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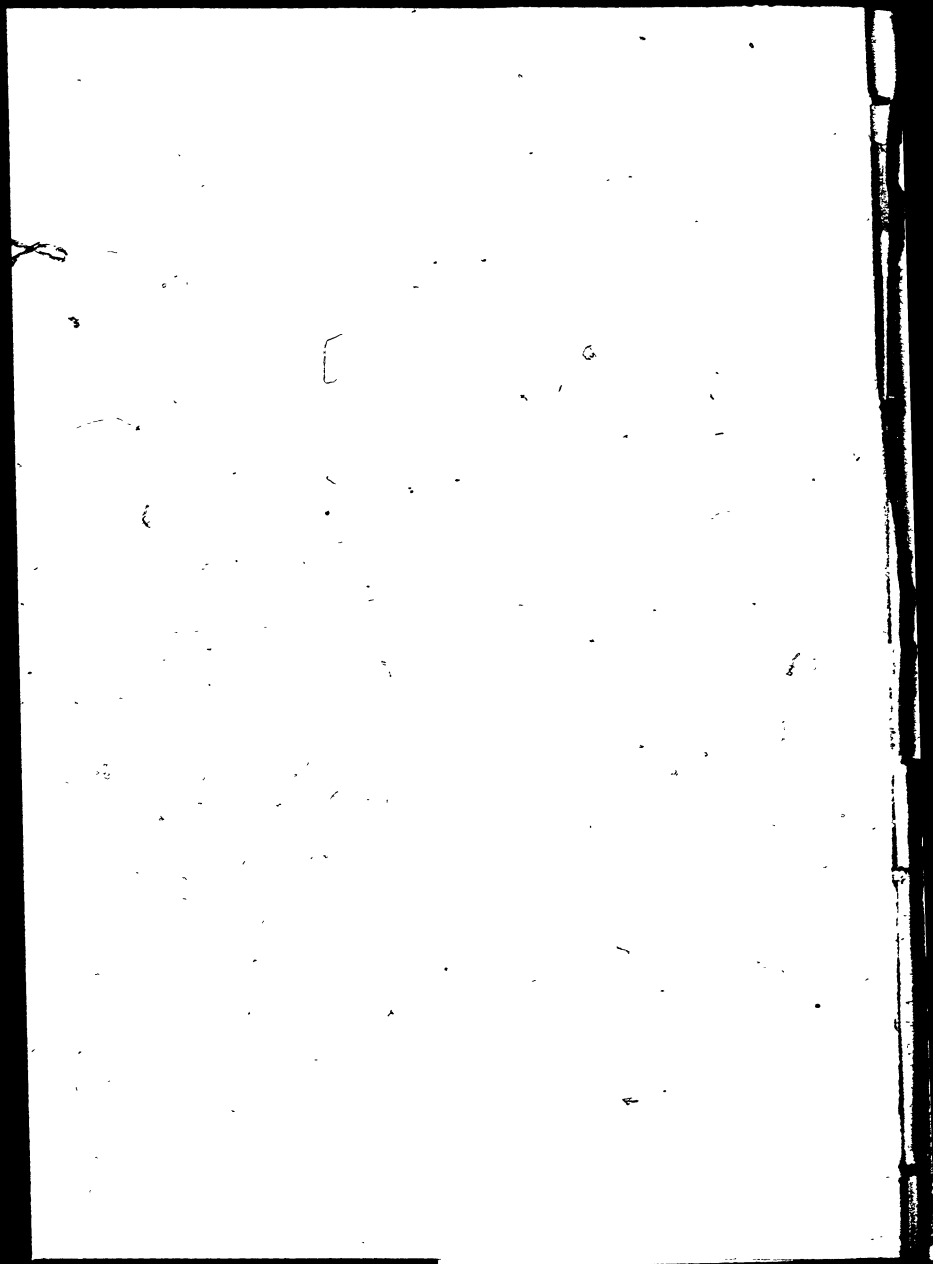
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THE
LUCK OF THE HOUSE.

A NOVEL.

By ADELINE SERGEANT,
*Author of "Seventy Times Seven," "Under False
Pretences," etc.*

MONTREAL;
JOHN LOVELL & SON,
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THE LUCK OF THE HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

ON DECK.

CLEAR and bright, with the crystalline clearness and brightness of atmosphere peculiar to Scotland, the brilliant summer day drew softly to a close. There was no cloud in the solemn blue depths overhead, but around the sinking sun a few fleecy masses had been turned into crimson and gold, and were reflected in gleaming light and glancing blood-red hues from the bosom of the majestic river, as it widened between receding banks towards the Northern Sea. A London steamer, making its way up the channel to a port on the North-Eastern coast, whither it was bound, seemed to be plunging into a mystical land of glory as it turned its head towards the burning West.

So it seemed, at least, to a girl who was standing on the deck, with her eyes fixed upon the shore, which was half lost in a golden haze. "We seem to have come to a City of Gold," she said, smiling, to a gentleman who stood at her side.

"Some people have found it so," he answered, rather drily. "A good many fortunes have been lost and won in the good old town of Dundee."

She moved a little, as if she did not quite like his tone.

