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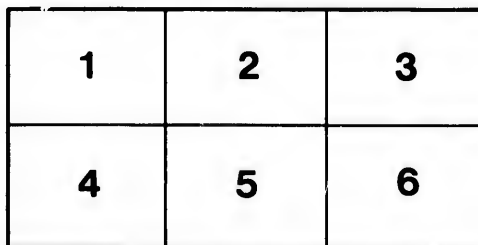
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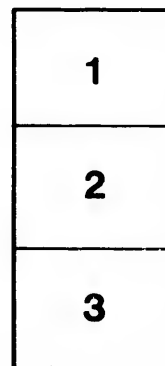
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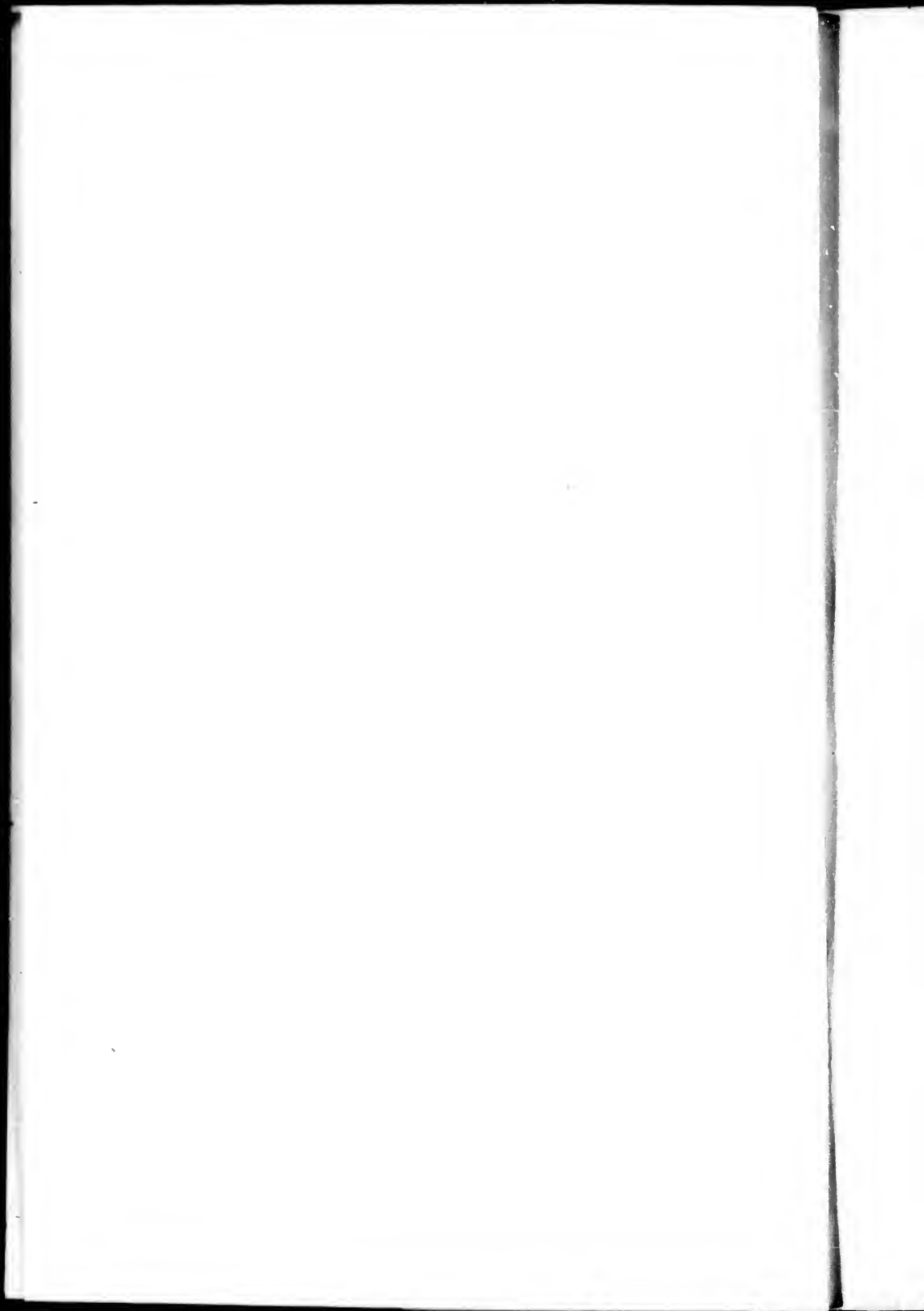
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ACROSS HER PATH.



BARBARA AND LADY BASSETT.



# ACROSS HER PATH.

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN,

AUTHOR OF "ALDERSYDE," "CARLOWRIE," ETC.

*NEW EDITION.*

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## ACROSS HER PATH.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### THE FALL OF THE LEAF.



THE month was October.

Harvest days were over, fields bare and desolate, the year was past its prime. The little patches of woodland relieving the dreary sameness of the uplands were stripped of every leaf, though, in the pleasant sheltered valley of the Wym, the brown and golden tints of autumn lingered still. In one of the cunning bends of the beautiful river, Little Wymar had its peaceful being,

undisturbed by the clang and clamour of the great world from which it was blissfully removed.

It was called Little Wymar, because up the river there was a Great Wymar, which had its being in the very midst of noise, and bustle, and worry, and where the tide of life ebbed and flowed to the din of factory wheels.

Great Wymar essentially savoured of trade. Its little millionaires built themselves sumptuous abodes, gat them horses and carriages, men-servants and women-servants—in a word, all the outward appearances of wealth and rank; but in the eyes of those to the manner born, they remained “these Wymar factory people,” with whom blue blood disdained to mingle, and whom it would not even recognise, save from afar.

Little Wymar and its neighbourhood was intensely aristocratic.

It was also poor, yet it spoke of, and acted very contemptuously towards, the cotton glory of its neighbour up the river. With the exception of a few, whose souls yearned continually after the one thing wealth could not purchase, Great Wymar could jingle its money-bag complacently, and smile at high-born contempt. But between society in Little Wymar and in Great Wymar there was a tacit rivalry, rendered all the more bitter because it was never acknowledged in so many words.

On the outskirts of Little Wymar there stood on the river's bank a square brick mansion-house of small dimensions, known as the Red House. It was a rambling old place, crumbling to decay, yet possessing that indescribable inimitable beauty with which Time loves to clothe the buildings of the past. It had a great garden about it, a wild, luxuriant wilderness, overgrown with old-fashioned country flowers, neglected strawberry beds, and gnarled old fruit-trees, as barren as the fig-tree of old.

For many years the Red House stood empty, till a family came from London one summer and created a stir of talk in Little Wymar. It consisted of a gentleman of frail and delicate appearance and two children—a son and daughter. Before they had been many days in Little Wymar the gossips had discovered that Mr. Dale was a literary man from London, whose health had been ruined by over-work, and who had come to the pleasant, health-giving valley of the Wym, either to be restored to life, or to pass his last days in peace and quietness away from the world which had robbed him of his best energies, and had given him nothing in return. They seemed to be very poor, for Miss Dale performed her own household duties, with the occasional help of a woman from the village. Immediately upon their settlement in the Red House, the son entered one of the banks in Great Wymar as cashier; then Society made up its mind very decidedly regarding the Dales, and treated them with the utmost coolness. The rector and Mrs. Guest called on them, of course, and Winifred Guest would have made a friend of Barbara Dale if her mother would have permitted it. But Mrs. Guest was a Burnett of Castle Burnett, and, though she had married beneath her, kept herself aloof from any but the first circles in Little Wymar. Of little account to the Dales was the behaviour of Little Wymar. They had come for rest; and Miss Dale seemed so much bound up in her father that she had

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neither time nor thought for anything else. But very quickly Robert Dale made his way into the hearts of the people, in spite of themselves. He was a sunny-hearted, careless, winning young fellow, whom to look at was to love. But he was as unstable as water, unable to withstand temptation, and generous to a fault. Poor Robert Dale! These quicksands of human nature have swallowed many a bright and happy spirit; he was but one among the many. Before a year was past Robert Dale disappeared alike from Great Wymer and Little Wymer for ever. The blow hastened his father's end, and Barbara Dale ministered unto him herself, constantly striving to be bright and cheerful with him when her heart was very near the breaking. He lingered on through the early autumn, and the grey, still days of October found him waiting daily for the summons which, save for his daughter, he would gladly obey. Late in the afternoon of the last day of October, Barbara Dale sat by her father's sick-bed, watching while he slept. There was no light in the room save that given by the fire, and the red glow shone full upon her face and showed the mist of unshed tears in her eyes. It was a striking face in many respects, but not a beautiful one, unless the wonderful lustre of the eyes could make it so. It was dark in hue, and the features were strongly marked. But the broad, beautiful brow, and the grave intellectual mouth were somewhat of an index to the nature of the woman. She was no ordinary girl, Barbara Dale. She was born to make her mark in life, and would make it, if these resolute lines about the mouth meant anything. Her figure was graceful, and even in her shabby black gown she looked like a lady. Her hands were exquisitely shaped, but neither white nor fine, for, as I have said before, they performed the common drudgery of a servant girl. The room was poorly furnished, but clean and in order, as everything must be with which Barbara Dale came in contact. Upon the bed lay the worn and wasted figure of a man considerably past his prime, and sufficiently like the watcher beside him to proclaim their relationship even to a stranger. They were father and daughter, and they loved each other well, but the last parting was at hand.

His sleep was troubled and uneasy, and very soon he opened his eyes wide and looked full at his daughter.

"You have rested, papa," said Barbara Dale, her sweet voice full of innocent solicitude.



"A little. What o'clock is it, Barbara?"

"Almost six. I did not light the lamp, nor move, lest I should disturb you," she answered.

He smiled slightly, and moved his head to and fro on the pillow.

"The hour comes when nothing will disturb me. You know it, Barbara."

She bowed her head, and her lips moved, but no sound escaped them.

"Barbara!"

"I am listening, papa."

"Look up, child; come nearer to me. The time is short, and I have many things to say to you."

Softly Barbara moved her chair nearer to the bed, and laid one firm hand on the nerveless fingers lying above the coverlet.

"When I am gone, Barbara, what is it you mean to do?" he asked.

"You need feel no anxiety about me, papa. I am not one who will be helpless in the world. I can stand alone."

Her voice was quiet, but firm to hardness.

"It is not a good thing for a woman to be alone in the world," said William Dale, musingly. "It would have killed your mother; but you are different."

"You have bequeathed to me your indomitable will, papa," said Barbara.

"Ay, I see that. But the world has broken my will, and killed me before my time. Take care that it does not treat you in the like manner, Barbara."

Barbara Dale shut her lips together, but answered never a word.

"The world, ay, it is a hard world," went on the sick man, seeming to recall the past. "The world which killed poor Chatterton is the same to-day—a little more refined, a little more cultured, but doubly cruel. Have nothing to do with it, Barbara, promise me."

"I will promise you this, papa, that I shall bring the world which has been so cruel to you to my feet. I shall only know it to move it as I will, to use it as the creature of my fancy," said Barbara Dale, passionately. "And then I shall go away and leave it for ever, and end my life in some quiet place not yet tainted by its vices and its hollowness."

"How will you do this, Barbara?" queried the sick man, in surprise.

"You know you have told me many times I would yet be a world's idol. It is better for me to be alone, for then I shall have no ties to hamper the work of my pen."

The sick man closed his eyes, as if the burden of thought her words conveyed was too heavy for him.

"It is not a life which can make any woman happy, my daughter. It takes a strong man to do such work. A woman is happier at home, with little children about her knees, Barbara."

The sick man raised himself on his elbow, and looked eagerly, almost beseechingly into his daughter's face.

"Think better of it, my dear; Leigh is still devoted to you. Lay aside all these dreams, which in their very fulfilment will convince you of their hollowness, their utter inability to satisfy the cravings of nature. Be his wife. Let me die thinking of you as in his care, rather than earning the poor living of an author in the great wilderness we have left behind us."

A dark flush overspread the face of Barbara Dale, and she rose.

"*That* above all things is an impossibility, papa. I dislike and despise Jasper Leigh from my soul. He has blinded you, papa. Time was when you could have read him better."

"Barbara!" Again the pleading hand went forth, and Barbara Dale bent down to catch the words which he uttered with great difficulty.

"He has been very kind to me, my child. Be civil, be courteous to him. I—I owe him money, Barbara. But for him we might have been without a roof-tree——"

Barbara Dale looked as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet, and her face grew white to the lips.

"Don't be angry with me, Barbara; I could not help it. We needed it, and I could not have borne to see you sit night after night wasting body and mind for a beggarly pittance."

"No," said Barbara slowly, "you preferred rather to lay me under an obligation which even full repayment will never wipe out. Papa, I did not deserve it."

Then her innate tenderness rose above her indignation, and she put her arms about her father and pillowed her head on his breast.

"Oh, papa, papa, take me with you," she moaned, for her

woman's heart was sore within her. "Life was hard even when I had you ; what will it be without you ?"

"Barbara, be kind to Robert when he comes back. He was a good boy, but heedless and easily led. He will need a friend ; you are his sister. Don't forget it, or he may sink deeper," said William Dale drowsily, and then his eyes closed.

For a very long time there was a silence in the room, broken only by the sighing of the wind outside and the falling of the ashes from the grate.

By-and-by it seemed to Barbara Dale that her father grew heavier in her arms, and also that the breathing seemed to be imperceptible. Very quietly she laid her hand to his heart and found it still.

At that moment the charwoman looked into the room with that easy familiarity common to her class.

"Please mum, Mister Leigh from Wymar's in the sitting-room, and will you come and speak to him, mum ?"

"Say to Mr. Leigh, Betty," said Miss Dale in clear, icy tones, "that I cannot possibly see him to-night, but that I shall be glad if he will call to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock. And then do you come back here at once. I shall need some help. Mr. Dale is dead."





## CHAPTER II.

### CLOSING ACCOUNTS.



At ten o'clock next morning, Jasper Leigh, attorney, High Street, Great Wymar, left his office in charge of his senior clerk, and betook himself to the railway station to catch the ten-fifteen train for Little Wymar. You will look at him for a moment, if you please, as he leisurely paces up and down the platform, for he is to play an important part in this history. He was a man of middle height, slenderly and lithely built, gentlemanly in appearance, and faultless in attire. This morning he wore a black cord suit and a grey overcoat, with a black band across the sleeve. More than one had paused to wonder whether Mr. Leigh had any relations dead—he was so evidently in mourning. He was very dark. A profusion of heavy black hair clustered about his neck, his eyebrows were black and bushy, the long moustache on the upper lip was black also, and waxed at the ends to perfection. His face was good-looking enough, but it was repellent. The eyes were grey and steely, the nose long and sharp, with an unpleasant habit of dilating at the nostrils, which once seen would be remembered for ever. His mouth was long and thin, and cruel-looking, another characteristic of his nature. It was a false, mean, pitiful nature, selfishness to the very core; yet Mr. Leigh was a favourite among the womankind of Great Wymar, and could have married any day he pleased into some of its wealthiest families. But Mr. Leigh had found his heart's desire beyond Great Wymar. The ten-fifteen was late by fifteen minutes.

"I shall be obliged to report this to the Company, Barry," said Mr. Leigh, in his cool, easy tones. "To business-men time

is money," and the official had to touch his hat servilely, and keep his tongue between his teeth. No one had ever gained anything by crossing Mr. Leigh. It was forty minutes' journey by rail to Little Wymar, so that Mr. Leigh could not keep his appointment punctually. He walked swiftly through the village, and, drawing out his watch at the gate of the Red House, found that it was a quarter past the hour. From one of the upper windows Miss Dale was watching for him, though he did not see her, and she opened the door to him herself.

"My dear Miss Dale," he began, but she interrupted him with a quick gesture of deprecation, and bade him, in a low voice, come into the house. He hung up his hat, biting his lip the while, and followed her into the sitting-room.

Then Miss Dale turned round to him and lifted her eyes with a slightly inquiring gaze to his face. She observed the tokens of mourning in his dress, and resented it with her whole soul.

"I could not see you last night, Mr. Leigh. I am grateful you should have taken this trouble on my account this morning," she said. "My father passed away very quietly last night about seven o'clock."

"You have my deepest, most heartfelt sympathy, Barbara," said Mr. Leigh, looking straight into her face. She did not flinch.

"Dr. Guest came to me at once," she forced herself to say; "and was kindness itself. He has made all arrangements for me. We will bury him here in Little Wymar. It was his wish."

Again Mr. Leigh bit his lip.

"I hoped to be permitted the melancholy satisfaction of performing these duties for you, Barbara."

The repetition of her name, the assumption of proprietorship in his whole manner, was as gall to her, but she forced back her indignation, and spoke with the same calm hauteur.

"I thank you for your proffered kindness, Mr. Leigh, and regret that I cannot accept it now, or at any other time. While my father lived, circumstances threw us together, but now our ways must lie apart."

Mr. Leigh rose from his chair and looked at her with his cold eyes; looked her through and through.

"Barbara, Mr. Dale left you in my care. You have forbidden me to speak of the desire of my heart to you, at

least for a time ; but I shall not relinquish my charge, nor extinguish my hope while life lasts."

"I forbade you, I think, *ever* to speak on such a subject again," said Miss Dale, with a tremor in her voice.

Mr. Leigh smiled.

"Perhaps you did ; but a lover—especially such a one as I—cannot be so easily repulsed. I love you, Barbara, and you *shall* be my wife. I have sworn it," he said, with perfect coolness.

"Such idle talk is simple waste of time," said Miss Dale, in calm, icy tones. "There is but one little matter to settle between us, and then I shall wish you good-morning."

She moved over to an old-fashioned writing-table, unlocked it, and took from it a sheet of note paper.

"I learned only last night, a few minutes before my father died, that he was your debtor for a sum of money," she said bravely, though a dark-red spot burned upon either cheek, brought by the humiliation of the moment. "That debt is, of course, now mine. Be good enough to name the exact sum, and I shall place this I.O.U. in your hands till the time comes—very soon, I hope and expect—when I shall be able to refund the money, and clear my father's name."

Again Mr. Leigh smiled, though the flash in his eye told of inward disturbance.

"You are charmingly honest and upright, Barbara," he said, lightly. "Supposing, then, that I decline to tell you?"

"Then you put me in a painful position, Mr. Leigh, but one, I believe, which will afford you exquisite delight," said Miss Dale, her anger getting momentary mastery.

"Then, my pretty Barbara, I shall not tell you, and so tease you a little," said Jasper Leigh, slowly.

Then Miss Dale pointed to the door.

"I wish you good-morning," she said, pointedly ; but he saw how her hand was pressed to her heart, and knew what he was making her suffer.

"May I be permitted to ask in a friendly way what you are going to do, or where you are going, Barbara?"

"You may *not*," she said, and pointed again to the door.

Then Mr. Leigh took up his hat.

"You are playing the queen to-day, Barbara, and I am the humblest of your subjects. But one day it will be my turn," he said, with a curious curl of his lip ; "and we will see how

you can play the *rôle* of suppliant. I will leave you, as you wish ; I will ask you no questions ; but, though you go to earth's utmost ends, I shall find you there, and confront you when you least expect it. I was your friend ; I am so still, but in a different way. Barbara, good-morning, and good-bye. I wish you every success."

Mr. Leigh made a low bow, glided out of the room, left the house, and took the noon train back to business.

Miss Dale stood in the sitting-room window, and watched her visitor out of sight, then she went up-stairs to her own bedroom and sat down very composedly to trim her best black gown with crape. These beautiful fingers could do more than wield the pen. There was no branch of a woman's peculiar work which they could not perform deftly and well. Necessity, my friends, obliges humanity to do many things to which inclination is opposed. Miss Dale proceeded to put on the sombre trimming in a way which ought to have done credit to a *modiste*, even when, all the while, her thoughts were far removed from her work. Her plan for her immediate future stood out clearly and distinctly in her mind, and already she was shaping her course far ahead. Shortly after noon another visitor came to the Red House ; this was the rector of Little Wymar.

Miss Dale laid aside her work when the knock came to the door, and went to open it, being alone in the house save for the silent sleeper in the front bedroom. She smiled when she saw Dr. Guest upon the threshold, gave him her hand frankly, and bade him come in.

He was an elderly man of handsome and benevolent appearance, with a face which was index sufficient to the large, generous, warm heart within. But his most kindly impulses were considerably kept in curb by his aristocratic wife, who ruled him completely.

He followed Miss Dale into the sitting-room, laid his hat and gloves upon the table, and turned to her compassionately.

"My dear child," he said, "how do you find yourself this morning?"

"Thank you, Dr. Guest, I—I am as well as I can hope to be," returned Miss Dale, with an unmistakable tremor in her voice. Strange that in her interview with Jasper Leigh she had not once flinched, and how the first words of considerate kindness should so nearly break her down.

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said Mr. Guest, purposely avoiding the use of that hideous word we all dread; "and I hastened to be before them, to be with you when they came."

Swiftly Barbara Dale's eyes turned upon the clergyman's face, and the wonderful flash of gratitude in their depths almost amazed him.

"They are at the gate, Dr. Guest," she said, and turned to go and admit them. But Dr. Guest motioned her back, saying gently but firmly—

"Nay, you will remain here, Miss Dale; I shall accompany the men upstairs."

"You will call me when they are ready, Dr. Guest," she said. "He would like me to be there; I would like it myself."

"Yes, I will call you," Dr. Guest promised, and went out to meet the undertakers.

By-and-by, he returned for Barbara, and took her up-stairs, and she stood by pale and tearless while they laid her father in his last narrow bed. She seemed utterly unconscious of what was passing till Dr. Guest touched her arm.

"My dear, come down-stairs," he said, and she obeyed him like a child. "I find there are very many in Little Wymar who desire to go to the burying-ground to-morrow, Miss Dale," he said, when they re-entered the sitting-room. "They will meet us here at three o'clock. You are quite sure, my dear, that there is no one you would like to send for—no relatives who——"

"I have no relations, Dr. Guest, and my father desired that none of those whom we knew in the old life should be asked to his funeral," said Miss Dale in the same listless way. "It is very kind of the people to wish to come. I shall remember it gratefully always."

"You will not remain here alone all night, Miss Dale," said the Rector then. "Come down to the Rectory and stay, at least, till morning."

"And leave him?" she queried in simple surprise.

"My dear, it cannot possibly matter to him now," said Dr. Guest gently.

"I should not like the idea of it, Dr. Guest. Many thanks, but the woman from the village will come up and sleep in the house, and I have no fear."

Then Dr. Guest took up his hat.



"There will be plenty of time to talk over your plans for the future by-and-by," he said. "In the meantime I will say good-morning. Winnie would come and see you, Miss Dale, if—if——"

"I should be pleased, but Mrs. Guest might not like it," said Miss Dale quietly. "My arrangements are all made, Dr. Guest, and I leave Little Wymar the day after to-morrow."

"Impossible! Where do you think of going?"

"To that refuge for the needy—the great wilderness which hides so much and so many," she said with a slight hardness in her voice. "I am going back to London."

"What to do? Forgive my plain question, my dear. I am an old man, and I have always liked you. You will do nothing rashly."

"No, I will do nothing rashly," she repeated, with a little smile. "I am going straight to a good-hearted soul who was our landlady once, and who will shelter me till I find some occupation."

"What kind of occupation?"

"The orthodox one for young women in reduced circumstances. I shall teach for my living for a little while, and then——"

She looked at her fingers a moment meditatively, and then lifted a pen from the desk.

"And then, when I have collected my thoughts a little, these will either bring me to wealth and fame or—— But why detain you so long, Dr. Guest. Your kindness to a stranger and an orphan will live in my heart to the end of my life—yours and Winnie's."

She lingered tenderly on the girl's pretty name, as if it called up a dear and pleasant memory.

"Say to Winnie, Dr. Guest, that to-morrow night I shall run down to the Rectory for a last word with her. If she is obliged to be out, perhaps she might send a note, so that I may know not to come."

"I will remember," said Dr. Guest; and, taking her hand in his firm, warm clasp, bade God bless her, and went away.

His eyes were dim when he turned away from the desolate house; and yet Miss Dale had been composed enough in outward appearance all through the interview. All that day Barbara Dale's face haunted the Rector of Little Wymar.

Upon the morrow, in the grey stillness of the afternoon, they

carried William Dale to his rest in the little churchyard facing the river. Miss Dale remained alone at the Red House, and, though many pitied her, none came to intrude upon her in her sorrows. She partook of her solitary tea in the dreary sitting-room, and then, when the night had fallen, put on a hat and cloak and went out. She walked quickly down the lonely road to the gates of the Rectory, and there paused a little, as if not greatly caring to enter.

"It is for Winnie," she said to herself, and touched the bell. A smart maid-servant opened the door, and, in answer to Miss Dale's question for Miss Guest, said, somewhat pertly—

"Mrs. Guest said I was to show you up to the drawing-room when you came, Miss Dale."

Miss Dale bowed, and beneath the broad-brimmed hat her face burned. The maid shut the door, and ushered her up the handsome staircase to the drawing-room.

"Miss Dale, Mrs. Guest," she said, and then closed the door, leaving Barbara standing just within it.

Up from the rocking-chair upon the hearth rose a tall, haughty-looking lady, with a clear-cut, handsome face and a profusion of fair hair arranged in coils about her head. She was beautifully dressed, and presented in every way a complete contrast to Barbara Dale. She was alone in the room; Barbara looked in vain for the sweet face she had come to see.

"Ah, Miss Dale, come to the fire," said Mrs. Guest politely but frigidly. "These November evenings are very chilly. Are you quite well?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Guest," said Miss Dale quietly, and took the chair to which her hostess pointed, willing to endure humiliation a little longer if in the end she could see Winnie.

"I have been very sorry for you, Miss Dale," said Mrs. Guest, seating herself and crossing her white hands on her lap. "Dr. Guest tells me you contemplate leaving Little Wymar."

"To-morrow morning, Mrs. Guest," said Barbara briefly, and bent her eyes upon the fire, without making an effort to continue the conversation.

"He tells me also that you contemplate earning a livelihood by teaching. Let me advise you against it, Miss Dale. Unless a young woman is possessed of exceptional talent and accomplishments it is miserable drudgery."

Miss Dale turned her eyes a moment on Mrs. Guest's face.

"What would you advise me to do, Mrs. Guest?" she asked out of simple curiosity.

"Oh, there are many things *you* might do. Take a situation as a housekeeper, or begin a fancy business in London. I am sure I, and Dr. Guest also, would be very pleased to do our utmost for you in that way."

Miss Dale rose and put back her veil with a very decided gesture. Her face was very pale, save where upon either cheek a red spot burned.

But the words she spoke were calm and courteous, and very far removed from the subject.

"I conclude I may not have the pleasure of seeing Winifred to-night, Mrs. Guest?"

Mrs. Guest bit her lip, and rose also.

"Winifred is engaged, Miss Dale. Good-evening."

"Good-evening, Mrs. Guest. At some future day I hope to thank you for your proffered kindness, and also to show you how little I stood in need of it," returned Barbara, with a little scornful smile, which very nearly upset Mrs. Guest's aristocratic composure. She rang the bell sharply, and requested the maid who obeyed the summons to show Miss Dale downstairs.

Out on the gravelled pathway in front of the Rectory Barbara stood still, and looked up at the lighted windows with yearning eyes.

"Good-bye, my darling, Robert's Winnie," she whispered sobbingly, then drew down her veil and hurried on her way.

Before she reached the gate she was startled by the tread of a light footfall behind her, and the sound of her own name. She wheeled round to see coming swiftly towards her a slim figure in white, with a crimson shawl about its head and shoulders. In a moment Barbara had the figure in her arms, and for a moment there was nothing said.

"I ran out, Barbara, through the kitchen," said Winnie Guest, in a breathless whisper. "I nearly died when I heard you going and thought I could not see you."

"Did she forbid you to come into the room while I was there?"

"Yes."

"Did she think I would contaminate you, Winifred?"

"I don't know, Barbara; mamma is very proud, you know," faltered Winnie. "Oh, Barbara, are you really going?"

"To-morrow morning early, Winifred. I must be off now

Good-bye," said Barbara, steeling herself to be hard and cold to the rector's daughter.

"And I shall never see you any more, Barbara," said Winnie, and the tender blue eyes were suffused with tears. "And I shall not know when Robert comes home."

"Are you thinking of Robert still?" asked Barbara Dale, almost sharply. "You know what he is, Winnie, what he must be all his life now."

"I know what mamma calls him, Barbara," said Winnie, pitifully. "But he is always the same to me. I love him still."

Then Barbara Dale raised the sweet face in both her hands, and looked into the very depths of the violet eyes.

"Winifred, if Robert in after years ever sought you again, would you love him in spite of all?"

"When Robert comes back, Barbara, I will be his wife if he will take me," returned Winnie, with answering gravity. "I would go to him now, if I knew how or where to go."

"You are a little fool, Winifred," said Miss Dale bitterly, though her heart was full of sweetness. "It would not do for Mr. Guest's daughter, for a relative of the Burnett's, to come down to the level of a common——"

A soft hand on Barbara's lips stopped the word.

"Don't, Barbara. Kiss me, dear, and let me go, or mamma will find out I am here."

Then Barbara Dale clasped her arms very closely about "Robert's Winnie," and bent her face down to hers.

"Good-bye, my darling. Not here to-night can I tell you what you have done for me, what boundless good your sweet love and blessed faith in us have wrought in my sore heart. I do not know when we shall meet again, Winifred Guest, but I know that God will bless *you* always; you are His own sunshine in a miserable world." And so they parted.





### CHAPTER III.

NO. 5 HILL SQUARE, ST. JOHN'S WOOD.



BREAKFAST was upon the table in the dining-room of No. 5 Hill Square, St. John's Wood. Behind the tray sat the lady of the house, Mrs. Alfred Greenway, a thin, scraggy, anxious-looking woman, past her prime. She was neatly and tastefully dressed, but she did not look like a lady, nor did her daughter Julia, sitting at the other side of the table, arrayed in a dirty morning gown, and a row of yellow curl-papers along her forehead. Deep in the columns of the *Standard* was the master of the house, Mr. Alfred Greenway, solicitor in the City. He was a mild, inoffensive-looking man, who was evidently content to occupy a back place in his own abode.


"Julia," said Mrs. Greenway in somewhat angry tones, "I tell you once for all, I cannot have you appearing at the table in that costume. If you cannot dress properly you must not expect to breakfast in the dining-room."

Julia buttered her roll in the most unconcerned manner, and answered calmly—

"How often have I told you, ma, that my hair is a fright all day if I take it out in the morning. And what does it matter for only you and pa."

"There is the example for the little ones, Julia," remarked Mrs. Greenway severely. "You are no use in the house. What is there to hinder you from teaching the children if you liked, and looking after their wardrobes as well. I'm sure there has been enough spent on your education."

"But I'm born without any brains, thanks to you, ma," said Julia, who could be daringly impertinent to her mother without



compunction. "And I was made for ornament, not for use; it is such a bore to me to do anything. When *are* you going to get a governess though, ma? The girls are turning into perfect tom-boys."

Mrs. Greenway made no answer; simply because that for the moment she was too angry to speak. In the constant struggle to keep up appearances on very limited means, she received no assistance whatever from her eldest daughter. Julia Greenway could spend money, but she could not help to earn it.

"My dear," said Mr. Greenway, in his quiet, apologetic voice, "here is something which I think would suit you very well."

"What kind of thing, Mr. Greenway?" asked his wife. "I have no money to spend on rubbish."

In the early days of their marriage, Mr. Greenway had been much given to spending money on every new-fangled article for household use which he saw advertised, till his wife had effectually stopped it by relieving him of the purse altogether.

"No, no, my dear," said Mr. Greenway hastily. "Nothing of that kind. You were looking out for a young person to teach the girls, weren't you? Well, here's something like the thing—"

"YOUNG WOMAN desires teaching daily or otherwise; good references. Apply Mrs. Carmichael, 14 Beltrees Road, Stockwell."

"That is a young woman who knows her place," said Miss Greenway. "Every penniless girl who has to earn her living nowadays styles herself a young lady."

"Be quiet, Julia," said her mother peremptorily. "Let me see the paper, Mr. Greenway, if you please. It is ten minutes to nine now."

Mr. Greenway took the hint and rose. Mrs. Greenway read the advertisement carefully again, and then laid aside the paper without remark.

"Some more coffee, ma, please," said Julia. "Here's all the children, of course, before I've done. There's not a moment's peace in this house."

In trooped the other five daughters of the house of Greenway—whose ages ranged from four to fifteen—rollicking children every one of them, whose propensity for wearing and tearing clothes was a constant worry to their anxious, careful mother.

The second child of the family had been a son, but he had

died in childhood, a blow from which Mrs. Greenway's heart had never recovered. She had a heart, though it was girt about so closely with the armour of the world that it was not easily reached.

"Julia, you will look after the children," said Mrs. Greenway, rising suddenly. "And see that Patty has the dinner punctually at four. I am going into the City with your father."

"Are you going to get a governess, mamma?" asked Bessie, the eldest of the five, a gentle-eyed, fair-faced creature, a complete contrast in every way to her elder sister.

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Greenway, her voice softening as it always did when addressing the pet of her flock.

Julia frowned.

"I'm going with you, ma. It's such fun hunting up a governess and seeing the airs they put on," she said. "Bessie can look after things well enough."

Mrs. Greenway ignored her daughter's speech altogether. There was constant warfare between them, for there was nothing in common between the hard-working, energetic mother and her indolent, frivolous, silly-minded daughter. Mrs. Greenway attired herself in a marvellously short space of time, gave her orders to the servants, and was ready to accompany her husband when he came downstairs with his boots on.

"I am going into the City on some shopping," she said in answer to his look of astonishment, "and then to Stockwell to see that young person advertising for a situation. I must get one at once, or the children will forget everything they have learned."

"Very well, my dear," said Mr. Greenway in his mild way, and they left the house together.

Mrs. Greenway's shopping was no trifling matter, for necessity obliged her to lay out every sixpence to the utmost advantage. None of the neighbours who admired the pretty dresses worn by the inmates of No. 5 dreamed of how little they cost, or that they were made by Mrs. Greenway's skilful fingers in the privacy of her own apartments. It was two o'clock before she completed her purchases in the City and turned her steps in the direction of Brixton Road.

Mrs. Carmichael's abode was a tiny brick cottage standing in a dingy little garden back from the road. Mrs. Greenway directed the cabman to wait for her, and went up the little paved passage to the door. Her knock was promptly answered

by Mrs. Carmichael herself, a buxom little woman with keen, black eyes, which travelled over Mrs. Greenway's face and figure in sharp criticism.

"Is the young person who advertised for teaching within?" asked Mrs. Greenway. "I would like to see her for a few minutes."

"Come in, mem," said Mrs. Carmichael, dryly, and held open the door.

Mrs. Greenway stepped over the threshold, and followed the woman into a dingy little sitting-room looking out to a back court.

"I'll tell Miss Dale to come, mem," said Mrs. Carmichael. "Please sit down."

But Mrs. Greenway preferred to stand and take a survey of the apartment. There was a fire in the grate, and a worn leather easy-chair drawn close to it. Across the arm lay a fine Shetland shawl, and an open book turned face downwards upon it. Mrs. Greenway eyed the shawl critically and lifted the book. It was a volume of Carlyle, which Mrs. Greenway knew by repute, though she had never read it. She laid it down, and, walking over to the piano, glanced at the titles of the pieces lying scattered on the case. She had but time to replace them hurriedly when the door opened suddenly, and she beheld on the threshold the figure of a young woman arrayed in shabby mourning, but before whom Mrs. Greenway felt herself shrink into insignificance. And yet the young woman spoke with appropriate humility and respect.

"I am the person who advertised for teaching, madam," she said, in her clear, musical tones. "Will you please be seated?"

Mrs. Greenway took a chair, and looked in silence upon the girl's face, which, though not beautiful, was yet the most striking she had ever seen. There was nothing of the shabby-genteel young lady about her; she was a lady, Mrs. Greenway's perception told her at once.

"I came in answer to your advertisement," she said at length. "But I am afraid you might not consider my situation worth your acceptance. There are four little girls to be taught, and I require the person I engage to overlook their wardrobes, and superintend the music and French lessons of my second daughter, who is sixteen."

"May I ask how you would remunerate?" inquired Miss Dale.



"I would prefer a resident governess, of course, to whom I should pay twenty-five pounds a-year," said Mrs. Greenway, feeling painfully conscious of the meagreness of the sum. "If you board outside the salary will be thirty-five pounds."

"I would prefer to reside in the house, madam," answered Miss Dale; "and if you are satisfied with my accomplishments I shall very gladly accept the salary you offer. I can teach thorough English and French, German also if desired, painting in oil and water colours, and good music."

"That is quite sufficient, Miss—Miss——"

"My name is Barbara Dale," said the young woman quietly.

"Well, Miss Dale, I presume you will be able to furnish me with a reference from your last employer?"

"I have not taught before, madam," said Miss Dale; "but I can give you a reference if you desire it." She moved over to a workbox on the side table, unlocked it, and took from thence a folded paper which she handed in silence to Mrs. Greenway. That lady glanced over it carelessly and looked to see the name at the foot. It was Doctor Guest, Little Wymar Rectory.

"That is quite sufficient," she said. "But I shall not trouble Doctor Guest. I like you, Miss Dale. May I consider that you have accepted my terms?"

Miss Dale bowed.

"Thank you, madam, I did not expect such a ready confidence," she said very gently.

Then Mrs. Greenway rose, and took her card case from her bag. Miss Dale read the name upon the card—Mrs. Alfred Greenway, 5 Hill Square, St. John's Wood.

"Will you come as soon as possible, Miss Dale? It is some little time since my last governess left through ill-health, and my girls are in sad want of some one to look after them."

"I shall come on Monday, Mrs. Greenway," said Miss Dale, lifting her eyes to the lady's face. "And I thank you that you have spared me the necessity of seeking further for my daily bread."

A curious look crossed the face of Mrs. Greenway, and she answered with unwonted softness—

"I hope you will feel at home in my house, Miss Dale. I am conscious that the remuneration I offer is very poor indeed. But it is all my means will permit me to spare in that way."

"It is enough for me," returned Miss Dale. "And I think we will be mutually satisfied with each other. I shall do my duty, Mrs. Greenway."

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Greenway. Then they shook hands, and Mrs. Carmichael came to show the lady out. Then she returned to the sitting-room with an anxious look on her face.

"Will she dae, Miss Barbara?" she asked, her tongue betraying her Scotch nationality. "Will she dae, my bairn, and hae ye made a bargain wi' her?"

"Yes, Elspet. Twenty-five pounds a-year and board," answered Miss Dale, "and there are five pupils to instruct."

"It's better than naething, but it's no muckle," she muttered, adding under her breath, "especially for an Ogilvie o' Dunire."





## CHAPTER IV.

### LITTLE CROSSES.



SO Miss Dale became governess at No. 5 Hill Square, St. John's Wood, and in a short time wrought a marvellous change in the young Greenways. She was firm with them, but very gentle. She brooked no disregard of her authority, but she did not punish after the manner of others of her class. It was the victory of a strong will over weaker ones, and Mrs. Greenway saw the governess exact implicit obedience without trouble, when she, the mother, had little or no control.

Miss Dale's sharp eyes saw through all the outside show in No. 5, and she pitied Mrs. Greenway with a vast pity. She was a great help to the wearied, anxious mother in many ways, and unconsciously Mrs. Greenway began to lean upon her children's governess, and to treat her with more confidence than she bestowed upon her own daughter Julia.

Barbara Dale disliked and despised Julia Greenway, and altogether ignored her existence. If compelled to speak to her, she did so courteously, but she never voluntarily sought her. Miss Greenway chose to assume a condescending and patronising demeanour towards the governess, which only amused but did not irritate Barbara Dale. Then, when Julia saw how completely Miss Dale considered her beneath her notice or contempt, the mean, small, jealous nature rose in rebellion, and did its utmost to render Barbara's life a burden to her. She did not succeed, though she could at times send a stray shot home, which would bring the bright carmine to Barbara's face.

Between Miss Dale and Bessie Greenway there sprang up a

warm affection ; and, upon the whole, the governess was very happy.

Mrs. Greenway evinced no curiosity regarding Miss Dale's antecedents, and never sought to break through the barrier of reserve with which Barbara encompassed herself.

But Julia was not so considerate. She would intrude upon Miss Dale at all times, and ask questions which Barbara sometimes found it difficult to parry without being actually rude to the daughter of her employers.

"That's a lovely ring you wear," said Miss Greenway one afternoon, finding the governess alone by the schoolroom fire. "Are you engaged, Miss Dale?"

"No," said Barbara, smiling a little, but added nothing to satisfy Miss Greenway's curiosity.

"Let me see it, will you?" was the next question.

Barbara slipped it from her finger, and gave it to the inquisitive damsel, thinking it better to let her have her way in such a small matter.

"What is that in the inside, Miss Dale?" asked Julia, holding it up to the light. "Is it French, or German, or Spanish?"

"It is a Scotch motto, Miss Julia," answered Barbara quietly.

"How awfully funny! Where did you get it? It just fits me exactly. It is just too lovely for you to wear," said Julia flippantly, and held up her hand to watch the flashing of the diamond.

"Let me have it, please. It never leaves my finger, and ought not to have done so now," said Miss Dale.

Julia took it off, and tossed it into her lap.

"If you didn't get that from some lover or other, I don't know how you came by it," she said with cool impertinence. "Governesses don't often wear diamond rings!"

Miss Dale took up the book on her lap, and fixed her eyes on it, thus ignoring Miss Greenway's speech and presence altogether.

"It is so odd, too, that you don't seem to have any relations, or anything," continued Miss Greenway, incensed by Miss Dale's behaviour. "If I were ma, I'd have inquiries made."

