to something tangible—to that dear papa whom she believed as much as her brother distrusted—was to reassure. 'Yes, certainly with poor papa,' she repeated.

'When I feel that I may have to give up all *my* happiness—that I may have to leave home and Hilda and never see either again?' he asked.

'Perhaps you need not, any more than I need give up Arthur,' she answered, a sunny smile flashing over her sweet face, which even Derwent, in spite of his tragic mood, felt to be almost contagious.

'You must be guided by my mother and Lady Machell,' then said Derwent, taking refuge in the inner lines.

'Mamma will not object. Why should she?' said Muriel.

'But Lady Machell will,' he returned. 'You know that she will, Muriel, as well as I know it.'

'If she does, I do not think that he'—the beloved man is always that undesignated but predominant 'he' to the woman who loves him—'will give me up. He is not a boy now, and I do not think that he will be frightened away from me, even if his mother should not like it.'

She spoke with a rather unusual dash of pride and firmness in her tone. Soft as she was for herself, she could do battle for those whom she loved. She had already stood by her father; and she could do the same for her lover and her love.

'But I should object, Muriel, most strongly, if Lady Machell

does, said Derwent. 'I would not have my sister enter a family where she would not be welcome.'

'I would rather have Lady Machell's consent and that she should like me, of course,' said Muriel; 'but I think I would do as he wished, even should she not. I think I should feel that he was the best judge, and that I married him, not his mother; and that if he wished it, my duty was to obey him. Would you not like Hilda to feel the same for you, dear?'

Derwent was silent. Through all the froth and seething vanity of his youth there was substantial justice and magnanimity of nature. He had been superficially spoiled by the life at home, where he had been caressed and praised and loved over-much; but after a few apprentice years to suffering and self-reliance of a nobler kind than he knew now—when his self-reliance was mainly self-conceit—he would come out into the light of day a truer, braver, better man than he gave promise of for the moment. He could not gainsay his sister. He knew that, as she said, he would take Hilda from her family, against the consent of father, mother, brothers, all, and against the wishes of his own people equally, could he but get her for himself—could he but build a fitting bower for so rare and sweet a bird; and what was right for him ought also to be the rule for his sister. Neither could he blame her for a constancy which he would ask from his own love.

All the same—his truer manliness not having come yet—he was hurt and distressed to think that Muriel should or could love anyone so much as to voluntarily give up him, Derwent, for the sake of that other. She should have waited until she had seen how things had turned with himself and Hilda, and then she might have made her own happiness when his had been secured. As it was, she was cruel and selfish to leave him for any other love: what love indeed could there be to equal his in intensity or righteousness of claim? And now, with this formless pain and dread about the father, surely she was infinitely cruel—infinitely wrong!

He could scarcely say all this. She had accepted his confession of love for Hilda so sweetly, so unselfishly, it would be hard on her if he showed himself less brave. He must not speak all that he felt even to her; from henceforth he must be sufficient for himself, and bear his solitude as he best could. If he could not say all this however, he looked it; and poor Muriel was made as wretched by his eyes as she would have been by his words. For these—all that he said was:—

'We must see how things turn out here at home, Muriel, before anything can be definitely arranged;' speaking with as much mournfulness as if he had been speaking of a death, not a bridal.

'Things are sure to turn out well here,' answered Muriel.

And as she said this, the lodge gates opened and Arthur Machell came up the drive on his natural errand of seeing Mrs. Smith—the wife of Edmund Smith who had just returned from Africa—that he might get her formal consent to his engagement with her daughter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOT YET.

MEN seldom see the future which lies immediately before them. They spend their strength in bewailing, perhaps in providing for, remote possibilities which may never come to pass, while they do not even rub their eyes to see more clearly the events running swiftly to meet them. Thus Arthur Machell anticipated only smooth sailing and no kind of danger with Mrs. Smith. With his own mother he knew that he should have trouble enough and to spare; but that this secluded wife of an absent husband, this woman of unknown antecedents and mediocre means, this mother of a dowerless daughter—however lovely and divine in herself, still not a matrimonial prize as the world apportions its market—should object to the marriage of that daughter with him—he a Machell and she only a Smith—was a possibility in the decrees of fate which had not occurred to him.

He had only one duty and only one pain. The first was to make a new career for himself; the second to withstand the angry sorrow of his father, the prayers and tears of his mother, the heavy-handed disdain of Wilfrid, and in all probability eternal separation from Hilda for the sake of love and Muriel. Her sweet consent gained last night among the flowers, all the rest was easy on this side. There were no breakers ahead between him and Owlett, no sunken rocks nor wrecking shallows; only a broad smooth sea, safe, calm, and sure. And as for the difficulties known and foreseen—those he would provide for and overcome.

As he came up the drive, resolute and joyous, his well-knit figure tall, soldierly, erect, striding between the flowers and flowering bushes with the haste of a lover seeking his beloved, it was to Muriel as if a bit of sunshine had suddenly flashed out of the grey sky, making that which was colourless and cold full of warmth and life. He might have been Apollo showing himself to some adoring nymph for the exquisite delight of his presence; but to Derwent he

was simply a young man like any other, who had been successful where he himself had been if not defeated yet certainly not victorious. And as all men are jealous, more or less, and as Derwent was inclined to the more rather than the less, it was not specially exhilarating to him to see Arthur Machell triumphant where he was cast down. Naturally too he was not charmed with the engagement. He liked 'young Machell,' as he affected to call him when he was ill-tempered, well enough for his own sake—better by far because he was Hilda's brother—but he did not rejoice in him as Muriel's future husband, the man who would stand between him and his sister for ever, who had already deposed him and was still more thoroughly to dispossess him.

Wherefore, actuated by all these feelings and for the moment entirely unamiable, it was not to be wondered at that he received the handsome young officer as stiffly as if he had been an envoy from an enemy's country, and even forbore to conciliate Hilda's brother in his desire to show his displeasure to his sister's lover.

He might have spared himself the trouble of putting on his little airs of an offended prince annoyed with bold rebels. Arthur was too much in love to see what passed about him outside that love, and Derwent's approbation or disapprobation had been taken into no more account than the chance of Mrs. Smith refusing to consent to the engagement, and affected him as little as if Brian had barked unpleasantly. But Muriel saw it all, and for the first time in her life wished that her brother would leave her to herself. His presence, usually both pleasant and helpful, now troubled and embarrassed her, and his evident ill-humour made everything more difficult than it could have been. And a girl's first meeting with her lover, the confession of her love is difficult enough at the best. It scarcely needs to be made more so by unnecessary additions.

Bashful and oppressed, loving and glad and shy, it would have been hard for Muriel to have defined her own state at this moment. Her lips smiled, but they quivered as much as they smiled; her eyes were soft and dewy, full of tender, pure, and maidenly love, but they looked only once at Arthur, then turned anxiously to her brother, and then to the ground, with something almost like tears in them. Her heart beat with that strange force which takes all strength from the body; her colour went and came like the sunlight flickering through the flying clouds of an April sky; she was humbled with the shame of her love, but made proud by its glory; longing for Arthur to show how much she loved him, but fearing to show that love by any overt sign of word or deed. It was all confusion and unrest, in the midst of happiness; and her face betrayed the turmoil of her heart.

'Are you tired this morning?' was Arthur's rather trivial question, as he held her hand and looked at her with that tender, smiling, yet lordly look of a strong man come to claim in the sunshine the confirmation of a woman's love confessed in the moonlight.

'No,' she stammered.

'Why should she be tired?—we were not late, and I took care that she did not dance too much,' said Derwent with his commanding air.

'A ball is always fatiguing more or less,' said Arthur, without knowing too well what he ought to say, still holding Muriel's hand, and looking into her eyes with frank and undisguised delight, but at the same time dimly conscious that Derwent was unpleasant, and that his presence there at all was an unmitigated nuisance. 'However, I am glad to see you look so well this morning,' he added with the wonderful fatuity of a lover; and Muriel smiled, and, fatuous too for her own part, though it so chivalrous and dear and tender that he should say so!

'We had a surprise last night when we came home,' she said after a rather long pause, the three walking slowly up the lawn. The silence was becoming painful, and the woman is generally the first to break it when painful.

'Yes! what was it?' he asked.

Derwent broke off the hanging branch of a barberry tree with a nervous, almost vicious movement.

'We found papa at home,' she said.

'Your father!'

Arthur was a little disturbed at this; not because he had any reason to doubt or dislike Muriel's father. On the contrary, he felt grateful to him for his gift of this precious life to the world and him; but it disturbed the arrangement of his ideas, altered the lines of his relations with the family as at present laid, and altogether was a break in the existing order of things—and a break of any kind in the first days of a man's love is uncomfortable.

'You did not expect him, I suppose, as you said nothing of his return to me last night?' he continued.

Derwent winced. It was the traditional gall and wormwood to him that any man should give himself the right to speak to Muriel as if their affairs were identical—a joint-stock concern in which he had a claim to be included.

'No, we knew nothing of it,' she said. 'Only when we came home we found papa. Such a surprise!' she repeated.

Her brains were in no better working order than Arthur's, and she found repetition more convenient than a new idea.

'And you were overjoyed?' said Arthur, not quite so much like a radiant Apollo as before.

'Yes,' answered Muriel tenderly.

'Of course we were glad to see my father,' said Derwent proudly.

It was as if Arthur had doubted, and had partly understood why; and he was eager to set him right and to vindicate and defend the father whom secretly he himself more than doubted. But what he did no other man should do.

'Should you have known him?' Arthur asked, rather to make conversation than because he was deeply interested in the personality of this unknown father. Save for Muriel, indeed, he would not have cared for Mrs. Smith's returned husband more than for the return, say, of Mrs. Rushton's.

'No, not in the least,' she answered. 'He has changed so much out in those hot countries! Besides, we were very young when he went away. I should have remembered him though had he been just the same—but fifteen years in Africa!'

She made a pretty little movement expressive of impossibility.

'Ah, then it is Africa where he has been travelling!' Arthur asked with a little look of satisfaction that a local secret, which had been so long kept, was at last revealed. It was quite a harmless and natural look, but it offended Derwent and perplexed Muriel.

She turned to her brother.

'Yes, I believe so,' she answered with a slight hesitancy. For after all, asked point-blank yes or no, was she sure?—and could she say yes?

'In what part of Africa was he?' Arthur asked again.

'I do not quite know,' she answered, looking again at Derwent, who persistently refused to look at her. 'We have been so often and for such a long time without letters from him, that it must have been somewhere in the interior; far away from any post or port.'

'You did not know where your father was?'

Arthur said this with a very natural kind of surprise. This ignorance seemed odder than ever now that this apocryphal father of theirs had returned.

'That was one of the unselfish traits of my mother's character,' put in Derwent stiffly. 'She would never tell us when my father was in danger, but kept all the anxiety to herself.'

'I dare say you would have been better pleased to have shared it,' said Arthur pleasantly. 'I should had I been in your place.'

'My mother was the best judge,' answered Derwent curtly.

'You were older than your sister when he left home; should you have known him?' Arthur asked.

'No,' said Derwent as shortly as before.

'So!' thought the lover; 'the lieutenant does not quite approve of this return of his captain. He does not like being shelved.'

But he held his peace, and only laughed inwardly at the lad's fretful temper and silly pride, though Muriel, for the sake of saying something, went on talking of her dear papa, and of how strange everything was to him so long unaccustomed to civilized life as he had been; and how tired he was; and how odd it was to know that he was papa and yet to see him as a stranger; with a thousand other girlish reflections, partly to prevent that awkward silence, which was more embarrassing than anything else, from falling among them, and partly to enlist Arthur's sympathy and forbearance from the first for the father whom she pitied—she scarcely knew why.

All this time they were strolling about the garden; Derwent still keeping close to Muriel who walked between the two young men with a feeling of division and adverse claims not specially consoling. If only that beloved brother of hers would go away! But it never occurred to him to leave her alone with Arthur. It would have seemed to him a very doubtful kind of thing in a protector, as he had always held himself to be; more especially as Arthur had as yet only 'spoken,' and they were not formally engaged; and that his sister should be uneasy and Arthur secretly disgusted, neither occurred to him as possible nor would have disturbed him had he thought of it, any more than his disapprobation disturbed Arthur. He was simply doing his duty—on guard against possibilities which might attack his treasure; and who cares for censure when he knows that he is only doing as he ought?

After some time spent in this uncomfortable and indefinite manner, wandering without aim through the shrubby paths and without object across the lawn, Arthur turned suddenly to Muriel, and taking her hand drew it within his arm.

'May I see your mother?' he said. And may I see her alone?'

It was Muriel's turn to flush now; Derwent's to turn pale, to bite his inner lip, to toss up his hair, and to look even more than ever like a young prince by turns aggrieved and offended.

'Can my mother see you to-day?' he asked with a vague feeling of putting some kind of obstacle in the way of this unwelcome affair; no matter what—the readiest to hand the best.

'I hope so,' said Arthur steadily; and Muriel turning to her

brother, but not looking at him, echoed as steadily: 'I should think so.'

There are certain things in life which make brave men wince; and the formal demand of the daughter's hand from the parent is one of them. The offer is bad enough; but that terrible act of asking papa, of propitiating mamma, is ten times worse. And so Arthur found it now. He would rather have braved personal peril than this ordeal; for all that he anticipated no kind of difficulty, but imagined that his way was easy before him and that he had but to walk over the course at his own pace. He soon became conscious however that things were not going to be so easy as he imagined. Mrs. Smith was cold, curt, unhelpful; she would not give him a lead anyhow, but left him to find his own way as he best could through the chilling reserve and evident preoccupation of her manner; preoccupation perhaps a little too exaggerated, as if she wished the young fellow to see that his ardour was mistimed, his action unwelcome, and that, in the midst of the more important events of the hour, the marrying and settlement for life of an only daughter counted for nothing.

At last he did bring her to the point, with a burst, and asked her in so many words for what was to him the priceless gift of Muriel's hand. He spoke of his devotion, his love, and how his life would be wrecked without her—all his good gifts of health and strength, of power of brain and social standing lost for ever to himself and the world if he could not marry that one special woman. He spoke of his earnest and passionate affection, so sincere, so sure to last for all time—never to pass from her by that terrible way of satiety and habit—never to be given to some newer fancy, never! never! He spoke of his intention to make her as happy as the angels in heaven, if the purest love and the most unselfish care can make a woman happy; in short, he went through the whole litany of lovers—that litany which all repeat pro forma when they have their object to gain, but which it is a simple matter of chance if they keep when they have gained it.

Mrs. Smith's delicate face scarcely changed as the young man went on. It did certainly grow even whiter than before, and her lips closed into a somewhat thinner line; else she looked much the same as usual; statuesque and undemonstrative—a very lovely but immovable Fate whose decision no anguish and no prayers of men could shake.

When he had finished he took her hand in both of his, his flushed and handsome face quivering with emotion as he looked earnestly into hers—hers which was at this moment the face of his assessor, the one who was to apportion to him life or death, blessed-

ness or despair. And then and then only she gave some sign of feeling. The blood flew across her cheeks and forehead, her eyes filled with tears, her lips parted and trembled, her nostrils dilated, her bosom heaved, as she gave a little sob and pressed Arthur's hand with a quick convulsive grasp. But the momentary emotion passed as it had come; and she was once more the Mrs. Smith of Owlett—reserved, silent, unsympathetic, undemonstrative—as the world judged and knew her.

'I can say nothing now,' she said stonily, though she had to fetch her breath by one or two deep and laboured inspirations. 'My husband's return has taken all out of my hands. He is henceforth the master.'

'Let me see Mr. Smith,' said Arthur.

She raised her eyes as if in wonder at such a request.

'Certainly not yet,' she answered. 'He is fatigued with his journey, and I would not disturb him now. Besides, he knows nothing of the neighbourhood; he does not know one name from the other.'

'Ours may easily be learnt,' interrupted Arthur Machell a little proudly.

'Yes, he will soon know all about you of course,' she returned. 'But he naturally wishes to have his home and children to himself for a while. Think how long he has been without them.'

'But I am not asking to marry Muriel next week,' said Arthur, smiling but impatient too. 'He will have her with him all the same whether engaged to me or not.'

'No; it would make all the difference to him,' she answered. 'To make him feel that she is uncertain—already promised to some one else—that he is not the first in her affections, as he ought to be, but that she is preoccupied and so far taken away from him—to meet him so suddenly with a proposal of marriage as the first event on his return—no, I could not, Mr. Machell. We must leave it for a while. Not yet—some future time.'

She spoke quickly, and with an odd kind of suppressed emotion. Her love for her husband was evidently very deep when she could postpone the consolidation of her daughter's vital happiness merely on the plea of a sentimental loss, a shadowy grievance to him. It was deep and true and womanly; but was it just to those whom she caused to suffer for it? If wifely, was she maternal? This was the thought that came into Arthur's mind, and checked what would have been his admiration, his enthusiasm for her devotion.

'You love your husband so much as this,' he said a little reproachfully, emphasizing the pronouns. 'Cannot you feel then for me—for Muriel—who also love each other?'

'What I may or may not feel for you has nothing to do with it,' she answered, turning away her head.

She did not wish him to read her face. She feared that it might show how she was tortured at this moment—the faithful wife who had consecrated herself to the restoration of her husband's happiness—the loving mother, who would have given her own life for her daughter, but who, forced by inexorable circumstances, was prepared to take that daughter's heart as a sacrifice to her husband's peace.

'What you feel is the whole thing,' urged Arthur. 'You are absolute in the family. Your husband would naturally be guided by you, and if you would give your consent nothing more need be said. His would come with it.'

'I cannot say anything yet,' said Mrs. Smith, a little more softly than she had spoken before. 'You must wait.'

'I must wait in any case,' he answered. 'I have no end of arrangements to make; and it is only whether I shall make them, sure of the result—sure of my happiness—or whether I shall be hampered by doubt, uncertain of some things if sure of others.'

'What arrangements?' she asked.

'I shall leave the army and enter on a new career altogether,' he said.

She caught at the admission.

'I do not choose to promise my daughter to anything so vague as this,' she cried, looking him full in the eyes with an unspeakable expression of relief in her own in that she had at last found a solid foothold, a tangible objection.

'I think she would be safe in my hands,' he answered proudly. 'I have friends and energy; there is not much doubt of my making a career which she may well share. I should not ask her to accept any conditions which were beneath her.'

'Doubtless you believe all this of yourself,' she said, 'and I dare say you will succeed; but you can easily understand that no mother who consulted the best interests of her daughter could promise her to a man who was on the point of breaking with his present profession before having entered on a new one.'

'You would be right if I were unknown to you—practically an adventurer, without the guarantee of friends or status; but your objections cannot possibly apply to me. They are in the air, Mrs. Smith, and you must feel them to be so.'

He spoke with dignity; the Machell blood in him protesting against the position to which Muriel's mother sought to relegate him; asserting his claim to be accepted as one of those for whom

Fortune has no blanks in the lottery of life, and whose wrestlings with Fate include no chance of falls.

'Still I must insist on something more definite,' said Mrs. Smith uneasily.

'Then do I understand that you do not sanction my engagement with your daughter?—that, if she holds by me, it will be against your will?'

His voice trembled as he spoke and his face was deadly pale; but his attitude was calm and even proud as, rising from his seat, he stood towering above this unsolved enigma, this living sphinx of Owlett, who sat as if carved out of stone, save for a certain nameless distress on her face which all her power of self-control could not wholly conceal.

'I say nothing definite,' she answered, nervously plucking at the border of her handkerchief. 'It is all too sudden and precipitate. Sir Gilbert and Lady Machell must consent before anything can be arranged; for it is a bad marriage on either side. My daughter has no fortune, and you have to make your career. Her father has just come home, and your mother has not yet been consulted. Her consent is absolutely necessary; I could not allow my daughter to enter your family without it. It cannot be yet. You must wait.'

She spoke in a strange, jerky, incoherent manner, as if she were afraid of herself and putting some strong kind of control over her emotions; but she spoke firmly too, and Arthur recognized that further pleading was in vain—a mere waste of time and strength. She was fixed and impregnable in that one stronghold: 'Not yet!' What she suffered, what she wished for her own part, had nothing to do with it. She had other duties than those of a mother solicitous for her daughter's happiness, other things to remember and to provide for; and whether her own heart bled or not was a matter which influenced her in no wise. She had her work to do, her sorrow to fulfil; and she shrank from nothing that might meet her on the way marked out for her weary but so patient and so steadfast walking.

The interview must then come to an end, if a little abruptly at the last. Arthur told her distinctly enough that he would not give up Muriel, and that he would hold her to her promise, which also he believed she would be willing to keep. If he could not claim her now, he would when she was of age, he said, and when she might—and indeed must—choose between her family and himself.

'For myself, I would give up father and mother and my whole

family for her,' he cried passionately. 'And I do not believe that she loves me less than I love her.'

'No marriage should include such sacrifice,' said Mrs. Smith in a low voice. 'There should be no question of giving up the world, of going against the family, on either side. If there are circumstances which make it this matter of choice and of division, it is better to abandon it at once. It can never be happy.'

'I should be happy with your daughter if I lost the whole world beside,' said Arthur, in the same passionate voice and manner as before; 'and it would be the world well lost to gain her.'

A spasm crossed Mrs. Smith's face.

'Ah!' she said with uncontrollable agitation; 'you do not know what that includes! And yet it is the best thing,' she half-whispered; 'in the face of all, love is the best!'

'Now I have your consent!' cried Arthur, taking both her hands almost by force.

Again she looked into his face as she had looked before, her eyes full of tears, her lips parted, pitiful, soft. In another instant it seemed as if she would have abandoned herself to his entreaty, as if she would have given the consent that he implored. But the softness of the moment passed, as it had passed before; and again she stiffened, chilled, hardened into the Mrs. Smith of ordinary life and habits.

'No,' she said coldly. 'I do not consent to Muriel's engagement with you. It is better for all that it should not be.'

It was not a pleasant hour for Arthur, still less for Muriel, when he went to find her in the garden, to tell her that her mother refused her sanction to their engagement, though unable to give any good or sufficing reason why; and that if they held together—not that he put it hypothetically, but very positively, as their holding together—it must be in direct opposition to her wishes (Lady Machell was out of court for the present) and on their own responsibility.

'But you will not fail me, Muriel?' he said, looking at her anxiously, his face, which had been so bright and confident when he first came up the drive, now pale and harassed, and if as resolute as before, yet suffering and depressed.

'No, I will not fail you,' she answered with something of her mother's quiet strength.

'No one will make you break your word?'

'No one,' she said.

'They will all try, Muriel; I shall have to trust only to your faith, to your promise.'

'And to my love,' said Muriel, raising her eyes to his—those

steadfast, soft, and candid eyes, with the love of her heart shining through them like an inner light.

There was no hesitation about her now, no girlish shame or pretty bashfulness. It was no longer the maiden's timidity that held her, but the woman's religiousness of love that moved her, the future wife's calm constancy and faithful truth that inspired her.

He took her hands in his, and kissed them tenderly.

'I can trust you?' he said in a low voice.

'Yes,' she said; 'you may.'

Just then Derwent, who had left his sister because unable to bear the sight of Arthur's triumph, came wandering back, too jealous to keep away if also too jealous to bear his part with sympathy or resignation. He saw by the eyes, the attitude, the manner of each, that here was none of the happiness of love, if all of its strength, its determination, its openness of confession.

Neither he nor they spoke as he came up; and for the briefest possible instant he was glad that this affair of theirs was perhaps at an end, and that Muriel would be once more his and his only—his sister, no other man's lover—and devoted to him as of old. Then his nobler nature prevailed, and, ashamed of that momentary baseness, he bent over his sister and kissed her forehead, at the same time, laying his hand on Arthur's shoulder.

'I see that something is troubling you,' he said. 'What is it? What answer did my mother make?'

'No,' said Arthur shortly.

He threw up his head.

'She did not consent?' he cried. 'She will not allow the engagement? Preposterous! Unheard of! Never mind Arthur, nor you, Muriel; she *shall* consent. You may trust me. If you love each other, you shall be married when you wish; and both my father and my mother shall consent.'

'Darling Derwent!' cried Muriel, turning her face to his shoulder, and bursting into tears.

'You are a good old fellow! Thanks for your sympathy,' was Arthur's less enthusiastic rejoinder. But he was glad that the boy had come to his senses. He thought it would make everything easier, and Muriel so much happier.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THINGS STOOD.

GRANTLEY BOURNE had enough material at this moment for talk on all sides. Wilfrid Machell's engagement with Miss Brown de Paumelle and the various circumstances attending thereon;—the sums that had been paid and those which had yet to be paid, as the price of the alliance; the restoration of Machells and the splendid appointments to be made in the left wing where the young people were to be lodged; the date of the marriage and the monogram on the lockets of the bridesmaids; what the settlements were to be, and how old Brown de Paumelle had resisted and how Wilfrid and my lady had driven their bargain hard and home; who was to have the wedding orders and what the gown was to cost—in short, all the gossip lying about such an event as the fringe to its substance was naturally the most prominent circumstance in that temple of talk into which the society of the place surged and congregated.

Then there was the ball, and what everyone had done and what everyone had said; how these young ladies had been dressed and with whom those had flirted; what future marriages were evidently afoot and what coolresses between old friends and acquaintances as evidently afoot; Mr. Brown de Paumelle's rampant vulgarity and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle's underbred timidity; how out of place they all looked and what a ridiculous masquerade the whole thing was—all this made up the chapters in that book of detraction wherein the visiting world writes its comments on its friends and its recognition of hospitality.

The madness of Miss Forbes in taking into her service that dreadful ticket-of-leave man was also a subject by no means exhausted; and the certainty still existing—and cherished—that some night they should all find themselves with their throats cut, gave occasion for much prophetic mourning and present indignation. And now the arrival of this long missing and virtually apocryphal Mr. Smith came as the coping-stone to the whole.

It was a fine time for those who loved to discourse about their neighbours—and who does not?—and the talk which eddied from lip to lip was like a river with the lock-gates lifted. But naturally the coming of Mr. Smith was the sharpest spur of all to the curiosity of the place; and because no one knew anything about him, everyone assumed to know *à*, so that the reports which flew

about were as many as there were possibilities of circumstance or variations to which a theme can be set.

Everyone called, as of course; but it was most extraordinary and disappointing—Mr. Smith was never to be seen. Either he was out, or he was tired and asleep; he had a bad headache that day and could not be disturbed, or he was occupied with agents and men of business whose time was precious and their trains punctual. To be sure, no carriages were seen about the roads on those days when these men from afar—lawyers and agents—stood between Mr. Smith and the local strangers who wished to become his friends; and the railway porters at the Grantley Bourne station knew nothing of them; but all the same there they were at Owlett, closeted with the master according to Mrs. Smith—and who had ever known Mrs. Smith other than truthful if less than confidential? Anyhow, there were always good reasons why the latest arrival should be so invariably invisible; all of which came to the same thing in the end—the neighbourhood called and Mr. Smith did not appear.

Nor did he come to church. Mrs. Smith and the young people came as usual, the Sunday after his arrival; but the husband was absent.

The people were greatly discontented. For some years they had looked forward to this arrival as a pleasant addition to their restricted circle, as well as the solution of an irritating problem. And now, when it had come, this obstinate seclusion made the wheat of knowledge chaff, and evaporated the wine of gossip till only the sour lees of conjecture were left. They questioned Mrs. Smith; but, serene and impenetrable as she had always been, she answered suavely, naturally, but never satisfactorily. At the end of a long conversation she had given no more information than they possessed before; and that without appearing to withhold any. They took comfort however from the fact that Derwent was pale and in noticeably bad spirits, and that Muriel was pale and somewhat pre-occupied too;—which did not look much like joy at the return of the father, said the people with that energy which looks like spite, but which is only baffled curiosity—the dramatic instinct seeking food and finding none, and gnashing its teeth in consequence. Yet her face brightened as she said: 'Dearest papa, yes,' tenderly, as her ejaculation of assent when, to prove her, they remarked how glad she must be to have him at home again and how strange it must have seemed to her not to have known her own father!

Derwent was more reticent; as reticent indeed as if he had been his mother translated. He answered point-blank questions, because obliged by the laws of politeness; but he never went beyond the radical Yes or No which they demanded. When asked things to which he could not give this monosyllabic answer—as: 'Where

had his father been all these years?' he would draw himself up in his haughty way and say: 'Really I cannot go into the list of the stations where my father halted. It would require a gazetteer for that;' or: 'He has not had time to tell us his adventures; or, perhaps: 'Ask my father when you see him. You will understand things better from him than you possibly can through me.'

At all events, he would not gratify anyone's curiosity; and the ill-will that he got by the sparseness of his communications went beyond any that he had yet earned. And he had earned not a little by his personal pride and the stiffness of his moral sentiments alike. For though people resent it as an impiety when your lines of morality are wider than their own, they also resent it as an impertinence when they are closer. And by this view of things young Derwent Smith had been very impertinent indeed.

At home things went somewhat awry in spite of Mrs. Smith's endeavours to lay them straight and keep them smooth. Her one sole object was to ensure her husband's happiness, to make him the supreme pontiff of the home life, the centre of the family worship. It was always the father to the children; never herself, nor them. It was the father's health that must be cared for; the father's convenience that must regulate all goings and comings, and forbid or allow all proposed engagements or occupations; the father's nature that was so beautiful, his judgment that was so sound, his presence among them that was so valuable. The domestic religion which had gone on in his name, when a photograph was the shrine and remembrance the sacrament, she still tried to keep up now when he was there in the body to be judged of according to fact and measured by the general standard. But she had her difficulties; and of these difficulties Derwent—the son who had longed so passionately for the return of his father—was the most formidable.

Keenly alive to the fact that things were not as they seemed, and that underneath all this show of love and worship so strenuously insisted on by the mother was hidden some hideous secret which was to be kept from both himself and Muriel at all costs, Derwent held himself rigidly aloof from the domestic ritual, and refused to join in it anyhow. He was revolted at what seemed to him the falseness of the whole thing—the mother's devotion, the father's acceptance; and if the point of his suspicion was wrong the instinct at least was true—if Edmund Smith had not been a slave-dealer in Africa, he had been perhaps something worse in England. The boy stood apart from it all; but, specially apart from the father. The two indeed were like armed neutrals prepared at any moment for active warfare; though the one was rather repulsed

than belligerent, and the other would not have been belligerent at all had he not felt himself deceived. At any moment Edmund would have clasped his boy to his heart if only he would have thrown himself there; but the proud young neck was stiff, and the sweet memories of childhood were powerless to blind him to the ugly facts of the present. He shrank from the whole household, from father and mother, and even from Muriel; spending his time in riding long distances, as if he could shake off the black care that clung to his saddle by the multiplication of the furlongs put between himself and Owlett—or turning round and round the park of Machells; mounting little eminences whence he could see the house and gardens; happy if he could speak to some of the labourers connected with the place; soothed if he could track the smoke of the chimneys against the sky; solaced if he could gather a few leaves from the woods which belonged to Hilda's father. The hours spent in the house were chiefly employed in writing alliterative poetry of which Hilda was the theme and where the feet were halting.

Muriel, on the contrary, had accepted without reserve this poor papa of theirs whose unknown sorrows demanded such incessant tenderness and self-sacrifice. She saw him only as her mother presented him—as a gentle-natured saint, victim somehow of strange griefs and tyrannous circumstances; but a man eminently lovable, eminently noble, and above suspicion all round. It came in as a natural part of life that she had no chance given her to speak of her engagement, or her promise to Arthur to abide by the choice and decision of love. Mrs. Smith would not allow her to approach the subject. She seemed to know by that fine instinct which made her, as it were, double-sensed, when the dangerous borders were neared; and she warded off her daughter's confidence as skilfully as she had always guarded her own. Either dear papa wanted her, and she must go to him at once; or really she must not interrupt her mother now at this moment when she had to attend to him; and once with more directness of application, when Derwent had announced his intention of writing to his Uncle Louis for that appointment in the diplomatic service on which he had always counted, she said to Muriel that there could not possibly be a question of Derwent's leaving home just yet; dear papa was too fatigued to attend to anything—he wanted so much rest after all that he had undergone! Besides—pointedly—it would be cruel to ask him to part with his boy almost as soon as he had seen him! She was sure, she went on to say, her beautiful eyes fixed imploringly on her daughter, that her beloved children would postpone their own affairs, however important, for just a few weeks till papa was fit to attend to them. Think how long it

was since he had been at home, and what happiness it must be to him to have his darlings once more about him! Could they be so heartless as to interrupt this happiness?—break up this home the instant their long-time exile had reached it?

Her appeals used to seal Muriel's lips and bring the tears to her eyes—they were often now in the mother's, in spite of her frequent wild smiles and sometimes hysterical laughter; that icy self-control which she had maintained for so long seeming to be giving way at both points alike. There was nothing for it but constancy, determination, faith, and the girl's unspoken vow: 'Whatever happens I will be true to him. I am Arthur's now, and no one can separate us.'

And what was true with Muriel was true also with Derwent. The boy's magnificent assurance that he would make his mother consent to his sister's engagement with Arthur Machell went the way of most young assurances—it evaporated into smoke and left no residuum of fact behind. Mrs. Smith simply refused to allow him to speak. Once or twice, when he began, she cut him short peremptorily, and would neither give nor receive any explanation whatsoever. It was not his business; she knew what she was about; Muriel understood her position, and would do her duty; his entering on the question at all showed his ignorance of its bearings—with a thousand other reasons equally stringent and equally factitious. They answered their purpose, however; she stopped her son's mouth as she had already stopped her daughter's, and wept silently in the night for the heart-break to which she was condemning both.

As for the object of all these loving cares and tender devotion—the man who had been so long lost to his family, and who now when restored was so strangely silent as to his past history—the moral change to be expected from him was gradually making itself felt in his ways and manners. He had come crushed, humiliated, broken. His daughter's caresses had agonized him for shame at his unworthiness to receive them; his son's grave eyes had abashed him as if he had been a young archangel touching the hidden sore of his soul; only his wife had been able to soothe him—only her love had not stung him as something worse than open contempt. Now he was beginning to feel himself to be, what that wife tried so hard to represent him, the victim of circumstance rather than the author of his own sorry fate. He had been tempted and led astray by minds stronger and keener-sighted than his own: the evil then lay with them, not with him. He had sinned for a good motive—to keep his wife and children in the position to which they were entitled; judged by motives, he was not only blameless but praiseworthy;

and motives are true while facts are but appearances. And at the worst, his had been only a legal offence, not a moral crime; and if he had sinned he had suffered.

So he reasoned, till the vanity which had always coloured his character came once more to the surface, and from the crushed humility of the first days shaped him into the very fair representation of a rather sad and saintly kind of English gentleman, with mysterious sorrows to be pitied and mysterious wrongs which he had forgiven.

Side by side with this weakness and vanity he had to perfection that class of virtues which chiefly delight women and render a man contemptible among men, the idol of his home. He was sweet tempered, affectionate, complaisant, and generous. His pleasure was to please; and if the return which he demanded was praise which ran into flattery, the accurate recognition of every smallest grace, and a rather appalling amount of personal caressing, these were taxes which both wife and daughter were willing to pay. The wife had shut her eyes to all but the sweeter qualities of the man who, she persuaded herself, had sacrificed himself to her; and the daughter was still under the spell of that childish remembrance by which her father had taken on himself the likeness of Sir Philip Sidney, aided by the charm and fascination of his present loving, tender, mournful, and sympathetic personality. Hence all went well with them, and it was only poor Derwent who suffered.

Meanwhile, Arthur Machell came and went without let or comment. He only saw Muriel and Derwent, for Mrs. Smith had become to him as invisible as her husband; but so long as he might have these long quiet talks with Muriel, hear her say again and again that she loved him and would never forsake him; make light of the difficulties besetting them; promise for a surety her mother's consent in due time; see her look into his eyes with her own so tender, faithful, frank; feel her gently return the pressure of his hand as he held hers so tightly clasped; feel her fresh lips shyly quiver beneath his own, when he kissed her for that sacred twice—once on coming and again on going—while he could thus strengthen and consolidate his love, he gave little heed to the present dumb negation of Muriel's parents, though in spite of all his promises the future active hostility of his own sometimes troubled him. For the former, Muriel would be of age in two years' time; and if two years are an eternity to a young man of twenty-four, passionately in love and not naturally patient, yet Arthur was both wise and strong, and could recognize that true love is worth a stern apprenticeship, and that a future with Muriel would be well bought by present pain. He could wait if need be, as he could hold his own against

all opposition if need be; and what is strength good for if it cannot stand a trial?

Derwent, too, was genial and sympathetic; and if powerless to aid them as he had promised stood by his sister and her lover gallantly. Not to take from the value of his better feeling, perhaps, something was due to the fact that Arthur was the only link now remaining with Hilda, and represented to him a beauty and poetry of life that had somehow passed from him. That tender little love-poem of his had come abruptly to a close; and like fastidious folk reduced by hunger, he was glad to welcome Arthur as the best substitute that he could have for Hilda.

The coolness which had sprung up between Machells and Owlett was marked enough; though nothing overt had been said or done, and Sir Gilbert and Lady Machell, like all the world beside, had called on the invisible Mr. Smith. Still, things are in the air; and that my lady was displeased with Derwent and Muriel was very patently in the air. It was not so much on account of things as they were, as for what they had been; for in truth the excitement and business of all kinds attending Wilfrid's approaching marriage a little veiled the eyes of the watchful mother as to Arthur's present habits. At one time she would have noted his long absences—for the whole of the morning or all the afternoon—with his evident preoccupation when at home; and she would have soon found out the secret spring and have tracked its course without a break. Now she could not afford the time even to observe, still less to follow; and if sometimes she felt the same deadly anxiety that she used to know, the next moment found her deep in plans and details which required all her attention to keep in hand.

And it was because of all that was pressing on her at this moment that Arthur kept silent as to his engagement with Muriel; waiting until Wilfrid's affair should be finally over before opening what he knew would be the terrible fire of his own.

Another reason too why this, with other annoyances, fell into the background in my lady's mind, was because of Guy Perceval. He was so frequently at Machells now, and apparently so intent on forming Hilda after a secret model of his own mind, and if so, for sure purposes, that he had accustomed even Wilfrid to his presence, if his personality was still repugnant enough to the girl. The Machell family was looking up in the world, and Guy put in his claim to a share in the rehabilitation. Not that he was a time-server; but even honest gentlemen worship rising suns, and prosperity attracts friends as surely as a magnet gathers to itself steel filings.

Lady Machell was well content to keep the owner of the Manor

as a prospective investment. She respected him honestly, and believed in his moral worth as she believed in the first chapter of Genesis and the final destruction of the earth by fire. His good heart and fair estate were better to her mind as clauses in the marriage settlement than graceful manner or physical beauty; which last indeed she found it convenient to blaspheme as a wholly unimportant item in the furniture of a man—nay more—as marking a low and sensual nature should it be required as a condition of love, or too much admired when present. Yet she had married Sir Gilbert and was the proud mother of Arthur. As for the 'crazes' which had given Guy such an odd kind of notoriety, she had no doubt that she could do what she liked with them all, new or old, when he was her son-in-law. Nor had she any fear that Hilda's fancy would flow into undesirable channels leading to disastrous outfall, when she should be his well-dowered wife. She was too true a Machell, and had too much of the religion of pride and self-respect, ever to go wrong. Get only money and all the rest would come right, thought my Lady Machell of Machells, taught the exceeding value of wealth by years of penury and pinching. Get only money, you daughters of the nineteenth century, and love and honour and happiness will be slaves bound to the chariot wheels, compelled to follow; or you can go through your triumph without them.

So matters stood for a short time, local history at this moment running fast; when one day—that inevitable day which always comes—Mr. Smith's spell was broken, and the charmed invisibility in which he had lived since his return came to an end. It was Miss Forbes who first unearthed this shy wild game hiding so closely behind the walls and in the woods of Owlett; and Miss Forbes was that unpaid, voluntary crier always found in small societies—what she knew the world very soon knew also, and sometimes with an appendix attached.

She and her sister came one day to Owlett to ask the young people to join in an afternoon which Baby had arranged to give: it was Baby who gave the girlish fêtes for which Tower was famous; Miss Dinah who organised the dinners, and took credit to herself for the larder and the cellar:—and they came upon the mysterious master of the house as suddenly as the prince came on the sleeping beauty in the wood. This was Miss Aurora's simile after they left. Mrs. Smith and Muriel were out; Derwent no one knew where, but in point of fact in his own room, suffering from a severe attack of gloom; and Edmund Smith, fearing no evil, had wandered into the garden, where, stretched on the seat under the tulip tree, he had fallen asleep, as he so often did. When he woke he found

standing over him a coarse-featured, broadly-built, stalwart-looking woman of the hybrid species, with small keen eyes and a shrewd if heavy face. Near her was another woman like a faded wax doll draped in snippets of incongruous finery, peeping from behind this stalwart person's shoulder as an ingénue of fifteen might peep at that strange creature, half lovely, half frightful—a man. Both were gazing at the sleeper till, roused by that occult power of the human presence, he woke and met their eyes fixed on his.

There was no help for it. Flight, silence, concealment were alike impossible. The ordeal had come upon him, and he must meet it as bravely as he could. The instincts of a gentleman and the recollections of society came to his aid; and if both were somewhat rusty from disuse, they were at least fairly serviceable and helped him with more or less good grace at a pinch. He received the ladies with only so much confusion tinging his courtesy as was but natural to a man found sleeping by strange women; talked to them on vague generalities which kept him on the safe side of dangerous tracks—and as he talked to them freely he so far gained in their esteem. They saw nothing unpersonable in him, nothing suspicious, nothing to account for his persistent non-appearance, nor any basis whatsoever for any hypothesis. His seclusion was due then, as he said, simply to excessive fatigue consequent on long and continuous travel, and to the man's natural desire to be left quiet and undisturbed with his wife and family after an absence of so many years—so many that his children were practically strangers to him, whom it was his first duty to learn.

It was all plain and evident enough; and the Misses Forbes shook hands with him cordially, and thought that really he was a most charming person, very pleasant in his manners, and so like—like whom? Not Derwent—and yet there was a strong resemblance to the boy; not Muriel—and yet there was a still stronger resemblance here too; but this was not the likeness which had struck both ladies, and for which neither at the moment could find a name, when suddenly, as they were driving home, Miss Aurora, who had that odd sharpness which sometimes belongs to fools, whereby they occasionally startle—and distance—the wise, cried out:

'Diny! how like he is our Robert Rushton! Did you see it?'

'So he is, Baby, and that's it!' answered Miss Forbes slapping her knee. 'What a smart little angel you are!'

By the evening of the next day Miss Forbes had told the whole neighbourhood of her adventure; how she had found Mr.

Smith asleep; how nice and 'conversable' he was; how much he seemed to have to say; how fond he was of his family; how he had evidently been a handsome man, but how haggard and 'down' he looked now; and really he was a very well-mannered person; winding up her narrative to each with the one same conclusion: 'and the oddest likeness you can imagine to my man Bob Rushton!'

When his wife came home Edmund Smith told her on his side of the adventure that had befallen him in her absence, in terms which would have considerably enlightened Miss Forbes could she have heard them; terms of such terror and distress as went far beyond all apparent reason why. But Mrs. Smith's calm face never changed from the quiet look of pleasant interest with which she listened to him.

'Ah well, it is not to be regretted,' she said when he had finished. 'You must see your neighbours some time, dear love; it is only a question of time, and your feeling of unaccustomedness will soon wear off; it is only that, Edmund.'

'Yes, I know; but the longer I can put off meeting the people the better,' he answered, passing his hand over his oddly-cut hair, and the stubbly beard which he was cultivating with a shy lad's secret assiduity.

She understood the gesture.

'That dear hand!' she said, kissing it reverently.

If the sign of his shame, it was the symbol of her devotion; and the cross which he bore weeping she carried with him as proudly as if it had been the eagles of the triumphal procession wherein he received the honours which he had merited and gathered up the praises that he had earned.

CHAPTER XX.

SHOOTING OFF THE TIES.

It was a beautiful day for Miss Aurora's garden party. Baby always had Queen's weather, Miss Forbes used to say fondly; as if the little one, as she sometimes called her, were a special favourite with Providence, so that a neat series of cosmic miracles was wrought affecting the whole condition of things, because she had invited half-a-dozen idle people to shoot arrows at a bit of painted canvas at the end of an alley, or to drive a shuttlecock over a strip of netting strained on sticks across the lawn. Which is what the doctrine of Queen's weather comes to when dissected.

Being fine, all the world gathered as invited; including of course the young Smiths—Derwent looking very blank and wretched at the first, but warming as time went on—the Brown de Paumelles and the Machells. It was on account of these last two indeed, and the betrothal between their houses, that Miss Aurora had given the garden-party, for which Providence had taken the trouble to secure uninterrupted sunshine. It was her contribution to the congratulations offered on the occasion; also her sop thrown to the curiosity of the place; for society at Grantley Bourne was by no means weary of watching the behaviour of these affianced lovers to each other, trying to find out if he did really care for that common-looking little thing—the majority affirming that he did not and could not; and if she could possibly love that heavy, plain, ill-tempered fellow whose tongue was as sharp as his face was sour—the majority here too saying that it was impossible.