"I did not mean that," she said, in a lowered voice.

"I know you did not," said John Hannington, with a swift look at the sweet, girlish face to which he was almost sure that he had lost his heart during the last two days. "I knew you had some meaning that an unlucky brute like myself is certain to misunderstand. Something too beautiful and transcendental for my poor ears."

"Oh, no, no," said the girl, deprecatingly. She colored a little at his words. "My thought was a very foolish one."

"Will you not tell me what it was?" said Hannington, drawing a little nearer. "Do tell me."

She had a very charming face, he thought. —She looked half-frightened at his request, and then a brave, modest expression came into her beautiful blue eyes. "It is not worth making a secret of," she said. "I only thought—when I saw the golden light making those hills and buildings look so dream-like and unsubstantial—of Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and the Celestial City that the pilgrims saw from afar."

In the silent evening air, speech sometimes travels further than we know. The girl was quite unconscious that her clear, fine utterance had reached the ear of one other person beside her immediate auditor. A middle-aged man with a grave, keen face, who had been leaning over the bulwarks, with his eyes fixed abstractedly on the water, and his head turned away from the golden glory of the West, was struck by her words. He changed his position a little, so that he could see the girl's fair profile, studied it for a moment or two with a look of kindly interest, then rose up and walked away. But as he passed the couple, he heard John Hannington's reply.

An amused laugh came first. Then a half apology.

"I laugh from surprise, not from amusement, Miss Raeburn. The imagination required to convert smoky, whisky-loving, jute-manufacturing Dundee into a Celestial City is prodigious. Bunyan himself could not have possessed more."

"Ah, you do not understand," said the girl, smiling herself now and shaking her head. "I had forgotten Dundee altogether. But you must not abuse it; because it is going to be my home."

The gentleman who had passed them was out of hearing by this time.

"Do you know who that is?" said Hannington, looking after him with interest. "Moncrieff of Torresmuir; one of the wealthiest men in Scotland. Some people say, one of the most unfortunate. But I'm not among the number."

"Why?"

"Why unfortunate? or why am I not among the people who call him so? Well, I'll answer both questions, Miss Raeburn. In the meantime, won't you sit down?" He grasped a small deck chair by the back-rail, and gently pushed it towards her. "You can look at the sky while

you sit just as well as if you were standing, you know," he said, in the broad, easy-going way which made John Hannington such a favorite with his acquaintance, while the girl accepted the seat with a little nod of thanks and a pleasant smile. "As to Moncrieff—he lost his wife three or four years ago under specially sad circumstances; she was thrown out of a pony cart which he was driving, and killed before his eyes. Then, his only son is weakly—in fact, something of an invalid. He has a young daughter, I believe, but no other child."

"How very sad!" said Miss Raeburn. Her gentle eyes were full of sympathy. "His wife's death must have been a great loss to him."

"Conventionally, yes," answered Mr. Hannington, fingering his black moustache, with a smile. He found Miss Raeburn's simplicity adorable, and thanked fate for sending him on board the steamer from London to Dundee, where he had found her in the charge of a lady with whom he was acquainted. "In real life, you know, the death of a wife does not always leave a man inconsolable. It is rumored that Mr. and Mrs. Moncrieff did not get on very well."

"Oh, then, he is even more unfortunate than I thought," said the young girl, quickly.

"You think I am very hard-hearted because I do not call him so? I understand. To a sweet-natured, loving woman, it must seem strange—the callous way in which we men of the world look at things!" cried John Hannington, with apparent impetuosity. He was really very much on his guard. "To a worldly man like myself, Miss Raeburn, it does not seem that Mr. Moncrieff is anything but a lucky man. He has a fine estate; he has a splendid income and a magnificent house; he has—or may have—all the official County distinctions which he wants; no career is closed to him; and, although he has lost his first wife, whom rumor says that he did not love, he is free and able to marry again, and to marry whom he pleases—which many men are not."

A harsh note was audible in his voice. The girl kept silence. She was still gazing towards the West, where the light was growing faded and dull. It seemed to her, suddenly, that if she listened long to Mr. Hannington's worldly wisdom, life also would fade in brightness as surely as

that Western sky. But Hannington knew what he was doing: he had an effect to produce.

"What am I saying?" he broke out, with an accent of sudden self-reproach. "Inflicting my hard, worldly maxims upon you, who are so far above me—so far removed from evil—"

"Oh, please, Mr. Hannington, do not talk in that way!" said the girl, with drooping head and flushing cheeks. And yet—Stella Raeburn would not have been a girl of nineteen if the flattery were altogether distasteful. Mr. Hannington knew that well enough.

"I *must* tell you—before we separate"—he said, in agitated tones, "that since I knew you, I have felt a different influence. I have felt as though a nobler, higher life were possible. I have seen that your standard was higher than mine, and have wished—wished bitterly, and I feel vainly—that I could attain to it!" He stopped short as if emotion impeded his utterance: and Stella attempted a few words of deprecation.

"I am not worth such praise: I can only wish that my own standard were higher," she murmured.