No answer whatsoever made Miss Dale, but her lip twitched. She could bear with Miss Greenway at times, but her heart had been stirred that day by many memories, and her endurance was slipping from her.

"I know well enough that you're not the common sort that

go out as governesses—shopkeepers' daughters, and the like," went on Miss Greenway, tapping her dainty satin slipper on the fender, and fixing her grey eyes mercilessly on the face of the governess. "The question arises, what are you? what's your story? I intend to find it out, Miss Dale."

Miss Dale looked up from her book, and spoke a few words in a very low voice, but so decidedly that Miss Greenway stopped in her careless tapping on the fender.

"Be good enough to leave the schoolroom, Miss Greenway; I am not aware that you have any right to intrude upon me here, or to disturb me at my work."

Very red grew Miss Greenway's face. "Oh, indeed; you are to be the mistress of the house, I suppose," she said spitefully. "I see how you are sneaking round papa and mamma, till you have got them to think you an angel in disguise. Mamma holds you up to me every day as an example of every virtue woman can possess. I don't say much, but I'm biding my time, Barbara Dale, and I'll pay you out for it."

So saying, Miss Julia gathered up her silken skirts and bounced out of the room. Miss Dale smiled a little in a tired way, and went on with her book. Miss Greenway's explosion had not aroused anything but amusement in her mind. Presently Mrs. Greenway entered the schoolroom with a half-finished frock over her arms.

"Just tell me how you would put on this trimming, Miss Dale," she said; "you always know just how a thing ought to go."

Barbara shut her book, and went over to the window to give her opinion.

"What has Julia been saying to you, Miss Dale? I heard her tongue going a minute ago," asked Mrs. Greenway.

"She was putting a few plain questions to me, Mrs. Greenway, and, because I did not think fit to answer satisfactorily, she poured the vials of her wrath on my head," said Miss Dale. "Julia and I cannot agree, Mrs. Greenway," she added with a little laugh.

"Don't stand any impertinence from her, Miss Dale," said Mrs. Greenway emphatically. "She has neither sense nor shame sometimes. Be very sharp with her, and never mind her when you can help it."

Barbara was silent, while her skilful fingers fastened the trimmings gracefully and effectively on Bessie's gown.

"There, I think that looks very nice," she said when it was done.

"Yes, it is nice," said Mrs. Greenway. "My dear, you are a great help to me. I am very glad a happy chance brought you to me."

Miss Dale looked up into the anxious face with a quick glance of gratitude.

"Thank you," she said very gently.

"I get so sick of this struggle sometimes, child," said Mrs. Greenway, "trying to live on three hundred a-year as if I had a thousand. It'll kill me by-and-by."

"Dear Mrs. Greenway, give it up," said Barbara, impulsively. "Begin a new life quietly, which will not tax and strain your resources, and worry you as your present one does."

Mrs. Greenway sighed and shook her head.

"Easily said, Miss Dale, but old habits are difficult to cast aside, and it is not pleasant to come down in the eyes of the world."

The world again, thought Barbara Dale. Ay, it was a hard world in the experience of many besides herself. When Mrs. Greenway left the room she sat down by the fire again, and fell to dreaming of the future. It was three months since she had come to St. John's Wood, and she was growing very tired of her occupations and surroundings.

She was not born to be a teacher. The work was intolerably irksome to her, though she performed it unflinchingly, and with a good measure of success.

She was impatient, too, of witnessing the constant struggle of the Greenways to appear other than they were; weary of formal dinner and tea parties which Mrs. Greenway deemed a necessary part of the farce of keeping up appearances; sick of the life for which she was so unfitted. But she did not feel yet that she could begin the work she intended to pursue by-and-by, and it was possible that a change into another family might be a worse thing rather than a better. So in the meantime she would remain in No. 5, teach the young idea how to shoot, and help Mrs. Greenway to make gowns.

Her head dropped on her hand, and she watched the flashing of the diamond in her ring, while drops as bright as the precious stone trembled on her eye-lashes. At times there came home to Barbara a terrible sense of her desolation; in all the world none thought kindly or lovingly of her, save perhaps

the fair-faced daughter of a southern rectory, who was forbidden to have the name of Dale upon her lips.

"Barbara Dale, you are a fool," she said bitterly and petulantly. "What have you to do with love; it is fame you have bound yourself to win, and perhaps when you stand on the high places of the earth there may be found one heart who will care for you—for yourself—till then be content, and do not waste time in vain longing and regret."

"Can I have my music now, Miss Dale," asked Bessie's gentle voice in the doorway. "There is about twenty minutes before the children come up to tea."

"Yes, Bessie, come away, I am idling here, my dear," said Miss Dale, and rising she drew up the blind to let in all the fading light of the February afternoon. Bessie opened the old piano and lifted her music from the rack.

"What shall I take first?" she asked, and raised her eyes inquiringly to the face of her governess.

"You have been crying, Miss Dale," she said quickly.

"Yes, my dear, the strongest of us have our weak moments. Come, or the twenty minutes will be gone before we get begun."

Bessie seated herself on the stool, and played the prelude to her piece. She became conscious by-and-by that Miss Dale had moved away from her side, and when she looked round she saw her standing by the mantelpiece looking into the fire.

"Go on, Bessie, I hear you quite well," said the governess quietly. So Bessie played on to the end, and then rose without seeking another exercise. Going over to the hearth, she laid her soft young arm about Miss Dale's shoulder, and bent her sweet eyes on the tired, sad face.

"Dear Miss Dale, I am afraid you are very unhappy," she whispered. "I am so sorry for you always when I look at this," she said, pointing to the crape on her dress. "Was it some one you loved very much?"

"I had a father and mother who loved me as yours love you, Bessie, and I have lost them. I had a brother, too, whom I loved, and I have lost him also."

"Is he dead, too, Miss Dale?"

"No, Bessie. Perhaps, when you grow up to be as old as I am, you will begin to learn that there are things worse than death."

Bessie was silent, neither understanding nor caring to ask what she meant.

Then Miss Dale took her face in both her hands and kissed it once very fondly.

"Take that, Bessie, because I love you, and because you remind me so of one very dear to me. God bless you, and give you a sweet and happy life to the very end. Now I am going out to the gardens for a little while to rid myself of a wretched headache. You will look after the schoolroom tea to-night, Bessie."

"Of course I will. And don't hurry back, Miss Dale," said Bessie, with affectionate solicitude; "I'll begin the lessons too."

"Thank you," was all Miss Dale answered, but the tone in which the words were uttered was reward sufficient to the heart of Bessie Greenway. Miss Dale retired to her own room, and put on her bonnet with restless fingers. She could not understand why she should feel so nervously excited; her nerves were strung to the highest pitch, and yet the day had been like other days, drearily monotonous, relieved only by Julia's sharp tongue, which, however, had only momentarily ruffled Miss Dale's composure.

As she passed down-stairs Julia came out of the drawing-room, and regarded the governess with haughty surprise.

"Are you going *out*, Miss Dale?" she said sharply. "It is the children's tea hour."

Miss Dale passed down-stairs without so much as answering Miss Greenway by a backward glance. In her quiet way she showed very effectively that she regarded no authority in the house save that of Mrs. Greenway.

At the outer door she encountered Mr. Greenway on his return from business.

"Going for a mouthful of fresh air, eh?" he said in his mild, genial way. "That's right; you need it, my dear; you are paler than you ought to be."

Miss Dale smiled and nodded to him, and passed out into the clear fine air, her heart bounding to feel the caress of the boisterous wind of spring.

How sweet it was! how refreshing and life-giving after the close atmosphere of the dingy schoolroom. She crossed the street, and entered the gardens through the little gate which was the exclusive property of the inmates of No. 5.



There was not the same free, wild loveliness which had gladdened her eyes so often in the woods of Little Wymar, but there was green grass in the miniature forest, and budding flowers, and green trees, beginning already to be tinged greenly by the mild sunshine of a new year's spring. She took off her hat when she was hidden from view of the windows, and let the wind toss her hair and play upon her aching brows.

"I wonder am I going to be ill," she said to herself, and the very thought of a sick-bed, tended by any of the Greenways, made her feel impatient and rebellious.

The wind charmed away the pain, by-and-by, and she began to feel strangely light of heart.

The twilight fell quickly after the red sunset, and it was nearly dark when she bethought herself of returning home. As she passed out of the little gate again she saw a hackney carriage drive rapidly away from the door of No. 5. Wondering slightly who or what it had brought to the Greenways, she knocked at the door. In the hall there stood a gentleman's portmanteau, with a heavy overcoat flung across it, and a great hum of talk was issuing from the dining-room. As she passed the half-open door she glanced in, and saw reflected in the mirror above the mantel a face which had been in her thoughts not many minutes before, the handsome, evil face of Jasper Leigh.



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## CHAPTER V.

### EQUAL TO THE OCCASION.



OR a moment Barbara Dale stood absolutely still, thinking she must be dreaming. But presently she heard him speak in the smooth, false tones she remembered well—"Yes, I have not been in London for nearly six months, Aunt Helen," he said. "My business does not often call me in this direction, but I took a fancy to see you all, so I came off to surprise you." She did not stop to hear Mrs. Greenway's reply, but fled up to her own room, astonishing a domestic whom she encountered on the stair.

"You're in plenty of time, Miss Dale," she ventured to say. "I'm just going to infuse the dining-room tea."

Miss Dale did not look as if she had heard her, but passed into her own chamber and shut the door.

She sat down there in the grey darkness, and tried to collect her thoughts. Surely it was a strange, merciless fate which had brought Jasper Leigh across her path so soon. His coming could have but one meaning, of course—to persecute her with his old attentions, and, when repulsed, to take his petty revenge. He had not said so in so many words, but she knew the man—none better—and there was no doubt of his intention in her mind.

What should she do? The impulse uppermost in her mind was to flee from No. 5, and place miles between herself and Jasper Leigh. But she was no coward, and after the first shock of nervous surprise was over she rose very quietly, and laid aside her bonnet and jacket.

Then she poured some water into the basin to wash her face and hands, and just then there came a light tap at the door.

"May I come in, Miss Dale?" asked Bessie.

"Yes; just come and light my gas for me, Bessie, I have stayed too long out, and must hurry with my dressing," returned Miss Dale, in her usual composed way; and Bessie entered, suspecting nothing.

"There is plenty of time," she said. "Did you hear that Cousin Jasper had come from Great Wymar quite unexpectedly? so tea is delayed a little."

"I saw a portmanteau in the lobby, Bessie," said Miss Dale, beginning to brush her hair; "but I did not know you had a Cousin Jasper in Great Wymar."

"Oh, did you not!" echoed Bessie in surprise. "Well, I thought mamma or Julia would have told you. He is a very clever man, I think; but I don't like Cousin Jasper, Miss Dale."

"Why do you dislike him?" asked Miss Dale, curious to hear what the answer would be.

"I can't tell. His eyes make me cold when he looks at me. If I said that to Julia she would scold me dreadfully. She thinks Cousin Jasper perfection in everything. Just look at his eyes, Miss Dale, when you go down, and see if I am not right."

"You are a very fanciful child, Bessie," said Miss Dale, but her face was averted when she spoke. None knew better than she how true was the description.

"How very nice you look, Miss Dale. I'm so glad you went out, you have got such a nice, bright colour in your cheeks," said Bessie in her simple way. "I am quite sure I never saw you look so nice before."

Miss Dale laughed.

"Run away now, Bessie, I shall be down just in a few minutes," she said, and when Bessie left the room she walked over to the dressing-table and took a deliberate survey of herself.

Bessie had spoken truly; she did look well, for her cheeks were burning, and her eyes flashing with excitement. Yet she was outwardly calm. At that moment the tea-bell rang, and she lowered the gas and went away down-stairs.

At the dining-room door she paused for a brief moment, for the rôle she had marked out for herself was not an easy one to perform.

Mrs. Greenway was already in her place, and at her right hand sat Jasper Leigh. Miss Dale came very quietly into the room, but Jasper's eyes lighted on her the moment she entered. He had been watching for her ever since he entered the house.

Mrs. Greenway rose—

"My children's governess, Miss Dale, Jasper," she said pleasantly. "Miss Dale, this is my nephew, Mr. Jasper Leigh, from Great Wymar."

Miss Dale bowed, without meeting the eyes of Jasper Leigh, and took her seat beside Mrs. Greenway.

Jasper took his cue from her, and for the present claimed no previous acquaintance with her. He talked busily to Mrs. Greenway and his cousin Julia, but ignored the governess, greatly to Bessie's disgust, and her sister's delight.

But once, when Barbara lifted her head to answer a question from Mrs. Greenway, she met his eyes. They were full of a meaning she read only too plainly, and she bit her lip till it bled. She was thankful when the meal was over, and she could escape up-stairs. Unless there was company in the house she had her evenings to herself, and she retired to her own room, devoutly hoping that Mrs. Greenway would not require her presence in the drawing-room that night.

"I don't think much of your treasure's appearance, Aunt Helen," said Jasper Leigh, when the door closed on the governess. "She must be better than she looks."

"I am surprised to hear you say so, Jasper," said Mrs. Greenway, in a displeased way. "I consider Miss Dale very handsome."

"Tastes differ, you see, ma," said Julia, with a simper. "I always considered Miss Dale a perfect fright."

"You are a fool, Julia," was the mother's unexpected and vigorous retort. It was a curious and painful thing to note the constant jarring between mother and daughter; neither had learned the lesson of forbearance; and with all her experience of life, Mrs. Greenway had not yet found the golden key to the hearts and wills of her children. Bessie was obedient, because it was her gentle nature to be so, but all the others were as unruly as the winds, consequently it was neither a happy nor a well-regulated household.

"Will you come up to the drawing-room, Cousin Jasper?" asked Julia, in her sweetest tones. "I hate the dining-room after tea, it gets so close and stuffy."

"Yes; but with your permission, Aunt Helen, I shall go up-stairs and change my coat. It is the old room, I fancy."

Mrs. Greenway nodded, and Jasper withdrew. On his way to the room on the third floor he very deliberately went along the corridor to the schoolroom and looked in, but it was

empty, for Miss Dale had taken the precaution to retire to her own apartment. He did not spend many minutes on his toilet, but joined his cousin in the drawing-room before she had settled herself in her most becoming attitude by the hearth.

"Come away, Cousin Jasper, and tell me what you have been doing with yourself in Great Wymar. There must be some other attraction besides business, I doubt," she said coquettishly.

Jasper Leigh smiled slightly, and looked at his cousin with considerable interest. She was certainly very pretty, but he entertained for her a species of contempt. She was as empty and frivolous as a woman could well be.

"I have been working hard, Julia, and you have been improving yourself. By Jove, you *are* pretty though."

"You flatter absurdly," said Julia with a laugh; but she was prodigiously delighted with the compliment.

"I was struck with your good looks in contrast to that guy of a governess," said Jasper adroitly. "Where did Aunt Helen pick her up?"

"In some questionable locality," said Julia, not weighing her words. "I positively hate her, Jasper. She's like a boa-constrictor, or something."

Jasper Leigh laughed outright.

"I am afraid your ideas of a boa-constrictor are rather hazy, Cousin Julia. Miss Dale appeared to me to be a very quiet, unobtrusive sort of a person."

"She's a sneak," said Julia viciously. "I don't like paragons, and that's what she sets up to be."

Jasper Leigh was heartily disgusted with his cousin's vulgarity, but made no sign of it.

"She is a mystery, too, in a way. Nobody knows anything about her—she has no relations or anything. I believe ma took her without a reference or a character. She has such airs, too: one would think she was a duchess at least."

"Perhaps she may be some day," put in Jasper Leigh, and in after years the memory of these idly-spoken words came back to him very vividly.

"She wears a ring, too, the like of which governesses should not wear. I'd like to know where she got it. I wish you'd try to find out something about her. You're a lawyer, Jasper, and it is your business to find out things."

"Perhaps I may unravel this mystery before I go away,

cousin," said Jasper. "Well, Aunt Helen, here we are discussing the governess yet."

"Is Miss Dale not here?" asked Mrs. Greenway, looking sharply round the room. "Oh, run up, Bessie, and tell her to come down. I would like you to hear her sing, Jasper. It is something wonderful."

"Mamma makes a perfect idol of the creature," whispered Julia under her breath.

Contrary to Jasper Leigh's expectation, Miss Dale returned to the drawing-room with her pupil, and sat down quietly at a side-table with her sewing.

For a little Mrs. Greenway talked to her nephew about family matters till he grew tired of the subject, and turned to Julia.

"Cousin Julia, do you still sing 'The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington?'" he asked. "I have a vivid remembrance of your performances of it when you were at school."

"Since Miss Dale came I have not been required to sing," returned Julia. "Mamma prefers her services to mine, naturally."

Jasper Leigh glanced curiously at the bent head of the governess, and saw a little smile rippling about the corners of her mouth. What a complete mistress she was of herself! He could not but admire her perfect self-possession and ease of manner in situations which would have upset the nervous systems of most women.

"Miss Dale," said Mrs. Greenway from the depths of her easy-chair, "just sing that song of Kingsley's, will you? I forget the name of it, but I want my nephew to hear it."

"Certainly, Mrs. Greenway," said the governess, and, folding up her work, went to the piano. Courtesy itself, Jasper Leigh was at her side in a moment adjusting the stool, and placing the music ready for her.

"Thank you," said Miss Dale, just as she would have said to the merest stranger.

Then she sang Kingsley's weird and beautiful words with so much pathetic sweetness that the tears chased each other down Mrs. Greenway's cheeks. Barbara's singing was peculiarly her own, and once heard would linger in the memory long.

Her fingers wandered restlessly up and down the keys when the song was done. For the moment the spell of the music shut out all else from her mind.

"So I have found you in a very unexpected corner, Barbara," whispered Jasper Leigh. "Fortune has favoured me so far."

Barbara played a little louder, but no change came upon the expression of her face.

"You are an inimitable actress, my dear, but it can't last. I have many things to say, which you must hear before I leave London."

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Greenway, I shall sing another song to you," said Miss Dale, in clear, steadfast tones. "I don't think you have heard it before."

Then, without waiting for an answer, she began—

"The world is fair, and life is new,  
Because the past has fled,  
Because in this strong heart of mine  
Old memories are dead.

And, though they come to me in dreams  
They cannot touch my heart;  
For in these sweeter, stronger days  
Sad memory has no part.

The past is dead; I have no fear,  
Because I have grown wise,  
And from these unremembered fires  
Dead ashes cannot rise."

"How very sweet and pretty," said Mrs. Greenway. "I have never heard it before, surely."

"No; the lines are *impromptu*, and set to a scrap of music I have not played for years," rejoined Miss Dale, with a clear, sweet laugh. "If you will permit me, I shall go up-stairs now, Mrs. Greenway. I have the children's exercises to correct for to-morrow."

Mrs. Greenway assented, and Mr. Leigh opened the door for the governess. As she passed out of the room her eyes met his in one glance of mocking defiance.

"Aunt Helen, your governess has a history," said Jasper Leigh, when he returned to the hearth; "and it is not an innocent one. I am astonished that, as Julia tells me, you should have engaged her without a reference."

"Julia is mistaken, Jasper," said Mrs. Greenway, coldly. "I have a very warm and flattering recommendation from a clergyman, whom, by-the-by, you ought to know, the Reverend Dr. Guest, rector of Little Wymar."

So, for the present, Jasper Leigh held his peace, and bided his time.



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE FIRST OF IT.



LESSONS began in the schoolroom at ten o'clock.

The following morning Miss Dale left the dining-room whenever breakfast was over, and came up to the schoolroom at half-past nine. The fire was but newly lighted, and the maid busy with the dusting, but the governess wrapped a shawl round her, and sat down on the end of the fender. Cold and discomfort were preferable to the ceaseless scrutiny of Mr. Leigh's eyes. The girl, apologising for being late that morning, made haste with her work and quitted the room. Then Miss Dale dropped her face down on her hands, and fell to wondering how long Jasper Leigh intended to remain in No. 5 Hill Square. In the middle of her meditation the door opened, and the object of her thoughts entered and closed it very carefully behind him.

"I have come, Barbara, to have a talk with you," he said, rubbing his hands together. "You are so sly, you know, in company, I can't get a word out of you."

She turned her back on him, and, leaning her arms on the mantel, bent her eyes on the kindling fire. She did not trouble to bid him leave her presence; it would be as well, nay better, to hear what he had to say, and what she might expect at his hands.

"I must compliment you a second time upon your admirable acting," he said, crossing round where he could see her face. "I would advise you, Barbara, to adopt the stage as a profession. It would pay you infinitely better than teaching my charming, but somewhat thick-headed, cousins."

Miss Dale neither spoke nor moved, and the long lashes



veiled the hazel eyes so that he could not see the expression in their depths.

"This can't go on, you know, Barbara," said Jasper Leigh, with a tone of impatience in his voice. "It is four months since you left Wymar; fully two since you came here. Only last week my cousin Julia dropped your name in one of her letters to me, and I came off at once, scarcely daring to hope fortune had favoured me so completely. Everything comes to those who wait. I have waited, and I intend to wait."

There was a moment's silence, then Miss Dale lifted her head and looked at him with clear, unfaltering, contemptuous eyes.

"Sir, I decline to renew any acquaintance I may have had with you in the past. I decline to recognise your right to address me as you are doing now, or in any way, save as a gentleman may speak to a stranger lady. I do not know how long you may intend to insult me with your presence in this house, but if you seek to speak to me again as you have done to-day I shall claim the protection of my employers."

Jasper Leigh smiled.

"Very good. I hear your pupils on the stair, and I am pledged to take my cousin to the Zoological Gardens, so I will bid you good morning," he said. "Miss Dale, I shall see you again."

All that forenoon Miss Dale's thoughts wandered from her work, and her pupils found her strangely indifferent to the manner in which their tasks were performed. Jasper Leigh took Julia to the Zoological Gardens, also to other places of interest in the City, which detained them in the City till the afternoon.

Miss Dale did not appear at the dinner-table, and in answer to several questions Mrs. Greenway mentioned that she did not feel well and had gone to lie down.

"Your governess does not look strong, Aunt Helen," said Jasper Leigh.

At that moment the shutting of the hall door caused Julia to rise and look out of the window.

"Gone to lie down has she, ma? There she is away out for her walk. I believe she keeps a daily appointment with some one, she goes out so regularly. The illness was only a pretence, as half her other behaviour is."

"Fresh air is good for headache, my dear," said Mr. Greenway mildly. Mrs. Greenway made no remark, not caring to bicker with Julia before her nephew, for whom she entertained a profound admiration and respect.

The subject was changed by Jasper, and the governess was mentioned no more.

"I forgot to wire some directions to my clerk when we were out, Julia," he said when dinner was over. "There will be a telegraph office near, I suppose."

"Yes, round the corner," returned Julia. "Don't stay long, Jasper; I want to try the duets we got to-day."

"All right, *ma chere*. I shall be double smart," he said carelessly, and left the house.

Instead, however, of following out Julia's directions about the telegraph office, he simply crossed the street and entered the gardens by the little gate which, being unlocked, told him it had admitted Miss Dale before him. It was growing dark, but it was wonderfully sweet and still and pleasant in the miniature park, and Jasper Leigh lit his cigar and strolled up and down the wide path near the gate, waiting complacently for the return of the governess. He did not venture very far, being afraid of missing her, and having the pleasure of vaulting the railing. He had not many minutes to wait, for presently he heard the light footfall approaching, and saw among the shadows the slight, graceful figure of the woman he had sworn to win.

He was a clever man in his way, but he was not clever enough to win Barbara Dale. He leaned up against the closed gate, took his cigar from his mouth, and, throwing it away, folded his arms, and looked at her where she stood.

"I said I would see you again, Barbara," he said, "and here I am. I have something to say to you. Will you walk a little way with me, and will you accept of my arm?"

"I will walk a little way with you, Mr. Leigh," said Miss Dale, quietly and clearly; "but, no, thanks, I shall not take your arm."

They turned together from the gate, and walked a few paces in silence. When they were fairly shadowed from observation by a clump of trees, she stood still again, and turned to him inquiringly. A weird, uncertain gleam of the chill February moonlight straggled through the bare boughs of the oak trees, and shone full upon her face. About her throat was the soft folds of a white wrap, which matched the hue of her cheek. She was deadly pale, but her eyes shone like stars.

"Will you tell me now, in as few words as you can, Jasper Leigh," she said, "why you persecute me in this way? What is it you require of me?"

"You know very well, Barbara," answered Jasper Leigh with

sudden passion in his voice, "I love you madly. I want you for my wife."

"I cannot be your wife," she answered faintly. "I do not love you. I have told you so before. Is it manly to annoy me in this manner? Is it right?"

"I care nothing for any of these things. I only know that I love you, and that I will never give you up," he said fiercely.

She leaned a moment against the trunk of a tree and covered her face with her hands.

But of what avail was it to appeal to the better nature of this man, who owned the sway of but one mad, hopeless passion he would neither curb nor strive to root out of his heart?

"I have given you my answer, Jasper Leigh," she said at length. "For the last time I repeat I do *not* love you, and can never be your wife."

"Listen to me, Barbara," he said passionately. "Do you think it is nothing to me to see you drudging over yonder like a common servant girl, though they call it by another name? I am a rich man, but I only care for money when I think of it as given to you. There is some good in me; you could foster it better than any other, you could make of me what you will. You would have no care. I would surround you with luxury, the like of which you never dreamed of. I will live but to make your life a summer day. Give me a chance, Barbara; you will never regret it."

She lifted her head and looked at him in silence for a moment. There *was* good in him, else he could never utter such words. When she spoke again her voice was very gentle but full of weariness.

"It cannot be," she repeated. "I am a woman who cannot say one thing and think another. We could not be happy, even if I loved you. Let me go now, taking with me the memory of the first really kind words you have spoken to me for many a day."

That moment's better impulse fled, and the evil nature of the man was roused again.

"I have humbled myself to you, Barbara Dale, as I shall never do to mortal woman again, but you will be the loser. Have you forgotten that you are in my power, Barbara?"

"In what way?" she asked haughtily, and began to move towards the gate.

"I have it in my power to throw you out of your present employment for one thing," he said.

"A power which you will probably exercise," she said with her hand upon the gate.

"Probably, if I think fit."

"Will it afford you such an intense satisfaction to see me deprived of my present means of existence?" she asked, looking at him fully under the light of the gas lamp.

"When I reflect that it is your own fault, yes," he answered. "You have chosen your own alternative."

"I despise you, and I am not afraid of you," she said, with a curious little smile. "And I am not quite sure that I do not pity you. Good-evening, Mr. Leigh; perhaps you will live to discover that it is not so easy to crush a woman, especially when that woman is Barbara Dale."

Miss Dale ran lightly up the steps, opened the door with her own key, while Mr. Leigh lit another cigar and continued his stroll up and down the pavement.

Miss Dale went straight to her own room, and began to take her garments from the wardrobe and contemplate her trunk, as if studying its capacity.

In the drawing-room Julia grew impatient at the piano, while Mrs. Greenway darned stockings to the music of Bessie's voice conning her geography lesson aloud.

Half an hour later Jasper Leigh came up to the drawing-room.

"Have I sinned beyond forgiveness, Julia?" he asked, lightly.

"You must have lost your way, Jasper," she said, petulantly.

"Not I; but the evening was pleasant, and I forgot. I'll try the duets after. Aunt Helen, is there a quiet corner in this lively house where you and I could be undisturbed for a little while? I'm going home to-morrow, and I want to talk to you."

Mrs. Greenway rose in surprise.

"Have you been getting into scrapes, Jasper, or are you going to be married?" she asked, pleasantly.

"None of these. My talk is not of myself, but it will be interesting, I promise you."

"Tell it here, Jasper," said Julia, eagerly.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Julia, but my secret is for Aunt Helen's ear alone," he answered, suavely.

"We can send your uncle up here, and get the dining-room for the discussion of this weighty secret," said Mrs. Greenway, with a laugh; and the two left the room. Not many minutes later Julia repaired to the dining-room door, and put her ear to the keyhole; but, being a very smart man, Jasper Leigh opened

the door suddenly and discovered her in the act. So she retired confusedly, and did not try eavesdropping again that night.

They were long closeted together in the dining-room, and when Julia heard the supper-tray being carried in she came down-stairs. The expression on her mother's face made her wonder what the nature of the communication had been. She looked as if she had received a great shock.

"Go up to Miss Dale's room, Sarah," she said to the maid, "and say that I do not expect her down-stairs to-night, and ask her if you can bring up anything to her."

"Very well, mum," said the girl. Then Mrs. Greenway took her place at the table, and the meal began.

Next morning Mrs. Greenway did not appear at breakfast, but sent a message bidding Julia come to her immediately the meal was past.

"Are you ill, ma?" inquired Julia when she went up to her mother's room.

"My head aches, and I feel tired, Julia, that's all. Was Miss Dale at breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Hand me my purse from the toilet drawer there."

In some surprise Julia obeyed, and watched her mother count out its contents.

"There isn't enough. Take my keys, Julia, and bring me a five-pound note from the lower drawer in the dressing-room wardrobe."

Julia brought it, wondering much what her mother wanted with so much money. It was neither the time for paying the servants' wages, nor for settling the monthly accounts.

"Ten pounds!" said Miss Greenway.

"Go up to the schoolroom, Julia, and give that to Miss Dale. Tell her it is a quarter's salary over and above, and that I expect her to leave this forenoon. You will make no remarks of your own, if you please."

"Mercy, ma, have you given Miss Dale her dismissal?" queried Julia in extreme surprise.

"That is her dismissal, Julia. You need ask no questions. Miss Dale will expect it, I fancy, and will express no surprise. Tell her that I cannot see her before she goes."

"Did Jasper tell you some queer things about Miss Dale, mamma?"

"Go away, I tell you, Julia, and do as you are bid," said

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Mrs. Greenway with asperity. "Though you stand there till doomsday I'll tell you nothing about it."

Julia discreetly withdrew to the schoolroom, where she found Miss Dale alone. She laid the money down upon the table, and looked boldly into Miss Dale's face.

"That's your quarter's salary over and a'bove, ma says, and you're to leave this house as soon as you can. She says you'd know what it is for, and that she can't see you. That's all."

The red blood mounted to neck and cheek and brow, and Barbara's lip twitched.

She lifted the five-pound note from the table, and pushed the rest towards Miss Greenway.

"Say to your mamma, Miss Greenway," she said quite quietly, "that I can't possibly take what is not my due, and that I consider this note ample payment for the time I have laboured here. Tell her I am not surprised, save that, perhaps, I did not quite expect she would be so quick to visit the sins of others upon an innocent head."

So saying the governess quitted the room, and for a wonder Julia forgot to be triumphant. Even in her humiliation the governess had the best of it.

Before an hour had gone, Miss Dale quitted No. 5, and drove away in a hansom, leaving a dumfounded household behind her.

Jasper Leigh had left the house before her, and when the cab drove round the corner into the open street he hailed another, and bade the man follow at a safe distance.

It was a long drive, but it came to an end at last, and Jasper Leigh saw the cab draw up at the little cottage in the Brixton Road.

He dismissed his own cab, and lounged into a tobacco shop nearly opposite.

"Who lives in the house with the green blinds across the way?" he asked the girl, after making a liberal purchase.

"A Mrs. Carmichael, a widow, I think, sir; she takes lodgers—looking for apartments, sir?"

"Ah, yes, but I don't know if it would suit, thanks; good-morning," he answered carelessly, and sauntered out of the shop.

"Carmichael—heathenish name; Brixton Road. I shan't forget that," he said to himself, and hailed a cab to convey him back to Hill Square. That same day Jasper Leigh returned to his business in Great Wymar.



## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LION IN THE PATH.



MERCY me, Miss Barbara, bairn, it's never you!" exclaimed Elspet Carmichael, when she came from the back premises to answer the knock at the front door.

"Yes, it's me, Elspet. Let me in with my belongings, and I'll tell you all about it presently," said Miss Dale having deposited her trunk in the lobby, and paid and dismissed the cabman. When the door was shut Elspet turned suddenly and took the young lady in her arms.

"Ye are welcome hame, my bairn," she said, with a smile and a tear. "Noo, come awa' ben to the kitchen an' warm yersel'. Ye've left yer place, I see."

Miss Dale followed her into the snug and comfortable kitchen, sat down in her favourite corner, on the end of the shining fender, and began to draw off her gloves.

"Yes, Elspet, I've left Mrs. Greenway's. I'll tell you why by-and-by," she said slowly; "and I've made up my mind not to go out teaching any more, Elspet."

"Very well, my deary, it wasna wi' my wull ye went, and it'll be wi' my wull ye'll bide, sure enough," said Elspet, bustling to get out materials to make a pudding for the dinner.

"I was just afraid you might have taken a boarder since I was here," said Miss Dale; but Elspet shook her head.

"There was a chap here yestreen wha wad fain hae cam' here, but I couldna be bothered tae think o't, though he wad hae paid me weel. It was a Providence, my lamb, for gin ye're no gaun oot ye'll need the rooms, ye see."

"Yes, Elspet, I shall need to be very quiet. I am going to earn my living in a new way."

"Are ye?" said Elspet, her eyes very round with interest. "There's nae need, as lang's my faither's bawbees last, and they're no near the end yet."

"I owe too much to you already, Elspet," said Miss Dale with glistening eyes; "but if this new venture succeeds, I'll be rich and famous in a little while."

"An' what is't ye're gaun tae dae, micht I speer?" said Elspet.

"I am going to write a book," answered Miss Dale.

Then, indeed, Elspet's face fell, for her memory went back to the day when William Dale laboured with his pen day and night, and yet had never reached the fortune he hoped and worked for.

Barbara divined the unspoken thought.

"I know what you are thinking, Elspet," she said soberly. "But I am not going to write quite the same kind of books that papa wrote. They were very clever, but they could never be popular."

"Weel, maybe ye ken better nor me," said Elspet, still doubtfully.

"At anyrate I am going to try, Elspet, and I'm going out this very day to buy paper, pens, and ink."

"Weel, bairn, ye'll listen tae me, noo," said Elspet, wiping her floury hands, and turning to face the girl. "I've nae objections tae ye tryin', if it'll keep ye frae wearyin'; but directly I see ye beginnin' tae look as your puir faither did when he first took ill wi' the trouble fouk tak' that write books, I'll burn the hale thing, an' empty the ink bottles i' the gutter. I'll dae't, mind, though ye should scold like a Hottentot. Ye're the last o' them I hae lo'ed sae weel, an' I'll look after ye as long as I leeve."

"God bless you for your love for me, Elspet," said Miss Dale, rising to kiss the cheek of her faithful friend. Then she went away into the sitting-room, and through it into the little bedchamber which had been familiar to her so long. She felt an unutterable sense of peace and rest steal into her heart—a feeling known by all who return home after a long absence. She looked affectionately at the shabby, old-fashioned furnishings, and touched with tender fingers the cheap little ornaments on the mantel, for they were all old, old friends. But Elspet was



calling that the dinner was ready, so she laid aside her hat and jacket, and went back to the kitchen.

By-and-by, when the meal was past, dishes washed, and the place redd up, as Elspet termed it, they sat down together to talk matters over at length.

"Well, Elspet," said Miss Dale, "Mrs. Greenway dismissed me because she heard about Robert."

"Did she? an' she'll ca' hersell a Christian, nae doot, an' pray in the kirk on Sundays?"

"You cannot blame her altogether, Elspet," said Barbara with a sigh. "It might not be pleasant for her to have the sister of a felon in her house; yet I believe she was sorry to send me away. She liked me, I know."

"She couldna help that, bairn."

Miss Dale laughed.

"Everybody does not look at me with your eyes, Elspet. Mrs. Greenway's eldest daughter certainly did not."

"That's aye the way," said Elspet. "I wonder hoo the leddy found oot about Robert. Did she say?"

"No; but I know very well. I cannot tell you that to-day, Elspet," said Miss Dale. Then there was a little silence.

"Every time I think on't, bairn, it's waur tae thole," said Elspet, with a catch in her voice. "Puir Robert, puir misguided laddie! It was a mercifu' God took yer mither awa', although he thocht it sae bitter that winter day."

Barbara sat silent, with her face hidden in her hands.

"It was bad company, wasn't it, bairn? He was sae fond o' his joke, an' sae easily led."

"Yes, Elspet, that was it. He got in with a set in Great Wymar who led him into all kinds of wickedness. He had not sufficient means to pay his way, so appropriated what was not his own," said Miss Dale. "Then there was the exposure and the punishment, you know."

"I canna thole'd," repeated Elspet in a choking voice. "An' him come o' an Ogilvie o' Dunire. I'll aye blame mysel' for being persuaded tae hide in London when you gaed tae the country, but it was dune for the best. But I micht hae keepit him in check, or gi'en him money when he needit it. Puir laddie! he hasna your strength o' mind. We'll need tae be guid till him when he comes oot o' the penitentiary—that I should hae tae say the word wi' an Ogilvie's name."

Barbara made no answer. At times she rebelled against the

constant shadow her brother's sin cast across her path—she had tried to learn more of that charity which suffereth long and is kind.

Before the darkening, she went out to make the purchases necessary for her contemplated literary work.

Elspet looked at the pile of manuscript paper, and shook her head.

"Ye'll be by wi't, bairn, lang afore the half o' that's written," she said solemnly. "But I'll keep my word, dinna be feared."

The writing was begun that night, and in a few days there was a considerable diminution in the quantity of blank paper.

By-and-by there began many weary journeys to the City, but the young aspirant for literary fame could find no publisher willing even to look at her story. But there came a day when Elspet, watching anxiously from the window, saw her return without the little packet under her arm.

"I'm dead tired, and hungry as well," she said when she was within the hospitable door; "but I don't care, for I've got a publisher at last."

Elspet looked pleased because Miss Dale did, and presently she asked a hesitating question—

"I suppose ye ken aboot thae things. D'ye think yer book's worth a lot o' money?"

"Elspet, I *know* it is," said Barbara, and stood looking out of the window a moment in silence.

"If you think sae, it'll be a' richt," said Elspet cheerfully.

"Come awa' tae yer tea, then, and hear *my* news."

Barbara looked round in surprise.

"I've haen a veesitor the day, bairn, askin' very parteeklar for you."

Barbara's face flushed, then grew pale again, and a great fear gathered in her eyes.

"Who could come here asking for me?" she asked sharply.

"I have no friends in the wide world, Elspet, except yourself."

"Dinna be vext, deary; he *was* a freen'. He said he cam' frae—what d'ye ca' the place? Wymar, or something, an' that he had kent ye a' weel there. He said he had been seekin' for ye a lang time. He was a weel-faured, fair-spoken chield. I doot he's mair than a freen' tae ye, Miss Barbara," said Elspet, slyly.

"Did you answer all his questions?" asked Miss Dale.

"Yes, I telt him aboot Mrs. Greenway's; he kent aboot Robert, ye see, already, an' he was very angry like, an' said she was nae leddy," said Elspet, innocently; "an' I telt him aboot the book writin', an' he was sae interestit. I had a fine crack wi' him a' thegither, bairn."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"No, I clean forgot tae speir, but he said he was a lawyer, and said he was comin' back sune tae see you, but that I wasna tae tell ye, as he wantit to gie ye a pleasant surprise. Frae that I jaloused he was mair nor a freen'—ye nicht hae telt me aboot him afore, I think, bairn. Mercy, what's up noo?"

Barbara pushed back her untouched cup, and rose.

"You love me very much, I know, Elspet, but you have been very indiscreet to-day," she said, with quivering lip. "Do you know that man was an enemy to my father, and Robert, and me, and that it was he who turned Mrs. Greenway against me. I thought I was safe from him here."

Elspet's cup fell from her hand, shivering to atoms on the floor.

"'Od sake, yer enemy! an' him sae fair spoken?"

"Yes, and we will need—at least, I will need—to go away from here, for I cannot meet him again. Do you understand?"

"The villain! oh, the scoundrel!" said Elspet; "if I'd only kent I'd agi'en him a double quick mairch oot o' my door. We'll leave this place sure enough. I'll gie up the hoose the nicht, an' pay the rent till Whitsunday. Tae think my claverin' tongue should hae brocht sic a trouble on ye, my bairn."

Barbara stole away into the other room, and began to pace restlessly up and down the floor.

Jasper Leigh seemed to be her Nemesis. Would he haunt her life, and cast a shadow across her path in the end? she wondered, not guessing how many times she would need to ask these questions in days to come.




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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE KEY TO EL DORADO.

N the stately drawing-room of an aristocratic mansion in Harley Street sat a lady, deep in the pages of a new novel. That she was absorbingly interested in it was evident from her attitude, and the rapt expression on her face.

She was an elderly woman, not handsome, but striking in appearance, and having about her that indescribable, inimitable something which at once proclaims noble birth. Her dark hair, slightly tinged with grey, was coiled simply behind her head, but she wore no cap or other adornment upon it. Her face was thin, and her features strongly marked, her eyes black as sloes, and piercingly keen. Her mouth was the distinctive feature of the face. It was a shrewd, clever, intellectual mouth, but there were indications of tenderness about it too. In her best moments her mouth was beautiful. Her attire was rich and costly, and in faultless taste. So much for her outward appearance. It was a touching story surely, for as she read, the tears were running down her cheeks, and yet she was not one of those women whose tears can flow at every trivial touch of the feelings.

Presently she was disturbed by the opening of the door, and the voice of her servant announcing visitors.

"Lady and Miss Severne."

She rose, with a slight gesture of impatience, laid aside her book, and turned to greet her visitors.

As may have been surmised, they were mother and daughter, a fact which was instantly proclaimed by the resemblance between them.

The term which could most fittingly be applied to them was simply aristocratic.