They had enough to do in observing the lovers to-day, the gratuitous play offered for their amusement being rather richly mounted, all things considered. Between Jemima's spasmodic attempts at skittishness—coming so oddly in the midst of her normal shyness, and the one as full of awkwardness as the other—and Wilfrid's baffling stoicism, there was ample room for that ridicule which friends make it a matter of conscience to bestow on each other, and for the conjectures which are never so fruitful as when they have no solid foundation in fact.

Possessed by the belief that Wilfrid loved her for herself, and divided between abject fear of him as a man and the natural desire of an underbred girl to parade her conquest, Jemima executed a series of pantomimes which it took all the Machell philosophy based on the de Paumelle millions to bear with becoming fortitude. She called 'the Captain' to her with a jerky wave of her hand and a pecking movement of her head, irresistibly suggestive of a bird, and a bird only half-fledged; and when in obedience to her summons he had moved his tall frame near to her diminutive person, she laughed with that mixture of nervousness and silliness which is so irritating to a proud man made into a butt for contemptible jokers, and so idiotic in every sense, and told him she had nothing to say to him, and he might go home again the way he came. She dropped her handkerchief by design, and bade him pick it up with what she thought was the pretty imperiousness of a spoiled beauty and an adored mistress; she sought to send him into temporary despair by making such eyes as she could command at Derwent Smith, in spite of his standoffishness as she called his pride and reserve, or by giggling with George Lucraft, a pert youth

of the 'Arry species whom naturally she would have preferred for her companion and playmate to all others at Grantley Bourne; and when she thought that she had sufficiently bruised and broken her disheartened lover, to console him for her cruelty she gave him her fan to hold as she would have given a stick to a begging Newfoundland. If he laid it down to do some little service to Miss Aurora say—she, poor old dear, not too proud to accept crumbs where others had the loaf, kissing-crust and alice—she would take it up with what was her idea of saucy archness, misguided little girl—making believe to pout, as if Wilfrid Machell were no more formidable than that same honest 'Arry to whom nature had addressed her had not fortune stepped in and blotted out the label with her golden pen.

But at a glance from him—that grave, displeased glance which she had already learned and trembled under—her thin film of skittishness dissolved like snow beneath a shower, and she collapsed into the crushed condition natural to her. Then she would shrink away to her mother, and looking piteously into her face, say in a frightened whisper:—

'Oh, ma! whatever shall I do? I've gone and offended the Captain, till he's as cross as cross, and I'm that frightened I scarcely know my head from my heels or which end I'm standing on!'

As she had none of that reticent self-control which comes mainly by the education of Society, if sometimes it is natural and instinctive, the bystanders were made free of all the acts and scenes of the little drama as it was played between the two, and found in its fitful progress far more amusement than that which Miss Aurora had provided in the more legitimate ways of croquet and lawn-tennis, archery and *les grâces*.

But there was something else to watch—something beside the manners of Wilfrid Machell and Jemima Brown de Paumelle; and to the full as interesting. This was best expressed in the question put so severely by Mrs. Constantine to Mrs. Lucraft: 'What did Arthur Machell mean by the devoted attention which he was paying to Muriel Smith?' and by Mrs. Lucraft's characteristic answer: 'It looks like a case, surely!'

It was the first time that Arthur and Muriel had met in public since the famous ball which had given them to each other; the first time that the mother had seen her favourite son with the girl whom she so specially feared since he had justified those fears and leaped into the abyss; and Arthur seemed bent on showing both the world and that mother how things stood between him and Muriel. If he had not cared to tell his people before now by reason of their preoccupation with Wilfrid's affairs, he was far

from intending to conceal the truth when he had a natural opportunity for declaring it. And it must be confessed that he declared it broadly enough.

His mother's displeasure, ill-concealed from the world and so evident to him, at first shown only in the look of her eyes and the tone of her voice; her whispered remonstrances, stern, pleading, angry as he grew more demonstrative and she more convinced; her endeavours to detach him from Muriel now on one plea and now on another, and none successful; Wilfrid's sarcastic comments, and that assumption of the elder brother's superiority so galling to a young fellow like Arthur, high-spirited but well-bred, and in the presence of the woman whom he loves and who loves him; Miss Dinah's winks and nudges, coarse hints and questionable jokes; Miss Aurora's gushing sympathy, which perhaps made the broadest trial of all—nothing touched him, nor indeed seemed to be seen by him. He still went on as he had begun, talking only to Muriel, and taking exclusive possession of her in that natural way of attention which seemed to assume the right to adjust her gloves, her belt, her armet for the archery—to be her partner in croquet—to coach her in badminton—handing her over to her brother on loan, and to be taken care of for him till he could claim her again, when he was forced to leave her for a moment—standing between her and all intruders of either sex as a man does when he has taken a woman by the royal right of love to be his own.

Not the most artfully planned manœuvres lured him from his post or got the better of his determination. Even when Hilda was confided to his care in the archery-ground—she being the sacred oriflamme of the Machells, the temporary guardian of whom was assumed to be solemnly consecrated to her exclusive service for the time being—while my lady went into the house for the one circumstance of personal refreshment to which she was a slave, that indispensable four o'clock cup of tea; even then he kept himself to Muriel as before, and delivered up Hilda to the care of Derwent. It is only fair, however, to say that he suspected no more how things were between his little sister and the boy than this latter had suspected how they had been between him and Muriel. Loving Muriel even as he did, and prepared to stand by that love in the presence of all powers and against the pressure of all influences, he would have hesitated before—as yet—countenancing a like affair between those other two. He might take whom he would, but Hilda's husband must be one whose alliance would exalt, not depreciate, her personal value; and Muriel's brother was of not such circumstance or character as would satisfy a Machell in the candidate for the hand of the daughter of the house.

All this, however, was in the clouds and the winds, and the only thing real and tangible was that he, Arthur Machell, was in love with and engaged to Muriel Smith, and meant to hold what he had got and fulfil what he had promised; that his people had to make up their minds to accept what they could not refuse; that when he was determined he was also immovable; and that a sunny temper and facile kind of outside nature in a man are quite compatible with an iron will when a resolution is once taken—and the object of it is a woman.

Lady Machell was more disturbed to-day than she had been for years. She was very angry with Arthur, very bitter and unjust to Muriel after the manner of mothers in general when their sons love for love and not by prudence; but she was still more angry with herself in that she had not checked with a high hand when she first suspected it this mad passion which, ruining her best, would make even Wilfrid's gain no better than a loss. She was his mother; he had always been loving and dutiful; had she taken it at the first she could have prevented and conquered. Now perhaps it was too late. His manner to Muriel, tender, devoted, was more assured than is the manner of a man who is still only seeking and has not yet won; and hers to him had something of the happy rest of confession, something of the peace of certainty, if also tinged with the confusion, the strangeness, the shy exultation of a love that is not acknowledged to the world. The way in which he braved the curious glances of the people about and set loose their idle tongues also was sufficient indication to one who could read by signs; and as the day wore on Lady Machell had simply to watch and be confirmed—Arthur as pleasant, smiling, and affectionate to herself as usual, but utterly untouched by her displeasure and indifferent to her desires.

They were all in the avenue where the targets were set, Muriel and Hilda the best players on the ladies' side as Arthur and Derwent were on the men's. It was an accomplishment in which poor little Jemima was even more deficient than that of keeping accurate time with her feet to music set in three-four measure; but she sat near her mother under the tree, having exhausted her little stock of pretensions and being now subdued and inoffensive. And she was better pleased to be left there quietly as Jemmy with her poor old ma than if she had been called on to take a part among the swells.

The four crack shots, as Miss Dinah called them, were shooting with the two divisions of course; but there was every chance of the match soon centering in themselves and their respective ties. And indeed it came to this soon after Wilfrid was out of the field,

having shot away his last arrow into space, and so losing the score. His aim was destroyed by a sudden flash across his eyes, as he saw Arthur adjust Muriel's finger-stalls, and hold her hand longer than was at all necessary, looking into her face the while—she looking up once into his—with what the dullest must have seen was love in both. Wilfrid's arrow went wide as his eyes flashed and his heavy face contracted with a jealous man's sudden pain; and soon after this the best four were left to themselves to shoot off the ties—Muriel and Hilda having scored even, and Derwent and Arthur.

Then came Miss Aurora's shrill schemes of delight as she flitted to and fro, apparently in a state of the wildest excitement; offering bets of macaroons and sugar-plumbs on Arthur and Muriel, declaring mysteriously that if they won something else would happen—taking this as the sign. She would not say what this something was, but it was something very nice and pretty—dancing her curls and laughing; they would soon learn all about it; she had, long ago!—and so perhaps had they.

'But I don't see why the others should not have their chance as well—a double event, don't you call it then?' cried Miss Aurora, who had, as has been said before, that odd occasional sharpness which sometimes characterises fool's. 'We should have all our belles and beaux matched then.'

'Not all, Baby,' said Miss Dinah with meaning. 'I know one little belle that would be kept out of the fire.'

On which Miss Aurora laughed with a good imitation of embarrassment; and the guests laughed too; but whispered to each other behind their fans and hands that really these old women were the most ridiculous creatures in existence, and that it was hard to say which was the sillier of the two.

Suddenly a thought struck Miss Aurora's brain. With a sly look and a shrill laugh she ran through the avenue, catching Guy Perceval by the way, till she came to the flower-beds on the lawn. Here she clapped her hands and set all her gowns and ribbons, her bows and ends and flowers and jingling chains and charms in motion, while she flitted about among the beds, gathering flowers with the glee of a child, and as she thought with the grace of a nymph.

'Hold the basket, like a dear man,' she said girlishly to the master of the Manor. 'I am going to make a consolation-prize.'

She chose her flowers quickly—a delicate moss-rose bud, a pansy, jessamine, and forget-me-nots; and, as she was deft with her fingers, she soon twisted up a bunch of jessamine with a purple pansy in the centre for the one, of forget-me-nots surrounding a moss-rose bud just opening for the other. She then tied each with

rather broad white ribbon, the bows and ends of which she made conspicuous and significant; and ran back into the avenue—the wind blowing her scanty tresses from her face and giving her a scraped and touzled look, which she thought must be delightfully suggestive of youth, nature, the wild woods, fawn-like nymphs, and the like, all represented and reproduced in her. (Of a surety that famous giftie, which is granted to so few, had never been assigned to Miss Aurora Forbes !

Meanwhile, the ties had been shot off; the contest ending by Arthur on his side and Muriel on hers winning the highest score. They carried the heaviest metal, as Miss Dinah said; and the heaviest metal tells in the long run. But it was quite right; just as it should be, she had added with a wink; and she was sure that Dimples for one was not displeased with things as they were, nor, she would be sworn, was her gallant young soldier, Mr. Arthur.

‘And you two are just as well matched, and make just as nice a couple!’ cried Miss Aurora gushingly to Derwent and Hilda, standing near together; he excusing his defeat and showing how it was due to accident—pure accident—and not to his own comparative deficiency; she, secretly more annoyed than she cared to show, but, always remembering the obligations of good-breeding and her Machelhood in the sweetest way possible, congratulating dear Muriel on her greater skill. ‘Look!’ continued the gay young creature, ‘I have made a consolation-prize—one for each. Have I not chosen well for you?’ she added archly, as she gave Derwent the forget-me-nots round the moss-rose bud, and to Hilda the jessamine with its central purple pansy.

‘That is just like you, Miss Aurora!—always so kind and thoughtful! I will keep mine for all my life as an emblem,’ cried Derwent with the ecstatic look of a youthful poet who has seen something rare and beautiful; while Hilda, passing the tip of her little finger caressingly over the pansy, said with charming simplicity, but warmly:—

‘What a beauty this is!’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Aurora twining her arms round the slender waist of the pretty little girl; ‘two rosebuds on one stem. I thought it looked like Mr. Derwent, proud and princely and velvety, you know; just as that dear little moss-rose looked like you, you precious little thing. You see I gave you to each other, you dear things; you look such a sweet pair!’ And then she laughed, while Hilda stole a glance up at Derwent, who was still in that state when glances go for words and a smile is equal to a promise.

‘I would rather have my defeat—our defeat—and our consolation-prizes than any victory in the world,’ he said in a low voice to Hilda. ‘It is in itself the greatest victory.’

'It is very pretty,' she answered smiling. 'I am so fond of forget-me-nots. They go so well with roses.'

'So I think,' he answered with meaning. 'And are you fond of pansies too?'

'Yes; and this is a darling,' she answered.

He took it from her hands as if to examine it, and gave his own to her; he was obliged to be careful, wily, more than circumspect, with all the eyes that were about them. As things looked, it was only a boy and a girl comparing toys.

When they restored each bouquet to its proper owner, Derwent bent his head and whispered: 'Now you have given yourself to me, and have accepted me. Have you not?'

'Yes, these are my flowers, and those are yours,' answered Hilda, just as her mother told Guy Perceval, sharply to bring her daughter to her; and Guy thrusting himself between the children, as Miss Aurora called them, offered Hilda his arm to take her to Lady Machell coming down the avenue from her afternoon tea.

'If you were wise, Miss Hilda, you would not encourage that forward young man's attentions,' said Guy in his high-pitched voice, as he led her off, triumphant for his own part, but as a captive to her thinking. 'It is young men like him who play the mischief with a girl's life and prospects.'

'I do not know what you mean,' said Hilda Machell, opening her eyes to their fullest and looking up with the loveliest expression of childlike candour.

'I am glad to hear it,' he answered. 'It is better for you that you do not. But what you do not understand for yourself you must let your friends arrange for you.'

'I shall be very glad,' said Hilda prettily. 'I should be very sorry to have to manage things for myself.'

And Guy Perceval, looking into her sweet, childish, candid face, thought that the purity, softness, tenderness, and womanly charm which he had once so much admired in Muriel Smith were repeated here in Hilda Machell with even greater loveliness; and that on the whole the latter was the more desirable creature of the two, Lady Machell as against Mrs. Smith counting at least for honours in the game.

But Derwent, emboldened by the state of things between Arthur and Muriel, a little thrown off his balance by Miss Aurora's injudicious sympathy, and for the moment forgetful of his father and the terrible suspicion of slave-dealing hanging about him, followed Hilda to the sacred fastness of her mother's presence, where, taught craft by love, he bore Lady Machell's well-bred snubs with

such unruffled good humour, paying her such devoted attention as he stood in a gentleman-in-waiting kind of attitude by her chair, and looking the while so supremely handsome and picturesque that in spite of herself he softened her, so far as she herself was concerned, and made her feel really humane and almost maternal towards him. But when she thought of him as an admirer, perhaps an aspirant for Hilda, she longed for the olden times which gave the power of *lettres de cachet* to the blue blood when intrusive plebeians laid their unwelcome hands on the ark of the anointed, and dared to believe that a man's worth was equal to a parchment patent. So that her manners were a curious mixture of softness and anger in rapid alternation; but as Guy Perceval was mounting guard over Hilda, and not a look could pass between her and her young detrimental without being intercepted by the way, my lady yielded by fine degrees to that feminine quality which always does make women yield, by fine degrees or otherwise, to the insistence of a handsome man laying himself out to win favour; and poor Derwent felt that all was won because Lady Machell smiled twice as she spoke to him, and once by misadventure called him 'Derwent.'

As for the quarrel between him and Guy, it had passed into that state of things so well known in small societies, when Guy as the elder cut Derwent, and Derwent as the younger ignored Guy. The two met, but did not speak; and each went through the fiction of assuming that the other did not exist. Sometimes indeed Guy talked at Derwent, and sometimes Derwent fulminated over the head of Guy; but for the most part they met in silence and parted in disdain, and spared the world about them the trouble of considering the merits of the case.

Flitting to and fro among her guests, Miss Aurora finally perched on the arm of a garden seat where Arthur and Muriel were sitting.

'Miss Muriel,' she said gaily, 'I want your help.'

'Yes?' said Muriel, smiling.

'I am gathering rose-leaves for my pot-pourri—will you come and help me?'

'Willingly,' said Muriel, suspecting nothing. 'When?'

'To-morrow,' said Miss Aurora. 'Will you and your brother come to luncheon? or after? Which you like; only come;' giggling.

'We will come after,' answered Muriel, thinking of her father.

'We can do a great deal in an afternoon.'

'A rose-leaf and jessamine bee!' cried Miss Aurora girlishly.

'What a charming idea! is it not, Mr. Arthur?'

'So charming that I think I shall join you,' was his answer.

Muriel looked up at him, and Miss Aurora clapped her hands.

'Do!' she cried: 'but please don't tell—don't tell anybody. I want to have it all to myself; a nice little select party of flower-gatherers.'

'It will be delightful,' said Muriel.

'The best idea I have heard for a long time,' added Arthur.

'Well then, it is agreed; you will all three come?'

'Yes, Derwent and I will,' said Muriel.

'And you may count on me,' said Arthur.

'And you will not tell?'

'Not a soul!'

'No!' laughed Muriel. 'We will keep it a dead secret.'

'So sweet of you!' gurgled Miss Aurora as she fluttered off, leaving the lovers to themselves, and making them understand her good intentions by saying as her parting salute: 'Now I will leave you, you dear things. I am sure you would rather be to your two selves than with a tiresome third to interfere! Oh! don't say no, Muriel! I can see as well as my betters!' with a playful jingle of her earrings, and an airy dancing of her feathery tresses, as she emphasized her words by a shrill peal of laughter.

She then skirmished in her light way into the Machell quartette under the trees, intent on giving all the young people a chance, and thinking to play the part of a benevolent fairy by helping on their love affair, whether wise or unwise, likely to come to good and solid issues or to end in smoke and despair. Indeed she was at all times the benevolent fairy bent on helping all love affairs whatsoever; and next to having adorers at her own feet, liked to lay cushions handy for adorers at the feet of others.

'Come and take a little turn with me,' she said, putting her hand through Hilda's arm. 'I declare I have not spoken a word to you all the day. I hope you have enjoyed yourself, you dear little thing, but I have been really most cruelly neglectful of you!'

On which she led the girl down the avenue, and when well out of hearing said:—

'What a lovely bracelet you have, dear! I have never seen it before. How pretty! Where did you buy it? Who gave it to you?'

It was a pretty little bracelet of Swiss enamel;—roses and forget-me-nots, like Derwent's bouquet.

'Wilfrid gave it to me,' said Hilda.

Miss Aurora unclasped it from her arm.

'How very lovely!' she cried enthusiastically. 'What a sweet pattern! Would you mind lending it to me to copy? Just for to-night; I will not keep it longer. Come for it to-morrow after luncheon. Ask your brother, Mr. Arthur, to bring you. Can you?'

'I dare say mother will let me come,' the girl answered with one sharp glance at the kindly, weak, and waggish face of this antiquated Mercury accredited by Venus, this faded sympathiser with rosebuds and young love. 'I wonder why,' she thought to herself; but as life was rather dull for Hilda in the ordinary run of things, she was by no means disposed to be critical about the mouths of her gift-horses.

'Then you will come?' asked Miss Aurora.

'If mother will let me,' answered Hilda.

'Ask her prettily to-morrow, you little dear,' said the elder.

'Not to-day?' returned the girl innocently.

'No, not to-day; you see she might be anxious about your bracelet—think perhaps I meant to steal it'—laughing a little idiotically—'but to-morrow. Don't you see?'

'Yes,' said Hilda demurely; 'so I will.'

With this they went back to the group under the trees, just as Lady Machell had risen to say good-bye to Miss Forbes and Mrs. Brown de Paumelle.

'Come, Hilda!' she said a little sharply; 'I am waiting for you.'

'Yes, mother,' answered Hilda meekly. 'I am so sorry that I have kept you.'

'That child has the germ of a most remarkably sweet woman in her,' thought Guy Perceval approvingly.

'What an angel of beauty and goodness she is!' thought Derwent with unnecessary emotion.

'Wilfrid,' said Lady Machell in a low, stern, agitated whisper; 'make your brother walk home with you; and for God's sake speak to him before he has ruined himself for life.'

'It is too late, mother,' said Wilfrid heavily; 'but I will do what I can.'

The company now began to melt away, and soon all had gone save Wilfrid and Arthur Machell, when the elder, going over to his brother, said in a strange voice:—

'I am walking, Arthur; will you come with me?'

'Willingly,' said Arthur quickly, smiling and setting his shoulders square.

His hour had come, and he was not sorry to begin the struggle. He was grieved for them all, and for the annoyance that he was about to give them; but it could not be helped, and in time they would be reconciled. His mother's displeasure was the penalty attached to the exquisite prize that he had won; but no penalty could overmatch the value of that prize; and if the whole world had to be lost for the gaining of Muriel, he felt that, as he had said

to Mrs. Smith, it would be the world well lost. Had he spoken the truth, as men do not and dare not speak it, Wilfrid would have answered Amen.

CHAPTER XXI.

HIS ELDER BROTHER.

'I THOUGHT you would have said something to me before now about my marriage,' Wilfrid began with a slight accent of surprise artificially laid on his voice, one less slight of displeasure that was not artificial.

'It was rather difficult to know what to say,' returned Arthur candidly.

'Why?'

'Well, you know, frankly, Will, it is scarcely the kind of thing one would have expected from you,' he answered.

'No; as how, pray?' with disagreeable politeness.

'Oh, nothing against them all morally; nothing against her personally; but it is not the kind of thing all round that I should have thought you would have done—not the choice that I should have expected from you anyhow.'

'So you think that I have chosen?' Wilfrid asked with an odd emphasis.

'I do not suppose you would let anyone choose for you,' returned his brother.

'Anyone; perhaps not. But circumstances might, necessity might.'

'I cannot quite see it,' said Arthur. 'A man ought to be the master of his own fate, and I cannot understand sacrifice when a little energy on one's own part would bring things straight.'

'Could it?'

'Yes,' said the younger brother firmly; 'a man's courage and energy can always pull him through.'

'How in my case, Arthur?—in ours, I should say.'

'I am not prepared with a scheme off-hand like this,' he answered. 'One cannot build up a theory, mark out a career, all in a moment; but if it had been my affair I would have done something—anything—rather than have married for money against my inclination. For that is what it comes to, Will, if, as you say, you have chosen your wife by necessity, not inclination.'

'I do not doubt you, Arthur. This is just what I believe of

you,' said Wilfrid sarcastically. 'But you see a man must sacrifice his inclination at times for higher duties; and we Machells must.'

'We Machells need not,' said Arthur hastily. 'While there is a man's life to be lived out of England I would not lead a slave's in it.'

'Which means in plain words that you prefer inclination to duty, and yourself to your family.'

'I prefer work and the woman I love to money and a woman I do not love,' he answered.

'Most men would. It is only a question of which is the right thing for others,' Wilfrid said with meaning. 'Surely you cannot think that I like the marriage I am about to make?' he went on with rising bitterness. 'What you said just now is only too true—for herself, poor little soul, she is the last woman in the world that I would have chosen, and her people the last with whom I would have associated myself, had I been a free agent. But I am not. I owe myself to my family, as you do. Our first duty is to our own people, and to our name.'

'I am half glad, if sorry for you, Will, that you have chosen as you have out of what I think is a mistaken idea of your duty, and not after your own idea of what is best for yourself,' Arthur replied, skirting by the injunction.

'Having chosen, however, I stand by my choice and shall make the best of it,' said Wilfrid steadily. 'She shall never know what it has cost me;—as one other shall never know.'

His voice did not break nor tremble as he said this. It only deepened into that kind of monotone which expresses with some as much pain as others express by their tears.

Arthur looked up, and the eyes of the brothers met.

'What other?' asked the younger in frank surprise.

Wilfrid was notoriously reticent in his family, and as notoriously commonplace and unsentimental. He was supposed to be incapable of an idealism of any kind; to be only the plain, practical, hard-headed Englishman, leading a decorous public life supplemented by one in private, perhaps not so decorous, where his own will stood for both law and Gospel; and to find him now with a romance on the one hand and prepared to tell it on the other, was something that surprised his brother beyond the half-natural self-deception common to brothers, who think that they know all about everything, and therefore see nothing so very wonderful when that everything comes out.

'What other?' he repeated.

'That is nothing to the purpose,' answered Wilfrid; 'but I will tell you something that may be of use to you in forming your own

decision in life. I am not a man to talk much of myself, as you know, or to make a parade of my feelings. Whether I suffer or am happy—happy! who is?' he broke in bitterly—'is generally unknown to anyone; but'—he stopped for a moment, and his heavy face grew paler and more leaden-coloured than before. This was the only sign that he gave of the pain which had gathered round his heart, and his hesitation of speech was but for an instant. He had wrestled too long with pain and himself to give way now; and there was also a certain feeling of pride in being able to conquer himself, which the self-controlled know if they do not confess—a certain feeling of contempt for the ignorance of their companions as to the inner truth of things, which helps proud souls as a tonic helps weak bodies. 'I want to tell you now,' he went on to say, 'that although I am marrying Miss de Paumelle I love one whom I cannot marry, as few men in the world have loved, or can. But I have never shown what I feel. To what use? She has no fortune, and Machells has to be redeemed. I have seen her at times almost daily, and I have seen other men about her whom I know I could have cut out; yet I have let her drift from me in silence, remembering my duty to my family and to her. And now I am putting this marriage as an eternal barrier between us, with the feeling of going down alive into the grave. And what I can do others can, and ought.'

'You are a fine fellow, Will, and I respect you more than I ever did before,' said Arthur warmly; 'but I do not agree with you. You sacrifice your own happiness, and perhaps that of another—if she would have loved you as you say, not perhaps, but certainly—and you are marrying a woman who, let you be as kind to her as you like, will find out sooner or later that you do not love her and that you have taken her for her money; and all for what?'

'For what is more to the life of a man than the love of any one woman in the world,' said Wilfrid; 'for the sake of honour and duty, and the good of my people if not for my own individual happiness.'

'Well, be it so. If you think this, you have your reward,' Arthur answered. 'You are the eldest son; you inherit Machells; you hold the family name in trust, and are our great man in the county—you give up love for ambition and a woman for money. Perhaps you are right; in your position at all events; but right or wrong, you have both your object and your compensation. An eldest son has duties which we younger ones have not, just as you have privileges and advantages which we have not. Things equalize themselves, and neither has all the plume.'

'A family hangs together. It is not centered in the eldest son.'

We are brothers, Arthur, and we have our father and mother, and sister, in common.'

'You have made the sacrifice of yourself for them and Machella,' returned Arthur. 'All that is wanting for the old name and place you have got now.'

'A sacrifice for you to profit by? I thought you were a man of higher spirit than this,' sneered Wilfrid coldly. 'You have always posed for a rather remarkable amount of honour and independence. I should scarcely have expected that you would have made your own gain out of my loss.'

'I do not make my gain out of your loss, Will. This marriage does not touch me anywhere. If it gave you more millions than it does, I would not ask you for the loan of a hundred pounds to float myself with. I would do just as I should if you had married without sixpence—that woman you love—and, to be as frank with you as you have been to me, as I shall do.'

'Will you tell me how it is to be done? You have decided on marrying without money, but as you cannot live without it you must have some plan in your head, I suppose, for getting it. Bread and meat are necessities, and ravens are out of fashion.'

'My plan is a very simple one,' answered Arthur. 'Australia.' 'The bush?'

'The bush if I can do nothing better.'

'And your wife?' He could not bring himself to say Muriel, to indicate his knowledge by name. 'Is she to be the typical bushman's wife?—to cook and bake and wash and scrub, with half a dozen young barbarians sprawling in the mud in as many years? Is this the condition to which your idea of the best kind of manly love will bring her? It seems to me that the truer manliness would be to give her up altogether rather than drag her down into such degradation as this.'

'I will try not to drag her down, nor yet to degrade her,' said Arthur with a heightened colour, but keeping his calmness. 'And perhaps—'

'Perhaps! A man founds his life on a "perhaps"! What childishness!' interrupted Wilfrid scornfully.

'Not a bad foundation if it means hope with a strong dash of certainty and a resolute determination not to be beaten,' he replied good-humouredly. 'At all events perhaps—which means a great deal with me, Will—I shall not take Muriel to the bush, nor set her to the work of a common servant. One can give up the superfluous softness of an old civilization without plunging into the poverty of savage life. There are middle ways, and I mean to take one of them.'

Wilfrid's face changed, and for a moment he could not speak. Something rose into his throat that choked his voice, strong as he was and used to self-control. But the rush of passion, despair, hatred for his brother's love and contempt for his weakness in yielding to it, which suddenly swept over him, were too much for him, and he was silent from very inability to speak. At last he said :

'You are determined to marry her?'

'Determined,' said Arthur.

'At all costs?'

'At all.'

'And she?'

'Will keep as true to me as I to her.'

'My mother's opposition will do nothing!'

'Nothing.'

'You will force on your family a woman whom they will not receive?'

'No, I will not force her on you. I will take her away. You will not have the chance of rejecting her,' said Arthur, dropping the frank good-humour which until now he had maintained, and turning on Wilfrid with as much steady pride and burning passion, as much undisguised disdain and haughty resoluteness as his own. 'Her association with you, Will, is the last thing you need fear!'

Wilfrid, usually so sparing of his words, so quick to recognize the futility of talk and the right of a man to his own life, seemed suddenly afflicted with a woman's pertinacity. His irritation against his brother overpowered him, and he lost both his good sense and self-command.

'You are really contemptible, Arthur!' he said angrily. 'You give up the man's life for the boy's; your position as an English gentleman, your family name, your future—and hers—all you throw to the winds for a boyish passion which better men than you have both felt more deeply and conquered more nobly.'

'Put it as you like so far as I am concerned,' said Arthur with an effort. 'There are always two ways of putting everything, and if you leave her alone I can bear your hard words for myself.'

He meant to come out of the fray victorious, but it was difficult.

'Yes, there are two ways—the right and the wrong; and yours is the wrong,' answered Wilfrid.

'As we cannot agree on that, we might as well drop the conversation,' said Arthur. 'We understand each other, and further talk is useless.'

'If you had had patience for a month or two, until I had got things a little settled, I would have made your fortune with my own,' said Wilfrid a little grandly.

'Thanks. You were always good; but I do not want any man to make my fortune,' said Arthur quickly. 'I prefer to make my own. I can work; and I would rather work for myself than buy idleness with old Brown de Paumelle's money.'

'It seems to me, Arthur, that you have stored all your honour and high spirit in the wrong places,' burst out Wilfrid irritably. 'What you might accept without loss of dignity you reject, and what you ought not to do, if you were governed by any of the common-sense principles of an honourable man, that you cling to as the sign of your independence. I thought you had been less of a boy by now.'

'Look here, Will,' said Arthur; 'this has lasted long enough. Drop it now. You have done your elder-brother duty by trying to persuade me against my marriage, and you have not succeeded; so now—basta! We are brothers; but we are men; and the limit has been reached.' Then in quite another tone and manner he said, after a moment's pause: 'Have you fixed the date of your marriage, Will? When is it to be?'

'The fifth of September,' said Wilfrid, following his brother's lead with sudden coolness. 'I shall have the birds, as we go to Scotland for the month. There will be only a week to wait.'

Then the conversation fell on to a thousand different subjects which served as fencework between the brothers and danger until they reached Machells, when the interview, which was to have done so much and which did so little, came to an end, leaving Arthur confessedly engaged to Muriel Smith, and the family, as represented by Wilfrid, distinctly opposed to the marriage.

'Did you speak to your brother?' asked Lady Machell, meeting Wilfrid in the hall.

'It is too late,' he answered curtly. 'He is engaged, and his mind is made up.'

'Then I will prevent it,' said my lady, instinctively stiffening her tall figure and bringing her lips into a thin line.

'You may spare yourself the trouble, mother,' returned her son. 'Arthur is a Machell, and recognizes nothing stronger than his own will.'

'He shall recognize his mother's power,' was her reply, made proudly as Arthur came through the doorway, wondering at that moment for how long the old home would remain open to him, now that his contumaciousness was fully acknowledged.

Nothing, however, was said, and to all appearance the hatchet was buried under the softest layer of moss and flowers that could be made out of fraternal accord and family peace. Hilda played some accompaniments, and her brothers sang bass and baritone to her small but pure soprano; Sir Gilbert and my lady had their time-honoured rubbers of écarté, followed by cribbage and then by bésique; and save that a certain air of artificiality was in the calm which reigned everywhere, the evening passed like a domestic idyll all the personages of which were unconscious of present danger or future disturbance. It was a well-acted little drama of pretence—one of those which it makes people angry to call by their right name, but which, under various mountings, possess the stage of human life to the exclusion of that unwelcome intruder, sincerity—that offspring of Ithuriel, lauded as a virtue in heaven, but treated as a crime on earth.

The next morning passed in the same kind of lull which is more dangerous than discussion when cross-winds and counter-currents are about. Everything was almost oppressively sweet and waxy. No one said a disagreeable word or broached a hazardous subject; though, for the matter of that, no one touched an honest one; for, save Sir Gilbert, who was content that his clever wife should manage events when they did not manage her, everyone was thinking of things to which no vocal shape could be given save at the cost of blowing up the whole temple of peace which they had built so laboriously and leaving themselves confessed for what they were—kinsmen—and with each other. As this would have been premature, things went well together till luncheon was over, and then Lady Machell, who had ordered the pony carriage betimes, announced her intention of driving herself alone to Owlett. As she said this she looked full at Arthur, watching to see how he would take what she felt to be the first shot fired. For all demonstration he turned rather quickly to his brother and said:—

‘You were my interpreter, Will?’

‘Yes,’ was the reply.

‘All right,’ said Arthur, getting up from the table and going round to his mother. ‘Dear mother,’ he said in a low but clear voice, ‘I am sorry to do anything to grieve you; believe me that I am. But there are moments in a man’s life when he must grieve his people, if they set themselves against him; and this is one of them.’

‘When they set themselves against him!—when he opposes, insults, and destroys them you mean, Arthur!’ said Lady Machell angrily. Suddenly changing her tone, she added: ‘Do not let us discuss that now; we will wait for the end.’

'Yes, let us wait for the end. Only promise me, mother, to be reconciled to me when that end does come!' said Arthur lovingly.

'I promise nothing,' she answered in a hard tone. 'I know only the disgrace and madness of the present.'

He took his hand from her shoulder where he had laid it. For himself he could bear much; but when their words hit Muriel, then his blood was aflame, and he knew nothing but that he was her champion against the world—neither sister nor mother, neither family nor fortune, so near to him or so precious as her beloved self.

'Disgrace!' he said; 'what do you mean, mother? Will it be a disgrace to her to be allied to us? There can be none coming from her to us!'

'You are mad!' said Lady Machell with an uncontrollable burst of angry contempt: 'these pitiful ravings of a love-sick boy!'

'Mad as all men are mad, mother, who choose for themselves against the world, and prefer truth and love to money and class ambition.'

'Who prefer their own selfish desires, their own wicked indulgence to duty,' returned Lady Machell, as Wilfrid had said before her. 'You have lost your perception of truth, Arthur, with your sense of duty and honour.'

'You will think better of me in time, mother,' was his reply. 'I can trust to time—and the mother's heart.'

Saying which he once more laid his hand on her shoulder with a caressing gesture, and left the room, Sir Gilbert looking at him as he passed, without a muscle of his face moving but a world of love shining in his quiet eyes, and Lady Machell, choking back her tears, confessing to herself that she had taken nothing by her move, and that now she had but one chance left—Mrs. Smith of Owlett.

'If you do not want me for anything, mother, may I go to Tower for my bracelet?' asked Hilda, looking up suddenly and speaking in her innocent way as if she had heard nothing that had gone on, and had just wakened out of a dream. She had that way of springing her little requests on her people. It was one of her ideas that it was safest to give no time for consideration; and that it is easier to snatch a Yee than to work for it.

'What about your bracelet?' asked Lady Machell sharply. Her eyes were full of hot tears for grief and anger at Arthur's madness, and it was a relief to turn against her daughter who had done nothing wrong—but who might, who knows?

'Miss Aurora took it to copy the pattern, and told me to call for it to-day,' returned Hilda meekly.

'It is the first I have heard of it,' my lady said still more sharply.

'Yes,' said Hilda sweetly. 'I did not say anything about it till I saw what you were going to do, and whether you wanted me or not. If you do not, shall I go for it? I do not like to let her have it so long; and perhaps Arthur will go with me.'

'Is anyone to be there?' asked my lady, still unpleasantly.

She was in one of her porcupine moods, and not easily handled.

'Not that I know of. It is only to get my bracelet,' replied the child with childish simplicity.

Lady Machell looked at Wilfrid. Hilda followed her eyes.

'You come with me, Wilfrid,' she said prettily, knowing that he was engaged to go to Paumelle House, and conscious that her mother trusted him more than she trusted Arthur. Her request for his escort was, she knew, suggestive of safety.

'I would if I could, little one,' he answered kindly; 'but I am engaged.'

'Shall I let her go with Arthur?' asked my lady doubtfully.

That favourite son of hers had fallen terribly low in her esteem of late, and Wilfrid, who had acted as a Machell and a man of honour should, had risen in proportion.

'It will be a pleasant little walk for her,' said Wilfrid, who never could refuse his sister anything; 'there can be no harm in it.'

'Yes, you may go, Hilda,' repeated Lady Machell not too graciously; 'that is, if Arthur will go with you. Perhaps he has other engagements!' scornfully.

'I will ask him,' said Hilda, rising from her chair and gliding out of the room with her smooth unhurried step, but skipping gaily through the hall so soon as the door was safely shut between her and her mother, more like an ordinary girl released from restraint and glad of the prospect of a pleasant afternoon, than like Hilda Machell as she was being made by training and the severity of polite discipline.

Running lightly down the long north passage till she came to the 'boys' study,' as the end room was called, she opened the door and thrust in her pretty richly-coloured curly head.

'Arthur, are you here?' she said.

'Yes, come in Lil,' he answered, putting back into his pocket-book the photograph of Muriel which he had been studying as if it were something new and unknown.

'I want you to come with me to Tower,' said Hilda when she entered. 'Miss Aurora took my bracelet to copy, and said that I

was to go for it this afternoon. Will you come with me like a dear boy? Oh what lovely flies! I wish I could make flies as well as you do, Arthur,' with admirable acting.

Her brother looked at her keenly as she stood by the table turning over the leaves of his fishing-book. Did she know of those dead rose-leaves which Miss Aurora had proposed should be gathered for her pot-pourri, and was she coming as a spy? No, it was nothing; a mere coincidence—that Cinderella of circumstance bound to carry all the burdens and accountable for all the ashes; or Miss Aurora had made the excuse designedly, wishing to give the child a little pleasure. It was nothing; and he was glad that she should go.

'Has the mother given her permission?' he asked with dutiful caution.

'Yes,' Hilda replied, still intent on the brown heckles and yellow dubs.

'Very well,' he returned kindly. 'Be ready in half an hour, little one, and I will take you.'

Whereupon Hilda smiled, nodded, called him a dear boy, and then vanished; flying up the stairs like a young goat, and spending the greater part of the half-hour intervening in arranging her hat so as to show to the best advantage the little fringe on her forehead, quite satisfied with life as it stood, and believing in the beneficence of fortune as devoutly as ten years ago she used to believe in the generosity and foreknowledge of Santa Claus.

Meanwhile Lady Machell drove off to Owlett for the interview which had for its object Mrs. Smith's absolute refusal to consent to this mad and wicked engagement between her daughter and Arthur.

'And if she has any sense of her duty as a mother, and any kind of personal pride, she will refuse her consent after I have said all that I mean to say,' thought my lady to herself, settling herself firmly in her seat and touching up the old cob smartly.

CHAPTER XXII.

WE ARE AGREED.

LADY MACHELL had always respected Mrs. Smith. Though the curiosity, which it was but natural she should feel as a woman, had been baffled by the reticence which it was just as natural she should resent as a denial of the rights due to rank and assured position by a

commoner of unknown antecedents, still the refusal to tell the world more than she wished it to know, which was one of Mrs. Smith's characteristics, claimed my lady's respect, and won it. It was what she herself would have done in the same circumstances, and what, to her mind, every woman who respected herself should do. Consequently she approved theoretically even while personally annoyed; and she had justice enough to say so.

But to-day her esteem rose to admiration, and she was prepared to admit to all—even to Arthur—her appreciation of the exceeding excellence of Mrs. Smith of Owlett; her wonderful good sense and supreme judgment; as well as, in spite of their knowing so little about him, the nice feeling and high principle of her husband. It was a rosary of laudation from end to end; and in her gratitude for their co-operation she forgot to be jealous of an assumed equality which under other conditions would have offended her beyond forgiveness, and overlooked the fact that these commoners of unknown antecedents had placed themselves throughout on the same plane with herself, and had taken a tone of repudiation as proud as her own.

'I have come to claim your help, Mrs. Smith,' said Lady Machell, as the self-possessed mistress of Owlett entered the half-darkened drawing-room, receiving her, as she received all her guests, with that mixture of dignity and reserve which seemed to recognise no grace in the present, and to deny the possibility of favour for the future.

'If I can be of use,' she answered, her calm eyes looking into my lady's steadily.

'You are the only person who can,' said my lady.

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Smith tranquilly—her favourite monosyllable expressing neither acquiescence nor curiosity; a mere monosyllable—cast in as a break to silence, no more.

'My son Arthur has engaged himself to your daughter Muriel,' said Lady Machell, one of those direct women who like to cut their Gordian knots without the trouble of trying to unpick them—to go straight to their point without making excursions by the way, or losing time in beating about their central bush; 'and you and I must prevent the marriage.'

Mrs. Smith's delicate nostrils quivered, but she did not speak. She only bent her head—it might be in token of acquiescence; it might be as a sign that she had heard what my lady had said.

'My son must marry money,' continued my lady. 'The Machell property has gone down, owing to the undeserved misfortunes of our house; and I scarcely think that your daughter has enough for my son's needs. If she has such a dowry as will enable

them to live according to his rank in the county, I withdraw my opposition. I want you to understand, dear Mrs. Smith, that it is not to Muriel herself, but to her financial position that I object—for herself, dear girl, she is simply charming.'

'My daughter has nothing,' said Mrs. Smith curtly.

'Yet she has engaged herself to a man with nothing!' cried my lady rather angrily. 'Such an act of madness on either side! I gave Muriel credit for better sense than this!'

'Young people have seldom much worldly wisdom in their love-affairs,' was the reply made with the faintest flavour of sarcasm in the calm voice.

'On which account it is the duty of those placed over them by Providence to direct them aright and keep them from folly,' said my lady.

Again Mrs. Smith bent her head without verbal answer. Always chary of her words, my lady found her to-day more than ever taciturn.

'Surely you could not have consented to this thoughtless engagement!' cried Lady Machell, a little provoked by a silence which might be dignified but which was also embarrassing.

'I have not consented to it,' said Mrs. Smith.

My lady breathed more freely.

'Thank God for that!' she said with naïve fervour. 'Indeed, you may thank God for your side,' she added, remembering her breeding; 'for such a marriage would be as bad for Muriel as for Arthur.'

It cost the proud heart something to say this. Arthur without a penny would still have been to her mind a great match for Muriel with thousands; just as Wilfrid, inheriting bankruptcy, was a great match for his poor little straw-coloured Jemima, in spite of those ennobling and redeeming millions whereby, according to the faith of to-day, the Brown vulgarity was softened into eccentricity and their mediocrity exalted into excellence.

'My daughter, like your son, must also marry money,' said Mrs. Smith coldly.

'Just so,' said my lady, with a rapid thought of Guy Perceval and the *Manot*; 'therefore she must not marry Arthur.'

'I do not wish her to do so, Lady Machell. She has neither asked my consent nor consulted me in her action.'

'And when she does you will refuse that consent?' said my lady, with a peremptory kind of eagerness which seemed to take a denial as impossible.

A slight look of pain crossed Mrs. Smith's pale face. 'I have already,' she answered, her voice unnaturally low and monotonous, and it was never other than low and level.

'To whom, if not to your daughter? To my son?'

'To your son.'

'He asked your sanction to this absurd scheme—this insane proposal—yours, when he had not dared to speak to me, his mother, of an attachment so impossible as to be almost criminal? He is mad!' said Lady Machell.

'He asked my sanction,' returned Mrs. Smith, wiping her upper lip which slightly quivered.

'And you refused of course?'

'Yes, because it is absurd, insane, impossible, almost criminal, that your son should marry my daughter, I did refuse,' she answered with a bitter smile.

'Yet he persists in it. He told his brother yesterday that he and Muriel meant to stand firm against all opposition, and that no remonstrance would move him.'

'He has said nothing more to me. Indeed, I have not seen him since. My daughter has not spoken to me. I am in entire ignorance as to the whole affair,' were Mrs. Smith's utterances made with forced calmness.

'In that case Muriel has acted with extreme indiscretion; for they have often met—they must have met,' cried Lady Machell. 'I am surprised that a girl of principle and good conduct should have so far forgotten herself.'

'I go out, as you know, rarely; and since my husband's return I have been chiefly occupied with him. Muriel has not wished to deceive me. She has had no opportunity for an explanation,' said Muriel's mother, somewhat evasively.

'She ought to have made an opportunity,' was my lady's reply made severely. 'You did not know that this absurd affair was going on—you, with an only daughter?'

'I had no means of knowing,' said Mrs. Smith haughtily.

'Let me then enlighten you on what all the world but yourself knows. Arthur and Muriel are openly and confessedly engaged, and the whole place is ringing with the news. It is an engagement made by my son in direct indifference to my wishes—in direct defiance of my prohibition.'