"Ah, don't remove yourself further from me than you are now," he pleaded, ardently. "Be still yourself—the star of my dark night—the guiding-star, that points without its own knowledge, without its own volition, to the birthplace of all that is most sacred, most holy, in the world."

She shrank a little. In her peaceful maidenliness it seemed to her as if his reference to the Star of Bethlehem were half profane. He felt the momentary recoil.

"Forgive me if I say too much. Your very name suggests it. Stella, your friends call you, do they not? I never hear it without remembering all sorts of poetic fancies, lines that poets have written, and fables that have been told about the stars. Will you forgive me?"

"So long as I have only poetic fancies to forgive—it is not much!" said Stella, lightly. But she rose from her seat as she spoke and began to move about the deck, where several other persons were sitting or standing. Hannington knew that he had gone far enough. The girl was sensitive, and perhaps a little proud, in spite of all her gentleness. He hovered near her, as she walked, but he did not speak again till she addressed him. But he knew that silence is sometimes as effective as speech.

Meanwhile, Allan Moncrieff of Torresmuir, the tall and stately-looking man of whom Hannington had spoken, went straight to the Captain of the vessel with a question.

"Who is that young lady with fair hair who sits next but one to you at table, Captain?" he asked, carelessly.

The Captain was busy, and replied with curtness. "Oh! you mean Miss Raeburn, daughter of Matthew Raeburn, of Dundee: Raeburn and Millar: jute."

"Jute, of course," said Mr. Moncrieff, drily. He recollected the names of Raeburn & Millar. They had one of the largest jute mills in the town, and were reputed to be wealthy men. What a delicate, flower-like face Miss Raeburn had! He had noticed it several times since he came on board, but had not hitherto thought of asking any one its owner's name. A sweet, delicate face; but strong too, with a kind of squareness about the white chin, and considerable breadth of forehead. The pretty lips, moreover, closed firmly, and the beautiful blue eyes were serious rather than gay. There was character as well as beauty in Stella Raeburn's face.

"I suppose," said Moncrieff to himself, "that she will live and die, be married and buried, in Dundee." He himself had a strong dislike to the great manufacturing town, a dislike extending, possibly, to the manufacturers. "With that sweet face, she deserves a better fate than one of uninterrupted, commonplace, middle-class prosperity. Yet—what safer and happier fate could I wish for her, poor girl!"

He had no suspicion that he himself was destined to be one of the determining factors in Stella Raeburn's fate. There seemed at present no point at which her life was likely to touch his own. He was to stay a night only in Dundee; he had come thither on business, and it might be months before he came again. He and his family mixed little in society, save of the exclusively aristocratic kind. He was not at all likely to encounter the Raeburns amongst his friends, and his house was nearly two hours' journey from Dundee.

He thought of her as one might think of a lovely picture hanging on the wall of a gallery, or over the altar in a foreign church: with admiration, with delight, but with no wish to possess it, and no especial desire to analyse the charm that it held for all-comers as well as for himself.

He forgot her in five minutes. Why should he think of a manufacturer's daughter whom he had seen, but never spoken to, on board a steamer bound for Dundee?

CHAPTER II.

THORNBANK.

THE golden glow was still resplendent in the West, but the light of day was gradually fading, and here and there lamps twinkled on the rising banks of the river.

"We shall land very soon," said Stella to her companion, as they walked up and down the deck, stopping now and then to look at the men piling cargo and luggage in readiness for disembarkation, or at the vessels that passed them by.

"Very soon," said Hannington. "Don't you think the town is rather picturesque, approached in this way? People say it is like Naples, you know: the houses clustering down to the water's edge, and the conical hill behind, to represent Vesuvius."

Stella laughed. "Has Naples those tall factory chimneys?" she asked.

"Ah, the factory chimneys. After all, they are important parts of the landscape; they give out the smoke that hangs in a haze over the town like the cloud from Vesuvius itself. Miss Raeburn," said John Hannington, in a suddenly differing tone, "may I ask what your arrangements are? Do you expect any one to meet you?"

"Oh, yes, I expect my father," said the girl, with a thrill of happy feeling in her voice. "He is sure to come. I have not seen him for four years."

"You have been abroad, I think you said the other day."

"I have been at school in Brussels. In the holidays I travelled about with Madame Beauvais and the other girls. We went to Switzerland one summer, to Germany another,

and to Paris. Then in winter, to Italy—Florence, Venice, Rome. Oh,"—with a pretty smile—"I have seen a great deal of the world."

Hannington smiled too. But he was not going to pursue the subject of her travels.

"And now you are to settle down in Dundee. Your father's house is at the West End of the town, I believe? You will be out of the smoke there."

"Yes, I suppose so. I have not seen it. Papa removed to Thornbank when I was away. We had a dear, gloomy old house in the Nethergate before."

"And you will be mistress and queen of Thornbank, I suppose?" said Mr. Hannington, pensively.

Stella blushed a little. "My aunt lives there. I think she is queen of the house. Dear Aunt Jacky! I have not seen her either since I was sixteen."

"You will allow me, perhaps," said her companion, in a very formal tone, "to call and inquire how you have borne the fatigue of your long journey from Brussels, and to make acquaintance with Miss—Miss Raeburn?"