The mark of their high lineage, of their faultless breeding, and of their immeasurable pride, was observable in their stately carriage, in every gesture, in every poise of the head, in every curve of the lip. Their manners were marked by that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

"Dear Lady Bassett," said the elder lady, "we have missed you at various places of late, and, hearing that you were indisposed, have come to learn for ourselves the cause of your desertion of society."

Lady Bassett laughed a pleasant, ringing laugh.

"Society must frame some plausible excuse, I suppose; but the truth is, Lady Severne, I had grown insufferably weary of ball and rout, and soiree and kettle-drum, and was trying complete retirement as an antidote."

"That must not be told in Gath, Lady Bassett," said Frances Severne, with something approaching to a smile wreathing her cold lips. "So universal a favourite as you must not desert society."

"You talk nonsense, Frances," replied Lady Bassett serenely. "Spring has come upon us with chilly footsteps, surely. I fancied the room cold this afternoon, and I see you are buried in furs."

"Yes; it is cold. We went down to Mount Severne last week, intending to remain a week, but Adrian prophesied a snow-storm," replied Miss Severne. "So we took flight back to town after spending Sunday."

"Is Adrian quite well? I have not seen him of late."

"Yes," responded Lady Severne. "But he has neither time nor thought for anything at present but his Parliamentary duties," responded the proud mother, her face kindling at the mere mention of her son's name. "Adrian's constituents will never have reason to complain of his inattention to their interests."

"Adrian was always a good boy," said Lady Bassett, a rare tenderness creeping about her mouth. "And he is making his mark very rapidly. I hear his name mentioned in certain circles sometimes, Lady Severne. I am expecting to live to see Adrian Severne a ruling power in the State."

Such words from Lady Bassett meant much, and the face of Adrian Severne's mother glowed with pride.

"What have you been reading, Lady Bassett?" asked Frances

Severne, lifting the book from the table. "‘Ambition!’ Oh, this is the book Adrian was speaking of this morning, mamma."

Lady Severne stretched out her hand for it, put up her eyeglass, and glanced at the title-page.

"The author's name is not given, only the initial letter B., I see," she said carelessly.

"A new writer, I think Adrian said. Have you read the book, Lady Bassett?"

"I am in the middle of it; I was crying over it when you came in," said Lady Bassett, in an odd voice. "It is certainly a remarkable book, and, I am sure, the work of a man's hand. There is such bold delineation of character in it, and such powerful description of scenery. I am greatly interested in it, and would give much to know its author. Did Adrian like it?"

"He was quite excited over it," said Frances, with a little mirthless laugh. "He said it was the best novel of this or any other season, and, like you, is wild with curiosity about its author. He also said that it is creating quite a sensation in literary circles."

Lady Bassett looked intensely interested.

"I see I am losing myself remaining shut up in a shell," she laughed. "You will be going to Mrs. Granby's ball on the 18th?"

"Yes."

"I shall see you there, if not before, and there, if anywhere, we shall learn the secret of 'Ambition.' Must you go? Good afternoon; remember me to Adrian."

She shook hands with them both; to very few, indeed, did Lady Bassett vouchsafe a warm salutation; and the representatives of the house of Severne took their leave.

Lady Bassett resumed her reading, and finished the book before she slept that night. It moved her to the very depths; its simple, unstudied pathos went straight to her heart, and in some strange manner the story brought back to the childless widow the memory of golden hours in the springtime of her days—before her life had been robbed of all its sweetness. Hers was not the only heart which "Ambition" had touched, though not a month had elapsed since its publication.

The following morning Lady Bassett's well-known greys bore their mistress in her brougham to Paternoster Row, and in obedience to a touch from the driver, paused in front of the publishing house of Messrs. Warren, Grimshaw, & Co. She alighted, and going into the office, inquired for Mr. Warren.

She was at once shown into the private room of the head of the firm, which was occupied only by Mr. Warren. He was an elderly man of somewhat stern and forbidding manner, which did not unbend even before the rank of his visitor.

"What can I do for your ladyship?" he asked, politely.

Lady Bassett put back her veil and looked straight into the publisher's face.

"I have called to speak about 'Ambition,' which I believe you have published."

A curious dry smile crept to Mr. Warren's lips, but he merely bowed, and waited for her further remarks.

"In common with many others in London and elsewhere I am curious about its author," she said, with a charming smile. "If, in asking who he is, I seek to intrude upon a desired privacy, pray tell me so, and I will go away again."

"You have been pleased with 'Ambition,' Lady Bassett?" asked the publisher, inquiringly.

"I consider it the finest and most remarkable novel I have ever read in my life, sir, and I am acquainted with all the standard works of fiction."

The publisher rubbed his hands together, and the smile grew broader on his lips.

"Pardon the question, Lady Bassett, but is it generally thought in the circle in which you move that the author of 'Ambition' is a man?"

"So I understand. Are you pledged to secrecy, Mr. Warren, or may I ask who wrote it?"

"No, I am not pledged to secrecy, and I shall be happy to give you the address of the author of 'Ambition,'" returned the publisher, and, drawing a blank sheet of note-paper towards him, he wrote a few words on it and handed it to her ladyship—

"Miss Ogilvie, 34 Egbert Street, Holborn," she read aloud. "A woman! Impossible, Mr. Warren!"

"It is true. The author of what promises to be the most successful book which has been published is a woman,—what manner of woman you may learn for yourself by calling at the address I have given you."

"Thanks for your courtesy, and many thanks for your suggestion, Mr. Warren. Good morning," said Lady Bassett.

The publisher escorted his aristocratic caller to her carriage, and when he heard her order given to the footman he returned to his sanctum muttering to himself—

"The old story once again. They'll take her into their fine rooms and worship her till they tire of her, then they'll let her drop. I wish I'd kept my secret to myself, but if Lady Bassett takes her up her fortune's made, apart from her authorship altogether."

The greys bore their mistress swiftly to Egbert Street, Holborn, and the footman gingerly escorted her up the steps to the unpretentious entrance of No. 34. His imperious ring was answered immediately by a rosy-cheeked little maid-servant, who stared in open-mouthed amazement at the grand lady and her grandly attired footman.

"Does Miss Ogilvie live here?" asked Lady Bassett.

"Yes, mum. Will you come in, please mum, and the gentleman, too?"

The gentleman repressed a grin, and retired down to the carriage, while the lady followed the little maid into the house.

She was ushered into a very tiny drawing-room, where a fire burned brightly, casting a cheerful glow over the pretty room.

"Who shall I say's called, mum?"

"Your mistress would not know my name; simply say a lady wishes to see her," answered Lady Bassett, and the little maid dropped a curtsey and withdrew.

Lady Bassett stood with one dainty foot touching the bar of the fender and one dainty hand on the mantel, and glanced curiously about her. She had never been in so small a room in her life, but she found it pleasant to the eyes. There was no evidence of literary work, no litter of paper or other untidiness, but there was an open piano, and a little work-table standing by a low chair, whereon lay a piece of sewing and a thimble, as if it had been but newly laid aside. Before she had quite finished her survey she heard a light footfall on the stair, and turned expectantly to the door.

It opened immediately, and a young lady entered, closing it again behind her. In one swift, keen glance the sharp eyes of the lady of Bassett Royal took in every detail of the girl's face and figure. She came forward into the room and bowed, and the shadow of a great surprise flitted across her face, surprise at the appearance of the lady on the hearth.

Lady Bassett put back her veil, and returned the bow with a sweet, frank, gracious smile.

"Am I speaking to Miss Ogilvie?" she asked in the sweetest, gentlest tones of what was at all times a musical voice.



"I am Miss Ogilvie," said the younger lady with an answering smile. "May I offer you a chair?"

"Thanks, in a moment, when I explain my business. To begin with—there is my name."

Miss Ogilvie took the card from the lady's hand, and read the name upon it—

"LADY ELIZABETH BASSETT."

"Yesterday I was reading a very marvellous book, which has moved me as nothing has done for years," said her ladyship. "Is it possible that I see before me the author of 'Ambition?'"

A warm, rich flush overspread the face of the girl before her, and she slightly turned away. Not yet was she used to hear her work spoken of by strangers; it was still a very delicate, almost sacred thing to her. She could find no words worthy to answer Lady Bassett, but the woman of the world was quick to note and understand her mute reply.

The next moment the young authoress felt her hands taken in a warm, close clasp, and the lady bent her proud head till it was on a level with the downcast one.

"My dear, let me touch your hand. I esteem it an honour. There, I know I am an eccentric, foolish, old woman. Will you offer me a chair now?"

For answer, Miss Ogilvie drew in a chair to the hearth, and motioned her into a seat.

"I am very much surprised, Lady Bassett," she faltered. "Your visit and your kind words came so unexpectedly upon me, but I thank you very much."

"Nay, it is I who must thank you for your kind reception," smiled her ladyship. "I am frightfully impertinent, and I want to chat a little with you. How could the idea of such a story come into your head, and how could you work it out so splendidly? Stupid questions both of them. You must be a genius, or you could not have produced it; but one must say something."

"Necessity helped me considerably, I fancy," said Miss Ogilvie, recovering her self-possession, and speaking with graceful ease of manner. "I was dependent on my own exertions for my livelihood, and I fortunately have found the work best suited for me at last."

Lady Bassett's eyes asked another question, and, impelled by their charm, Miss Ogilvie continued—

"I am an orphan, and I have not in the wide world a single friend, except an old servant of my mother's, who has befriended

me in my need, and who is with me now when Fortune has begun to be kind to me. That is all there is to tell about myself, Lady Bassett."

For a moment Lady Bassett did not speak. She was a woman of quick impulse and warm feeling, and her heart went out unspeakably towards the girl before her.

"Thank you, Miss Ogilvie. You have rewarded my inquisitiveness as it scarcely deserves," she said at length. "But you will not regret it. Permit me to tell you briefly who and what I am. Like you, I was left an orphan, but in the care of a prodigal brother, who wasted his own heritage, and would have wasted mine also, had I not married to prevent it. My husband was twenty years older than I, and he only lived eighteen months after we were married. I have no children, nor any near relatives, and I live alone. Will you come and see me?"

Miss Ogilvie's face flushed, but she made answer—

"You are kind, but you move in a circle far removed from my station in life," she said, and there was a distinct ring of proud independence in her voice. "I fear it might make me feel discontented, and unfit me for the work I have marked out for myself."

Lady Bassett rose.

"The author of 'Ambition' would honour any society by her entrance into it," she said with infinite grace. "Nay, my dear, I take no refusal. You must know my world, and it must know you; and we will be of mutual help to each other, I do not doubt. I want you for my friend. I can read character, and I have stayed here nearly an hour. When you know me better, you will learn what value I set on my time. What is your first name?"

"Barbara."

"I thought so from the initial on your title-page. Barbara—I may call you so, I suppose?—good-bye, I shall come again, perhaps to-morrow."

Again the eccentric old lady of Bassett Royal bent from her haughty height, and this time her aristocratic lips touched the cheek of the plebeian maiden who possessed the larger gift.

When Barbara recovered her surprise she found her visitor gone. A faint, sweet perfume lingered in the room, and a sweeter perfume had stolen into her heart. Also, her eyes were wet with tears.

So the world opened its golden gates to Barbara Dale.



## CHAPTER IX.

### IN SOCIETY.



MY dear madam, I congratulate you with all my heart. The demand for 'Ambition' exceeds the supply, and your fortune and fame are made."

So said Mr. Warren, the publisher, beaming over his eye-glass at the slight figure and pale face of the successful author.

"I am very pleased to hear it," she returned, with a composure which caused the publisher to marvel inwardly. Here was a woman whose head could not be turned by a stroke of fortune, and his admiration and respect for her underwent a considerable increase.

"The second edition will be ready in a few days," he continued. "You saw the *Athenæum* notice, I think."

"Yes, Mr. Warren, Lady Bassett showed it to me yesterday," returned Miss Ogilvie.

"Lady Bassett! Ah, yes, of course you know her. She came to me about the author of 'Ambition,' asking his name, ha! ha! She was not more surprised than pleased to hear the new writer was one of her own sex. My dear, you are very young, and I am old, let me give you a piece of advice."

"Yes, sir," assented Miss Ogilvie, with a smile.

"You've read the story of Burns' life, I suppose, and you know how the fine ladies and gentlemen who dwell at ease used him. I took myself to task for revealing your identity to such a leader in society as Lady Bassett, but if you keep Burns in mind, and don't let them spoil you, there's no harm done."

Miss Ogilvie laughed in pure amusement.

"I shall not forget your advice, Mr. Warren, but I think you

need have no fear for me. I can estimate the great world at its worth, take what it can give me, and pass on. Let us to business now, if you please," she said in her clear, practical way. "Will you be willing to consider another piece of work from my pen by-and-by?"

"Are you writing again?" asked the publisher in genuine amazement.

"I write continuously, sir. It is no trouble to me."

"It won't do. If you are to sustain the reputation your first venture has won, you must give your brain a rest. I wouldn't mind if you produced nothing more for five years, if at the end of that time you could lay before me something equal to 'Ambition.' You will find that prolific writers do not produce the best work. Literature which is to last, Miss Ogilvie, requires time in coming to maturity. Nourish your rare gifts in the dews of quiet thought, and our most ambitious hopes for you will be abundantly fulfilled."

"I will remember what you say, Mr. Warren," said Miss Ogilvie, "and try to follow your advice; but thoughts come to me with such a rush at times that it is a positive relief, a necessity too, I hold, to put them into words."

"Well, Miss Ogilvie, all the magazine editors are down upon me to make you known to them, but I am going to keep you out of their clutches as long as I can—till the summer is past at any rate. My wife and family are going to St. Leonards-on-Sea for the Easter holidays. If you will join us there we shall promise you a pleasant rest."

"Thanks." Very grateful were the eyes uplifted to the publisher's face. "But I have already promised to spend Easter with Lady Bassett in Kent."

A curious expression flitted across the face of Mr. Warren, but he made no remark beyond expressing a polite hope that she would have a pleasant holiday. Then Miss Ogilvie took her leave.

At home she found a note from Lady Bassett, which ran—

"23 Harley Street, 17th March.

"Dear Barbara,—I am going out of town for a few days, returning in time for my assembly on the 29th. Remember I expect you early that day, and will find it hard to forgive you if you fail me.—Your friend,  
E. E. BASSETT."

With the open letter in her hand, Barbara sat down by the

fire and fell to thinking of many things. Scarcely eighteen months had passed since she had quitted Little Wymar in despised obscurity, and already she was spoken of in the high places of the earth as one whom all delighted to honour. She was conscious of no proud exultation, for it was only the fulfilment of an expected desire, the result of an indomitable perseverance and resolute will. She had registered a vow to stand upon the pinnacle of the world's fame, and even now, when it was coming very near her, like Dead Sea fruit, it was bitter to the taste, and her woman's heart was desolate and void, and crying out for some other thing to satisfy its innermost needs. Finding her musings unprofitable and unsatisfactory, she rose and went to her study, to the work which she had elected to be all-sufficient for her life. But thoughts were hampered, and refused to flow from her pen with their wonted vigour and ease. Her heart was troubled and restless, and would not be stilled even at the voice of the will which she desired to be the ruling power of her life.

The week during which Lady Bassett was out of town seemed intolerably long to the girl whose life she had so sweetened and blessed by her friendship. Barbara had paid many visits to Harley Street, but hitherto they had been of a private nature, such as morning calls or afternoon teas; but she had at length yielded to her friend's entreaty, and promised to appear at her assembly, and to be introduced to certain celebrities who were eager to make her acquaintance. On the morning of the 29th the well-known greys appeared in Egbert Street, and the footman announced that he had been sent for Miss Ogilvie. Elspet, whose adoring admiration for her young mistress was almost amusing in its intensity, got into her usual state of excitement at the appearance of the grand equipage from Harley Street, and ran to help her to get her things together, talking all the while.

"It's something like the thing, my dearie, tae see ye gettin' ready for a dance, an' I'm gled tae see ye gaun intae society befitin' a grand-dochter o' Dunire. Mony a braw dance hae I dressed yer mither for. I only wish her leddyship had letten me gang wi' ye tae pit ye intae yer goon i' the efternune."

Barbara listened to the old woman's half proud, half tender words, and smiled to herself a little sadly. Any allusion to the fair, delicate, frail mother, whom she had loved with a most passionate devotion, awoke many thronging memories in her heart.

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"I sometimes think, Elspet," she said, as she watched the old woman laying her delicate evening attire in its wrappings of white paper; "I often think it would have been better for me never to have known any other life than the quiet one I lived here with you."

"Wheesht, bairn," said Elspet, in a reproving voice. "Did ye think an Ogilvie o' Dunire wad hide. Na, na; ye was made to shine amang braw folk; an' ye hae gotten in amang them by a queer leadin' o' Providence. God bless ye, my lamb, an' gie ye a happy nicht an' a licht heart tae keep time tae the music. My respects tae that douce wummin, Leddy Bassett."

"Good-bye, Elspet, I'll be home some time to-morrow," said Barbara, putting up her lips for the kiss without which she never left her faithful friend. "I don't know what is going to happen to me to-day. I fear I'm going to meet my weird, as they say in the north countrie," she added gaily, and ran downstairs to the carriage.

The servants in 23 Harley Street were prudent enough to pay all outward respect to Miss Ogilvie, though there was much talk below-stairs regarding the new freak of their mistress, to make so much of a dowdy creature who abode in such a locality as Egbert Street, Holborn.

She was shown up to a large and luxurious dressing-room, where there was a sparkling fire, and every other comfort, and there Lady Bassett joined her in a few minutes.

"My dear, let me look at you, it seems so long since I saw you!" exclaimed the warm-hearted, impulsive woman. "You are ridiculously pale and heavy-eyed. I *am* glad to see you."

Barbara found the greeting so sweet that again her eyes filled with unwonted tears. The friendship between these two women, so unlike each other in every way, was an abiding one, which time would serve to strengthen and to deepen. It was even at its very outset a source of deep, unalloyed pleasure to both.

"Well, I have been visiting, Barbara, and have enjoyed myself," said Lady Bassett abruptly. "I only returned from Mount Severne yesterday afternoon, and had I not been so fatigued, I should have come to you last night."

"I am glad you have had a pleasant time," said Barbara, simply.

"Yes," I know you are. I should like you to see Mount Severne, Barbara. It makes me feel quite discontented with

my plain habitation after I have been at that princely heritage."

"Whose heritage is it?" asked Barbara.

"My dear, you are very stupid! How often have I spoken to you of my dear boy, Adrian Severne. Even if I had never mentioned him to you, you ought to know him from the columns of the newspapers. He is one of the chief hopes of his party in the House."

"I am no politician, Lady Bassett," Barbara reminded her, laughing.

"You ought to be; every woman ought. When you get a husband, Barbara, you ought to be able to talk to him about such things. Politics is an absorbingly interesting topic to most men. Why, my dear, if it hadn't been for me, Lord Bassett would have lost his seat at the last election. I worked hard, I can tell you. Perhaps you will need to exert yourself in a like manner for your lord and master some day."

Again Barbara laughed.

"Am I a woman likely to own the sway of a lord and master?" she asked, half-mockingly.

"Don't be absurd," retorted her ladyship, sharply. "An unmarried woman is an unfinished study, Barbara. If you remain single you will be a spoiled one altogether; there are such possibilities in that great heart of yours. Well, there is a time coming, but we will not sentimentalise. I have got something for you to wear to-night."

Barbara flushed, and rising, began to undo the fastenings of the package on the chair.

"So have I," she said, with quiet but decided dignity. "I fancied you would be thinking of me in this matter, dear Lady Basset, but I prefer to wear my own."

A curious smile flitted across the face of Lady Bassett.

"You are the very embodiment of independent pride, my little woman, but I like it," she said with genuine frankness. "Well, let me see the taste of an authoress."

Barbara took from its wrappings the dainty, graceful folds of rich black lace which had been her choice for her first appearance in public. It was a dress which even the Lady of Bassett Royal herself would not have disdained to wear.

She nodded in great satisfaction.

"You are wiser than I, and you know what becomes you, Barbara. I had planned to array you in a satin gown, but this

is infinitely better; it is exquisite. I shall be proud of my friend to-night. Will you accept nothing from me, then?"

"Yes, some heath from your greenhouse, dear Lady Bassett; these are the jewels I like best to wear," she said, and the subject was dropped.

It was very pleasant to Barbara to be made much of by her friend, and to roam about at will through the magnificent house, and delight her eyes with the beauty all about her. She had stipulated that she should be allowed to slip into the ball-room during the assembling of the guests, and that she should be allowed some time to familiarise herself with the room and its occupants before she was called upon to undergo the ordeal of introduction to any one. Lady Bassett had willingly humoured her; but while Barbara slipped about from one place to another, unobserved, as she fondly anticipated, there were many eyes fixed upon the grave, sweet, intellectual face, and on the slender, girlish figure in its graceful, clinging black robes, while the whisper went from one to another that she was the authoress about whose book all London had gone mad.

In a quiet corner, near one of the folding doors, Barbara stationed herself at last, and listened to the dreamy strains of the band striking up the first quadrille. While there she became the unwilling listener to a conversation, of which she was the subject.

Not many yards from her stood two gentlemen deep in talk.

At the one Barbara had glanced with interest before, being struck by his tall, splendidly built figure, and fine, open, generous face. It was a Saxon face and a grand Saxon head, such as Barbara fancied might have pertained to one of the Good King's spotless knights. The other was a foppish youth, but he possessed a sharp tongue, as Barbara heard evidence.

"Well, I've read the book, and I can't see anything in it that isn't in every other three-volumes of rubbish at Mudie's. What *are* they making the fuss about?"

His companion smiled, and Barbara fancied she would not like to be the object of that smile. It was a finer sarcasm than twenty cleverly turned sentences.

"If you don't like it you don't, and there's an end on't," he said lightly.

"I say, though, if she's a woman, as they say, what precious queer ideas she sets forth about married life. I wouldn't like to have to marry the author of 'Ambition.'"



"A writer does not necessarily identify herself with all she produces, Courtney," returned the other. "Still, as you say, a woman who can set forth such peculiar views in a book, to which she puts her name, would not be a very desirable person to marry."

The speaker moved aside a little to allow a gentleman to pass, and his eyes fell on the figure by the folding door. They rested with more than a passing interest on her face in the brief glance which was all that courtesy permitted. At that moment his hostess touched his arm.

"Adrian, you are very idle," she said, with a reproving smile. "Come, I will provide you something to occupy your attention."

"I am in your hands," he assented with his sunny smile, which made his face a very winning one to see.

Then, to his utter amazement, she led him to the solitary damsel by the folding doors.

Involuntarily Barbara stood up, and a faint rose-leaf bloom overspread her face, making it for the moment rarely beautiful.

"Sir Adrian Severne, Miss Ogilvie," said Lady Bassett's clear, ringing tones. "Adrian, permit me to introduce to you the distinguished author of 'Ambition,' and now *au revoir*."





## CHAPTER X.

### AT BASSETT ROYAL.



BARBARA, it is pleasant to be at home," said Lady Bassett.

The two were standing together in the window of the morning-room at Bassett Royal.

"In such a house as this it must be," answered Barbara. Then there fell upon them both an odd silence. It was a fair picture their eyes rested on that sunny April morning, one to

make the heart glad. The spring had been tardy in her coming. In Eastertides gone by Lady Bassett had been wont to see daisy and cowslip carpeting the meadows of Bassett Royal, heart's-ease and anemone growing thickly on every bank, and the hedgerows white with May. But to-day there was only the living green of the undulating uplands, the tender budding of beech and elm, the low twittering in the eaves to whisper of the spring. She was a laggard even in sunny Kent, but the air was full of her whisperings and the music of her feet.

"This is my *home*, Barbara," said Lady Bassett half dreamily. "It has none of the grandeur of Blenheim Towers, but my husband loved this place, and here he died."

Barbara stood very still, not even looking on the face of the woman she loved, knowing that though she addressed her, she was not conscious of her presence, and feeling with her innate delicacy that her memories were sacred.

"It will be five and twenty years ago on the 1st of May since he died. Had any one told me then that I should live without him all that time, and be what I am to-day, I should have laughed in scorn. My heart broke that day, but it seems

that people can live on in the world though their hearts are broken, but at first it is very hard."

The dreamy look had passed from her face, and across it now there swept a wave of her unforgotten sorrow. With a sudden passionate gesture she laid one white hand on Barbara's arm and looked her full in the face.

"I do not know what the future may hold for you, Barbara. God forbid that a sorrow like mine should cloud it. Mine was not, is not, the common grief of widowhood. Listen to me."

She began to pace restlessly up and down the room, with her troubled eyes bent upon the floor.

"I was left, as I think I told you, an orphan in the care of a spendthrift brother. I was a Verschoyle before I married, Barbara, and my race was a wild, reckless lot from the beginning. I had some money in my own right, but my brother would have had it from me had I not married in time. When I was twenty-one I became the wife of Lord Bassett, who was twenty years my senior. I did not love him, I married him for his wealth. The world does not hold many like him, Barbara; I have never met another since I lost him. He was a king among men, and he loved me as such men love, and I was unworthy. I tried him with indifference, with careless coquetting with others who were unfit to tie the latch of his shoe. He bore with me, he forgave me seventy times seven, but my heart did not turn to him. I gave him nothing for the love he lavished on me, a love with which few, very few, women are blessed on earth. Well, eighteen months after we were married we had come down here for Easter, and, as usual, I filled the house with guests, when he was seized with fever. It was malignant and contagious, and my guests fled. They tried to persuade me to leave him, but in these awful days the scales fell from my eyes. I saw my husband as he was, and I learned that I loved him, but how dearly I proved more bitterly afterwards. I nursed him, but he never knew me. He thought the hands on his brow were those of a stranger, and he called for me incessantly. My love, my remorse, came too late, for he died unconscious. That is my story, Barbara; my husband—whom I would have died to save—went away from me unknowing, unconscious of my breaking heart, and I am here still. Time has somewhat healed the scar, and of late there has come to me a deep, unutterable peace, for there are whisperings of a meeting by-and-by, of a full reunion when

the mists have cleared away. Over yonder the agonies of earth will be forgotten. God be thanked that we of earth can know it for a certainty."

There was a moment's intense silence. Presently Lady Bassett paused in front of the girl and laid her two hands on her shoulders.

"Every year since then I have come to Bassett Royal at this season of the year, and always alone," she said. "Knowing this, you will know how I love you, my friend."

Then the two women held each other close for a moment, the heart of each speaking to the other more eloquently than words.

"Now, Barbara, the morning is fine, and we must enjoy sunshine and pure air while we have it," said Lady Bassett, blandly. "I have ordered the phaeton, and we will call at the Vicarage for Mrs. Cambridge, and then I shall show you my model village, which I shall expect you to immortalise in the next work from that wonderful pen of yours."

Barbara laughed.

"I never sketch from real life, though your friend, Sir Adrian Severne, appeared to marvel when I assured him I wrote entirely from imagination."

"Ah, had you some talk with Adrian on the subject?" asked Lady Bassett, with some interest.

"Very little, for he speedily understood my aversion to speak of my works," returned Barbara, carelessly. "If we begin to talk again, Lady Bassett, the morning will be flown; and see, there is a mass of ominous cloud coming up in the east."

"You are right; but if it rains we shall not visit the village. I want you to see my pet picture in the light of bright sunshine, Barbara," returned Lady Bassett; and they retired to their separate rooms to make ready for their drive.

Her ladyship drove her ponies herself, and the pretty creatures seemed to know and love the touch of their mistress's hand on the reins. It was pleasant, moving so swiftly and smoothly through the cool, bright air, and there was so much to delight and engross the eyes that there was but little said. The road to the Vicarage was like other country roads, with pleasant banks of green on either side, dotted with the blue of the sturdy speedwell and the starry eyes of the daisies, which had braved the east wind of an unusually bitter spring, and blossomed into life before their fellows.

"See, yonder is the church and the Vicarage, and, lower down,

the village," said her ladyship. "Steady, Floss, my dear. Now, Barbara, isn't that beautiful? Look back, and you will see Bassett Royal very well from here."

The ponies obeyed their mistress and stood still, and Barbara looked first at the sweet, peaceful scene spread out in the hollow, the ivy-clad church, with its graceful spire, the old-fashioned gables of the Vicarage beside it, and further down the clustering roofs of the village, lying bathed in the full glory of the morning sun. Behind, on the face of the hill, the sun set ablaze the windows of Bassett Royal, and touched serenely its quaint towers and turrets, making it a fair picture, and one to stir the heart.

"Yes, it is very beautiful," said Barbara softly, and Lady Bassett knew from the expression on her face that she drank in all its loveliness. She was beginning to know that in her moments of deepest feeling Barbara was very still.

"These things make me feel so strangely, Lady Bassett," she said, when the ponies hurried on again. "I cannot quite explain to you how a bright day, an unclouded sun, and a scene like this affects me. I feel as if I dared not speak nor hear another person speak lest the words should jar upon the harmony."

"I understand; well, I feel quite differently. I could sing out in the exuberance of my delight over a beautiful earth. Well, here we are. You will like the Vicar and Mrs. Cambridge. There are no young people in their house."

The ring at the gate bell brought a servant out in haste.

"Just a minute, my lady, and I'll tell John to come to the ponies," she said, and Lady Bassett stood by her favourites' heads, patting their glossy necks till the Vicar's coachman appeared to take them in charge. Then the ladies went up the short avenue to the house. As they neared the door, a hand drew aside the curtain of the drawing-room window, and a face looked out. Lady Bassett bowed, and Barbara grew pale to the lips, and her limbs trembled beneath her. The face looking out was that of Winifred Guest. Before she had entered the house she had composed herself by a mighty effort, and it was a perfectly self-possessed if somewhat pale-faced young person who followed Lady Bassett into the presence of Mrs. Cambridge. She was a lovely old lady, with a sweet, refined face, somewhat sorrow-lined, indeed, as the faces of good women are who have passed through many trials. The kiss which the lady of Bassett Royal denied to many of her high-born friends was bestowed very warmly on the Vicar's wife.

"Welcome to Bassett once more," said Mrs. Cambridge with a tremulous smile; then she turned to the slight, dark-robed figure of her ladyship's companion.

"This is my friend, Miss Ogilvie, Mrs. Cambridge," said Lady Bassett; then she looked towards Winifred Guest, who had risen from her chair, and was looking at Barbara with great, sad eyes wide with surprise. She managed to stammer a reply to Lady Bassett's greeting, and to bow confusedly to Barbara in response to the brief words of introduction. From Barbara's eyes she gathered that for the present she did not desire recognition.

"And how have you been in this haven of rest, dear Mrs. Cambridge, while I have been wearying myself out in London?" asked Lady Bassett, seating herself by the side of Mrs. Cambridge, leaving Barbara to make friends with the young lady in the window. But while the elder women conversed freely, as old friends do, the younger remained absolutely silent. Barbara only once lifted her eyes from the floor, and took a long, long look into the sweet face of Robert's Winnie, then they fell again, and a great shadow filled them. The face of Winifred Guest was white and sharply outlined, and there were purple rims about her eyes, and deep, sad lines about the pathetic mouth which had a long story to tell.

Presently Lady Bassett turned to her with concern on her face.

"My dear, what have you been doing with yourself? When you were here two years ago you were a picture of health and beauty!" she added, with a slight smile. "Have you just recovered from illness?"

"No, Lady Bassett, perhaps only entering upon one," she answered in a low voice. "I have not been well for a long time."

"I was at Little Wymar last month," said Mrs. Cambridge, "and was so shocked to see our pet looking so ill that I insisted on having her back with me. I think she is a little brighter since she came to us. You feel better, Winnie?"

"I do not feel very ill, Aunt Lucy, only tired," said Winnie, simply, and the old lady turned her head swiftly away to hide the mist which filled her eyes.

"Will you come to the study and see Mr. Cambridge, Lady Bassett?" she asked by-and-by. "He has had a severe cold, and I do not permit him to quit his own apartment yet, but he will be very disappointed if you go away without seeing him."

"Certainly," said Lady Bassett, and rose at once.

"The young ladies can amuse each other, I suppose,"

laughed Mrs. Cambridge, and followed her guest, not dreaming how unspeakable a service she was doing to them both.

Whenever the door closed, both girls instinctively rose, and a wave of feeling swept across Barbara's face. The next moment Winifred's arms were about her neck, and her golden head pillowed closely on her breast.

"Barbara! Barbara! what does it mean? How came you here in company with Lady Bassett?" she managed to ask at length.

"It is a long story, Winifred," returned Barbara, and the cool, self-possessed voice was broken and trembling. "Lift up your face, my darling, and let me see it. I have hungered for it many times since I saw it last that night in the darkness at Little Wymar."

Winifred lifted her face, and Barbara held it back, looking at it with fearing eyes.

"Winifred!" she said, sharply, "what is it? Why should you look so?"

Winifred Guest turned her eyes a moment through the window up to the sunny sky, and when they came back to Barbara's face again they were filled with a deep, sweet peace.

"It means, Barbara, that when Robert comes back to me," she said, without hesitation, "he will find only my memory, and a green grave in the churchyard at Little Wymar."

"Oh, Winifred!" No more could Barbara utter; and she hid her face on her hands, and there followed a long silence.

"What has caused this? You were quite well when I left Little Wymar," she asked by-and-by.

"Not *quite* well, Barbara," corrected Winifred, gently. "I never was strong, you know, and I have had much to bear at home."

Barbara did not speak. In the depths of her soul there was unutterable bitterness born of the knowledge that *her* brother had brought such a cross to the heart of the girl who had loved him far beyond his worth.

"You remember Wymar Grange, Mr. Trevlyn's place?" asked Winifred.

"Yes, I remember it well."

"They wanted to make me the mistress of Wymar Grange, and because I could not, you know, mamma has not been pleased with me of late. I cannot bear unkindness; it hurts me to hurt those I love, so my health has failed, that is all."

Barbara bit her lip. What burned for utterance would be better left unsaid.

"Winnie, Robert is not worth so much unselfish love.

He proved himself unworthy when the knowledge of your unbounded faith in him could not keep him from sin."

"Perhaps you are right. I never seek to question such things, nor to unravel them," said Winifred. "I only think, Barbara, that it is given to some women to love only once, and always, no matter how unworthy its object. I think that, if God spared me, Barbara, I could keep Robert in the right way. But I fear I shall not live till he comes back."

Again Barbara was silent, overwhelmed with emotion.

"Now, Barbara, Aunt Lucy will be back immediately, and I want to hear something of you. Aunt Lucy is papa's sister, you know, and that is how I come to be here."

Barbara rose, and began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

"Well, Winifred, I will tell you briefly all there is to tell, though my heart is so full of you I can scarcely collect my thoughts. I went to London from Wymar, as you know, and got a situation as governess in a few weeks' time. I stayed three months, and then went back to lodgings and set myself to write. I have been very successful."

"Have you? Tell me what you have written, Barbara; I should so like to read it."

"I have written innumerable magazine articles, to which I never put my name; but I have only written one book, Winifred; its name is 'Ambition.'"

"Barbara! is *that* your book? I hear everyone talking of it, marvelling over it, and praising it; but I never dreamed it could be yours."

"It is mine, Winifred, and it has secured me an entrance into society. Lady Bassett was interested in it, found me out through my publisher, and made me her friend. It is a great honour, Winifred."

"Yes, it is. Lady Bassett is the friend of royalty, and her name is a passport everywhere, I know," said Winifred. "Well, with all this wonderful success, are you happy, Barbara?"

"No, unhappy," said Barbara, half fiercely. "Wretchedly unhappy. I hate my life. I hate my work. I sometimes wish I was dead, Winifred."

Very pitiful grew the sweet, worn face of Winifred Guest. Far removed in her own sweet, unclouded faith from such fierce, dark thoughts, she could yet understand the experience of a nature very different from hers.



"You will find peace by-and-by, as I have found it, Barbara," she said softly. "And I believe you will have a happy life yet."

"I!" Barbara's lips parted in an exceedingly bitter smile. "No, Winifred, happiness and I shall only know each other from afar. I was not born under a happy star, and I shall go on living a miserable, stunted, discontented life to the end."

"Do you take no pleasure in your writing, Barbara?"

"Yes, at times I forget even that I am alive in my intense absorption; but the best part of all literary work, Winifred, is drudgery, poor, mean drudgery, of which the soul grows sick unto death. Yet what the world calls a successful author is looked at with curious, admiring, envious eyes, and is regarded as a fortunate being. I do not know what others of my class may feel, but I am sick, sick-tired of it all already."

Winifred remained silent, knowing that the wild burst would give relief.

"I have nothing that other women have to satisfy them, no home or heart-ties: nothing but a well-filled purse and an empty name. I saw a peasant woman on the road to-day, Winifred, hugging her baby to her breast, her rough face softened and made beautiful by the mother love in her heart; and I thought how much richer she was than I, and hated her as I looked."

"I trust, Barbara, in God's good time that may come to you also, and make your heart beautiful too."

Barbara did not appear to be conscious of her words.

"There is another thing, Winifred. Lady Bassett is good and kind; how good and kind none can know so well as I; but her kindness partakes essentially of the nature of patronage, at least so I feel it. It is all take, I give nothing; yet I must bear this also, for it is a quicker step to the object I have in view."

At that moment the shutting of a door in the corridor, and footsteps approaching, warned them that they must relapse into conventional attitudes.

"Winifred," said Barbara hurriedly, "you will never say you have seen me; never speak of my changed circumstances to a living soul. I have left the old life behind altogether, and a new being is identified with the new. I am Barbara Dale no longer, but Miss Ogilvie; remember Barbara Dale is dead."

"I will remember," said Winifred; then there was a hurried embrace, a murmured "God bless you!" from Winnie's pale lips, and their interview was at an end.



## CHAPTER XI.

### A REVELATION.



It is very sad. I do not remember ever hearing anything so sad," said Lady Bassett as they drove away from the Vicarage gate down to the village.

"What is very sad, Lady Bassett?" asked Barbara.

"That niece of Mrs. Cambridge's, poor child. We were talking of her in the study. She is a sweet, interesting girl, to whom I was drawn when she was here two years ago. It seems she had a lover, a worthless fellow, beneath her in station, and in every other way, to whom she gave her whole affection. Her parents were naturally against it from the first, but might ultimately have become reconciled to the engagement had not the young man embezzled a large sum of money from the bank in which he was employed, and, of course, the law laid her finger on him at once. He is expiating his crime now at Dartmoor, and she, poor thing, one of these delicate blossoms who cannot bear the rude blast, is wasting away. Isn't it very sad?"

"Yes," answered Barbara in a hollow voice, and turned her grey face away. It was a terrible moment for her, and it was well that Lady Bassett's chief attention was engrossed by the village they were nearing, otherwise she must have noted and suspected something. It was a terrible thing to don the face of hypocrisy, to affect a careless indifference when her heart was pierced as by a two-edged sword.

She knew, none better, the wrong she was doing her kind and generous friend; in fact, her whole life at Bassett Royal was a living lie. In that moment of agony she could fancy the

look of clear, haughty surprise and contempt which would come upon the face of Lady Bassett, she could almost hear the cutting tones that would bid her go.

The shadow which the sin of others had cast over her name might be forgiven, but the daily, hourly practice of deception, never. The pure, high-souled, noble-hearted lady held all such wilful sinning in such disdain, that even the semblance of an untruth raised her ire.

"It is a wretched thing to be a woman, Lady Bassett," she said.

Lady Bassett laughed, and her voice was as clear and sweet as a bell.

"My dear, you say what comes uppermost in your mind, and never think what it implies. You, of all people, blessed and gifted as you are, have no need to rail against the fate which made you a woman. But a truce to such morbid talk. Here is my picture, Barbara; not a picture only, I thank God, but a living, beautiful reality; a happy, contented, peaceful 'English village.'"

Barbara forced herself to banish unpleasant thoughts, and to centre her attention upon the row of white-washed, rose-latticed cottages upon which they were entering.

The houses were built on a slope, on either side of a wide, grass-grown street, with a row of budding beeches down its centre. There was not a sign of poverty or squalor in all the village. Each cottage had its plot in front and garden patch behind, and all were uniform in size and style. There were signs of life about it, smoke curling upward to the sunny sky, clothes drying on the hedgerows, and open doors with rosy-cheeked children playing about the steps.

As they drove slowly through it the women ran to their doors to curtsy to the lady, and some of them would run across for a word with her, with such love in their faces that Barbara easily saw in what estimation her friend was held in the place.

"When I came first to Bassett Royal, this was a wretched place, Barbara. It was a perfect blot on the landscape, and it was trying to interest me in my home that my husband proposed to make a sweeping renovation of the whole place. It was unfinished when he died, but I knew his wishes and plans concerning it, and it was my sacred and mournful duty to fulfil them to the utmost. Then I began to know the people on my lands, and to find how they worshipped my husband. That

drew me to them, and now it is an unspeakable joy to me to know that all the people love me, even as I love them. They believe I have their interests at heart, and knowing the pride I take in the village they take a pride in it themselves. There is never any disturbance of any kind here; the people live sober, useful, contented lives, such as I could pray all the working people of England would live. Much lies with the landed proprietors. If they would bestir themselves heartily in the interest of their people there would be much gained in the right direction. But the spirit of selfishness has the ascendancy over the minds of the English upper class. Barbara, I am forgetting myself, my dear, but it is a subject on which I feel deeply."

"You forget how you are enlightening me," Barbara reminded her with a smile.

"I think you need very little enlightenment," said Lady Bassett. "While reading 'Ambition,' I was forced to think it the work of one either connected with or intimately acquainted with the ways of the upper class: you write with such ease and correctness about people of rank. We are caricatured in so many novels, it is a source of infinite amusement to read the things and the actions with which we are accredited."