'Your son disregard your wish?' said Mrs. Smith, raising her eyebrows.

'I grieve to have it to confess, but it is the first time; and I can scarcely hold him alone responsible,' Lady Machell answered, aiming her shaft with more courage than courtesy. 'And so long as your daughter holds him to his promise he will naturally maintain it. As an honourable gentleman he could scarcely do less. And it is for this reason that I ask for your interference, Mrs. Smith—your prevention by your daughter of what else will be a crime.'

'I will do my best,' said Mrs. Smith. 'If Muriel will be guided by me, the affair will be at an end.'

'If I' said Lady Machell a little scornfully. 'A mother knows no "if" in her dealings with her daughter.'

'Muriel has been dutiful and obedient hitherto; but daughters, like sons, are apt to be unmanageable when parents oppose their wishes—in love,' Mrs. Smith replied.

'Muriel cannot be refractory—she must not! The future must be as the past,' said Lady Machell emphatically.

Mrs. Smith turned her troubled eyes to the floor. Somehow the experience of that past, smooth as it had been, did not wholly reassure her as to the conduct of the future. The very power of love which had hitherto made Muriel so easily dealt with, might it not make her just the reverse when the conditions were changed—when her affections which had been bound up in her obedience were now consecrated to resistance? Glad as she would have been to have satisfied my lady, and to have boldly promised all that she desired, she dared not take on herself this sponsorship too rashly. Muriel, though gentle, sweet, and good—none more so—was not weak; and if she had the pliancy of love she had also its tenacity.

'You and Mr. Smith must both forbid it,' repeated Lady Machell, watching her narrowly. 'From what even I know of Muriel, you will have no difficulty in making her yield to your command, because you will have none in making her see her duty.'

'We have no other wish,' said Mrs. Smith in a curiously constrained manner.

'Then I hold the thing for done,' said Lady Machell.

'It is as well not to be too confident,' was the cautious answer, with that same subtle accent of constraint in the smooth voice, of trouble in the quiet eyes.

'I may be safely confident if you are firm,' said Lady Machell slowly. 'If you and Mr. Smith are sincerely desirous of preventing this marriage, it will be prevented. You cannot shake me from this position.'

'We are as sincerely desirous as yourself, Lady Machell,' said the mistress of Owlett proudly.

My lady bowed. For the next moment the two changed places. It was Mrs. Smith who talked, and my lady who kept silent.

'Would you like to see my husband on this matter?' said Mrs. Smith with more show of what in anyone else would have been called temper than Lady Machell had ever seen in her before. The want of fervent belief in her assertion seemed to try her

patience strangely. 'Perhaps he will convince you more thoroughly than it is evident I have been able to do that we are as much in earnest as yourself, and that we too wish to detach our daughter from your son, for our own reasons and for her own ultimate good.'

'I shall have pleasure in seeing Mr. Smith,' said my lady grandly; the natural contradiction of human nature half disposing her to resent this pointed repudiation, this proud acquiescence—nay, more than acquiescence—as a personal offence that would have to be punished; for was not Arthur so far beyond Muriel's natural deserving that her mother might have been held excused—among mothers—had she even manœuvred to catch him, not to speak of holding him when caught? Yet here she was, denying him as if he were a nobody, and professing her anxiety to prevent the marriage for reasons of her own and for her daughter's ultimate good! Lady Machell could have found it in her heart to be intensely angry, violently aggrieved; but this was not the time for pride. If she could but accomplish her object, she would bear a few pin-pricks in the process. Let her but rescue Arthur from Muriel Smith, and she would submit to a little constructive humiliation from the mother. Her relief was too real to allow her to feel personally wounded by a pride that so far was on her side; wherefore she resolutely turned from that view of matters to the æsthetic contemplation of Mrs. Smith's honourable and marvellously sensible conduct, which more than anything else that she had done or refrained from doing for all these fifteen years proved her to be a loyal and noble-natured woman, one whose life was an example to her generation and her principles without a flaw.

'I will bring him to you,' said Mrs. Smith; and with the conventional 'Pardon,' as she passed Lady Machell, she glided quickly from the room.

She did not ring and send a message by the servant, as anyone else would have done; but herself went for her husband, with a fine air of respect and wifely devotion not lost on Lady Machell, if not entirely approved—my lady holding to the doctrine of the supremacy of women and the inferior quality of men, who were sent by a benevolent Providence into the world chiefly that they might obey their mothers, provide for their wives, protect their sisters, and renounce all forms of life and liberty save those which women in general can themselves enjoy. It is the doctrine belonging to those of the thin-lipped tribe who have strong wills and more love of power than love of love.

In a short time Mrs. Smith returned, and with her the mystery of her life—this unknown owner of herself and Owlett, so long

absent and so persistently invisible as to have become almost phoerical.

Lady Machell looked at him with critical curiosity, seeking to understand the secret of his seclusion since his return. But she saw nothing to explain it. He was not marked with any kind of brand humiliating to show and painful to see; he was not ugly, not deformed, not imbecile, not touched with the faintest trace of loathsomeness or disease; he was a man in no wise to be ashamed of, but rather on the whole well-looking, if sad and weary—and yet—yes, certainly a little strange. Apparently he was about sixty years of age, though in reality he was not yet fifty; with short grizzly hair and a short grizzly beard; his eyes were well shaped, but uncomfortable in expression—restless, furtive, glancing—still they were handsome, if nothing more; his manner was quiet but evidently constrained; and he had the ordinary bearing of a gentleman, but with a curious air of disuse which might be accounted for by long absence from the country, and which he evidently tried to conceal.

Lady Machell greeted him with stately interest, and he returned her greeting with somewhat over-deference, though his sombre melancholy of itself gave him a certain air of dignity—and always with eyes that glanced sideways, and never looked straight into any face save his wife's, which was his book of signals wherein he read his directions, his warnings, his encouragements.

'Lady Machell has come to claim your influence with our daughter,' began Mrs. Smith in the tone of one repeating a lesson. 'It seems that she and Mr. Machell have entered into an unwise little affair together, which it is the interest of both should be ended.'

'So?' said Mr. Smith, also as if rehearsing a part. 'What is there in the affair that it should not go on? You see I am ignorant of your local politics,' with a look to Lady Machell, and something on his face that seemed as if it struggled to resemble a smile.

'The want of money on either side,' said Lady Machell hastily. 'My son has only his profession, and your daughter has nothing. It is impossible that they should marry under such conditions; but my son will not be the first to draw back—naturally; as a man of honour he scarcely could—and it must be for your daughter, influenced by you, to bring this folly to an end.'

'It is a folly which must come to an end,' repeated Mr. Smith, looking at his wife.

'Yes,' she said, meeting his eyes; 'it shall.'

'Then you do at last promise me that?' cried Lady Machell eagerly.

'So far as we have any influence over Muriel you may count on us,' was Mrs. Smith's reply; and Mr. Smith added as chorus, 'Certainly.'

'Thank you,' said Lady Machell. 'I was sure that I was dealing with honourable people. I was sure that you,' turning to Mrs. Smith with her gracious regality of manner, 'would not wish your daughter to enter a family against the desires of that family and the express denial of the parents.'

'By no means,' said Mrs. Smith, her pale face a trifle flushed; 'we are the last in the world, my husband and I, to encourage an unwelcome affair, even though Muriel's happiness should be at stake. We too have our pride.'

'You are right,' said Lady Machell; 'nothing can be more humiliating than a marriage made between young people where the parents are opposed. For though,' she added hastily, 'I need hardly say again that I have no cause of opposition to this alliance with your family save the mere want of money, yet, whatever the cause may be, if the fact exists, the humiliation is the same.'

'Just so,' said Mrs. Smith, slightly curling her lip; 'and this humiliation we are not disposed to undergo.'

How small and puerile, how mean and ungenerous, my lady's objections seemed to her, with that terrible reserve in the background! If there had been nothing but this want of money between the young people and their happiness, she would have been the first to have urged them to remain constant; to have counselled him to work and her to endure. But the truth of things was far removed from this mere outside circumstance, this mere husk of life; and though forced to play my lady's game with all the skill of which she was capable, she played it from such a different standpoint, for stakes so infinitely more serious, that she could afford to despise her partner's aim as both fallacious and contemptible.

After this other things were talked of; Lady Machell, radiant in the consciousness of having fulfilled her mission and rescued her beloved, lending herself to every subject on which they touched with the grace and cleverness that belonged to her when she was in a good humour, which was not always; and especially forbearing to question Mr. Smith on his travels and adventures during all these years, as if knowing, by her fine intuitive perception of things, that he would rather not take the world into his confidence—perhaps vaguely suspecting that he was on the whole wise in proportion to his reticence.

'Where is Muriel?' she then asked kindly. She would be very sweet and tender to the girl in Arthur's absence and when this

foolish little affair was at an end. She could afford to be gracious then, not having another son to be drawn into danger, and Guy Perceval to all appearance free from peril. She would make it up to her in every way possible, and perhaps get her well married to some county man independent of a jointure, but one whom she did not covet for Hilda. 'She has always been a great favourite of mine, and when Arthur has left us I hope that I shall see much of her. It must make no difference in our relations.'

'Derwent and she are at Tower this afternoon,' answered Mrs. Smith quietly, taking no notice of my lady's gracious announcement.

Lady Machell changed colour.

'I am going to Tower now,' she said, rising hastily and in disorder; 'perhaps I shall see them.'

'You are sure to do so,' said Mrs. Smith, also rising and looking at her steadily; while Edmund turned away his head and fingered the books on the table nervously.

His eyes were full of tears, and he dared not let his face be seen. That sweet child of his, who loved him with so much devotion and whom he loved so tenderly, to be doomed to such a trial as that which was before her, and all because of him! Had there been nothing against this marriage but the mere want of money, which had been Lady Machell's overwhelming obstacle and impelling motive, he, like his wife, would have held by their daughter's happiness in preference to Arthur Machell's advantage, which moreover they would have argued was secured in the highest sense by this marriage. They would, as they had already done with each other, have placed love and fidelity before worldly wisdom and social gain. But with that other something which must one day be discovered, they had no choice; and that other something which was to strike her to the heart, that would come from him, and him only. A second *Virginus*, it was his hand that must slay the beloved; but it was not a stranger's iniquity from which he had to shield her; it was his own crime for which she must suffer. The past had already borne bitter fruits, but none so bitter as this. And yet, was this the worst that had to come?

'She is a very charming girl,' then said Lady Machell, looking at Mrs. Smith; 'I love her dearly, and will be her best friend in the county. It is only this dreadful want of fortune.'

'We understand you, Lady Machell,' said Mrs. Smith with a sudden flash of angry pride. 'Pray say no more. Are we not agreed?'

'She has no right to it, but her pride is my friend,' thought Lady Machell, smiling softly to herself as she pressed Mrs. Smith's

hand with deprecating warmth; 'and being my friend, I forgive it; else——'

It was not difficult to know what that shadowy alternative implied; but, as things were, the rivalry in stately self-respect, which my lady would have regarded as an infringement on her own rights, fitted in too well to be punished, and the two women parted to all appearance in perfect harmony of feeling—which was certainly only appearance with the one, if my lady was for the moment absolutely sincere.

Still there was that dangerous little conclave all this time hatching mischief and harbouring evil at Tower; and Lady Machell felt that she could not scatter it to the winds an instant too soon or by any method whatsoever too severe. Wherefore, whipping up her cob even more smartly than before, she went at a rattling pace over the ground between Owlett and Tower, and in far less time than it generally took passed the sunk fence which separated the high road from the lawn. And there on the lawn, in the full view of anyone who might have passed that way—in the full light of day, as if such things were of ordinary occurrence among decent English gentry, with the religion of appearances to obey as well as with well-mannered souls to be saved in the orthodox way—she saw what for a moment blinded her with a curious sense of insecurity and the general madness of all humanity—Derwent Smith, pale, agitated, bareheaded, holding Hilda in his arms—she also pale, agitated, bareheaded, and with her dress falling in tattered lengths about her, leaning against his breast, holding up her face to his, as if asking to be kissed and expecting to be answered.

Arthur, with Muriel's hand in his, was close to them, apparently sympathizing and comforting, in no wise reproving nor even restraining. Muriel, her disengaged hand on Derwent's shoulder, was bending near to Hilda, and as Lady Machell passed stooped down to kiss the back of her tangled curly head; and Miss Aurora, the elderly Venus hovering round this modern Cupid and Psyche, was laughing and crying by turns, and making various movements with her arms that gave her the appearance of a huge old bird fluttering round her nestlings, pruning their wings for flight.

'Good heavens, Arthur! what is the meaning of all this?' cried Lady Machell, sweeping into the group like an angry Juno. 'Have you lost your senses for Hilda as well as for yourself—are you really mad?'

'Derwent has just saved the child's life,' said Arthur quietly. 'You owe it to him, mother, that you have a daughter at this moment at all.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

CUPID AND PSYCHE.

MEANWHILE this was what had happened :—

The four young people had assembled at Tower, paired and presided over by Miss Aurora as the general sympathizer with young love, whether parents refused and common sense forbade, or whether, on the contrary, fortune smiled and mothers had schemed. It was all one to her what the finger-posts said. It was love; and to her idea love was the prettiest plaything afloat, and to be encouraged like any other pet—her jackdaw, for instance, or that little black monkey with the ruffed face; the one a stealer of valuable property which could never be replaced, the other a destroyer of brittle ware which could never be repaired.

Acting then on this general sympathy, she arranged her guests according to their desires, on the principle of doing as she would be done by were she in their places. Arthur and Muriel were dismissed with a shrill laugh and a waggish dancing of the feathery ringlets, and bid to pick rose-leaves in the long terrace walk, where they were tolerably screened from view and not likely to be interrupted; while she herself took possession of Derwent and Hilda, and fanned with her breezy airs of juvenile participation the tender little flame of their childish romance. And as they were still in that embryonic state of feeling when it is pleasure enough to be together, with liberty to speak but without desire to express, it was no hindrance to their happiness that Miss Aurora held Hilda's hand on the one side, while Derwent walked in blissful admiration on the other; or that the conversation was mainly composed of silly little speeches from their chaperon, to which Derwent made sententious replies, and Hilda cast in a few random and not very sensible interjections. On the contrary, her presence was a kind of sanction which gave them courage and broke up the embarrassment that else might have sprung from too safe a solitude; and Derwent insinuated, and Hilda looked, things of infinitely more force and meaning than either would have dared had they been alone. In this way, then, they strolled about the garden, always at a discreet distance from the terrace 'where,' Miss Aurora said, 'those dear things were picking rose-leaves, and where she, for one, did not want to pick gooseberries;' till she began to think what more she could do for her special charges, and how much mischief under the guise of kindness she could work them.

'Come and see the view, you dears,' she then said, turning her head from one to the other. I have made such a sweet little nest up there—just what will suit you both, you dear little things. You will look like two dear, darling little doves on a perch.'

Hilda laughed prettily, looked sweet, and thought to herself: 'What a dreadful old goose she is!' and Derwent contrasted her airs of false juvenility and undignified gush with his own mother and Lady Machell, not to the advantage of this breezy old Baby who was giving herself so much trouble to please them both. But as we do not wear glass windows in our breasts, it did not much signify what they felt; and as both expressed their willingness to follow Miss Aurora wherever she chose to lead, and as both looked pleased and handsome and conscious, she was more than ever satisfied with the part which she had assumed, and saw herself in still clearer lines as a generous kind of Venus protecting Cupid and Psyche instead of persecuting them—the patron saint of youth and love.

This view, which she was making now the occasion of injudicious aid to an impossible affair, and which was the great feature of the place, was from the top of the old tower which gave its name to the house. There had originally been a stronghold of some kind here, but all traces had long ago disappeared, save this one ruin covered with ivy and haunted by owls. It was on the top of this, to which a narrow flight of wooden steps had been made, that Miss Aurora had built her nest as she called it—that is, had had a garden seat put under the shadow of the western wall. All the dangerous parts were railed round, and the whole thing made apparently safe; so that it was in no sense an expedition to go there, though practically few of the Tower guests ever did. The ladies did not like the stairs, and the men, having seen the country once, did not care to study it again. Yet it was a splendid view, stretching far down the valley and over the low hills out to the broad plain and the shining sea beyond. They could see the stately pile of Machells, with its long slope of park and background of noble woods; the leafy corner where Owlett was hidden under the shadow of the fell; the little village in the hollow, with the church and parsonage set on an eminence dominating the lower lives at their feet; distant towns; and about four miles off, that glaring, treeless, and obtrusive Paumelle House, which looked as if it had grown up in a night and had not had time yet to get mellowed into harmony with the rest.

The day was soft and tender; a suggestive day, made for poets and young lovers. It was a day to inspire and excite; and Derwent, who was young, vain, impressionable, and in love, began to

quote poetry as the best expression that he could give to the feelings and thoughts possessing him. It was an accomplishment in which he excelled; and the manner in which he repeated some of 'Childe Harold' touched Hilda so that she left her seat and went over to the side of the ruin, leaning against the wooden railing which protected the gap, and was the sole barrier between her and a sheer descent of some sixty feet. There she stood, her pretty little face half shaded, half revealed by her Rubens hat; her eyes fixed now on the sky and now on Derwent as he went through his stanzas; and her slight, sylph-like figure, leaning against the wooden railing, standing in all its slender grace delicately outlined against the sky. On the garden seat sat Derwent in the pose and with the sentiment of a troubadour or an improvisatore; and Miss Aurora, dancing her curls, expressed her admiration by a series of signs in dumb show, which if reduced to a system would have been invaluable in a deaf-and-dumb asylum. Great brown bees rifled the flowers with which the old ruin was overgrown; butterfly-flies spread out their wings on the broad green leaves of the ivy; dragon-flies darted hither and thither like strips of rainbow flashing from earth to sky; birds twittered in the trees close by; cattle lowed in the distance, and the village dogs barked in warning or in welcome: all nature was at rest, or happy in its labour, and sorrow and turmoil and distress seemed as far off as Arctic snows or tropical storms.

Down below, on the terraced walk, Arthur and Muriel made believe to remember their ostensible mission of replenishing Miss Aurora's pot-pourri. But they had graver work on hand than that of massing rose-leaves in a fancy basket, for Arthur knew that the decisive moment of their lives was upon them, and that all would depend on Muriel's tenacity of love on the one hand and power of resistance on the other. Who would win the day—her mother, influenced by Lady Machell; also, as Arthur had so often remembered, in some mysterious way herself averse from this alliance—or would he be the conqueror to the end as he had been so far successful in the beginning?

'They will try to take you from me, Muriel,' he said, after he had told her of Lady Machell's opposition and errand to Owlett. 'Will they succeed?'

'No,' she answered quietly. 'No one could take me from you now, Arthur.'

'Whatever their arguments might be?'

'I think not,' she said with a faint smile, as if the supposition were too extravagant to hold water.

'They will try all they know, dear. They will try to touch

your pride by telling you that you will be unwelcome in the family, and that if you enter it, it will be against their wishes and unrecognised by them; and they will try to move you by your very love—by telling you that your marriage with me will be my ruin as well as your own. But if you can withstand them all, throw their arguments to the winds, and trust to me only, we shall wear through every obstacle and come out victorious in the end. It is a trial for you, my darling, and one which will touch you in your best feelings: for I know you, and I know what they will do. But I may rely on your trust in me; may I not?’

His young, flushed, handsome face looked into hers eagerly, searchingly. His bright blue eyes were dark, and something was in them which, had he not been a man, would have been tears.

Muriel laid her hand on his arm.

‘You may rely on me,’ she said with the tone and look of one taking an oath—quiet, solemn, intense, and religious; free from passion and affectation alike. ‘I have given you my promise and my love, and I can take back one as little as the other.’

‘I trust you implicitly for yourself,’ he answered fervently, but with a certain ring of trouble still in his voice. ‘The only thing that makes me anxious is, if my mother can convince you that you will do me harm by marrying me. I know that this will be her great argument after her appeal to your pride has failed.’

‘I will say to her, if she does tell me that I shall do you harm, that I cannot judge of your affairs for you,’ said Muriel. ‘I suppose you do know your own affairs best, Arthur?’ she added, looking up into his face playfully; ‘and that you are not in need of a caretaker and adviser?’

‘Of both in you,’ he answered, catching her tone for an instant, but passing off again into the more earnest and anxious mood in which he had been for the whole interview. ‘But tell me, Muriel, he continued, ‘how will you meet your mother’s refusal, if mine has influenced her so far as to induce her to forbid our engagement? If she says that you are not to see me, what will you do?’

‘I must obey her so far,’ said Muriel, her eyes filling with tears and her soft mouth quivering. ‘I could not vex papa and mamma by direct disobedience. If they forbid me to see you, however hard it will be, I must give it up while I am in their house; but,’ turning to him with a kind of quiet, concentrated devotion, more impressive than the most fervid demonstrations, ‘I will be true to you under all trials and in every circumstance. You need not fear me, Arthur. I could not be false to you for any one—not even for papa or mamma or Derwent. No one could make me desert you.’

‘You have satisfied me now, truly and wholly,’ he said in a low

voice, kissing her sweet face with as much tenderness as passion, as much respect as love.

'Have I?' she smiled; 'did you doubt me?'

'Not you; I do not doubt you, darling; but I do fear the weight of my mother's arguments.'

'They will not outweigh my promises, my love, my trust!' cried Muriel with a certain passion in her voice, of all things the most unusual with her, as she lifted her eyes full into Arthur's, and taking one of his hands in both her own kissed it with a kind of Ruth-like devotion that had as much religion in it as love.

'Muriel,' he began to remonstrate; but a truer sense than the ordinary gallantry of the English gentleman, true as that is, overcame his first impulse, and he left his hand in hers, pressed warmly, tenderly against her breast.

'I love you, do I not?' she continued; 'and I have promised to be true to you under all trials? I could not fail you! Darling! oh, believe me, I could not!'

With a sudden, overpowering impulse of emotion she flung herself into his arms; then, partly for shame and partly for love, she burst into tears all the same as if she had been unhappy for loss, instead of being, as she was, too blessed for peace.

'I do believe you, Muriel. God bless you. I dare not speak,' said Arthur, in the constrained voice of a man too deeply moved to trust himself; but he held her to his heart and smoothed the hair from her forehead, and by degrees Muriel checked her tears, and looking up into his face with a girlish glance of penitence, blushed as she said half softly: 'How silly I have been!' Arthur answering: 'How dear and lovely, you mean. My darling! my beloved! I cannot love you nor thank you enough.'

Suddenly, while they were standing there in the shadow of the laurels hedging in the walk, feeling in that moment what gods have felt in power and saints in ecstasy—the divine glory of life and the supreme blessedness of love—they heard one shrill shriek of concentrated terror, and then rapid screams of a wilder and more distracted kind. The shriek was Hilda's, the screams were Miss Aurora's, as the railing against which the girl was leaning gave way, and she was flung into space—that sheer descent of sixty feet below; but caught in the branches of a young ash-tree that grew out from the wall some twenty feet from the top.

'Hilda!' was all that Arthur said, as he and Muriel turned to the ruin to see a mass of light drapery fluttering among the branches and leaves of the ivy, to hear the clattering of the falling stones and the crashing of the small twigs, and to realize the certain death lying below.

In another moment he had rushed up the steps and disappeared, while Muriel, dazed with dread, saw Derwent leap from the top of the tower to—she knew not where; for involuntarily she covered her eyes and cowered close to the ground. It was too horrible to see him fling himself thus, perhaps to his death, for her to look at it as a fine gymnastic feat; but when she turned again, her momentary faintness and instinctive shrinking past, she saw him standing on a projecting buttress close to Hilda's side, holding on by the ash-tree with one hand, while with the other he supported her. He had measured his distance and dropped on to a through stone a few feet from the top; then swung himself down by the ivy to the platform made by the broken head of a buttress close to where Hilda's ash had caught the poor child in the fall, and saved her from destruction. It was a bold drop. Had he missed his footing, nothing could have saved him; but he had the nerve of faith and the courage of love, and so alighted safely and kept his footing firmly.

At first she nearly ruined all by the frantic way in which she clung to him. Her small hands clutched him with such desperate strength as almost dragged him from his foothold; but he caught at a branch of the ash-tree in time, which kept him up; and after a while he calmed her so far that she no longer did her best to dash them both to pieces in her fear of falling.

Help too was at hand before Derwent's nerve or strength had failed, if indeed the former would; the latter might, without reproach to his courage or his power, as he had struck his arm against a jagged stone which had cut through the sleeve and made an ugly gash, and pain tells in the long-run. In this case, however, the run was not long and there was no time for failing, as the help of strong hands and cool heads came, and the worst results of what was already bad enough were prevented.

The first intimation of rescue was given by Miss Aurora ceasing to scream, and hanging over the side of the ruin as she called out: 'Don't give way, darlings! We are coming down to you directly! It will be all right, my loves!'

Then she diverted her energies to Muriel, beseeching her not to faint or scream—which she had not the slightest intention of doing—as the dear little things were quite safe and would soon be all right; for Bob Rushton, who had been playing at work near the place and had seen the whole affair, with a curious reminiscence of requirements in certain circumstances of his past history, had brought a coil of rope which he and Arthur were preparing to use. Bob was especially demonstrative and eloquent in his exhortations for the young gentleman to hold on and the young lady not to be afraid; and Arthur proved something of the quality of his nature

by the coolness, promptitude, and self-command with which he foresaw what was necessary and arranged what had to be done, though he felt his little sister's peril as if it had been his own death. But he was not a man to cherish his feelings to the loss of his power; so, making the slip-knot secure, he flung the end of the rope below as coolly as if he had been doing a bit of common stone-mason's work—hauling up a block of granite instead of perhaps saving, perhaps losing, two lives, the one of which was infinitely dear to him, the other part of the life of the woman whom he loved. Derwent, also cool, as a brave man's very love makes him, fastened the rope securely round the poor little girl's waist, taking occasion for a great many loving words and more than one boyish caress, which it must be confessed Hilda rather liked than not and returned with not too much grudging, though she knew that it was naughty and would have to be repented of; and then, with a great deal of masculine encouragement on all hands, she was slowly drawn back to safety and the solid earth once more. Derwent accompanied her so far as he could, guiding her with wonderful courage and care as he swung himself from branch to branch of the overhanging ivy, till the supports growing weak, and the stones crumbling beneath his hands and feet, he was obliged to stop and consent to be hauled up the remaining distance somewhat ignominiously for a hero, when her safe landing had been accomplished.

This done, what might have been the most direful tragedy of local history ever enacted ended in a few bruises and a ragged skirt for Hilda, a rather ugly gash and a torn coat-sleeve for Derwent, and a general condition of agony and relief, pain and joy, with multitudinous kisses and congratulations, all round; Muriel crying softly to herself as she flung her arms round Derwent, feeling that he had never been so dear as now, and even Arthur moved more than he liked to own as he took Hilda to his heart and thanked God for her safety. The scene was wound up by a fit of hysterics from Miss Aurora, and a rapid calculation on the part of Bob Rushton how he could turn his zeal into capital and make his activity pay. He was not fond of work, and he found Miss Dinah's tender mercies, if not cruel—that would be too strong a term—undeniably heavy.

This, then, was how it came about that when Lady Machell drove up to Tower she came upon that little group on the lawn—Cupid and Psyche embracing each other with effusion, while the rest stood by as the sympathetic audience aiding the delinquents of their admiration. For Psyche had been incited to a fresh outburst of gratitude by the discovery of Cupid's ugly gash and torn coat-

sleeve—got in his brave delivery of herself from danger—and she knew no better method of expression than that which had been so effectual before, and which, though naughty and to be repented of—she knew that—she was not sorry to repeat.

‘I owe it to him that I have a daughter at this moment at all; and where then were you, her brother?’ asked my lady in her most regal tones and with a heavy frown. She had not been warmed up to their point, and her surprised indignation was perhaps natural. All the same it struck the actors in the drama, excited as they were, as eminently hard, unwomanly and unfeeling.

‘I was in the garden; Hilda was on the tower,’ answered Arthur coldly.

‘And why were you not with her? You should not have left her. I shall never be able to trust her out of my sight with you again,’ cried Lady Machell, as if she had been speaking to a nurse, with intentional discourtesy for the purpose of humiliating him before Muriel.

The colour changed on Arthur’s face, but he did not answer. It was not pleasant to bear, but—she was his mother; and Muriel would understand.

‘But in any circumstances I see no reason for such an extraordinary display as this,’ my lady continued, looking round from Miss Aurora to Derwent, and from Derwent to Hilda, ‘as severely to one as the other. ‘I never thought’—to her daughter—‘that I should have to reprove you, Hilda, for impropriety or want of reserve; yet I find you—I will not trust myself to give it words!’

‘Oh, mother! if you had been hanging where I was, with that dreadful precipice below, and a dear, good, brave boy had saved your life at the risk of his own, and got hurt too, you would have done anything to show your gratitude—far more than I have done to Derwent!’ cried Hilda, with a curious burst of mingled emotion and temper, as she turned to Muriel—not to Lady Machell—and sobbed hysterically on her neck. The tears that had been shed that morning at Tower were in goodly quantity.

‘Don’t cry, darling,’ said Muriel softly, while Arthur took advantage of the child’s position to make Muriel conscious of his presence; and poor Derwent, more distracted than when she had been in danger, almost forgot Lady Machell’s august presence in his youthful anguish at the tears of his beloved.

‘Do not do that, Hilda,’ said Lady Machell a little less harshly, but not softened to the point yet of positive tenderness. ‘I cannot bear to see you cry like this. I am not vexed with you, child. I can quite understand your state, but’—her heart always sore against that recreant son of hers, until of late so passionately loved—

'your brother should have had more thought for you; he should have taken more care of you.'

'Arthur could not prevent the rail from giving way,' sobbed Hilda, looking up with an indignant flash.

It was an unusual luxury to her to be able to tell her mind to her mother, or to oppose her in any way; and she thought the present opportunity for a little moral relaxation too good to be lost.

'Perhaps not,' said my lady coldly; 'but he might have prevented your leaning against it, if that was the way in which you fell into danger. However, as I know no particulars, perhaps some one will kindly enlighten me,' looking to Miss Aurora.

'It all happened very simply, Lady Machell,' answered Baby, taking up the challenge. 'I will tell you in a very few words. Those dear things,' indicating Arthur and Muriel, 'were picking rose-leaves for my pot-pourri, and I took up those dear little lo:es to see the view from the top of the tower. Mr. Derwent was repeating poetry, and that dear little Hilda went to the side and leant against a rail; and then the rail broke and she fell down, and Mr. Derwent jumped after her; and the tower is sixty feet from the ground.'

'I suppose they did not fall that sixty feet,' said my lady, unable to prevent her sarcasm, though she had turned white and was trembling.

'No. I was caught in a tree, and Derwent jumped down after me. But it was a miracle that he was saved,' said Hilda. 'We can never thank him too much, mother.'

'So I think,' said Arthur warmly.

'Thank you, my dear,' said Lady Machell, holding up her hand to Derwent and speaking with a quite natural emotion. 'I am deeply grateful to you. I see that you are hurt. I hope not seriously?'

'It is nothing. It was for Hilda—' 'Hilda!' half murmured my lady uneasily—'and for her I would have died, willingly,' said Derwent with more simplicity and less affectation than was his wont.

It seemed as if the peril in which both had been so lately had sobered and, as it were, strengthened and ennobled him; as a great danger does when the nature has sufficient depth and the vanity and folly encumbering it are only superficial.

'You are very good,' said Lady Machell a little proudly; 'but is not your devotion rather excessive? I like courage, but I do not sympathise with heroics.'

'Mother! how can you speak so to poor dear Derwent when he has done what he has?' cried Hilda, half wondering at her own

boldness; while Arthur turned away, softly whistling a bar of the 'Blue Danube' to himself.

Now, it was undeniable that at the present moment my lady was, as she said, deeply grateful to the preserver of her daughter, and that she had to check her natural impulse, which of itself, without ulterior danger connected therewith, would have led her to take the lad to her heart with as much maternal effusion as if he had been her own son. But she was still Lady Machell, if also the mother of a rescued child; and neither joy in the rescue nor gratitude to the rescuer must blind her to things as they were, or make her unmindful of her rights, her privileges, and other people's duties. Wherefore, when her daughter, emboldened by the success so far of that moral relaxation already indulged in, and too highly wrought to be careful of signs, permitted herself to make a remonstrance which my lady would not have allowed from Sir Gilbert himself when she was young and before he had lost the power of command, she felt that this kind of thing had gone on long enough; and turning to Hilda, then and there strangled at its birth the first little demon of rebellion which had ever dared to make head against her.

'Silence, my dear,' she said in her most royal manner. 'Your having been preserved from danger does not warrant your indulgence in impertinence. You must remember who I am when you speak to me, and then I shall not have occasion to remind you.'

'Do not scold her on my account,' cried Derwent hurriedly, looking penetrated with distress; and, 'Come to me, Lil,' said Arthur, putting his arm round her waist and leading her a short distance apart.

'Your arm is bad, Derwent; let me bathe it for you,' said Muriel to cover the retreat. Also she was anxious for her brother.

'Yes, come into the house, you dear boy,' chirped Miss Aurora; 'it had better be bathed.'

'It is really not worth all the trouble you are taking for me,' said Derwent; but on Lady Machell saying graciously: 'You had better go, my dear, else you will suffer more pain than you need,' he agreed to let himself be ministered to, because it was Hilda's mother who advised.

'And you must come and have your dress mended, you dear little thing,' said Venus to Psyche. 'You are in an awful plight—all in rags and jags, like a darling little beggar that has just come into town,' laughing.

'I will soon mend your dress so that it will look respectable, Hilda,' said Muriel kindly. 'I am going in with Derwent.'

'No; I wish you to stay here with me, Miss Smith,' my lady interposed in her peremptory manner. 'Your brother can bathe

his scratched arm without you, and Miss Aurora's maid can mend my daughter's dress. I have something of importance to say to you, and these things are not important.'

Muriel looked at Arthur. The terrible crisis through which she, like the others, had just passed, made her shrink from an interview where would be only pain and distress.

'Must you have your talk now, mother?' said Arthur. 'Muriel is shaken, as you can see; and it is her brother who has just saved our little one's life,' with emphasis and meaning.

'I must,' said Lady Machell, holding her head straight and speaking in her most decisive tones. 'Derwent's courage does not affect Muriel's will or fortune; and all that I have to say is comprised in that one word.'

'It is not the winning word, dear mother,' he returned gently.

'We shall see,' she answered.

'Go with my mother, Muriel,' then said Arthur, in a quiet, low, and steady voice, taking Muriel's hand, and in the very face of his mother carrying it to his lips. 'It is time that we all understood each other clearly.'

'It is,' said my lady, bringing her lips into that well-known thin line which meant so much.

'And remember all that I have just said to you,' he continued, in the same voice and manner as before. 'It is your trial.'

'Yes,' answered Muriel, a sad, faint smile coming like a ray of moonlight, rather than the traditional sunlight, over her face.

Her heart had sunk within her, and she was trembling visibly like a frightened doe; but her spirit was firm, if her body suffered; and she felt prepared to endure and resist any pain whatsoever that might be in the trial before her, as a martyr endures to the end for the sake of the truth to which he is pledged to testify and which he is bound not to betray.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TIME OF TRIAL.

THE two stood in the lime-walk facing each other—Lady Machell in her long, straight, flowing black gown, with the soft Indian shawl drawn round her like Greek drapery, imperative, severe, majestic, not to be turned from her course by any appeal to her feelings that was not endorsed by her judgment, positive in view, inflexible in determination, a woman born to impose her will on

the world around her, and to rule while others yielded; Muriel, in a pretty dress of pale brown, quiet in manner, soft of voice, sensitive in face, a tall, supple, tender girl, sweet and pure and loving, but with no instinct of command and no spirit of opposition, only tenacious to love and loyal to principle—surely a girl to be influenced without difficulty by a woman of my lady's Junonic quality!

The sweet scents of the lime-blossoms hung heavy on the drowsy air; windless clouds, soft and grey, veiled the glare and cooled the heat of the summer sky; and the whole sense of life was one of peace, as the whole aspect of nature was that of rest. But the two standing there were strangely at odds with this sentiment of peace, this expression of repose. Different and apparently unequal, they had met in what was substantially deadly combat—substituting the facts of life for blows—feelings, arguments, threats, and constancy for the weapons of the one, the armour of the other.

Lady Machell, usually so calm and self-possessed from pride on the one side and unchecked command on the other, was now shaken as by a storm. Her anger against Arthur and Muriel was met by her passionate love for him, and the admiration which her natural justice could not refuse to give to her; her intense distaste to this threatened alliance eddied against the yearning gratitude which, as a mother, she felt for the saviour of her child—that saviour Muriel's brother—but the sense that this was an unhappy moment for her opposition and one that set her in an odious and unworthy light, instead of softening, made her grimmer and harder and more determined to carry her action to its ultimate development. At the same time it made her at war with herself and increased the tumult within her. As for Muriel she knew that her hour of pain had come, and that Arthur's mother standing there before her was her enemy whom she must resist to the last shred of her strength.

The hour, hard as it was for both, had to be lived through; and whether nature was soft like a sleeping child about them, or furious in storm and uprooting like the goddess of war let loose, the two women in the lime walk had to fight out their fight to the end, and prove which would be the stronger—a mother's anger or a maiden's love.

The preliminaries were soon settled. Lady Machell asked Muriel in a formal manner—the salute before the swords were crossed—if it were true what she had heard, that she and her son Arthur had entered into what they chose to call an engagement together—the contemptuous phrase striking the keynote sharply; and Muriel looking into her face steadily, but without bravado, had said: Yes, it was true; they were engaged.

'Indeed! But I suppose you do not expect that I can sanction this folly?' Ellen said my lady with a smile of superiority; 'nor can you yourself believe in its continuance.'

'I do believe in its continuance,' Muriel answered very gently as to voice and manner, but with more firmness than Lady Machell had anticipated. 'It is for life and death; nothing can undo it.'

'What every love-sick school-girl says, my dear. It is always for life and death, whether it is for the singing-master to-day, or for the unattainable prince to-morrow. You have more common-sense than to give in to these heroics, Muriel, and are quite wise enough to see the impossibility of this affair.'

'Indeed, Lady Machell, I do not,' Muriel pleaded.

'Let us understand one another,' my lady went on to say, not noticing the interruption; 'this rash affair—so rash as to be an absurdity—must be given up. You must renounce it now at once.'

'If he wishes it,' said Muriel.

'Whether he wishes it or not. It is impossible, and must not go on.'

Muriel did not answer. As it was not impossible, according to her way of thinking and Arthur's plans, she had nothing to say. Moreover she felt, sagely enough, that the less she did say to my lady the more chance there was of keeping the peace and the less of burning all the boats irrevocably.

'Without money on either side, with no prospect of a sufficient dowry at any time with you, and with my son's social requirements—his name and station which he has to keep up—it is too absurd. It would be a marriage into beggary and something worse—at least for Arthur,' she added cruelly. 'You must give up all hope, all idea of it now at once,' she repeated.

'Whenever he wishes it,' Muriel answered, as she had answered before.

'Let me say something which may help you in your decision;—if you enter our family, you enter it against our consent. Not one of us will or can welcome you among us.'

Lady Machell said this with sudden and intense severity. Muriel's tenacity, which was more tenacious than she had expected, had rasped away the thin layer of courtesy with which her anger and disdain had been so far coated, and she meant to try now what plain speaking would do.

'I should be very sorry for that, Lady Machell,' said Muriel, lifting her eyes but giving no sign of yielding.

'More than sorry, I imagine,' returned my lady loftily. 'You would be deterred.'

'No, not deterred unless he were,' said Muriel. 'It would be for him to decide, not me.'

'And you have so little sense of womanly dignity that you would marry into a family which refused to receive you?'

'It would be very, very hard, but one marries the one person and not all the family,' said Muriel; 'and if I should be sufficient for him, he would for me.'

'You would separate him from his own people, and not be ashamed of your selfishness? and this you call love!' cried Lady Machell with indignant energy.

Muriel's colour came into her face. She was not used to hard words, and they stung her.

'It is not I who would separate him from you; it is you who would discard him. It would be your own voluntary act; no one would oblige you to do it,' she answered.

'Which means that you are to have your own wilful way in everything, and no one is to resent your wickedness or interfere with you,' cried Lady Machell hotly; to which Muriel returned, a little under her breath, 'If it were wickedness.'

'It is,' said my lady; 'intense wickedness; and what will never bring you a blessing. I, Arthur's mother, tell you so. I oppose the whole affair,' she continued, her voice deepening, her figure stiffening, her whole personality as it were strung and strengthened to the one endeavour to crush if she could not convince Muriel. 'I forbid this engagement—this shameful marriage. So does his father; so does his elder brother—the future head of our house, and his superior both in age and position. If you encourage him in continuing it, you encourage him in disobedience to those whom it is his first duty to honour and obey. As your own parents disapprove of this affair as much as we, you will be disobedient and undutiful on your side as well as making him so on his. The whole thing, from first to last, is a crime as well as a folly. How can you say your prayers to God, look up to heaven and ask for grace, when you induce my son to disobey me, and yourself disregard the commands of your parents?'

'I will obey papa and mamma if they refuse to sanction the engagement,' said Muriel—'that is,' she added, answering the triumph that flashed into Lady Machell's face, 'I will not make any occasions for meeting him, and he will not come to Owlett; but I will trust and wait. I have promised to be true to him, whatever happens, and I will keep my word.'

Lady Machell looked at her with a disdain so passionate, an anger so intense, that Muriel involuntarily shuddered. Dislike of even a mild kind was almost unknown to her—how indeed could anyone dislike her?—and this sudden expression of passionate repulsion seemed to overpower her as if she had been trampled on and

bruised physically. Then my lady fired her eighty-one-ton gun, which she had kept in reserve for the final effort should her other shots have failed.

'You will make him keep his; you hold him to his promise, you mean,' she said. 'The word of a gentleman is sacred—you know that—and a Machell, even if not rich, is a match far beyond the daughter of a Mr. and Mrs. Smith whom no one knows and many doubt. It is a calculation worthy of a practised woman of the world, Miss Smith; were you ten or fifteen years older I should not have been taken by surprise, but I confess I scarcely expected such astuteness and such courage from a person of your age and limited experience.'

'Lady Machell, you are unjust, and you know that you are!' cried Muriel indignantly.

'I am not unjust; I am candid and observant,' said my lady. 'It is what everyone will say, and what we all have said among ourselves already. Of course you will keep your word, because you know that he will keep his, and you know that if you let him go you will never have such another chance again.'

Muriel turned away, and made a few steps along the walk. It was hard to bear such a taunt as this, striking as it did on the most sensitive fibres of her nature, and wounding her modesty as well as her love, her truth and pride, as well as her fidelity. But she remembered what Arthur had said to her, and how he had forewarned her of her trials; and then she felt as if she were going through one of those temptations of old-time romance wherein the forms of angels were to be resisted as well as those of demons, and an appeal to her conscience to be laid aside together with one to her weakness.

'He knows that it is for himself alone,' she said, coming back after a short pause; 'he knows that it is neither his name nor station for which I love him; but because he is Arthur; and that were he a mere nobody, ruined, disgraced, or anything you like, he would always be to me what he is now. He could never accuse me of self-interest, for he knows that I am ready to sacrifice even his love for his greater good—if it were his greater good.'

'He is bound by his promise; he can do nothing; it is you who have to release him; and you would release him if your love were as true as you say it is,' said my lady eagerly.

'He has only to make me understand this,' said Muriel; 'it would be done then at once. We trust each other too truly to make any mistakes. He knows me, and I know him.'

'And I do not know you,' said Lady Machell, levelling her eyes at the girl with a look that made her lower her own. 'I had

thought you unselfish, modest, sincere, with enough womanly dignity to make you understand your position in this matter, and to shrink from it as utterly unworthy and degrading. I find that I am mistaken. You have neither true love nor unselfishness, neither modesty nor dignity. It is a deep-laid scheme on your part, and my son is your victim.'

Muriel covered her face with her hands. She half wondered whether it were more righteous to bear these taunts for love of Arthur and faith in his words than to end them by ending the occasion for them. It was a bitter trial; and what if my lady spoke the truth? What if Arthur would really be better without her? But was not this too one of the temptations of which she had been forewarned?—a sign sent to prove the strength of her love, the quality of her faith and courage? She would bear it all, and more; she would trust him; and at the moment when Lady Machell, thinking she had at last somewhat broken down that rebellious spirit, had made a step towards her to take her hand and promise to be her friend for life, Muriel, lifting her face from her hands, roused herself as if from a danger, and clearing her eyes went back to her old position.

'I must bear it,' she said in a low voice, not looking at my lady. 'It is cruel to say such things to me; but they must pass for what they are worth. I trust him, and believe what he tells me.'

'Then you will not renounce this engagement?'

'Not till he himself tells me that he wishes me to do so,' she said.

'And if I, who have watched him from his birth and known his whole nature, tell you that he will be thankful after a time to be free, that he will recognize it as the best thing, and be grateful to you for your unselfishness?'

'I believe that you think all this sincerely, Lady Machell,' poor Muriel answered, her tears falling rapidly; 'still I must trust him before all the world, even before you.'