"Miss Raeburn? Miss Jacquetta Raeburn!" said Stella merrily. "You must remember that she is not Miss Raeburn; she is Miss Jacquetta; she is very particular about the title. I am sure she will be exceedingly pleased to see you."

"And you," said Hannington, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, "will you be pleased to see me too, Stella?"

She started and moved a step or two away from him. They had been standing still for the last few minutes. The man followed her closely. He was not going to let her escape.

"Forgive me if I have gone too far," he said. "But will you not give me one word of comfort? Will you not say that you will be glad to see me too?"

There was so much noise about them, so much talking, so much shouting of orders, dragging of chains, bumping of bales and boxes, creaking of machinery, that he had to approach her very closely to hear the faintly murmured "Yes" that fell from Stella's lips. Her slim, ungloved hand hung at her side. It was easy in the gathering twilight to take it unobserved in his own, and to hold it for a minute or two in a very tender clasp." To Stella's simple soul, the action seemed like a ceremony of betrothal.

Was she very quickly won? She had known John Hannington for less than six and thirty hours. She had come on board the "Britannia" with her friend, Mrs. Muir, on Wednesday morning at ten o'clock, and it was now Thursday night. Mr. Hannington and Mrs. Muir were old acquaintances, it appeared, and he had at once attached himself to them—or perhaps it should be said that Mrs. Muir had at once retained him in her service. Ever since that Wednesday morning, he had been in their company at every possible moment. And the days at sea are very long! Two whole mornings, afternoons, evenings, had John Hannington sat at Stella Raeburn's side, walked with her on deck, whispered soft sentences into her ear under the shade of the same great white umbrella; in fact, as Mrs. Muir noted with delight, he had deliberately laid himself out to attract the sweet-faced, serious-eyed Stella, and apparently he had succeeded.

Stella did not know the meaning of the word flirtation. Her refinement, her thoughtfulness, lifted her out of the region where flirtation or foolishness existed. She did not even know that Mr. Hannington was paying her more attention than was usual on so short an acquaintance. Others watched, and wondered and commented, but Stella was ignorant. She only thought vaguely that Mr. Hannington was "very kind," and hoped that he would call at Thornbank before he left Dundee.

Of course Mr. Hannington did not live at Dundee. A commercial, ship-building, jute-weaving town had no attraction for him as a place of residence. He was a London man, a man about town, a man with a small private fortune (recently impaired by gaming losses), and a reputation that was not quite flawless. He was not "a bad man," in the ordinary sense of the word. He was by no means a villain. But he was selfish, callous, worldly, as he had called himself (and as Stella did not believe him); he was still capable, at need, of doing a generous thing, but he had a keen eye for the main chance. He was clever, and, in some people's opinion, handsome, in a dark, hard style, which other people particularly disliked; but by young men and young women, who are not generally keen physiognomists, he was admired. Stella Raeburn admired him very much, though he shocked her now and then by his sippant manner of speech.

He had friends at a great house in the neighborhood of Dundee: Lord Esquhart's second son, Donald Vereker, was his particular "pal," as he explained to Miss Raeburn, and he had been invited to spend a week or two at the Towers for some shooting. The Raeburns were naturally not in the Towers "set," but Hannington was nevertheless determined to pursue his acquaintance with the manufacturer's daughter. Stella Raeburn would have money, and Hannington considered himself poor.

So he held her hand, and she stood silent, with downcast eyes, not drawing her fingers away. Hannington felt them quiver in his hand like a soft, live bird. At this movement, he himself had a moment of tender feeling; it was not very lasting, but while it lasted it was real. He thought to himself that she was a dear little girl, and that he should be very fond of her. He rejected the imputation cast on him by his conscience of being a fortune hunter, with disdain. No; he was in love with Stella.

Presently the steamer lay alongside the wharf, and through the gathering darkness and the flickering, changing lights, Stella watched anxiously for the coming of her father. Mr. Hannington watched too, fingering his black moustache, and musing on the subject of dowries and fortunes made in jute. He wanted to see Mr. Raeburn before committing himself further. Stella's friend and chaperon, Mrs. Muir, came up from the saloon with many exclamations of relief at the conclusion of her voyage. She was the wife of a clergyman in Dundee, and an English-woman.

"Of course the weather has been lovely, and the boat is very comfortable," she said; "but you can't settle down to anything in two days, and there seems so little to do. Confess, now, Stella darling, haven't you found it a tiny bit dull?"

Stella blushed beautifully, as she answered with a sincerity that John Hannington thought very sweet, that she had not been at all dull—not in the very least.

"Well, I'm very glad of it," said Mrs. Muir, glancing at Mr. Hannington, "for I am sure I have not seen much of you; I never feel well enough at sea to walk about and enjoy myself like other people. I come this way, you know"—sinking her voice a little—"because it's cheaper. Stella, there's your dear papa. Don't you see his head in the crowd over there by the gangway?"

Stella did see, and made an impulsive movement forward, which had to be restrained by the talkative Mrs. Muir.