A momentary gleam of gratification stole into Barbara's face, but her heart was very heavy. The more evidence given to her of Lady Bassett's noble, upright life, the more deeply the meanness of her own came home to her. At times the impulse was strong upon her to confess all, and throw herself on her friend's generous heart. We all like to be thought well of. Barbara found it very sweet to be caressed, and praised, and deferred to as a person of importance, and shrank from the change which must inevitably follow a revelation of her real self. She hardened herself against the better impulse which moved her at times, and only remembered her vow—"to bring the world to her feet." Well, it was daily drawing nearer. With the publication of her new book, and the attainment of a place in society which she had bound herself to win, would come the *Ultima Thule* of her ambition, and then—would she creep away, she wondered, into that quiet place of which she had spoken to her father in his last hours, and end her days in obscurity? Perhaps circumstances might necessitate it when the whirligig of time brought to her its revenges.

"Barbara, it is half-past one, and we are at home," said

Lady Bassett. "If you are in a brown study, I am very hungry, and we are late for luncheon."

"I have had a very pleasant morning," said Barbara, as they entered the house together. "And I shall not forget to immortalise your model village."

"Sir Adrian Severne is here, my lady," said the pompous voice of the oldest retainer of Bassett Royal. "He arrived about an hour ago, and is in the library, my lady."

"Impossible! What can have brought Adrian from Mount Severne just now? Lady Severne expected a houseful of guests at Easter," she exclaimed, and hurried to the library at once, while Barbara proceeded up-stairs, her heart beating wildly. She knew what brought Adrian Severne to Bassett Royal, and ere very long the truth would be known to others.

She came down to luncheon wearing a plain velvet robe, and no ornament save the exquisite gold brooch which fastened the linen band at her throat. She was a woman at whom all men and most women would look twice, although she was not distinctly beautiful. Sir Adrian Severne started when she entered the room, and Lady Bassett looked surprised. Neither had ever seen her look so rarely well.

"I have just been explaining to Lady Bassett that I had business in town, and could not resist the temptation to run down to Bassett Royal, Miss Ogilvie," said Sir Adrian, when the first greetings were over, and they took their places at the table. "I have spent many a happy holiday here when I was a lad."

"I do not wonder that you retain pleasant memories of Bassett Royal," said Miss Ogilvie, with an appreciative smile. "The West End will be deserted this week, Sir Adrian?"

"Probably; but I was only at Downing Street, and the talk was purely Parliamentary. I met Sir Philip Rydal in town, Lady Bassett. He is about to be married, I believe, to a daughter of Captain Hexham, of the Fusiliers."

"That is news," said Lady Bassett, but without much show of interest. "Will you stay till to-morrow, Adrian?"

Sir Adrian glanced at Miss Ogilvie, but she was toying with the fruit on her plate, and did not lift her head.

"Thanks, I may as well give myself the pleasure. My mother has not been fortunate in her selection of Easter guests this year. The liveliest of them is the Duchess of Wendover. Do you know her Grace, Miss Ogilvie."

Miss Ogilvie raised her eyes with a slightly deprecating glance.

"I know to whom you refer. I have no acquaintance with dukes and duchesses, Sir Adrian."

He bit his lip, and Lady Bassett interposed.

"Barbara is in a contrary mood to-day, Adrian. My head troubles me. I think I shall go and rest for a little, if you two could amuse each other."

"Has Miss Ogilvie seen Aversham Castle?" said Adrian with unmistakable eagerness.

"No; that will be a pleasant walk, Barbara. You have no objections, I hope.

"None," answered Barbara demurely.

"I can promise you a ruin which those who delight in such antiquities pronounce the finest in the South, Miss Ogilvie," said Sir Adrian.

"I shall enjoy it," she answered, but Sir Adrian cared more for the upward glance of the hazel eyes than for the politely uttered words.

So, unconsciously, the lady of Bassett Royal helped these two to a better knowledge of each other, and gave opportunity for the growth of a feeling which, had she suspected, she would have done her utmost to nip in the bud. She lay down with a mind at ease, and, being weary, fell asleep almost immediately. When she awoke the sun was slanting westward, and her watch hands pointed to six. She started up and rang the bell at once for her maid.

"I have slept soundly surely, Evitt," she said. "Have Sir Adrian and Miss Ogilvie returned?"

"Yes, my lady, they were back before five. Miss Ogilvie looked in, I think, but slipped away when she found you asleep," replied Evitt. "They are in the drawing-room, I think; at least, I heard Miss Ogilvie singing not long ago."

"Has she dressed for dinner?"

"Yes, my lady, so has Sir Adrian."

"Make haste, then, Evitt, I have been very lazy, but my headache is gone, and I feel like a new creature."

"Yes, my lady; medical men always recommend lying down for a headache. I am glad you feel better," returned the maid as she began to brush her mistress's hair.

In fifteen minutes Lady Bassett was ready to proceed to the drawing-room. As she neared the door the sound of Barbara's

voice singing held her spell-bound. It was a weird, sweet, beautiful melody, but she could not distinguish the words. It was followed by a few plaintive notes on the piano, then there was utter silence. She stood a moment on the threshold, and then opened the door softly and looked in.

At the far end of the room, among the shadows, sat Barbara, with one beautiful arm, bare to the elbow, leaning on the keys of the piano. Her face was downcast, and there was something in it which struck Lady Bassett strangely. But she found its explanation in the face of Adrian Severne. He was bending towards her, with his head stooping from its stately height, and there was a look on his face which only one emotion could bring.

Lady Bassett staggered back, and drew the door shut, feeling for the moment that she could not face them. Adrian Severne had found his fate at last, and Barbara Ogilvie had won the prize upon which so many fair eyes had been longingly cast.

What would the world say to such an alliance? What would his kinsfolk say, who were the highest in the land? What would be the verdict of the proud mother, and the still prouder sister? All these questions chased each other through the mind of the lady of Bassett Royal, and to each and all there came but one answer—

“It must never be!”





## CHAPTER XII.

### HIS PROMISED WIFE.



SIR ADRIAN SEVERNE is in the drawing-room, my lady," said Evitt to her mistress.

It was the afternoon of a sultry June day, and the lady of Bassett Royal was reclining on a couch in her own sitting-room. The headache troubled her more frequently during the oppressive heat of these summer days, and many gay assemblages missed the presence of Lady Bassett.

She was in Harley Street still, waiting with the rest for the prorogation of Parliament.

"Is Sir Adrian alone, Evitt?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady," returned the maid.

"Send him up here," said her mistress, and raising herself on the cushion she fell to wondering what brought him that day. A minute later she heard his firm step on the stair, and turned her head to greet him.

"Come away, Adrian," she said, with her sweet smile. "I am an invalid to-day; but I never have the heart to send you away."

He bent his head from his tall height and took the slender, white hand in his own. Does it seem strange to you that the heart of Adrian Severne warmed to this woman as it never did towards his mother or sister? The ladies of the house of Severne had what emotions they possessed well under control, and never suffered any exhibition of feeling at any time. Very often Adrian Severne felt chilled and frozen in his dreary home, and in his need turned always to Lady Bassett, who had loved him since the days when he came, a little lad, to spend his holidays at Bassett Royal.



"Can nothing be done to remove this headache business?" he asked in the impetuous, boyish way which lingered with him still, and which was a chief charm in the eyes of Lady Bassett. "Frances complains sometimes, but her headache does not blanch her face like this."

"It is constitutional, my boy, and admits of no cure. Come, sit down and tell me something fresh from the outside world. Have you come to get a cup of strength for the warfare on Monday night?"

"I have come to get a cup of strength, indeed, Lady Bassett," said Adrian, "but not for that contest. I want your advice, your sympathy, and your help in a matter which lies very near to my heart."

He spoke earnestly, and as if under the influence of deep emotion, and he began to pace restlessly up and down the room. Straight as an arrow Lady Bassett's thoughts flew to Barbara. She had dreaded something of the kind, and though she had taken care that the two should never meet under her roof-tree, what guarantee could she have that they had not met times innumerable elsewhere?

"Sit down, Adrian," she said, somewhat wearily, "and tell me what this weighty matter is. If I can advise or help I shall do so very gladly, you know."

She did not say "sympathise," and Adrian was quick to note the omission.

He paused in front of her sofa, and looked down at her, his blue eyes smiling a little, though there was trouble in their deepest depths.

"Lady Bassett, you are a woman, and one of keener perception than most women. Do I need to tell you what I have come to speak to you about?"

She looked at him searchingly a moment, and admired the manliness which could meet her scrutiny so unflinchingly. He was not ashamed of his errand, whatever it might be.

"I wish I did *not* know so well, Adrian," she said. "Sit down here where I can see your face, and let us talk the matter over."

Adrian sat down, and bending a little towards her said somewhat quickly—

"I see you do not approve. You have always said that my wife would be as dear to you as my unworthy self. Surely, though I make a marriage with which the world has no sympathy you will not turn against me, my friend?"

Tears started to the eyes of Lady Bassett. She loved him beyond any earthly thing, he was as dear to her as if he had been her own son, and his words touched her heart.

"One word, Adrian. Have you spoken to Barbara?"

"I have not; I preferred to speak to you first, because I feel that I owe it to you," he answered. "But I intend to go to Egbert Street to-day."

That also touched her. It was a tribute as sweet as it was unexpected.

"Adrian, have you weighed this matter well? Have you looked at it in all ways? Are you willing to bear opposition, coldness, estrangement, perhaps, from your kindred, for the sake of Barbara?" she asked.

A smile flitted across the face of Adrian Severne.

"I love her as a man loves the woman he would make his wife, Lady Bassett. You have been a wife, and you know what that means," he answered gravely.

Ay, she knew, none better, and her opposition began to melt away in her mind.

"I do not approve of unequal marriages, Adrian. They may turn out happily, but the chances are against it."

Adrian was silent, and after a moment's hesitation, she continued—

"I love her, as you know, and admire her more than any woman of my acquaintance; but, Adrian, I question very much if she would make you happy."

"What makes you doubt it?"

"I don't expect you to believe what I am saying, Adrian, because you are young and very much in love," she said, with a gleam of humour; "and I am old and of a clearer vision than you. Besides, I am a woman, and can read other women as you cannot do. She has lived too much within herself, Adrian, and her nature is not an unselfish one. I fear she could not love you as you deserve to be loved."

Adrian Severne turned his face away a moment. She probed very deep.

"Do you think she cares for you, Adrian?"

"I do think so."

Lady Bassett kept the thought unspoken. She had watched Barbara closely during the past two months, and her opinion differed from Adrian's.

"Do your mother and sister suspect this, Adrian?"

"I cannot say. I marry to please myself, Lady Bassett," said Adrian, somewhat impatiently.

"Naturally; but your nearest kindred demand a little consideration. They will be very angry, Adrian."

"I know it."

"She is a brave woman who will face the haughty ire of the Ladies Severne."

"Lady Bassett, this is all to no purpose. Do you suppose I don't know all these things better than you can tell me?" exclaimed Adrian, rising to his feet and resuming his restless walk. "I came to you to talk about *her*, not about what other people will say of my marriage. The world's opinion is of less account to me than the dust beneath my feet."

"Very well, we will talk of her," said Lady Bassett, drily. "How long have you known her, Adrian?"

"Love is not measured by days, Lady Bassett. Do you remember your assembly of the 29th of March?"

"I have reason to remember it, Adrian."

"Well, when you introduced me to Barbara Ogilvie that night you forged the first link in the chain of my destiny. When I looked on her face I knew that it was the face of my wife. Such flashes of inspiration *do* come to us even in this prosaic nineteenth century. I have seen her many times since then, and now the time has come for me to speak. My very soul cleaves to her, Lady Bassett, and I cannot face the possibility of a refusal from her lips."

"Come here, Adrian."

The change in Lady Bassett's voice was so marked that involuntarily Adrian started. He came close to her, and she lifted one hand to his tall shoulder and raised her tender eyes to his face.

"It was prudence which spoke in me before, but my heart pleads for you, and will not be stilled. Go, my boy, and take the wife heaven has ordained for you, and may God bless you both."

So, with that benediction ringing in his ears, Adrian Severne betook himself hopefully to Egbert Street, Holborn.

Miss Ogilvie was at home, and in her study. The little maid showed him into the drawing-room, and went to tell her mistress. The place was not strange to Adrian Severne; nevertheless he looked at his surroundings with considerable interest. She spent much of her time there. On the table lay a book, open where she had been reading last. He lifted it and read its title. It was the poems of Matthew Arnold. While he was

turning over its pages the door opened, and there came the soft rustle of a dress in the room.

"How do you do, Sir Adrian? I am inclined to quarrel with you for interrupting me," said Barbara's sweet voice. "I have been particularly lazy to-day, but the cool of the afternoon roused my sluggish energies, and I was successfully rescuing my heroine from an uncomfortable situation when Patty brought your name."

Her self-possession put him at his ease for a moment, but Barbara was woman enough to know something of what was passing in his mind. Yet she must seem unconscious of it; so, to aid her, she lifted the book he had laid down at her entrance, and made some trivial remark concerning it.

He did not answer it, but kept his eyes fixed upon her placid face with a penetrating gaze, which threatened to banish her self-possession.

"London is very insufferable during these sultry days," she said, going to the window and looking out into the dusty street.

"I am thinking of running away to the sea-side by-and-by. Your Parliamentary duties will keep you in town for some time yet, I fancy."

She turned inquiringly towards him as she spoke, and beneath his gaze her eyes fell. Knowing that she guessed what was coming, he took a step towards her, and spoke in words brief, earnest, and impassioned, as all true love-words are.

"Barbara, I have come to-day to seek my wife. Have I found her?"

A great wave of crimson swept across her face, and she put up her hand as if to keep something away from her. For a moment there was an intense silence, then Barbara lifted her head and looked at him with unfaltering eyes.

"Do I hear you aright? Are you asking me to be your wife, Sir Adrian Severne?"

Her coolness told upon him, and, folding his arms, he answered, briefly and almost sternly—

"I am."

"It is a great surprise. I did not dream that you would stoop to such as I," she said, almost piteously. "Have you considered it well—have you counted the cost?"

"All these are matters foreign to the main question, Barbara, which is simply do you care for me sufficiently to give yourself to me. I have never loved a woman before, and never will again."

She turned away from him a moment, and there was silence again.

"Will you listen to me a few minutes? Sir Adrian.

"Before you answer me?"

"Yes."

"I will; but be brief, Barbara. These are very sharp moments."

"It is right that you should know something of the antecedents of the woman with whom you would share your name," she said, in quiet, clear tones. "I will be brief, as you desire. My mother was a Scotchwoman—the only daughter of a Highland family, whose descent would bear comparison even with yours, Sir Adrian Severne. She made a runaway marriage with a London journalist, a step which severed her from her kindred for ever. Her life was a very hard one. Your public life may have brought you into contact with such struggling literary men, whose genius is insufficient to gain them entrance to the world of letters, and which is yet sufficient to unfit them for anything else. Such was my father. My mother had been delicately nurtured, and she faded in her married life, until she died, when I was sixteen.

"A few years later my father's health broke also, and we went away to a quiet country place to seek restoration, and there he died. I returned to London then, and set to work with my pen, taking the name of Ogilvie, because I wished to remain unknown to my father's friends, and because I loved my mother best. My father's name was Dale."

"Were you the only child?" asked Sir Adrian, deeply interested.

She turned her face away, and it grew white as the lace about her throat. Nevertheless she answered him clearly enough, taking a lie upon her lips—

"I was."

"Is that all you have to say to me, Barbara?"

"That is all," Sir Adrian.

He took a step towards her—

"May I have my answer now?"

She stood before him mute, but the shy drooping of the eyelids, the tender, exquisite curve of the lips, the whole attitude were answer sufficient.

So he took her to his heart, his promised wife, upon whom he had lavished the whole wealth of his love, to whom he had given as true and noble a heart as ever beat in man's bosom. But she was not content. For above the music of his love-words there came a whisper which even his sheltering arms could not keep from sending a chill to her heart—*Retribution*



## CHAPTER XIII.

### SIR ADRIAN'S CHOICE.



SIR ADRIAN SEVERNE went straight from Egbert Street home to Park Lane. The ladies had already left their dressing-rooms, and he had only ten minutes wherein to dress for dinner. Punctuality was a virtue of the ladies of the house, the neglect of it an unpardonable sin in the eyes of Lady Severne. Sir Adrian did not often transgress, and on this occasion he made such good use of his time that he was in the drawing-room before his mother, ready to take her down-stairs.

There was a visitor at Park Lane, a friend of Miss Severne's, the Hon. Ethel St. Maur, an heiress, with a pleasant face and manners of a particularly frank and charming kind.

Sir Adrian liked her; she liked him; but further than that neither felt inclined to go, much as it would have delighted the lady of Mount Severne.

The meal was a pleasant one, for Ethel St. Maur was an indefatigable talker, and rallied Adrian unmercifully about his absence of mind. He was thankful for her presence, and managed to keep up the conversation, though his thoughts were very far from the place.

Ere the meal was well past a carriage called for Miss St. Maur. She had promised to visit Drury Lane with the Duchess of Wendover.

"Won't you come, Frances?" she asked her friend.

"I think not, Ethel. I shall stay quietly at home with mamma to-night. I have seen the opera before, you know."

"What of that? I could go and see it fifty times!" cried the volatile Miss St. Maur with a gay laugh. "See the advan-

tage of being a country girl. I never suffered from *ennui* in my life, Frances, and I never was bored within my recollection. Ah, thanks," she said to Adrian, who rose to open the door. "*Au revoir*. A pleasant evening *en famille*," she added laughing.

Sir Adrian took her out to the door, and adjusted the rich folds of her wrap about the white shoulders in his own kind and tender way.

"You are the perfection of cavaliers, Adrian," she said, with an upward glance from her mischievous black eyes. "You will take good care of your charming wife when you get her."

"How do you know she will be charming?"

"Because she will be the taste of Sir Adrian Severne, severest of critics, most fastidious of men, and when Dame Rumour accredits him with falling in love, I, and all the world besides, will be on the *qui vive*," she said, merrily. "I *must* run; you know from experience that Her Grace of Wendover is not the embodiment of patience."

Adrian Severne smiled to himself as he turned away. She was very charming, and, had Barbara not crossed his path, he might have amerced the revenues of Mount Severne from the full coffers of Trentham Abbey. As it was, how infinitely dearer was one hair upon Barbara's head than the diamond-crowned locks of Ethel St. Maur; how infinitely preferable was the insignificant figure in sombre black to the queenly one in shimmer and sheen of satin!

"My darling," said Adrian to himself, as he turned towards the drawing-room to face an ordeal as trying in its way as the one through which he had passed but a few hours before. His mother and sister looked up in surprise at his entrance.

"Are you not going to Westminster at all to-night, Adrian?" asked Lady Severne.

"Not to-night, mother," he answered, and, going over to the hearth, stood with one arm leaning on the mantel, looking from one to the other meditatively. They had composed themselves for a quiet evening at home, Lady Severne with her knitting, and Frances with her Berlin work. Both were the pictures of stately repose. Frances Severne wore a gown of palest sea-green silk, fitting her perfect figure to perfection; delicate ruffles of priceless lace shaded, but did not conceal, the contour of her arms; her fair hair was braided smoothly and faultlessly about her head, and her calm, proud face, with its

patrician features, made her fair enough to see—fair, but cold, colder, Adrian thought, than the rubies at her throat.

"Frances, we shall call for Lady Bassett to-morrow," said Lady Severne. "Adrian, be so kind as to move the candle a little way. Oh, thanks, I can see nicely now."

"Yes, mamma, Mrs. Græme told Ethel and me to-day in Regent Street that she has been very unwell."

"I saw Lady Bassett to-day," said Adrian.

Lady Severne looked up in some surprise.

"Was she out of doors, Adrian?"

"No, mother; I had occasion to call and see her in the afternoon."

"She makes an absurd fuss over you, Adrian," said his sister, with the slightest curve of scorn on her lip. "Did she send for you to come to Harley Street?"

"No," said Adrian carelessly, though the words and the tone somewhat nettled him. "I am proud to call Lady Bassett my friend, and I went to consult her as a friend concerning a matter which was of the utmost importance to myself."

"*We* were not worthy of your confidence, Adrian," said his mother with some stiffness.

Adrian Severne remained silent, for the simple reason that he had but one answer to give, and it might not improve matters.

Lady Severne never sought or invited her son's confidence on any subject whatsoever; could she complain, therefore, when it was withheld?

"Ethel talks of going home on Monday, mamma," said Frances, changing the subject.

"I am very sorry to hear it," said Lady Severne. "Ethel St. Maur is one of the most charming girls I have met for a long time. She is very beautiful, Adrian," she added, and looked directly at her son.

"She is, and, as you say, most charming," said Adrian, unable to repress a smile. "I, too, am sorry that her visit must come to an end so soon."

"Perhaps if you told her so, Adrian, she might be induced to prolong it," said his mother meaningly.

The smile grew broader on the face of Adrian Severne.

"That would be a very peculiar proceeding on my part; it is your duty, mother—yours and Frances'—to press Miss St. Maur to stay if you wish it."



Lady Severne looked disappointed. A curious smile flitted for a moment on Frances' lips, and then disappeared.

"Adrian," said Lady Severne, suddenly laying down her knitting and turning her eyes on her son's face, "I wish you could see what would be to your infinite advantage, and not let another opportunity slip away from you."

"I do not understand you, mother, in the least," said Adrian, with perfect truth.

"You are obtuse when you wish," returned his mother with some bitterness. "To speak plainly, then, I wish you would come to some understanding with Ethel, and set our minds at rest. One so beautiful and popular will not wait for ever, even for you, Adrian."

"I have no desire to come to any understanding with Miss St. Maur, much as I admire and like her," returned Adrian promptly. "And I am sure she is as indifferent to me as I am to her. I am at a loss to understand, mother, how you ever fancied there could be anything between us."

Lady Severne took up her knitting again, and her lips closed together. She was a woman of few words at all times, and even in the bitterness of her disappointment had nothing to say. Again the smile touched Frances' lips, but she, too, held her peace.

Adrian began to pace restlessly to and fro, and there was a long, constrained silence.

"From what you have just said, and from other tokens you have given me of late, mother," said Adrian, by-and-by, "I conclude that you wish me to marry. Am I right?"

"You will be thirty next month, Adrian," said his mother coldly. "It is natural that I should begin to feel anxious to see what manner of woman is to be the future mistress of Mount Severne."

Again there was a silence. Adrian continued his restless walk, his thoughts in the little drawing-room in Egbert Street, and his heart with its solitary occupant.

"I have chosen my wife at last, mother."

Clearly and distinctly his words rang through the quiet room. Again the mother dropped her knitting, and this time Frances suspended her needle, and fixed her blue eyes on her brother's face.

"Well," said Lady Severne, and her hand went to her heart, as if in expectation of some shock.

"I scarcely dare hope that you will approve my choice, though she is the only woman in the world I shall ever make my wife. You know her well—Barbara Ogilvie, the friend of Lady Bassett."

Lady Sèverne covered her face with her hands. Frances resumed her needlework with an unmistakable curl of her proud lip, which Adrian saw and understood. It expressed her opinion with infinitely more force than a storm of words.

"This is a great blow to me, Adrian, though not entirely unexpected," said Lady Severne, by-and-by, with perfect composure. "You do not, of course, expect us to be elated over your choice. I make no remonstrance, no remark whatever, knowing that because you are a Severne, you will have your way."

Frances Severne shrugged her dainty shoulders, and ventured a remark in her cool sweet voice—

"It would be quite useless, as you say, mamma, to attempt to influence Adrian in this matter. It will be an unpleasant thing for us to have to answer inevitable questions regarding the new member of our family. A discreet silence, I fancy, will be the best course for us to adopt."

Adrian Severne was very angry, and did not speak till his passion cooled. He altogether ignored his sister then, and addressed his mother—

"Mother, there are many families as well born as ours who would be proud to welcome Miss Ogilvie into their midst. She is a fit mate for the best in the land," he said quickly. "Since you are so well aware that my purpose cannot be changed, will you be kind to my wife, for my sake?"

"When Miss Ogilvie becomes your wife, Adrian, I shall not fail in courtesy towards her," answered Lady Severne.

"I know what that means," he said, bitterly. "I know how your courtesy will chill her to the very heart. Mother, life is very short, and contains at the best little enough happiness, heaven knows. Will you not for once lay aside this pride which saps all affection and let your heart plead for me and for the woman I would make my wife? Mother, I am only asking a very little thing from you; will you not grant it?"

"I do not quite understand you, Adrian."

"Then I will speak more plainly. Go to Miss Ogilvie, ask her to visit you here. Take her with you where all the world will see her, and understand what such tokens mean. Treat

her as you would treat Ethel St. Maur were she the one I had chosen."

It was an unfortunate speech. Lady Severne rose, and a red spot began to burn on either cheek.

"You ask an impossibility, Adrian. When this person is your wife, as I have said, I shall countenance her. Further than that I cannot, and you have no right to ask me to go," she said, haughtily. "Frances, will you join me upstairs? I feel very much upset."

"It is my first and last appeal, mother," said Adrian Severne, with darkening brow. "But I deserved better treatment at your hands."

"Adrian!" said Frances, suddenly and sharply, "you are selfish and unfeeling. It is surely enough that you are about to tarnish the lustre of your name. Spare us your reproaches, because we cannot rejoice with you over your unworthy choice."

"God forgive you, Frances," said Adrian in a low voice, "and give you something of a human heart."

She swept past him in ineffable scorn, and mother and daughter left the room together to bewail in private the downfall of the house of Severne.

Adrian paced up and down the room for a few minutes, then left the house, and proceeded to the House of Commons. But his colleagues found him absent-minded and apparently ill at ease.

That night his own concerns were of more interest than the affairs of the nation, and he listened to the winding up of a dreary debate without comprehending it, and declined to vote either way.





## CHAPTER XIV.

### OPINIONS, FAVOURABLE AND OTHERWISE.



EARLY on the morrow Lady Severne betook herself to the residence of Lady Bassett, in Harley Street.

The latter could have pleaded indisposition as an excuse for declining to see her visitor, but for a motive of her own she desired that she should be shown into the drawing-room.

In a few minutes she joined Lady Severne, looking worn and ill in the extreme, and a frigid greeting passed between the two, who never at any time had been warm friends.

After a few commonplace remarks, Lady Severne said, abruptly and sarcastically—

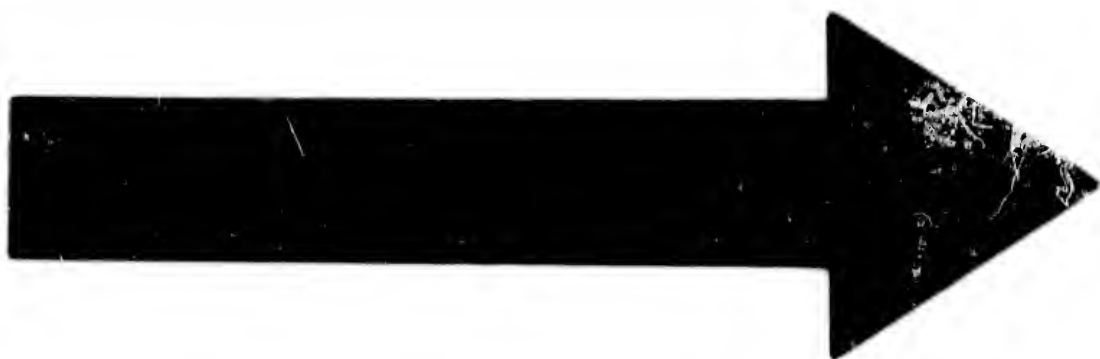
“I presume *you* are aware of this absurd folly of Adrian’s, Lady Bassett.”

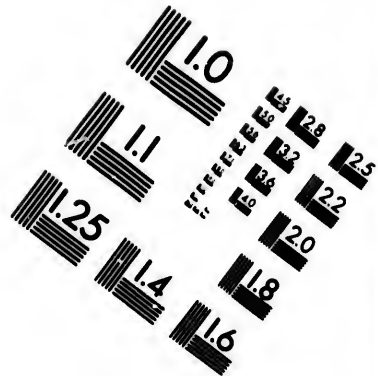
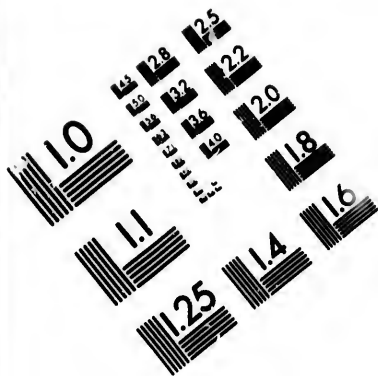
“Adrian is very seldom guilty of any act of folly, I think,” said Lady Bassett, picking some dead leaves from the plant in the *jardiniere* by her side.

“It pleases you to affect ignorance or indifference,” said Lady Severne, with more passion than the woman who knew her so well could have dreamed her capable of. “The person who has entangled my son into a rash and foolish engagement being a *protégée* of your own, Lady Bassett, your sympathies will naturally go with them.”

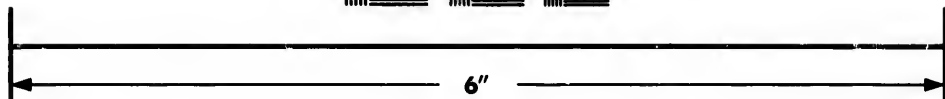
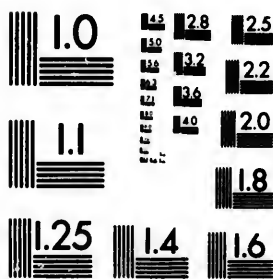
Lady Bassett rose. She was very angry, but she hid it well.

“I affect no ignorance, no indifference, Lady Severne,” she said, clearly and calmly. “If I am aware that Adrian has asked *my friend*, Barbara Ogilvie, to be his wife, what then?”





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"Then I ask you, Lady Bassett, was it fair, **was** it just to me and mine to throw temptation in my son's way, to encourage him in this folly—yes, I repeat it, this wicked folly?"

Lady Bassett bit her lip.

"You are angry, Lady Severne, and I will let your words pass. Permit me to vindicate myself, although I do not in the least imagine I am called upon to do so. It was during Easter holidays when Adrian came unexpectedly and without invitation to Bassett Royal, that I suspected first that he had a warmer feeling than admiration for my friend. The discovery was not pleasant to me, for I say to you what I said to Adrian, Lady Severne, I do not approve of unequal marriages. After my return to town I was careful to keep them apart so far as lay in my power. But I am only one. There were others who had no such interest, and at whose houses they met, and *I* could not prevent it. Adrian came to me yesterday, and told me of his intention to make Barbara his wife if she would take him. That she *has* accepted him I take for granted from what you have just said."

Lady Severne's lip curled.

"There was no possibility of a refusal," she said curtly.

"I warned Adrian of your sure displeasure," continued Lady Bassett. "But he was in dead earnest, and he loves her as men love only once in life. Knowing that, I had no right, nor has any other person—even *you*, his mother—any right to stand in his way. She is worthy of him, Lady Severne—no disgrace can possibly attach to a marriage with her."

"Is it a marriage you would have sought for your son, if you had one, Lady Bassett?"

"I would not stand in the way of my son's happiness, Lady Severne."

Lady Severne rose.

"My idea of happiness differs from yours," she said. "In my opinion there can be none apart from a conscientious performance of the duties we owe to ourselves, our families, and society at large.

Lady Bassett smiled somewhat sadly.

"I could wish that society would return to the simple ways of its grandmother, Lady Severne, and regard love as the chief element in the marriage state. There is no happiness without it. Good morning. As one who has loved Adrian almost as well as you, may I plead for him and for his betrothed?"



"I shall never forget that I am a lady," returned Lady Severne, and took her leave.

Lady Bassett sat musing long upon what had passed, and finally ordered her carriage. Her heart yearned unspeakably over Adrian's betrothed, and she was conscious of a certain placid satisfaction that the affair had so turned out, though she had honestly done her utmost to prevent it. She had been faithful to Adrian's mother, but there was no reason now why she should not openly countenance the engagement.

She was left an unusually long time in Miss Ogilvie's drawing-room, and when Barbara did enter she was struck by her exceeding paleness. She took her in her arms without ado, and kissed her as she might a daughter of her own.

"My dear, I know all about it, and I congratulate you with all my heart."

Barbara murmured some words of thanks, and escaped from the embrace.

"You are a very fortunate girl, Barbara; your life is quite a romance. My dear, you ought to be a happy and grateful girl—you have won the heart of a great and good man."

Barbara did not lift her eyes. She did not look particularly elated over her good fortune, whereat Lady Bassett marvelled.

"Sir Adrian has not delayed telling you," said Barbara at last.

She spoke his name without a tremor or a blush, and a faint smile crept to her lips.

"Adrian has no secrets from me," said Lady Bassett, somewhat drily.

She was disappointed in her friend that day, and inclined to be out of temper with her.

"I had a visit from your future mother-in-law this morning, Barbara," she said by-and-by.

Barbara's face flushed, but she spoke never a word. In her heart of hearts she feared her future kindred with a great fear.

"She was speaking of you, Barbara," continued Lady Bassett mercilessly. "It is a proof of Adrian Severne's nobleness of heart that he made known his engagement to you to his mother without delay. There is no such thing as shirking duty, however painful it may be, in the nature of your future husband."

"What did she say of me?" asked Barbara, in a cold, hard voice.

She could not bear to hear Lady Bassett speak in such a tone. Every word stabbed her to the heart. Already she was paying a heavy price for her sin.

"You will have trouble with Adrian's relatives, Barbara," said Lady Bassett, beginning to remove her gloves. "It will require all the tact you possess to enable you to hold your own among them."

"From that I gather that it is not likely the Ladies Severne will welcome me kindly," said Barbara.

"At present they are not inclined to do so," was the candid reply. "Forgive me if I remind you that, in certain ways, Adrian's marriage with you is a great blow to his mother. She is a very proud woman, Barbara."

"So am I, Lady Bassett," said Barbara with quiet pride.

"My dear, let me advise you; I am older than you, and I know intimately the family into which you are going. You must win them, Barbara, and not live at daggers'-points with them."

"I shall keep out of their way as much as I can, I fancy that will be the wisest course," said Barbara with a laugh.

"You will have the feelings of another besides yourself to consider, Barbara, and when that other is your husband your duty becomes very plain," said Lady Bassett.

"If my husband truly cares for me, Lady Bassett, he will keep all unpleasant things away from me," said Barbara willfully. "I claim his first consideration as a matter of course."

Lady Bassett fastened her glove and rose.

"You are not in a good mood to-day, Barbara, so I shall go. Will you accompany me to Drury Lane to-night? I shall be alone in my box."

"Thanks, yes. Dear Lady Bassett, forgive me; I am very wretched," said Barbara hurriedly.

Lady Bassett laid her two hands on the girl's shoulder, and turned her face to the light.

"Barbara, I do not understand you. Answer me truly, do you love Adrian Severne as he deserves to be loved, for this morning I feel inclined to doubt it?"

"I have promised to be his wife, Lady Bassett," said Barbara, but her eyes fell. Not always, ah! not always could she keep up the mask, and the eyes bent upon her were very keen indeed.

"If I thought, Barbara, that you could be capable of deceiving Adrian Severne I should——"

"Well," said Barbara.

"I should be forced to lose my friend," said Lady Bassett, and Barbara's pale lip quivered. "My dear, I am very cruel, but it is because I love you both that I am so. Oh, Barbara, strive to be worthy of a good man's love. It is the choicest gift of heaven. I say it, who have loved and lost."

Barbara had no word to say, and the next moment she was alone.

Then she fell down upon her knees sobbing, for the limit of her endurance was reached, and she felt her position with all the acuteness of a sensitive nature.

At noon Sir Adrian Severne was announced. Barbara came into his presence shyly; her love did not match his, but her heart was awakening in response to his.

Adrian Severne was not a very demonstrative lover, and contented himself that morning with a long, close pressure of the slim hand offered to him in greeting. But his honest eyes were demonstrative enough, for, after the first glance, Barbara dared not meet them.

She seated herself on an ottoman, and Adrian, after looking at her a few minutes sat down beside her.

"I cannot realise yet, Barbara," he said, "that you are my promised wife. I——"

"You have not repented, Sir Adrian?" said Barbara, timidly.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"A needless question, my darling," he answered lightly.

By-and-by he took from his pocket a tiny morocco case which contained the betrothal ring. It was worthy his taste, and Barbara could have cried out in admiration of the exquisite and costly gem.

He slipped it upon her finger.

"It binds you to me, my darling, in the meantime. By-and-by my wife will have jewels more fitting than this."

She drooped her face low, so low that it rested on his arm.

"I am not worthy, I am not worthy," she sobbed. "What can I give in return for such love?"

No need to record his answer, nor to linger with them here. Their talk was lovers' talk, and the hours sped like minutes.

Adrian Severne took his leave, more in love than ever, and Barbara, unsettled and restless, went to her study, not to

write, but to sit and think till her eyes grew weary, and her heart as heavy as lead.

The day passed, and, at the appointed time, Lady Bassett called for Miss Ogilvie. Barbara wore a white gown and a rich crimson cloak, and no ornament save her betrothal ring. She was very fair, and sweet, and love-worthy, and lady-like enough to comport herself in any society. So thought her friend when they were whirling through the streets. Barbara drew off her glove, and held up her left hand, where the priceless gem flashed and glittered in the dim light.

"Adrian came to-day, Lady Bassett, and brought it with him," she said with an exquisite mixture of shyness and pride which won Lady Bassett's heart.

"Ah, it is lovely. Now you are my Barbara," said the elder woman good-humouredly. "It was a strange, wild creature I encountered this morning."

Barbara laughed, and the talk turned upon matters of general interest.

Many eyes were directed towards Lady Bassett's box that night, and very deliberately Lady Severne put up her eye-glass and took a protracted survey of its younger occupant.

At the close of the second act Sir Adrian went round to Lady Bassett's box, and remained behind Miss Ogilvie's chair till the end of the play, a proceeding which created quite a sensation in more than one curious breast. He also escorted the ladies to the carriage, and, as he wrapped his darling's cloak about her, murmured a word of passionate endearment which was audible to her and one other. Under the gas lamp, close to the carriage, stood a gentlemanly, well-dressed individual, who had been in the theatre, but whose attention had been wholly engrossed by the little tableau being enacted in Lady Bassett's private box.

As Miss Ogilvie gave her hand to her lover for a last adieu her eyes fell upon the man's face, and he lifted his hat and went away.

No wonder that she sank back sick and faint among the cushions, and put up her wrap to hide the pallor on her face.

For her enemy had crossed her path once more.



## CHAPTER XV.

### WARNING WHISPERS.



"H, bairn, what wad I no gie for a glint o' Dunire an' a scent o' the heather hills."

The voice was feeble and full of a most painful longing.

Faithful Elspet Carmichael was dying far "frae hame," dying amid the smoke, and din, and bustle of the great Babylon, and in the last hours her heart was in her own land, among her own people, her eyes longing for the scenes from which she had been severed so long.

It was the evening of a November day, and a fog enveloped the city in its impenetrable folds. Even in the comfortable sick chamber the atmosphere was close and unpleasant, and the gas burned only dimly.

Barbara was in the room, sitting by the bed pale and heavy-eyed, for her heart was very sore for Elspet.

"Dear Elspet," she said, and laid her cool hand on the old, worn, and nerveless fingers, "if I only could get all these for you, if only I could spirit you away to Dunire. When the spring comes we will go together——"

She paused, for the old woman raised a warning finger.

"Wheesht, bairn; baith you and me kens brawly that I'll never see anither spring. I ken ye wad gie me a'thing. I'm no grumblin', but the hame o' yer forbears is dear, dear tae a Scotch heart—Bonnie Dunire."

She said the last words almost in a whisper, and the look on her face told the girl who watched by her *how* she loved the place. Only now did Barbara begin to know the full depth of unselfish devotion which had made Elspet Carmichael stick to

the one daughter of the house of Ogilvie, and again to *her* daughter, so long and faithfully.

"Are you weaker to-day, Elspet?" she asked anxiously.

"Ay, ay, sippin' awa'," said the old woman, and, suddenly lifting the girl's left hand, she looked for a few moments at the ring shining on the third finger.

"It's a braw ring, an' it was a braw man that gied it, an' no only a braw bairn, but a guid," she said. "I can dee in peace, Miss Barbara, kennin' ye'll be a happy mairret wife afore lang."

"Yes, Elspet," said Barbara, very low.

"Bairn!" The keen, black eyes turned very searchingly upon the girl's face. "Answer me ae thing, truly, hae ye telt Sir Adrian about Robert yet?"

"No, Elspet, I'm afraid," said Barbara.

"Ye *maun* dae't. What is't ye fear? D'ye no ken that a man's true love winna gang past ye for sic a trifle? Tell him, bairn, the very neist time ye see him. If ye wait till ye're mairret he'll mebbe no forgie ye sure for hidin't frae him. Nae guid ever cam' o' concealment ye, Barbara; my lamb, be guided in time."

"You don't understand, Elspet," said Barbara hurriedly.

"Sir Adrian Severne might not think fit to connect himself with the sister of a felon. I—I dare not tell him, Elspet, I could not let him go now."

Elspet shook her head to and fro on the pillow.

"Ye winna prosper—mark my words, ye winna prosper if ye keep on deceivin' the man," she said solemnly. "Frae that I jalouse that ye'll be gaun tae let yer brither drap a'thegither?" she added sarcastically.

"It is not right, it is not just, Elspet, that I should suffer for my brother's sin," said Barbara, rebelliously.

"It's the way o' this weary warld. Eh, bairn, I lo'ed yer mither weel, and I lo'ed ye as weel—mind my deen' words. Be open wi' the noble, true-hearted man wha luv'es ye better than himsel'. Tell him a' thing afore ye tak' a wife's vows upon ye. It'll save ye mony a sair heart, and maybe something waur," said Elspet half-drowsily.