'You are a shameless young woman!' cried Lady Machell, transported beyond herself. 'Your love is as immodest as it is selfish. Love! It is not in the nature of a good girl to care for any man in this frantic manner, and I am more than ever against the marriage, seeing what an undesirable person you are in yourself. Poverty, obscure birth, doubtful history—all are nothing compared to this shamelessness, this want of maidenly dignity and reserve!'

'Lady Machell, unsway that!' pleaded Muriel, clasping her hands. It was like a curse that she had hurled at her—Arthur's mother, and she to become one day Arthur's wife!

'No!' said my lady; 'I repeat it! You are a bold and dangerous schemer; and my son is lost for time and eternity unless I can detach him from you! But I can and I will!'

On which she swept from the scene, leaving Muriel leaning against a tree, feeling as if the very earth were no longer solid, life no longer real; while to my lady herself neither Jemima's millions nor Guy Perceval's prospective thousands were of avail or value because of this daughter of Heth who had taken possession of her son's fancy, and meant to keep what she had taken.

But when Arthur came crashing through the shrubby bushes, as he did so soon as he saw his mother sweep up alone towards the house—when he took her in his arms, kissed her sweet pale face again and again; told her how he revered her for her courage, how he loved her for her trust in him, and adored her for her constancy—then poor Muriel's crushed heart began to expand again and her wounds to cease from smarting. She had passed through her hour of trial, and now she was rewarded and comforted. Her love was not his hurt, as the mother had said; no, it was his joy, his salvation, his one dearest hope and possession; and to doubt this would be to doubt that the sun shone in the sky, or that there was a God in heaven; and to act on that doubt would be to ruin him from now to the day of his death—better indeed to make this the day of his death than to cast him off for any reason whatever. All of which was to Muriel like an anodyne in the midst of torture; like the softest music after howling discord; like peace and rest and silence after tumult and disturbance. It was confirmation; and even the most trustful natures need that when they have been sore tried.

If my lady could do nothing with Arthur, she was resolved that this puerile folly between Derwent and Hilda should be peremptorily stopped now on the instant. She remembered the short method with cockatrice' eggs, and made up her mind that this at least should have no full-grown birth. Though he had saved the child's life, he should take nothing by his act, and should be excluded from Machells as rigorously—as his sister. Who were they, these penniless, unknown Smiths, who had dared to come in at both doors, disturbing the family peace and bringing such infinite disaster in their train? Inferior and audacious, they must be taught by severe discipline the lesson of their wrongdoing and the fact of their inferiority; and my lady was just the woman for the purpose.

But almost for the first time in her life she could not carry her husband with her. Sir Gilbert, who loved his little daughter and dreaded my lady's designs on Guy, argued that they owed some-

thing to the lad who had saved their child's life at the risk of his own, and that gratitude was a duty as well as the arrangement of liberal settlements. Wherefore he said they could not shut their doors against him but were, on the contrary, bound to be tolerably kind to him, though—and here the good, kind, sleepy-headed baronet put on a stern look, which was as real as that old stone mask cut into the Aldobrandini rock—it was to be expressly understood that there was to be no more nonsense between him and Hilda. A youth who had not taken even his first step towards making his life was not a suitor to be encouraged for any man's daughter, and Hilda was too young for suitors at all. Still, they owed the lad something.

Even Wilfrid confessed the same thing, and allowed grimly that the boy had claims on them which as gentlemen they could not refuse to acknowledge; but, as he and his mother agreed, if their anger at his presumption did not destroy his claims to their gratitude, neither did his gallantry condone his insolence. If he were allowed to visit at the house it must be on the express condition that he did not presume to think of Hilda, save as a being infinitely removed from his sphere. But how could he visit here when Muriel was excluded? The situation was altogether embarrassing, and made so much more difficult because of Arthur's folly. Had he not got into this entanglement with the girl, they might have patronised the boy with less danger than now; but as things were, the countenance given to Derwent would be assumed to extend to Muriel as well, and this, said my lady vigorously, could never be.

'Yet he saved our little one's life,' said Arthur quietly.

'And for this we are to fling her at his head, and allow the folly into which you have slipped to go on?' cried Lady Machell scornfully.

'For myself, I shall be far away as soon as Wil's marriage is over,' Arthur answered; 'and Muriel's coming to the house will do no one any harm then. And as for Hilda, I am not sure that it would not be the best thing for both to let Derwent feel that at least he has a chance.'

Two days ago he would not have said this; but Derwent's bravery had touched that sympathy which every strong man has for courage; and though the boy was not one whom he would have chosen for his little sister, yet if he had it in him and could make a good thing of life?—and if Hilda liked him? Man for man he was better than Guy Perceval; and he might make his mark, who knows?

Lady Machell clasped her hands above her head in a paroxysm

of anger and despair; while Wilfrid growled out an obscure something, which, if spoken plainly before a magistrate, would have cost him five shillings; and even Sir Gilbert raised his mild eyes with wonder, and thought that surely Arthur's fever had not been got rid of yet, but that it had passed from his digestive organs to his brain and settled there.

'Hear me, mother,' Arthur continued. 'I do not think that Hilda should be engaged to anyone; it is sacrilege to think of marrying her for years to come. Let Derwent have a fair start in life, and a chance like any other; but neither he nor anyone,' with emphatic meaning, 'should be encouraged as a lover. Why, she is but a child!—the idea of her being married is revolting!'

'You are warped throughout, Arthur,' said Lady Machell, always angrily. 'It would be well to settle her at once if this disastrous absurdity of Mr. Derwent Smith is to be the result of waiting. If I cannot banish this wretched penniless adventurer from her mind, I shall marry her within the year to some one who can take care of her better than her brother has done.'

'No, no, my wife,' said Sir Gilbert mildly, but with unmistakable firmness; 'we must not be too precipitate. The child must be kept at home for some years yet, as Arthur says. She is scarcely out of her cradle yet, and to marry her would be a sin, let the man be who he may.'

'It would be destruction to give her to *that* man,' said Arthur warmly.

'A destruction which would have its compensation—which yours has not; neither in your grand scheme for her, nor your shameful choice for yourself,' was my lady's bitter reply.

'Mother, I cannot listen to such words!' cried Arthur, rising in extreme agitation. 'This is the second time that you have spoken of Muriel in this unworthy way. She a shame—a disgrace? It is a shame instead to say so!'

'She is what I have said,' returned his mother, looking him full between the eyes.

'Ah, mother! how can you be so untrue to your best self?' he cried. 'What is this disgrace which troubles you so much? Want of fortune! This is the shame of my marriage. With every virtue, every beauty, that a woman can have, of honourable parentage, with no relations to shrink from, she has no more fortune than myself—so that, in marrying her, I shall not be able to live without work! You have absolutely nothing but this to say against her; and to this I can only answer, that I would rather marry Muriel with nothing than any other woman with thousands;

and that by principle I should at all times decline to accept my life at the hands of my wife.'

'You see what you wish to see, and are as foolish as a silly girl,' Lady Machell answered harshly. 'What do we know of this honourable family of hers? I do not say that her father is a scoundrel—they both acted with perfect good sense and good breeding to-day—but we know nothing of them; and for all that is satisfactory in such a matter they are nowhere.'

'Which cuts both ways,' said Arthur.

'I almost wish he were proved to be a returned convict. Then at least the affair would be at an end!' cried Lady Machell with temper.

'My wife!' remonstrated Sir Gilbert with a smile.

Wilfrid too relaxed into that grim grimace which stood for a smile with him, while Arthur laughed outright.

'Mother, mother, you are thorough!' he cried good-humouredly, restored to his usual brightness by the very force of her fear—the absurd fear—of supposing Mr. Smith of Owlett to be a returned convict; 'we must wait however till he is shown to be a ticket-of-leave man, like Miss Dinah's Bob, and meanwhile it is perhaps safest to believe that he is not.'

But neither emotion nor good temper, neither sweetness nor opposition, nor her own mistakes, stirred my lady. She had set her face like a flint against this marriage, and she was not to be softened anyhow; and even though the councils of the men of the family carried it over her wishes, and Derwent was to be allowed still to visit at the house which had known him for fifteen years, and the life of the only daughter of which he had saved, yet she neutralized the grace so far as she could, and influenced her daughter if she could not bend her sons. She had a long talk with Hilda that very night, and made her promise by all the gods most sacred to a girl—by her filial duty and her maidenly modesty; by her promise given, not so long ago, that she would always obey her mother and that she would religiously keep her word; by the fears which are so easily aroused in a young mind and the hopes that are already stirring; by all that had been and all that might be—that she would not even think of Derwent as a possible future lover, still less encourage him to think of himself as one.

She had no difficulty in this. Hilda was too well disciplined to resist her mother; and the blood of the Machells had also its part in her nature. She cried and felt herself cruelly used, but she said yes all the same; and when her mother kissed her, as she had kissed her once before, she bent her pretty head for the better fastening of her collar of slavery, and resolved to make herself as comfortable

as circumstances would allow. There was very little fight in Hilda; she preferred instead of war and her own will submission and to be at peace. And then the main point with her was granted—Derwent was allowed to come to Machells; and this was enough for her, too young as she was to wish for a confessed engagement, or to care for more than the immediate pleasure of the moment.

Lady Machell had not stirred Muriel from her stronghold of trust and determination to abide by her promise, and neither did her own people. They forbade her engagement—the mother firmly, curtly, without explanation why; the father apologetically and with infinite distress. She answered them tenderly, kissed them tearfully; but she said that, although she would obey them so far as not to see nor write to Arthur, she should always hold herself promised to him, and that she should look forward to being one day claimed by him as his wife—when they would consent.

From this position they could not stir her—not for all the prayers of the one, the severe commands of the other; not for all their arguments, which, never touching the secret truth, fell short of conviction; not for all their appeals to her pride, her duty, her fear. She stood firm and substantially calm amidst it all, and at the end no one had moved an inch from the position each had taken at the beginning.

‘She is your true child, Constance,’ said Edmund to his wife when they were alone and discussed this matter together—‘love and faith and constancy in one scale, and the loss of the world in the other!’

So there things stood—Arthur and Muriel obedient in action but resolute in spirit; Derwent hopeful under his restrictions; Hilda resigned and submissive; Arthur waiting only for Wilfrid’s marriage before making his own way clear, when he would force the consent of Muriel’s parents by the removal of the only obstacle assignable at this time; Muriel full of trust in his power, not only to make that way clear, but also to gain from his own people the consent which she had no doubt hers would finally give. She was a girl who naturally took brave and cheerful views of things, because she was unsuspecting, even-tempered, and affectionate; and she felt that it was her duty now to look at the best side of matters, and not to embarrass anyone by tears or misgivings.

Whatever grace or good there had been in her innocent and happy girlhood, strengthened under her present trial into the richer nobleness of the tested woman, tried and not found wanting. Her very face grew grander in its lines as her thoughts went through love into sorrow, and her life had more fixity of purpose and more complexity of feeling; and beautiful as she had always been, she was

more beautiful now than before. Even Derwent, for all his spirit of fraternal domination, recognized that divine something which had passed like a breath over her soul, and wakened it into power out of grace—that divine something which made him more ready now to rely on her judgment than to compel her to accept his own.

But then a certain change was working too in him, and the vanity which had been his boyish snare was becoming daily less potent and less visible. He had touched that important moment of a young man's life when he is conscious that he must be and not only pose at seeming to be; when he must do, not dream. He wrote to his uncle Louis for that Viennese appointment which had always been his ambition, and by which he hoped to win fame and wealth enough for Hilda's home—his father's nefarious slave-dealing in Africa having fallen a little into the background, and his first vague distrust having given place to a settled general coolness, but without further distinct suspicion. And when fairly launched in life he was sure, he used to say to Muriel, that he should make his way and succeed. If only Hilda would remain as true to him as his sister to Arthur, all would be well. And he thought that she would; he was sure that she would.

All this was very pleasant, very hopeful and cheering in the midst of the depressing facts which were undeniable, though none of the young people thought them irremovable; and the days ran smoothly, and with hope to guide them, when one morning Miss Aurora, who was burning to know how the two love affairs of the family were going on, sent a note to Muriel, asking her to go up to Tower that afternoon, as she wanted her advice and assistance about some contributions to a bazaar which she had undertaken to send. And no one was so clever with her fingers as dear Muriel, said the gushing creature, as no one had such pretty little fingers to be clever with. There being no one else handy, she sent this note by Bob Rushton, with a message to give it to Miss Smith herself, and bring back her answer.

As the man came up the drive the horses were at the door. Derwent and Muriel were standing there prepared to mount; Mrs. Smith was out on the gravel walk, discussing the road which the young people were to take; while Edmund was feeling the legs of Muriel's chestnut, as a man fond of horses does when he has a chance. Bob, pondering always on how he could make that devotion of his to little Miss bring more than the guineas which both Arthur and Derwent had already given him—Derwent, by the way, intensely disgusted that a convicted thief should have even handled the rope by which Hilda was saved—came straight upon them as he entered the small gate which faced the drive before the house, and led through a side-door into the yard and offices.

He took off his cap, and the eyes of the men met. A strange gleam of intelligence shot from each to each; but Bob, making a rapid movement with his fingers, took no further notice of the master, though evidently an old acquaintance met unexpectedly—and that meeting not unpleasant.

Only when Miss, as he called Muriel, was reading the note, with another look and movement as rapid, as subtle, as undiscernible by an uninitiated bystander, he seemed to summon Mr. Smith to come to him as he himself drew a few paces off and stood with his back to the group as if for greater respect.

'All right, governor,' he said in a low whisper, when Edmund Smith went over to him as if to give him the orthodox shilling for his agency. 'I'll not peach—but you'll make it easy for me? I'll come down to-night when our folks are abed, and show you what I think.'

'All right, Bob,' said Edmund Smith, meeting his fate without faltering. Had he not known it all along? 'I will be out here to-night at twelve o'clock; and then we will see what can be done.'

CHAPTER XXV.

PLAYING AT PROVIDENCE.

WHAT the Tower ladies knew, the world at large was invited to discuss; and the facts that, not only were Mr. Arthur Machell and Miss Muriel Smith engaged—and Lady Machell as cross as the cats about it, as Baby said to her friend Mrs. Lucraft—but that Derwent and Hilda had kissed each other in full daylight on the lawn, were public property before the week was out.

In due time the budget came round to the 'foretime Browns of Clapton, to whom scraps of personal gossip were precious. But it came with the rider that everything had been broken off between Arthur and Muriel because of the want of money; and that Lady Machell had been, as Jemima put it, 'that mad with her daughter and young Mr. Derwent as to box his ears well for him, though he had saved little Miss Peacock's life at the risk of his own.' The snowball set rolling gathered greatly by the way, and by the time it reached Paumelle House was full of sticks and straws that had never belonged to it in the beginning. And this was one of them.

Wilfrid, when appealed to by his bride elect, was explicit and

emphatic enough on both points. There was no engagement at all—now—between his brother and Miss Smith, he said grimly. How could they marry when neither had sixpence, and when the families on both sides were opposed? Love in a cottage, and the total disregard of social necessities for the sake of a pretty face, were all very well in trashy novels, he said with a contemptuous sneer, but a man's life has to be founded on a different basis; and Arthur had too much sense to make a fool of himself when fairly put to it. He would see with their eyes before long, if indeed he had not already. As for Derwent and Hilda, he pricked that bubble with his lance very disdainfully. The child had fallen, and was in a little danger undoubtedly; and young Smith had done a gallant thing to help her; but good heavens! a lad may do a manly thing to save a child whom he has known all his life, without the necessity of any love affair between them; and the idea of Hilda with a lover at all was not only absurd but revolting. She was scarcely out of the schoolroom yet, and it was sacrilege to connect her name with that of any man in the world.

Nevertheless, for all his repudiation, he was bound to admit that something had been said and done to justify the first flakes of the snowball; a mere child's escapade—no more—and made vastly too much of by those two chattering old women who never knew when to hold their tongues, and with whom all molehills were mountains. And in like manner he could not deny that Arthur and Muriel had been—well, engaged, if Jemima liked to call such folly as that an engagement, he did not—but that even the cloudy relations which might have existed between them were now at an end, and the cause of the break was—want of money.

This want of money as the hitch in the smooth running of the silken thread pained Jemima. She had a tender heart, and took as much interest in love stories as she did in those of murder, ghosts, and haunted houses. Moreover, she liked Muriel who, though she had never been intimate, had been always kind and gentle, neither snubbing, nor patronizing, nor yet courting her; and she admired Derwent, though he was so standoffish and treated her as if she had been Catskins and not good enough to speak to. Also she had a very friendly feeling for Arthur, of whom she would have been considerably fonder and not nearly so much afraid had he been the elder son and standing in Wilfrid's place—she called it standing in his shoes. So that on the whole her not very solid being was considerably disturbed, and she was what an American would have called, considerably mixed. More than this, she was not selfish and did not care to keep all the good

things to herself. She longed to be able to play Providence to these unlucky ones so far as she could, and to make of the present ravelled web a seemly wedding garment. It was the fledgling's first flutter of its unaccustomed wings; the beginning of independence from the dawning consciousness of possession, which however Wilfrid would take care should not last long nor yet be freely exercised.

It wanted but a short time to the wedding; and with a true instinct of how things would be after, Jemima felt that if she wanted to do anything for her future brother-in-law and the girl whom he loved, she had better do it now. When she was fairly 'turned off'—irrevocably the Captain's wife—she knew in her secret soul that she would be sold into bondage, and kept there. Wherefore, asking leave of no one, not even consulting her mother, and certainly not her future husband, she wrote a letter to Arthur beginning, 'Dear Lieutenant Machell,' wherein she offered him a sum of ten thousand pounds which her father had just given her 'to do what she liked with.' If that would do to start him and Miss Muriel, so that they could marry when they had a mind, he was heartily welcome to it, she said in her small thin scratchy handwriting, where every letter had its loop, and all the tails ran through all the heads like so many meshes in a net. She did not know much about money matters, she went on to say, as she had never had the handling of it; but she had heard her father say that he began life on five pounds borrowed, and as he had done so well perhaps Lieutenant Machell would follow suit. And she was sure, she said, that if he wanted to go into business, her father would help him; for no man knew more of the city roughs and rigs and ins and outs than he did. She begged the Lieutenant not to tell of her to anyone—underlined four times—as she did not want to be talked over, and she had done it only for his good.

It was not like Jemima to be underhand. On the contrary, save perhaps that giggling eye-flirtation with the lawyer's clerk from the window, she had never had a secret of any kind from her mother, and enjoyed her life only in proportion to that mother's participation. The two in concert certainly kept a host of minor things from the husband and father; it being part of Mrs. Brown's creed that it doesn't do to tell everything to the gentlemen, gentlemen being a world of bother at the best of times, and the more dust ladies can throw in their eyes the better for everyone and the quieter things go on; but then they were together, and deception shared by two does not scrape the conscience so hard as when it is single. Now however fear was already making its mark, and

domination was bringing forth its fruits, if not exactly of deceit yet something very like it. Moreover, being a daughter of Eve, the slight flavour of naughtiness in her virtue had its charm, good girl as she was; and she sent her note and waited for the reply with almost as much excitement as she had felt during that famous scene in the conservatory.

If only she could play Providence to these people, so much her superiors in all save the mere possession of pence, and feel that their happiness was owing to her! Like a child making believe at motherhood, the idea of patronage and endowment to a depressed and crumpled little creature like herself, who had never snapped the leading strings, never exerted her will, and seldom had a will to exert, had inexpressible fascination. She almost wished that she had sent the money anonymously; but if she had, the Lieutenant would not have thanked her for his happiness; and of what good to be a Providence if you are not known as such and blessed accordingly? Few people care to keep the left hand stranger to the right, and Jemima was not one of the few.

The reply to her letter came in a different form from that which she had anticipated. She had looked for a nice little note from her brother-in-law designate, which she would receive clandestinely and read behind locked doors; feeling delightfully frightened, yet not guilty—only important and burdened with a secret that would be sure to offend the Captain if it were told, but that did not offend her own conscience. Instead of this, Arthur, who had no desire to enter into an underhand correspondence with his brother's future wife, himself rode up to the house to thank the good-natured little thing, as he mentally called her, for her generous intentions, and to put an end once and for ever to the idea that he could possibly accept such help as she proposed. He had resolved to make his own life, as a man should; and his brother's wealthy connections were to be of no use to him.

'You are very good,' he said to Jemima, standing with her in the bay of the drawing-room window, 'but I cannot accept your generous offer. All the same I thank you heartily, and shall never forget your kindness.'

'La, Mr. Arthur, don't say that; I knew that you were as good as given to Miss Muriel, but that you had some bother about money, and it was all off again.'

'Not quite off,' he said smiling; 'only delayed.'

'I'm glad of that,' she answered; 'but you needn't wait if you haven't a mind. Pa has come down very handsomely all round, and I couldn't, if I tried, want more than I have.'

'Very glad to hear it; so much the better for you!' he cried cheerfully.

'But if I don't want this ten thousand—and I don't, mind you—why shouldn't you take it for you and Miss Muriel to begin house-keeping with?' said Jemima, with the air of a person reasoning out the matter logically. 'I couldn't make a better use of it, and you'll be all the better for it. Do, Mr. Arthur! now, do! I do wish you would take it! It would make everything come square, and I should like to have Miss Muriel for a sister.'

'You are very good,' said Arthur almost tenderly; 'but indeed I could not. I will find a way yet to make Muriel my wife without robbing you, dear Miss de Paumelle; but do not think that I do not thank you. I do from my heart.'

'La!' thought Jemima, 'how nicely he talks, and how well he looks when he smiles?'

And at this she sighed. Her Captain did not talk so nicely, nor smile so often, nor look so well as his brother when he did.

'But if you won't be helped over your stie—and I'm sure to goodness I wish you would, Mr. Arthur—can anything be done for Mr. Derwent Smith?' she asked after a pause. 'Cannot he be put to something in the city through my pa? and then,' giggling, 'he and Hilda'—Arthur winced a little at the familiarity; it was all right, he knew, but it grated nevertheless—'could make a match of it, as by all accounts they'd like to do if they had the chance.'

'I am afraid that Derwent is hardly the kind of man for business,' said Arthur, with an almost imperceptible shade of haughtiness in his voice and air. 'And I don't think my mother would quite like such a position for Hilda.'

'But I am a city man's daughter,' said Jemima, opening her eyes. These refined distinctions were hieroglyphics to her whereof she had not the key.

'You are different,' Arthur answered gallantly.

So she was, looking at the thickness of her gilding; but naturally this was not the view of things which she herself took.

'Well, I suppose I am,' she said simply. 'I can't see it myself, but everyone seems to think it; so I suppose it is so. At least it's what the Captain and Lady Machell seem to say,' with a fatuous little laugh which made Arthur pity Wilfrid. But he was a Machell, and with the Machell social heroism; so he answered smiling:—

'They are right;' and looked into her face pleasantly.

Jemima coloured and hung her head.

'La, Mr. Arthur,' she said shyly, and crumpled up the end of her pale blue necktie.

After a moment she took up her parable where she had dropped it.

'And you will not really let me give you that money? I haven't the smallest mite of use for it; indeed I haven't,' she said earnestly.

'No, no; a thousand thanks, my dear, but I can manage quite well,' was his reply, his tone, if always gentle, too resolute to allow anyone more observant than Jemima to continue the contest; but she was both obtuse and pertinacious, as weak people generally are.

'Just think what it would be!' she said, as if he had never realised such a future. 'You and Miss Muriel married, and not to be parted again—think of it, Mr. Arthur!'

'Yes, it would be great happiness,' he said, a certain wistful far-away expression coming into his darkened eyes. 'But believe me,' he added, 'it would be absolutely impossible for me to buy even such happiness at this price. I must be sufficient for myself.'

She turned to him with what was for her passionate beseeching.

'Ah, but do!' she cried, clasping her hands. 'Do now, Mr. Arthur! It would be so nice to me to feel that I had made you both so happy! And oh my, you would be happy!'

Something in her words struck her. The thin little crust of pretence in her own future happiness with her stern and undemonstrative Captain, which she honestly tried to maintain, broke under the consciousness of the intensity, the reality that would be between Arthur and Muriel; and, covering her face, she burst into tears.

'My dear!' cried Arthur, moved, startled, sorry, and man-like understanding nothing of the hidden meaning of what he saw. 'What makes you cry like this? Do not be so sorry for us; we shall do very well in time. It is only a question of a few months' waiting,' lightly; 'we are not going to forsake each other, and it will all come right.'

He took her hand as he said this and kissed it. The Machells were not a kissing family, though he was more given that way than the rest; and the brothers were not men to salute each other's wives with or without sanction. They did not cherish sentimental fictions; and the lawfulness of fraternal familiarity to sisters-in-law, because of their sacredness, was a fiction which they appraised at its right value. It was then as a concession to natural emotion, and the desire to sooth the hysterical outburst of a would-be benefactress, that Arthur took the meagre little hand and carried it to his lips gallantly.

'La, Mr. Arthur!' said Jemima, a grateful smile shining through her tears; 'how nice you are to me! how nice you are to everyone!'

'Am I?' he said laughing; 'I think it is you who are nice to me.'

'Oh, my!' cried Jemima, first turning red and then white, as a look of real terror came like pain into her face.

Arthur followed her eyes, and saw beneath the window, looking up to them as they were standing there, performing their little comedy, his brother Wilfrid and her father old Brown.

Few things are more unpleasant than to be caught, doing nothing wrong but set in a snare of doubtful appearances. Arthur and Jemima in the bay of the drawing-room window, she with her handkerchief to her eyes, he carrying her hand to his lips, looked queer enough to the two men standing on the gravel below; and both Wilfrid and old Brown were justified—the one in his haughty surprise that his affianced bride should dare to show his brother so much confidence, and what the deuce was that brother doing here at all?—the other in his flush of apoplectic anger that the brother of his future son-in-law should be so dashed impertinent, and what was his girl about that she hadn't spirit enough to treat him as he deserved?

Meanwhile, Jemima felt as if she was in a dream, or rather hoped that she was; and Arthur himself, albeit conscious of no evil, wished that Wilfrid and old Brown had not seen her cry nor him kiss her hand. As things were, it could not be helped; and all that they had to do now was to put a good face on it, and not make bad worse by looking ashamed or as if they had done anything that they wished to hide. Which was easy enough to a man who has his equality of manhood and consciousness of strength to help him; perhaps also the habit of doing things which he would have to defend if proclaimed on the housetop; but difficult to a timid little girl accustomed to be herded, and to whom concealment is as rare as blame.

The trial however came; and the two men entered the room; Jemima feeling that she had to face not her lover so much as her master, and Arthur wondering what he should say if 'Wilfrid cut up rough,' and Jemima did not want the truth to be told. But nothing was said for the moment. Wilfrid's sense of family dignity forbade him to make cause against his brother before the Brown de Paumelles, even though the daughter of that despised and utilized house was to be his wife; and old Brown followed as his future son-in-law led, and would not have held up even his little finger if the Captain had told him to lower his hand. But after Arthur had endured his brother's grimness and old Brown's satirical familiarity for some time with the best grace that he could command, and had left the trio to themselves, then Wilfrid's hour came; and he used it.

'I did not like to say anything before Arthur, but what was the meaning of that extraordinary scene which your father and I witnessed just now?' he asked. 'Of what sorrow were you making my brother the confidant?'

'Yes,' said old Brown, heckling; 'what was that young man a-saying of to you, my dear? The Captain and I saw what made me as mad as a hatter, I can tell you; and he was not best pleased; so now you know.'

'La, pa! it was nothing; and you've no cause to look so glum, Captain Machell,' said Jemima, who was apt to be pert when frightened to the point which lies between the first awkwardness and the final collapse. 'I was doing nothing wrong.'

'I do not suppose you were; still I should like to understand what it meant,' was Wilfrid's cold reply—his head held a trifle higher than was necessary.

'Yes, my dear, we should like to know what it meant,' echoed Mr. Brown.

'And I've a good mind not to tell you,' said Jemima, friking nervously.

'It would be a better mind to be frank,' said Wilfrid, lifting his eyes with one of his hard looks.

'Yes, my dear, make a clean breast of it, and then you'll be better,' said her father, in an odd kind of coaxing tone, as if he had been speaking to a child or a lunatic. It was his way of manifesting his sense of superiority to the silly sex.

'Well, then,' said Jemima, who could never stand long on guard, 'I was just asking Mr. Arthur to take that little bit of money, pa, that you gave me a few days ago, so that he and Miss Muriel might marry and set up a house together as soon as they liked.'

'Why, Jemmy, my girl, what put that into your head?' said old Brown, trying to frown, but with a glistening glaze in his eyes which made the knit eyebrows a mere stage demonstration. He was not a man to throw away his money, nor did he like to see other people throw away theirs; still he had his romantic corners, and Jemima's generosity touched him.

'Well, pa, I hear that it is all off between them for want of a little something to start with, and I thought it would make every one happy if they could be set a-going without fuss or bother. And we have all we want, and more than I care for; and I like Miss Muriel, who has always been nice and affable to me; and Mr. Arthur is the Captain's own brother; and it seems hard that he should want when we have more than enough.'

She said all this in a breath. It was a long speech for her,

and uttered in a manner wholly unusual to her; but she was out of her general bearings to-day and roused to points hitherto untouched.

'You are a brick, my girl,' said old Brown warmly; 'but,' wagging his head, 'a cool ten thousand is not picked up at every street corner, let me tell you, and you must keep a little tighter hold than that over what you've got; eh, Captain?'

'You are very good,' said Captain Machell stiffly; 'but it was quite unnecessary from first to last. Had you consulted me I could have told you that your good intentions would be of no avail—for I suppose my brother did not accept your offer?'

'No,' said Jemima, shaking her head; 'and that made me cry. I was that sorry to think of them being separated for want of what I had, I could not help myself. So now you know all about it.'

It is again one of the sentimental fictions of life to pretend that angry men can be softened by the magnanimity of the action whereby they have been offended. They are only likely to see the folly or the annoyance of it, and to let its moral greatness, which cannot work and has been inconvenient, go to the winds. And Wilfrid at this moment was no exception to the rule.

'You would have done better to have left things alone,' he said in a tone of irritation; and at the accent which they had all learnt by now, old Brown shuffled hastily out of the room. As he told his wife, there was a breeze on between the young people, and they had better have it out by their two selves.

'I did not think I was doing anything wrong,' said Jemima, beginning to collapse.

'You did something underhand, which of itself is not right,' he answered sternly. 'It is not very becoming to plot with my brother unknown to me, even though it is for his own good—as you believe.'

'But he doesn't care for me,' said Jemima hurriedly. She thought her Captain might be jealous; it was natural; and she had better satisfy him out of hand. 'He is as much in love with Miss Muriel as ever he can be, so what harm could it do even if you didn't know?'

'Pshaw!' said Wilfrid, turning away impatiently. Could he possibly support this kind of thing for life? If she was buying her position in the county with a price, so assuredly was he buying his wealth!

Jemima began to cry. She had been a fretful child, and had grown up into a tearful woman.

'Don't cry,' he said, coming back to her and forcing himself to

speaking gently. 'I am not angry, and you are a good little woman. But for the future consult me when you are going to do anything out of the common way, and take my advice; which is sure to be better than your own; don't you see?'

He took her meagre arm in his broad hand and drew her gently to him, bending his head as if to kiss her forehead; but something seemed to repel him, and he raised it again, leaving the caress ungiven.

'Will you then do something for Mr. Arthur, if I cannot?' said Jemima, after a short pause.

'No,' said Wilfrid uncomfortably. 'He has determined on his own way, and will let no one help him.'

'Dear! such a pity! And they would make such a fine couple!' said Jemima, ignorant of pitfalls. 'They're just made for each other—to the very life.'

Wilfrid's heavy face was leaden-coloured; but he made no answer. He had to bear his pain for life without solace or relief—a pain which no one could share and none must know.

'So would Mr. Derwent and Hilda,' continued Jemima.

'Derwent Smith and Hilda!' cried Wilfrid with an energy that made the girl start. It was a legitimate cause for an outburst and he profited by it. 'Why not George Lucraft at once?'

'La!' cried Jemima, her secret sympathies preventing her from seeing the sarcasm; 'I don't think Hilda cares for him, and she does for Mr. Derwent.'

'Listen—I have said once before that this is a subject which I will not have discussed,' said Wilfrid, morally crushing the poor weak creature before him. 'Never again let me hear you speak, either of love or marriage, in connection with my sister. You do not wish to make me angry, I am sure, and this does make me angry—more than I care to be with you.'

'I am sure I am very sorry, and I don't want to put you out,' said Jemima humbly, beginning to cry afresh.

Just then old Brown bustled back, 'hoping not to intrude' as he stood at the door with a made-up smile broadening his face; and little Mrs. Brown stole in meekly after, whispering to her daughter to come along upstairs and try on her bridal dress, which had just arrived from Paris.

'Ma, I never can grow to him, never!' cried the bride elect, sitting down on the couch in her bedroom and whimpering helplessly. 'He's that stern and high I don't know where I am with him. It's of no use. I try all I can to get free with him, but I can't, whatever I do. He seems to hold me at arm's length as it were; and yet why should he? Oh ma, if only he had not taken a fancy to me, but had left me quiet at home with you!'

'It's too late now, my dear,' said good Mrs. Brown, also sitting down on the couch and whimpering helplessly in concert. 'Your pa has made up his mind, and things have gone too far to be mended; and us women are made to suffer, Jemima, my dear! That's what we are born into the world for, it seems to me. But God is good and He knows best,' she added meekly, though it was a hard saying and faith a difficult virtue on the whole. For, as she had often asked herself, why should poor women be tormented for the sake of those bothering men?—and why should Providence have made the one so strong and the other so weak, that the one might be tyrants and the others slaves, with no help for them on earth, whatever there might be in heaven?

But tears are not the fitting pearls for bridal dresses; and after a time the two women kissed each other and wiped their eyes. Summoning their grand maid, who despised them and checked their familiarities as unbecoming to her own dignity, the gown was tried on and pronounced perfect; and grief was forgotten in the pleasure of satisfactory finery—as is the way with women.

While Jemmy was standing before the pier-glass pulling this fold and pinching up that seam, and Mrs. Brown was mentally calculating the cost price of the material, and burning at the iniquity of the profit included in the whole sum, a telegram was brought to the elder lady, which threw both into an agony of apprehension.

'What ever can have gone wrong?' said Jemmy piteously, feeling faint and queer.

It was nothing very bad; at least not for them; only one of the bridesmaids—that same Helen Lawrence whom my lady so much desired for Arthur—had fallen suddenly ill with what they feared would turn out to be scarlet-fever, and therefore could not fulfil her engagement with Miss de Paumelle.

'La ma! now isn't that unfortunate?' cried Jemmy, who had her favourite superstitions like her pet sympathies. 'I've heard it's as bad as bad for luck to have a bridesmaid fall ill.'

'You mustn't think of that, my dear,' said her mother soothingly; 'but it's a pity to spoil the half-dozen. Five's an awkward number to sit at table, but I dare say we can manage.'

'La!' cried Jemmy suddenly; 'I'll ask Miss Muriel. The Captain wouldn't let me when I wanted to before, but he can't object now when we are put into a hole, as one may say. At all events, I'll try it on.'

'My dear!' remonstrated her mother timidly; 'hadn't you better begin as you'll have to go on. It's of no use your setting up against the Captain, Jemmy my dear. He's master, and means

to be so, if I have eyes in my head. Your pa's been master over me, and you'll have to dance to the same tune, so you might as well begin from the beginning.'

'Well, then, ma, suppose you ask her,' said Jemima coaxingly. 'The Captain can't row you, you know, and you and pa have a right to choose my bridesmaids. Do, Ma!—let me have Miss Muriel, and give her to Mr. Arthur. He was to have had Miss Lawrence, you know, so a fair exchange is no robbery. Do, ma, dear! It will make me so happy if you will!'

'La, Jemmy, who could refuse you, my dear, when you choose to ask!' said Mrs. Brown, kissing her tenderly. 'Why, of course, my dear, if you want her so bad as that you shall have her, let the Captain be as mad as he chooses. I'll go over this very afternoon to Owlett, and I'm sure Miss Muriel is not of the stuff to say no when she is prettily spoken to, and you, my dear, want her to say yes!'

'Oh ma,' said Jemmy lovingly; 'you are that good!—I never did see one like you—never.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

HIS FUTURE EXCELLENCY.

THERE was no sort of mystery about it, but Derwent and Muriel had often wondered why Uncle Louis never came to see them. He was the head of the family; their father's uncle; their mother's trustee under her marriage settlement; their own guardian through the long period of their father's absence; the business man *par excellence*, to whom everything of importance was referred—who bought Owlett and sent the money for the furnishing; who chose Derwent's tutors and prescribed the course of his studies; who paid in to mamma's account at the local bankers the four hundred pounds quarterly which made up her yearly income of sixteen hundred; who often sent presents to them all, and always at Christmas, and in the autumn when he came back from his tour on the Continent with pretty trifles from Paris and Vienna, Rome and Berlin, to show the young people that he had not forgotten them, and to give them a little pleasure in their uneventful lives. But though he wrote to them paternal letters, full of minute inquiries as to what Derwent was doing and how Muriel employed her time, and where both stood in relation to their studies—though he was evidently deeply interested in them and as evidently Mrs. Smith's

best friend—yet he never came to see them, and he never asked them to go to see him.

To the children he was a being as unknown and almost as mythical as their father. He was Uncle Louis; a kind of incorporate Fortunatus's purse and the giver of good things to all; but, though a power in the household, like one of the unseen forces of nature—an agency not a presence, felt not visible.

Mrs. Smith did not talk much of him, though she did not appear to shrink from him when her children questioned her. He was a kind-hearted man in a certain sense, she once said when they were especially enthusiastic over some jewellery which he had sent as the fruits of a visit to Castellani's—a generous man too; truly, she willingly allowed that—but a strict disciplinarian, one who never overlooked a failing and never forgave a fault: 'He is right there!' said young Derwent grandly. Still he had his good points, she went on to say in a lofty kind of manner, which looked more like a magnanimous rendering of the best side of him than the free acknowledgment of what was undeniable—as if she could have put another interpretation on his character had she been so minded, but would not, because of generosity and human kindness; and his virtues, if of a harsh and severe cast, were strong and manly, and such as entitled him to honour.

All the same she evidently did not love this uncle, how much soever she was obliged to respect him. She did not wish to invite him to Owlett, she said carelessly when her children pleaded; and she was glad that he did not invite them to London. He lived, she told them, in grand style in his magnificent house on the banks of the Thames, and was a man of immense wealth and honourable standing. He was not married; and in early days—a trifle emphasized—he had been very good to papa.

As she was habitually reserved to her children, there was nothing wonderful in her not detailing any little anecdotes of personal gossip or description which would have filled in the picture more completely and made them understand Uncle Louis better than they did. She simply gave the outline; answered such questions as they might ask; and volunteered nothing. But she taught them to respect him; his own kindness made them love him as much as an unknown person can be loved; and the portrait which she carefully drew of a kind, severe, upright, and inflexible man was one which touched a chord of sympathy in Derwent's heart, and inclined him to a reverence for this unknown uncle of his father only second to the reverence which he felt for that father himself. Of late indeed he would have said that, so far as he knew him, the uncle seemed infinitely the nobler character of the two.

Rich, honourable, and with a powerful connection, it was evidently not difficult for him to find a fitting place for Derwent; and the promise which he had always made that the lad should have a fair start in life, was the sheet-anchor to which all the young fellow's hopes of happiness were moored. That appointment to the Vienna Embassy!—this was the Open Sesame which he longed for the opportunity to pronounce. He wished to travel and see foreign countries; but he wished to see them *en grand seigneur*, not as a Bohemian artist taking the rough with the smooth, fraternising with peasants for the sake of their costumes, and sleeping on straw in his search for picturesque adventures. He had no fancy for the rough things of life, and he hated peasants as much as he hated sleeping on straw. His thoughts went to great cities full of nobles and diplomatists, where the politics of the world were regulated in after-dinner talk and the quiet corners of state apartments; such a place as Vienna, always Vienna, and the *crèmes de la crème* there.

His great-uncle had fostered the fancy, and Derwent's dreamy ambition had soared very high indeed. His Excellency! nothing less! He was to be ambassador some day, and to be ennobled and beribboned like the best. And when he was H. E. the Ambassador at some high court in Europe, being quite a young man then without a furrow or a grey hair—youthful dreams go at fever pace—Hilda would be my lady and the vice-queen of ideal perfection.

Since the father's return Uncle Louis had not written. The quarter's account had been paid into the bank with the usual punctuality, but no word of greeting had come with it, and no word of welcome to the long exiled traveller. Derwent had remarked this to himself; but he had not spoken of it even to Muriel. It had been another item in the sum of his displeasure and suspicion; which however he was learning to cast up in silence, keeping his thoughts and his sorrows to himself.

At last, when the uncertainty of his position became more and more intolerable, he wrote to Uncle Louis and reminded him of his promise. He was close on twenty-one now, he said, and he began to find his home life not only irksome but unmanly. Now that his father had returned to take care of his mother and Muriel, there was no reason why he should stay; and he was becoming impatient to begin the serious work of life on his own account.

His letter expressed as much by what it did not say as by what it did. Not a word of love, of sympathy, of admiration for the father whose praise had so often filled the boy's letters in the days when he was still—in Africa; not a word of regret at leaving him, or home; nothing, in short, but dissatisfied impatience and restless craving for change.

Uncle Louis, a shrewd man of the world who could read between the lines, understood the whole thing clearly enough. He pitied the poor boy profoundly, and gave him credit for the fine instincts which in truth he possessed.

'Poor lad!' he sighed compassionately as he folded, docketed, and laid away the letter. 'But he has bad blood in him, and the father's strain must come out sooner or later,' was his second thought, less generous in its impulse than the first.

He did not answer this letter immediately. He had his own designs for the boy, and he wanted to wait until he should be legally of age. He would then have something to tell him, and something to propose, which he would rather not broach during his minority.

His silence was a terrible trial to Derwent. His hope that through Uncle Louis things would work clear for him with Hilda, made him doubly impatient of delay, and his sorrow at the turn which Muriel's affairs had taken helped on his disquiet. He could not be angry with Lady Machell, Hilda's mother; but he felt sure that if Uncle Louis would only interfere, everything would be made right, and all the knots pulled smooth and straight. Not hearing, he wrote again, a short time before the wedding; and this time—his demands rising higher by delay, like the Sibyl's of old—he introduced into his letter the love-sorrowa of Muriel and Arthur, and besought Uncle Louis to give them as well as himself a helping hand.

'We are at a total loss for useful friends,' he said in conclusion. 'My father has evidently made no connection of any kind during his absence; and his experience, whatever it may have been, is of no value to us, his children.'

'I should think not,' said Uncle Louis aloud, as he folded, docketed, and put away this letter also; refreshing his memory of dates, which was waning, by looking into a register headed E. Smith; whereby he saw that Derwent would be of age in about three weeks' time—when the die would be cast, the truth told, and his fortune placed unreservedly in his own hands.

It was a maxim with the merchant to let each person know the truth of his own affairs, and Derwent has to learn the scamy side of those belonging to him. But, to tranquillize the lad, he wrote to say that he hoped to be able to place him according to his wishes; and that this day month he should expect him in London. He wished that they should become personally acquainted before he took the full responsibility of his future on himself, though he made no doubt but that this acquaintance would only heighten the goodwill which they had mutually felt for each other so far as they had gone.

As for Muriel and Mr. Machell, if the latter would call on him when next in town, he had no doubt here too but that he could arrange something which would set all that little difficulty straight and ensure the happiness which they seemed so much to desire. He had always designed to give Muriel a fitting dowry if she married according to his liking; and if Mr. Machell was according to his liking, the thing was done, and there should be no further obstacle on the score of money. He hoped that this letter would meet the wishes of all concerned, and he was Derwent's affectionate uncle and friend,
LOUIS MEREDITH.

The tone of the letter throughout was that of a generous and powerful autocrat disposed to good deeds and glad to help his suffering subjects. It was by no means offensive, but it was autocratic; and above all things it expressed power.

Derwent was overjoyed. Had some good angel, brooding over the earth and regulating the affairs of men, specially interested himself in the behalf of these four young people in an obscure village in England, and rearranged the whole mosaic of human life that each of the two Strephons should be married at their parish church to their respective Chloes, he could not have felt more elated with present prospects, more sure of future success.

He and Muriel read the letter in the garden—their favourite council-chamber—and congratulated each other over it; and said what a splendid fellow Uncle Louis was and how excellent a thing it was to be able to depend on anyone—and they could depend on him; how surely everything would come right now that he had taken matters in hand; and what a blessing it was to have a business man among them! They laughed like happy children, and wove the brightest visions that youthful hope and fancy could devise. Derwent rose with a bound from his late depression to the highest point of elation, feeling that fate was conquered and fortune won; and Muriel caught the infection too, and echoed his hopes with her own.

When he said in triumph: 'Lady Machell can make no objection to your marriage now, Muriel; you at least are safe!' she answered, as confident in spirit if more softly in tone: 'No; she cannot object now, I should think; nor to you, darling. If Uncle Louis makes your fortune as he seems to say he will, there cannot possibly be any objection to you:—to our boy, no!' lovingly.