"My dear child, you had better stay where you are. He can find you more easily; see, he is making his way towards us." And, as she spoke, a tall man, with shoulders slightly bent, and a fringe of white hair about his face, made his way towards the little group. Stella could be kept back no longer; she sped to her father like an arrow from a bow. Her face seemed transfigured by happiness.

"What a sweet girl she is!" Mrs. Muir exclaimed. Then she drew a long breath. "Ah! he *has* kissed her. I am glad of that. I was half afraid that he wouldn't!"

"Not kiss his daughter?" said Mr. Hannington, with an uncomprehending accent.

Mrs. Muir nodded at him. "The Scotch are much more reserved in public than the English, Mr. Hannington; and poor dear Stella has lived abroad four years among people who are more demonstrative than the English. I was half afraid that her father would seem cold to her, although I know that he loves her dearly."

"He *ought* to love her," said Hannington, with emphasis.

Mrs. Muir favored him with a keen look, "You think so too, do you?" she said. "I quite agree with you; but we are impulsive people—English, you know."

"I am not an impulsive person."

"Well, perhaps not. And if you are not, you may like to hear that Miss Stella is not likely to be absolutely portionless by and by. She will bring a very handsome tocher, as my husband would say, to the man she marries."

Hannington made no reply. If he had been ignorant of the fact stated, he might have felt grateful to Mrs. Muir for her information; but as he knew it already, he was a little inclined to resent what he called her "fussy interference." He waited silently until Stella and her father approached them. Mr. Raeburn spoke to Mrs. Muir, thanking her for the care of his daughter, and then Mr. Hannington's introduction took place. The manufacturer gave the young man a pleasant greeting, and stood for a few minutes on deck talking to him; while Stella, with her hand in her father's arm, and a slight, unconscious smile on her sweet face, listened to the conversation, and shyly thought that she had never seen any one so handsome and distinguished-looking as Mr. John Hannington.

The young man was not disagreeably impressed by Mr. Raeburn's manner. It was a little stiff and old-fashioned, but not out of keeping with his highly respectable appearance. The father's eyes were like his daughter's, though with more anxiety and less gentleness in their expression. The lines of his pale face were rather deeply traced; his high wrinkled forehead and hollow cheek showed signs of ill-health as well as care and thought. He looked like a man who had great responsibilities on his shoulders, and whose life was never free from trouble of one sort or another. He spoke in dry, gentle tones, hesitating now and then for a word, with a slight Scotch accent, which even Hannington, in his London-bred fastidiousness, found characteristic and picturesque.

"We will be glad to see you, Sir, if you should find your way to Thornbank," Mr. Raeburn said courteously to the younger man. "Any friend of my daughter's—or of Mrs. Muir's either—will aye be welcome. You'll come and take your dinner with us one day, maybe, if you are to stay long in Dundee, and have the time to spare."

"I shall be delighted to come," Hannington answered, quickly. "Any day that suits you, Sir—or that Miss Raeburn likes to fix. You will allow me the pleasure of calling to-morrow—to inquire after Miss Raeburn—and then, perhaps——"

"Any day," said Mr. Raeburn, "just any time you please, you will be welcome." He gave a stiff little nod, as if to show that the conversation was at an end. "We must be moving off, I should think, Stella, my dear. The carriage is here to meet us, and your aunt has got a fine tea ready for you at the other end."

Stella, with her hand resting on her father's arm, gave a gentle little smile to Hannington. There was something of regret mingling with the joy of her return home. Was she sorry to part with him already?

Mrs. Muir's leave-takings were of the effusive kind.

"Good-bye, sweet Star of Hope," she said, as she kissed Stella. "I shall soon come to see if you are still shining at Thornbank as you have shone on board. She has been the centre of attraction, Mr. Raeburn, and I am sure we are all sorry to part from her."

"I'm obliged to you for your kindness," said Mr. Raeburn, a little more stiffly than usual. "Good-night to you,

Mrs. Muir. Come, Stella, say good-bye to your friends." Stella took her hand from his arm, and gave it first to Mrs. Muir, and then to Mr. Hannington. He held it in his own for a moment longer than is usual under such circumstances; and then, as her father's back was turned, and the lights around them were but dim, he bowed his head over it and raised it to his lips.

Stella drew it away, coloring violently, and as she did so, her eyes met those of a gentleman who must have been a spectator of the scene. It was "Moncrieff of Torrismuir," as Hannington, had named him to her; and the keen, cold face was set in lines of a gravity that was almost stern. Stella felt as if he had condemned her for this act of John Hannington's, and she was conscious of an emotion of shame and distress, quickly succeeded by something very like resentment. What right had this stranger to look at her with those critical eyes? Stella's nature was very gentle, but she was not without her share of pride, which was a little wounded by his gaze. It was not until afterwards that she was fully aware of the mingled pain and pleasure which the touch of Hannington's lips on her little ungloved hand had brought to her.

Meanwhile her flush and gesture of avoidance convinced Hannington that he had offended her, and when he came to the carriage-door and handed her to her seat, he put on a look of the deepest concern and contrition, with which upon his face he said good-bye. Stella sank back on the soft cushions of the carriage when he had gone, with the feeling that she was in a new and exciting world. For a moment she forgot even her father.