Then she fell into a slight sleep, and Barbara rose.

The words impressed her deeply, but she had travelled so far on the way of deceit that it was hard, hard to turn back. She pictured to herself the look upon the face of her lover

when she told her tale, fancied how he would turn from her in his righteous ire, and, though she believed he would not cast her off, she would need to be contented henceforth to occupy a lower place in his estimation. He had placed her on the highest pedestal, and it would be gall to her to step lower. So she reasoned and hardened herself, and continued in the path she had chosen.

Ah, me! but the days were coming when she should remember with bitter pain the faithful counsel of Elspet Carmichael. They were the last words Elspet spoke. Before the dawn she fell asleep, quietly and peacefully, and so the last link was severed between Barbara's old life and the new. She was laid to rest, as she desired, beside Mrs. Dale, in the London cemetery. Even in death she did not wish to be parted from those for whom she had given up so much.

In the first week of December Barbara proceeded to Bassett Royal. She was to be married in the parish church of Bassett on the morning of Christmas Day. During the six months of her engagement she had not once come in contact with her future kinsfolk. They chose to ignore her, to ignore altogether the fact of the coming marriage. Adrian waited as long as he could before he broke the silence. But when December came, and he was counting days instead of weeks till his marriage, it behoved him to have some conversation regarding the future state of his domestic affairs.

At breakfast, one morning at Mount Severne, he said, pointedly and somewhat coldly—

"My marriage takes place, mother, on Christmas Day."

"So you have left us to gather from the columns of the society journals," said Lady Severne, briefly.

"Is that my blame, mother?" asked Adrian, quietly. "Have you ever asked me a question? Have you ever expressed the slightest interest in my affairs?"

Lady Severne held her peace.

"The bride is to be given away, I believe, by Lady Bassett," said Frances, leisurely sipping her coffee.

"I owe to Lady Bassett a debt which I shall never be able to repay," said Adrian. "She has done and been to me all I had a right to expect from my relatives."

There was a dead silence. Lady Severne turned over the *Times*, but though her eyes were fixed upon it she did not read a word.

"My wife and I shall come straight to Mount Severne on Christmas Day," he said presently.

"Which means, mamma," said Frances, with her chill smile, "that you and I will be expected to spend Christmas elsewhere."

Lady Severne made no remark.

"Mother," said Adrian, pushing back his chair, and speaking in tones they had seldom heard, "will you lay aside your paper for a few minutes and listen to me?"

"I am listening," she answered, but did not look at him.

"We must come to some understanding at once and for all. In your present state of feeling towards the woman who is to be my wife, it would scarcely be pleasant for you, leaving her feelings out of the question altogether, to be here when I bring her home."

Lady Severne bowed her head.

"I have not spent a Christmas away from Mount Severne since your father died, but doubtless Frances and I can go elsewhere, and leave the house to you and your bride," she said, with affected meekness, which was all pride.

Adrian Severne bit his lip. He was sorely tried, but he would give them nothing wherewith to reproach him.

"I shall make arrangements, if you wish, to have Beltreis Hall put in order for you; it——"

"My arrangements are already made, Adrian," his mother interrupted. "Frances and I go to Mentone on the 26th. We will remain here to receive your wife, and then rid you of our presence."

Adrian was profoundly surprised. Was she softening? Was it not possible after all that she might reconcile herself to the inevitable, and welcome his wife with at least an outward show of kindness and cordiality. The soul of kindness himself, he never dreamed that there could be another and a baser motive in her heart.

"Thank you, mother, for even that concession," he said quickly, and she winced at the words.

"How long do you intend to remain in France?" he asked by-and-by.

"Several weeks. I intend to purchase a house in London, Adrian, and at holiday times we may look upon the Dower House as our own, I suppose."

Adrian remained silent. The Dower House was too near



Mount Severne. Barbara would be subjected to a constant scrutiny, which might be unpleasant to her. But she could hold her own, he knew, therefore he answered cordially enough—"As you please, mother," and the subject dropped.

Sir Adrian Severne's engagement with Miss Ogilvie had created much stir in certain circles, and the *denouement* of the affair was waited for with considerable anxiety. When the society journals announced that the marriage was to take place at Bassett, and that the breakfast was to be laid at Bassett Royal, it became a matter of much conjecture whether Sir Adrian Severne's relations intended to countenance the affair. It became known before the 25th that his nearest kindred intended to absent themselves, but his uncle, Lord Ellerslie, had signified his intention of being present, and the select few to whom Lady Bassett sent cards of invitation accepted without any exception. On the 24th Sir Adrian Severne came to Bassett, and, after dining at the Rectory, proceeded on foot to Bassett Royal.

"Adrian, I was growing anxious lest you should not come to-night," said Lady Bassett, meeting him in the hall. "Come in here a moment. Barbara is in the drawing-room. I want only a word with you."

She drew him into the library and shut the door.

"What of your mother and sister, Adrian? Do they show no signs of relenting?" she inquired eagerly.

"I hardly know how to answer you," he said. "I cannot read Frances, but my mother waits at Mount Severne to receive Barbara; these were her words."

Lady Bassett reflected a moment.

"I wish you had told me of this before, Adrian. I would so willingly have placed Blenheim Towers at your disposal rather than that Barbara should be subjected to such an ordeal on her wedding-day. She will not be in a very fit frame of mind to stand a cold reception."

"Do you doubt my mother's sincerity?" asked Adrian.

"My dear boy, no; but what she might deem a kind enough reception might chill the heart of a young wife on her wedding-day," she said. "I think you have not acted quite wisely in this matter."

Adrian began to pace restlessly to and fro the room.

"What can I do, Lady Bassett?"

"Nothing now. It may be all right, but I have been very

uneasy to-day. Now go to Barbara; she is waiting for you."

As Adrian Severne turned to leave the room he took one of the white hands and raised it to his lips tenderly and reverently.

"May God bless you for your kindness to Barbara and to me—kindness which we can never hope either to acknowledge or repay," he said, speaking under the influence of deep emotion.

Tears started to Lady Bassett's eyes, and she kept the hand a moment in her own.

"You have crept, both of you, into the heart of a childless widow," she said tremulously; then a smile stole about her lips. "And because it is my nature to be contrary, I have favoured you, whether wisely or unwisely remains to be seen, in this love affair of yours."

An answering smile touched Adrian's lips.

"Wisely, you will live to see," he answered lightly, and went away upstairs to his darling.

The beautiful room was in darkness save at the further end, where a red glow from the fire made strange, fantastic shadows on the floor. In a low chair on the hearth sat Barbara, with her hands folded on her lap, and her eyes fixed upon the fire. Her face was grave and thoughtful even to sadness, and her eyes were troubled. She was glad to hear the door open, and, rising slowly, turned to greet her lover. Her attitude was one of shy expectancy, her face downcast, her eyes moist and tender. He said nothing, only took the drooping figure to his heart as if he would keep it there for evermore. There was no shrinking from his embrace, no avoidance of his caress, for all the love of her heart was his. How deep, abiding, and passionate that love she had not discovered yet.

"My darling," he whispered by-and-by, "I thought to-day would never come."

She smiled a little, and drawing herself back, looked up into his face.

"Am I very dear to you, Adrian?" she asked, almost wistfully.

Dear! How dear no words of his could tell. She was the very light of his eyes, the joy of his heart, the most precious thing to him on earth.

"Could nothing make you love me less, Adrian? Will you always care for me as much as you do to-night?"

"Why these questions, dear one?" he asked lightly. "Nothing could make me love you less—unless I was to learn that you had deceived me in any way."

"Why should I deceive you, Adrian? That is a strange thing to say."

She faltered and her eyes fell.

"My darling, I will have no more of this foolish talk," he said gently. "You are to be my wife to-morrow. That is sufficient for me at present. Lift up your face, my dearest, and tell me you are happy. I have not asked many assurances from you, Barbara; give me this one."

She lifted her pale face to his, and laid her hands on his tall shoulders with a light, clinging touch.

"Yes, Adrian, I am happy, and I will be to you a loving and faithful wife. There is nothing I will not do and be to you to prove my gratitude for the unspeakable honour and happiness you have given to me."

Then she hid her face upon his breast, sobbing, breaking down in his presence for the first time.

I need not linger with them here. There was not a shadow upon the happy heart of Adrian Severne, and Barbara, yielding to his influence, found her heart beginning to be at rest again. Surely when she was the wife of this man no care nor sorrow could come near her any more.

None indeed, except the bitter sorrow she had heaped up for herself.

The only shadow upon her hearth would be that placed there by her own hands.





## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE WEDDING DAY.



HERE was a guest at the marriage of Sir Adrian Severne who had received no card from Lady Bassett. He was early in the church, and sat in an obscure pew behind one of the flower-wreathed pillars. But from thence he had a good view of the ceremony, and while it was proceeding a half-bitter, half-scornful smile played about his cruel lips.

It was a fair morning for a bridal, and the Christmas sunshine stole into the beautiful building and gilded the head of the bride as she knelt before the altar. She was exquisitely dressed, and looked more beautiful than even those who admired her most had ever seen her look before. She took her vows calmly and quietly, uttering the responses in a clear, sweet voice distinctly audible through the whole church. Even the uninvited guest did not lose a word, and he ground his teeth as he listened. But when the ceremony was past the bride moved and spoke like one in a dream. She obeyed her husband's touch upon her arm, and accompanied him to the vestry, signing the register there, and listening to the warm congratulations offered to her without being able to answer. There was a fear in her heart, a fear of something indefinable, but of which she could not rid herself. She found its explanation before she reached the carriage which waited to convey her back to Bassett Royal. As they stepped out of the church into the warm, clear light of a brilliant sun, the uninvited guest, standing among some curious onlookers by the church porch, looked directly into the face of the bride, and spoke a few words, brief, pointed, and courteous—

"I congratulate you, Lady Severne."

They were heard by those nearest to him, but fortunately or unfortunately escaped the ears of the bridegroom. He felt his wife's fingers tremble on his arm, and turned to see her grown pale as death.

"My darling, what is it? This has been too much for you," he whispered.

"A momentary faintness, Adrian," she answered, with a wretched attempt at a smile. "It is a trying ordeal even for a woman who claims to be free of nervousness. It will pass in a moment."

Nevertheless, the pallor did not leave her face, and when she crossed the threshold of Bassett Royal, dressed for her wedding journey, her eyes were full of a strange, deep dread, and she glanced round almost expecting to see there also the uninvited guest.

She made her adieux hurriedly, scarcely finding words wherewith to answer the blessing with which the woman who had stood in the place of a mother to her sent her on her way. They drove to the railway junction, some miles distant, to meet a train which would take them direct to Abbot's Lynn, the nearest station to Mount Severne.

When the train was fairly on its way the newly-made wife recovered herself, and began to talk in her natural and graceful way.

"Your mother and sister are to be at Mount Severne Adrian," she said, as they neared their journey's end. "I am not a timid woman, but I shrink from the meeting. They might have sent me a kind word by letter to reassure me."

"You will not be in their presence long before you win their hearts, as you have won mine, my wife," said Adrian, fondly; but Barbara slightly shook her head.

"They are women, Adrian," she said, with a gleam of sarcastic humour; "and they have cause to regard me with disfavour, because I have in a measure supplanted them."

She spoke the words as she felt them in simple truth, and without the shadow of offensive assumption. From how few women's lips could such a sentence have fallen so gracefully, her husband thought; but he also thought inwardly that such a speech made in the hearing of his kinsfolk would be likely to raise a storm. But having implicit confidence in his wife's tact and good taste, his mind was at ease.

The short winter day was near its close when the train steamed into the station at Abbot's Lynn. They were the only passengers, and their carriage the only vehicle in sight. In the grey light the curious officials saw nothing of the new lady of the manor, except a slight figure buried in furs, for her face was veiled.

The stately individuals in charge of the faultless equipage at the station gate were the pictures of stolidity, yet their eyes rested keenly upon their new mistress, and when she put back her veil before entering the carriage and smiled at them, they were considerably gratified and surprised.

A two-miles' drive along a picturesque road, which followed the windings of a narrow stream, brought them to the magnificent entrance to Mount Severne. The lamps were lit, the lodgekeeper on the alert, so without a moment's delay they swept rapidly through the great gates. Looking out, Barbara saw upon either side of the wide avenue a stately line of noble trees, with boughs interlacing overhead, through which the first faint beams of a rising moon were playing weirdly.

Both were silent, but similar thoughts occupied their minds.

When the carriage stopped, and she saw the flicker and gleam of many lighted windows in the darkness, she turned to him tremblingly.

"Adrian, I am afraid. Is it home? Will I feel it to be so?" she asked.

"My wife, ten thousand welcomes home," he said, with his lip to her cheek. "God grant that it may be indeed home to you, in the fullest sense of the word."

There was nothing more said, and Sir Adrian Severne sprang from the carriage, helped his wife to alight, and ushered her into his home and hers. There was no assemblage of domestics, no demonstration of any kind. It was in keeping with the feelings of both, with all the circumstances of the marriage, that the home-coming should be as quiet as possible.

"The ladies?" said Sir Adrian inquiringly to the footman. "Are they upstairs, Markham?"

"In the white drawing room, Sir Adrian," returned the man. Then Adrian took his wife upon his arm, and they proceeded upstairs. Not in the first moments of her home-coming did Barbara observe any of her surroundings. She was conscious of nothing but a flutter of nervous excitement, and a strange sinking of heart.

Yet when they paused a moment at the door of the room where the ordeal was to be faced, she looked up into her husband's face with eyes in which a smile lay.

"You are not afraid, my darling?"

"Not with you," she answered, and he opened the door.

The room was brilliantly lighted, and dazzling in its magnificence of white and gold.

Barbara withdrew her hand from her husband's arm, and in the gesture told that she was able to stand alone to meet the women who had despised and ignored her on a footing of her own. She had seen them many times and in many places, but never had she seen them look so stately, so patrician.

They were in full evening dress, and Frances in her sweeping robe of blue satin seemed to cast the shrinking little figure into utter insignificance.

Nothing was to be gathered from their faces, they were calm and cold as ice.

"Mother," said Adrian, eagerly, "this is my dear wife. Bid her welcome home."

Barbara raised her veil and took a step forward. For Adrian's sake she could have laid her head upon the breast of his stately mother, but there was no invitation in the cold eyes bent upon her. Nevertheless, one white hand was outstretched, and in it Barbara laid her own.

"You are welcome, Lady Adrian," said the proud, cold voice, but the look and the tone belied the words.

All the passionate heart of Barbara rose. She could have cried out in the presence of these two statues, who had the faces and figures of women, but she only bit her lip, and turned to Frances almost wistfully.

"Won't you kiss me?" she said, impulsively, and regretted the words the moment they were uttered, for they provoked no response save a smile on the lips of Frances Severne. Then the slight figure drew itself up—her face hardened, her eyes became brave, and bright, and fearless.

"The cold outside was nothing to this, Adrian," she said clearly. "If you have nothing more to say to me, Lady Severne, I shall retire to my own apartments to make my toilette."

A gleam shot through the eyes of Lady Severne, and she answered slowly—

"I have no more to say to you, Lady Adrian, except that dinner will be served in half an hour."

Barbara bowed, and a smile, half-amused, half-mocking, wreathed her lips.

But in the corridor outside it died away, and she lifted very troubled eyes to her husband's stern face. It was very stern, for Adrian Severne's ire was roused.

"Adrian, are they women? What are they made of? They make me feel wild and wicked. If they are to be here I cannot stay, or I shall do some dreadful thing."

"My darling, they are *not* to be here," he reassured her. "I shall take good care in future that my wife is spared a repetition of such a scene."

In the drawing-room mother and daughter looked at each other a full moment, then Frances spoke, and her tones were very bitter.

"She will not be ignored, mamma."

"My worst fears are realised," groaned the unhappy mother. "If she had been gentle and humble, willing to learn and be guided by me, I could have borne it, but she has a bold, proud, independent spirit. I can see from the very way in which she looked at me, Adrian's wife will be the mistress of Mount Severene, so the sooner you and I quit it the better for us both."

"Adrian is to be pited," said Frances. "She will wind him round her finger. Did the chit think to deceive me with her affectation of affectionate humility? Yes, as you say, mamma, the sooner we quit the better for all concerned. I have never quarrelled with any one in my life, and, if I could fancy myself doing so, it would be with Adrian's wife. I wish we had gone away to-day, mamma. How is the evening to be spent? we will be so unmistakably *de trop* both in the dining-room and here."

"We can go to another room, I fancy," said Lady Severne sharply.

"The rooms are *hers* now," said Frances pleasantly, and, without answering, her mother began to pace restlessly up and down the long room.

These were bitter moments for her, for the pride of her race was strong within her, and it was a double chagrin to find her new daughter a person who would resent patronising, and who to all outward appearance was not in any way awed by her elevation to a position of which any woman had just reason to be proud.



"Lady Bassett has spoiled her utterly with her absurd idolatry," she said bitterly, "and has taught her to fancy herself the equal of the highest in the land."

"Don't speak of Lady Bassett," said Frances passionately. "But for her we might have been welcoming Ethel home to-night. I shall never forget her as long as I live."

The sound of approaching footsteps, the soft opening of the door, and the rustle of a silken robe made them look round in surprise. It was Adrian's wife already, and alone.

She wore an exquisite robe of cream-coloured silk, with rich lace about the throat, among the soft folds of which sparkled her husband's wedding gift, a necklace of priceless value.

She looked well, rarely well, in spite of her insignificant height, and she carried herself with the grace and dignity of a queen.

She came forward into the room without hesitation, and looked from one to another a moment in silence.

"Is Sir Adrian not ready yet?" Lady Severne was forced to say, for even she winced under the keen, cool, penetrating gaze of these bright, beautiful eyes.

"No," answered Barbara, her voice clear and sweet as a bell. "I made haste with my toilet, and came down alone, because I wanted to speak to you, Lady Severne."





## CHAPTER XVII.

### EVEN AT MOUNT SEVERNE.



T was a curious picture. The beautiful room, the dazzling lights, and the three figures grouped about the hearth. Upon two faces—the dawning of a haughty surprise, upon the other the light of a settled purpose.

"I am ready to hear what you have to say," said Adrian's mother to Adrian's wife.

"It is but a few words," said Barbara quietly. "I am aware that even in thus voluntarily seeking you, and addressing you, I am but convincing you that I am a stranger to your ways. I may be, but I am also a woman, with feelings keen, quick, and passionate, and I want simply to ask whether I may take your reception of me to-night as the text of the treatment I may expect at your hands for all time coming."

It was a daring speech, but it was delivered without faltering, and her eyes never once left the face of the woman to whom it was addressed. She waved her hand as if to put it far away from her.

"I welcomed you to your home, Lady Adrian. What more did you expect from *me*?"

"You used words of welcome, but your eyes slew me where I stood. You touched my hand, and hated me in your heart. I am not blind, Lady Severne. I can read beneath the surface. Am I to understand that because your son has chosen to honour me above all other women with the unspeakable gift of his love, and that because my heart answered to his, I have made his kindred my enemies for life? Many women would, from cowardice or reticence, leave such questions unasked. I cannot do so. Will you answer them truly as they are put?"

Frances Severne shrugged her shoulders and glanced at the timepiece on the mantel.

"It is a pity Adrian should miss this excellent piece of acting," she said with infinite scorn.

For a brief instant Barbara's eyes turned upon her face fearlessly, and almost contemptuously.

"I await your answer, Lady Severne," she said quietly.

"I have none to give," was the calm reply. "You have reached the summit of your ambition. You occupy to-night a proud position as the wife of Sir Adrian Severne. Let it content you, and leave your husband's kindred to themselves."

Something blinded Barbara's eyes for a moment, and her lip quivered. She would make one appeal to the heart of her husband's mother for his sake. She took a step forward, and laid her hand on Lady Severne's arm.

"In me you see the downfall of many proud hopes, perhaps, for with just reason you looked for a nobler daughter than I," she said in a low voice. "But I am Adrian's choice; for his sake forgive me, and love me a little, for I will be a true and faithful wife to him, and do my utmost to fill my place worthily and well."

A momentary softening stole into her proud face, and involuntarily she bent towards the eager, uplifted face. But it passed as quickly as it came, and she let the hand drop from her arm.

"I do not understand such sentimental talk. You are my son's wife, Lady Adrian; I shall not forget it," she said, and moved away to the further end of the room.

"Frances, will *you* plead for me?" said Barbara with exquisite grace, but Frances Severne turned her back upon her brother's wife.

Then Barbara's face hardened again, and, when she spoke, her voice had in it a ring of scorn.

"I have humbled myself very low to-night, Lady Severne, for, proud as you are, your pride cannot equal mine. I have sued to you as I shall never do again, and the memory of this night will never fade from my remembrance. I thank God that in my husband's love I can find all I need to make the happiness of my life."

Adrian's entrance put an end to the painful scene. He looked from one to the other questioningly, easily guessing from his wife's face that there had been something unusual passing.

"You should have waited for me, Barbara," he said in a low voice, and offered her his arm.

His other one was his mother's right, but it was not offered to her to-night, and the curious family party proceeded to the dining-room.

During the meal Barbara's behaviour was perfect, and forced admiration from those who were ready to magnify trifles. But though the talk never flagged, all were relieved when it was at an end.

Lady Severne and Frances retired immediately to their own apartments without remark or apology of any kind.

Husband and wife left the dining-room also, and Adrian led the way through the great hall to a folding door at the further end. He swung it aside, and Barbara entered, to find herself in a large, light apartment, fitted up as a study. It was furnished in exquisite taste, and the choicest gems of literature and art had been gathered there for her benefit and pleasure. She lifted her eyes inquiringly to her husband's face.

"This is where the author of 'Ambition' will weave her next plot, and wield the magic pen which stirs so many thousand hearts," said Adrian, with a fond smile. "Does it please her fastidious taste?"

Barbara did not speak. She walked slowly through the beautiful room, noting with keen eyes the evidence of her husband's thoughtfulness for her. All her favourite books, the pictures she most admired, met her delighted gaze. Nothing had been neglected or forgotten.

"I want my darling to understand," said Adrian, with a light touch on her arm, "that though she is married to me her time is her own, and that she has perfect freedom to pursue the work she loves best, and which she has made so successful, only on one condition, that I am allowed to interfere when I fancy she is inclined to sacrifice health to fame. Is the bargain sealed, Barbara?"

Slowly Barbara turned and raised her eyes to the noble face bent upon her in love. They were full of tears, and for a moment her tender lips could utter no word.

"Adrian, Adrian, you make me ashamed. I am so unworthy, so unworthy," she said brokenly. "What can I do to prove the depth of my love, my gratitude, my unspeakable happiness?"

"Only this, my darling," said Adrian, drawing her to his heart, "come to me with all your cares, and trust me implicitly.

It is only trust which proves beyond a doubt that there is perfect love. It is not too much to ask?"

For a moment a wild impulse came upon Barbara to tell him all even now, to own her deception, to find peace and pardon on the very evening of her wedding day. Surely there could be no better opportunity than this to clear away the mists, and begin a new life, new in all ways.

"Is it too much to ask, Barbara?" said Adrian, with a smile.

"No," she answered, with a sigh; "you have all my heart, my husband. I was but quiet with the weight of my own unworthiness, that was all."

So again the chance slipped, and with her own hands Barbara Severne put away from her the surest foundation for an enduring happiness. At what cost, she was to learn in days to come.

Early on the morrow, Adrian Severne's mother and sister took their dignified departure from Mount Severne. The parting was cold and constrained on all sides. Not yet could Adrian forgive them for their treatment of the wife he loved so well.

The days passed at Mount Severne as the first halcyon days of married life pass, on wings of gold. In the close and constant communion of heart and soul Barbara learned each day more and more of the noble, upright, princely heart she had won. It was all open for her to read, there was no page of Adrian Severne's blameless life which was not shown to the wife he loved; but, though he knew it not, he had not all her confidence, and certain pages of her chequered life remained unturned. Better, far better, that she had trusted him then; better the brief pain for both than the years of bitter sorrow which her deception cost.

Barbara had fearlessly braved the aristocratic displeasure of her husband's kindred, but she feared with a great fear the cloud which would surely gather on his brow when she told her tale.

They lived in complete retirement. Soon enough would the gay and busy world claim them, therefore Adrian Severne was miserly over these quiet days, and grudged them passing one by one.

But Barbara, in a fever of unrest, longed for the time to return to London, where so many duties and pleasures awaited her that would surely banish self-reproach. His worship of

her was a constant reproach to her ; his unutterable faith in her, his plainly expressed thought that he had married a queen among women, though sweet to her heart, contained a bitter thorn. He laughed to scorn her reiteration of her own unworthiness, but loved her for her humble estimate of herself.

The days slipped away, as I said. The people of Abbot's Lynn grew accustomed to the sight of the lord and lady of the manor riding through the lanes together, and curiosity regarding her was beginning to be allayed. One fine afternoon, when her husband was engaged with his bailiff in the library, Barbara stole out with a shawl about her head to watch the red sun setting beyond the clustering roofs of Abbot's Lynn. The turf was green on the lawn and in the great park, and the mild sunshine of a new year's spring had tempted some shy violets into bloom. Barbara's delight in them was like a child's, and she began to gather them one by one to wear at her throat that evening. She wandered on through among the leafless trees till she reached a wicket which opened into the woods. In the shelter of the low hedgerow the violets grew thickly, and here and there a yellow bud told that the primroses would not be long behind their fellows. She stooped down, looking at them very lovingly, so much absorbed that she did not hear a foot on the soft turf behind her.

When she raised her head every vestige of colour fled, for she was face to face with Jasper Leigh. There was a smile on his face, and he offered her his hand.

"Barbara, how do you do?" he said, in exactly the same tones he had used that memorable morning in the Red House at Little Wymar.

They looked at each other a moment in silence, then Barbara drew her shawl about her head and fled like a hunted thing, so quickly that it was useless to try to follow her.

"You've escaped me this time, my beauty, but my time is coming," said Jasper Leigh coolly, and, lighting his cigar, leisurely sauntered back to Abbot's Lynn.

Sir Adrian was still with his bailiff, and Barbara escaped up to her dressing-room, where she threw herself into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

Her deceit had made an absolute coward of her, and she could not face the case and think it calmly out. Jasper Leigh had no power over her save what the knowledge of her brother's sin and punishment gave him, but she was afraid of

him. He had said he would have his revenge, and he had not waited very long to seek it. The skeleton of the past pursued her, sat with her at meals and by the hearth, came between her husband and herself, and turned her moments of sweetest happiness to gall.

Only one thing was uppermost in her mind that night—the resolution to go away from Mount Severne—to put many miles between herself and Jasper Leigh—to flee from the shadow which lay across her path.

"Adrian," she said, when they were alone in the drawing-room after dinner, "could we not go away abroad somewhere for the remainder of the recess?"

Adrian Severne looked surprised, a little hurt, perhaps, but his wife did not see it, for her troubled eyes were bent on the fire. Well they might, for they could not meet the look bent upon her.

"Have you grown tired of our home so soon?" asked Adrian a little quickly.

Barbara rose hurriedly, and, going behind her husband's chair, laid her arm about his neck. "Oh, no, my dearest, it is not that, believe me, it is not that; but I am so restless, so full of waywardness and changing mood, I cannot be content. You do not yet know all the weaknesses of the woman you have married," she said with a sob. "I do not know what is the matter with me, Adrian. I feel afraid of something here—perhaps of the shadow your mother left behind. So if you will take me away for a little while I think it would be better for us both."

Adrian Severne took his wife's face in his hands, and looked at it with passionate, yearning gaze. Well might her eyes fall before that look.

"My precious wife, what have I to do but care for you, and make your happiness my first earthly aim. I am glad you have come to me, Barbara, and told me what you wish, because it proves to me that I did not expect in vain my wife's implicit trust."

She was very silent, keeping her face hidden.

"Parliament opens on the 15th February," said Adrian, by-and-by, "so that we have a month at our disposal. If you like we can be on the wing to-morrow."

Two days later Sir Adrian and Lady Severne were on their way to Rome.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CLOSING IN.



S may be surmised, the eyes of society were turned upon Sir Adrian Severne's wife when they took up their abode in Park Lane. He had no reason to be ashamed of his choice; nay, every day deepened his admiration for her grace and sweetness, her consummate tact, her exquisite bearing in what was at first a trying position. Ere many days were past Adrian Severne saw with proud satisfaction his wife being warmly welcomed by those whose approval he most desired, and congratulations were offered to him on all sides.

Society forgot her former obscurity; it asked no questions regarding her antecedents. She was received as the wife of the diplomatist who was already making his mark, and also was honoured, on her own account, as the first novelist of the day.

They said she was a woman to be envied, that earth had no more to give, not knowing that at times she accounted herself the most wretched of women. The cleverest men of the day coveted the honour of a few minutes' conversation with her, she was so brilliant, so original, and yet so gracious. Women envied her, but none had a word to say against her; she won them all.

March found the Ladies Severne still on the Continent, but the London fashionable journals sent to them by mail kept them fully informed regarding the doings of Adrian and his wife. Her brilliant success in society, as well as in the field of literature, was as gall to them, and they did not greatly care to return to be witnesses to it.

To Barbara their movements occasioned no thought. They



had declined to receive her as a member of their family, and henceforth she would leave them alone.

One afternoon a visitor's name was brought to Lady Adrian in her study. She looked at the card, and the name upon it was, "The Hon. Miss St. Maur." She recognised it as that of a young lady of whom her husband had often spoken, and went to the drawing-room at once. Miss St. Maur was standing in the window, with the sunlight falling full upon her queenly figure and beautiful face. Barbara bowed, but Ethel St. Maur, flinging conventionalism to the winds, went forward and took Barbara's hands in her warm clasp.

"I don't know what you will think of me, Lady Severne," she said, in her winning way, "but Adrian Severne's wife must not be a stranger to me. I am a very old friend of his, and I came to see you whenever I arrived in town. Can I hope for a place among your friends?"

A warm, rich flush overspread Barbara's face, and a bright smile wreathed her lips.

"I thank you very much," she said simply, and touched with her lips the face of Ethel St. Maur. Oh, if Frances Severne could but have witnessed that she would have been doubly, trebly bitter against her brother's wife. "Sit down and stay a little with me, Miss St. Maur. Adrian will be home shortly, I expect. He is at a Cabinet meeting this afternoon," she said by-and-by. "Or will you come to my sanctum?" she added, with a little smile. "It is there I am most at home, and there only *friends* are welcome."

Ethel St. Maur looked gratified, and the twain proceeded to the study, which here also Adrian Severne had set in order for his wife.

Barbara shut the door, drew an easy chair to the fire for her guest, but Ethel stood a few minutes looking at the writing-table with its litter of manuscript.

"I feel nervous," she said, with a ringing laugh. "Am I really within the sacred precincts where the words are penned which create so much disturbance in the literary world? May I peep?"

Barbara nodded, and Miss St. Maur lifted almost reverently the page which the author had left unfinished.

"Great joys are more humbling in their effects than great agonies. Humanity rebels against pain, and employs itself in finding abundant reasons why it should *not* be afflicted, rather

than in humbly acknowledging the chastisement as deserved. There are few who can complacently accept great happiness as a fitting reward either for personal merit or for conscientious fulfilment of duty," read Miss St. Maur in wondering tones. "Do you identify yourself with all you write, Lady Severne?"

"That would hardly be possible," returned Barbara. "But *that* I believe to be true, and so will you some day, if you do not now. Do not read any more, Miss St. Maur. You will find only the skeleton of the story there. I have many hours writing before my work is ready for public perusal."

"May I ask its name?" said Ethel, replacing the paper on the table.

"*'A Woman's Way,'*" returned Barbara, and there was a brief silence.

"Now, Lady Severne, you have been so forbearing with me that I am going to sit down here and ask a great many questions about your literary work," said Ethel St. Maur, in her frank way. "Tell me how you feel. What thoughts you must have, what deep interests, beside which the petty aims of other women sink into insignificance."

"I am the friend and the woman to-day, not the authoress," said Barbara almost deprecatingly. "Another time perhaps we may have a talk about it, to-day let me grow friendly upon other subjects."

"How gracefully, and yet how effectually, you stem my curiosity," laughed Ethel. "Ah, here comes your husband."

Barbara rose, blushing like a school-girl, but not before her husband had seen the attitude in which they stood, Ethel with her dainty hand on Barbara's shoulder, and her face very near hers.

He was more than surprised, more than pleased, for, as you know, he had a warm liking and admiration for Miss St. Maur.

"Ethel, I am *very* pleased to see you," he said with a heartiness there was no mistaking, and their hands met in a warm, friendly clasp.

"I have taken your castle by storm, you see, Adrian," she laughed. "And your wife and I are friends, are we not, Lady Severne?"

Barbara smiled and answered yes; but the eyes bent on her husband's face told her thoughts were elsewhere. Even Ethel understood that look of love, and gathered from it that those busy tongues who said Adrian Severne's wife had married solely for ambition spoke without knowledge.

From that day Ethel St. Maur was the firm, steadfast friend of Adrian Severne's wife, and even when the shadow fell upon the hearth which appeared so fair that day, she remained true to her, and kept her faith unshaken till the dawn of brighter days.

Lady Bassett was late in coming to town that spring. Every year bound her closer to her beloved Kentish home, and lessened her desire for, or interest in, the whirl of a London season.

But one morning late in March Adrian Severne's wife received a note in her familiar handwriting, dated from Harley Street.

"Dearest Barbara," it ran, "I came up last night. Needless to say anxiety to hear Adrian on the Eastern Question brought me. I shall be at home to you to-morrow afternoon. Do not fail.—Yours ever,

"E. E. BASSETT."

The servants in 23 Harley Street had more obsequious attention to pay to Lady Adrian Severne than they bestowed upon her when she was Miss Ogilvie. She was inwardly amused at the change, but made no remark upon it to her friend. Her welcome from the woman who had done and been so much to her was like herself, warm and sincere. After the first close embrace, Lady Bassett held her at arm's length, and gazed at her affectionately and approvingly.

"You look, what shall I say?—distinguished, my dear," she said heartily, "and I am proud of Adrian's wife. I half-expected him also. You have not yet begun, I hope, to dispense with your husband's escort on every available opportunity?"

Barbara laughed, and the sound was more assuring even than her words.

"Necessity is a hard mistress, dear Lady Bassett. If I cannot dispense with my husband's escort in these stirring times, I find I must stay indoors. I have married, I think, the busiest man in all London."

Lady Bassett nodded.

"You have married one of the most hard-working and conscientious of Her Majesty's Ministers, Barbara. See you to it that you make his home a place where he can find at all times a rest from work, and an antidote for care," she said, with her searching eyes fixed upon Barbara's face.

"I try very hard, Lady Bassett. My husband tells me I succeed," she said, with the odd simplicity which was at times such a charm in her manner.

"Well, I have wondered often and often what manner of reception your stately mother-in-law gave you at your home-coming, but I shrank from mentioning it in a letter, since you never alluded to it or to them at all."

"Had I been less sure of my husband's love, Lady Bassett, less sure that I was first in his heart and thoughts, they would have broken my heart between them that night," returned Barbara, quietly, though her face flushed slightly and her eyes flashed. "As it was, I was able to hold my own and to show them that I did not fear them, and that, too, without forgetting what was due to my husband's relatives."

"I am glad of it. I felt very anxious on the subject. Surely they must be pleased now to know how popular and beloved Adrian's wife has become."

Barbara remained silent, because she could not assent.

"I fancy you older, paler, more careworn-looking, now that the red has left your cheeks," said Lady Bassett, by-and-by. "Do you find the responsibilities of your position too heavy?"

"Oh, no; but I have been writing a good deal. I am anxious to get my MSS. in the publishers' hands before the Easter recess."

"The world of letters is not to be deprived of its ornament though society has gained a new one," smiled Lady Bassett. "What does Adrian say to the literary work?"

"Adrian never interferes with me in any way," answered Barbara, and turned her eyes away to hide the quick, passionate light of love which sprang to them.

"Ah, that is like Adrian. He has given you a great love, Barbara, and deserves all your heart in return."

Barbara rose.

"You asked me a question once, Lady Bassett, which I did not answer very satisfactorily. I can do so now," she said falteringly. "Wife never loved husband before, I think, as I love mine. I am nothing without him. I would die for him at any moment."

"Now my heart is at rest. God bless you, my darling, and Adrian too, and keep your love fresh in your hearts to the end," said Lady Bassett. "Must you go now? When will Adrian and you dine with me?"

"I shall ask him and send a note or call and tell you," answered Barbara. "Good-bye."

Some shopping in Regent Street detained Lady Severne, and she did not reach home till five o'clock.

"Has Sir Adrian returned?" she asked the servant in the hall.

"No, my lady, but there is a gentleman in the library wishing to see you. He came nearly an hour ago, and said he would wait till you came home."

With her servant's keen eyes upon her it behoved Lady Severne to appear outwardly unconcerned, though her heart was sick within her.

"Did he give his name?" she asked, with perfect ease of manner.

"No, my lady. He said you would see him without it," returned the man, and his mistress moved towards the library door. She dared not hesitate on the threshold with his eyes upon her, so she was obliged to open the door and enter at once. She shut it somewhat hastily, and, putting back her veil, turned to face the visitor. As she had expected, she confronted Jasper Leigh. He came forward with his easy smile, and stretched out his hand, but she waved it aside, her lips curling with infinite scorn.

"What do you want? Why have you sought me here, Jasper Leigh?" she asked sharply and clearly.

"You won't shake hands, Barbara? Very well," he said, slipping his into his pocket. "Well, perhaps it would be too much to expect the wife of Sir Adrian Severne to touch the hand of a country attorney, though he is an old friend."

"Such talk is to no purpose," said Barbara, forcing herself to be calm. "Tell me what it is you want. What brings you here intruding upon me in my own home."

"Your own home, yes, and, by Jove! it is a magnificent one. You have played your cards well, Barbara, and deserve credit; you are a very clever woman," said Jasper Leigh effusively.

Barbara kept her lips shut, and for a moment there was silence in the room.

"Do you remember what I said to you long ago at Little Wymar—that I would find you out and confront you when you least expected it? Well, here I am."

"You are here," she repeated calmly. "What do you want with or from me?"

"I want nothing but to look at you. You did not expect that I wanted money from you, Lady Severne?"

"I shall be obliged to appeal to my husband for protection against your insults," said Barbara, drawing herself up.

"Do, and then I shall tell him some little incidents relating to his wife's antecedents and former life which he will be greatly pleased to hear."

"There is nothing to tell that he does not already know," she said bravely.

"Yes, there are a few things. When you related your life-history to your future husband you omitted to mention that you had a brother at present enjoying himself at the expense of the Government," he said daringly, and watched her closely. He was but surmising it, but Barbara, whose nerves were strung to the utmost pitch, had not perception to see nor strength enough to deny it. In her agony she even fancied wildly that he must have been eaves-dropping during that interview in Egbert Street.

"There are one or two other little incidents, too," continued Jasper Leigh, pleasantly. "Moonlight walks you and I had together on the banks of the Wyn, stolen half-hours in the sitting-room of the Red House long ago."

"These are false, Jasper Leigh; false and wicked fabrications," she interrupted passionately.

"Yes; but if they serve my purpose, what of that? and they would appear true enough in the eyes of your husband, especially in the light of the deception you have already practised upon him."

Grey, grey, grew the face of Barbara Severne.

"Jasper Leigh, have you no pity? I am happy here. I am a wife, and thus removed from you for ever. Be pitiful; my life has been hard in the past, let me enjoy the happiness heaven has graciously given to me now. You may part me from my husband, but will it benefit you? You may wreck my life, but it will not build up yours. What end will it serve you?"

"This end, Lady Severne," said Jasper Leigh slowly. "You wrecked my happiness, scorned my love, when I would have died for you. Now that you have learned to love, I swear I shall make you suffer through it. I have nothing left to live for but revenge."

There was nothing more said, and without a word of farewell, Jasper Leigh quitted the room and the house. So the shadows deepened across the path of Barbara Severne. Deepened fast, and the night was closing in.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### IN THE SHRUBBERY.



HE Dowager Lady Severne and her daughter returned to England early in April, and took up their abode in the Dower House, within the policies of Mount Severne.

Adrian had been duly notified of their intended arrival, and had given orders to have the house newly furnished and set in order for them. Come what might, he would do his duty by them, and give them no ground for complaint. They were perfectly aware that Adrian and his wife would spend Easter at Mount Severne. Perhaps a certain degree of curiosity as to what manner of guests would come with them, and what manner of hospitalities Lady Adrian would dispense during the holiday season, had something to do with their decision regarding their place of abode.

Lady Severne had not yet concluded the purchase of a town house, though negotiations were on foot regarding it.

A privileged few were invited to spend Easter with Sir Adrian and his wife at Mount Severne, all names of lustre in society as in the world of letters. Never before indeed had such a select party partaken of the hospitality of Mount Severne. Their presence was evidence sufficient of the high place allotted to the woman the Ladies Severne despised, so they could no longer hold aloof. Barbara had made up her mind not to make the first advances to them, and was surprised upon the second morning of her arrival at Mount Severne when the servant ushered into the drawing-room Lady and Miss Severne.

Several lady guests were with her in the room, and, rest assured, their eyes opened wide to witness the meeting. Barbara was equal to the occasion. She approached her mother-in-law with infinite grace and kissed her cheek. This time the kiss was not repulsed, because Lady Severne felt the scrutiny of all these feminine eyes, and meant to disappoint them. But Barbara did not offer to kiss Frances, the memory of the recep-

tion her proffered caress had met with on her wedding day was too fresh in her recollection.

They seated themselves in conventional attitudes, and Barbara broke the ice at once by asking some questions about their Continental sojourn, and very soon the conversation became general.