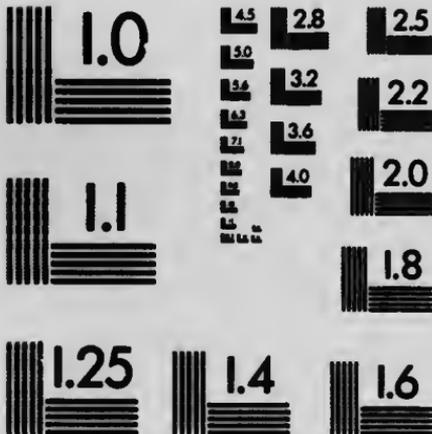
'To neither of us,' he answered. 'All throughout Lady Machell has put it only on want of money; and of course as a mother she was justified. Now, you will see, she will welcome us both.'

Muriel's smiles a little vanished. She remembered certain sharp words from my lady which were not due only to want of



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money; but she did not repeat them. She would not sadden her brother at this moment with unpleasant reminiscences. Let the day have its joy, as its evil is sufficient for it; why sadden the feast with the skeleton?

'I am so glad,' she said vaguely; and her words, pointless as they were, satisfied her brother, and seemed exactly what she should have said, and what he expected her to say.

After they had talked a little more, going through the whole circle of the future and minutely examining every beautiful possibility and glorious certainty as their hopes constructed each, Derwent took the letter to his mother, where she sat with his father in the workshop that had been fitted up for him since his return. How he had learned it in the heart of Africa no one knew, and he did not tell, but he had come back with a passion for fine carpentering, which he executed with the skill of a professional.

It was a rare event for Derwent to go to this room; and both father and mother looked up in surprise when he entered, his face brighter than they had seen it of late, his step lighter, his bearing pleasanter. But those parents once so passionately beloved, the one of whom he now distrusted and from the other was estranged, knew rightly enough that he had not gone there to see them for love nor to consult them for respect, but rather to give them his ultimatum on some point which it was his will that they should know. Things had come to this pass with them, and there was no chance of making them better.

'I have had a letter from Uncle Louis, mother,' he said rather coldly as he entered. 'At last he has found me a post.'

'Yes?' she said, turning pale; 'and where and what is it?'

'An appointment as attaché, I suppose. It was what I asked for and what he has always promised; but he does not distinctly specify it there.'

'I know that you have always wished for that,' she returned, looking at her husband as if asking him to say something.

'A good opening,' put in Edmund Smith constrainedly.

'Yes,' said Derwent as constrainedly.

'And when are you going?' asked his father, not looking at him.

'Uncle Louis says this day month, sir.'

His mother turned away.

'And then we shall lose our boy from home for ever,' she said, with an affectation of lightness in her voice with which the quivering lips and humid eyes were not very harmonious.

'It is time,' said Derwent, who heard only the voice and did not see the face.

'Not the less a pain when it comes,' she answered, a more natural accent of trouble breaking through her artificial assumption.

The boy's eyes softened, but he answered steadily enough:—

'You have my father now, mother. You no longer need me, though perhaps Muriel still does.'

'One love does not drive out another, my boy,' said Edmund.

'One presence makes another unnecessary, sir,' he answered stiffly.

'I have observed that you think so; but you are none the less in the wrong,' the father said with rising irritation.

Their conversations generally began by his trying to conciliate his son and ended by their greater estrangement.

Derwent held his head very straight. If his vanity and affectation had a little abated in these latter days, his pride had not; and his suspicion that all was not right with his father—that in point of fact things were decidedly wrong with him—made his home temper anything but pleasant.

'This day month?' cried his mother hastily, for a diversion. 'We shall still have you for your twenty-first birthday. I am glad of that; though we shall make no public display. Still, we can keep it happily among ourselves.'

'I see no need for keeping it at all, mother. The great good which it will bring me is legal independence.'

'From the harsh parental control that you have suffered under so long!' said Edmund with weak sarcasm.

'From something perhaps as painful, sir,' flashed out Derwent.

'What date is the De Paumelle marriage, my dear?' asked his mother, in the innocent way of a deaf person who has not heard the sharp beginnings of strife.

'The fifth,' said Derwent, after a short pause.

'Do you go?'

'Certainly; why not?' proudly. 'Muriel and I are both going.'

'Muriel? I shall be sorry if she goes,' said his mother slowly.

'And I shall be more than sorry if she does not,' he answered.

'Do your mother's wishes count for nothing with you, Derwent?' asked his father.

'My mother's knowledge of Muriel's affairs is not so great as mine,' the boy retorted.

Mrs. Smith's delicate face was suddenly convulsed as if by some sharp and intense anguish; but the habits of a life came to her aid, and it was the old calm mask which she turned on her son, as she said:—

'Your words mean a reproach, my dear. It is undeserved. I know what is best for my child.'

'In this matter, no, mother; it is I who know what is best. Muriel ought to go to the wedding; and,' impulsively, 'she shall.'

'Our commands notwithstanding?' said Edmund.

'Notwithstanding,' echoed Derwent. 'If you had gone among our friends, they would have had weight, sir; but, as you know nothing of the people here, you cannot judge of certain things as well as we can.'

'Your father understands his own life best,' said Mrs. Smith hastily.

'As I am not admitted into his confidence, and know nothing of his reasons, I can only judge of things as they look,' he answered. 'And you can scarcely wonder at it, mother, if I do not like what I see.'

Edmund rose from his bench in strange and passionate disorder.

'We must come to some explanation together,' he cried angrily.

'Your manner to me is intolerable, Derwent. I will not endure it longer.'

'My love! he is but a boy!' said his wife, laying her hand on his arm and smiling as if with uncomfortable compassion.

'No, mother; I am a man with a man's perception of evil and honour for truth,' he cried.

'Perception of evil and honour for truth!' said his father, trying to speak with scorn, but turning pale and shuffling his feet uneasily.

'Yea, and this is not truth,' said Derwent, looking at him fixedly and gravely. 'There is something concealed—perhaps something that cannot be told. You know best what it is, father; I only know what I feel and see.'

Edmund shrank back. All his self-respect, like his plaintive air of martyrdom, seemed to fall from him in the presence of his son. He could be himself, and more than himself, with his wife and daughter; pose for the saintly kind of English gentleman which the one maintained and the other believed him to be; accept their homage and return their love; pay back their tender flattery with caresses, make them both the objects of his attention and the happy sharers of his hours; but something in his son overpowered him:—and in all their contests Derwent was the victor, and he abashed, humiliated, conquered.

'You are rude and undutiful,' said his mother sternly.

'I am neither, mother. I want only to be told the truth. Take me into your confidence, treat me as your son—as a man—and no one would love or reverence their parents more than I,' he answered.

'You are too childish to argue with,' she said, with well-feigned disdain; and turned away.

Derwent's heart, which had leaped at the prospect of a struggle whence might ensue an explanation, sank down at her voice and manner. He gave an irrepressible sob.

'No, mother,' he said, pushing off the hair from his forehead; 'that is as untrue as all the rest. Neither you nor my father dare tell me the truth of things; that is it; not that I am too childish to be spoken with.'

'Have it your own way,' she said icily. 'If it gives you pleasure to cherish these wild fancies, keep them, my dear. Meanwhile, we have forgotten the main purport of your visit to us here—your uncle's letter.'

'There is nothing more to be said about it,' he answered, after a short struggle with himself. 'I am leaving home this day month, and probably shall not return for some time. If I go abroad, I certainly shall not.'

There was a pause; no one of the three dare trust emotion or speech; at last Derwent said, in a voice which he managed to keep tolerably steady:—

'And when Lady Machell herself asks Muriel to be at the wedding, you will offer no opposition, mother?'

'Lady Machell will not ask her,' she answered.

'But if she does?'

'Even then I should desire her to refuse. There can be no close friendship between ourselves and the Machells.'

'If no disgrace is attached to us, I do not see why not,' said Derwent slowly.

'It is my will—our will,' replied his mother, looking at the clock. It was close on the hour when they expected Bob Rushton to come for the final arrangement of certain terms which he had made.

'And mine that we should be allied as closely as is possible for two families to be,' he returned passionately. 'If it has to come to a fight between us, mother, it must.'

'Derwent!' she cried in an agonised voice.

He turned to her eagerly.

'Mother! mother! are you going to be yourself again?' he cried, flinging his arms round her and holding her to him.

'My boy!' she said, kissing him with feverish passion; then she pushed him from her; 'you are mad,' she added coldly, and went nearer to her husband.

The boy stood for a minute as if dazed, then slowly turned from the room, feeling that the last effort had been made, and that henceforth he had lost both father and mother for ever.

'My position is unbearable!' cried Edmund, as his son closed

the door behind him. 'Not all your love, Constance, not all Muriel's sweetness, can make it endurable. I cannot bear it—and will not!'

'You must, my darling,' she answered soothingly. 'It has to be worked through. We have no choice.'

'It is good that he leaves us so soon, before bad becomes worse,' said Derwent's father fretfully.

'Yes, very good,' she answered quietly.

She stood for a moment quite still, then drawing her husband's head to her breast kissed it tenderly; but as she smoothed his hair and caressed him with the fond old touch, she suddenly broke down into a paroxysm of passionate weeping. For the instant the mother conquered, and she realized to the full the fearful price which her devotion to her husband had cost her.

CHAPTER XXVII.

REHABILITATED.

LADY MACHELL was in no sense a bad-hearted woman. She was only clear as to what she wanted, and not afraid of methods. She was ambitious for her children because she had felt the humiliation of an inherited position deprived of its appliances, and she wished them to marry money because she had suffered from the sorrows of poverty. If love could be added to money, so much the better; but love with an empty purse was a fool's paradise which it was the duty of every parent to bolt and bar against their young, while money was at the least a fact standing four-square and undeniable.

In that inner self which she suppressed as a matter of stern duty, she had mourned over Arthur's pain, and had been sorry to hurt Muriel; but the cause was more important than the result, and if she could but save her son from destruction it would be a gain for all time well bought by a little present suffering. If she could! Still she had no pleasure in seeing suffering or causing it: and it had been the sense of duty only which had compelled her action. Had the marriage been simply negative—if not actively good, yet by no means ruinously bad—she would have accepted it, and would have hidden her disappointment that it had not been better; but, as it was, she would have been false to all her traditions and unfaithful to her principles had she not opposed it with her whole strength, and as the struggle might.

As for Hilda and Derwent, she looked on their affair as a childish absurdity about which it was not worth while to waste either time or thought. Perhaps she was right. How dear soever it might be to Derwent at this moment, and how precious soever as a remembrance for his future manhood, still it was only what she said—a filmy romance like most first loves, baseless in its beginnings and impracticable in its issues.

Guy Perceval was far more to the purpose. Certainly he was not beautiful to look at, but he had solid qualities which would wear well; and his very crazes proved his good impulses. If Hilda could not love him romantically, she would at the least respect him; and respect lasts when romance has died.

All the same, if Derwent Smith had had Guy Perceval's material advantages, my lady would have preferred him for her son-in-law as richer than Guy by so much grace and beauty; but as things were she chose rather than a handsome youth of unknown family and uncertain fortune, a man whose family and whose antecedents, whose character and whose fortune were all impeccable and as much public property as the parish church; and in choosing him, with the distinct if unexpressed intention of one day making Hilda choose him also, she believed that she had done the best thing possible for her daughter's enduring happiness.

But again, let it be said, her action was founded only on the basis of money. Given Derwent with Guy's place and money, she would have chosen him for Hilda with greater pleasure than the present master of the Manor; or given Muriel with only fifty thousand pounds, and she would have accepted her for Arthur with greater pleasure than she had fixed on Jemima with millions for Wilfrid. It was only this dreadful want of money that made all the mischief! Wherefore, she was not to be accused of inconsistency, when, after Derwent had shown her Uncle Louis' letter, she allowed herself to be thawed by his fire, and to believe in the pot of gold which he said was shining beneath the rainbow.

'My fortune is made!' he cried enthusiastically; 'there is nothing now between me and full success.'

'I am glad of your brilliant prospects, my dear,' said Lady Machell with stately kindness. 'I have always said that you would do well if fairly started.'

'And I will justify your belief,' he answered with a not unbecoming pride.

How handsome he looked!—how full of youthful hope and fire! Different from Arthur, who was more massively fashioned in all ways and with more of that large kind of energy which can create its own circumstances, Derwent had yet that seductive kind of

power which belongs to a highly wrought nervous organisation, and a fine quality of fibre.

'He will do well,' thought Lady Machell approvingly; and she was glad for the boy's sake that he had this brilliant opening, if it did not touch her secret designs for Hilda. Still, he was sure to do well. It was the right kind of career for him; and he was almost certain to fulfil his dreams and rise to eminence in the diplomatic service.

Then said Derwent, leaning forward in an attitude as expressive of beseeching as if he had knelt at her feet:—

'Keep Hilda unmarried, Lady Machell, till I can come back to claim her and place her in a position worthy of her! Keep her with you—for me!'

My lady laughed, but not unpleasantly.

'Keep her for you, such a mere boy as you are!' she said, passing her hand lightly over his picturesque head. 'There can be no question of an engagement between you and Hilda—two such babies as you are! You have your spurs to win yet, my boy, and she has her education to finish.'

'But give me time to win them,' he pleaded. 'Promise to keep her till she is of age—five years from now—unless she forgets me, and herself wishes to marry some one else.'

It was an imprudent admission. My lady did not take it up, but she remarked and cherished it all the same.

'I will not force her to marry against her will, if that is what you mean,' she answered always pleasantly—almost lightly indeed;—and plainness from Lady Machell was the mark of supreme good fortune in the present.

'And are you willing to wait for me?—Dear Lady Machell!

'I will not coerce her one way or the other,' she answered. 'I can scarcely believe that you have made any way with her,' looking at the boy fixedly; 'as I do not suppose you capable of the dishonour of such a thing. For you know it would be dishonour, Derwent, if you had tried to entangle the affections of a girl so young as Hilda, when you have positively nothing whatever to offer, and are only just now about to put your foot on the first step of the ladder. Still, if your prospects have become certainties, and my daughter should chance to be unmarried some years hence, why not you as well as another? I would not be your enemy, but I cannot promise you more. There is nothing against you but your youth, and want of definite fortune and position; everything for the present moment, but barriers that time and your own good conduct will remove.'

'I cannot in honour ask more,' he said, his handsome face

beaming like a young god'a. 'Only let me feel that I have a chance which it will depend on myself to make a certainty!'

'Surely; you are not discarded from the list because you are Derwent Smith,' she answered smiling. 'I wish only my child's happiness; and I have always been fond of you, my dear.'

'Thank you,' he said with deep emotion. 'You have made me thoroughly happy now.'

He was so sure of his success in the future that to get so much concession was equivalent to a bond. He wanted nothing more, though he would have been contented with nothing less.

'And now, dear Lady Machell, what about Muriel?' he asked: this softer mood of their former pitiless Juno must not pass without fruits for his sister as well as for himself.

'I have always said that I have no personal objection to Muriel—only to her want of fortune,' was the reply made with sudden stiffness.

'But if Uncle Louis does as he says he will? He is not married—has no one so near to him as my father and us—and has always been our best friend,' said Derwent. 'He can, if he likes, give Muriel fortune enough for any man!'

'I would not oppose her entrance into our family if she came sufficiently provided,' replied Lady Machell not too graciously.

She still resented Muriel's tenacity, and only conceded so much out of love for Arthur.

'Then, Lady Machell, write to her and ask her to go to the wedding!' said Derwent. 'I am going of course, but M'rirel says that she will not. She says that she has promised not to meet Arthur, and she will not break her word. But if you ask her, dear Lady Machell, she is freed from her engagement, and everything will come right. Do, Lady Machell! it will make us all so happy!'

'I am not in the habit of repudiating my own words,' was her reply, spoken coldly and haughtily.

'But you say that it was only because of her want of fortune—and now that this is removed,' he argued, 'you have no other cause against her; for indeed she has not a fault!—and see how honourably she has acted! Dear Lady Machell, you will ask her to go of your own free will and to please you;—will you not? She will not else.'

'Not else, what?' said Sir Gilbert, looking in at the open window where the two were sitting.

'Oh! Sir Gilbert, you are well come!' cried the boy, getting up from the low chair near my lady, and going closer to the window, where, in a few rapid words, he poured out part of his budget, and

enlisted the father's sympathies for his son—where indeed they had always been.

The boy kept back his own dream of hope with Hilda. It was only Muriel's matter of which he spoke; the other was a secret between him and Hilda's mother, and he preferred to keep it so.

'Yea, yea,' said the good-natured baronet, 'surely, my dear! We should all be very dull without pretty Muriel Smith. Yes, you will write to her, Annie, and tell her to come?'

Was it weakness or wifely obedience? womanliness or crafty calculation? Was it the desire to please her son and to re-establish the old loving relations which had been so terribly interrupted of late, or natural sympathy for a young girl until now a favourite in the house, the only one in the neighbourhood to be discarded from the great event of the neighbourhood? Was it that kind of general benevolence which is the result of success, or was it a concession due to the probable arrangements to be made by Uncle Louis? Who can disentangle the crossing lines of thought which make up the impulse of action? Something of one and something of another probably influenced my lady; so that, softening by fine degrees under Derwent's earnestness and her husband's insistence, she yielded to the prayers of the one and the desires of the other, and wrote a kind little note to Muriel which she supposed would set all straight at Owlett, how much soever it sought to undo her own work. For a woman like Lady Machell is always Ahasuerus to her own mind. "Those whom she touches with her sceptre graciously are bound to receive gratefully; pride being a passion sacred only to herself. And if she so far humbled herself as to write as she did now to Muriel, begging her to come to the wedding on the fifth, for her sake—underlined—and to make everyone at Machells happy—also underlined—she anticipated a refusal no more than a king would anticipate the refusal of pardon and reprieve sent instead of the executioner to a condemned criminal.

So Derwent rode back to Owlett triumphant on all counts; meeting Arthur by the way, coming from Paumelle House, and carrying him with him as the sign of his victory and the fruits of his success.

Was there ever such a joyous moment as that when the two young men rode through the gate at Owlett? It was the loveliest little poem that could be written in human hope and youthful joy—the sunniest break in a dull sky that an unexpected burst of summer beauty could create. Muriel, who had been watching for Derwent's return, understood at once the meaning of her lover's coming. She remembered nothing of the harsh words that had

been said, of the dignity that she ought to maintain, the pride that she should cherish. There was no pride, no dignity, for her at this moment—only love and delight.

She came to meet them, almost running—her hands outstretched; her blush-rose face, which had not laughed before to-day for so many sad days, now dimpled with happy smiles—every smile a caress, a vow, a confession; her true and faithful heart shining in her eyes, neither afraid nor ashamed to show how great had been her loss by her frank delight at this dear return. Why should there be shame where there is love?—and does it not, when perfect, cast out fear?

Arthur, no less frankly elate than herself, flung his bridle to the groom who came to the front on the sound of the horses' hoofs up the drive; and drew her away to the dear old seat beneath the tulip-tree, feeling like an exile who had once more found his home. There they sat and talked, and, as Derwent and she had done before, wove their pleasant dreams and made themselves glad with hope and joy.

Arthur would not forbid Uncle Louis if he wished to endow Muriel. That was not in his list of prohibited advantages. All the same he would work for himself—if not in the bush, yet he would do something by which to use his strength and justify his manhood; but what came to Muriel was her own, and she might hold and enjoy it. The great good of this prospective endowment was to ensure my lady's consent; and hers given, of course Mr. and Mrs. Smith would give theirs also. Their refusal had been founded only on a quite natural and laudable pride; and the sensitive dread of appearing to force their daughter on a family unwilling to receive her was something to be praised, not condemned. Indeed, everybody somehow came out into perfect goodness and beauty, and a paradise bloomed where so late a desert had frowned.

'I am especially glad that you are coming to the wedding,' said Arthur, taking Muriel's forgiving consent as certain; 'putting myself out of the question—and I need not to say how glad I am for myself.'

'Why glad for anything but your own and your mother's reconciliation?' asked Muriel.

'On account of the De Paumelles themselves; or rather on account of my future sister-in-law,' he said; 'for that good little woman has just done a kind and generous thing to me, and I know she will be pleased.'

'What has she done?' asked Muriel, opening her eyes.

'Offered me ten thousand pounds to ~~part~~ with,' he answered smiling; 'so we have had Danaë showers in abundance to-day!'

'How good and kind!' cried Muriel. 'She is very sterling; I always thought so. But——,' she hesitated.

'No!' he said laughing; 'I have not come to that, my darling. Your uncle's gift to you is one thing—my accepting ten thousand pounds from Jemima de Paumelle is another.'

Muriel brightened.

'I did not suppose that you would,' she said. 'It would be better to work and wait than to marry on her money.'

'I wonder if there is a subject on which we could think differently!' cried Arthur with a lover's enthusiasm. 'We were made for each other from the very beginning.'

She laughed.

'I think so,' she said half slyly, half playfully.

All this time neither Mr. nor Mrs. Smith appeared. If they knew of Arthur's presence there in the garden, they thought it best to ignore it and to let the new current run itself dry unhelped or unhindered by them. It would run dry; of that they were sorrowfully convinced; for by what spell soever Derwent might have been able to work on Lady Machell (he had purposely not spoken to them of Uncle Louis' intentions with regard to Muriel), it was one but for the moment, and would have to pass like any other. Only when Muriel, wishing to have all made clear before Arthur left, and to see her way straight before her, went into the work-room where they still sat, and told them of Lady Machell's olive-branch sent by Derwent, and of Arthur's desire—which was almost more authoritative than desire—that she should go to the wedding like all the rest of the world, only then they both said—the mother as the original voice, the father as the echo—that they wished her to decline, and that if she went it would be against their express will and command.

While they were fencing with, and not replying to, her earnest prayers to tell her why, the servant came to the door and announced Mrs. and Miss de Paumelle 'on very particular business.' There was no help for it. If they did not wish to knit up relations with which they might hereafter be reproached as the worst injury that they could have committed against unoffending people, yet neither did they wish to excite suspicion by a reluctance to meet their neighbours beyond the natural reluctance of reserved and secluded folk, as they were known to be. Hence they were obliged to go into the drawing-room with their daughter, to meet there Mrs. and Miss de Paumelle, Arthur Machell and Derwent, and to see the destruction of their defence work, the razing of their barriers.

For what could they do? What could they say? When Mrs. de Paumelle set forth their sad case of ceremonial destitution, through the illness of Miss Lawrence—and Miss de Paumelle, with

a look at Arthur, besought Muriel's maidship as if it had been the very crown of her marriage, the lustre of the diamond without which all the rest was dim and unsatisfactory;—when Arthur, in the true Machell voice and manner, assumed the thing as done, and spoke of his mother's pleasure should her request be refused, and how his father would take it as an intentional slight, and Willfrid as a personal affront, which last was a bow of rather longer dimensions than he was warranted to draw;—when Derwent did his best to cut the ground from under their feet by asserting their willing consent, and even Muriel would not help them by expressing a hypothetical willingness to abide by their negative decision if given;—what could they do? They were met and surrounded on all sides; and unless they wished to lay the train to their own mine, they must give way:—as in time they did, with evident but not excessive reluctance—reluctance of the kind to which they could refer afterwards and say: 'Did we not object till overpowered by your insistence?—did we not show that we did not wish it?'

But when was youth other than heedless of signs?—love other than obstinate in its own desires? Even to Muriel the light on her lover's face blinded her to the cloud on her mother's; and she was too happy in her reconciliation with Lady Machell to remember the hard words by which the breach between them had been made. The day was gained and the point carried; her acceptance by Arthur's people was in its turn accepted by her own—however grudgingly, still accepted; and nothing was wanting to the perfect happiness of the present moment save their sympathy and absolute approval.

But these were just the jewels missing from the band. How could they sympathize, how approve, when that very day they had promised to take Bob Rushton into their service as their bribe for his silence?—when their social honour and personal pride, their repute and position were, henceforth and for ever, in the hands of a returned convict, who for weakness if not for wickedness would be sure sometime to let the whole thing slip from his grasp to be made public property and private scorn? They saw it stealing ever nearer and nearer; and they knew that one day it must overtake and overwhelm them. The fewer the links that would have to be broken when that dread day should dawn, the less pain to be endured; but, wanting a solid ground for argument or even for authority, they were forced to consent to the thing that they would not, and to see their children follow lights believed to be stars from heaven, but which they in their sorrowful knowledge knew were marsh-lights leading to flower-hid ruin, death-lights playing over well-masked graves.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

' I SWEAR IT.'

INDOLENCE was Bob Rushton's central spiritual point, his moral cell round which all his other faculties clustered and on which they were founded; just as Derwent's was the pride of self-respect, and his father's the vanity which demands praise. This indolence had been the origin of all Bob's misfortunes, as he euphemistically called his offences; and it was to be the cause of those to come. His ideal of life was that of a Neapolitan lazzarone, sleeping in the sun and waking only to eat, drink, and play; and the worst punishment in the hell in which he believed, but which he made no effort to escape, was that of hard work, such as he had had at Bindwood.

He had been grateful enough to Miss Forbes when first she rescued him from starvation. Though she made him work, yet she let him live; and at the time this was a circumstance by no means to be counted on as belonging to the certainties of tomorrow. But men forget the past as readily as they shut their eyes to the future, and Bob, well fed but tightly held—as he phrased it, with his nose to the grun'stone, and the grun'stone handle never to let it rust for want of turning—began to think the price paid for his living excessive as well as irksome; and to wish in an aimless kind of way that he could find his plate filled with beef, and his mug with beer, without the trouble of earning either by work.

When chance revealed to him the true personality of Mr. Smith of Owlett, the problem was solved. He felt that his good angel—if he had one; which was doubtful—had at last wakened to a sense of his duty; and that henceforth all his larks would fall ready roasted from the sky and all his fields grow clover. He went back to Tower, consoled for the hard knocks that had been dealt to him by fate at the hands of Miss Forbes. They were knocks done with—like Bindwood—sure now not to be repeated; and he was too well pleased to remember the bruises.

He was more light-hearted than he had been for years; indeed, more than he had ever been in his life before; only troubled about the exact point to hit with his former 'pal,' so that he should not demand less than he might get, or more than would be given. He did not mean to hurt his old comrade, by whom he had sat for so many years in that well-guarded carpenters' shop, where they had worked and talked in dumb show, undiscovered by the officer in

charge, but none the less understood together. He meant to make it easy for him, if pleasant for himself; and to keep their joint counsel strictly. If he was known and pointed at, the Governor should be safe, he said to himself; and if he would do as he ought, it should never the worse for him.

At the first, Bob meant to ask only for something like what he had now—a place as privileged handy-man, where he would have high wages for no work, and be answerable to no man save the master, who would take care not to make that questioning too strict. But as he walked along the dark road, his mind travelled and his ground-plan enlarged; as minds and ground-plans do, when men are on the eve of making conditions with a victim, squeezable, helpless, and prolific; and he foresaw the time when he should demand an annuity sufficiently generous to enable him to live in a cottage of his own, with nothing to do but keep himself warm in winter by the fire, in summer-time lounging against the gate-posts in the sun. Fifty pounds a year; that was his figure. He could live on fifty pounds a year—at least he thought so. As he added up his various requirements for the second time, however, he found that they had grown as fast as the yeast plants, and that a pound a week would not do all he wanted. An extra ten shillings a week might hold him clear; but after a little more adding up, and another sprouting of the yeast-plant, he finally established himself on the Pisgah of a hundred; when he would be content and ask no more. A hundred a year: not too great a sum wherewith a gentleman with an ugly secret was to buy silence and security for life.

'The Governor daren't refuse me,' said Bob to himself as he opened the Owlett gate cautiously, and met his old benchmate in the drive, leaning on the faithful arm that had never failed him—and come what might that never would!

This demand of his for the place of handy-man in name and of privileged loafer in deed, was just that which the Smiths were most reluctant to bestow. If only he would take a sum of money and leave the country, instead of fastening himself on them as a leech for life! They offered him what they could give for the present, and they promised the rest in due time; but Bob had a shrewd idea of the value of a bird in the hand, and thought it well to keep in view the game which had to be stalked. The Governor might take it into his head, you know, to go out for a little walk one of these fine nights and forget to come back again; and then where would he be, with his cottage of cards blown to the winds, and nothing of it left but a pinched finger got in the building? No, all things considered, he would stick to that place of handy-man; and

make the best of it when he had got it. And he would take it now at once; and if he could not make things square with the old lady at Tower, well they must go crooked; so that was all how and about it.

It was to no good that Edmund asked him to wait until Derwent should have left home—to none that Mrs. Smith urged the consideration due to Miss Forbes as his benefactress, and advised a more decorous appearance of deliberation, some show of reason why, and less of ingratitude and haste. Bob, weary of his work, and longing for the luxury of idleness and unlimited pots of beer, listened to them with a fair show of attention enough, but ended by pressing yet a little closer the ends of that cleft stick in which Edmund found himself; and when a man is in a cleft stick, what can he do but submit to be pinched? There was nothing for it but to give way—and to give way with the best grace they could command; telling him that he was to come when he had spoken to Miss Forbes, and that they hoped he would be comfortable when he had come.

'But,' said Mrs. Smith, as her last feeble effort, 'you must not be surprised if the other servants do not like it—things being unfortunately known as they are—and if perhaps they refuse to associate with you. You know the prejudices of people,' added the poor lady, with that pitiful paltering with the eternal laws not rare in those who speak of evil to an evil-doer whom they are careful not to offend.

'All right, mum,' said Bob with unruffled serenity. 'Them as don't like it will have to lump it, and them as can't will have to go. I'll do nobody no harm, if they'll leave me alone; but I'll not give up a good thing for other folks' whimsies.'

It could not have happened at a more inconvenient moment; but then misfortunes always do happen at inconvenient moments—indeed, when is the course clear and the place prepared for them? Just when Derwent's brightened prospects had raised his spirits and sweetened his temper, when Muriel too was snatching, as it were, a brief hour of happiness, this wretched incubus hovered down in the night and fastened on them; and there was no way in which it could be shaken off. Bob was the incarnate curse that always follows on crime—the chastisement that is extra to legal retribution. It might have been different had any spark of nobleness warmed his poor mean soul; but when was weakness other than selfish, or selfishness other than cruel? Bob Rushton was not a ruffian, as ruffians go—he was only an indolent, slippery, untrustworthy varlet who could not rise to the dignity of self-control—but he did as much harm as the worst ruffian a-foot, and with as little compunction. For whether his ease was bought by the sorrow of others or not

influenced him no more than the fluttering of the bird influences the snake when about to strike. He was tired of Tower with its 'Bob, do this,' and 'Bob, go there;' its hoeing and weeding, wood-chopping and boot-cleaning; its water for drink, play-hours forbidden—and never a farthing in his pocket to play with, had they been allowed! Working out his salvation was not much in his line; and as he knew that he would be far jollier at the Governor's than he was now, why, he determined to be jolly, and to leave the consequences which did not touch him to the care of those whom they did. If the piper had to be paid, so long as he was not asked to pay him he did not take to heart the wry faces of those who had.

It was not like Mrs. Smith to be a coward. She was reticent truly; but reticence is not faint-heartedness; and to hold one's own in silence, asking neither help nor sympathy, is sometimes more courageous than to spread out one's life like linen in the sun, that all may run their fingers through the rents and comment on the amount of washing to be done. This time, however, she was a coward, self-confessed. She dared not tell her son, so proud and pure, and proud of his purity, that they had taken into their service this returned convict whose presence in Grantley Bourne he had already so hotly resented, and about whom there had been such bitter discussions. It seemed such a pity to break down his new happiness for what was to all appearance just a wilful act of insane philanthropy, if it were not something worse. Still, if she did not like to confess, she could neither deny nor recall. She had simply to sit by and watch the springing of the mine, and do her best with the ruin that it would cause when the moment came.

It came sure enough;—when Derwent one morning went into the stable-yard to look at his horse, and was met by the groom with a curious air of offence and discontent, and spoken to by him in a tone as curiously dry and uncomfortable. Derwent, being of the kind to whom servants are a very doubtful kind of brothers indeed, did not trouble himself about a manner which only betokened and did not express. He simply noted disdainfully the fellow's evident ill-humour; but so long as he kept to the shibboleth prescribed for inferiors, he might harbour what feeling he would—human nature in subordinates being like the Primrose guinea—a possession allowed as an abstract right but by no means to be used.

As the young master came out from the stable he met Bob Rushton face to face. The man's presence there at all, in dust and ashes and crushed contrition, would have been sufficient cause for Derwent's anger, but as he was—his hands in his pockets, a purple pansy (Hilda's flower!) between his lips, his cap set jauntily on one

side, lazy, loafing, smiling, content—it was as if some deadly insult had been flung full into the boy's face.

He stopped suddenly, and looked at Bob with an indignation as undisguised as his contempt. The man met his fiery eyes a little insolently. Knowing what he did, he was not to be put down by the high hand of Edmund Smith's son; but he touched his cap conventionally and said: 'Good morning, sir;' as any one else might have done.

'What are you doing here?' asked Derwent angrily.

'I've come to be helper, sir,' answered Bob with a subtle accent of familiarity in his voice, also with something like the shadow of a smile passing over his face.

'Yes, sir,' said the groom sullenly; 'and we're going, Jim and me; and so is Taylor'—Taylor was the coachman.

'How dare you presume to come here, among honest men?' cried Derwent hotly.

'The lady and gentleman has taken me on as handy-man about the place,' said Bob tranquilly.

'And I discharge you!' cried Derwent, forgetting common sense and his minority.

'Beg pardon,' sir, said Bob pleasantly; 'the master has taken me on; and I'll take my warning only from him.'

'Then you'll have it before the day is out,' cried Derwent.

'I don't think I shall,' said Bob Rushton slowly, and looked the young master full in the face.

'Dare you bandy words with me, you scoundrel!' said Derwent, advancing a step nearer.

'You be advised by me, sir,' returned Bob in an odd half-paternal way; 'you just leave things alone as you don't understand, and let them as knows manage them.'

For all answer he lay sprawling on the stones. Derwent's pride flamed out into passion and got the better of his prudence and his breeding.

The man picked himself up with the hang-dog look of one to whom a kicking comes naturally. He neither squared nor swore, only rubbed his bruised shoulders ostentatiously, looking at Derwent the while with an expression in his face which the dullest could not fail to see meant something more than mere reproach. And yet what else could it mean? What could this returned convict have on his mind which the young master would not care to hear?

'I'll remember you for that, sir,' he muttered after a pause, but keeping well out of Derwent's reach.

'And he's got what he deserved,' said the groom approvingly, while the rest of the men grinned and honoured the lad for his

high ways. They and their kind like to feel dominated by a superior. It is a pale reflection of divinity which, when armed with thunderbolts compels respect, when holding up a cornucopia attracts adoration.

‘And you’ll get it again if you presume to speak to me,’ said Derwent, looking supreme and archangelic. ‘We are not accustomed to men like you about the place.’

‘All right,’ said Bob, shuffling off; ‘but maybe the time’ll come when you’ll get accustomed,’ he added, as he vanished round the corner into the safer precincts of the kitchen-garden.

‘You did it well, sir,’ said Taylor, who had seen the whole affair from the window of the harness-room, and now came forward to add his account to the rest. ‘It is hard on us all that we’ve got to give our hands to a man like that, or else to leave a place where we’ve stopped so long and been so comfortable; but there is none of us in the house or out of it as will live fellow-servants with a gaol-bird. It is not to be expected, sir, as men who think anything of themselves and their own characters would.’

‘You are quite right, Taylor,’ said Derwent loftily; ‘but I do not think you’ll have to go.’

‘Then he must,’ said Taylor firmly.

‘He will,’ said Derwent in his grandest manner. ‘My father and mother have allowed themselves to be imposed on by this worthless fellow, but I am sure that when they know how it is taken by you all they will send him off.’

‘I hope so, sir, for their own sakes as well as ours,’ said Taylor.

But he did not look too confident. He was a shrewd guesser; and if he had not found yet he was burning.

Then the lad, flushed and highly strung with his encounter, strode away into the house, and to the work-room where Edmund Smith sat tranquilly making a glove-box for his wife. It was a small repetition of poor ‘Louis Capet’s’ locksmith work. The Revolution might be thundering at the gates, but he found nothing so interesting to chronicle as the work that he had done with file and anvil. Edmund Smith, with Bob Rushton installed at Owlett, lost all perception of danger and of pain in making nicely-fitted dovetails from a handy length of cedar.

‘What is the meaning of this disgraceful affair, mother?’ asked the boy, standing midway in the room and speaking with mingled sternness and imperiousness.

Edmund shifted his feet; the mother raised her head but not her eyes. These were still fixed on her work—a bit of wood-carving, which she had begun in order to be still more the companion of her husband.

'What do you mean, my dear?' she asked in her quiet way; but her voice was perceptibly unsteady.

'The presence of this disgraceful fellow here in this house,' he cried. 'Is it true what he says, that you have taken this returned convict, this common thief, as a servant here at Owlett?'

'Yea, it is true,' said Mrs. Smith still in the same attitude, facing her son, but not looking at him, while her husband turned pale and winced, and busied himself at random among his tools.

'Mother! with Muriel—with me still here?' he remonstrated.

'With you and me—and your father—here,' she answered, laying her hand on her husband's arm.

'Have you no respect for your children left in these miserable latter days?' said her son, ignoring the companionship. 'It is not right to degrade us by such association.'

'The Bible teaches us God's forgiveness and man's mercy,' she answered; and at this she raised her beautiful eyes and looked at her son steadily.

'This is not true Christianity,' returned Derwent. 'Indifference to right and wrong is not religion.'

'But pity to the erring is; and ability to see the essential good through any cloud of fact is the only true philosophy of life,' said his mother emphatically.

'We have argued this question before,' he returned coldly; 'and as we could not agree then, we are not likely to do so now. But I think you owe it both to Muriel and myself as your children, to yourself as a lady, and—' he hesitated; 'to my father too,' he added with visible effort—'that our home should be kept pure and free from disgraceful associations. In harbouring such a wretch as this Rushton you insult and degrade every honest man and woman under your roof.'

He spoke slowly and sternly. The presence of this returned convict had stirred him deeply.

'For God's sake!' cried Edmund wildly, rising and holding out his hand.

'Hush!' said Mrs. Smith peremptorily to her son; 'you are going beyond yourself, Derwent. Your duty is to accept what we—your father and I—think it best to do, and to fall into the family life, as we arrange it, with obedience and respect.'

'I will not accept the presence of a convicted thief,' he said loftily.

'While you remain among us you will,' was her reply, with an attempt at sternness that quivered down into a kind of entreaty—with something underneath not expressed.

Her son looked at her for a moment. Evidently thoughts both bitter and unwholesome were working in him.

'If there is any reason for this, and why I ought—and must—I think you should tell me,' he said with measured emphasis. 'If it is only a charitable whim of yours, mother, that this wretch should be here, I will turn him out and take the consequences. It is profanation that he should breathe the same air as Muriel; or myself,' lifting his hands and his head with the old familiar action of pride. 'And if any harm comes of it, I will appeal to Uncle Louis.'

'Leave things alone which you do not understand, and let those manage them who do,' said his mother evasively—the very words which Rushton had said only a few minutes ago.

'If it is by my father's desire—for his own purposes—if my father is bound to have him, I will do as you say, mother—accept what I cannot avoid—the family shame and my own ruin,' returned the boy slowly.

Edmund looked up and down and here and there; he fingered his tools and he smoothed his beard; shifting his feet and his place with uncontrollable uneasiness; but neither he nor his wife spoke. If only he could nerve himself to confess all, to say out that hidden hideous truth, manfully now at once, and then trust to his son's love and pity, and the intrinsic love-worthiness that was in himself to get over it! If he could but face it, and live through the bitter hour! Sooner or later it must be discovered; and why not now as well as at another time? But must it be discovered? Might he not sail over the shallows as so many others have done, and die with his secret unconfessed and unknown? All crime is not public property. Murders are done and the murderer is never found; so why might not he escape detection as well as they? why must his past be so specially transparent?

The coward's hope in providential interposition upheld him, just as the coward's fear of pain repressed him. Not now! not now! The ordeal was too terrible to be undertaken voluntarily; and a straw might save the drowning man.

Husband and wife exchanged one rapid glance. Had he shown signs of yielding she would have stood by him in the fatal moment with all her strength, all her energy; she would have helped him with the reverent love that had shielded him so loyally since his return, and that might have influenced her son, as all strong feeling and resolute will do influence the young. But he shrank back and turned his face once more towards that false peace which he and she had tried so hard to maintain as true. Hating pain as he did, either to feel or to cause—loving, irresolute, soft-hearted, vain—he could not bear to see either the distress or the abhorrence of his boy. If it

had to come—as it must—let it come in his absence; and when he, the father and the cause of all, was not there to see it. No, he could not bear it: not now! not now!

He made a sign with his lips and hand which she alone understood—but which told her that the moment had passed and the opportunity was lost.

‘It may be by my wish and desire without including disgrace or ruin,’ he said weakly.

His wife took her cue without wavering.

‘My dear child, your imagination runs strange riot!’ she said to her son. ‘Shame! ruin! Because your father and I have agreed to do a kind thing by a poor creature who has been in trouble, but who is now desirous of leading a new life, is there necessarily an ugly skeleton of our own to hide?’

She laughed with a light and pleasant air; but the metallic ring in her voice was not light nor were the lines round her mouth pleasant.

‘There is a skeleton,’ said Derwent, looking from one to the other; ‘mother! it is useless to deny it!’

‘Foolish boy!’ she said, with a repetition of her former laugh, as she adjusted her saw with exaggerated care. ‘There is a medium between density, which sees nothing and your exaggerated sensitiveness, my dear, which creates its own horrors. It makes you hard and suspicious, which are not amiable qualities; and really—they lose one so much time in life!’

The boy turned from her abruptly. This new manner of hers, light, mocking, unreal, hurt him more than all the rest, and more than all the rest made him feel that the world in which he had lived since his father’s return was delusive, deceptive, phantasmal. He went up to his father—the old boyish love, checked for the moment for the one, rushing over him for the other like a pent-up stream let loose.

‘Father, tell me!’ he said. ‘Whatever the truth may be, tell it to me! Why is this man here?—and by your wish and sanction? What does it all mean?—where is it to end?’ He laid his hand on his father’s shoulder and gripped it hard. ‘Why is he here?’ he repeated. ‘What claim has he on you?’

Edmund turned his haggard eyes to his wife. Her face, which had become of late even more haggard than his own, thin and worn and suddenly old, gave him back the ready smile, the encouragement of love, which he had always found there.

‘Dear boy, what do you wish your father to say?’ she asked, smiling.

‘Yes, what do you wish me to say?’ he echoed.

'What can either of us tell you that will satisfy you?' she continued. 'Of course Rushton is here by your father's wish. We cannot let the poor creature starve.'

'He was not starving at Tower,' said Derwent.

'But the work was too hard for him. It was killing him,' said Mrs. Smith, dropping her eyes.

The lad raised his shoulders disdainfully. Bob Rushton, sleek and oily, had not the look of a man dying from overwork. The excuse was too palpably a blind to be accepted as a reason.

'Did you know this man in Africa, father? Was he—your—agent—there?'

The father caught at the word eagerly.

'No, not in Africa, certainly not!' he cried. 'What a relief it was to be able to speak out straightly and firmly without lies or subterfuge! 'No—not in Africa.' He could say that quite confidently—swear it in a court of justice, if need be; and look his son, like the world, firmly in the face while he did so. Decidedly not in Africa!'

'If not there, then where?' asked the boy. His manner, no longer haughty and reserved, was tender, earnest, pleading as if for very life.

'I knew him in England, my boy,' his father answered, meeting that new birth with a passionate eagerness of welcome. 'It is many years ago now, and I used to see a great deal of him at one time; and believe me, dear child, he is a good fellow at heart, though he did once get into trouble. But he is not all bad—no one is; not even,' his voice broke a little, and he lowered his eyes, 'not even, Derwent, convicted criminals.'

He took his son's hands in both his own as he said these last words, and pressed them feverishly.

'You know his whole history?' asked the lad, too intent on Bob Rushton to notice that sudden failing in his father's voice.

'Yes; all of it.'

'And he yours?'

The father let his hands drop.

'What there is to know of it,' he said with a forced laugh and an uneasy shuffle.

'What do you think there is to know?' asked Mrs. Smith with her thin metallic mirth.

'Is there anything? Father!' the boy's voice rang with a passionate entreaty, of itself the most pathetic thing in this whole chapter of pain; father!' he repeated, 'is there anything in it to our harm—our disgrace?'

'You make your own spectres,' said his father coldly.

The boy took back the weak and trembling hands that had just let his fall.

'Say no, boldly! Look me in the face and say that there is nothing to hide—nothing that you are afraid should come to light—nothing that this man knows—and that we are not to know,' he cried.

A pause: a moment when each held his breath: when life seemed to stand still, waiting for the answer.

'There is nothing!' then said Edmund, in a harsh and husky voice, looking at his wife, who flushed to her temples and shuddered visibly.

'Look at me, father!' cried Derwent. 'Nothing?—there is nothing?'

The restless, shifty, furtive eyes by a supreme effort raised themselves and looked full into the clear young face bending down and gazing so earnestly into his.

'Nothing,' he repeated with the boldness of despair. 'I swear it—so help me God!'