"Yon's a rather officious young fellow, I'm thinking," said Mr. Raeburn, drily.

His daughter sat up, and passed her hand over her eyes. "He has been very kind to me, papa," she said softly.

"Very kind? Well, I'm glad to hear it. Who is he? A friend of Mrs. Muir's?"

"Yes, papa. He is going to Esquhart Towers to-night, to stay at the Earl's. He is a great friend of Mr. Vereker's."

"No credit to him," said Mr. Raeburn. "Everyone knows that Donald Vereker will take up with the first-comer, whoever he may be. Do you know anything more of him?"

"Only that he is a friend of Mrs. Muir's."

"Ah—well. I dare say we shall see no more of him. When he gets among his fine friends at the Towers he won't think of us again."

Stella was silent ; but a little smile crept to the corners of her mouth. What did Mr. Hannington care for his fine friends, she said to herself, in comparison with her ? He would certainly come, certainly ; he had said so ; and then her father would see how mistaken he had been in his estimate of this young man—who was not as other young men. But she said nothing, and Mr. Raeburn presently began to ask her short, dry questions about her journey and her life abroad, and this sort of conversation lasted until the carriage swept round the curve of a gravelled drive which led from the road to the door of Mr. Raeburn's new residence—Thornbank.

Stella had not heard much of the house, for neither her father nor her aunt were good letter-writers ; but she had gathered from their remarks that it was a fine big place, and that it had been "newly furnished." Still, she was hardly prepared for the solid magnificence of the mansion into which her father now conducted her : the broad stone steps, the spacious hall lined with marble figures and exotic plants, the big pictures and flaming chandeliers of the room in which her aunt met her, struck her with astonishment, but not altogether with admiration. She had seen too much of really good Art and fine architecture in her travels to be anything but critical ; and, in spite of her wish to like everything in her father's house, she felt oppressed by the blaze of light and the glaring colors of the furniture. It seemed incongruous, too, to see her aunt's old-fashioned little figure hurrying towards her between velvet hangings and ormolu stands, and all this strange new paraphernalia of wealth. Only when Miss Jacky had taken the slim young figure in her arms, and was kissing the girl's fresh cheek with a sort of rapturous delight, did Stella feel that she was really at home, in spite of the cold and bewildering splendor of the house.

Miss Jacquetta Raeburn was a very little woman. Her head did not reach to Stella's shoulder, as Stella was rather surprised to find—for the girl had grown during her four years' absence from home—but what she lacked in stature she made up for in dignity of a vivacious and energetic

kind. She was by no means an insignificant-looking person, for all her shortness of figure. She was dressed in a black brocade of very ancient make, but stiff and rich looking; over it, however, she had tied a blue bib and apron, with rather an odd effect. On her head was perched a very high cap, adorned with many spikes of green grass, upright feathers, artificial flowers and iridescent beads, such an erection as had never been seen on the head of mortal woman before, and was the pride of Miss Jacquetta's heart.

"Eh, my bonny woman!" she cried, with a little shriek of delight, "and it's you that are back again, after all this weary while. And me and your papa have just been wearying for a sight of you! And you must be quite done out with your journey, I should think, and will want your tea sadly!"

"No, Aunt Jacky, I don't know that I do," said Stella, laughing a little, and stooping to kiss the delicate, wrinkled face. "But when I sit down I daresay I shall find an appetite."

"I'm sure I hope so, my dear. I've been trying all day to mind what you used to like, and I think you'll find something to your taste. Now come away upstairs and lay by your bonnet. What a deal there is to show you and tell you about, to be sure! Did you ever see such a fine house as this, Stella? And your own little room—well, just come away with me, and I'll show you what your papa's done for you."

She led the girl hurriedly across the hall and up the broad, well-carpeted, illuminated staircase, refusing the attentions of one or two of the servants who stepped forward to offer assistance on the way. "Not now, John; just you go downstairs again, Mary; I will show the young mistress to her own chamber myself, if you please. You'd never believe the thought your papa has taken to have everything just so before you came home, my dear. But it's not me that would deny him his way, as you know, and everyone of us in the house is as glad to see you as himself. And now, look here."

Miss Jacky had preceded Stella for the last few minutes, and now threw open the door of a room, in which she evidently took great pride. And indeed it was a charming little nest. White and pink were the colors that predomi-

nated; the mirrors were framed in silver, the toilet requisites were in ivory and silver; the silken bedquilt and curtains were edged with delicate lace. A white rug lay before the fender, and a small but cheery wood fire burned in the grate. Evidently good taste had presided over the choice of every article, and Stella was the more gratified and surprised because the rest of the house, with all its gorgeousness, had not pleased her very much.

"There's a parlor opening out of it," added Miss Jacky, with infinite delight, "so that you can just slip away up here when you're tired of us old folk, Stella, my dear. And I hope it'll be to your fancy."

"It is lovely—it is charming!" cried the girl, with a bright flush of color on her delicate face. "I never saw a room half so pretty! How good of papa to get it all done so beautifully."