"I expect a friend of yours this afternoon, Frances," said Barbara, coming to her sister-in-law's side. "Ethel St. Maur will be with us at dinner this evening. If you will excuse such unceremonious notice, will you join us? She often speaks of you, and would be pleased, I am sure, to see you again."

"Ethel! Is she coming here?" exclaimed Frances, betraying in her face and voice the greatness of her surprise. Barbara was woman enough to enjoy the answer she could make.

"Yes, next to Lady Bassett, Ethel is my dearest friend. She would have come with us but for a prior engagement. May we have the pleasure to-night?"

"Thank you, Lady Adrian," said Frances. "I shall see what mamma says."

"Thanks," said Barbara, and moved away to talk to another of her guests. Frances sat quite still in the shadow of the curtain watching her, hating her for her infinite grace and tact of behaviour, for her elegant attire and her brilliant powers of conversation. Ay, there would be a feud between Frances Severne and her brother's wife to the bitter end. The call was not prolonged, and they took their leave without seeing Adrian, who was out with some of the gentlemen.

He was pleased, of course, to hear that his mother and sister should have made the first advances.

"Let them alone, my darling; they must turn to you in the end," he said.

"They will never love me, Adrian; at least Frances will not; but for your sake I shall be so glad to be friends with them. They are to dine with us to-night."

He looked well pleased, indeed. The estrangement from his kindred had been the only cloud upon his sky—for after all, we cannot at a stroke sever the ties of blood.

Lady Adrian was not looking well. Her face was worn and white, and under her eyes were great shadows. At times there was a shadow in their depths as well, the shadow of an inward care. Sleeping or waking she was never at ease, for she seemed to live on the brink of a precipice. One day Jasper Leigh might put his threat into execution, and wrest her happiness from her.



Her husband wondered sometimes why her eyes would seek his face with such a glance almost of dread when he suddenly entered a room, and would tease her about it when they were alone.

"I am afraid of losing your love, Adrian," she would answer, and were not the words strictly, painfully true?

"Can my wife not read all my heart yet?" he asked her one night. "What is there that I can do to prove to you at once and for ever that you need have no fear, my darling; that nothing can change me or lessen my love. One hair of your head is dearer to me than anything else on earth. I could not live without my peerless wife."

Sweet words, precious words surely to fall upon the ear and heart of any wife, but they could not lessen the load of Barbara's care. She made the most of her life, the most of her privileges, not knowing how soon all might slip away from her. She did her utmost to make these days unutterably happy for her husband, to make that a memorable visit for their guests. Who could tell—it might be the last as it was the first time she should dispense the princely hospitality of Mount Severne? Upon a sunny April morning, when all nature was rejoicing exceedingly in the health and gladness of the spring, the shadow fell across her path again.

She was driving Ethel St. Maur through Abbot's Lynn, when she beheld Jasper Leigh standing idly smoking a cigar at the door of the village inn. She turned her head swiftly away, and the fingers handling the reins trembled sorely.

"There is a gentleman lifting his hat apparently to us; do you know him, Barbara?" asked Ethel.

Barbara looked backward, and slightly shook her head. Practice was making her perfect in the assumption of perfect self-control in the most trying moments.

"No. Some one who knows Adrian, perhaps—a constituent, probably," she answered carelessly. "Their name is legion."

"He is not a native here, but looks like a tourist, though this is not the season nor the place for them," said Ethel, in a matter-of-fact way. "Whoever he may be, his face does not recommend him. Oh, Barbara, look at the sunlight falling on yon hillside! What would I not give to be able to transfer that grand picture to canvas."

Thankful for the change of theme, Barbara answered, and the talk turned upon art—a subject which was not exhausted when they returned to luncheon.

The guests, who were charmed with the brilliant conversation

of their hostess that day, who heard her ringing laugh, and watched the sweet smile playing about her lips, little dreamed of the agony of apprehension, the load of pain and of care at her heart.

Before the day closed a messenger from Abbot's Lynn brought a note to Mount Severne addressed to its mistress. It was brought to her when she was occupied with her guests, and it was slipped at once into her pocket. Any one watching closely might have seen an indefinable change upon her face.

In the privacy of her own dressing-room she opened it with feverish hands. Its contents were brief enough :—

"I have come down to see you. Meet me to-morrow afternoon at three at the wicket leading into the woods. "J. L."

So Jasper Leigh weaved the meshes of his web about the unhappy Lady of Mount Severne.

It so happened next afternoon that Frances Severne, taking a constitutional in the policies, espied from a distance two figures standing by the wicket. The lady's figure was familiar to her, but she put on her eye-glass and satisfied herself that it was her sister-in-law. She also looked curiously at the gentleman. He was not one of the guests at Mount Severne, nor was he, she could see, one of their order.

She remembered having passed him but yesterday on the road to Abbot's Lynn, and inwardly marvelled who he was, and what his business with her brother's wife. They appeared to be in close, earnest conversation, but she was at too great a distance to see the expressions on their faces.

She saw Barbara lift her hand, once, as if to put away some evil from her, and immediately after turn and take her way hurriedly back to the house. Miss Severne turned also, and went her slow way back to the Dower House, pondering the thing in her mind.

When her maid was brushing her hair that night she was astonished by her mistress asking a question at her.

"Frisette, do you know whether there are any strangers staying at the Severne Arms just now?"

"Yes, Miss Severne, one gentleman from London, an artist, Mrs. Barnes thinks—a very nice gentleman, she says, and liberal with his money. His name is Mr. Leigh," returned the girl, eager to impart her information.

Her mistress made no remark whatsoever, but inwardly resolved to find out something more definite concerning Mr. Leigh.

From that day the life of Lady Adrian Severne was a continual burden to her. Jasper Leigh claimed many meetings with her, and, while fearing to refuse, she lived in an agony of dread lest her husband, or even any of her guests, should surprise her. She did not dream that the one she would have avoided most was a witness to nearly all her interviews with him. Surely the haughty Miss Severne had descended from her high estate when she stooped to play the part of detective towards her brother's wife.

After a fortnight's stay all the guests save Ethel St. Maur departed from Mount Severne. She remained, and would return to London with them. Truth was that Barbara dreaded being left alone with her husband.

One afternoon, when Ethel was at the Dower House, Sir Adrian was returning from a long ride, and when he emerged from a bend in the avenue he was astonished to see in the distance his wife in conversation with a gentleman, a stranger to him. His keen eyes saw distinctly the expression on his wife's face; it was as if she was in keenest pain. Without a moment's hesitation he turned his horse's head towards them, but long before he could have reached them the man turned and went his way. His wife came towards him, trying to be brave, to be calm. We know at what cost.

"Who is that, Barbara?" he asked, without hesitation.

"A friend, one I knew in the old days before you found me," she answered, trying to smile. "He was in the neighbourhood, and desired to see me, naturally."

Adrian Severne was not satisfied.

"If he is my wife's friend, he is surely welcome at Mount Severne, Barbara. Why stand to speak to him outside?"

She turned her face away. It was coming; oh, it was coming fast, and her heart failed her.

"I am sorry I have displeased you in this respect, Adrian. I shall not do so again," she said, with something like a sob in her voice. The subject was changed at once, but there was something stole into Adrian's heart that night—the something which was the beginning of the end. For the first time since their marriage, his wife's eyes had not met his; for the first time he began to feel a vague distrust of her, a vague disappointment in her.

He tried to banish it, but it would not go; and in that hour the barrier began to rise between Adrian Severne and his wife.

Next morning the ladies from the Dower House were calling at Mount Severne. In the middle of the talk, Frances stole away down to the library to her brother. He looked up in surprise, which was not removed by her words.

"I have come to talk to you, Adrian, about your wife."

"What can you have to say about my wife, Frances?" he asked; but his look was not one of perfect unconcern.

"I am afraid I shall either shock or displease you very much, Adrian," she said in her cool, clear tones. "But I cannot be silent any longer. For your sake, for the sake of the honour of Mount Severne, I must speak."

He pushed back his chair and looked at her with eyes which might have warned her.

"Perhaps you will attribute my story to my dislike to your wife, Adrian, but that has nothing whatever to do with it. I do not like your wife, I tell you frankly, and I have mistrusted her from the first. Do you know that she has clandestine meetings with a man who has been staying at Abbot's Lynn since you came to Mount Severne?"

"Frances, do you know what you are saying; what you insinuate against my dear and honoured wife?" he thundered.

"Don't lose your temper, Adrian; this must be looked into, if for nothing but to keep the servants' tongues silent," she said serenely. "Your wife has no living relatives, I understand; then who and what is this man; and why should she meet him in secret? If he be any of her literary friends, why not visit openly at Mount Severne? These questions require to be answered, Adrian."

"Have you seen them meet?" asked Adrian, in a voice of curious calm.

"I——" A little smile touched her cold lips a moment, and then passed. "Yes, I have seen them, I am sure, six or seven times in the policies when I have been out walking by chance. You will admit that it is a trifle peculiar, Adrian?"

"I admit nothing! I decline to receive your ungenerous insinuations. You have admitted your dislike to my beloved wife, and so prejudiced me against anything you might say. I would scorn to speak to her on such a subject. I would sink with shame before her righteous wrath. You have need, as I said once before, Frances, to pray for a human heart, and I have need to shield my wife from those who ought to give her the love she deserves."

Again Frances Severne smiled in bitterest scorn.

"I expected nothing else," she said slowly. "Perhaps a day may come when you will remember my words and know that I sought to warn you in time."

So she left him with a barbed arrow in his heart, taking with her his peace of mind.

Two days later the ladies from the Dower House were dining at Mount Severne. On the morrow Adrian and his wife, with Miss St. Maur, would return to London, and Barbara had asked them simply as a matter of form. Adrian did not join them in the drawing-room, but, pleading that he had letters to write, shut himself into the library.

Very little writing did Sir Adrian Severne that night. The demon of jealousy had entered his heart and turned all his thoughts to gall. Before an hour had passed Frances disturbed him. She looked eager and excited, and spoke in a voice which trembled.

"Your wife has left us up-stairs, Adrian. Will you come with me to the billiard-room just for a moment?"

Involuntarily he started to his feet; involuntarily he followed her out of the room and through the hall to the billiard-room. It was in darkness, of course, save for the weird light of the young May moon, which stole in at the windows and made strange shadows on the walls and floor.

The windows looked directly out into a thick shrubbery which grew at the eastern end of the house. Frances drew him within the shadow of the curtains.

"Adrian, look there!" she said, pointing with chill finger to the walk leading through among the shrubs.

There was no need for the gesture, no need for the words; he saw it well. In the middle of the way stood a man, the same he had seen before in the park. In front of him, with a crimson shawl folded loosely about her shoulders, and the jewels in her hair flashing in the moonlight, stood the figure of a woman clad in white. The moonbeams fell straight upon her face, showing its ghastly paleness, its agony of pleading, its pain-shadowed eyes, its drawn white lips, the face he loved beyond any earthly thing, the face which he had so often kissed, the face of the woman he had made his wife, into whose keeping he had given the honour of his untarnished name. And she was unworthy.

That was the beginning and the end.



## CHAPTER XX.

### ESTRANGED.



WHEN Lady Adrian was in her dressing-room that night her husband sought her there. It did not need his words to make her heart faint within her—his white, set face, his stern eyes, told her that his suspicions were really awakened now. He came to her, laid his hands upon her shoulders, and turned her face to the light.

"Now, Barbara," he said, in that voice of curious calm, "tell me, before I let you go, the meaning of the scene I witnessed to-night. Tell me who and what is the man who can induce my wife to meet him clandestinely, and who can bring upon her face the expression I saw upon it two hours ago?"

Her eyes did not meet his, her lips quivered, and she tried to free herself from his fingers. But they remained firm upon her shrinking shoulders, and the eyes looked at her as they had never looked before. She could not speak.

"I am waiting, Barbara," he said briefly.

"Let me go, Adrian; I cannot tell you," she said faintly.

"You cannot tell me," he repeated, slowly and distinctly.

"No, I cannot, Adrian. Adrian, do not look at me with such eyes. It is not as you suspect. I am your true and faithful wife."

He folded his arms, and a bitter smile wreathed his lips—

"Actions speak more strongly than words, Barbara. Has your action of to-night and other days and nights before been in keeping with your assurance? I think not."

She turned her face away from him, nervously clasping and unclasping the bracelet on her arm.



"My God, Barbara, it maddens me to see you so calm—to hear your quiet refusal to allay my suspicions, when all the fires of Gehenna are burning in my breast," he said fiercely. "Is this all the satisfaction I am to have at the hands of the woman I have called my wife?"

"There is nothing to tell, Adrian. I am your true and faithful wife," she repeated, mechanically.

"Very good. Then, till my true and faithful wife places full and implicit confidence in me, and gives me fullest satisfaction regarding this matter, we must be as strangers," he said briefly, and, turning upon his heel, quitted the room. With a low moan Barbara Severne sank upon her knees, and buried her face in the cushions of the chair. The blow had fallen, the punishment of her sin had overtaken her, the blackness of midnight must henceforth lie across her path for evermore. Sooner or later she must quit her husband's roof, for would he believe her now in the face of Jasper Leigh's lying words?

Ah, no! his suspicions were aroused, his confidence in her shaken for ever. She had felt in her inmost soul the stinging scorn of his bitter smile, felt that she had fallen from the pedestal upon which he had set her, fallen for evermore. So the sweet calm of the spring night fell upon her ruined hopes and breaking heart beneath the stately roof-tree of Mount Severne.

Next day, as had been arranged, the party returned to London. A little while longer must the world be deceived, a little while longer before society would be shocked by an open rupture. The world saw little or no change in the domestic life of Sir Adrian Severne and his wife. If it was remarked that they were less frequently in public together, it was attributed to the ever increasing claims of Parliamentary duties upon Sir Adrian. The Eastern Question grew more intricate every day, and absorbed the interest of all statesmen.

Lady Bassett did not return from Bassett Royal at all that summer, so was spared the pain of witnessing the shadow resting on the home which was so often in her thoughts. Barbara was very thankful, for it could not long have remained hid from the sharp eyes of her friend. It was a wretched life, and to escape from the agony of her own thoughts Lady Adrian plunged into the whirlpool of gaiety, accepted every invitation to dinner, garden-parties, picnics, and routs, and in her turn filled her house with guests.



Her writing was altogether neglected. She would not visit her study for days together, and though Mr. Warren was clamorous for the promised MSS., "*A Woman's Way*" lay unfinished on the table. Before midsummer Lady Adrian Severne was known as the gayest, most fashionable woman of the season rather than as the intellectual, reticent, but charming woman of letters. Those who were her true friends regretted the change, and none more heartily than Ethel St. Maur. The best part of *her* time was spent in trying to account for it without success.

Strange as it may seem, though living under the same roof, husband and wife met alone very seldom. Adrian never again broached the subject; he had sued to her once for all. Ere very long the hope of some satisfactory explanation died from his breast, and left him unhappy as those are who have loved and trusted, and found the object of it unworthy. But at times his heart yearned unspeakably over his wife, still dearer to him than anything on earth. At times it was more than he could bear to refrain from taking her to his heart again. But the Severne pride was strong within him, the Severne honour stronger still. Both had been touched, and until his wife of her own accord could restore them, he was powerless to act.

One morning in July Lady Adrian found among her letters one addressed in a familiar handwriting, and bearing the Hastings postmark. Her face changed, and she hurriedly broke the seal, for she recognised the writing as that of Winifred Guest. Thus it ran—

"Care of Mrs. Jones, Seaview Square, Hastings.

"Dear Barbara,—I am here alone with a nurse from the Training Home. I am very ill. I think I shall never see Little Wymar again in life. If you could come, if it is not too much to ask, I should so like to see you again. Dear Barbara do come. You see I use the old name, although you are such a great lady now. I read of your marriage in the newspapers, and found your London address in the '*Directory*.' I cannot write any more, I am so weak and spent, dear Barbara. —I am,

Your loving friend,

"WINNIE GUEST."

Barbara covered her face with her hand, and two tears stole down her cheeks. Her husband glancing at her across the breakfast table, wondered what brought them there, but sat still. In time gone by, how quick he would have been to



ask their cause, and comfort her with words of sympathy and love.

Suddenly she spoke, and the words took him by surprise.

"Will you read that, Sir Adrian, if you please?"

Of late Lady Severne had begun to prefix "Sir" to her husband's name.

He bowed, read it through, and returned it without remark.

"Winifred Guest is a friend I made when I was in the country with my father, as I told you," she said quietly. "She was, and is very dear to me. I should like to see her again. Have I your permission to go to Hastings?"

"You are at liberty to please yourself in this as in every other thing, Barbara," he answered coldly. "I have not been accustomed of late to have your plans submitted for my approval."

She bit her lip. The words hurt her, how sorely *he* did not guess, but they were not wholly undeserved.

"Very well, Sir Adrian, I shall leave town this afternoon, returning to-morrow in time for dinner.

He made no remark, and the dreary meal was finished in silence. How different from the old, fond days when plans were made, letters read and exchanged, Parliamentary news discussed with a point and freshness which excelled all after-dinner talk. There was none of these things now; in general the silence was never broken save by the rustle of a newspaper or the comings and goings of the servant. Ay, it was a changed house in all ways, and none were quicker to note it than the servants, though master and mistress were studiously polite to each other in the presence of dependent.

Lady Severne arrived at Hastings at sunset that evening. She had never been in the beautiful watering-place before, but her mind was too pre-occupied to take interest in any of her surroundings.

She found the residence of Mrs. Jones without difficulty. It was one of a number of cottage villas facing the sea.

The nurse was watching for her from the window, and, when she was ushered into the house by Mrs. Jones' parlour-maid, received her in the dining-room.

The nurse was a lady of birth and station, one of these noble women who, casting aside the trammels of the world, give themselves unselfishly up for others, and spend their lives in alleviating the sufferings to which humanity is heir.

"You are Lady Severne," she said, in a low, sweet voice. "I am very pleased you have come. Miss Guest has been restless all this evening expecting you. Will you come up-stairs and take off your bonnet? I shall order some refreshment for you at once."

"Thanks." Lady Severne sat down wearily, and, putting back her veil, began to unfasten her gloves. Her face was pale, so pale and haggard that the nurse involuntarily remarked upon it.

"I fear you are unwell yourself, Lady Severne, or fatigued by your long journey," she said, in her sympathetic, gentle way.

"Oh, no, I am quite well. Are *you* Miss Guest's nurse?" she asked, in some surprise.

The nurse bowed.

"Yes. My name is Evelyn Carlisle—Nurse Carlisle, commonly," she answered, with a smile.

"I imagined a very different person," said Lady Severne. "Will you tell me something about your patient, then? Is she very ill?"

"Hopelessly so, Lady Severne."

"And is she here alone? Are none of her relatives with her? Will they leave her to die alone?" asked Barbara, passionately.

"Dr. Guest comes every Monday and remains till Thursday. He left us this morning. Mrs. Guest comes sometimes; but the physicians agree that she is best alone with me. We understand each other, and Winifred likes to have me beside her."

"I do not wonder at it," said Barbara, bluntly. "May I go up-stairs now? If a servant could bring me a cup of tea before I go to see Winifred, Miss Carlisle, I should be greatly obliged. I want to be very quiet, and my nerves are unstrung. I do not like travelling."

The nurse bowed and led the way to a comfortable bed-chamber, where she left Lady Severne, and went to order the tea and to prepare her patient for her visitor.

In half an hour's time Barbara was ready to go to Winifred.

"You must expect to see her greatly changed, Lady Severne," whispered the nurse in the corridor. "It is the last stage of the decline now."

Barbara nodded, and the nurse opened the door.

The red glow of the sunset had not yet faded from sea and sky, and its reflection filled the room, and touched very tenderly

the worn, wasted face of Winifred Guest, where it rested among her pillows. Barbara cast but one swift glance at it, and in a moment was kneeling by the bed, and had the golden head pillowed on her breast.

"My darling, my darling!" the nurse heard her whisper brokenly, then she shut the door very softly and went away.

"Barbara, I am so glad you have come—so glad, Barbara," whispered Winnie back.

She could not speak above a whisper now. Then Barbara lifted her head and looked at her. Her face, though thin and sharply outlined, was marvellously beautiful, her cheeks were red, her eyes bright, her expression perfect peace. Those of us who have watched the dread disease know these to be the precursors of the end.

"Do you suffer much, Winnie?"

"None at all. God has been very good to me, Barbara. I did not think it would be so easy to die."

Barbara hid her face in the coverlet, and for a time there was a silence. Only God knew how she envied her, how gladly, thankfully she would have changed places with her at that moment. Life was not now so sweet to Barbara Severne that she should care to prize it.

"Tell me of yourself, Barbara," said Winifred's caressing voice. "You are married now; are you satisfied, are you happy?"

Barbara flung up her head.

"Do I look like a happy woman, Winifred?"

Winnie Guest sorrowfully shook her head.

"I have built such castles about you, Barbara. I have pictured you loved, honoured, courted in society. It is hard to have them shattered. What is the trouble? Is it your husband?"

"My husband!" Barbara repeated the words over, lingering almost as one would speak of the dead. "I had a husband, Winifred, whom I worshipped, and who worshipped me. I have lost him through my own doing. You love me, Winifred, therefore ask me no more."

Again there was a silence.

"Do you remember what I said that day at Bassett, Winifred, that happiness and I would only know each other from afar. Well, I have known happiness, moments so exquisite that I dared scarcely breathe lest I should dispel them. But it is

all past, all past, and I am the Barbara of old, miserable, discontented, restless; wild of mood as the wind."

"God guide you to peace, my friend," said Winifred, laying her thin hand on Barbara's bowed head.

"You see it will not be very long, Barbara, before I inherit perfect peace," she said, by-and-by. I sent for you to give you my message to Robert. The time of his waiting is passing, though not so quickly as mine. I want you to say to him, Barbara, that I died loving him, that I would have lived for him if I could. And say to him, Barbara, and, oh! say it tenderly and faithfully, that he must live the rest of his life as God would have him live it—pure, blameless, and upright in the eyes of God and man, so that we may surely meet in the home to which I must go so soon. You will remember that, Barbara?"

"I will remember. I will deliver it faithfully and tenderly to Robert, Winifred. It will be to me a sacred trust," answered Barbara, solemnly.

A satisfied look came on Winifred's face.

"That will do. I must close my eyes now, Barbara, and not speak any more. I feel my mind beginning to wander a little, I am so weak."

Barbara stooped and kissed the fevered cheek, then moved softly over to the window. A great light was shimmering on the sea—the light of summer moon and stars—and a great peace encompassed everything save the heart of Barbara Severne.

There was no sleep for her that night. She paced restlessly up and down her bedroom, or stood in the window watching the restless sea, finding in it something corresponding to her mood.

In the morning Winifred was very ill, too ill for conversation; indeed, she scarcely recognised her friend when she bent over her. Fain would Barbara have remained till the end, but she was expected at home that day. So at noon she bade Winifred a last sad farewell and went her way. Miss Carlisle wondered much what manner of mental trouble had set such a mark upon the face of Lady Severne. Ere many days were over her wonder was set at rest.



## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE BLACKNESS OF THE NIGHT.



SIR ADRIAN was at St. Stephen's when his wife returned home that evening. She was scarcely disappointed. She was growing accustomed to all the changes in her life. She had only the memory of days gone by, days full of tender care, of loving consideration, of unremitting attention to her slightest desire, and it was not sufficient to satisfy her, it only served to make the present seem more dreary by contrast.

"A gentleman called to see you yesterday, my lady," said Markham, as she passed through the hall. "He left his card, but Sir Adrian took it, my lady."

"Did Sir Adrian see him, Markham?" asked her ladyship in tones which all her efforts could not steady.

"Sir Adrian came in, my lady, just as the gentleman was speaking to me at the door. I had laid the card on the table, my lady, and Sir Adrian put it in his pocket; that was all."

"Do you remember the name, Markham?"

"Yes, my lady; it was Mr. Jasper Leigh," returned the servant, but keeping to himself the fact that he had been charged by his master to shut the door in the face of Mr. Jasper Leigh the next time he presented himself.

Lady Severne made no further remark, but passed up-stairs with her hand to her heart. Swiftly, oh! very swiftly the night was closing in! After partaking of her solitary dinner, she sought her neglected study. She sat down there by the fire, not to muse on the sweetness of the past nor on the bitterness of the present. She was done with both. Her thoughts must be all of the future now.

By-and-by she rose, and, sitting down at the table, made out a list of guests to whom on the morrow she intended to send invitations to dinner for the 28th. That done she turned to her neglected manuscript, and began idly to turn over its pages. But she could not bear it, for every sentence reminded her of happy hours, during which she had read aloud to her husband, and then had listened to his fond indulgent criticism. She wrapped it up hastily, tied a string about it, and putting it into a drawer, locked it, and threw the key into the waste basket. It was found there weeks after by one of the servants. She drew a blank sheet towards her and began to write, scarcely knowing what words flowed from her pen.

It was a poem, wild, beautiful, and touching, the exact expression of all that was in her heart at the moment—passionate abiding love, unquenchable regret, deep-breathed sorrow over happiness fled for ever. When she read it over tears welled up in her eyes, and, letting her head fall upon the table, she gave way for the first time to all her pain. It was a fierce, wild storm of weeping, but it relieved the overcharged heart, and a great calm succeeded.

She folded up the paper with the verses upon it, and, moved by some strange impulse, she enclosed it in an envelope, sealed it, and wrote upon the back, "For my husband's eyes alone."

Then it was placed in her desk, above her publishers' letters, and she rose. For that night her work in her study was past.

She wandered to the drawing-room by-and-by, spent ten minutes at the piano, and then sought her old place by the hearth. It was ten o'clock. If proceedings were lively in the House she need not expect her husband for hours yet. She did not know what was chiefly occupying the attention of Her Majesty's Government at that time, having, among other changes, ceased the study of politics.

Before eleven o'clock she heard the opening of the hall door, and her husband's foot in the hall. She also heard him speak to Markham, and guessed he was asking if she had returned and where she was at that moment. She had not to remain long in suspense, for he came directly to the drawing-room. She rose slowly to her feet and turned her colourless face towards him, wondering how he would greet her. His face wore its habitual look of stern coldness, deepened, she thought, since she saw it last. He came forward to the hearth, and for a brief space husband and wife looked at each other in dead

silence. Her eyes drooped first, and sought the fire. Then Adrian Severne slowly drew from his pocket the card with Jasper Leigh's name upon it, and offered it to her.

"There is your friend's card," he said, in a strange voice. "I happened to encounter him at the door on my return from Downing Street. But that Markham's eyes were upon me, I would have kicked him into the street."

Barbara took the piece of pasteboard, tore it into little fragments, and threw it into the fire.

"When it comes to this man seeking interviews with my wife in my house in the broad light of day it is time for me to interfere," he said in cutting tones. "This cannot go on, Lady Severne."

Swiftly Barbara's hand went to her head, as if she had received a cruel stab. Her formal title, the first time it had fallen from her husband's lips when he addressed her, hurt her more than all the rest.

"No, as you say, it cannot go on. Nothing I can say can convince you now that I am, and have ever been, your faithful wife in thought, word, and deed, but I swear it to you now before God, Adrian Severne. I cannot clear myself in your eyes. Believe it or not as you will."

She felt the keen scorn of the smile which touched his lips. She stood a few moments longer, and then slowly quitted the room and went up-stairs to her own. He had asked no questions regarding her journey, evinced no curiosity or interest in the errand upon which she had gone, and she volunteered no information. Little did she dream how that visit to Hastings was to be construed, and how it was to be made a link in the chain of evidence against her.

Next morning Lady Severne went away to Bassett without saying anything of her intention, simply leaving a message for him with a servant. That she had in reality gone to Bassett was proved by a note he received from Lady Bassett the following morning—

"Dear Adrian," it ran, "your wife looks so wretchedly ill that I shall not let her back to London to-day, as she desires. When I think she is fit for gaiety again I shall send her home. Come when you want to see her—from Saturday till Monday, if possible.—As ever,  
"E. E. BASSETT."

Needless to say that Adrian Severne did *not* go to Bassett from Saturday till Monday. Lady Bassett was sorely puzzled to understand the change in the wife of Adrian Severne.

"It is not only that you look ill, Barbara," she said one morning, when they were alone. "It is the expression of mental anguish which I see upon your face at times which puzzles me, and nearly breaks my heart. I am your true friend. I think I have proved it to you, Barbara. Trust me."

"My trouble, whatever it is, is my own, dear Lady Bassett, and could not be healed even by your sweet sympathy," she said wearily. "But it is coming very near an end now."

"There is but one ending to it that I can see, and that is in the grave, judging from your outward tokens," rejoined Lady Bassett, with grave candour. "Do Adrian and you not sail smoothly together in the boat of matrimony?"

"No, my husband and I have drifted very far apart. It is my fault, Lady Bassett. Let that satisfy you."

"It will satisfy me in the meantime, but if this matter, whatever it is, can be set at rest, I shall do it. Adrian Severne is too noble a man not to make instant reparation if the fault lies with him, and he loves you so dearly that he will be generous with you. Barbara, take my advice; do not for a punctilio, for a whim of pride or prejudice throw away a life's happiness. If you have erred, or come short in Adrian's eyes, own your fault and begin anew; believe me, you will never regret it."

Barbara rose, and, walking slowly over to the window, stood looking out upon the plenitude of summer loveliness on the earth.

Lady Bassett waited for her answer, but none came.

"It is six months since I was married over yonder," she said, pointing to the spire of the village church. "Centuries ago it seems now, centuries, centuries. If it were but possible, how quickly Adrian would undo the knot Mr. Cambridge tied that day," she added, bitterly.

Lady Bassett made no remark. Remembering her own rebellious youth, her own undutiful wifehood, her careless scorning of a good man's love, she had no word of reproof for the girl who seemed to be following in her footsteps. How very far she was from guessing at the true state of matters may be judged from the fact that she sat down that very day and wrote a long letter to Adrian Severne, pleading with him to steal a few hours from public work, and come down to Bassett. "I can see there is something amiss between Barbara and you, my boy," she wrote, "and I cannot rest till the little cloud be



dispelled. She says the fault is hers ; but, Adrian, have you been gentle with her? have you remembered always the acuteness of her feelings, the nervous delicacy of her susceptibilities, the jealousies of her nature? She cannot help these, it is you who must bear with them. Do come, take the advice of one who loves you both so well. Let my home be the birthplace of a newer, deeper, more abiding happiness."

Two days later the answer came briefly, thanking her for her kindness, for her anxious desire for his happiness, but pleading press of work as an excuse for declining her invitation. It was a courteous reply, but cold and distant; then Lady Bassett sorrowfully resolved to leave to time the reconciliation she would so gladly have effected at once. From Bassett Royal Barbara wrote a note to the Dowager Lady Severne at the Dower House asking her and Frances to come to town for her dinner on the 28th, and to remain a few days at that time. She also asked that her reply might be addressed to Park Lane, where she intended to return in a day or two.

Lady Bassett did not press her to prolong her stay, for this sad-eyed, weary-hearted woman, aging so fast before her youth was past, was not the Barbara of old. Yet she was unspeakably dear to the lonely lady of Bassett Royal; dearer even than the bright-eyed girl who had won her heart at first.

Long afterwards Lady Bassett remembered the passionate tenderness of Barbara's farewell that day. Now she clung to her, now she came back again and again to kiss her, and murmur broken words of thanks and blessing. Little did the noble, generous-hearted woman dream that it was Barbara's *last* farewell, and how many days and years would elapse before her eyes rested again upon the face of Adrian's wife. Barbara's invitation to the Ladies Severne was accepted, and they came, greatly to Adrian's surprise, for, as usual, his wife had planned without consulting him.

The dinner on the 28th was one of the assured successes of the season. Lady Adrian surpassed herself that night; never had she so fascinated her guests by her grace of manner, her flow of talk; even her beauty was remarked upon that night as something striking. There was a wild brilliancy in her eyes, a bright, unnatural colour in her cheeks, a strange, feverish unrest in all her movements, which might have warned Adrian when he looked at her. He *did* look at her often, and felt his heart go out to her most passionately, while to her, and to all out-

ward appearance, he seemed cold and calm, and engrossed with the conversation of a colleague beside him.

Long afterwards that entertainment was spoken of, and all Lady Severne's brilliant speeches, gay repartee, original and witty remarks recalled and commented on with morbid interest. How little any one of them, how little Adrian himself dreamed that it was her last appearance in the society which had made so much of her, and which had elected her as one of its chiefest ornaments; her last tribute to her proud position, her last sad farewell to all dear to her on earth!

When the guests were gone, Adrian went down to the library, as was his wont, and where abundance of work awaited him always. But, instead of approaching his writing-table, he flung himself on the couch, and, closing his eyes, fell to thinking of his wife.

He did not know how long he had lain, when the door opened softly, and he saw her enter. In that first glance he noted that she had laid aside her shimmering silk attire, all her jewels, and that she wore some plain, sweeping robe of dark material.

Some impulse moved him to keep his eyes closed. The gas was not lit, and the fire low in the grate, so that the great room was almost in darkness. Softly the slight figure glided over to the couch and stood a moment looking down upon the sleeping form of her husband.

"My darling, my darling!" she murmured, brokenly. "I can call you so when you cannot hear—my husband."

The last words were her farewell, though he did not know it, and when he started to his feet to clasp her to his heart she was gone, and, save for two tears glittering on his hands, he might have fancied himself dreaming. Oh, if he had but obeyed the impulse of his heart, and sought her at once, the blow might have been averted, years of suffering might have been spared to both! But he hardened himself again, and allowed fully half-an-hour to elapse before he left the library. It was still early—probably the ladies had not yet left the drawing-room.

He went up-stairs and looked in, but his mother and sister were there alone.

"Where is Barbara?" he asked.

"We do not know, Adrian; she departed with her guests, and left us to our own resources," answered Frances crossly.

Something stole into Adrian's mind, a sudden prevision of evil, a fear of something he could not define.

A few strides took him up-stairs to his wife's dressing-room. It was empty, and the gay dress she had worn hung over a chair, and the jewels lay open in their cases on the table. Hearing the movement in the room, Wynter, the maid, appeared on the threshold.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Adrian, I thought it was her ladyship. She sent me away saying she would read a little before going to bed, and that she would ring," said the woman, and immediately withdrew.

Then Sir Adrian's eye was arrested by a closed envelope lying above the jewels on the table. He lifted it and broke the seal.

"This life is killing me by inches," ran the trembling words, "and, as you said, it must come to an end sooner or later, I prefer to go before you send me away. That all good may attend you in every way of your life is the prayer of her whom once you called wife, and whose only comfort in her desolation will be the memory of the happiness you gave her in the past."

"BARBARA."

Not many minutes later, Wynter, whose curiosity was somewhat aroused, peered into the room again. But when she saw the livid face of her master she fled to the drawing-room for Lady Severne.

"There is something wrong up-stairs—Sir Adrian—my lady, will you come at once?" she gasped.

Lady Severne followed at once.

"Oh, Adrian, what is it—what has happened?" she asked faintly, when she saw her son's face.

He turned to her then, crushing the paper in his hand.

"My wife has left me, mother, that is all," he answered, in a voice which haunted her for long. "Tell Frances, and never either of you mention the subject to me again."

Then he passed her and went down-stairs.

It was long years before the word "wife" again crossed the lips of Sir Adrian Severne.



## CHAPTER XXII.

BONNIE DUNIRE.



HE bloom was fading on the heather, the golden tinge of harvest-tide lay upon upland and lowland, the ruddy hues of autumn were stealing over the trees and hedgerows of the north country. The 12th was past, but sometimes yet the guns of enthusiastic sportsmen awoke sounding echoes across moor and loch, and the shooting lodges would not be wholly deserted yet awhile.

That September was a dream of beauty and peace in lonely Alvalloch. It was an out-of-the-world spot that quiet Highland parish, yet life's tragedy and comedy found its representation there as elsewhere all the world over.

The giant slopes of Benvalloch sheltered its straggling, irregular, picturesque street, its old-fashioned school-house, its quaint and lovely kirk, its primitive hostelry, from the fiercest blast of the wild northern winds. On a summer's day all were faithfully mirrored in the clear bosom of the loch—Dunire Loch—so named because it ebbed and flowed upon the soil of Ogilvie of Dunire. Away beyond the broad sheet of water, hidden among silvery birch and gloomy pine, the dwelling-place of the Ogilvies reared its grey head, with its crown of tender moss and faithful ivy, fit birthplace for the stern, proud race whose heritage it was, fit dwelling now for the desolate, cankered, old man who inhabited it alone.

His story was often told to sightseers, who, lingering an hour, or mayhap a day in Alvalloch, evinced some curiosity regarding Dunire, and who would ask naturally enough why its proprietor kept its gates shut against all intruders, and why it was that in a region where hospitality and free-handed generosity were proverbial he should prove an unpleasant exception to the rule.

It was a sad story, which never failed to awaken pity in the hearts of those who heard it, a story which lingered in the memories of some, and which caused Alvalloch to be remembered long after the halting places of a tourist's journey had been forgotten.

But I digress. Let me go on. Upon one of these golden September days a lady came by coach to Alvalloch, and proceeding to the "Corbie," as the tiny hostelry was curiously named, inquired from good Mrs. Mackenzie whether she could have a bed-room and a sitting-room for a week or two. Mrs. Mackenzie was prepossessed in her visitor's favour. She was a slight, graceful person, expensively but quietly dressed, and having the appearance of "rale gentry," as the good woman subsequently informed her satellites in the kitchen. Her face was pale and worn enough to confirm her explanation that she was in indifferent health, and desired a complete change and rest. In extreme haste Mrs. Mackenzie bustled to show her what accommodation she possessed. The lady, who gave her name as Mrs. North, took the front sitting and bedrooms, the windows of which looked directly out upon the loch and its opposite shore.

"What wull ye be wullin't tae say for them, mem," said the simple old body. "Gin ye bide here a while I'll no be hard wi' ye."

Mrs. North smiled.

"I am quite able to pay for my lodgings, Mrs. Mackenzie; make your own terms. The rooms are all I could desire, and the view lovely. I shall want you to tell me the places of interest, by-and-by, when I have rested and had some tea. I feel the better already of your pure mountain air."

Fain would Mrs. Mackenzie have sat down on the spot to indulge her propensity for talk, but perceiving that her traveller was tired and hungry, sent her off at once to the kitchen to procure refreshment.

When she returned to set the table herself she found that Mrs. North had already made her toilet and was standing in the quaint, wide window looking down upon the loch. She wore a black silk dress, plainly, but perfectly made; a white collar at her throat, and white band at her wrist. On her slender finger she wore her sole ornaments, three rings, a wedding band and two gems, which flashed with every movement of her hands. All these Mrs. Mackenzie noted even while she was busy with the table.

She was not a widow was evidenced from her attire, but it was sombre enough to suggest the recent loss of some relative.

"It's a bonnie loch Dunire wi' a summer sun shining on 't," she ventured to say. "I see nae picter sae bonnie onywhere as that."

Her remark elicited no reply. Her guest did not even hear it, indeed, she was so absorbed heart and soul in the scene. It was the sunset hour. From the quiet street below arose the low hum of the children at their play, but above it rose the musical ripple of the miniature sea as it broke upon its pebbly shore. Upon its shimmering breast lay a great light of crimson and gold, a light which to the eyes of her who looked, seemed not of earth. The changing leaves of the trees on the opposite shore seemed like little points of flame, being touched by that strange weird light. Beyond the grey turret of the lonely keep the harvest moon was peeping up. Ere long another light, more strangely weirdly beautiful, would touch water, hill, and wood.

"Surely here," she murmured to herself; "surely here I shall find peace."

"That's Dunire," said Mrs. Mackenzie, coming to her side. "If ye're fond o' a story that reads like a beuk I can tell ye yin about Dunire; but, if ye'll come an' get yer tea, I'll tell ye while ye're at it. It'll wile awa' the time."

The easy familiarity, which had nothing offensive or presuming in it, struck the stranger lady very forcibly, but it was in keeping with all the rest. She took her place at the table, which looked tempting enough with its array of country dainties!

"Weel, ye see, Mrs. North, mem," began the good soul, sitting down and twisting her apron round her thumbs, "there's been Ogilvies in Dunire sin ever there was a Dunire ava'. It's an auld, auld place. Some folk that come this gate wad gi'e an unco heap tae see'd because it's auld; but the Laird's a changed man frae what he was, an' ye winna wunner at it when ye hear the story. Thirty years ago, when there was a leddy an' a bonnie dochter in Dunire, the laird was a winsome chiel'; a'boday lo'ed him, an' a'boday was welcome to Dunire. Ay, it's jist thirty years ago this very simmer. I was new mairret tae Donal' that verra year, an' we had been only sax months i' the 'Corbie'— Some mair tea, mem?"

"If you please."

"Weel, mem," resumed the good soul, "in July that year there cam' tae Alvalloch a gentleman chap, an Englisher, frae Lunnon, ca'd Dale. He wrote for newspapers an' sic like, an' was said tae be verra clever. He wasna verra weel an' was travellin' i' the Heelan's, an' he took sic a fancy tae this place

that day he passed thro' i' the coach, that he cam' tae the "Corbie" an' took a room for a week. Donal' an' me thocht a lot o' him, he was sic a pleasant-faced, weel-spoken gentleman; an' a'boday liked him that kent him here aboot. He took tae drawin' a bit when he was here, an' it was aye Dunire he was tryin' tae mak' a picter o'. It was aye tae the wuds o' Dunire he gaed for his walk. It was different then, ye ken, mem, for the gates o' Dunire were open till a'boday. Weel, I s'pose in his walks he had fa'n in wi' Miss Marjorie. That was the only bairn o' Dunire. Eh, mem, but she was a bonnie flower, an' the pet o' us a'. As for her faither an' mither they fair worshipped her. Her hair was just like simmer sun, her e'en as changin' as the loch on a simmer mornin', her cheeks like ane o' her ain bonnie roses. Weel, as I said, this Mr. Dale fell in wi' Miss Marjorie, as we found oot after, an' they had their walks thegither ower the hills an' amang the wuds, and it cud hae but ae end. Donal' an' me winnert whiles what way he was bidin' sae lang wi' us, never thinkin' that it was the bonnie e'en o' Marjorie Ogilvie, that keepit him in Alvalloch. She was but a simple, country lassie, ye ken, mem, an' kent naething aboot the warld's ways, nor the deceitfulness of men. Weel, it cam' tae an end, as I said, for ae mornin' the parish was dumfoonert wi' the news that young Dale was aff, an' Miss Marjorie wi' him. It was waefully true, Mrs. North, and frae that day to this Dunire never set e'en on its bonnie flower again."