The boy gave a sudden sob. For a moment he could not speak, choking back the tears that rose into his eyes and strangled his voice. Then, with indescribable grace and tenderness he laid his lips on his father's forehead.

'Forgive me, father,' he said in a low voice, 'all my folly and wickedness since you came. I have been in a fog—and have suffered more than I have made you or anyone else suffer. You have lifted a load from my heart. I cannot thank you enough—but forgive me.'

'I forgive you heartily, my boy,' said Edmund, accepting his rôle with that wonderful facility of a vain and loving man. 'Let us say no more about it. We have not understood each other, that is all.'

'And now we do,' said Derwent affectionately.

'Yes, now we do,' said Edmund.

The lad turned to his mother.

'Mother, do you forgive me?' he said, as he flung himself on his knees by her, and put his arms round her waist, as he used to do when a child, looking into her face with his dark eyes yearning for her love, and his young mouth pleading for her kiss.

'My boy!' she answered, laying her head against his with a heavy sigh, and drooping suddenly. When he lifted her face, she had fainted.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE LISTS.

LADY MACHELL had eaten her leek handsomely. She had to perfection that power of going back on herself when circumstances were too strong for her which belongs to the two extremes of reasonableness and weakness; and now, as at some other times in her life, she had shown herself reasonable almost to excess.

She had done all that could be expected of her by the most exacting; and she had done it well. She had made a gracious apology fluently; had kissed Muriel, foreign fashion, on both her cheeks, and asked her to forgive and forget those harsh words of hers, spoken without due consideration and repented of as soon as spoken, in the lime-tree walk at Tower: a request which the girl was too loving and sweet-tempered not to grant without reserve, and always with the feeling that it was Arthur's mother whom she was called on to forgive, and that it was something of Arthur himself to whom she opened afresh her generous and unselfish heart; and no one could have seen by her present manner to her 'poor Muriel,' as she sometimes called her, that she had ever been anything but the affectionate and quasi-maternal friend of so many years' standing now as to constitute a claim as well as a tie.

She was as benevolent to Derwent as she was gracious to Muriel. Perhaps, had she been as candid as she was astute, she would have given some of the credit of her renewed graciousness to a second letter from Uncle Louis, in answer to a third of Derwent's, entering into a yet fuller explanation of how things stood with him and at home—his undying love for Hilda, and his belief, amounting to certainty, that he could make his way with her people if he had but the fortune and position necessary; and how Muriel's fortune had brightened, owing to the generous promises made by this dear unknown uncle and friend; and how happy they all were—and how much happier he might be if only Uncle Louis would strip his own nest bare that his might be well lined. For this was what it came to substantially, when freed from the disguise of self-deception and fine words.

And as Uncle Louis's answer to this appeal was a very definite promise to provide for both nephew and niece to such extent as would leave nothing to be desired, my lady had set her sails to that wind with a good will and heartily; and the Smiths of Owlett were

now in the ascendant at Machells, and received as if there had never been an hour when they had been discarded.

The estrangement too between my lady and son was also a thing of the past; as much as that other estrangement between Derwent and his parents which had caused so much distress while it lasted, but which was now so happily at an end. Thus the marriage which was to be the turning-point in the lives of everyone concerned, was ushered in with a kind of universal hymn to peace;—at least so far as my lady was concerned; though there were still outsiders left in the cold; and Machells, like every other house in the place, was greatly exercised in its mind at the philanthropic freak whereby Bob Rushton, the returned convict, had been transferred from Tower, where he ought never to have been, to Owllett, where he had even less business to be.

Also, to do the men of Machells justice, the fighting blood in their veins, never long in want of an object to set it flowing, at this present moment found that object handy in Guy Percival of the Manor.

In their dislike of him as their little sister's possible proprietor, they made a great deal more account of Derwent than else they would—Uncle Louis's letter notwithstanding; or rather it ought to be said that Wilfrid did: Derwent Smith being to the mind of old Brown's future son-in-law so utterly impossible for Hilda when things came to close quarters, as to be a safe kind of stalking-horse behind which to compass Guy's confusion. If this gave the boy false hopes, and so prepared for him disappointment and bitterness in the days to come—well, better men than he had had to go through the same thing; and pain, which is the law of life, must be expected by everyone, thought Wilfrid, true to his central point of hardness to adult humanity while tender only to children and dumb animals, adding a little contemptuous compassion for the weaker kind of women who loved too well and came to sorrow as their reward. Besides, it is experience; and experience is the making of a man. The lad was too useful at this moment for it to be a matter of much account whether he was justly treated or no. Wilfrid's main thought was to protect his little sister from Guy, not to take care of Derwent Smith; and that a man should look out for himself was a maxim too much after his own heart to be questioned under present conditions.

On his side Arthur was disposed to let things settle themselves. A clear stage and no favour he thought as good a rule for Derwent as for anyone else; and if his uncle would make the boy's fortune, why not he as well as another in the fulness of time when Hilda was fit to be married to anyone?

The upshot of it all was, however, that Derwent was almost too well treated at Machells; and if he had been as wise as he was well-content, would have seen what the whole thing meant; while secret war was made by both brothers against Guy—but war after the manner of gentlemen and with plenty of rose-water on the wounds.

As for Muriel, she only came back to her past condition, and took her former place vacated for a time. She had always been a favourite at Machells, both with Sir Gilbert and my lady, and until now with Wilfrid: Arthur did not count, on the principle of 'going without saying.' But even after the reconciliation between her and the authorities had been formally confessed and acknowledged, the change in Wilfrid's bearing towards her was both marked and embarrassing. What did it mean, and why should he treat her so coldly? as more than herself mutely queried by astonished looks and uplifted eyebrows.

When he heard that she had been chosen as bridesmaid in the place of Helen Lawrence, he expressed his mind in the terse but conclusive manner which Jemima had learnt by heart by now; though why he should have made such a to-do about it, and looked that high and haughty, beat her to understand, as she said to her mother dolefully. But he did; and though he did not fume for long—which was not his way; his method of showing annoyance being more concentrated, sharp, and military than that—yet he did blaze when he heard of it for a moment fiercely enough; so fiercely that, by the law which makes extremes meet, the poor little girl from sheer fright plucked up the seeming of a spirit, and said pertly, while quaking like an aspen leaf:—

'Well, I'm sure I don't know how to please you, Captain Machell'—she had never once called him Wilfrid, nor had he asked her. 'Here is Miss Muriel, as nice a young lady as ever lived, and quite taken to again by Lady Machell; and whether she is or she isn't, I've always heard say that a bride has the right to choose her own maids. Which I'm sure is little enough for her to do,' whimpering; 'seeing what she's going to.'

When he met Muriel at Machells, recognised as of old, he made her feel that he had no part in the peace proclaimed, and that for him she was still exiled and unforgiven. He would have been hard put to it to say what her especial crime was, if he had been questioned; for the fact that Arthur loved her and she him was surely no crime now—according to the Machell code of sins and offences—given Uncle Louis and a portion sufficient for the maintenance of the Machell honour! It had only been Arthur's inheritance of bankruptcy and his want of fortune which had been the obstacle to and

made the sinfulness of their love—had not my lady said so?—and, the obstacle removed, the sinfulness went with it. Why then should Wilfrid carry on as he did, according to Jemima's phraseology, and make it so uncomfortable for everybody?

'What an odd fish he is to be sure, ma!' she said to her mother one day after her return from Machells where she had been alone, and where she had found the young Smiths. 'He was downright rude to that sweet pretty Miss Muriel, and she engaged to Mr. Arthur; and all for what I should like to know?'

'Ah, my dear!' said patient Mrs. Brown with a little sigh; 'there's a deal about gentlemen as ladies never do know. But tell me about Miss Muriel,' she continued, settling a little closer to the table. A good gossip was like her favourite cup of tea, and refreshed her when nothing else could.

'Well, he treated her to-day downright cruelly, ma. He really ought to be ashamed of himself, that he ought! and she so good-natured and seeming not to mind it! If she had given him a good setting down, it would have been only what he deserved, great big monkey; that he is!'

'He has a high hand and a heavy one, this future husband of yours, my dear,' said her mother anxiously; 'and I doubt, Jemmy love, if you'll have a soft time with him when you are fairly married and in his power, as one may say.'

'Perhaps things will be better then, and we'll grow to one another,' said Jemmy, with another sigh to echo her mother's.

'Perhaps you will, my dear,' she answered: 'and at the best gentlemen are all pretty much alike and carry things over our heads as if there was nothing between them and the Lord but their own wills. So one's about as good as another, and one manages to creep along somehow.'

'It's a shame all the same,' said Jemima with such indignation as she could muster.

'Yes, well, so it is,' returned her mother; but so it is, my dear, and so it must be. Your father's hand has been none of the lightest, and so I tell you; but you see we've had you, my dear, and on the whole I might have done worse. So tell me now about Miss Muriel and the Captain. We shan't have many more talks together, Jemmy.'

'La, ma, yes! many and many a one!' said Jemmy tremulously; 'but I'll tell you what happened when we go to bed to-night, for pa's coming in—I hear him—and I would not for worlds speak out before him.'

'Well, no,' said Mrs. Browne de Paumelle drily; 'I shouldn't advise you, my dear.'

The circumstance which had called down the feeble lightnings of Jemima's wrath on her absent and hard-handed Captain had been a curious display of temper founded on a most insignificant matter that had taken place that day at afternoon tea at Machella. They were all there—Muriel of course by Arthur, and Jemima under my lady's liberal wing. For whatever went wrong Lady Machell was uniformly the same to Miss Brown de Paumelle, and showed a fixed determination—so far to her honour—to abide faithfully by her part of the contract, and to make the sacrifice as easy to the poor little victim as the most perfect appearance of maternal tenderness could.

The tea-table had been brought out and placed under the trees, and the young men handed the cups which Hilda filled. Both brothers came at the same instant to Muriel, who, looking up with her pretty smile to Wilfrid, naturally took Arthur's. Wilfrid pretended afterwards that it was an accident; but at the time it looked very like design; for he set his lips and lowered his brows as the rejected cup fell from his hand into a dozen pieces on the ground. In the midst of the chorus of interjections which greeted this disaster, turning to Muriel he said, with a smile of intensest bitterness on his heavy face:—

'If you were in the south of Europe, Miss Smith, they would say you had the evil eye.'

'I hope not,' she answered, looking up at him and smiling, as she had done before. 'I should not like to bring disaster on my friends.'

'Perhaps you do without liking it. On me for instance when—you made me break this cup.'

He said this in the off-hand manner of men when they fence with the truth of their own thoughts.

'It is rather hard, is it not, to blame me for your ——?' began Muriel; and then she stopped. She was going to say awkwardness, but the word sounded harsh and rude; and she checked herself in time.

'My misfortune?' asked Wilfrid, not seeing the alternative.

'If you choose to call it so,' she answered.

'Your influence can be scarcely classed under any other head—an evil eye for others, however unintentional and however beautifully framed,' returned Wilfrid, looking her full in the face; then, as if by an after-thought, glancing at his brother.

But it was not Arthur of whom he first thought.

Muriel turned pale. When was love other than superstitious?

'At least you are uncompromising, and show what you mean

with unmistakable candour,' she said, a dash of girlish pride as well as pain in her voice.

'Pardon me, in spite of my candour I do not suppose that you know in the least what I do mean, Miss Smith,' he answered, harshly. 'And perhaps it is as well for you, and everyone else, that you do not.'

'You make one thing clear enough,' said Muriel, meaning his dislike.

'Do I?' he answered; 'I wonder if we should agree on what that one thing is,' with an unmistakable sneer on his lips, and a look in his eyes which Muriel could not interpret, but which went down into her heart with such a mingled sense of pain, fear, and bewilderment as almost took away her breath. Then he turned away and devoted himself to Jemima with exaggerated courtesy, just as Arthur came back from the tea-table, and within earshot again.

He certainly was, as Jemima said, 'carryin' on' against the former favourite both oddly and unjustly.

Another person too, who 'carried on' in his own way, was, as might have been expected, Guy Perceval. He came to Machells as usual during this uncongenial time, but he came more from a sense of duty to his intentions in the future than for present pleasure to himself or others. The brothers indeed made things too strangely disagreeable for a thought of pleasure to be mixed with them; and Lady Machell seemed to have withdrawn the buckler which hitherto she had been so careful to hold over him. They spoke of Hilda pointedly as a child, and treated her more than ever as if she had been a little girl of ten or twelve at most—and they had never yet sinned on the side of precocious respect. They mounted guard over her with more and more the air of making her the sacred oriflamme of the family; or they threw her into Derwent's hands in the very teeth of the Master of the Manor, with his theories and his hopes, while they carried him off to something entirely unsuited to his tastes and temperament, but which he could not refuse and where he was both bored and boring. When he looked to Lady Machell for the customary protection, in all probability she would smile her approval of her sons' plans, and descant on the pleasure to be derived from a game at billiards where he would be beaten without mercy, or the advantages of shooting at a mark where the only things he was likely to hit were the bystanders—unless he managed to shoot himself. And all this time Hilda sat by her mother with that sweet simplicity of obedience, that high-bred resignation of herself, which made her supreme charm in the eyes of a man who liked to be master and who resented opposition.

He was intensely disgusted at the whole thing; and sometimes thought that he would give it all up and let the Machells go to the destruction which they were courting. Honestly believing that it was destruction, and as honestly that he should be Hilda's salvation here and hereafter could he but induce them to adopt his views of training now, and let him complete the course himself hereafter, it was a struggle between his feeling of human pity backed by moral duty, and his sense of personal dignity weighted with his impatience of contradiction. And as yet it was uncertain which way it would turn.

This almost ostentatious reinstatement of the former discarded sinners—his enemies against whom he had unforgiven griefs and unavenged wrongs; the subtle and intangible hindrances created by the brothers, and their as subtle and intangible enmity; Lady Machell's undeclared change of policy; all annoyed him beyond bearing. But, on the other hand, moods pass while circumstances remain the same; and Hilda's beauty, youth, good birth, and possibilities under the hand of a skilful experimentalizer, were eternal facts—while Wilfrid's grim humour and Arthur's more declared hostility were movable and remediable.

Still it was an unspoken and uncomfortable bit of play—of which everyone saw as much as he chose to see, and where no one was hopelessly committed—an awkward little accompaniment of discords running through the hymn to peace which my lady had intoned with so much boldness and force.

The marriage was close at hand now; and Guy had been of course invited as one of the principal guests. If not the 'best man,' which was Arthur's place, he was to be the second best and to have Hilda as his partner. The chief bridesmaid was to have been Helen Lawrence, as we know, partly because of her position in the county, partly to secure a fitting companion for Arthur, with the contingent remainder of assigning Hilda to Guy.

The first hitch in the plan had come in the illness by which Miss Lawrence was thrown out and Muriel taken as her substitute; so that she must either be the principal maid and fall to Arthur's share, as Jemima desired, or be given to Guy Percival to the confusion of other arrangements. The other hitch had to come now when Guy made his appearance on the lawn at Machells, just after Wilfrid had smashed the rejected tea-cup, and set Muriel wondering at his unaccountable savageness and that strange look which seemed to express a world in itself—but a world of which she knew nothing, and whereof the language was foreign to her.

Without much preamble Guy announced in his thin high-pitched voice his intention, or rather his obligation, to leave to-morrow

morning for the purpose of meeting a certain man of eminence in London—a meeting that was to be the opening of a great many new channels of activity for more than the inhabitants of Grantley Bourne. The luminary in question was a French specialist, whose acquaintance the Master of the Manor and trainer of hobby horses in general especially wished to make; and now was his time; for his club had arranged to give the chevalier a dinner, and Guy, whose name had been put on the list as one of the stewards, was bound to attend. He would be back the day after to-morrow—on the morning of the wedding—he said. He had looked at Bradshaw, and he found that he could do it by taking two lines, and waiting at one station for so many hours; where, if he was not exceptionally unlucky, he should just catch such and such a train at such and such another station, and so be landed at the Manor by ten o'clock, in time to dress and get to Paumelle House by eleven. But, in view of the bare possibility of a failure, he had come over to lay the facts of the case before Lady Machell, and to ask her indulgent consideration for his circumstances.

Indulgent or not he meant to go to the dinner; and my lady was wise enough to fall in with what she could not prevent, but with which she was in her secret heart greatly displeased.

Of course he was quite right to go, she said with her unruffled good breeding; while the brothers exchanged glances, and Arthur shot a look at Derwent. If the worst came and he did not return, they must fill up his place at the eleventh hour; but it should be kept open for him till the eleventh, and she hoped that he would be there at the time arranged.

'I am sure to come back,' said Guy.

'If you do not, Smith can take your place,' said Arthur blandly; and then he looked at Muriel and smiled.

Guy's face clouded. The admittance of the young Smiths to Machells and the marriage, after their public banishment, had sufficiently disturbed him; and coupled with his own indefinite disgrace had more than disturbed; and to-day something in the whole air and attitude of the group as he came up to them seemed to indicate even more than he knew.

Muriel, looking happy, lovely, and at home, he might have allowed. He had no sister for whom he wished to secure Arthur, and he himself had got over his sudden fancy for her on the principle of the one nail which drives out another; but to see Derwent there, with that air of absolute ease and universal possession characteristic of the nature to which hope stood for certainty, was more than he could endure with equanimity; and Arthur's suggestion broke the

back of a patience which had never been able to endure the piling up of many straws.

'I am not likely to forfeit my engagement; least of all to give up my place to Mr. Smith,' he said contemptuously.

'You could not have a better substitute. We don't catch a real live hero every day,' said Arthur.

'Oh, if you prefer your hero!' cried Guy, twisting round on one foot.

'My dear fellow, no one talked of preference,' put in Wilfrid, with the air of a heavy dragoon representing good sense and a moderate way of putting things; 'only, if you leave us in the lurch, we must in our own interest find a substitute.'

'I shall not leave you in the lurch,' snapped Guy.

'In which case we shall not find a substitute,' said Wilfrid.

'I scarcely expected from old friends the slight implied in the preference,' continued Guy, going back on the subject with womanish irritability.

'And I scarcely expected to have to deny again that we have made it,' repeated Wilfrid coldly.

'A mere lad—a nobody—the son of no one knows who!' muttered Guy.

'Come, come, Perceval, this is going too far!' said Arthur, who overheard him.

To touch Derwent's parentage was to touch more than the boy himself; something which rasped Arthur in his tenderest point, and not only warranted, but enforced, the taking up of cudgels in his behalf.

Lady Machell interposed.

'My dear friend,' she said soothingly, 'we shall fill up your place only at the very last moment, I assure you. If you do not put in an appearance we must, else the whole arrangements will fall to pieces. If you feel that you are bound to go up to Town to meet this foreign gentleman'—she shrugged her fine shoulders as her conclusion. She meant to convey her idea that it was a pity, and might perhaps have been prevented; but if it must be it must. 'I am sorry that anything should be superior in attractiveness to the event of the neighbourhood, but——'

She lifted her eyebrows this time in place of the former shrug. The one was as expressive as the other.

'It is a case of duty, not of superior attraction,' said Guy.

She smiled.

'And duty is its own reward,' she answered; 'but for all that, the marriage procession must be properly arranged.'

'In any other way but this,' he answered sulkily under his breath.

'I must be the best judge of ways,' said Lady Machell stiffly.

Guy looked from her to Derwent, and from Derwent to Hilda—the two sitting close together, as if paired by nature and circumstance all the same as Arthur and Muriel—talking, looking, smiling, without stint or rebuke. What did it all mean? Was he absurdly jealous? boyishly suspicious? or had the wind of my lady's favour really turned and scattered his schemes like chaff on the threshing-floor?

'In that case——' he began, answering his own thoughts.

'In what case?' asked Wilfrid, interrupting him.

'Yes, I do not understand you—in what case?' echoed my lady.

'I see my place,' cried Guy.

'Always the place of a friend,' said my lady graciously.

But Guy's heart and self-love were pricked to the quick, and he was not to be smoothed down by a few soft words, even though Lady Machell, the mother of Hilda, spoke them.

'I once thought so,' he said, looking at Derwent; 'but in the present company I am forced to think otherwise.'

'Do you mean to insinuate that if I am a friend you are not?' asked Derwent, rising to his feet and prepared for war.

Guy measured him from head to foot. The lad was the taller, the handsomer, the more gallant of the two; but the Master of the Manor stood on his pedigree and his acres, and despised the possessor of only beauty and a fine temperament, as much as if bulk constituted quality and gold was the supreme virtue of humanity.

'Yes, I do,' he then said in his high thin voice. 'Lady Machell will have to choose between us; for I refuse to meet you, Mr. Smith. So now you all know!'

'As you have put yourself in the wrong, you have left my mother no choice, Perceval,' said Arthur hastily; while Wilfrid turned to him angrily, and Lady Machell raised her eyes with all the Machell pride flashing in them.

'I allow no one to dictate to me my conduct, or my friends,' she said haughtily.

'Then you throw me over for that young man—a friendship of inherited generations for an acquaintance forced on the neighbourhood only yesterday, and without a holding in the knowledge or the respect of the people?' cried Guy.

'Lady Machell, do not speak—let me answer; for you will have to answer to me,' said Derwent, turning from my lady to Guy, and speaking steadily, though he was pale and agitated.

'Answer to you? I answer to you? Do you think me mad?' said Guy contemptuously.

'If you are a gentleman—' began Derwent.

Guy cut him short with a scornful laugh.

'If! there is not much if about that! he said. 'And being a gentleman I am not inclined to "answer" a young man whose family history is both suspicious and obscure. Fools only do such things; wise men do not.'

'Wise men shall,' said Derwent, advancing towards him; but Wilfrid laid his strong hand on the boy's shoulder and held him back.

'No brawling here, Smith,' he said sternly. 'Men arrange these things by themselves, not before ladies.'

'There is nothing to arrange,' said Guy. 'I am not going to fight a duel, if that is what you mean, with the son of a man who for aught we know may be a returned convict like that precious scamp he has just adopted; as little as I will enter the lists with him in any kind of contest, or for any kind of prize,' significantly.

'I am sorry that my choice of friends should vex you,' said Lady Machell calmly; 'but I am afraid that you, Mr. Percival, like everyone else, must submit to my will in my own house.'

'Not to association with Derwent Smith,' said Guy.

'Then not with us at all,' said Wilfrid fiercely—not to defend Derwent, but to uphold the Machell right of supremacy.

'At your pleasure,' said Guy, fuming, turning away as if to leave.

But Lady Machell, who, above all things, objected to burning of boats, laid her hand on his arm as he was passing.

'Come, come, my friend,' she said graciously; 'this kind of thing must not go on. We have been friends too long to be separated for a moment's petulance; and we must go on being friends. Let us forget this little ebullition, and double down the page. We shall see you, then, the day after to-morrow as arranged? As I say, we will wait for you to the last moment.'

Guy, substantially good-hearted if superficially disagreeable and tainted with the petty spite and impulsive vindictiveness inseparable from that kind of feminine element which was so largely represented in his character, could not resist this appeal. Perhaps it would be truer to say he did not wish to resist it; he too having principles concerning the burning of boats which coincided with those of my lady.

'I am sorry if I have let my temper get the better of my judgment,' he said, after a moment's pause. 'Let this momentary misunderstanding pass. Yes, you will see me at the wedding.'

'All right,' said Wilfrid.

'So glad,' said my lady; but Arthur looked at his little sister sympathetically; and Derwent, repudiating Christian doctrine, thought strife a decidedly better thing than peace, and regretted my lady's flag of truce from his heart. He was obliged however to follow where the rest led and accept what they proposed; more especially as his share in the reconciliation brought about by my lady's own will was at the most infinitesimal, seeing that Guy, taking leave of the group awkwardly, forgot to include either him or Muriel, but went off uncommitted to even such bonds of good fellowship as might be knitted up in the touch of a hand or the nod of a head.

'Better that it should be so,' thought Derwent in his youthful intolerance of fair seeming; 'we are not friends and never can be, and it hampers me less with everything.'

'I forgive them,' was Guy's reflection, 'for the sake of that dear girl of theirs; but I don't forgive that young fop; and if I can put a spoke in his wheel and spoil his market, I will.'

With which amiable intention he went away, and made no doubt but that fortune would throw the means into his hands.

CHAPTER XXX.

GLAMOUR.

WHAT an unnecessary amount of mystical baggage our forefathers carried in their muttered spells and midnight invocations, to bring about results which love, hope, and faith create without any supernatural furniture whatsoever!

Here at Grantley Bourne, a whole chapter of glamour was going on, in which nothing was as it seemed to be, and where everyone was deluded by appearances or deceived by his own desires; and all without the suspicion of a witch to brew a philtre or to work a charm.

Take Lady Machell and her financial and matrimonial schemes, laid with so much skill and wrought out with equal care, and honestly supposed to be the best that could be done for her family:—Jemima and her Captain, she believing in his sincere love for herself personally, dowry and prospective millions not counting: he in his power of future patient bearing with a woman who said 'La!' and from head to heel was antipathetic to his tastes and uncon-

genial to his habits:—Derwent, accepting his father's oath as true, and believing that he should one day rise to the level of Hilda's hand and the Machell pride:—Muriel and Arthur counting on the consent of their respective houses as surely as if it were already given:—and Edmund Smith, arguing that a miracle might be wrought in his favour, so that the slippery hand which held the secret of his shame should keep a close grasp, against nature, and never let the ugly truth escape for the scrutiny of the public;—what a mass of deception from first to last!—what a general belief in the solidity of rainbows and the veracious presentations of glamour!

It made them all happy; and so far might be said to be a gain by those who are not afraid of following after shadows; but it was pitiful to those to whom the dignity of truth is dear, and who would rather live in the barrenest desert of reality than in the loveliest corner of a fool's paradise.

Of all now sunning themselves in the delusive warmth of the hour Arthur and Muriel were the happiest and the most secure. For even Muriel, with the unconscious self-deception of a love so great that it does not fear, did honestly believe that her mother would yield when Uncle Louis had formally arranged her fortune; and that henceforth no barrier would exist between her and her lover. As things were, she had not much solid foundation for her faith; seeing that her mother was still cold and hard about this matter, and treated it always as a crime when not more lightly as a folly. She refused to talk to her daughter of her engagement, as any other mother would have talked—refused to sympathise with her present joy, her future prospects—would not accept this Machell reconciliation, but kept proudly aloof as one too deeply aggrieved to be able to forgive—would not say more than: 'Sorrow will come of it, Muriel,' though never, straight out: 'I forbid it;'—yet with all this, that subtle something which speaks from heart to heart belied her outward manner, and chance tones and looks, as it were forced from her against her will and almost without her knowledge, made Muriel feel that the core was different from the crust, and that this opposition must be more a matter of passing temper than of fixed principles. It was a natural mistake to make; and she made it.

But if the mother was so strangely hard—though sometimes the irrepressible tenderness of her real feeling broke through her sterner seeming and bewildered Muriel with its contradiction—the father made it up to her by his increased sweetness and tenderness. With his kindly weakness of nature, which could not bear to see sorrow or to meet the stern facts of pain, he wished her to be happy so long as she might; and preferred that she should cherish a hope

which was but the other face of despair, rather than see her waken from her dream and know the miserable truth. The mother, left to herself, would at any cost of present suffering have shut out this delusive sunlight, and set the girl's face towards the night and its long darkness which sooner or later she must accept. But the father checked her.

'Let her alone, dear wife,' he pleaded. 'Let her be happy while she can. The truth will come out soon enough.'

'And will be all the harder to bear for the false hopes of the present,' said Mrs. Smith, gently if steadily.

Her husband caressed her in his loving, womanish way. Caresses had always been his favourite arguments, and it was as much a gain to him to stop a mouth with a kiss as to convince a brain by reasoning.

'No! no! let her alone!' he repeated. 'I can sleep better when I know that she is happy. It makes a new man of me, Constance, to see her sweet face look so bright; and God knows,' sighing, 'I have need of all the consolation I can get!'

His wife sighed too. Loving and faithful as she was, this incapacity to bear pain, this weakness which ever sacrificed the future to the present, and preferred the poltroon's falsehood to the strong man's brave confession, even of his guilt, tried her resolute nature even more than the early sin which she had long ago forgiven, and the present sorrow which she was carrying for love. It was always a dead weight which she had to bear on her hands unhelped and alone—always a shifting mass of fluid inconstancy of purpose to which she had to give vital force and compel into a stable form. And even worse, and more than this. What had it not impelled him to do on that day when Derwent gave him the chance of confession, and he had set it aside for the sake of the false peace of a little longer falsehood? That moment of his false swearing had been the bitterest to her of all this bitter history. It was the first time that she had felt a self-acknowledged impulse of aversion from him—the first time that her own sense of right and virtue had risen up in indignant repudiation of his weakness and wrongdoing.

But this too she had borne with and conquered, like all the rest; burying her instinctive horror deep in her heart—with so many others of her dead. It was her duty, she said to herself; her task self-imposed and nobly fulfilled. Was he not her husband? were they not given to each other for better and worse? and if the one died, as he had died in all that constitutes the real life of a brave man, was not the other bound to carry that body of death to the end, and to conceal with her own life the fact of that pitiful decay?

Other women had done the same. Should she, so much more loving than most, be weaker than they? Yet it was painful all the same; the most painful act in the whole of this tragedy set by a man's criminal weakness and played by a woman's courageous devotion.

'If she could but marry him!' said Edmund Smith, yearningly. 'It might never come out, Constance, and then everything would be right. If she could but marry him!' he repeated, turning back on his favourite faith in chances, common to the weak and cowardly.

'She must not,' said Mrs. Smith firmly, but always tenderly. 'We owe it to them that they should not be allowed to enter our family.'

'I do not see why, really, when one comes to think of it,' he answered with a shade of petulance.

'Only on the condition that we tell the fact to the whole family; and that then they all, from Sir Gilbert to Arthur himself, fully and freely accept her. Only on this condition, Edmund; on none other. This is a thing in which we must both be firm, darling, for the sake of honour and justice.'

'Ah, there is my worst trial!' he cried with a burst of despair. 'I who love her so much and I who am going to kill her!'

'No, she loves you too well, dear, to die,' answered his wife; 'she will find her happiness in you as soon as the first sorrow has passed. I know her as I know you; do not be afraid.'

'I know that she loves me, and that my love for her is her happiness, or at least part of it,' he answered. 'But neither father nor mother would have consoled me for the loss of you, Constance, when I was young; nor do I think that you would have been happy with your people without me.'

'No,' she said; 'you were my life, and always have been.'

'And you mine,' he returned; and then wandered off into one of his long love-talks with his wife of times gone by when both were young and he was innocent, and their fortune was as bright as a polished mirror before a breath has dimmed its lustre or evil chance has marred its perfectness. These love-talks were the most blissful circumstances of Edmund's present life. They represented so much, and made him forget as well as remember. He went back over the past till it became more vivid than the present, till the fool's paradise in which he loved to live was the solid earth, and these fifteen years of shame and disgrace melted away into a thin shadow scarcely discernible. In them he grew young and prosperous again, and could look the world straight in the face as an honest man should. They were glamour in every essential; but they were the poor, weak, loving creature's life, and the wife who had devoted herself to him accepted

them tenderly, and welcomed them as the means by which her husband could make himself content.

But day dreams for a woman essentially practical and real?—fond memories of past joy to mask the terrible suffering of the coming hour, for one whose whole nature was strong to bear?—is it not easy to see the trial that lay here, and how these hours of memory and caresses carried with them as much pain to the one as they brought solace to the other? Yet this, too, was in the bond; and Mrs. Smith, industrious and real, sat there in the work-room with her husband, her hand clasped in his, passing the whole afternoon in idle reminiscences of the things which happened before they were engaged and when he was still doubtful if she loved him—of what he felt after they were engaged, and the life which they led when they were married—the balls to which they went and the honours that they gave; the dresses which he chose for her and the summer excursions which they made together—all that happy history of long ago before he had first yielded to temptation and then to despair—before he had forged his uncle's name after that fatal Derby when he had backed the favourite for a fortune and been landed in the mire instead.

What a lifetime ago it was now to her—what a mere yesterday to him, facile and fluid where she was tenacious, impressionable and shiftily where she was resolute! But it made him happy to look back to the closed Eden and live in the past; and his happiness was her reward—as her love for him was her weakness if also her strength.

Their talk to-day was broken in upon by Muriel and Derwent, who came back from Machells with the news that perhaps Guy Percival would not be at the wedding; in which case Derwent was to take his place and be one of the men, as Muriel had already been chosen one of the maids.

'It is very odd,' said Derwent, laughing lightly—the laugh of a conqueror; 'but Muriel and I, who were to have been discarded altogether and sent to Coventry for no one knows what mysterious offence, are now at the top of everything, and the two most mixed up with the wedding of any one here.'

He flung up his head when he said this, meaning to express his belief that he and his sister had come only to their deserts, and that what had gone before was very much less than their deserts. But for all this little flash of recurrent vanity, he was broader and nobler and less boyishly conceited than of old.

'Are you not glad, papa?' said Muriel, sitting down by her father, and taking his hand in hers.

'Yes, love, very glad,' he answered fondly.

The mother said nothing, though Muriel's yearning eyes turned

on her, beseeching her to add her congratulation to the father's. For indeed this public adoption of the two young people counted for much in the present state of affairs.

'I should be happy too, my Muriel, if I believed in its stability,' the mother said, after a pause.

'Oh, mamma! it *is* stable,' was the answer made with girlish fervour and girlish faith.

'Cassandras are always unwelcome,' said Mrs. Smith, with a sad smile. 'But if they have to speak, they cannot prophesy smooth things.'

'If you would only say why you do not believe in its stability, then I should understand you better,' Muriel returned.

'Parents cannot always give their reasons to their children,' she answered.

'Your mother is right to warn you not to be too confident, my darling,' said Edmund, with his temporizing tenderness. 'It may all come to nothing, and the marriage with you and Mr. Machell may come off all right; or things, you know, dear, may go wrong. It is on the cards always; many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know. And this is all that your mother says. She just wants you to keep that in view, not to let you be too confident. Is it not so, dear?' to his wife.

'Dear papa, how kind and tender you always are to me!' said Muriel, gratefully.

Her mother's pale face became paler; and, sad as it always was, even sadder. She loved her daughter—let her nightly sorrows witness how much!—but she would not buy present comfort by falsehood; and to feign belief in what she knew must fail, that she might be loved and caressed as her reward, was as impossible to her as the contrary was impossible to her husband.

'I love you, my child;—how then can I be anything else to you but kind and tender?' said Edmund. 'There is no sacrifice that I would not make for you—none!' he added fervently, believing in himself at the moment—quite sure that he would do anything—everything—to ensure his darling's peace.

'I am sure you would, papa,' said Muriel, believing him as sincerely as he believed in himself.

'Happily there is no question of sacrifice anyhow,' said Derwent brightly. Since the explanation with his father he had been like another creature, and his mother's strange fainting fit had re-awakened all his old chivalrous devotion for her, his filial worship and respect. 'The sky has not a cloud!'

'My children, it makes me tremble to see you so confident!'

said Mrs. Smith, earnestly. 'This world is so full of sorrow and disappointment!'

'And of happiness too, mother' he answered, lovingly. 'Who would not be happy with such a mother!' he added, putting his arm round her neck.

She smoothed his curls for the instant, smiling naturally and fondly.

'There! that is right! now you look like yourself!' he said; 'the sunlight comes back again!'

'Ah, my boy, I am afraid that your flattering tongue was never given you for the good of your soul,' she said playfully.

'And what was not given me for the good of mine, mamma?' asked Muriel, coming over to them and kneeling by her mother's side.

'Yours?' said her mother, still smiling; 'well, your eyes, I think!'

Muriel laughed.

'They are true eyes, mamma—are they not, papa?'

'Yes, as true as steel!' said her father, hitching his chair closer to them and making one of the group by patting Muriel's head and taking his wife's hand.

Never since his return had they made such a loving, tender, united little group as this! It was like a new page in a book, a new revelation altogether; and as they sat there and talked and laughed, and made even the mother lay aside her sadness and the father his strange and subtle under-current of timidity, both the children felt that everything was won, and that the sky was, as Derwent had said, absolutely clear and with no thunderbolt to come out of it.

Then suddenly there came a peremptory kind of knock at the door; and, opening it without waiting for an answer, Bob Rushton put in his head and said in an oddly familiar as well as dictatorial manner:—

'I say, will you just step out here for a minute, Mr. Smith, and teach that Taylor of yours his place, and what I am in this 'ere house?'

Again, as once before, his answer came in a manner unexpected, in a moment Derwent was upon him, and for the second time the young fellow knocked him down. It was just the once more which the returned convict could not forgive. For Bob, if a lazy hound, mainly concerned with the problem of how to live without work, was not the man to take an injury without resenting it—if he could.

So now Derwent Smith had two enmities on hand:—that of

Bob Rushton, the returned convict who knew his father's secret; and that of Guy Perceval, the honest country gentleman who had his own designs upon Hilda, and was inflexible in his ideas about the purity of race.

Bob, who was crafty in his own way, picked himself up as he had picked himself up once before in the yard. Contenting himself with a look to Edmund, and retreating out of arm's length of Derwent, he stood for a moment smiling and bowing with that sickening servility which, worse than open insolence, seems as if it courts a second assault. Derwent made a step towards him and ordered him imperiously to get out of his sight; and Bob obeyed, smiling to the end with an air that plainly told he did not mean to be put too much about by such a trifle as this. He had already borne more, all things considered; and one blow extra to a man accustomed to kicking, does not count for much. It would take more than the sudden passion of the young master to dialodge him, having made up his mind as he had done not to be dialodged by any one or any thing.

Had he had a sensitive fibre in his system, his life, such as it was, would have been intolerable to him long ago. Not a servant in the establishment would speak to him; not one would eat with him; and all had given notice to leave because of him. Bob stuck a flower between his lips and his hands in his pockets, and loafed about the place as contentedly as if he had been the chosen king of the company; eating his portion alone with as much appetite as if he had earned it by hard work, instead of spending his day in scratching with a light hoe at the utmost four square yards of clean garden ground.

When Derwent came across him, and treated him, as he always did, with a disdain that was more offensive than blows, Bob used to put his cap on one side in a defying kind of manner, stroke his chin and snigger, as the servants called his peculiar, half-insolent, half-amused laugh. And once he said to the stable-boy:—

'Young cockerels are bold, Timms; aint they now? But my belief is, if they knowed who could wring their necks with his tongue and his teeth they'd mend their manners sharp. What do you say, my lad, hey?'

But through it all he had kept faith loyally with his old mate and present master; and, save by his presence here at all, betrayed nothing of the nature of those links which bound him, a convicted thief, to Edmund Smith, of Owlett. To-day, however, the burden of his fellow creatures' abhorrence weighed on him more heavily than usual. The cook had curtailed his portion and flouted him when he asked for more; Taylor had driven him like a dog from

the harness-room; even Timms had perked up his head and pecked; and now the young master had knocked him down. And all for what? What had he done worse than others—or, 'weight for age,' so bad as that other?

Decidedly Providence is unfair and life more pain than pleasure, thought Bob in his own way; but when things go wrong, what so good as a comforting drop of drink to put them right? This was his theory and he meant to work it out this evening—no master's man but his own.

Accordingly he slipped away down to the King's Head, where he found by chance George Romer, head coachman at the Manor, who, having more liking for good fellowship than heed as to where he got it, had never been one to turn a cold shoulder to Bob. On the contrary, he had been friends with him from the first, liking his company and not delicate as to his history. So the two drew together over their pipes and beer—with a shilling's worth of gin to keep it steady and give it fire; and in the course of time their talk grew close and confidential as friendly companionship warmed Bob's heart, and the drink, to which he was not used of late, loosened his tongue.

CHAPTER XXXI.

VED.

WITH a great many affectations of hybridity, Miss Forbes had the one redeeming masculine quality of magnanimity. She did not judge of matters as they affected her own interests, and praise or blame according as she was well served or put to inconvenience. Unselfish herself, she knew that each man must make his own life in the best way in which he can, and that the capacity for sacrifice is not granted to every one. So that when Bob Rushton came to her, and, with many servile pullings of his forelock and much of the awkwardness of shame in his manner, announced the fact that he was going to quit Tower for Owlett—Mr. Smith having offered less work and better wage, and the old pain in his chest just now pretty bad—she would not let herself be annoyed for all that she thought it ungrateful in Bob and unneighbourly in Mr. Smith. She understood it all, she said contemptuously—despising the man's weakness for its own sake, though not disposed to quarrel with it for the effect on herself personally; and understanding it—why, she let it go.

But, if she was masculine in her solid layer of magnanimity, she was feminine in her froth of talk; and before the week was out had discussed the transfer of service with every one in the place. For her own part, she said that, although she had been glad to save thus far from ruin a poor shiftless wretch who could not stand upright of himself, yet she could not understand how any gentleman, the father of a family and the owner of property, should run the risk of offending a good friend for the sake of patronizing an idle thief who was only too well off as it was, and who would never do himself or any one else any credit; and she wondered at Mr. Smith's folly even more than she condemned Bob's ingratitude. If she wanted to be revenged on the former—which, Faven knew, she did not!—she would be soon enough, she said. She had found Bob slippery, and so would Mr. Smith; and she doubted if he would keep as tight a hand over the rogue as she had done. But there, that was enough; she wished him joy of his bargain, which for herself was a good riddance of bad rubbish. She supposed that Mr. Smith, who had seen so much of life, knew what he wanted when he had got it, and could manage his own business without her help; and at least, said the rough old kindly creature, talking off the froth and coming down to the solid layer, the poor fellow would be well taken care of; and perhaps his chest was bad, though he did not look like it.

She said all this in like substance, in varying form, to every one in the place; and the chances are that she would have gone on saying it had she not heard something which effectually closed her mouth and stopped her speculations. It was only one of Miss Aurora's random shots—but it told. They had been calling on Mrs. Lucraft, discussing the whole affair after the manner of gossips with starved dramatic instincts, when, as they were driving home, Miss Aurora said, giggling:—

'Diny! how funny it would be if Mr. Smith had done something wrong too, and been in the same prison with Robert; and that is why he took him.'

Miss Dinah turned pale and grew quite grave and silent when her sister said this. She forgot to call her a little angel or to compliment her on her sharpness; but from that day she said no more about Bob Rushton and Owlett, and pointedly avoided the subject when others would have discussed it.

But the world talked if she did not, and Grantley Bourne was much exercised concerning the whole affair. People instanced all the honest men with rheumatism and bad backs in the neighbourhood, and asked, with sneers, if Mr. Smith, or any wrong-headed philanthropist of his stamp, would have taken them and given

them a snug berth like Bob's? And was it just to take up a man because he had been a rogue, while leaving to starve, if they liked it, the virtuous who had never got into trouble at all? It was a premium on vice and a penalty laid on virtue, they said, waxing warm; and Mr. Smith was a bad citizen, a bad neighbour, and a very doubtful Christian for his pains, and so they would like to tell him to his face. But no one ever did—just as no one ever said out boldly that things looked odd, though many hinted so—at the first in a whisper and behind close-shut doors, but day by day growing louder and the chink wider.

The Smiths having as much as they could manage at home, without going abroad for complications, let the world talk its fill, taking no heed of broad hints or subtle insinuations when people called for the purpose of easing the strain, under pretence of asking after the character of this man or that maid—all the servants having given warning, and it being a matter of public history why. Had it not been for the wedding, which absorbed so much of the public interest of the moment, things would have grown hotter sooner than they did. But even the dramatic instinct in country places is limited; and when the biggest sponge is filled, it can take up no more.

Suddenly Miss Forbes determined that she would go to Owlett, to say what she had it on her mind to say. She had not been there since she had received Baby's chance guess like a revelation directly given, and the buzz of suspicious conjectures, growing gradually louder and clearer, determined her to take a line—which when taken she would stick to.

This day—the day before the wedding—when she came she was noticeably quiet and sympathetic; for her, quite ladylike and tender. She talked of a great many indifferent things, and then she turned the conversation on Bob, in spite of Mrs. Smith's efforts to avoid the subject; speaking of him with true womanly compassion, if a little loftily, as belongs by right to one of rigid virtue and snow-white morals when dealing with a slippery varlet as particoloured as a pie.

And at the end of her speech she said, looking full into Mr. Smith's disturbed face:—

'Well! I agree with the Bible, Mr. Smith; and when a man has done wrong and repents I am not ashamed to be on the side of the angels, and to rejoice with them over his salvation. If a friend of mine had gone to the bad, and repented and become a reformed character, I would stand by him, cost what it might; and I would despise the soft-boned Christian who would be afraid of doing the same.'

'Yes, I should have expected as much from you, Miss Forbes,' answered Mrs. Smith, with her wonderful tranquillity; while Edmund, weak, fluttered, abashed, by his very embarrassment confirmed her suspicion, and made her feel sure that Baby's random shaft had struck home.

'So, if ever the day should come when any friend of mine should want a substantial background,' continued Miss Forbes, with suggestive warmth, 'there is one at Tower which will not give way in a hurry and may serve at a pinch better than none at all—don't you see?'

Which was exactly what they did not want to be made to see, kindly meant as her words were now, and useful as her offer might be in the future.

This broad hint of service to sinners properly repentant and decorously rehabilitated, was given not only on the very day before the wedding, but also on that following Derwent's high-handed castigation of Bob, and while Bob, who had not come home all night, was drinking himself blind and mad at the King's Head.