"He did not hold his hand, certainly," said Miss Jacky. "He had people from London to see about this room; the folk here weren't good enough for him, though they did the rest of the house. I'm just hoping that you'll tell your papa, Stella, that you are pleased, for he's made a sight of work about this place, I can tell you, and it was easy to see that you didn't care so much about the public rooms below as he would have liked you to do."

"Oh, dear Aunt Jacky," said Stella, a little stung by the implied rebuke, "I never, never said a word. I only thought they looked—very—grand."

"They're not much to my taste," said Aunt Jacky, grimly. "A deal too much gilding and velvet about them for me. But your papa likes them; and surely I think he's gone clean daft over this house and its furniture. He's for throwing good money right and left as if it were but dirt. And it's 'Would the child like this?' or 'Would she have the other?' till I've been fair dazed at the sound of your name. Not but what it's a sight for sair een to see you standing there, my bonnie lassie."

Stella was slowly pulling off her gloves and laying her hat upon the bed. She did not speak for a minute or two.

"It's very beautiful, it's all very grand," she said. "I will certainly tell dear papa how grateful I am to him for this dear little room." Then, after another pause, she said, with a rather puzzled look, and in a hesitating voice, "In papa's letters to me, he kept saying that he was so poor. I—I did not expect anything like this,"

"It doesn't look as if he were poor, does it, my bairn? A year or two ago he was anxious enough, I know. And then his sadness of heart seemed to leave him all at once, and he began to talk of this new house, and since then he's spent just an awful deal of money—so it will have been only a passing cloud, you see." But, in spite of these cheerful assurances, Miss Jacky's face wore a cloud of anxiety and almost of fear, which Stella was quick to interpret.

"Don't you think he is well, then, Aunt Jacky?" she asked.

"He says that he's well, my lamb," said Aunt Jacky, "and she would be a bold woman that would contradict him. And so far that's a good sign. For it's only when a man's near death that he lets himself be contradicted without flying into a rage."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST DAY.

STELLA'S vague dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the new home, which she had scarcely yet learned to call her own, did not survive a glimpse of the sunlight which greeted her next morning in her lovely little room. She lay awake for a few minutes watching the beams which wandered through the Venetian blinds, and rested here and there upon the pretty things which, as she fondly remembered, her father himself had bought for her; and then, with a sudden wish to see what lay outside the house, she got up and pulled aside the blinds. Her room was situated at an angle of the house, and she had windows on two sides. From one she looked out upon a garden which sloped down a gentle descent, at the foot of which—broad and glorious—rolled the great river Tay, its bosom brilliant in the morning light. Stella looked across to the Newport side, and thought of some of her

old friends who lived there ; then she glanced at the great curve of the wonderful Tay Bridge, and uttered a little smothered cry at the sight of that yawning gap which had not then been filled up. The great Tay Bridge disaster had occurred when Stella was at school, and she had not seen even a photograph of the river since the Bridge went down. It gave her—as it has given to many people when they beheld it in its ruin—a sudden awe-stricken sense of tragedy ; it seemed to her as if the broken-down arches and solitary piers must always induce strange recollections of the sadness and mystery of life whenever they met the eye. She was not old enough to know how easily the mind of man recoils from contemplation of disaster ; and she would have been surprised indeed had she been told that in a very short time she would be far too much absorbed in the conduct of her own affairs to think (as she did at first), every time she glanced at the bridge, of a stormy night, the roaring wind, the rush of a train over the rocking arches, and the sudden plunge into the dark water below. She stood at the window and thought very seriously that she would take the sight of the broken bridge for a warning to herself ; and that whenever she was over-confident or impatient, or inclined to grumble, she would remember how easily all earthly happiness might fall to pieces beneath the Hand of One mightier than herself—the Hand of God.

“I do not think that I shall ever be discontented when I look at that bridge,” she said, as she glanced at the glittering expanse of water, the cloudless sky, the pale, purple hills that seemed to die away in mist on the other side of the water. “I shall remember how easily it might have happened that my dear father or some of my friends had been in that train, and that I might have been made an orphan ! There are many other ways, too, in which one’s happiness may be wrecked. There must be trouble in store for every one ; and I have had so little hitherto that I suppose it is all to come !—God grant that I may bear it patiently ! At the beginning of this new life of mine—
for everything seems new to me here—I will ask Him to bless it and to bless me ; so that I may be a blessing and a help to others, and may not live for myself alone !”

And thus reflecting, she slipped down on her knees beside the window and uttered a few words of fervent

prayer, that she might be guided and guarded in the home-life upon which she had now entered. There could not have been a better preparation for the chances and changes of Stella Raeburn's life.

She dressed and went downstairs. She had time for a little ramble in the garden before her aunt and her father made their appearance, and she came in eloquent about the sweet, fresh air, the beauty of the view, and the size of the garden. Her father listened with a dawning pleasure in his weary eyes.

"So you weren't sorry to come back to old Scotland after all?" he said, as he finished his saucer of porridge, and pulled towards him the cup of tea that Miss Jacky had poured out.

"Papa! How could I be sorry when I love it with all my heart? You have no idea how I used to long to hear a Scottish tongue! I thought I should die of home-sickness for the first year that I was away."