Here the good soul was quite overcome, and cried quietly with her apron to her eyes.

"The laird was past hissel', and the leddy lay down an' never rose again. She deed afore the leaves fell frae the rowan tree, an' was buried up yonder on the hill. An' never since syne has the laird been as he was; it seemed to change his verra heart. He was a prood man, ye see, an' a stern when his birse was up. They say he cursed the day o' his bairnie's birth when she ran awa', and struck her name oot o' the family Bible. Never sin syne hae the gates o' Dunire been open't till strangers or travellers, an' they say the laird's that thrawn noo in his auld age that even auld Duncan M'Dougal and Tibbie Macintosh, wha hae lived at Dunire wi' him a' his days, can hardly thole him. Anither thing I forgot tae tell ye, mem, Miss Marjorie's nurse, Elspet Carmichael, had helped her, an' gaed aff wi' her as weel, the limmer, as I should ca' her. She had years upo' her heid, an' ocht tae hae haen mair sense."



"Was nothing ever heard of the runaways afterwards?" asked Mrs North in her quiet, expressionless voice.

"Naething. Rumour gaed aboot that she had written hame, an' that she had twa bits o' bairnies in Lunnon, an' no that mony year syne it was said she was deid, but naebody kens whether sic stories be true or no. Oh, mercy me, there's seven chappin', and they idle hissies i' the kitchen, dear only kens what they'll be efter! Weel, mem, I'll be awa' doon the stair. We'll maybe hae a crack aboot Dunire anither day."

So saying, Mrs. Mackenzie lifted the tea-tray and took her departure.

The lady rose also, and again approached the window. Now the moon was up indeed, and had lit a shimmering pathway on the loch. But her eyes wandered beyond to the turrets of Dunire, which showed sharply and weirdly against the clear blue of the sky. Her heart was full of unutterable thoughts, of deep emotions, of unquenchable memories which were like to overwhelm her.

Suddenly her head went down upon her white hands, and she shook from head to foot.

"Adrian, Adrian! my lost, lost love!" she moaned.

In her sleep that night that name was often on her lips.

Mrs. Mackenzie's solitary guest slept late next morning, and arose refreshed.

With the morning she was more tranquil in mind, more reconciled to her loneliness. Also in her mind there was a fixed purpose, which kept her from brooding over sorrow.

She left the house immediately after breakfast, saying she would stroll round the loch, perhaps as far as the gates of Dunire. Needless to say that numberless eyes watched her when she appeared in the street; a stranger was a never-failing object of interest to the dwellers in sleepy Alvalloch.

It was a grand morning, mild and sunny, yet bracing—a morning to bring a healthy hue to pale cheeks, and to gild the heaviest thought. Insensibly Mrs. North's step grew more elastic, her eyes clearer and brighter, and a faint tinge of red stole into her pale cheek. The great gates of Dunire were closed, as the hostess of the "Corbie" had warned her, but a little wicket at the side stood ajar, and through it the lady passed without hesitation. The lodge-keeper's house was shut up, and had been for many years, so there was none to forbid her entrance.

From the gates a winding avenue of birch and pine led



towards the house. There were signs of neglect and decay here; rank grass, and weeds, and fallen leaves lay thickly underfoot, and the shrubs growing between the trees stood in sore need of pruning.

Yet it was beautiful—wildly, picturesquely beautiful, though saddening to the eyes.

Suddenly emerging from one of the winding turns, the lady drew back a step and stood still, for the old grey house was before her.

"Elspet's bonnie Dunire," she murmured with quivering lips. "No wonder she loved it; no wonder mamma's eyes grew weary in her last days for her home—bonnie Dunire!"

She leaned up against one of the trees, and stood looking lovingly, yearningly upon the lovely home where her fair and gentle mother had spent her girlhood.

Suddenly an ominous cough, the sound of an approaching foot, caused her to start and look round, to find herself face to face with an old man, of tall, slender, stately figure—he having about his shoulders the graceful draping of a Highland plaid. His thin locks, white as the snow which in winter capped Benvalloch, streamed out below his broad bonnet, giving him a strange, wild, pathetic appearance. His face was withered and bronzed with exposure to the elements; but his blue eyes were as keen, and bright, and piercing as they had been half a century before. For the life of her the lady could not speak or move.

"You are intruding here, madam," said the old man, harshly. "Did they not tell you in the village that I do not permit strangers to enter the policies of Dunire?"

"I am very sorry, sir," the sweet, womanly voice made answer back. "I am a stranger come to Alvalloch seeking restoration for a weary body and a wearier mind. I strolled to your gates, and, finding the wicket ajar, was unable to resist the temptation to enter. I shall not intrude again."

She drew her wrap about her throat and began to move on her way. But the old man still kept his eyes upon her face, and there was a strange softening in their depths.

"Stay, madam. If you are always alone, you have my permission to come here when you please," he said, with rugged grace. "Good-day."

"Sir, I thank you," returned the lady, simply and gracefully, and again passed on.

The old man watched her out of sight, and then, with a heavy sigh, flung his plaid across his shoulder and proceeded on his way.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### "MARJORIE'S BAIRN."



AFTER that day the stranger lady and the Laird of Dunire met often in the policies. But save a formal recognition, or a word regarding the weather, no communications passed between them.

One day, however, she was sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, by the side of a roaring torrent, far down the glen, when suddenly the old man appeared before her. She was not surprised or startled, being accustomed to being caught unawares by the weird-looking figure.

"It is a fine autumn day, madam," he said, leaning upon his trusty stick, and looking full into her face. "You spoke of a weary body and a weary mind the first time we met. May I ask if you have found the balm you sought?"

"My health is improving every day," she answered quietly.

"And your mind."

"Is weary still," she said, and turned her eyes to watch the cataract roaring over its rocky steep.

"Perhaps you have lost one dear to you, or perhaps the oak you leaned upon bent and broke like a reed," he said, his voice gentle as a woman's.

"I have lost *all* dear to me, sir," she answered. "But mine is not the gentle, lingering regret with which we mourn the dead. It is a living sorrow, for which there is neither antidote nor softening this side the grave."

"You astonish me, madam. You are young, and what the world calls fair. Your life is early over-shadowed," said the old man, still compassionately. "But I fear I intrude upon

your sorrow. I can sympathise, for I too have known the bitter overthrow of every hope ; I have proved, with the poet's poor old king, how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child. They will have told you my story in the village?" he broke off, with a return of the wild, fierce manner habitual to him.

"Yes, they told me," answered the lady softly.

"I thought so. They gloat over it ; they delight to tell how the pride of Dunire was levelled at one blow, how the honour of the Ogilvies was brought down to the very dust," he said fiercely. "The very people who lived off my bounty, who fed on my lands, have turned me and my woe into a subject of ribald jest and curiosity. They point to me as the poor old man whose sorrow has crazed him."

The lady rose, awed, alarmed almost, by the shrill tones, the wild flashing of his blue eyes, the upheaving of his breast, the quivering of every feature in his face.

"Oh, sir," she said, laying a gentle hand on his trembling arm, "believe me, you wrong them. All who have spoken to me of your sorrow, have done so tenderly, gently, feeling for you even as I do. As far as I have seen, your people are as jealous of the honour of Dunire as you could be."

During her speech he never took his eye from her face, but when she ceased he shook her hand off his arm.

"Take away your eyes. They are of the past, they eat into my heart," he said wildly. "They bid me pray, they bid me cherish a spirit of forgiveness and love. It is I who was wronged ! Did I not cherish her, did I not love her so that I would have died for her? and she was a wicked, ungrateful girl—a wicked, ungrateful girl." Repeating the last words to himself in low, muttering tones, he turned about and hastened away, his silver locks flowing in the wind, his tall figure held erect as if defying some unseen foe.

"This long sorrow, his desolate life, has indeed unhinged his intellect," murmured the lady to herself. "I fear I dare not reveal myself, though my heart goes out to him, finding in his awful loneliness something akin to mine."

These and kindred thoughts occupied the lady's mind during her homeward way, and made her little inclined to listen to the customary evening gossip of the communicative hostess of the "Corbie." Mrs. Mackenzie's admiration and esteem for her guest was unbounded, and it was an unalloyed

satisfaction to her to observe the outward signs of restoration to health which were visible in her appearance.

For several days Mrs. North avoided Dunire, and confined herself to the walks in the opposite direction.

But upon the Sabbath afternoon, after attending service in the kirk, she retraced the familiar way, and when she came in sight of the wicket she beheld the stately figure of the Laird of Dunire standing sentry there.

She would have turned at once, but he raised his hand majestically in recognition, and then approached her.

"I am pleased to see you again, madam," he said with quiet and gentle courtesy. "I feared that I had alarmed you so much the last time we met that in future you would not extend your walks to Dunire. You can forgive an old man who allowed his emotions to overpower him?"

The lady's eyes filled with tears. The old man looked at her curiously, and his own eyes grew dim.

"You move me, madam," he said in a musing, absent way. "A woman's tears can make babes of bearded men."

But for the pathos of the speech the lady could almost have smiled, there was so little aptness in the quotation.

"You will walk a little way with me?" he said inquiringly. "Perhaps even you will deign to enter my house to-day to show me that I am forgiven."

"I shall esteem it an honour and a pleasure, sir, to be permitted a view of the interior of Dunire," she answered, with her quiet grace. "Your courtesy to a stranger is very great."

"When I look at you," he said dreamily, "I see other eyes which once looked into mine with love. It is the weakness of age to return in memory to what was the joy and pleasure of youth. Here is the house. It is neglected within as it is without; but it is better so, fitter emblem of the desolation of my heart. In former days servants would have been waiting to admit us, but now the old man admits himself. The step is not worn by ladies' feet, but you are welcome to Dunire."

As in a dream Mrs. North passed through the low-arched doorway into the wide, low-roofed hall, which was lighted by an exquisitely painted window of antique form and design. The old man threw open a door on the left, and, bidding her enter, followed himself, closing it behind her.

It was the drawing-room of the house, a large and somewhat gloomy room, hung round with grim portraits of former Ogilvies

of Dunire. One above the mantel had its face turned to the wall, telling its own mute, pitiful tale. The furniture was old-fashioned in the extreme, and was fast becoming the prey of moth and dust. The atmosphere felt chill and damp, for there had not been a fire on the wide hearth for many a day.

"It is a chill and gloomy place, madam," said the old man, drawing back the heavy curtain from the widow to admit a ray of the autumnal sun. "You are the first lady who has looked upon this room for thirty years. See here."

He walked to the mantel and turned the face of the condemned picture to the light, sending a shower of dust floating through the room.

It was the picture of a girlish face, lit by hazel eyes, which seemed to have caught a sunbeam in their depths, and crowned by a ripple of golden hair. The cheeks shamed the bloom of the peach, the mouth was exquisite—shy, tender, and yet proud. Tears chased each other down the old man's cheeks as he looked; as for the woman beside him she had her face hidden, for to see before her the living, almost breathing image of the dear dead mother, who was one of her most precious memories, was more than even her well-trained control could bear.

"That was my daughter, my sweet Marjorie," said the old man softly. "I look at it sometimes, and the old anger dies, and I hear her mother's voice pleading, 'Roderick, she is our child.' Your are overcome, madam. You can feel, I perceive, for the sorrows of others. Ah! I remember you said you had lost *all* dear to you. Then there must be sympathy between us, for I too have lost my all."

The lady raised her head, and the old man glancing at the picture and then at her, broke off suddenly.

"There could not be other eyes so like. Who and what are you? I have never asked your name nor whence you came. Tell me now."

The lady, trembling from head to foot, took off her glove, and, drawing a ring from her finger, placed it in the old man's hand. She stood still while he looked at it, almost expecting a return of the fierce, wild mood she had witnessed in the glen.

"I know this ring; it was *hers*," he said quietly, but with a strange eagerness in his voice. "How came you by it? Did you know her? Do you bring me news of her?"

Silently still the lady placed a folded paper in his hand. It

was the certificate of marriage between William Dale and Marjorie Ogilvie, at Edinburgh, in the summer of 18—.

It fluttered from the old man's hand, and his eyes fixed themselves on the sweet face before him, his mind beginning dimly to comprehend the truth.

"Grandfather," she said timidly, "can you not guess? I am *her* child—I am your grand-daughter, Barbara Dale. Bereft of all dear to me on earth, my heart turned to my mother's home, and I am here. You will not turn me away."

The old man moved away to the window like one in a dream, his struggling faculties clearing away the shadows from the path one by one. Here was the explanation of his deep interest in a stranger, of his continual longing for her presence, his constant desire to look upon her face. His daughter's child! Oh, but it was a strange, sweet, solemn thought! After what seemed a very long time to the waiting heart behind him, he turned towards her slowly, his eyes travelling over every lineament of her face. Then he opened his arms.

"Marjorie's bairn," he faltered, going back in his emotion to his mother's tongue. "Marjorie's bairn," he repeated again, this time more lovingly, more lingeringly than before. "For her sake, come hame."



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## CHAPTER XXIV.

AT NO. 5 HILL SQUARE AGAIN.



N Mrs. Greenway's best bedroom, on a winter's afternoon, lay her nephew, Jasper Leigh, very ill. He had been in failing health for some time at Great Wymar, and, feeling himself growing daily weaker, had written to his Aunt Helen, asking if she would give him house-room while he was under the treatment of an eminent London physician. Pity for him in his weakness—left in the care of servants—and her natural kindness of heart prompted her to write at once a kind, warm, sympathetic letter, begging him to make her house his home as long as he pleased.

So he came—a pitiful wreck of his former self—a gaunt, hollow-eyed being, who appeared to be possessed of a spirit of unrest. The eminent physician came, made his examination, and shook his head. Then he asked a few minutes' private conversation with Mrs. Greenway.

"Are you his mother?" he asked.

She answered in the negative.

"The case is a serious one. The patient has been indulging of late in intemperate habits, which in his state of health meant death; but, in addition to this, he appears to me to have some burden on his mind which saps his bodily strength. Can you enlighten me?"

Mrs. Greenway drew herself up.

"That is but fancy, doctor," she answered, stiffly. "My nephew has lived a blameless, upright life, and is highly honoured in his profession."

The doctor bowed.

"I regret that I can do nothing for him now," he answered with professional gravity. "The essence of the disease is merely a question of time. He may linger long, or he may succumb suddenly, it is impossible to tell."

The doctor's opinion was made known to Jasper Leigh, and he spoke of returning to Great Wymar, but Mrs. Greenway set him aside, and decided that he should remain at St. John's Wood.

Julia was now married, and Bessie, gentle-eyed and sweet-faced as of yore, was her mother's right hand, and in very truth the household angel of No. 5 Hill Square. There was a spirit of love, a sweet peace, pervading the house which had been lacking in the days when the constant bickering between Mrs. Greenway and Julia had made it indeed a divided house. Mrs. Greenway's face no longer wore the anxious, worried expression, for fortune had smiled upon them, and sent them a legacy from a distant kinswoman, which lifted all care from the heart of the anxious mother.

Jasper Leigh, as may be surmised, found the peace and rest of his aunt's home very sweet after the loveless discomfort of his bachelor quarters at Great Wymar. During the first few weeks of his sojourn he was able to spend the greater part of each day in the drawing-room, but the time came when an hour or two spent in the easy-chair by his bedroom fire was all Jasper Leigh's strength would permit. He spoke very little. His aunt wondered often what were his thoughts, and wondered too what manner of preparation he was making for the approaching end. She was a woman whose feelings were deeply hidden, and who was reticent to a fault in interfering with those of others. Her heart yearned over her sister's child, and she would fain have pointed him to the hope for eternity, but each day slipped past and left the duty unfulfilled. But what her mother left undone Bessie did in her gentle, unassuming way, beginning by reading a few verses from the Bible to her cousin, singing to him hymns having reference to the subject of which her mind was full. She could not be sure that her effort met with any success. Jasper seldom made any remark, yet he seemed pleased when she read, and would follow every word, she could see. One afternoon he was dozing away on his pillows, his aunt sitting by the fire sewing.

"Are you there, Aunt Helen?" he asked feebly.

In a moment she was by his side.



"I don't want anything; thanks," he said. "Is there a copy of *Vanity Fair* lying there? Uncle brought it from the City yesterday."

"Here it is, Jasper," she answered, lifting the magazine from the mantel. "You are not going to attempt reading in bed, I hope?"

"No; I want to show you something," he said, and began feebly to turn over the pages till he found what he sought. "Read that, Aunt Helen, if you please," he said, pointing to a paragraph. "Aloud, if you please." And in some surprise Mrs. Greenway obeyed:—

"Dame Rumour whispers that a certain Minister of State has applied for decree of divorce against the lady whose flight made such a sensation in fashionable and literary circles three years ago, and that the advent of the summer will witness a happy change in his domestic affairs. It is expected then that the stately halls of Mount Severne will receive a mistress whose beauty and grace make her deservedly popular everywhere. It is also whispered that the alliance will be much more to the taste of the bridegroom's relatives than his former one. But perhaps we anticipate."

"What does it mean, Jasper? What interest can a piece of society gossip like that have for either you or me?" queried Mrs. Greenway, wondering.

"If you will sit down here, Aunt Helen, I will explain," said Jasper Leigh. "Turn the key in the door, please, so that we may not be disturbed."

Mrs. Greenway turned the key in the lock, as desired, thinking privately that the sick man's mind was wandering.

"You will not have forgotten, I suppose, a governess you had when I came here one summer nearly five years ago?" said the invalid, fixing his hollow eyes on his listener's face.

"That would be Miss Dale," she answered, with a sigh. "Yes, I have reason to remember her. I have never had a governess like her since. Whatever she might be, she did her duty by me. I have always said that."

"You remember the story I told you about her?" asked Jasper Leigh.

"Of course I do, and many a time since I have wished you never had told me it. It is not pleasant to have one's faith in human nature so rudely shaken. Had any one but yourself, Jasper, I would have refused to listen to it."

"Did it never occur to you, Aunt Helen, to wonder what my motive was?" asked Jasper Leigh, in the same quiet, almost listless, voice.

"No, you assured me it was in my interest and in that of my children you spoke," she reminded him.

The sick man smiled, sadly and bitterly.

"No, it was in my own interest, that of revenge, Aunt Helen. The base insinuations against her character were lies; the stories I told you of her life in Little Wymar were lies also. It was true enough that her brother had disgraced himself and his family, but she was as pure, and true, and good a woman as Bessie is, and she is an angel."

Mrs. Greenway sat staring at her nephew in absolute dumfounded amazement. If his words were not the wanderings of a mind weakened by physical pain, her faith in human nature was likely to receive a ruder shock than in the case of the governess.

"I see what you are thinking, Aunt Helen, that I am growing delirious in my weakness, but my head has never been clearer than it is at this moment. Listen to me; it will afford me a grim pleasure to show up my own villainy, and to be righteously condemned at last. My days are numbered, I know, and I may as well try and make what amends I can to those I have wronged. Well, Aunt Helen, Miss Dale's father, a London journalist, came to Little Wymar to seek health, and his son Robert got a situation in the Great Wymar Provincial Bank. I got acquainted with him, and he asked me to his home.

"I went, and there I saw his sister Barbara. I loved her from that very night I saw her; she was so different in every way from the women to whom I was accustomed. I have a long story to tell, so I must use as few words as possible. I loved her, but she would have nothing to say to me, and kept me always at a distance. She was as proud and haughty as any queen, and treated me with a contempt which galled me. She had clearer vision than the women-kind of Little Wymar, and I daresay could estimate me at my worth. Well, the brother fell as I told you before, and was tried for embezzlement, and sentenced to nine years' penal servitude. It was a terrible blow to his sister's pride, and killed the old man eventually. Deprived of Robert's pecuniary aid, they were in poor enough circumstances, and Mr. Dale borrowed from me once or twice paltry sums, amounting in all to about a hundred pounds. He died,

of course, without being able to refund, but had told his daughter, and she asked me to name the sum, so that she might free herself of all obligation to me. I refused to tell her, knowing how it would wound her, and that was the first part of my revenge. I had offered her a home when she had none in prospect, and she scorned it; it was my determination to scorn her when the time came. She refused to give me any inkling of her plans for the future, and left Little Wymar without confiding them to any one. By chance I discovered her here, and came to London at once. I renewed my offer of marriage, for I loved her sincerely, Aunt Helen, but it was again refused. Then I told you that fabricated story, and got you to dismiss her. That was the second part of my revenge. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, I follow you," said Mrs. Greenway, quietly but coldly. "It did not end with that then?"

"Oh, no; that would not satisfy a man's passion for revenge. I meant to dog her footsteps, to be her Nemesis, to be the continual shadow on her path, and I succeeded. I followed her to her lodging in the Brixton Road that morning she left, and then, as you will remember, I went home to Great Wymar. When I considered she would be beginning to feel secure again I returned to London, and went out to her lodging. I found the old woman, her nurse, as well as landlady, in the house alone, and worked her so well that I got all the history of Miss Dale's past, present, and future. Then I left, and when I came back, two days later, intending to see Miss Dale herself, I found the house shut up and its inmates gone, nobody could tell me where. After that I lost sight of her for a long time."

He paused and asked for a mouthful of water, which Mrs. Greenway gave him without remark.

"Well, as I said, I lost her for a long time, and when I saw her again her circumstances had undergone a mighty change. I dropped in at Drury Lane one night without any expectation of seeing her there, when, lo, as my eyes were scanning the boxes, I saw her sitting beside an elderly lady, who evidently belonged to the upper ten. I asked a question of a young fellow next me, and he told me the young lady was the famous authoress, Miss Ogilvie—"The "B." who wrote "Ambition," don't you know?" he said, and that the elder was Lady Bassett, one of the many great ladies who delighted to honour Miss Ogilvie. I thanked him, and watched that box like a hawk.

Between two of the acts a gentleman appeared in the box, and took up his position behind Miss Ogilvie's chair. His demeanour prepared me for my neighbour's next speech.

"Say, if you're interested in the parties over there, look now, that's Sir Adrian Severne, of the Cabinet, don't you know? and he's going to marry the authoress—so they say."

"I rose and went out then, but I lingered about the street till the theatre began to empty. Then I watched and stood where she could see me. Just as she was parting with her lover her eyes fell on me, and I knew that she recognised and feared me. Then I went away. I saw her again on her wedding-day in the parish church of Bassett, and was the shadow across her path when she was at the very summit of her success. Are you beginning now, Aunt Helen, to understand why I showed you that paragraph in *Vanity Fair*?"

"Go on," said Mrs. Greenway. "My opinion of this terrible story will come by-and-by."

"Well, I must be brief, for I am getting short of wind," he said, with a dreary smile, "and it can be told in a few words now. I haunted her. I appeared to her in her own grounds when she was spending her honeymoon at Mount Severne, but I got no conversation with her till I called at her house in Park Lane. Then it was by a daring stroke that I discovered she had withheld from her husband the fact of her brother's shame—the fact, indeed, of his existence at all—and I threatened to reveal it to him. I threatened to make up a fabrication about her previous acquaintance with me which would be sufficient to shake any man's faith in woman. Then she sued to me, pled for her happiness, and my success had come. But it was not so sweet as I had expected. I was even sorry for her in my inmost heart, though I would not own it even to myself.

"Well, I saw her frequently after that, and in time Sir Adrian Severne's suspicions were aroused. I encountered him on his own doorstep one day, when I called to see his wife, and I knew from his face that it was all up with her. I didn't see her that day, and the next thing I knew was the report that Lady Severne had eloped. There was no clue whatsoever to her whereabouts, but her husband thought then, and thinks still, that she left him to come to me. I had never intended such a complete wreck of her life, but it seemed as if Fate had approved my work, and stepped in to make it more complete. From that day to this, Aunt Helen, I have never

seen or heard of the woman who was your governess, and I know that her husband is ignorant of her whereabouts, and that the society which delighted to blame, as it had delighted to honour her would give untold gold to know what became of her. I myself believe her to be dead; she was looking like enough it when I saw her last. That is my story, Aunt Helen. Likely enough you will turn me out of your house now. Well, I suppose it would be nothing short of what I deserve."

It was a long time before any words fell from the lips of Mrs. Greenway.

"It would serve no end now, Jasper; it would do no good to the unhappy lady whom you have so irreparably wronged," she said at length. "You have great need—greater need than I thought even—to seek a throne of mercy. I cannot believe that it is my nephew, the son of my sister Mary, who has done this fearful wrong. O Jasper! had you no heart? How could you do it?"

"It is done now, and there is no use asking questions like these. I am to die, I suppose, and I would like to clear Sir Adrian Severne's wife in his eyes, and in the eyes of the world. It is all the reparation I can make."

Mrs. Greenway wondered at the calm indifference with which he spoke.

"Are you penitent, Jasper?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't know what you mean," he answered impatiently.

"I can't groan, and weep, and call myself a miserable sinner, though I know well enough I am one. But I'm sorry enough for the past, and would undo it if I could. How do you suppose I can set about making reparation possible now?"

"Where will Sir Adrian Severne be at this season, do you suppose?" she asked.

"At Mount Severne probably; that can be easily ascertained by inquiring at his club."

"Very well. That will be my work to-morrow," she answered quietly, "and, if need be, I shall take the journey to Mount Severne. I could not live another day with such a load on my mind. How you have supported it so long is a mystery to me."

"It has killed me, you see," said Jasper Leigh. "I am very much obliged to you, Aunt Helen. I knew you would do it at once. Are you going? Ask Bessie to come and read to me, will you? I fancy I could go to sleep if I heard her voice."



## CHAPTER XXV.

### WOMEN—AND WOMEN.



FAMILY party were seated at the breakfast table in the morning-room at Mount Severne. It consisted of Sir Adrian Severne, his mother and sister, and Ethel St. Maur, who had accepted an invitation to spend Christmas at Mount Severne. It was her first visit since she had been the guest of Adrian's wife, and she felt the position very keenly. So did Adrian; but, both being of the world, nothing of the inward thought could be gathered from outward tokens.

There was a change in Adrian Severne. The deep lines on his brow and about his mouth, the grey threads among his hair, told what the breaking up of his home had been to him. No person, man or woman, had heard him allude in the remotest degree to his wife's flight, or had dared to mention her name to him since that day. At her son's desire Lady Severne, the elder, sold her recently purchased London house and returned to overlook his establishment. As a matter of course, Frances came also, but Adrian and she were very far apart. There was no change in Frances Severne. She was the same cold, proud, unwomanly woman that she had ever been, loving but one being besides herself on earth, and that was Ethel St Maur. The bright, unselfish spirit seemed to possess some magic power over her, and could touch what heart was hid within that cold breast. Very sweet, and fair, and love-worthy looked the daughter of Trentham Abbey that morning in her rich crimson morning-gown, with its soft trimmings of creamy lace—as sweet and perfect a woman as any man could wish to make the mistress of his home. Had a strange, inscrutable

fate not seemed to rule Adrian Severne's destiny she might have been his wife. But he had loved once, and, though unworthily, for all, and henceforth all women must be the same in his eyes.

The meal was finished, and Adrian was busy with his letters, his mother deep in a long epistle from a friend abroad, and the younger ladies were looking into the papers and magazines which had arrived by post. In Ethel's hand was a copy of *Vanity Fair*. She turned over the pages carelessly, scanning the headings of each paragraph, when suddenly Frances observed a deep, painful flush overspread neck, and cheek, and brow, dyeing even her very finger tips. Then the magazine was hastily laid aside and another one opened. Frances made no remark, but by-and-by, drawing *Vanity Fair* aside, slipped it unobserved into her pocket, intending to hunt at leisure for the cause of Ethel's painful confusion.

"I am going to Castle Burnett this morning, girls," said Lady Severne, when she had finished the perusal of her letter. "Will you accompany me."

"Are there any visitors at Castle Burnett, mamma?" asked Frances

"Yes; the Duke of Wendover and his sister—Lady Cecilia—were, I know, expected at the castle," replied Lady Severne. "Will you come, Ethel?"

"I am in your hand, Lady Severne," returned Ethel, and her voice was not quite steady. It, however, passed unnoticed.

"You must be ready by twelve, then. Adrian, what plan have you for to-day? Can you escort us?"

"I am sorry I cannot, mother. I have to meet Gresham in Middleborough at one; but I shall ride round by Castle Burnett on my return, and escort you home." While he was speaking Ethel St. Maur quietly left the room. Then Frances Severne drew *Vanity Fair* from her pocket, and, turning its pages hurriedly, found what she sought. It was the paragraph which Mrs. Greenway had been requested to read to her nephew, Jasper Leigh.

"Adrian, look there," she said, and handed him the open page, with her finger pointing to the place.

Adrian's face flushed as he read—an angry flush—and his eyes flashed fire.

"This is scandalous," he said fiercely. "This unprincipled spy upon private affairs ought to be suppressed. It is a

fabrication which must be exposed at once. Tear it up lest it should meet the eye of Miss St. Maur, and spoil whatever pleasure her visit might otherwise give her."

"It is too late," answered Frances, quietly. "It was from Ethel's face I gathered there was some home-thrust in the paper she was reading. This compromises her, Adrian, and there is but one course open to you."

Adrian Severne turned upon his sister with rising passion in his eyes.

"Take care, Frances. I have had sufficient of your interference with my affairs in the past," he said, in a voice she had been wont to dread.

"This is very awkward, Adrian," broke in Lady Severne, who had read the paragraph. "Is there any truth in the first part of this extraordinary statement?"

"It is true that I have filed an application for divorce from my former wife," responded Adrian, briefly.

"And is there *no* truth whatever in the latter?" queried Frances.

"I will answer your question, Frances, on the understanding that it is the last time you will allude to such a matter. There is no truth whatsoever in the report that I am to marry Miss St. Maur or any other lady. I am done with marriage henceforth, and the sooner the world understands it the better for us all. I shall take instant steps to have this scandalous rumour immediately suppressed," answered Adrian, and, turning upon his heel, quitted the room. In the library, to his intense amazement, he found Miss St. Maur writing a letter. She saw from his face that he had read the announcement which had distressed her, and for a moment they stood in silence, neither knowing what to say first.

"I have been writing a letter home, Adrian," she said at last. "I find I must shorten my visit to Mount Severne."

Adrian Severne bit his lip and took a turn across the room. Ethel had opportunity enough to quit it, but something impelled her to stay.

"I need scarcely ask the question, I suppose," he said by-and-by, pausing in front of her. "That outrageous paragraph Frances has just pointed out to me is the cause of your change of plan?"

She bowed her head, the rich carmine flooding her face again.

"You will see that it is refuted at once, Adrian," she said



simply. "I have known you so long that I can speak to you about this matter frankly as a sister might, but you will understand that it will be better for me to leave Mount Severne at present."

Listening to her womanly words, looking upon her sweet, uplifted face, Adrian Severne's faith in women revived again, and he felt for Ethel St. Maur a reverence unspeakable.

"I will see that it is done at once, Ethel," he answered; then Ethel turned her face to the window, and stood looking out upon the snow-covered landscape in silence.

"It is due to you, Ethel," said Adrian by-and-by, "to tell you that it is true I am seeking a divorce from my former wife, but——"

"I am sorry to hear it. O Adrian! let a little longer time elapse; do not seek it yet," interrupted Ethel, turning shining, earnest eyes upon his face. He looked like a man who had received a sudden shock.

"Why not?" he asked, in purest amazement.

"I can hardly tell. I can give you no reason, except what may seem to you a fantasy of a woman's mind," she answered. "Adrian, I have never lost my faith in your wife. I knew her well, and I knew she loved you as a wife should love her husband—wherever she may be, whatever may be the explanation of this great mystery, I believe she is faithful to you."

"Ethel, Ethel! these are mad words," said Adrian Severne hoarsely.

"They are true. Call me mad if you like, but mark my words. Time will prove that I am right; a woman's instinct is unerring, Adrian," returned Ethel as she moved towards the door. She paused there a moment, and then turned to him again, a faint and lovely colour stealing over her face.

"Adrian, I will effectually prove to you how little that idle gossip in *Vanity Fair* has really hurt me," she said in a low voice, "by telling you what is known as yet only to my family circle—I am engaged to be married to the Duke of Wendover, and only the recent bereavement in his family has prevented the announcement from having been made public before now."

Adrian Severne took two steps towards her, and clasping her hands in his, raised them to his lips.

"May God bless you, Ethel, and him," he said fervently.

"He is worthy of you, my friend."

"Friends for life, Adrian," she said, with a smile and a tear

"And when brighter days dawn for Mount Severne, we will laugh together over this very peculiar interview."

Then she left him, his heart throbbing with a pain which had yet in it a wild thrill of hope. Her words were strange, but they carried conviction with them. Was it possible after all that his wife's secret might have been a comparatively innocent one, but which she feared to reveal to him? Truly Ethel St. Maur had given the master of Mount Severne sufficient food for thought that day.

As arranged, the ladies drove to Castle Burnett, but waited in vain for Adrian coming. Concluding that he had been detained in Middleborough, they returned home, reaching it about four o'clock.

"Has Sir Adrian returned from Middleborough, Markham?" inquired Lady Severne, as they entered the house.

"Sir Adrian is away to London, my lady," returned the servant.

Lady Severne exchanged glances with Frances.

"By what train, Markham?"

"The 2.10 express, my lady. Just after you left, as Sir Adrian was making ready to go to Middleborough, a lady called and asked for him. He saw her in the library, my lady, and then I was told to order a carriage to go to the station. They left together. Sir Adrian seemed very much excited," said Markham, volunteering his information respectfully.

Lady Severne grew pale, Frances looked curious, Miss St. Maur deeply interested.

"What kind of a lady was it, Markham?" asked her ladyship, unable to keep back the question.

"An elderly person, well-dressed; looked like a tradesman's wife, my lady," answered Markham. "Here is a note for Miss St. Maur," he added, offering that lady a sealed envelope.

"Sir Adrian did not say when he would return?" said Lady Severne.

"No, my lady; he left no message."

Then the ladies passed up-stairs.

"If I do not appear too curious, Ethel, would you read your note and see if it throws any light upon this strange affair?" said Lady Severne, pausing at the drawing-room door.

Ethel nodded, and, opening the door, the three entered the room.

She broke the seal there, and, having read it, passed it to Lady Severne. It was brief and inscrutable enough.

"My friend," it ran, "I have received sudden and indisputable proof of the truth of what I deemed your wildly improbable words this morning. I am away to investigate the matter, and satisfy myself as far as I can. That done, it remains for me to find her—a search in which I know I shall have your warm wishes and sympathy. God bless you, Ethel.

"A. S."

"What may this mean? Who is the *her* spoken of? What search has he gone upon?" said Lady Severne sharply.

"It means this, Lady Severne, that while Adrian and I were talking this morning about that paragraph in *Vanity Fair*, his wife's name was mentioned. Then I expressed to him my firm belief in her innocence, my conviction that the mystery would be cleared up, that happiness would again smile upon Mount Severne," said Ethel, with a trembling lip. "It is a great, deep joy for me that my hopes are likely to be fulfilled, and I pray God he may be successful in his search."

It was not pleasant at that moment to look upon the face of Frances Severne.

"And I say, God forbid," she said. "It is not fit that such a woman's name should be mentioned among respectable women. If Adrian should be so insane as to bring her back to Mount Severne, he will look upon my face for the last time. I *will* never forgive him."

"Oh, Frances, hush!" broke from the trembling lips of Ethel St. Maur.

"And I say—Frances and Ethel witness my words,"—said Lady Severne, "if Adrian can bring his wife back to Mount Severne cleared in the eyes of the world, if he can prove to his own satisfaction and to mine that she has been true to him, she will be to me as a daughter. Poor girl, poor girl! my heart has been very heavy about her often. I was very unkind to her, Ethel, very unkind, but I have been punished for it."

"Dear Lady Severne," cried impulsive Ethel, with her arms about the neck of the penitent woman, "I feel so light and sunny-headed to-day, though the tears will not be kept back. I think Adrian is to be made happy again. Dear Frances, don't look so strangely. Be glad with us for Adrian's sake."


Frances Severne turned away, her face growing dark with passion.

"Fools! fools!" they heard her mutter bitterly as she left the room, and that day they saw her face no more.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

CHAPTER.

XPECTING that Sir Adrian Severne would return to London with Mrs. Greenway, Jasper Leigh rose at noon, and was sitting in his dressing-gown at the bedroom fire when he heard the cab drive up to the door. He was perfectly calm, to look at him, so none could have guessed the unusual nature of the interview about to take place. There was some little delay down-stairs, caused probably by Mrs. Greenway's inquiries regarding her nephew's condition. Then he heard steps upon the stair, and, wheeling his chair round a little way, turned his eyes expectantly to the door.

Mrs. Greenway entered first. That she was much excited was evident from her appearance. Then followed her the stately figure of Sir Adrian Severne, and the two men—wronged and wrong-doer—were face to face. Sir Adrian's face was very pale now, and set in grim sternness. But that softened into pity when he looked on the death-stamped face of Jasper Leigh. All great natures are tender-hearted, and even in this moment when he had just reason to be bitterly angry, Adrian Severne pitied Jasper Leigh.

"You recognise me, I suppose, Sir Adrian Severne?" said Jasper Leigh. "There is no need to repeat the story which, I suppose, Mrs. Greenway has already told you. You have come just to satisfy yourself that I am the man and that the story is true before you proceed to search for Lady Severne."

"You state the case admirably," said Sir Adrian briefly. "I will spare you any expression of my own opinion of you, and will confine myself to questions bearing directly on the subject.

You assure me that the infamous story this lady related to me is strictly true?"

"I swear it, Sir Adrian Severne," rejoined Jasper Leigh solemnly. "I swear also that Lady Severne was faithful to you in thought, word, and deed. Her only fault was mistrust, a shrinking from revealing to you the blot upon her family name, lest it should turn you against her. I further swear to you that it was her great love for you which made her weak where she ought to have been strong. You believe it, Sir Adrian?"

These words, touching so delicate a spot, fell calmly and quietly from Jasper Leigh's lips as if they were matters of course, and though Adrian Severne winced he could not resent them.

"I believe you to be speaking the truth," was all he said.

"You thought, of course, that Lady Severne had left you for me," said Jasper Leigh, probing deeper still.

"My wife's flight was and is still to a certain extent a mystery to me," said Sir Adrian Severne. "When did you last see her?"

"On the night of the 29th April, 1876," replied Jasper Leigh, "in your own grounds at Mount Severne."

Ay, Adrian Severne remembered well the awful agony of that night.

He turned away a moment, for his thoughts were bitter indeed. How hardly he had dealt with her, in his judgment of her how quick to make the most of every trifle, how prone to adduce proof where there was none! He had disbelieved the note which came to her from Hastings, and had settled in his mind without hesitation that it had been a mere blind, a cloak to hide a less worthy motive. When he spoke again, his voice took a harsher, sterner tone.

"You can give me no clue to Lady Severne's whereabouts," he said. "You are perfectly sure you have never seen nor heard of her since she quitted her home?"

"I wish I could answer differently, Sir Adrian," answered Jasper Leigh. "I have spent both time and money in the search, but have failed to find a clue. *You* will be successful, for you have right upon your side."

The necessary questions were all asked, and the interview was practically at an end. Sir Adrian Severne turned to Mrs. Greenway. Throughout these sharp moments he had been curiously calm, but the veins upon his forehead stood out like knotted cords, telling how great was the mental struggle.

"There is no more to be said on either side, madam," he said courteously. "With your permission I shall take my leave."

He had turned his back now on Jasper Leigh. The sick man's eyes dwelt wistfully upon him, with an expression which plainly denoted the desire to hear a word of forgiveness from the man he had injured.

Mrs. Greenway stepped aside and opened the door. Sir Adrian was about to pass out, when Jasper Leigh recalled him by a word.

He turned on his heel and looked again at the wasted face lying back among the pillows.

"Has anything been forgotten?" he asked.

"No, Sir Adrian," rejoined Jasper Leigh. "Only—that as we shall meet no more on earth, because you are on your way to happiness, and I to render an account of my sins—let me hear from your lips one word of forgiveness, although I am so far beneath your contempt and hers. I loved her well, and my love was my ruin."

"Although you made my home desolate, although you have broken the heart of one dearer to me than life itself, and who, through you, may have by this time found a nameless grave," said Adrian Severne slowly and solemnly, "I forgive you, as God is my witness, Jasper Leigh, even as I hope to be forgiven."

Then he went his way.

Mount Severne saw its master no more for many days.

He went to Scotland Yard, detailed the circumstances of his wife's disappearance to the cleverest detective in the force, and told him what would be his munificent reward if he succeeded in discovering a clue. Advertisements, carefully worded, were inserted in the leading newspapers; but the days went by. The detective kept out of Sir Adrian's way, to avoid his ceaseless questions and conjectures, and to be spared the necessity of inflicting disappointment.

The West End filled for the season, as usual, and among others Lady Bassett arrived in town. Seeing her name announced in the columns of *Fashionable Intelligence*, Adrian Severne, dragging out miserable days of suspense and anxiety at his club, presented himself one morning at her residence in Harley Street, and was admitted at once.