'Oh!' said Mrs. Smith with a passionate kind of plaintiveness, 'if only we could prevent Muriel from being bridesmaid at this wedding!'

She had not been used to be either passionate or plaintive, nor to content herself with wishing in place of commanding, as was more her natural right; but circumstances had been growing too strong for her of late, and she was not able to hold the reins as heretofore. While the children were young and no other influence had conflicted with hers, things had been easy and she had governed them as she would; now, since the return of the father and the blossoming of these young loves, all manner of foreign strains had intermingled with and complicated her action, and the task of regulating their lives had become as difficult as it was disappointing.

'It would be a pity now that things have gone so far,' said Edmund, true to his temporizing policy as well as to his natural kindness.

'It would be better,' she answered. 'We are on the edge of the precipice, Edmund, and we must face our position before long.'

'Perhaps not,' he said, weakly. 'Miss Forbes might have meant nothing special. Perhaps it was a mere coincidence, and we are frightening ourselves for nothing.'

'I think not,' she answered.

'I am sure that Rushton would not betray me,' he continued, his speech, like his conviction gathering force from its own expression. 'What would he get by it? I am certain of it—no!—impossible!'

'We cannot be certain, dear,' she argued gently. 'He may have betrayed you unintentionally—by a chance hint that would be enough for a sharp woman as she is to work out.'

'He would be cautious for his own sake,' he said.

'No, unfortunately; he has nothing to lose. His story is too well known; and you saw for yourself how Derwent irritated him yesterday—how he has irritated him indeed ever since he came.'

'That boy of yours, Constance, has been made too much of. He takes too much on himself—a great deal,' said Edmund petulantly. 'He would have done better under a man's influence—under my care.'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Smith simply, and innocent of sarcasm.

He flushed and then turned pale.

'It is scarcely kind to say so,' he answered, tears coming into his eyes. 'It is rather a bitter reproach to make to me!'

She kissed him gently.

'It was not meant,' she said, soothingly. 'Do you not feel sure of that, my beloved?'

'It sounded harsh,' he answered, with a sigh; but he returned her kiss with one of forgiveness, and the understanding between them was that the offence was condoned. After a short silence, Mrs. Smith said:—

'Bob Rushton went away yesterday evening, and has not been home since.'

Edmund started.

'Why did you not tell me before?' he cried.

'I knew only just now—just before Miss Forbes came, else I would; but it complicates matters not a little, and makes me more than ever anxious to prevent, even at the last hour. Muriel's share in to-morrow.'

'This once can do no harm,' he pleaded; but he looked scared at the news of Bob's disappearance, as if he too felt it to be the first throb before the earthquake that was to overwhelm all.

'It is just this once which will do all the harm,' she answered. 'We know what has to come, dear—we must look it in the face, Edmund; and as Muriel's marriage is an impossibility—we must never forget that!—it is unkind to her, and dishonourable to the others, to let her accept a false position like this of to-morrow.'

'Why do you speak of it so much? I would like to forget it, and be happy, and you will not let me!' he cried with a sudden burst of petulant despair.

'Yes, forget it always—always,' she said, tenderly; 'but not in this one case of our children's marriages. We must remember it then—never lose sight of it, Edmund!'

'But how can we alter things now?' he argued. 'The wedding is to-morrow, and it is too late to rearrange matters. We cannot hark back; and things must take their own course.'

'With my will, no!' she said.

'Well, do your will, and make every one unhappy!' he said, turning away.

That beloved wife and faithful counsellor of his bored him by her insistence. It was both cruel and unnecessary.

'Muriel will be more unhappy if she is suffered to hope and believe unchecked,' she answered very quietly and very steadily.

'Tell me, at least, what do you propose to do?' he asked, always in the same tone of offence and annoyance.

'There is only one thing to do,' she answered, in a low voice; 'if we do not tell them, then we must tell her, and leave her to choose between love and honour.'

'Good God! you are mad!' he cried, in strong agitation.

'It has to come,' she said distinctly.

The room in which they sat was on the ground-floor, looking over the lawn to the tulip-tree. Muriel passed lightly across the grass, singing softly to herself. She was so happy, there was nothing for it but to sing as children laugh and young lambs skip. Her mother went to the window and drew up the blind, always kept lowered on that side.

'My dear, I want you,' she said; and Muriel, with a happy 'Yes, mamma,' turned into the house.

'For mercy's sake, Constance—for the love of God—don't!' pleaded her husband, in agony.

'Ah, my love! my love! What can I do for you?—what can I do for the best?' she answered, with infinite tenderness and pain; her heart sore for love, but her soul resolute against dishonour.

'Yes, mamma?' said Muriel's fresh voice at the door, and in another moment the girl was by her father's side. He had held out his hand to her lovingly as she came in; the poor mother had turned away her face.

'Muriel,' said Mrs. Smith, after a moment's pause, 'have you sufficient faith in me to do what I wish without asking why?'

Muriel's light heart grew heavy. A few months ago she would have answered cheerfully: 'Yes;' and would have added to her cheerfulness pleasure in the thought that her obedience carried with it sacrifice. Now it was different. What she might be willing to suffer on her own account she could not promise for her lover; and all that her mother was likely to ask of her would include Arthur's sacrifice with her own.

'Will you?' repeated her mother.

'You know how much I love you, mamma,' said the girl.

'Yes,' said her mother tenderly; 'and that makes me sure of you now. I want you to give up being bridesmaid to-morrow.'

'Oh, mamma!' she cried, covering her face.

Mrs. Smith looked at her with a strange mixture of pain and resolution. The sympathy of sex made her appear harder than she was, for, like Mrs. Brown, her creed was that women are sent into the world to suffer because of man—it is always Iphigenia who must be sacrificed that the gods may be propitious to Agamemnon; and here at home, among themselves, she and Muriel must give themselves that Edmund might be happy.

'I am grieved to disappoint you, darling,' she said, still so tenderly. 'But I have my reasons.'

'You see there is Arthur,' murmured Muriel, shyly. Her lover's name was by no means a household word between herself and her mother.

'Yes, there is Arthur, mamma,' repeated Edmund, holding a brief for Muriel.

'I cannot explain my reasons; but even Mr. Machell's pleasure is less important than they are,' said Mrs. Smith.

'Dear mamma!' said Muriel, with a little sob.

She loved her mother, and had ever been as little disobedient as selfish; but, as she said, there was Arthur to be considered too.

'It is very hard on her,' said Edmund almost in tears.

'It is better,' was the mother's answer.

'Mamma, you know best, but it will look so strange! It will be such a disappointment to Miss de Paumelle! Lady Machell will be so angry—everything will have to be rearranged. Must it be?' asked Muriel, tremulously.

'I have thought of all that; still, in spite of all, it is best; best for your father,' said Mrs. Smith slowly.

'Oh, no, not for me. Wife, let her go!' cried Edmund.

'If it is for poor papa—dear papa—of course I must and will,' the girl said, lovingly.

'No, no, my darling, I will not accept the sacrifice! No! I will not allow it! You must go! Constance, let her go!'

Mrs. Smith passed her hand over her eyes.

'My task is very heavy,' she said, the nearest to a reproach that she had ever uttered against her husband.

'Mamma, dear, I will do as you like!' cried Muriel, her faithful heart mindful of the years that had been. 'You are the best judge, and I will do as you tell me I ought.'

'I thought I had not lost you!' said Mrs. Smith, with a strange sigh of relief, when, just as the poor girl was feeling as if her heart

would break outright, the Machell carriage drove up to the door, and Lady Machell, with Arthur, came to carry off Muriel and Derwent to dine and spend the last evening of the old family life that would ever be spent at Machells.

'The last family gathering under the old conditions,' said Arthur, with his fresh smile and manly confidence; 'but not the last of all.'

'Certainly not,' said my lady, graciously, in her character of Ahasuerus.

'It will be very pleasant for you, Muriel,' said Edmund, before his wife could speak. 'Go now, dear; do not keep them waiting.'

Muriel turned to her mother.

'May I, mamma?' she asked.

Her father laughed.

'Of course you may!' he said, with affected gaiety. 'We are not quite such tyrants as that, Lady Muchell!'

'You hear what your father says, my dear,' was Mrs. Smith's rejoinder; but she was careful not to give her own consent. In the distress of the moment and the destruction that was coming on, it was some slight consolation to feel that she had discharged her own conscience if she had not arrested the course of events—that she could look them all boldly in the face and say: 'I did my best to the last, and was overruled.' And honour, however barren, is better than consenting to evil; as it is nobler to die for the right than to live softly with shame.

So the two young people went to Machells, and, for all that Wilfrid, the ostensible cause of the gathering, was absent and did not appear save just at the last, enjoyed the passing time as if there had been no past and was to be no future.

But while they were as happy and secure as youth and love could make them, Bob Rushton, at the King's Head, was laying the train to the mine which was to explode and ruin all.

He had been drinking all yesterday evening and all to-day; and George Romer had been in and out the sanded parlour where he sat, drinking, too, for company, but not so much as not to see that here was a track which, if followed up, might lead to queer places. He had plied Bob with questions as to the why and wherefore he had left Tower for Owlett, and had touched again and again on what was public property, but also what he saw was the sore point with the returned convict—young Mr. Derwent's conduct towards him. Till at last Bob, who had grown tipsy, angry, unreflecting, and confidential, said in a thick, loud voice:—

'Yes, that young Mr. Smith—that Mr. Derwent, as he calls himself—he thinks don't he now, as I am dirt under his feet?—not

good enough to wipe his shoes on, for that little matter of trouble as I got into? And who is his father, I should like to know? Yes!' said Bob, striking the table with drunken force, while the Manor coachman pressed close to hear what was coming; 'who is he? Well, then, I'll tell you, master—he was working carpenter at the same bench with me at Bindwood;—in for horse-racing and forgery—and had fifteen years of it, as I'm a living man!'

CHAPTER XXXII.

FROM A CLEAR SKY.

No one in or about Grantley Bourne would ever forget the wedding-day of Wilfred Machell with Jemima Brown de Paumelle. In the first place, the weather was of ideal beauty—that delicious English weather of early September, when the golden softness of summer is touched with the ruddy strength of autumn, more beautiful than the tender flush of May or the luscious warmth of July. Then the wedding itself was pretty in all its circumstances. The road from Paumelle House to the church was spanned with arches and decorated with fancy columns of green boughs and showy flowers; flags were flying from every point where flags could fly; and the village school children in white and blue, and the band of the regiment quartered in the neighbourhood, in their gold and scarlet, made a kind of triumphal procession that heralded the long string of carriages containing the wedding party and their friends. The church, like the arches and the columns, was as gay with flags as a city banqueting hall, and embowered in flowers and greenery like a harvest-home; and the altar-cloth of white and gold, given by old Brown for the occasion, was in itself a marvel of art-needlework, and really combined wealth and social arrangements with the symbols of the Christian religion in a manner as ingenious as it was admirable.

Then, again, the dresses were pretty; and this being what is called 'a white wedding,' they showed to advantage against the masses of colour in the church, of which the gold-starred crimson carpet was not the least noticeable. The six bridesmaids, all pretty girls, were dressed like brides themselves, save that here and there, to mark the difference, faint 'washes' of pale pink, like the reflected shadows thrown by monthly roses in the sunshine, and a few pale pink roses in their wreaths, marked them off as witnesses only, not

principals; while the bride, in the traditional splendour of her state, was, if not lovely in herself, yet good to look at from the point of view of perfect millinery—which counts for something in a pageant.

The married women, gathered to the side, lining the aisle and filling the seats, were the traditional bed of flowers, among whom Lady Machell was the most conspicuous, as, true to the style which poverty had imposed and pride retained, she towered above them all like a queen in her long flowing straight-cut black velvet gown, with a few of the family diamonds, redeemed, fastening her lace draperies, as her contribution to the animation of the scene.

As for the men, poor souls, this is the one day of all their masterful lives when, pushed from their place of power and thrust ignominiously into the background, they are made to look inferior and to feel foolish. As constituents of a pageant they are at the best but foils, and as circumstances of the ceremony they are, though necessary, more humiliated than honoured. In the present instance, however, though it was the woman's day, Wilfrid was too grave and strong-headed, Arthur too conscious of his place as a natural ruler, to look silly or to feel inferior. They were Machells, and in that word was expressed everything characteristic of the men of a dominant race.

This wedding, if it roused just the natural amount of regretful jealousy of the present in the younger brother, made him also proud and happy in the prospect of the future. If not his own drama, it was the rehearsal, and seemed to bring the real thing nearer. Muriel, as Jemima's bridesmaid, was the foreshadowing of Muriel as his own bride; and when he stood by her, as her assigned cavalier, he felt strong to meet the world in arms, gifted as he was with a treasure that money could not buy and that only death would lose—rich where other men were poor, and honoured while honouring;—as is the way with true and wholesome love.

Neither a craven lying at a woman's feet, to be now the despised and now the caressed creature of her caprice; nor yet a master taking by the force of his might that which is valuable only in proportion to the freedom of his gift; but the strong man giving his strength for defence, and his manhood for shelter—the strong man to whom by fitness comes the place of master and the duty of guidance—protecting the weaker from the consequences of her own weakness by governing her life, not by repairing her mistakes;—this was Arthur Machell's idea of a man's right and a woman's duty; and Muriel was so little a daughter of the generation as to agree with him.

To her, too, this was the rehearsal of that dearer drama of their

own which had to come. She had the same happy pride in the present moment and the same glad onlook to the future; and she felt as deeply as he that she was his as much by the right of nature as by the free gift of love. He was her king to whom she was consort, not serf; but, if consort and royal in her own degree, yet was he always her king and the supreme. Hers was the love of which the ritual is reverence; and so far she had found it both blessed and blessing. But with all this happiness there came ever and again sudden and remembrances of her mother's strong but unexplained opposition—of the weary, haunted look in her eyes to-day when she kissed her and bade her good-by—and a kind of prophetic self-reproach that she had not been strong and self-denying and ranged herself on that mother's side from the first. It was too late now. When she looked up into Arthur's face she knew that!—and when she looked up into his face she forgot all else but what she saw.

All the people said what a fine couple they made as they stood near together behind the bride and her groom; and not a few lamented that it had not been a double event—Miss Aurora suggested 'triple'—both the brothers married on the same day; when they winked and laughed, and said they knew who would have made the best show, and it would not have been the Captain and his poor little pin's head, although he was a fine-looking man for his own part and she was made of gold like Miss Kilmansegg's leg.

How should these last two make a good thing of it, seeing what had brought them there? Of love, not a pretence on his side—barely toleration; and that only by a strong effort of will and a man's natural sense of justice. On hers, obedience to the desires of those who were stronger than herself, and a false fancy that she has been chosen, not bought. There was nothing between them but ambition and need—a wealthy father wanting a social position, and a ruined family wanting money. The only real thing, outside this, was poor Jemima's belief that her Captain loved her—and that was false. It was a marriage founded on shams throughout, so far as feeling went, if the material basis was solid enough; and the world felt what no man knew. Not all the lace and pearls and bridal finery with which she was bedecked could bring Jemima Brown of Clapton up to the Machell mark, nor make those things fit which nature herself, as well as education, had mismatched. They were married, not mated; and it was impossible for the dullest not to see the truth of things.

But Muriel was Arthur's natural equal; the woman to his man; and between them they possessed all that Wilfrid and Jemima lacked.

As for Derwent, steeped as he was in the witchery of false seeming, life was purely golden all throughout for him to-day, and nothing that earth or man could give was wanting to the present hour. In his own estimation he was the principal person, after Wilfrid, at the marriage of Hilda's brother; himself as good as formally engaged to Hilda, and as certain to succeed in his future career as that to-morrow's sun would rise. He was in the dawn of the brightest day that ever shone on man; and he believed in himself and Hilda, in the beneficence of fate and the generosity of fortune, as much as if a God had sworn by the sacred Styx that he should be the favourite of Heaven and supreme among men. It was almost divine to the young, if to the older and more experienced, pathetic and fearful, to see the handsome lad's intense, undoubting confidence in himself and the good offices of the future. Disgrace, sorrow, failure, to come near him? Impossible! The peacocks which draw the car of peace are not herded on the common like mean and cackling geese; and youths like Derwent Smith anticipate the low-lying snares of ill-fortune as little as the sons of kings anticipate the beggar's dole or the headsman's axe.

For the rest old Brown was radiant. His prologue had been the ball, this was the real thing; and he experienced to the full the pleasure of the man who to-day has at last gained the pinnacle of his long cherished desires. To-morrow might reveal a further peak; but for the present he knew no beyond, and was at rest on the summit of his hopes. His very contentment sobered him, at least in manner; and for a marvel he was quiet and for the moment inoffensive.

So far he earned the gratitude of my lady, herself proudly and regally content inasmuch as now all that she had toiled for was secure. The poor little girl might die to-morrow, but Machells was saved. The door was locked once and for ever on those hideous skeletons of unpaid bills and worthless shares which had troubled her peace for so long, and had plucked at her skirts like ghosts at the banquet. Henceforth she might live without fear, and in the pride of her name and state, as belonged to her. But she would be very good to that poor little money-spider who had woven this dazzling net over the frays and fractures of the old ruined home, and shored up its tottering walls with golden beams. She should never regret her marriage, she said to herself, as she stood like a goddess, and looked compassionately at the clod which she had taken up into the empyrean. She would be her protectress and her guide in the strange high world where she was entering by the passport of adoption, not inheritance. No, she should never regret her marriage, but, on the contrary, be thankful to fate which had so far befriended her beyond

her natural deserts;—for as woman to man, Jemima Brown de Paumelle was no fit match for Wilfrid Machell, thought my lady, lifting her proud head haughtily as she looked from one to the other, and gave its full value to gold and its due worth to nature.

Sir Gilbert, who had taken his salvation as quietly as he had taken his ruin, was glad that Machells was safe, but he would be still more glad when all the fuss of the rescue should be over. His mind was full of things which he wanted done to the estate, and which he must get Wilfrid to attend to as soon as he came home. And if he had an active regret, it was that they could not have had the de Paumelle millions without the de Paumelle personalities. As that could not be, they would have to put up with it; but—if the ointment was fragrant, the Brown fly buzzed and was big.

Those who really suffered were the bride and her groom, and the bride's mother. To the two women it was like some sad dream where they were compelled to submit to sorrow, unable to throw off the hands that clutched their throats and pressed on their hearts, till they thought that they should have died—till they wished that they could have died! But they were helpless. The hour had come, and God works no miracles to lift men out of the pits which they have seen dug before them, and into which they have walked with their eyes open. They had been weak and nerveless, and bared their own throats to the knife; and Heaven helps only those who help themselves and know how to resist.

To cling to her pitifully up to the last moment; to look at her with those poor weak loving eyes, wherein by love she was transformed to all imaginable beauty and desirableness of feminine grace; to pity her as the victim of a father's ambition on the one hand, and of a man's unconquerable passion on the other; to bend lower and lower still under the load of her wealth and the uncongenial burden of her dignity, while only wishing that she and her darling might have been let to live their tranquil lives in humble peace and pleasant mediocrity together—this was Mrs. Brown de Paumelle's state of mind on her daughter's wedding morning; and this would have been Jemima's, had her bewildered senses been left sufficiently free to think clearly or feel distinctly. As it was, she was utterly lost and befogged; knowing nothing but the fact of pain and the sense of terror: while Wilfrid felt his strength in the bitter anguish which he conquered so far as to conceal.

The two stood before the altar where they were bound in the closest ties of man—ties well-nigh indissoluble—like two creatures met in the dark and not recognising each other's name or nature. And they never would recognise each other, neither now nor in the

future. They had no common language between them, and no love to frame one of its own.

When the clergyman joined their hands and gave out the formula which they were to repeat after him, Wilfrid felt like a brave man marching up to the scaffold. His mind was made up to endure courageously to the end—no wincing, no halting; but it was endurance, and it was the scaffold; while Jemima, scarcely audible, and stumbling over the words so that they were the mere symbols of words, knew that she was passing from peace into slavery, from a mother's love into a master's possession.

Pale and downcast, her eyelids red with weeping, her meagre figure crushed under her 'bravery,' she was all but effaced into a mere animated clothes-horse; and never did Wilfrid's breadth and strength and solid massiveness of form take such large proportions as now by the very force of contrast. It was the lion and the mouse, a titan and a pigmy—anything you like of oppressive unfitness; and no one felt this unfitness more than Wilfrid himself. He glanced once and once only to where Muriel stood, tall and graceful, girlishly supple, girlishly simple too, but with the potentiality in her of a so noble if always sweet and tender womanhood; and his heavy mouth grew pinched, his white face whiter than before, as he braced his chest and set his shoulders square and looked resolutely first at the priest and then at his bride—his; and Muriel was to be Arthur's.

At last the irrevocable words were duly spoken and the ceremony came to an end. The names were signed, the fraternal caresses given, and Jemima, with her millions, passed into the irresponsible keeping of a husband who did not love her, and who would be absolute master over every square inch of her being; and then the party left the church and the social part of the day's doings began.

Lady Machell had one good intellectual quality;—when she was beaten she yielded loyally, and neither took snap shots retreating, nor broke out in weak and futile ambush to harass what she could not overcome. In this she was delightfully just, and—anti-feminine; she fought with vigour while victory was possible, but she gave up her arms sincerely when she was beaten, and kept to the terms of capitulation. As now:—having given up her contest with Arthur and Muriel—having accepted his choice as her future daughter-in-law—she accepted her wholly without further reserve or regret.

It would all come right. Uncle Louis would make sufficient settlements; and by means of Wilfrid's county influence—so sure to follow on the de Paumelle millions—Arthur would be put into

one of those mysterious places expressly arranged for younger sons by Providence working through the British constitution—those mysterious places where, without previous training or the need of climbing ladders by their steps, he would have nominal work and substantial pay—family and wealth doing all that other folks have to do by hard work, close apprenticeship, and stiff examination papers.

Things had been too strong in one way for my lady, and had gone too far to stem now. All that was left to her then was graceful acquiescence, which the strength of will that was part of her very being made her able to give without faltering.

This complete acquiescence was noticeable to everyone in her manner to Muriel, whom she pointedly and publicly adopted. Never in the kindest of her days of darkness, when the girl was only 'pretty Muriel Smith,' and the house favourite of Machells, when Arthur's love was as little suspected as—Wilfrid's—never even then had she been so sweet and amiable, so maternal and delightful, as she was now. The world of Grantley Bourne looked and gaped and was fed with rich surmises. They knew when and where and all about the marriage of the handsome younger son before that of the elder was an hour old; and speculations were as rife for this as comments had been for that.

For a very little more Hilda and Derwent would have been given to each other; but there are limits even to the gossip of a small country society; and these limits were set by Hilda's age and apparent childishness of nature. It was sacrilege to think of a little creature, wearing her first long dress only three months ago, as any man's prospective portion; and as for young Derwent, himself a mere lad—this shadowy something that was between them was nothing but a childish affection, of no more consequence than if they had been two children playing at 'castles' by the sea-shore. So the girl's name escaped; which was just as well, judging of things by the light of truth and the spinning of the thread by the hand of the future. Only that breezy old Miss Aurora, true to her colours, wished that the dear little things might be married some of these days when they were old enough; they would make such a lovely little couple!—just like two sweet little love birds on a perch eating sugar and kissing each other all day long!

At breakfast everything to the company went smoothly and without a hitch; though those who suffered before suffered still, as before. The bride pale, bewildered, out of her depth every way, looked only at her mother and drank her tea with difficulty, her tears falling fast into her cup; her mother looked only at her, and let fall drop for drop for sympathy. Old Brown and Wilfrid, as

the respective proprietors of these weaker vessels, took each a tone of patronage and support which, different in the outside manner taught by breeding, was substantially the same in spirit—the assertion of superiority over the foolish creatures given to them as wives. Where old Brown joked noisily and ministered fussily—telling his good lady not to damp the bride-cake, and to make it up with her breakfast, at which she had taken pet long enough—not to give way like that, for why, bless his soul and body, it was only natural, as one may say, and young people will fly when they are feathered—Wilfrid spoke in a lowered voice gravely; prescribed champagne; and called the servant to fill Mrs. Machell's glass with a certain kindly condescension to imbecility which would have fired any girl 'with a spirit' more than an open affront. But it gave Jemima all the comfort intended, and indeed all that she could receive under present conditions. If only her Captain would be always thus gentle with and careful of her, he might dominate her as much as he liked! She did not object to the fact of being driven. She had been used, like her mother—and in that mother's vernacular—to run between the shafts; and she liked it better than freedom, which included, to her mind, desolation and the overpowering burden of responsibility. She was only afraid of whips and goads and starts and sudden checks, not being of the nature that bears well with shocks. So that when her newly-made husband ordered her to drink a glass of champagne, she obeyed automatically; and became the more confused and lachrymose in consequence.

But the breakfast came to an end at last, as the ceremony had done before it. The toasts were drunk; the speeches made; the crackers pulled with a running accompaniment of little screams; the bride-cake was cut in the orthodox way; the programme sacred to such occasions, was carried out to the last particular; and then the bride went upstairs to change her dress, and to shed with her bridal robes the last remnant of her former self.

While she was absent, Muriel chanced to be standing a little apart in the drawing-room. Arthur had left her to look after some of the arrangements which fell to his share as best man, and Derwent was occupied with Hilda. For the instant no one was speaking to her; popular as she was and generally surrounded by admirers of a kind; when Wilfrid went up, and, bending his head over the book of photographs in her hand, said in a low voice:—

'Do not think worse of me, Muriel, than you can help.'

This was the first time since she had grown from childhood to womanhood that he had called her by her name without prefix.

She looked up startled, surprised.

'I do not think ill of you at all,' she said earnestly. 'I think ill of you? no! Surely it is you who think ill of me!'

'I have thought so,' he said, not noticing her last words. 'You have shown as much blame as dislike for me of late.'

'Indeed, indeed, no, Captain Machell!' was her answer, her own transparent simplicity blinding her to the possibility of subterfuge in others. 'Why should I blame you? and I am sure I do not dislike you!'

He looked into her face when she said this—one of those long searching looks of a man seeking to be convinced and afraid to trust his own impressions.

'I was never a favourite with you,' he said. 'Don't you remember that in the old days?'

'I remember your saying so one day when you called at Owlett, not so very long ago,' she answered, trying to smile; 'but I do not think that is quite the right way to put it.'

'No? Then I was?'

She laughed and blushed.

'You were so much older,' she said shyly.

'Which comes to the same thing,' was his half-impatient, half-cynical rejoinder. 'We mean the same thing really, but we put it in different ways—I bluntly and disagreeably like the bear I am, but you prettily; wrapping it up in a nice little bit of coloured gelatine—like those crackers downstairs.'

'Which means that I am a humbug!' she said playfully.

'Which means that you are a woman,' he replied.

'What a dreadful cynic you are, Captain Machell!' she said, still good humouredly. 'Poor humanity fares badly enough at your hands!'

'Yes, it always does when men speak the truth,' he answered. 'But let me say, however, that I do not think you a humbug,—Muriel—and that I respect no one in the world more than I respect you.'

He spoke with surface calmness, but a strong undercurrent of emotion—emotion that made his eyes glisten and his voice husky. It was foolish to tempt himself as he was doing; but he was strong—and it was for the last time.

'Thank you,' said Muriel gratefully.

It was her sign of adoption by the last who had held out against her; and she was naturally pleased—for Arthur's sake.

'If you marry Arthur,' he continued—['if!' she thought—'if! when it is sure!']—'you will be happy; happier than—'

He checked himself. What he was on the point of saying was too terrible a confession for a man to make on his wedding day.

'Yes, I shall be happy, very, very happy,' she said; 'and so, shyly, tenderly, but frankly, 'I hope you will be!'

'God bless you,' he said warmly; 'you deserve to be happy.'

'You have always been kind to me,' said Muriel, smiling; 'I am so glad that you have adopted me as one of you. That was all I wanted to make me perfectly content, and now it has come!'

'Child!' he said, with so much yearning, so much pathos and tenderness in his voice, that Muriel looked up at him startled and distressed.

She met his eyes, as he bent his face to look the better into hers; and saw again the look which she had seen before on the lawn at Machells—a look wholly inexplicable to her, yet full of hidden meaning, sorrowful, reproachful, loving, questioning—a whole world of passionate feeling concentrated in that one glance, but a world as dark to her now as it had been before. Then, as if making a supreme effort over himself, he dropped his eyes, and taking her hands said, in a voice which, clear enough at the beginning, broke like a girl's at the end:—

'If my adoption, as you call it, gives you pleasure, understand that you have it heartily and fully. I congratulate you both. You will have one of the best fellows in the world for your husband, he—an angel—for his wife. I can say no more—but God bless you!'

He turned away and wiped off the drops that stood on his forehead. To which of us is it not pain to look at the face of our dead? And Wilfrid had just looked for the last time at the face of his.

At this moment the bride came downstairs, and, after the preliminary leave-taking of the strangers had been gone through, the two families, including the Smiths and Miss Forbes, drew away into the outer drawing-room in a small knot together. But a fringe of the rest gathered round at a certain distance, curious to see the end of everything. While Jemima's hands were in Sir Gilbert's, who was delivering himself of a few kind little phrases that somehow had more the ring of consolation in them than of congratulation, my lady drew Muriel's hand within her arm. Her action meant that although she had just bidden farewell to one daughter-in-law another remained to her—the ceremony of to-day was over, but that of to-morrow had to come.

At a little distance Derwent, taking advantage of the general pre-occupation and consequent comparative obliviousness of my lady, was fastening Hilda's glove with a very unnecessary amount of precision and delay; and their two young heads were dangerously close together, while the whole attitude, for all that Hilda had been more

consciously coquettish to-day than she had ever been before, was one of more familiarity than was warranted by facts, seeing that he was not, like Muriel, adopted. At the best he was only encouraged, and made use of by Wilfrid as a defence against Guy; my lady simply allowed him to hope for a future, which might come with the Greek Kalends and not before; and Arthur left things alone.

But almost all the things of life are regulated by falsehood not truth, and appearances go farther than reality. This youthful phantasy of the imagination between Derwent and Hilda, which had no stability—this appearance of a confessed and recognized understanding which did not exist—were the sparks which fired the mine and sent the whole thing into the air before its time; for at this instant the door was flung open and Guy Percival came in hurriedly.

Of course the train had been late at his cross-country station, and he had therefore missed that on the main line which was to have brought him to Grantley Bourne in time for his duties as groom's-man of the second degree. As it was, he was late for everything; save perhaps to fling a soiled satin slipper and a handful of rice after the happy pair. But he was not thinking of Wilfrid or his bride, or of the wedding anyhow, as he came in; it was of that other thing—that other thing which must be told at all hazards.

His face white and red by turns; his manner awkward, tremulous, excited, nervous; with the look of a man deeply troubled, yet withal an undercurrent of triumph visible enough—as when one has been successful against long odds, and proved one's sagacity in the teeth of doubt and denial—he made his way to Lady Machell as she stood there in the centre of the family group, caressing Muriel's hand lying on her arm, and with that unmistakable look of maternal recognition and affection on her face. As he went across the room, his eyes fell on Derwent and Hilda taking advantage of the general confusion to advance their own little poem by one stanza at the least.

It was all too much for him. Muriel, the girl who had rejected his own advances, accepted now as one of the Machell family—the principal bridesmaid at Wilfrid's wedding—Lady Machell's favourite daughter-in-law—Arthur's future wife, unopposed by any; Hilda, for whom he had designs, and of whom he had hopes, suffered to drift on unknown rivers with Derwent Smith for her guide; Lady Machell, his ideal of womanly pride and dignity, grossly injured, fearfully deceived, and playing into the hands of a family worse than honest beggars in his esteem:—no, he could not bear it.

'Lady Machell,' he said, his thin high-pitched voice quavering with sudden anger, while all turned to hear what was coming, and my lady, opening her eyes, said courteously, but by no means effusively:—

'At last! Glad to see you, but so sorry that you are late!'

He took no notice of her greeting, but pointed to Hilda with her head so perilously close to Derwent's, and then looked at Muriel's hand resting on my lady's arm.

'Are you wise in spite of all my warnings?' he asked. 'I have just heard who the father of these young people really is. He is a returned convict, who has been fifteen years in prison for forgery.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ARRAIGNED.

FROM an absolutely clear sky the thunderbolt had fallen with terrible precision and deadly effect. The instant that he had launched it, Guy Perceval repented. He had come prepared to confide to Lady Machell in secret solemnity the terrible news which his coachman had just told him during his drive from the station; and it was only when he saw the apparent familiarity between Derwent and Hilda that the impulsive spitefulness which belonged to him, for all his good heart at bottom, broke out, and he flung his cruel words into the midst of the crowd, so that henceforth there should be no mistake as to the true moral standing of the Smiths of Owlett.

For the first moment no one spoke; only a shuddering kind of gasp went through the assembly, as each person drew his breath hard, and looked to his neighbour to see how he took it. Then Derwent strode forward.

'It is a lie!' he said in a clear unfaltering voice, speaking as he believed; had not his father sworn to him?

'Yes, a lie,' echoed Arthur taking Muriel's hand which Lady Machel instinctively let drop.

As instinctively Wilfrid ranged himself on her other side, so that she stood between the brothers like a treasure guarded by each alike. But he did not speak. The action of protection to the girl was the man's natural impulse, but his silence was the expression of his belief in the possibility of the accusation. It tallied too closely with what he himself had already suspected, making only too clear all that had hitherto been mysterious and unexplained, for him to be able to doubt. A disgraceful secret to keep close as death; and Bob Rushton the joint gaoler and participant. Yes, it was evident enough; if not absolutely certain because not judicially proved, still it was perilously probable; and to a man of the world the majority of chances are conclusive.

Jemima ceased crying and crept to her mother. Both had a faint superstitious feeling that perhaps a case for swift divorce might somehow lie in this revelation, and that they might be suffered to come together again—that big obtrusive Captain expelled—because Mr. Smith, the father of Muriel, Arthur's affianced wife, was a returned convict who had been fifteen years in prison for felony. Old Brown turned pale and red by turns, and paced the room noisily.

'God bless my soul and body!' he said crossly; 'who in their seven senses, Mr. Perceval, would have come with such a death's head croak as this at a wedding party, and the young people just a-setting off on their tower? If this is what your fine manners comes to, I thank my stars I have only plain ones!'

Lady Machell said nothing. As instinctively as she had dropped Muriel's hand; she had drawn a little closer to her husband; one of the few times of her life when she had not been equal to the occasion, and felt the need of marital support.

Sir Gilbert, on the contrary, rose to the height of the moment, neither rash to judge unheard nor scared at the possibility of the truth. For all his quiet country life he understood the world well enough to know that the undercurrent, of which a few experts whisper, and which those who see only the surface of things indignantly deny as libel on English human nature, is a fact; and that society looks one thing while the hidden lives of men are another. He turned to Guy in his mild straightforward way.

'This is as little the time to discuss this matter, Perceval,' he said, 'as it was for your relating it. We know nothing one way or the other, and it is impossible to judge by hearsay. Such a charge as this demands the fullest investigation.'

Then Lady Machell found her voice.

'And shall have it,' she said severely.

'And shall have it—freely—to the end,' was Derwent's proud rejoinder; while Muriel, to whom the whole thing was suddenly clear, turned to her brother with passionate entreaty.

'Derwent! let us go home to papa at once!' she said in a voice that neither broke nor trembled. 'Do not let us leave him a moment longer.'

But she did not look at Arthur. The part of Iphigenia was marked out for her, and she must not weaken herself by looking at the happiness which she had lost.

'That is right, Dimples!' cried Miss Forbes, the powerful bass of her deep-bayed voice coming in among the lighter notes with singular effect, but with a comforting sound to Muriel; she scarcely realized how comforting, how strengthening and supporting; 'and

I will take you home,' she continued. 'Oh, yes! don't shake that pretty head of yours—I mean to. This is the time for your friends to show their metal, and how much their deeds back up their words; and I am a friend. Mr. Arthur—select—with us to Owlett or with your own people to Machells?

'With you,' said Arthur steadily; and then Muriel turned her face full upon him with a sudden but sad smile, as expressive as a caress.

'Gallantly said!' shouted Miss Forbes, slapping his back with an air. 'I expected no less!'

'And I will come too, Miss Forbes,' said Lady Machell armed with all her dignity; 'Sir Gilbert and I. We will finish with this suspense at once.'

'Yes,' said Derwent, 'we will finish with it at once. And you, Mr. Perceval, shall confront my father, and be forced to eat your own shameful words and confess yourself a liar and a slanderer.'

'If I were you, Smith, I would not take quite so high a tone,' said Wilfrid in a low voice, as he turned away from the little group to take back his forgotten bride—cutting short the interrupting interlude that he might finish the drama in which he himself was chief actor. He was of no good in this matter of Mr. Smith's past history and disgrace discovered, and time was becoming precious. 'Come,' he then said to Jemima, 'we must be going. The train will be late, and we shall only just catch it as it is. Wish your mother good-by, and come.'

So the last adieus were said; the last kisses given in a turmoil of extraneous excitement which took off some of the sharpness of sorrow from both mother and daughter; and after a few more tears and caresses the poor, pale, limp little soul was ready to depart. As she shook hands with Arthur, she whispered tremulously: 'There's that ten thousand, Mr. Arthur, still;' while in his turn Wilfrid, shaking hands for the second time with Muriel, and with her the last of all, said in a low voice, but not tremulously:

'Poor child! poor child! Remember, I am your friend through it all!'

Then the last rites of the ceremonial were gone through in a dislocated, half-hearted way; the slippers were thrown, the rice was scattered, the people below, who knew nothing, got up a hearty cheer, the people above waved hands and handkerchiefs, and the bridal pair drove off in silence, broken only by Jemima's sobs in the corner until Wilfrid, looking at his watch, said in the most matter-of-fact voice in which man ever spoke to his two-hour-old bride:—

'I think we shall catch it; and have ten minutes in hand.'

It was a sad and silent party that drove up to pretty, quiet, leafy Owllett. Miss Forbes and Arthur were in the carriage with Derwent and Muriel; Lady Machell and Sir Gilbert were together—Hilda being left to the doubtful care of Miss Aurora to take safely home; and Guy Perceval, very much discomposed at the consequences of his untimely rashness, and feeling as if he would have given half-a-year's income to be well clear of the difficulties in which he had so suddenly entangled himself, was examining and cross-examining his coachman as if he had been either as much of a miscreant as Bob Rushton himself, or the fertile weaver of romances not an echo of which the King's Head had ever heard.

The rest of the company had all dispersed, some wondering what had happened; for it was plain to the dullest that something was amiss; others having heard distorted rumours, making them still more out of shape and line; while those who had been chosen to spend the day at Paumelle House, to break the tedium of the time for the father and check the tears of the bereaved mother, found ample employment in arguing and conjecturing from the facts as really known—judging before proofs brought or evidence given, according to the way of rash minds certain of their lights.

At last the little party of accusers and defenders drew up at the door, and one by one alighted. Then Derwent took Guy Perceval as it were into custody, and, with his hand firmly grasping the other's arm, went into the house to fling the stone which was to prove if the fair-seeming surface of the still waters was the true expression of the pure and hidden depths; or if, when disturbed, it would prove to be a mass of muddy foulness hitherto undreamt of by the world about the banks.

They found Mr. and Mrs. Smith, strangely enough, in the drawing-room; and the children at least felt how opportune the chance was. It took off what else would have been the appearance of taking these beloved parents before the judgment seat; an informal judgment seat it is true, but none the less potent.

When they entered, Muriel, breaking away from Arthur, threw herself into her father's arms.

'Dear, dear papa!' she said, kissing him passionately in between her sudden sobs and tears; 'dear, best-beloved papa!'

She knew all in her heart, but her election was made. Though the whole world should forsake him, she would remain faithful; she and her mother would love and reverence him to the end; sacrificing their own happiness that he might forget his sorrow—sharing his humiliation that he might believe himself replaced in honour.

'Father!' said Derwent in his clear voice, standing straight and proud, while Edmund smoothed Muriel's hair, and kissed her forehead, and forgot the graver bearing of the moment in his grief at her distress. 'Father! here is a man who says that you have been—I scarcely like to insult your ears by using such words—but he says that you have been a forger, and are a returned convict. Will you tell me how I can best punish him?'

'I will tell you instead how I got my information, Mr. Smith,' said Guy, speaking with an agitation that sharpened his tones into bell-wires. 'My coachman heard it yesterday evening from that man Rushton whom you have taken into your service. The two were drinking together at the King's Head—for which Romer will have to go—and Rushton, not quite sober, but not so drunk as not to know what he was about, told him that you had been prison companions at Bindwood, and that your offence had been forgery, as his had been theft. This is all that I know; but knowing it, I told Lady Machell as my duty to an old friend. If false, your innocence can be easily proved; if true, it is only right that your neighbours should know the truth; and more especially—all things considered—the Machell family.'

There was a dead silence. Mrs. Smith kept her eyes fixed on her husband; his were still on Muriel, always clinging to him, always holding him like a treasure to her heart—her dear papa, her poor papa; whatever else might be, always her own, her beloved, her father.

'Yea, it is easily disposed of if false,' said Sir Gilbert cheerfully; while Lady Machell, looking now at Edmund Smith and now at Arthur, and from this last to Muriel, drawing up her figure and tightening her lips, put in as a rider:—

'But it must be investigated, Mr. Smith—strictly.'

Still Edmund did not speak. He flushed and turned pale; looked round as if to find some place of retreat—some hole where he might hide; and then turned his haggard eyes with pathetic appeal to his wife ever watching him, ever marking his mood and following on his will. He flung up his hand as if in despair. He had been tracked and hunted down, and escape was impossible. It was useless to fence or to deny. The truth had caught him, and he was the captive of her as well as of his past.

His wife read it all. She made a few steps towards him with the grace of a queen, the dignity of a goddess. Never had she looked so grand, so beautiful, so noble, so superior to man and to fate! She stood by his side and took his hand in hers, carrying it reverently to her lips.

'Yes,' she said in a voice as clear as Derwent's had been, lifting

her head and meeting Lady Machell's steady scornful gaze as steadily if not so scornfully; 'what you have heard is true. He is a returned convict; and my loved and honoured husband through it all!'

CHAPTER XXXVL

IN ARMS.

In the eyes of the world excess in virtue is an unpardonable offence. Be truthful, loyal, honest, chivalrous, up to the rational standard of the majority, and when you fall short, conceal; but to go beyond that standard is to bring on yourself as much condemnation as if you had fallen short—and perhaps a little more.

Thus, wifely devotion is a very good thing in its way, and women are required to be faithful to their husbands and mindful of their vows; but there are limits; and when society is incensed against a man, it would that his wife, sticking close to him on principle, was incensed against him too, rather than that her devotion should be by the free choice of love. It does not like its sinners to be consented with, nor the dishonour which it has branded to be condoned; it forbids that its excommunicated should be succoured, and would, if it could, banish its moral lepers to a place apart where the clean should not be offended by their presence; and when even their own stand lovingly by its banished, it holds itself aggrieved by a devotion which defies its decrees and nullifies its punishment.

This was the state of public feeling at Grantley Bourne where Mrs. Smith's fidelity was discussed as warmly as Mr. Smith's crime; and the one found to be very nearly as blameworthy as the other. She was condemned on all sides and for every kind of reason:—some saying that she ought to have thought more of her children than of her husband; others, that she had insulted society by living there at all; others, again, that she outraged morality by professing to still love a convicted felon—but some stood sternly on the strict text, 'for better, for worse,' and while suffering no paltering with the strict application of the words, maintained that she should have gone into exile from the first, and have separated her children from the children of the unconvicted, as the goats, poor things, should be separated from the sheep. They could not get over it. Conjugal fidelity and felony—felony which should, if it does not, break up a marriage as poison used to shatter fine Venetian glass—a returned

convict for the husband of one's neighbour and the father of one's hypothetical daughter-in-law? It was not a pleasant position for anyone; though perhaps the family of the unfortunate convict himself was the most to be pitied:—to hear Grantley Bourne, it would seem society—society which had rubbed its virtuous shoulders with a convict, and given its own clean hands in fellowship to a forger.

Indignation meetings were held from house to house, where Miss Forbes and Mr. Oliphant were the only speakers who said a good word for Mrs. Smith or a charitable one for her husband.

Mrs. Constantine maintained that Mrs. Smith ought to have told them from the first, and thus have saved them from the humiliation of such a dreadful association—or at least have left them free to choose their own line of action. But even Lady Machell confessed that this was an act of heroism hardly to be expected; and when the other shifted her ground, and said it was an infamous thing to come to the place at all, Sir Gilbert mildly remarked that she must live somewhere, and it would have been the same thing to any neighbourhood wherever she had gone.

'Then she should have kept herself in rigorous seclusion,' said Mrs. Constantine sharply.

On which Miss Forbes turned round on her without mercy, and in that alledge-hammer manner so well known to all, reminded Mrs. Constantine and Grantley Bourne in general that the poor dear soul had never sought any among them, but had been from the first noticeably reticent and restricted. So the rest were forced to confess; but they did it with a sniff, understanding the cause of it now, and no better pleased than they had been when they did not understand it, and had resented her refusal of the intimacy which they offered as an affront that deserved rebuke.