Since the cloud had fallen on Adrian's hearth he had had

little intercourse with his old friend, and was not quite sure in what light she regarded the unhappy business. She met him that morning warm hearted, full of sympathy as of yore, and before he had been half an hour beside her she was in possession of the whole story.

"I do not know what to think, Adrian," was all she said, and he rose disappointedly. It was the first time she had failed to give him material aid in any difficulty. He had fancied her woman's wit would instantly suggest some plan of search which would be crowned with immediate success.

"There was no doubt in my mind at first, Adrian, of Barbara's guilt," she said, showing that her thought was of the past rather than the present. "But, pondering over it calmly, I have often been bewildered and perplexed. She was *not* a woman to throw up such a position, such a life, for all the meagre satisfaction of an elopement, even supposing she had madly loved the man who tempted her."

"That is not the question, Lady Bassett," said Adrian, with all the impatience of which he was capable. "I have proved her innocence. What I want now is your help in finding her."

Lady Bassett thought a moment with her hand over her eyes. Then she looked up gravely, so gravely that Adrian was almost prepared for her words.

"In a matter like this, Adrian," she said, "it is necessary to face the worst at once. It has occurred to you, of course, that Barbara might, in her agony, seek the quickest and surest ending."

"It has flitted across my mind like a horrible nightmare," said Adrian Severne, great beads of perspiration standing on his brow. "But I cannot face it bravely. I cannot fancy my darling hid away for ever, beyond all hope of reunion. God will be more merciful than that, Lady Bassett."

She smiled, but a tear was not far distant.

"I was but trying you, Adrian. Barbara is alive yet. She was weak when you were concerned, fearing to lose you, but she was not coward enough to take her life. How you have loved her, Adrian!"

"Loved her!" re-echoed Adrian Severne, beginning his restless walk to and fro, even as he had done during another momentous interview in that very room. "I tell you, Lady Bassett, life without her is Dead Sea fruit. If the choice were given me, whether I would resign all my connections with the

world, political and social, in favour of a life of absolute retirement with her, I would not hesitate a moment. My very soul cleaves to her. I do not think she has been out of my heart for a minute since she left me, ay, even when I deemed her most unworthy."

"Such constant and abiding love is rare in these days, Adrian," said Lady Bassett. "Now let us to business. What agencies have you set to work to find her?"

Briefly Adrian explained all the steps he had taken for the recovery of his lost treasure.

"Have you been to Warren & Grimshaw, Barbara's former publishers?" she asked. "It is just possible they may know something of her. 'Ambition' is still passing through new editions. I do not, of course, know what were her arrangements with her publishers, but in the ordinary way of business that ought to mean something handsome for the author."

"I have received three remittances of a hundred pounds each from Messrs. Warren," replied Adrian briefly. "I called when the first one came, and when they understood that she was still in the eye of the law my wife, they said I must become the recipient. I have sent all the money to the Magdalene Hospital. They know nothing whatever about her present residence."

"Well, of course, if it was her aim to remain in hiding, she would scarcely put herself in communication with those who had known her in her happier days," said Lady Bassett musingly. "But if she is alive she will be working with her pen. I would know her work the moment I read it. Would not you?"

"Ay, in a moment," said Adrian. "I am beginning to think that is my only chance now, unless indeed she has crossed the Atlantic, in which case I fear all search will prove unavailing."

It looked as if Adrian was right in his surmise.

Yet again the days went by. Scotland Yard's best energies were in full force, but no clue to the missing lady was found. During that time of suspense Sir Adrian forced himself to attend as usual to his Parliamentary duties, in order to keep the world in ignorance of what was going on. If his search proved in vain, it would be better that the ashes of the dead past should not be raked up for public view. The few in the secret, though they were all women, kept it well. Easter came and went, spring ripened into summer, worn-out pleasure-



hunters longed to exchange gilded saloon and city drawing-room for the wild, free, heather-scented air, the roaring cataracts, the purple hills, and green, green glens of the North Countrie.

The talk was all of the prospects of the 12th—even the interest of politicians in Parliamentary matters waned before the forthcoming holidays.

The early days of August witnessed the flight of all who were not absolutely compelled to remain in town. By the second week the West End was very empty, the benches of the House but thinly occupied.

Sir Adrian Severne had no intention of leaving London yet, whereat many marvelled. Many marvelled, too, what kept Lady Bassett so long in town; in time past she had been the first to leave, as she was the last to arrive.

On the morning of the tenth a message left at his club summoned Sir Adrian Severne to Harley Street.

He found her waiting for him impatiently, and apparently much excited. After a brief greeting, she silently lifted a book from the table and placed it in his hands.

"Adrian, it is *hers*," she said, "or else I am wofu", mistaken."

He opened it and read the words on the title-page. They were few and inscrutable enough—

"NEMESIS,

BY

A WOMAN."

No name, no initial letter even, to give a clue to the author.

"The title struck me at once, Adrian," said Lady Bassett. "But I did not permit myself to hope till I had read a few pages. No pen but Barbara's ever wrote like that. Thank God, your search is likely to have a successful end at last."

Adrian Severne turned away a moment, holding the book closely in his hand. Dared he believe it? Dared he hope that the light of his life would be restored to him again? Dared he dream of holding his wife to his heart once more?

"I dare not hope, Lady Bassett," he said, hoarsely. "My God, it would be a terrible disappointment to find you are mistaken."

"I am *not*, Adrian," she answered, "in clear, undoubting tones. "I would not have sent for you on a mere supposition.

That book has been written by a woman who has passed through the very furnace of mental agony—that woman is your wife, Adrian. Its very name might bid you hope.”

“I may take it, I suppose,” he said.

“Yes; it is published, you will see, by the Messrs. Bretton, of Beile Sauvage Yard. You will go to them at once.”

“*At once*,” he said, and, turning, he wrung her hand like a vice. “If I do not return, you will know I have found a clue.”

He left the house, called a hansom, and drove at once to the premises of the Messrs. Bretton. The day was near its close, but fortunately press of business had kept the principals later than their wont. They were all courtesy, of course, to their distinguished caller, and more than willing to impart what information they possessed regarding the author of “*Nemesis*.” It was meagre enough.

“The MS. was submitted to us with no name attached, but simply an initial letter and an address, Sir Adrian,” said Mr. George Bretton, keenly watching his listener’s face. “A glance at the first few pages convinced us that it was the production of genius. We wrote to the author, offering to purchase copyright, but were answered to the effect that the lady preferred to publish on her own account.”

“The author *is* a lady, then?” said Sir Adrian.

“Yes, and one certain to come to the front rank as a writer. ‘*Nemesis*’ has already brought her into repute. In spite of its appearance at this somewhat awkward season of the year—the reading public being at present on the wing—the first edition is nearly exhausted. There has been no success like it since the publication of a novel four years ago, which probably you will remember without more explicit reference.”

Sir Adrian bowed, understanding the publisher’s reticence.

“I have reason to believe, Mr. Bretton,” he said calmly, “that ‘*Nemesis*’ is from the pen of my wife, Lady Severne, whom I am now seeking. You will be good enough to regard my communication as strictly private. Now, will you furnish me with the address you spoke of?”

“Certainly,” said the publisher. “The initial given was ‘O’—the address, Dunire, Alvalloch, Scotland. You can remember it, I presume. I need not note it down.”

“No; a thousand thanks. Good afternoon.”

Is it necessary to say that Sir Adrian Severne left London by the night mail for Scotland?



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### MY WIFE!



LATE on the evening of the following day Sir Adrian Severne arrived at Alvalloch. He had reached the market town too late for the afternoon coach, and hired a trap from the Station Hotel. The driver, a pleasant-faced, civil-spoken young man, seemed inclined to be communicative about the district through which they rapidly passed, but the gentleman did not encourage him. However, when they were coming near Alvalloch, he awoke out of his reverie, or laid aside his disinclination to enter into conversation.

"You appear to be well acquainted with the district," he said, in his deep, musical voice; "and, I presume, will be able to tell me something about the estate of Dunire and its present occupier?"

"Oh, ay, sir," replied the man, delighted to find his companion interested at last. "That's Laird Ogilvie's place on the ither side o' the loch. Ye'll be a stranger tae thae pairts, an' winna hae heard the story o' the rinawa' dochter o' Dunire. She gaed awa' tae Lunnon wi' some man, an' for mony a year efter it there was dool an' wae in Dunire. The auld leddy dee'd no' lang efter'd, an' then the Laird lost his wuts, some folks say, though I dinna think he ever was that faur gane. Hooever that may be, he lived his lane at Dunire for I'se warrand thirty year, an' no mony folk excep'in his twa auld servants ever saw his face; but Dunire's a changed place sin' Miss Ogilvie can.' hame."

In the darkness—great beads of perspiration stood on Sir Adrian's brow—and his voice was somewhat unsteady when he spoke.

What Miss Ogilvie?"

Highly pleased to find his story being relished, the young man continued—

"His granddochter, Miss Marjorie's bairn. She had dee'd in Lunnon, an' her man tae, so naterally enough her ae bairn thocht on her mither's hame. So she cam', about twa year sin' syne—ay, jist three year the noo. It was an awfu' speakin' at the time, but it's an auld story in the kintry-side noo. There's the lights o' Dunire, sir, see, blinkin' doon amang the trees."

They were rapidly descending a steep incline straight upon Alvalloch, and had an uninterrupted view of the loch and its opposite shore.

The night had been dark and threatening, but now, through a rift in the flying clouds, the moon shone out brilliantly upon the heaving bosom of the loch. Rising from its nest of birch and pine, the grey tower of Dunire could be plainly seen, and the steady lights burning in the lower windows were suggestive of warmth and comfort within. Sir Adrian spoke never a word. His eyes clave to the house, his heart picturing his darling within its walls. It required all his iron will to keep down the mad impulse to flee to it at once, forgetting the lateness of the hour and the alarm his undreamed-of presence would cause its inmates.

"Here we are, sir; this is the 'Corbie,'" said the man, recalling him to consciousness of what was passing around him. "Jean Mackenzie's no sleepin' yet, for there's a licht in the kitchen windy."

A loud and peremptory knock at the barred door of the hostelry brought Mrs. Mackenzie out in a great consternation. But when she discovered it was only a late traveller seeking accommodation she recovered herself, and hastened to assure him she could provide for all his wants.

Sir Adrian slipped a five-pound note into the driver's hand, whereat he scratched his head vigorously.

"I've nae cheenge, sir," he was beginning, but the liberal gentleman interrupted him.

"I don't want any—keep it. Good-night, and thanks," he said, and crossed the threshold of the "Corbie." The hostess, noticing the little incident, redoubled her anxiety to attend to her traveller, but he said he wanted nothing but to be shown to a good bedroom, being much fatigued and anxious for a night's rest.

Mrs. Mackenzie bustled up-stairs and ushered him into the sitting-room, which, though unknown to him, his wife had occupied three years before.

"I think ye'll find a' thing ye want, sir," she said. "Weel, gin ye be tired, I'll no' stan' claverin'. What time 'll I cry tae ye i' the mornin'?"

"I want my breakfast at nine, if you please," returned the traveller. "Good-night. There is my name."

Mrs. Mackenzie took the card from his hand, bade him a respectful good-night, and withdrew to the kitchen. When she read the words "Sir Adrian Severne" on the card, her flutter of nervous excitement increased. It was not often that a member of Her Majesty's Government condescended to repose beneath the humble roof-tree of the "Corbie."

Mrs. Mackenzie's bedroom was directly underneath that of her guest, and she heard him pacing the floor till far on in the morning. She was not surprised, thinking, in her simplicity, that the affairs of the nation were of more importance to him than such a commonplace thing as sleep. At nine o'clock punctually she carried in his breakfast-tray herself, and found him standing in the window of the sitting-room, probably admiring the lovely view which attracted so many eyes.

"Guid mornin', sir—my lord, I mean," she said, somewhat confusedly. "If ye've never been in this kintryside afore ye'll think it a braw ane. Mony a body staunds tae admire the loch an' bonnie Dunire. If ye hae an hoor or twa tae spare, sir—my lord, I mean—ye micht dae waur than tak' a walk through Dunire. It's rale worth seein'."

"Its proprietor admits strangers and tourists to his policies?" he said, inquiringly.

"Ay, sin' Miss Ogilvie cam' hame. It was wont to be a waefu' place—the gates lockt nicht an' day. But sin' she cam' she's made a new man o' the Laird, an' a new place o' Dunire. Ay, Alvalloch has richt reason tae bless the day Miss Ogilvie cam' hame."

"She is his granddaughter, the man who drove me last night informed me," said Sir Adrian, apparently willing to encourage Mrs. Mackenzie's gossiping tongue.

"Ay, she cam' here three year ago, and lived here in thae very rooms, see, my lord, for three weeks, afore she gaed up tae Dunire. She had tae come at the Laird by degrees, ye see, he was that wild whiles; but, my certie! she's gotten the

better side o' him noo. He's the Dunire o' ither days, an' he worships the very grund the bairn gangs upon."

"Is she so young?" queried Sir Adrian.

"Oh, no, but I'm auld, sir—my lord," said the good-hearted soul, her tears dropping on her cheeks. "She'll be near thirty noo, I'se warrant, but she's Marjorie's bairn tae the Laird, an' oor bairn here in Alvalloch. Maybe ye're no' acquaint wi' the ways o' kintry folk, my lord. We dinna staun' on muckle ceremony. Miss Ogilvie never comes doon but she rins in tae the 'Corbie' for a crack at the kitchen fire. She's the very sunshine o' us a', but whiles I hae seen a bit wistfu' look in her een, an' a peetifu' tremblin' o' her lips which gars me think she's left her heart faur awa' in Lunnon, though I hae never wisperit o' sic a thing to onybody afore. Weel, sir—my lord, I'll awa', beggin' yer pardon for my lang tongue. I used tae crack tae Miss Ogilvie just this way when she bade here, but naebody heeds auld Jean Mackenzie's claverin'."

Sir Adrian Severne did not linger long at the breakfast-table. Fifteen minutes later Mrs. Mackenzie heard him leave the house, and, watching from the window, she saw that he took the direction of Dunire.

He walked quickly, like a man who had an end in view.

The wicket beside the great gates was open, and he passed through it without hesitation, and took his way quickly up the winding avenue, till the sudden curve brought him close to the house. Then, indeed, he slackened his pace and, standing back among the trees, took a long, long look at the place which had sheltered his darling so long.

There was no sign of neglect or decay now about Dunire. The lawn was smoothly shaven, and, though the walks about the house were carpeted with lovely moss, there were no weeds, nor noxious grasses, nor fallen leaves to mar their neatness. The windows were open, the white blinds flapping, the delicate curtains swaying to and fro in the sweet summer wind. It was summer still at Dunire, for a late spring had kept it back, and as yet there was not one changing hue upon the trees.

It was a haven of peace and rest to outward appearance—a home where any might be content to live and die.

Presently the door opened, and two figures emerged out into the sunshine. I cannot describe to you the look which came upon the face of Sir Adrian Severne, but though a

thousand impulses were bounding in his heart, he stood still—absolutely still—not a muscle of his face moving.

The figures stood a moment just outside the door, as if to enjoy the warmth and joy of the sunshine. It was an exquisite, heart-touching picture. An old man, whose stately figure was beginning to stoop sadly at the shoulders, but whose face, with its crown of silver locks, was beautiful in its unutterable content, in its saintly peace. He leaned upon the arm of a lady of youthful, graceful figure, whose face under the broad hat was one any painter might wish to study. It was the face of a woman who had a history—a sweet, tender, wistful face, with lustrous grey eyes, and an exquisite mouth. She wore a muslin gown, blue violets on a white ground, and she had a white shawl wound about her shoulders.

That was the picture Adrian Severne's eyes looked upon that August morning at Dunire—thus he found his wife.

Presently the figures moved from the door, the lady guiding the old man's footsteps with tender care.

"Where do we go to-day, my bairn?" he heard the old man say.

"I think we will go away down to the glen, grandfather, if you are able to walk so far," she answered—every word distinctly audible to the figure concealed among the trees. "I feel wild and restless, and I like to watch the burn roaring in its rocky bed."

"You have been writing too much, my bairn. You forget you have been lately so ill," said the old man, anxiously.

"Oh, no, grandfather; it is only the shadow of the old sorrow lying——"

The rest of the sentence was lost to Adrian Severne, though his ear was strained to catch it.

The next moment they were lost to sight down one of the winding paths—then Sir Adrian Severne emerged from his hiding and went up to the door of the house.

His knock was promptly answered by a neat and pleasant-mannered maid-servant, who regarded him with some surprise.

"Mr. and Miss Ogilvie have just gone out, sir," she said. "I wonder you did not meet them; but perhaps they went the other way. If you will just come in, please, I'll run after them; I can easily overtake them."

"Thanks; that will do very well," said Sir Adrian, and followed the girl into the house.

She ushered him into a small room fitted up as a study. No need to wonder for whose use and benefit, for the writing-table was littered with manuscript.

"Excuse me showing you in here, sir," said the girl, with a candour which would have amused a city domestic, "but the painters are in the drawing-room, and Miss Ogilvie will not permit any of us to meddle with her papers. That's why they are so untidy, sir."

"I understand," said Sir Adrian briefly. "It is Miss Ogilvie I wish to see, and alone, if you please."

The girl nodded and disappeared. Then Sir Adrian, like a man in a dream, approached the writing-table and glanced over what lay upon it. He recognised the neat, legible handwriting he remembered well, but could not read a word. His heart was throbbing with the intense excitement of the moment, with the thought that in a few moments now he would hold his darling to his heart again.

Those few moments of suspense seemed like centuries to Adrian Severne, but at last he heard voices in the hall, and then a light footfall coming rapidly towards the study door. Presently it opened, and husband and wife were face to face again.

Neither spoke nor moved for the space of a moment. Barbara's eyes were fixed upon her husband's face, and there was no mistaking what was written there. If ever the deep, passionate love of a man's heart was expressed upon man's face she saw it now.

"Adrian, Adrian!" she cried like one awakening from a dream, and moved to him blindly, holding out pleading hands, as if fearing he would vanish from her sight.

He took her to his heart, he folded his arms about her, as a man enfolds his dearest treasure, as if he would keep it there for evermore.

Then there fell upon her ear two words, which, as they had been the sweetest to her in the past, were sweetest now.

It was not a moment for noisy endearment; it was fitter far that his first word to her should be the recognition of the sacred tie which had bound them in the past.

*"My wife!"*





## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### HOME.



OR a time it was sufficient for Barbara Severne to rest upon her husband's breast, to have once more the joy it was to know herself beloved, to feel in the close pressure of the arms about her that she was dear to him as of yore.

But it could not last; there must be explanation given, there must be, on her part, fullest, freest confession made, freest confidence bestowed. So she lifted her head at last, and met the eyes whose stern gaze had haunted her through these weary years—one of the memories which proved the serpent's sting in her Paradise of rest.

"Adrian," she said, her sweet voice trembling on the name, "I see nothing but love in your face, when there should be just anger, just condemnation and contempt. What does it mean? I left you to think of me what you willed, because I feared to own a long deception. Let me kneel down here at your feet and tell it all, and then plead for your forgiveness."

"Hush, my sweet wife," said Adrian huskily. "There is no need; I know all. I have been seeking you night and day, and I have found you at last—that is enough for the present."

"It cannot be known to you, Adrian. You do not know that my brother, whose very existence I kept from you, fearing——"

"That was it, Barbara. You feared me without a cause, you doubted where there ought to have been perfect trust. In spite of all the proof I gave, my wife did not know that I loved her so devotedly, so entirely, that nothing could part us. What cared I for your relatives? What was it to me though they were the veriest black sheep in Christendom? *You* were pure,

and true, and noble ; that was enough for me," interrupted Adrian, with his hand upon her downcast head, his eyes bent upon her in mournful tenderness.

"How did you discover the truth? It was known only to one other, Adrian."

"And that one other, finding himself nearing the end of a wasted life, repented of the evil of his ways, and made what amends he could before it was too late," returned Adrian. "In other words, Jasper Leigh—I can speak his name calmly now, my darling, when I have you by my side—finding himself dying, sent for me, and told me the whole miserable story. We can forgive him now, my wife, because he has gone to his account, and I cannot forget that it was through love of you he erred."

"Can you forgive *me*, my husband?" queried Barbara, with strange, wistful eagerness. "Is no blame for the unworthy wife? You ask no assurance, no confession, from me. Surely this is Heaven's own dealing with the sinner."

"Nay, *I* also have need to be forgiven, dear one," said Adrian, with a gleam of the sunny smile of yore. "I have taken to myself blame for my hard dealing with you, my wife. Had I been less harsh, less suspicious—had I cherished more of the spirit of charity which hopeth all things—much suffering might have been spared to us both. Well, we have learnt our lesson, and, though it has been very bitter, its fruit will be sweet. And now this subject is to be laid aside at once and for ever. Lift your dear eyes to mine as you used to do in the old blissful days before the shadow fell. Let me hear you say you love me, that your heart is mine as truly as it was that morning when we took our vows in the church at Bassett."

Barbara lifted her hands to her husband's tall shoulders, her eyes dim with happy tears.

"My husband, how I love you no weak words of mine can tell. You have raised me once more to the throne of your confidence and love, you will take me back to your home, to the life I shall so gladly, thankfully share with you once more. I have been punished for my sin, but God has been very good ; and before Him to-day, Adrian, I swear to be to you a faithful wife. I shall be to you so much that the memory of what I was will fade from your remembrance. The world, whose sneering scorn I left you to face alone, will see what gratitude is. Please God, there shall not be another home in England so blessed as I will make yours and mine, my husband."

Surely indeed that hour of most blessed reunion atoned for the agonies of the past.

The time was fleeting, though they took no notice of it. By-and-by there came a low, hesitating knock at the door.

"That will be grandfather, Adrian. I have yet to learn how you found I was with him," said Barbara; but her husband's meaning glance at the writing-table enlightened her beyond a doubt.

"You see how he has sheltered me; what a home he gave me when I threw away my own," she said, falteringly. "Even when I told him all my story, he did not turn me away. He has never ceased to urge me to return to you, and will be so pleased to welcome you to Dunire."

Then she turned and opened the door, her face all aglow. The old man paused on the threshold, looking wonderingly from one to the other. A great light lay on his bairn's face—a light which could have but one meaning.

"Grandfather, this is my husband," she said. "He has come back, you see. He loves me still. He will take me to his heart again."

Adrian Severne took two steps forward, and clasped the old man's hands in a grip of iron. Deep emotion prevented him uttering a word.

Slowly the Laird's eyes wandered over the stately, well-proportioned figure, and up to the handsome, manly face.

"The Lord be praised," he said, tears chasing each other down his furrowed cheeks. "The Lord be praised that I see the happiness o' my bairn, an' that there'll be a guid stock in Dunire again."

"I cannot find words to thank you for what you have done for my wife, sir," said Adrian Severne. "Perhaps in time I may prove the depth of my gratitude to you."

"Wheesht. Was she no my ain?" said the old man, in the fine old tongue of his forefathers. "I ask nae thanks. I only ask that ye dinna rob me of her a'thegether; that she'll come whiles hame tae the auld man in Dunire."

"It would be a poor return to take her away altogether from you, sir, and one which, God forbid, that I should make," said Adrian Severne, huskily. "And though I must take my wife away home in a day or two, you will accompany us, I hope, to see for yourself Barbara's home and mine."

He shook his head, but Barbara's arm stole about his neck. Barbara's voice fell pleadingly on his ear.

"Grandfather, do not refuse. Come home with us. Make your home with us till we can return together to Dunire. I could not be happy thinking of you living alone. You will miss me worse than you think."

"Ay, bairn, I'll miss ye. It'll be a puir, puir biggin' without ye. Weel, I'll think it ower, an' if ye be still o' the same mind whan ye're gaun tae travel, maybe I'll gang wi' ye yet."

"You *will*," said Adrian, with his sunny smile. "And now you will have two homes instead of one. As Barbara says—our home must be yours, and it will be my aim to be a son, as Barbara has been a daughter, to you, and so you will gain instead of lose."

"It is enough," he whispered. "Let it be as you say. I shall go out into the world, to which I have been a stranger so long. I shall leave Dunire, and cross the Border before I dee, for your sake and for the bairn's."

So the last slight shadow fled from the heart of Barbara Severne, and she was unspeakably content.

"I have three letters to write, Barbara," said Adrian, when they were again left alone. "Can you guess who are to receive them?"

His words took her thoughts back to the old life—to all the friends and faces of the past. She longed, yet feared, to ask concerning them, though his smile reassured her.

"Perhaps I can; but tell me, Adrian."

"There are three hearts across the Border whose prayers have followed me night and day in my search," said Adrian. "Let me hear you try to tell me whose they are?"

"I can only be sure of two—Lady Bassett and Ethel St. Maur," returned Barbara.

"You are right. God bless them—it is such as they who make womanhood so sacred. From Ethel's own lips, Barbara, I heard her conviction of your innocence. She it was who restored my faith in women, Barbara, and who gave me the dawning of the hope which is to-day so blissfully fulfilled. Let me repeat her words to me, they will make your heart glad—

"I have never lost my faith in your wife, Adrian," she said. 'Wherever she may be, whatever may be the explanation of this great mystery, I am convinced that she has been and is your true and faithful wife.'

"God bless her; oh, God bless her," fell from the lips of

Barbara Severne, and the vision of that bright face, with its lovely eyes and sunny smile, stole into her heart, one of the sweetest memories of the past.

"Lady Bassett was perplexed, and could not understand the mystery," said Adrian. "It is to her woman's wit I am indebted for such a speedy ending to my search. She placed 'Nemesis' in my hands, telling me it was yours, and bidding me seek the author out without delay."

"I feared my book would reveal my identity to some," said Barbara, smiling a little, "not dreaming that it was to restore me my lost happiness. I shall never write another which will be so peculiarly dear to me, Adrian."

"You have not asked concerning the third person I spoke of, Barbara," said Adrian.

"Tell me, I cannot guess."

"My mother."

Barbara turned her head away. It was too much that this thing also should be added to the sum of her bliss. Her husband understood, and let her feelings have their way.

"If these years had done no more than break down my mother's pride, though their only fruit was the blossoming of love in her heart for you, they would not have been in vain," said Adrian, by-and-by.

She stole to him again, hiding her face on his protecting arm, the old cry of her unworthiness passing her lips again, although a very different feeling prompted it.

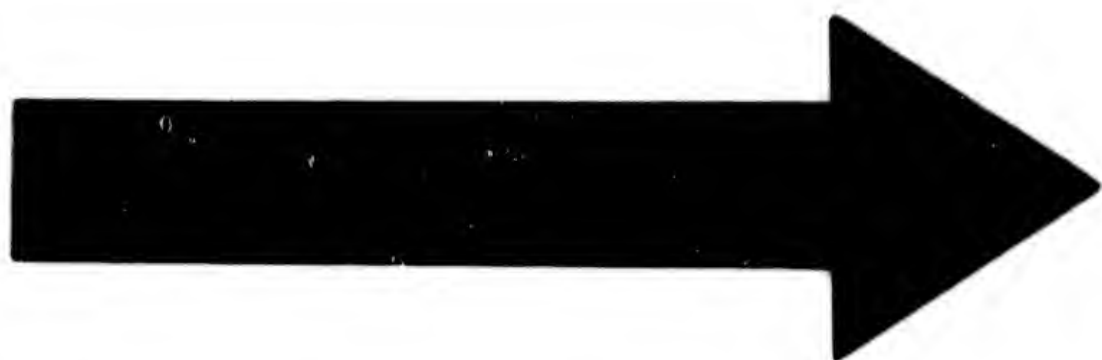
The letters were written at length, and despatched by the evening mail.

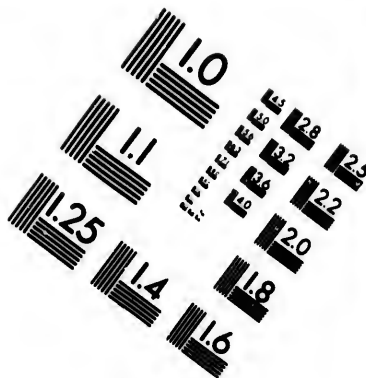
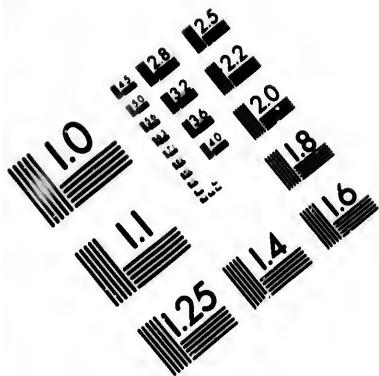
They lingered several days in Dunire, loth to leave the birth-place of their new-found happiness, and in that time of close, unbroken communion every shadow was swept away, all the old doubts explained and banished for ever, the dead past buried, and a newer, sweeter, nobler life begun.

In these days, too, the old man and the young drew close together in heart, each recognising the worth of the other, until the Laird was so buoyed up in his bairns that he would have followed them gladly to the world's end—ay, even though it should involve a last parting from Dunire.

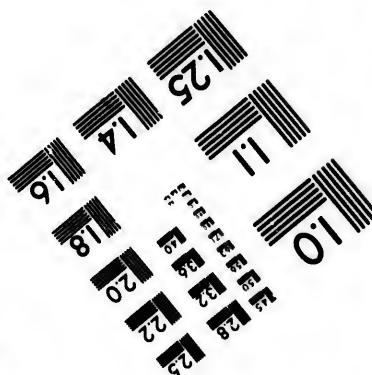
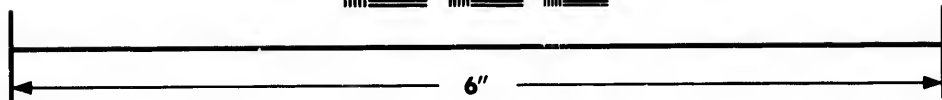
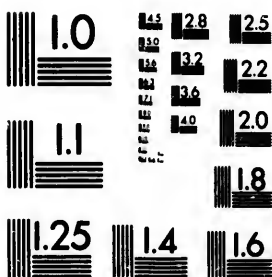
But they might not linger there for ever. Waiting hearts across the Border were growing weary for them; so one sunny morning they took their departure for the South.

Miss Ogilvie's return to Dunire was nothing to this new,





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strange element introduced into the quiet life of its inmates. The excitement was intense, the interest unparalleled; and when it transpired that the Laird of Dunire was actually away to London with his granddaughter and her husband, the gossips were struck dumb, and could but gasp that the world must be coming very near its end.

They travelled straight to Abbot's Lynn, waiting only an hour or two in London. Due notice had been sent to Mount Severne, and the carriage was waiting at the station. Barbara drew her veil down, for not yet could she let her eyes dwell upon the dear, familiar sights. She wanted to be calm, to keep her emotion in curb, for there was a trying meeting to be gone through when they reached home.

The conversation did not flag between the gentlemen, but Adrian's eyes never left his wife's face, and when they swept through the great gates he leaned forward and whispered, with all his heart in his eyes—"This is a sweeter home-coming even than the last, my darling."

She could not speak, she could not even lift her eyes to his, but he understood.

Presently the magnificent greys, taking a splendid curve, brought them in sight of the stately pile, the noble heritage of the Severnes, the home which was engraven on the heart of the woman whose yearning eyes now looked upon it again.

"It's a braw, braw hame, Adrian," said the old man. "Barbara, my bairn, I dinna wunner ye're fain tae see'd again."

As in a dream, Barbara felt herself lifted from the carriage; as in a dream heard her husband's passionate words of welcome home.

"The ladies are in the drawing-room, Sir Adrian," said Markham, in as matter-of-fact a voice as if his master and mistress had but returned from an hour's drive. "Lady Bassett and Miss St. Maur arrived this morning."

"You hear, my darling," whispered Sir Adrian. "These true friends are here. They will add to the intensity of this day's deep happiness."

"I should like to see your mother first, and alone, Adrian," she said, trying to be brave. "I will go into the library, if you will go up with grandfather and ask her to come down."

"As you wish," responded Adrian, and Barbara slipped into the library, and, moving over to the window, stood looking

with moist and happy eyes upon the fair domain, upon the smiling landscape, not blurred or shadowed now by a load of carking care.

When she brought them back to the room again, a figure had noiselessly entered, and she saw the face of Adrian's mother.

"Adrian sent me, my child," said the proud woman, tremulously. "My daughter, you are welcome home."

Then Barbara crept into her arms, and laid her tired head upon the breast of Lady Severne, asking no questions, begging no forgiveness, only saying simply as a child—

"My mother."

After a little they went up-stairs together, and entered the drawing-room. Lady Bassett had the first embrace, murmuring in her ear words of warmest greeting. But it was to Ethel—sweet, unselfish, true-hearted Ethel—to whom Barbara turned with tenderest eyes, and to whom she clung for a moment with passionate love.

"God bless you, my darling; I shall never forget," she found time to whisper, and the welcomes were at an end. Barbara asked no questions concerning Frances, knowing her absence was sufficient evidence of her feeling in the matter. She had indignantly and scornfully declined again to receive Adrian's wife, had parted from her mother in anger, and had retired to Devonshire to the lonely, loveless abode of a dismal maiden aunt.

That was a happy, happy evening at Mount Severne, made happier for one and all by the certainty that it was the precursor of many more to come.





## CHAPTER XXIX.

### OLD FRIENDS, AND A HAPPY ENDING.



IN a winter's evening a party of six persons were assembled in the drawing-room at Castle Burnett. They were Mr. and Mrs. Errol Burnett, Sir Philip and Lady Rydal, of Rydal Grange, and Dr. and Mrs. Guest, of Little Wymar. Mr. Burnett had so far forgiven his sister's marriage that there was now some intercourse between Castle Burnett and Wymar Rectory, and, for the first time for many years, Mrs. Guest was invited, with her husband, to spend Christmas with her brother and his wife. Needless to say, the invitation was promptly accepted.

Covers were laid in the dining-room for a dozen guests, for Mrs. Burnett was about to give one of her most select and *recherché* little dinners. She was a handsome woman, kindly in her way, but she did not "get on," as the saying goes, with her sister-in-law, Mrs. Guest. Nevertheless, she treated her with the utmost deference and courtesy, willing to please her husband, to whom she was most tenderly attached.

Mrs. Guest was not in a pleasant humour. She envied her sister-in-law's stately abode, her rich and costly attire, her diamonds, and felt that the purple moire and the pearls which shone so brilliantly at the Little Wymar social gatherings sank into utter insignificance at Castle Burnett. Her husband, simple-minded and genial as of yore, was not troubled by any such unpleasant thoughts, but was enjoying himself unfeignedly that night, sitting in the oriel window with his somewhat pompous but thoroughly well-informed brother-in-law, and listening to the brilliant critical talk of Sir Philip Rydal, who had the reputation of being the most merciless literary critic of his

time, and who was, on that account, held in awe and dread by newly-fledged authors and poets.

"You will be *so* interested to see Lady Adrian Severne, Mrs. Guest," said Lady Rydal, whose pink and white prettiness and caressing ways had won the heart of Sir Philip, even when his better judgment warned him she could be no companion to him. "Her story reads like a romance, does it not, dear Mrs. Burnett?"

"Indeed it does," said the clear, well-modulated tones of the hostess. "You must have heard, Emily, of the strange separation between Sir Adrian Severne and his wife, and of their complete reconciliation and reunion after a lapse of nearly three years?"

"I remember the story in the journals at the time," rejoined Mrs. Guest. "Was it satisfactorily explained?"

"Not in so many words. There was some grave misunderstanding, arising perhaps from incompatibility of temper," said Mrs. Burnett.

"Whatever it was, it is swept away for ever, and they are spoken of as the happiest pair in London or out of it."

"They are too absurdly happy for married people," said Lady Rydal, with a glance at her husband. "Believe me, it cannot last."

"She is literary, I think," said Mrs. Guest.

"Lady Severne is the first authoress of the day, and a very charming woman besides," rejoined Mrs. Burnett, warmly. "Her society is courted by Royalty itself. I esteem it a great honour that she extends her friendship to me."

"It will interest you, Mrs. Burnett, to know that Sir Adrian's services in the Cabinet are likely to be rewarded with a Peerage," said Sir Philip Rydal, from the other side of the room.

"Is that possible?" queried Mr. Burnett, in extreme surprise.

His political opinions were opposed to those of Sir Adrian Severne, therefore he could not be expected to wholly approve of his elevation.

"Sir Adrian and Lady Severne, the Duke and Duchess of Wendover," announced the servant, and conversation was at once suspended.

Mrs. Burnett stepped forward to receive her guests, her sister-in-law sat up in her chair, and turned her eyes expectantly to the door.

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Sir Adrian and his wife entered first. Mrs. Guest took no notice of him, her attention being transfixed by the face and figure of the lady by his side. After that one glance she fell helplessly back in her chair, for the face and the figure were those of Barbara Dale. She wore a dress of shimmering silk, with trimmings of lace and pearls which would have bought Mrs. Guest's dress and jewels thrice over. Diamonds sparkled in her dark hair, round her stately throat, and on her beautiful arms.

Behind them came the Duke of Wendover, with his fair young wife, the dear Ethel St. Maur of past seasons, and whose first Christmas of married life was to be spent with her friend, Barbara Severne.

They were a goodly pair indeed, and the young Duchess's attire rivalled her friend's, but Mrs. Guest saw them not.

Words of introduction were on Mrs. Burnett's lips, but to her astonishment Lady Severne passed her and approached Mrs. Guest with a grace which was superb.

"Mrs. Guest and I have met before, Mrs. Burnett," she said smilingly; then, bowing to the confused lady on the chair, "I am pleased to see that in spite of the lapse of years Mrs. Guest still retains a recollection of Barbara Dale. I am also pleased to renew our acquaintance under such happy auspices."

Then she turned to clasp the proffered hand of Doctor Guest, and to answer with her eyes the true pleasure which shone in his.

"Permit me to introduce my husband to you," she said. "Adrian, these are the friends of whom I have so often spoken, and who befriended me when I was in sore need."

That was her revenge, to heap coals of fire upon the head of the woman who in the past had caused her many a bitter heartache.

Her conquest was complete, and Mrs. Guest's humiliation complete still.

All that evening Mrs. Guest was like a person in a dream, and her eyes followed Lady Severne with a persistency which good breeding scarcely permitted.

Only once Barbara had the opportunity of a whispered word with Doctor Guest.

"Winifred sleeps in the churchyard in Little Wymar, does she not?" she asked, with glistening eyes.

"Her dust lies there, her spirit, I am humbly thankful to be able to say, has found the abiding rest of Heaven," returned the clergyman, his faltering tones betraying his strong emotion.

"I saw her in her last days at Hastings," said Lady Severne.

He looked much surprised.

"I was not aware that you had ever met since you left Little Wymar."

"I had been a few months married and was in London when her message reached me," rejoined Lady Severne. "I have passed through deep waters since then."

"Fortune has smiled upon you, Lady Severne, or to speak truly, God has apparently blessed you very abundantly."

"He *has* blessed me, Doctor Guest," said she in a full voice, and involuntarily turning her eyes on her husband's face. "Another time, perhaps, I may tell you how far beyond my deserts."

When the carriage from Mount Severne was announced, Lady Severne again approached Mrs. Guest.

"If you are to spend some time in this neighbourhood, Mrs. Guest, I trust we shall have the pleasure of seeing you at Mount Severne," she said aloud, adding in a lower voice, "I would seek to atone for the bitter words with which I last parted from you. I have learned since then to be gentler, and humbler. God, in His great mercy, has given to me a happiness of which I cannot speak. Will you forgive me, and come, for Winifred's sake?"

Mrs. Burnett wondered much what her distinguished guest was saying to her sister-in-law to bring such a look upon her face. She also wondered much of what nature their previous acquaintance had been, and when they were alone questioned her regarding it, but received no satisfaction whatsoever. The Duke and Duchess of Wendover, as I said, were spending Christmas at Mount Severne, also the Dowager Lady Severne, and others were expected before the 25th. Great festivities were to take place. For the first time since the death of old Sir Adrian, Christmas was to be kept royally at Mount Severne.

On Christmas morning, while her guests were preparing for church, Barbara, already dressed, stole away down to her husband in the library. He turned silently and took the slender figure to his heart.

"I have no Christmas gift for you, Adrian. I have just stolen down here because it is Christmas morning, to tell you something of my unspeakable happiness. I am afraid sometimes when I think of it, dreading always that something may mar it soon."

"Nay, my wife, we have had our share of clouds, and our sun is shining now, that is all. Has my wife nothing to ask from me, no request to make on Christmas day?"

"None," she answered; "none at all."

I have one thing to say to you, Barbara, and it must not bring a cloud upon my darling's face to-day. You will remember, I do not doubt, that on the 11th of next month your brother will be a free man again."

"I remember," she said faintly, not knowing what was coming.

"Then we will go down to Dartmoor together, Barbara, and meet him with words of comfort and hope for the future. I have been thinking much of him of late, and I think it will be better for him to go abroad at once. Your grandfather and I have talked it over. We wanted to provide the wherewithal, but it is my right to stretch out the first helping hand to him—afterwards he can give or send him what he pleases. You understand I look upon it as a sacred duty—as a thank-offering for past and present mercy extended to you and to me."

Merry voices in the hall, the sound of feet approaching the library, disturbed them, but Barbara found time to draw her husband's face close down to hers, to try and whisper something of the gratitude and unspeakable love welling up in her heart.

A gay party walked across the crisp, whitened fields to the church of Abbot's Lynn. Only Ethel noticed the unusual stillness of Lady Severne. Also in church she saw, when her head was bent in prayer, two tears steal through her fingers and that all through the service her eyes were dim.

What wonder? Deep joy moves to tears, and there was deep, thankful, unutterable joy that Christmas morning in the heart of Barbara Severne.

THE END.

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