Mrs. Lucraft's opinion was that she ought to have made her husband dead, and not have let him come home at all; but Mrs. Constantine, whose ideas on the marriage vow were strict, professed herself shocked, and said that she was bound to keep with him under any change of circumstance, only she ought not to say that she loved and respected him. This was her offence—a padding of her cross highly reprehensible, and indeed an offence against morality in the abstract. Then there were the children, continued Mrs. Constantine sternly; a felon's children; and Muriel engaged to that poor dear Arthur Machell! What a dreadful state of things!—and suppose that young Derwent followed up matters at Sharpeley, and become attached to her—what might it not be! How thankful she was to an angel who had taken such gracious care of her and he

It all came round to the same thing—Guelfs and Ghibellines, white and black, each party stood on the one central position. It was a dreadful state of things, and Mrs. Smith was very much to blame. But the odd part of it was, that everyone found now that he or she had suspected something of the kind from the first; and each reminded the other of sundry dark sayings, which, like the Sibyl's oracles, were intelligible only after the event, and served neither for light nor guidance when darkness was about and men were wandering in lost paths.

It was Miss Forbes who mainly provoked these discussions, under the idea that talking clears the air, and that the hearty advocacy which she carried into them would do the poor dears good. And certainly she stood by them gallantly.

She for one would not desert them, she said again and again, with the style and air of a grenadier protecting a house full of frightened huddled women. They were penitent; that poor dear fellow was broken-hearted: and she was on the side of those who rejoice over sinners saved. She had just sent them over a basket of choice pears such as they had not at Owlett, and yesterday she sent some grapes and the last of her late marrowfat.

Some people laughed at her, and some looked coldly on her for her advocacy; some twitted her with a weakness for criminals—as witness Bob Rushton the slippery scoundrel!—and some asked her jeeringly;—did she want men to get up a public testimonial to Mr. Smith, as was done for that interesting murderer who not only saved his neck from the halter, but even received a purse of gold in token of a nation's penitent regard?

Miss Forbes was not a woman to be laughed out of her position of antagonism, or jeered into voting with the majority. She generally held her own pretty firmly to the end; and in the present matter, if she could not turn, she at least did something to stem the torrent, and made some among them feel that all against one were odds more unequal than Englishmen in general think just. Even this was a gain which counted for something, and was so far better than no gain at all.

At Machella, things were, as might have been expected, black and stormy enough. My lady assumed Arthur's acquiescence in her repudiations of the Smiths, root and branch; and Arthur did not acquiesce. He was terribly shocked at the revelation—humiliated for Muriel—revolted to find himself standing so close to the dark shores of dishonour; but Muriel was always Muriel, and the sins of her father, if they overshadowed, did not stain her. Besides, the lustre of his own name would conceal the tarnish on her own; and fortunately Smith was too common to carry its history with it.

'You would bring a felon's blood into the family?—make your father—make me—the grand-parents of a convict's children?' cried Lady Machell proudly, passionately. 'You will give this man's daughter as a sister to Hilda?—you, Arthur, so proud as you have always been of your name?—so chivalrous as you have always been to your mother and sister?'

'And loving and honouring them now as I have always done, dear mother,' said Arthur gently. 'But I owe something also to Muriel, and the same constancy that her mother has shown her husband, who has done wrong, I owe to my affianced wife who has done none.'

'An engagement is not a marriage,' said Lady Machell scornfully. 'There is no dishonour in breaking off an affair when proved to be disastrous and inconsiderate.'

'To my mind there is,' he answered. 'You know, mother, that I have always looked to things rather than their symbols, and the meaning of an engagement is as sacred to me as a marriage. I should as soon think of being false to the one as to the other.'

'I trust that my sense of honour is as keen as yours,' said his mother coldly. 'This seems to me Quixotism—no! self-indulgence, headstrong passion, masking itself as Quixotism—rather than true honour, which, like every other thing, to be wholesome, should be rational and just.'

'I am not irrational to be true to the woman I love, in spite of her father's faults,' began Arthur.

'Fault!' interrupted my lady; 'had you not better call it a venial mistake at once, Arthur?'

'No, it is a fault—a crime—a dishonour; I will go all lengths with you in condemning it,' he answered. 'But granting all its shame and infamy, Muriel is not touched by it, and I am not to blame for taking her to be my wife.'

'Your religion is not quite so orthodox as I could wish,' said Lady Machell with a courtly smile. 'In my Bible I read that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, and that a son should obey his parents. You perhaps have an expurgated edition!'

'I have my own,' said Arthur hardily.

'Which is not God's,' returned my lady.

'Which is the Bible of love and honour, dear mother,' he answered.

'Of disobedience and of dishonour, you mean,' she said. 'You ought to put yourself to school again, Arthur, and learn the true meaning of words from a dictionary.'

He went over to her and tried to take her hands, but she drew them coldly away and busied herself with the frill of her tucker.

'Dear mother,' he said tenderly; 'I am sorry to hurt you; and I am sure you know that, mother—always my mother!—yet I have resolved on this marriage, and nothing but death can turn me from it. I love Muriel if possible more than ever now that I know she has need of me, and I should be dishonoured in my own eyes were I to forsake her. I am so sorry to pain you! but I must be frank; and you know that I am firm.'

'Shall you live here?' asked Lady Machell with dangerous quietness; 'bring your convict wife as a daily companion for your sister, and her father as the bosom friend of your own?'

'No, I shall carry out my original intention,' he replied as quietly. 'I shall go to Australia.'

'Ah! to Australia? I think you have shown great judgment, Arthur,' said my lady with the same strange manner of polite acquiescence. 'Your wife will be among her natural set there, and I should think would feel more at home than among people like ourselves for instance. I daresay you will have to go through some unpleasantness before you get accustomed to your new surroundings. You see you have not been used to forgers and convicts.'

'I will take what I get cheerfully I hope,' he answered with a heightened colour, but in perfect good humour. 'But I fancy that all Australian society is not made up of felons. I have seen some very decent fellows from there, and have known as decent ones go there.'

'Leaving your family, your country, does not seem to trouble you very much,' said my lady, her under lip slightly quivering.

'My family?—I must leave them wherever I live; I cannot be always at Machells; and you would scarcely wish it if I could. And for my country, I love it dearly enough, but as an Englishman who carries his real country with him. Mother!' he said with some warmth, tossing back his hair; 'I am sick of the shams of English life—of such shifts as we have been put to for the sake of position—of such a marriage as Wilfrid has made for the sake of money. I want to go into a freer and simpler life where a man's worth is his true value, and where he may dare to live and be himself as no one dares here.'

'So! you have become a communist as well as all the rest!' his mother answered. 'We are fortunate in our younger son.'

'Perhaps not so unfortunate as you think at this moment,' was his answer, as he took her hands by gentle force and this time held and kissed them; while she, feeling that her heart was broken and her life wrecked, conquered her mother's natural instinct to throw her arms round his neck and kiss and bless him, preferring instead

to nurse the wound which her ambition had received and to nourish the anger which had taken the place of her former love.

More was said ; but to what good ? It was all merely a repetition of the battle that had been fought before—but fiercer now than before, because more was at stake, according to Lady Machell. But as it had gone then so it went now, and the lover proved stronger than the son. The interview ended by Lady Machell refusing her consent to the marriage, and prophesying the divine displeasure in consequence ; in Arthur's unfeigned expression of sorrow but of quite as unmoved resolve ; and in his declaration that he intended to marry and go out so soon as he had finished his preparations in London, where he was going to-morrow.

That a word should be said on the other side did not enter into the calculation of a Machell. It was only whether or no he would fulfil his bond—the chances of Muriel having her own views on that fulfilment not counting.

If however Lady Machell was impenetrable, Sir Gilbert was not ; and Arthur soon broke through the crust and touched the soft part of him. True, he made pretence to frown, and to speak with forced severity ; but it was all a mask ; and Sir Gilbert was one of those men whose masks fall off at a touch like husk from a ripe nut or the last petal of a shaken flower. He kept up the pretence for a certain time, just for the sake of decency and parental appearances ; but, pushed into a corner, his guard was broken down, and his true heart spoke out. Laying his hands on his son's shoulder, he said, a trifle huskily :—

‘ My boy, at your age I should have done the same ; whether wisely or not is another matter. Still—God bless you ! You are headstrong and wilful, Arthur, as all the Machells are, and I hope that you will never have cause to repent. The strain is a bad one—there is no getting over that fact ; but the girl herself is all right, and—I suppose it must be ! I am sorry to lose you—but—God bless you, my boy ! You might perhaps have done worse ! ’

Which, considering all the circumstances, was as much as Arthur could expect and more than he had dared to hope.

Some little comfort came to my lady through Hilda. Arthur was wilful and disobedient, as his father said—the one great disappointment of the family ; but the child was a miracle of obedience and reasonableness. She recognized the futility of everything, and threw up her cards with the prettiest air of never having held them in serious play that could be imagined. It was not for nothing that she had been taught self-mastery for the sake of the world and expediency, and Lady Machell had reason to rejoice in the success of her training.

When she was questioned, she denied with the most candid air, the most unflinching eyes, that any tender passages had ever been between her and Derwent Smith—certainly not! She had never had such an idea! excepting when he had saved her life—at the risk of his own. She put this in with a quiet manner of unconsciousness that took from it the air of reminder—and with reminder, reproach—which else it might have had. And then she added with a smile:—

‘And that was only a silly burst of half fright, half gratitude.’

They had been boy and girl together, she continued, threading her beads and speaking carelessly, but not so carelessly as to excite suspicion because of exaggeration; and she had always been fond of Muriel. Of course she liked poor Mr. Derwent too; but really she felt just a little girl yet, and the idea of anyone in the world making a goose of himself with her never entered her head. ‘No,’ she said smiling, mother need not be afraid of her. She was not in love with him or with anyone else—she said this a little earnestly—and did not want to have to think of such things for years and years to come! She was quite of mother’s opinion that they could not go on knowing the Smiths after what had come out about them; and if Arthur would marry Muriel—here she began to cry bitterly—he had better go to Australia, or anywhere he liked, so that he did not bring her to Machells.

‘That child has a wonderful amount of sense as well as good feeling,’ said Lady Machell to her husband that night. ‘She is so docile—so easily managed. Only take her the right way and she is like wax in the hands of authority.’

‘Bless her, yes!’ said her father with his sweet contented smile, without thinking that at this moment Hilda was reading a letter received surreptitiously that very day from Derwent, in which he told her that his heart was broken, but that he renounced her for her own honour’s sake, as he would never ask her to degrade her family by mingling with his own. For himself, she would always be to him his one sole beloved, his star, his queen, his goddess; but he would not hold her by even the slightest thread; and all that he craved was sometimes a faint and tender remembrance of him as one who would have given his life for her, but who would not ask her to share in his dishonour. It was a letter characteristic of Derwent throughout—a little high-flown, very honourable, egotistical even while unselfish; but pure and fresh and young, and if somewhat narrow in its high-mindedness yet true to his best impulses, and faithful to virtue as he knew and understood it.

Hilda cried gently when she received the letter; and kissed it

often. Then she dried her eyes and put it carefully away among her treasures—where she had already put the orange blossom and the ‘consolation prize’ with which Derwent Smith was associated: that is, in a large envelope, on the outside of which was written: ‘Hair: Father, Mother, Wilfrid, Arthur.’ This envelope was tied about with ribbon and apparently firmly sealed—in case that mother should take it into her head to look through her girl’s desk in her absence, according to the privileges, not to say duties, of mothers as interpreted by Lady Machell. In reality it was only slightly gummed, so that the child, who knew the trick of it, could open it when she pleased and solace herself with the contents. It was an ingenious little bit of deception; but Lady Machell’s reins were tight, her curb sharp, and her hand heavy; and human nature has an ugly trick of shooting out its roots under-ground, like couch-grass or creeping silver-weed, when not allowed to flourish fairly in the light of the sun and before the face of men.

Long years afterwards those childish treasures were taken out and looked at by a certain matron who had married money, but in all whose splendour was not to be found a corner two feet square where Love could live, and whose happiness had no more substance than that of a pale ghost flitting sadly from room to room and finding rest in none. And the occasion on which she took out these childish treasures was when a man of wealth and eminence, who had done the state a brilliant diplomatic service, was raised from the ranks of the commonalty and made a peer—the lustre of whose new name eclipsed the splendour of many of the old established glories. The matron then looked at the crumbling dust which represented the once fresh symbols of her own past girlhood, and sighed a little more regretfully than she would have cared should have been noted by the father of her children. If she had been brave and faithful?—strong to wait and firm to hope? Well! she would have been disobedient to her mother and false to her own promise; but her social glory would have been greater and her personal happiness truer than now.

But this was many years hence—a vision shown only as a shadow on the prophet’s glass; and meanwhile the things of to-day pressed and the skein, at this moment entangled, had first of all to be put straight.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CHOICE.

BUT what was the social storm which raged without, when the secret history of Mr. Edmund Smith was made known, compared to that stiller but more deadly destruction—that annihilation of all happiness, that sweeping away of all honour, within the four walls of Owllett? When the fatal truth manifested itself at last, and the father's oath was shown to have been a coward's effort at concealment, not the honest man's indignant denial at an imputed crime and passionate assertion of his innocence, Derwent passed through the fire of a torture which was worse to his proud heart than death itself. It was death indeed in one form; and that the most terrible!

If Edmund Smith had been brave in time and met his fate fairly face to face, it would have been less hard to bear; as it was, delay and falsehood had added their force to the original sin; and in proportion to the sincerity of his false trust was poor Derwent's reaction of revulsion and despair.

It was all over. Home, father, his family honour, his early love of whose ultimate attainment he had had such boyishly certain hopes of late, his pride in the untarnished purity of his race, in the faultless honour of his name—all had left him; and he was standing like a second Adam expelled from Paradise for no fault of his own, and with no Eve to follow him into banishment and soothe his grief by sharing it. For it came now to the choice for Muriel, between home and him. What would she do? Go with him and make a new life with their uncle Louis for their friend and guardian, or remain here in this dishonoured home, to share in the sorrow of the mother and the shame of the father? She like himself was ruined; would she accept with him the only means of salvation possible, or stay by the wreck and go down with it to destruction?

He dared not hope and he would not renounce. From the first Muriel had adopted her mother's tone about this mysteriously unhappy father of theirs—this sweet-mannered, tender, and mournful victim of undeclared injustice and the tyranny of an evil fortune; and she had loved him as much as she had pitied. She had not been watchful and critical like her brother; she had not noted this lapse and that incongruity; but had accepted all things with the unquestioning faith of a true-hearted woman whose love is the crucible wherein the very faults of the beloved are transmuted into

pure gold. And now when the blow had fallen, would she turn from him, to add one other to the griefs already laid on him?—or would she cling to him all the closer because of his very failure, that she might make up by her love for the loss of man's esteem, and supply by her devotion the rent left by his own dishonour?

This was the question now; and one which Derwent was to resolve before another hour had passed.

They were in the garden; in their old happy place beneath the tulip-tree, where nature herself seemed to have changed like the rest on this gusty, grey September day—such a contrast to yesterday, when Wilfrid's ill-assorted marriage, surrounded by such exquisite harmonies of love and hope, though itself so pale and discordant, had been ushered in by a sky that seemed to have been borrowed from the sunny south, and accompanied by beauty that compressed into one point all that England had of most lovely and well-ordered.

'Your marriage now, my poor darling, is as impossible as my own,' he said tenderly. 'You can no more take your dishonoured blood into the family than I can offer my disgraced name. We are cut off from everything and everyone but each other.'

Muriel was sitting with her hands crossed on her lap—tearless, motionless, silent. The blow that had fallen on them all had crushed her too much to leave any active sense of personal pain. She was thinking more of papa and mamma, of poor Derwent—and of Arthur—than of herself; half-wondering, as the young do, why such misery should be allowed, and could it not be prevented?

'Yes, I know,' she said very quietly, her eyes looking straight before her. 'I have written to—him—to tell him so.'

'What will you do?' then asked Derwent.

He was not crushed. On the contrary, every nerve was feverishly alive—every fibre quivering with anguish. He was in that mood which makes a man exaggerate the evil of his days, and with that exaggeration increase his pain.

She looked up at him a little dazed.

'What can I do?' she asked. 'There is nothing for any of us to do but to cling together, and suffer.'

'No, by no means cling together—all of us in one group,' said Derwent hastily. 'You and I—yes; and my father and mother—but you must come with me. Muriel! leave this dreadful place, and let us begin a new and honourable life together. Honourable!—it seems a farce for us to say such a thing!' he added bitterly; 'but at least so far as we can ever be honourable again. For do what we will the stain will cling and we can never work it out!'

'And leave papa and mamma?—abandon them now when all the world is against them? No!' said Muriel, with her mother's soul in her unwavering eyes; 'I cannot leave them!'

'Then you abandon me instead?' he returned.

'No, dearest boy, it is you who will leave us,' she answered.

'Would you have me live here, Muriel?—become the boon companion of our father's pleasant associate Bob Rushton, and degrade myself at last so thoroughly to the level of our circumstances that I shall not be ashamed of them? Is this the path you would think it becoming in me to follow?'

'I do not say that you are to blame for going,' she said, not noticing his bitterness, only putting out her sweet womanly power of soothing. 'You are a man and would have to leave home under any conditions. You have to make your way in the world, and are in your right to go; but I am a girl and my place is at home.'

'Such a home as this?' he said with a scornful accent.

'Yes, even here,' she answered. 'Whatever papa and mamma may have done, I ought not to desert them.'

'I do not agree with you, Muriel. Though you are a girl you have also your way to make and your own name to respect.'

'My name is theirs,' she said.

'Well! you must decide as you think best,' he returned. 'I thought that you would have been sure to stand by me before all the world, and in preference to all the world. The day is dark for me at this moment; but I must live through it even if it becomes still darker,—as it will by you deserting me.'

'Darling boy! but think how dark it would be for them if both of us were to leave them at once!' she said, looking pitifully towards the house.

'He has no claim, and my mother made her election long ago,' Derwent answered proudly.

'Derwent!' she remonstrated; 'he is always our father; and can you speak like this of mamma? poor patient sweet mamma!'

'He is no father of mine!' he answered, flinging up his head; 'he swore falsely to me; he has disgraced us, and covered himself with dishonour twice over. He is not my father—I repudiate him!'

'Oh this is the worst of all!' cried Muriel, clasping her hands before her eyes; then turning to her brother she said, in a tone of mingled grief and horror: 'Do not say such dreadful things, Derwent! they are worse than wicked!'

'My uncle does not think so,' said Derwent. 'In his letter to-day, in answer to my telegram yesterday, he puts the whole thing plainly enough; and he gives us our choice as plainly.'

Which will we do?—you and I, Muriel—leave home and become his adopted children, take his social position, and inherit his fortune, on condition that we renounce our father and change our name to Meredith, or stay here at home in infamy, living on the allowance which he has made all these years to the family of the man who robbed him? My mind is made up: I shall accept his offer. What will you do?’

Muriel raised her head and looked at her brother, her large blue eyes dark with mingled tenderness and reproach, her face instinct with sorrow and surprise. If his was the purity which must abhor evil and shrink from contact with the sinner, hers was that which clings to love and from pity rises to forgiveness.

‘Leave them like that?’ she repeated; ‘renounce them? renounce mamma? change my name and cut myself off from them for ever? And you can do this, Derwent! you? when mamma has been to us what she has, and you have always been her favourite? No! a thousand times over! All that has come out only makes me cling to them closer and closer. Poor papa!’

‘Muriel, don’t!’ he said with a passionate gesture.

‘Yes, poor papa!’ she repeated steadily. ‘Think of his dreadful life!—and then, Derwent boy, we do not know all the story, nor how he was tempted. We ought not to judge him so harshly!’

‘Was he tempted when he called God to witness to that lie?’ cried Derwent, his pale face flaming. ‘Muriel! right and good are eternal; and if our father or anyone else breaks their laws he, as anyone else would be, is shamed and shameful!’

‘But it is not for us to say,’ she said hastily; ‘and at all events, mamma has done nothing wrong.’

‘My mother has lived for fifteen years a life of deception towards us,’ he said coldly.

‘No!’ cried Muriel with a warmth rare for her; ‘she only kept papa’s secret, as she had the right to do! And after all this, for us their children to add to their trouble! No, Derwent, indeed not!’

‘That is your deliberate choice?’ he then said without wincing or wavering. ‘Abide by it, dear, for as long as you can. When you are forced to reconsider your determination, as you will become to me. For me, I shall not sleep another night in my father’s house. I shall leave this evening, and except to you, Muriel, I am dead from to-day to all at Grantley Bourne.’

All this was said with the most extraordinary quietness of manner, a manner that was as new and strange as the rest. Muriel looked up once to see if it were indeed Derwent who was speaking; if he had not changed as much as her father’s past and her own

future. But the face, the eyes, the hair, the voice, all were the same; only the informing spirit was not the spirit of the brother whom hitherto she had known. That in truth was the soul of another.

'And you can leave us all in this terrible grief?' she said again, wondering at his hardness. 'You can add so much to what we are all suffering? Derwent! I cannot believe it!'

'I add nothing to any but you; and you have free choice of action,' he answered with quiet resolve.

'And mamma?'

'She has preferred her husband, who ruined us, to her children,' was his reply; 'and she too must abide by her choice. Do not let us speak of this,' he added hastily. 'It is only for you, my poor mistaken darling, that I am sorry.'

'And for yourself, Derwent,' she said with loving reproach.

'For myself,' he answered, not accepting her rebuke and putting it by with the lofty air habitual to him, 'I am simply destroyed. Do not let us talk of myself. I am only sorry to leave you, my dearest friend and companion of all my life; but you will it so, and I can do nothing.'

His voice, which had broken a little, steadied itself at the last words. The mother's tenacity and power of resolve which ran through him, made itself felt at this his first real contact with the hard things of life; his first struggle with a tangible not a sentimental misfortune. He had leapt at a bound from the dreamy unpracticality in which he had hitherto lived to the sorrowful understanding and power of a man. But the transition was a painful one; and of all who suffered at the present crisis perhaps no one was so much to be pitied as he, he being the only one who had not some form of love to hold by.

'Here are papa and mamma!' said Muriel, as her father and mother passed through the porch and came slowly across the lawn to the seat under the tulip-tree, where their children were; the last family council ever to be held beneath its shade.

Both the young people rose—Muriel with the unconscious reverence of love, Derwent with the conscious courtesy of well-bred enmity; the former went across the lawn to meet her parents, but the latter stood erect and still, waiting. This was the first time they had met since the scene of yesterday when all had been made known.

The father came with bent shoulders, depressed head—his eyes on the ground, but seeing nothing because of the tears that filled them—walking with the dragging gait of an old man; but the mother lifted her beautiful face to the sky, and through all its

sorrow spoke the old heroic resolute spirit which she had cherished for so many years—the heroism of love, the resoluteness of a woman's constancy.

'You have heard from your uncle, Derwent?' she began quite quietly.

'Yes,' he answered.

'I also. He tells me that he has written to you; and he tells me of the offer that he has made to you and Muriel.'

Derwent's voice suddenly ran dry. He bent his head in token of the assent he could not pronounce.

'He gives you little time for your decision,' continued the mother. 'By return of post, he says.'

'Yes,' half-whispered Derwent; then with a supreme effort he added: 'Time enough; I have decided.'

The mother's pale face turned paler still, and her dark steady eyes suddenly failed and drooped. She did not speak for a few minutes, but presently she too conquered herself.

'What have you decided on doing?' she asked in a voice made artificially level. 'I feel that you must be left free to form your own judgment and to arrange your own life.'

'I am left no choice,' answered Derwent proudly. 'I accept my uncle's offer.'

The father looked up swiftly, a spasm as if of acute pain passing over his face; the mother caught her breath and mechanically pressed her hand against her heart.

'Yes?' she then said. 'You renounce us altogether?'

'I begin a new life under new conditions,' he answered with unintentional disingenuousness.

'No, my boy,' said his father, suddenly waking as it were into life and self-assertion. 'You leave us because you, my son, have judged me more harshly than anyone else has done; because you have neither mercy nor pity, and less love for us than for yourself.'

'I leave you because I cannot and will not live with dishonour,' flashed out Derwent. 'If my mother had wished me to be able to bear the truth, which she knew must be told some day, she should have brought me up with the indifference to shame and the looseness of principle that alone could reconcile a son to such a family history as mine. It was cruel to teach me to love honour only to give me as my inheritance disgrace and humiliation.'

'Perhaps she trusted to the son's natural piety of love, and to the man's power of seeing all round a question and understanding how one may fail under a sudden temptation and yet not be bad all through,' Edmund answered, with a certain pride for which

his son involuntarily respected him. 'The sorrow and disappointment are not all on your side, Derwent; your mother and I feel both in another direction; and perhaps the son is as unsatisfactory in his own way as the father.'

'I am afraid, sir, that you must be content with me as I am without the hope of change,' the boy returned, holding up his head. 'I confess it—without shame—honour counts for more with me than love; and I prefer to tear my very heartstrings asunder rather than let them cling round a disgraced name and a dishonoured home.'

'You have said enough, Derwent,' said his mother hastily. 'Your decision is of itself sufficiently expressive—you need not dilate on it. And you, my Muriel?' she added, turning to her daughter. 'What is yours to be?'

The girl flung her arms round her brother, but she turned her sweet pale suffering face fondly to her parents.

'I love Derwent,' she said, clinging to him as she used in the old childish days when she had been tired or frightened or rebuked, and he had been her guardian and protector; 'but I cannot leave you and poor dear darling papa! You are always papa and mamma to us, and I cannot leave you.'

Edmund broke into a sudden fit of hysterical weeping, and even Mrs. Smith for all her self-possession sobbed softly to herself. Derwent, holding his sister closely pressed, looked far away into vacancy, his dry eyes full of passionate grief, his lips tightly closed, his nostrils quivering and dilated. He was sore to his very soul, but he was neither shaken nor unmanned. He had to finish his task as he had begun, and to find his strength sufficient for himself all through.

'God bless you, my darling!' said Edmund at last; 'you do not know how happy you have made me by your love in the midst of all my suffering.'

'God bless you, Muriel!' said her mother, looking at her son yearningly. 'You have chosen the better part, my child, and you will have your reward.'

Derwent put his sister gently from him.

'Go, dear,' he said with no petty jealousy, only with the quiet renunciation of heartbreak. 'You are theirs, not mine. I am alone.'

'Never alone while your mother lives to welcome you back to the home you have only to claim to have,' said his mother; while Muriel, clasping her hands round his arm tried to draw him nearer to them. But he unfastened her hands gently, and again put her away, as if giving her to her parents: then saying in a constrained

voice: 'I shall see you again to wish you good-by,' strode off into the house, to prepare for his first and final departure from the old home.

'You are sure of yourself, my darling?' asked Edmund Smith, caressing his daughter. 'You will not repent, and wish that you had gone with your brother?'

'No, papa,' she answered, kissing him in return, but sobbing bitterly as she said, in the manner of a cry: 'my poor Derwent! poor Derwent! Mamina what can we do for our boy?'

'Nothing,' said Mrs. Smith in a low voice. 'He has chosen, and he must go.'

'Poor wife!' said Edmund tenderly, and with as much humility as tenderness. 'What a curse I have been to you! How far better it would have been if you had made me dead, and so have rid yourself for ever of such an infliction.'

She turned to him with feverish passion.

'Hush! hush!' she cried. 'Leave me my love, Edmund, and my belief that I can make you happy. It is all that I have left to me!'

And Muriel did not resent the implied exclusion. Derwent had been so long the spoilt darling of both mother and sister that it seemed only natural he should be held for all and she counted for nothing in comparison; but the father caught the omission.

'And this dear angel,' he said fondly taking Muriel's hand in both of his and pressing it to his heart.

'Muriel is part of myself,' said the mother, looking towards the house where her eldest, her best beloved, he in whose beauty she had taken such delight and whose stately pride of youth and honourable pride of purity had been her glory, was preparing to repudiate them all—his mother with the rest. 'Muriel and I have always been one; she is my daughter;' she continued vaguely, with a kind of wonder that she did not die of her pain. 'I have counted on her of course—a daughter comes so close to a mother; one does not think of things with her; but—'

She could not finish her sentence; she did not want to break down, and the trial was almost beyond her strength.

'Go to your brother, my dear,' she then said to Muriel after a short pause. 'He will like to have you for the last hour at the old home, and I will stay with your father. You like me to be with you, dear, do you not?' she added in the same passionate manner, as Muriel left them to go to Derwent. 'I do make you happy, Edmund, do I not?'

'My best happiness,' he said. 'With you and our child I can be perfectly happy.'

'That is well, dear, quite well. If only I can make you happy, darling!' she said; and then clasping her burning hands before her eyes, she gave one deep bitter cry which she stifled like a thing suddenly killed as she turned to her husband and strained him to her heart.

That last hour of the boy's old life soon passed, and Derwent came down into the hall dressed for his long journey out into the world. His trunks were already on the carriage; the servants, some in tears, were standing about the passages and hall; Muriel was clinging to him, weeping and trembling; the mother, pale as if death-stricken, stood near him fighting with her impulse to clasp him in her arms and win him to throw over his pride, his future, and make one family to sink or swim together—fighting with the weakness and the strength of her love alike, for what she felt to be his right of election, his sacredness of repudiation; while the father in the drawing-room, his face hidden on his crossed arms which rested on the table, thought back on his prison life with regret—wishing that he had had the courage never to return home at all, but to have made himself dead as he once intended, rather than to have brought them misery and disgrace that he might be soothed by their presence and his wounds healed by their love. Too late now! What had been done could not be undone; and the web which had been begun must be finished to the end.

Derwent, outwardly the most self-possessed of all, kissed his sister tenderly, but without speaking. Still holding her in one arm, he turned to his mother.

'Good-by, mother!' he said in an altered voice—a voice wherein the love which until lately had been so strong an influence over his life, broke through the restraint and coldness which he tried to assume.

'Good-by: God bless you, my boy!' she said, her feverish hand clasping his as if she never meant to let it loose again.

She held up her face for his kiss—his last.

'My boy!' she murmured almost as if in a dream.

He hesitated. He scarcely dared trust himself to the embrace—the last that he should ever give the mother whom he had loved so devotedly—surely no son ever loved a mother better! Then loosing his arm from Muriel, he turned to his mother and pressed her to him with his whole strength.

'God be with you always, mother!' he said in a whisper. 'Mother, dear, dear, beloved mother!'

He kissed her passionately, again and again—her face between his two hands, and his eyes scanning her every feature.

'And your father?' she said beseechingly. 'Will you not wish him good-by, and kiss him too, Derwent?'

'No,' said the boy suddenly stiffened, putting her away; 'I have no father. Mine died when he took a false oath to deceive me.'

He once more kissed Muriel, but he did not look at his mother again; then sprang into the carriage; and soon Owlett, Grantley Bourne, Hilda Macbell, his former life, his family, and his very name—all were left behind, as he flung himself into the train that carried him like a swift current from the safe shores of the old familiar home into the vastness and vagueness of the unknown future.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LOST AND WON.

SITTING close together in a miserable triad, love and happiness falling them, save such as they could supply to each other, it seemed to Muriel as if she and her parents had touched the last boundaries of despair. Surely there was no beyond! She could not bear a greater load of misery than that which she was bearing now! Her lover lost, her brother gone away for ever, her father disgraced, and her mother broken-hearted—what was left? Her very gifts of youth and health were but additional circumstances of sorrow. She would be so glad to die now and have it all over; but she had instead such a long, long life of desolation to look forward to! It seemed as if it would never end.

She had done her duty to her father and mother—true; and she had behaved with honour to Arthur; and duty and honour are great things in their way and sound well in the ears of conscience. But, frankly—what kind of real comfort can they give to a young girl in the first wreck of her happiness? As well expect a mother to take comfort in the nice stitching of her darling's shroud as that loving hearts should reconcile themselves to the loss of all that makes life dear, because that loss has been honourably accomplished and dutifully pursued.

But she would not sit down and gloom, she thought to herself. She would be the comfort of those with whom she had elected to remain, and they should never see what it had cost her. Poor papa! she would help to make him happy; and how sweet, and kind, and good he was—how worthy to be made happy, he and that dear, self-sacrificing noble mother! She would be so good and

tender to them both, and make them feel that she shared their burden cheerfully, and in sharing, lightened it. She would always love Arthur; and she thought that he would always love her—but perhaps not now. If even he did not, she would never forget him; but of course after her letter she should never see him again, and—perhaps it was better not. And at this thought her eyes filled with tears which dropped silently on her hand. All the same, whatever her good resolves to be brave and cheerful as well as loving might be, the day was dark and dreary; and she could not affect to be cheerful with her brother's last kiss yet warm on her cheek, and her lover's silent acquiescence in her renunciation of him gnawing at her heart with as much surprise as pain. She thought he might have written; perhaps he would even yet; but he had had her note last night, and now it was past four in the afternoon of the next day. It was scarcely like him not to have answered—but surely he would!

She was thinking this, intermingled with speculations as to where Derwent was by now, and how strange it was to be without him, and how dreary the house was—as if a death were lying in it—when suddenly the sound of well-known feet was heard, the tones of a well-known voice echoed in the porch, and Arthur, asking for form's sake if the ladies were at home but setting aside the servant and the answer alike, came through the hall and into the room where the miserable trio were sitting.

For the first time since their engagement Muriel did not go to meet him. She rose from her seat hastily, but she turned her colourless face from her lover and looked at her father instead. Arthur too was pale and evidently deeply moved. He was resolute, but not unfeeling; and if he had put himself in opposition to his mother, and preferred love to home, and the independence of a man who makes his own career to the maintenance of his present social position, he had not decided without pain or acted without sorrow. But he had decided and he had acted; and he was not one to be driven from his point or made to go back on himself.

'No, you must not meet me like this, Muriel,' he said going up to her and holding out his hands. 'There is no reason why you should turn away from me.'

'But why you should turn from me,' she answered.

'I am the best judge of that,' he said gravely.

'No,' returned Muriel, that conversation with Lady Machell under the lime-trees coming back on her mind with photographic clearness; 'we must judge for you. I cannot bring disgrace upon you—what the world would call disgrace,' she added hastily,

throwing her arms round her father's neck—'but what I love and honour!'

'Your family will never consent to this marriage,' put in Mrs. Smith with a weary kind of air, like one tired of the struggle and desirous to hasten even the worst that she might lie down at last in peace. 'I made you understand my reluctance from the first; and I say now what I said then, that I cannot allow Muriel to be forced on your people against their will.'

Arthur turned to her and involuntarily drew himself up to his height. If his mother's opposition had not influenced him Mrs. Smith's was even less likely to stir him, save with a certain disdain at her presumption in making it. For with all his natural good temper, he was not very tolerant of opposition; and though in a certain sense democratic, yet it was the democracy of a man who held himself stronger than circumstance, and the one to give, not to take, the determining value of his surroundings. It was Muriel, not her people, with whom he had to deal; and the chances of their pleasure or displeasure had not been taken into his calculation at all.

'I have made my choice,' he said a little sternly; but his tone softened as he added—looking at the girl for whose sake he had just offended and renounced his mother—'Muriel is more to me than the whole world beside, and nothing can separate us but her own will.'

'And that must,' said Mrs. Smith; 'for your own sake we must not allow you to enter our family.'

'As I said before, I am the best judge of that,' he returned haughtily. 'I want no one to think for me or to arrange my affairs.'

'Poor boy!' said Mrs. Smith, her eyes filling with tears. 'We must protect you against yourself.'

The young man made an impatient gesture. At other times Mrs. Smith's maternal compassion would have pleased and warmed him; now it came with a galling sense of incongruity and interference, highly wrought as he was after that last scene with his mother, and feeling as he did that with all his love for Muriel, he had need also of some of his strength to make him overcome the aversion which such a man as he naturally felt for such a man as Edmund Smith.

'All this is beside the question,' he said proudly. 'My business lies with Muriel only, and I will take my answer only from her, after her long and deliberate choice. What do you say, Muriel? will you marry me and come with me to Australia, or am I to go there alone—my career in England destroyed, my old

home and old affections given up, and the new life that I have marked out with you a melancholy delusion and a failure?'

'I cannot leave papa and mamma,' she answered, still not looking at him.

'Do not all daughters leave their parents when they marry?' he continued. 'Why should you expect to make a life different from the rest?'

'Theirs do not want them so much as mine want me,' she answered.

'And do I count for nothing?' he asked in a voice full of tender reproach. 'Are your promises to me mere child's play that may be taken up or laid down at will? We men, Muriel, love better than that.'

She trembled more than before, and turned impulsively as if to go to him. Then she looked again at her father and crept a few steps nearer still to him.

'This is my duty,' she said in a low voice. 'Derwent has left us, and I must not leave them too.'

All the time Edmund Smith had not spoken. Suddenly he lifted up his head, and his long thin pointed fingers ceased their nervous tapping on the table.

'Yes, you must leave us,' he then said, speaking with dignity and command. 'Go with Mr. Machell, Muriel, if he is willing to take you knowing what he does; it is your duty to go.'

'And leave you and mamma?' said Muriel, who was strung to sacrifice.

'And leave us,' he answered.

'Papa, you must be always papa and my beloved to me!' cried Muriel, as she had said once before, flinging herself into his arms and clinging to him. 'I will be no man's wife who does not love you and accept you. You are my father, and nothing in the whole world shall make me give you up!'

Arthur drew back a few steps. The Machell blood in him repudiated this forger, this convict; and for the instant he felt that his mother was right—no alliance was possible between the clean and the unclean; the son of Sir Gilbert Machell could not marry Edmund Smith's daughter. He stood for a few moments, hesitating, pale, his teeth and lips set as his mother set hers; then he tossed back the hair from his forehead, cleared his eyes with his hand, and set his shoulders square as he went forward and gravely offered Edmund Smith his hand.

'Let the past die,' he said, making the one last supreme effort, the one last supreme sacrifice. 'You are Muriel's father, and I

will not separate you. Come to Australia with us, and then my darling will be happy.'

'No,' said Edmund sadly, holding Muriel in his arms. 'I will not darken your lives by my presence. We will be enough for each other, my wife and I; only let Muriel write to us, and tell us of her happiness—do not cut us off from her love, and we shall be satisfied. It is as much as I ought to ask, and perhaps more than I have the right to expect.'

'Thank you,' said Arthur simply, but he held out his hand again and pressed that of the forger with friendly warmth. 'Now, Muriel,' he said, taking her by gentle force into his arms; 'the last barrier is broken down, and I see no other to come. Look at me, my darling, and let me hear you say once more that you love me—in the presence of your father and mother who shall be mine because they are yours. Muriel! you do love me well enough to leave all and come with me, do you not?'

'Yes, if I may still hold them,' said Muriel, weeping for sorrow and smiling for love. 'Mamma! you know how much I love him; and this is just why,' turning back to Arthur, 'I could give you up for your own good. I do not want you to lose all for me.'

'If I lose the whole world, I have you,' said Arthur fervently; 'and I am content with the exchange.'

It was a bright and crisp December day. The outward-bound ship had taken in the last of her cargo and the last of her passengers. Her decks were clear, her steam was up, and in a short time the order would be given for all strangers to leave, when she would slip her moorings and move out to sea. But a few precious moments still remained to the loving hearts on the eve of parting, perhaps for ever; and the deck was dotted about with groups of sorrowful friends come to 'see the last' of those without whom, it seemed to them now, life would be impossible. Down in the Machell state-room sat Edmund Smith and his wife, passing the last half-hour with the true and faithful heart that had fought the battle of love for them—and won it. Arthur was on deck, his eyes turned wistfully to the shore. He had parted from his mother in anger on her side, in sorrow on his; but to the last he hoped that she would give way now when no good was to be got by displeasure; and that she, as his father had done, would come to see him, and wish him God speed, and be reconciled to his choice so far as to recognize Muriel as her daughter. But he strained his eyes in vain. Among all the faces looking across on the decks of the outward-bound his mother's was not to be seen.

Presently a little stir took place among the loungers and

hangers-on about the ship, as a stout and stalwart woman pushed her way through the throng, and came on board, demanding 'Mr. Arthur Machell' in a loud voice, and with an air of command that seemed to include the very captain himself among her servants. She had a small parcel in her hands which she held with care, and which, so soon as she saw Arthur, she thrust into his as her greeting.

'I have brought you a little souvenir,' she said without preface or prefix. 'It is the best I had—the string of pearls which my mother wore at her wedding; which Baby wore at her first ball; and again, for the last time, at your brother's marriage. They are good of their kind, and will suit dear Dimples to perfection; and, as you see, they are full of associations. So here they are; and take care of them; for they are worth money, I can tell you. And now, how are you? and where is Dimples?'

'In her state-room, with her father and mother,' said Arthur, who was going on to thank Miss Dinah, as she deserved; but she cut him short with brusque but not impatient haste.

'Ah! is she? Then I'll go down and see her,' she said: 'just give her sweet face a kiss, and bid her good-by and God bless her—and you too, Mr. Arthur; for of all the gallant young fellows that ever crossed my path, you are the most so. You are a man in your own right, Mr. Arthur, and I honour you for it!'

'Thank you for your good opinion, among all your other kindnesses,' said Arthur warmly. 'We were always good friends, Miss Dinah, were we not?'

'Always; and always will be,' she answered. 'If Baby had been a marrying girl, there is no one I should have liked so well for her as you. Thoroughly manly and wholesome—that is what I call you!'

The young fellow smiled a little sadly. If only his mother would have said half what this mere acquaintance said—felt half for him that she felt! His handsome face, smiling back into Miss Dinah's, grew suddenly pale and sorrowful as he looked again to the crowd standing about, but looked in vain for the only face that would have made it a living crowd for him.

He had nothing for it, however, but to hand Miss Forbes down the ladder to the state-room where Muriel and her parents sat hand-in-hand, and take his part in the talk which eddied in one unceasing circle wherever Miss Forbes found herself.

Then the last words were said, the last blessing breathed, and the last kiss given, as the strangers were ordered ashore, and the final preparations for leaving made. The father and mother, with Miss Forbes as a kind of tower of strength a few steps behind them,

stood watching the two standing by the bulwarks, arm-in-arm; the sweet pale face of Muriel full of smiles and tears together, as she now realised her loss and now her gain.

'By the by,' shouted Miss Forbes at the top of her voice; 'you'll find a small parcel from Mrs. Wilfrid inside those pearls; Dimples. It is to be opened when you get to Sydney, and not before. Good-by, my dears.'

'Good-by!' they returned. 'Good-by, mamma—dearest mamma—dear, dear papa!' said Muriel, as the ship moved slowly away.

At that moment a carriage drove rapidly up; the door opened from the inside, and Lady Machell sprang out—just in time to see the boat put off to sea. Her repentance, her broken pride, her return of love—all had come too late; the boat, like the moment, had gone, and only distance, ever increasing, lay between the mother and the son whom she had so passionately loved and so bitterly discarded.

In vain that she called him by his name; in vain that she stretched out her arms and besought him to return:—the inexorable fate of circumstance had divided them, and the love which might have bridged over the chasm had returned only when it was powerless to bless.

Muriel's eyes, like Arthur's, had been searching the crowd for that one missing face which it would have made her melancholy happiness to see; but hidden in the deep shadow of a doorway, Derwent Meredith—Louis Meredith's adopted son; that handsome young fellow who had flashed like a meteor into the courtly merchant's world, coming no one knew whence, and making all men wonder why—watched the going of the ship which bore away his sister without letting himself be seen. He watched it all like something seen on the stage, that deeply interested but did not personally concern him. He saw his father and mother come off the deck, clinging to each other as the only one each had left, while accompanied and in a manner guarded by the brave good soul who had stood by them in the face of the world, without wincing:—then he saw Lady Machell drive up, prepared to do what had been beyond his strength to compass—prepared to abandon her pride and to forgive. A thrill of passionate emotion passed over him, as these circumstances of his former life once more swept across his path; and when his father, who had wrought all this misery, crossed the deep shadow within which he stood, and his mother, who had been in one character the victim and in the other the executioner, turned her face as if instinctively to the darkness, he felt for the instant that he too must fling his pride to the winds,

and his future fortune with it, for the sake of that love for which the world is indeed well lost—nay, which is the world itself! But he controlled himself. He had his destiny to fulfil; and he contented himself by watching them and the vessel from the safety of his hiding-place—his resolution as strong now as when it was first taken and acted on.

Lady Machell, broken, passionate, hysterical, wrung her hands and called out her son's name as if he could have heard her—as if indeed, love and sorrow could command the elements and overrule the laws of nature. Arthur with a sudden start of joy waved his hand to her—something at his throat choking him—and he too feeling that she could hear and see him as he knew himself to be at this moment—loving, tender, grateful—her son once more in all that makes true sonship.

'If I could but have blessed and kissed him!' cried his mother with a burst of despair; 'if I could but have told him that I loved and forgave him!'

Suddenly she turned, and put both her hands into Edmund Smith's.

'It will comfort him; he will understand me,' she said, looking at the handsome figure standing bare-headed on the deck in the clear and frosty sunlight. 'He will know now that I am reconciled to him!'

'Mother! dear mother!' said Arthur aloud; 'God bless you for that! You too have sacrificed what was the dearest thing in life to you, and have given up your pride for love! God bless you my mother—always my beloved mother! Ah my wife, my Muriel, at last I have gained all!'

THE END