"Ye didn't mention that in your letters," said Miss Jacky.

"Oh! no, because I knew that it would have been foolish when papa wanted me to learn as much as I could, and not to come home until I had done with school. But it is delightful to feel oneself in one's own country."

"I am glad to hear you say so," said her father. "I was half afraid you'd come back half a foreigner, and not a sensible Scottish lassie after all. You've not forgotten how to sup your porridge, any way."

"I should think not!" said Stella, brightly. "I enjoy it more than anything—especially with this beautiful cream. I think I shall enjoy everything in Scotland."

"Well, make the most of your enjoyment," said Mr. Raeburn, spaking a little drily as he rose from his chair. "It's as well, may be, that you can find your pleasure in such little things; there's no knowing how long you may have bigger ones to enjoy."

He went out of the room rather quickly, and Stella, laying down her spoon, looked with a puzzled face towards her aunt for explanation. "He did not seem quite pleased," she said. "Did I say anything that he did not like, auntie?"

"Nothing that he *need* mislike, my bairn. It's just this: he's got a notion that we don't appreciate all that he's done

for us, in building this fine house up at the West End—which, in my opinion, is just ridiculous; and he seems whiles to wish that we should not like anything but what's cost money; so that though he himself still sups the porridge and likes them as well as ever, he'd have been better pleased, my dear, if ye'd turned up your nose at it and asked for some patty de foy grasse, or whatever they call it, or some of that fine raised pie with truffles and spices and what not. It's just the nature of the man, that's all."

"I see; I will try to please him," said Stella, with rather a troubled laugh. "But my tastes are all quite simple, I believe; I like cold mutton and rice-puddings; so what am I to do?"

"Ye'll just have to do what other women spend their lives in doing—*pretend*," said Miss Jacky. "We're all weak creatures, my dear; but I'd sooner be a woman than a man, because I'd sooner deceive than be deceived."

"Oh, Aunt Jacky, you don't mean what you say!"

"Indeed and I do, my dear. Why, I'm pretending and deceiving all day long. I'm always pretending that I like this big house, and I don't; I'm pretending that I like to be waited on, which is just my partecular abomination; and I deceive my brother all day long—for his soul's good, my bairn, all for his soul's good. And I've no doubt but that in the Last Day, allowance will be made for my situation."

Stella was rather appalled by this revelation of duplicity; but while she was still thinking it over, her father reappeared. He seemed in better humor now, and looked at her with a faint smile on his grey face.

"I'm going down to the mill," he said. "I shall take the next car that passes. What's the right time, Stella? Have you a watch?"

"Oh, yes, papa dear; you gave it me yourself just before I went to Brussels. It keeps very good time. Half-past nine; that is right, is it not?"

"A trumpery thing!" said Mr. Raeburn, taking the little silver watch from her hand, and turning it over disdainfully. "I'll give you a better one than that, Stella. It's not suitable for your position now."

"Papa, I am sure I don't want anything better." She had forgotten her aunt's recommendations, until Miss Jacky trod violently upon her toes under the table; and then,

blushing and starting, she resumed, "I am very much obliged to you, indeed. But really it is not necessary—this watch goes beautifully——"

"Pooh, nonsense!" said Mr. Raeburn, still good-humoredly. "You must have a new one now; something like what Miss Raeburn of Thornbank ought to have. You give me your old watch; I'll see what I can get it changed for——"

"Oh, not the dear old watch that you gave me, dear papa! I want to keep it always—for your sake."

"She can lay it past with her dolls and her primers," interposed Miss Jacky, pacifically. "It is just a little girl's watch; there's no mistake about that, Stella, and you should have a better one, now that ye're a young lady. So you go away down to town, Matthew, and get the watch for her if you like; but ye're no wanting to deprive the poor bairn of her playthings, which is but natural that she should have a regard for?"

"Well, well," said Mr. Raeburn, letting Stella slip her watch back into her pocket, "as you please. There's no need to exchange it; I can afford two watches, I should think, or half a dozen, if I please. A half-hunter, Stella, with your initials in brilliants on the back—what do you think of that now?"

Stella was saved from what was to her the painful necessity of replying, by the apparition of a solemn man-servant at the door. He had come to announce the approach of the tram-car, for it was one of Mr. Raeburn's peculiarities that he would never take his own carriage and horses out in a morning to convey him to the mill; he preferred the public car.

Mr. Raeburn went into the hall, but turned back once more before leaving the house.

"Is that young man—that lad that I saw on the boat—coming to-day, Stella?"

"I don't know, papa."

"Well, if he comes, you can be civil to him, but no too civil. I must make inquiries about him before he gets on any intimate footing in this house. Of course, if he was kind to you, and you like to pay him the compliment of asking him to eat his dinner with us some evening, you may; but don't you get so friendly, Miss Stella, with every long-legged lad you come across. Miss Raeburn must remember her position."

"I am sure I have never been particularly friendly with any one, papa," said Stella, with flaming cheeks.

"Well, may be no. But mind what I say."

"I dare say he will not come at all, papa."

"All the better," said Mr. Raeburn. "I don't want too many of his sort round the house. There's no reason why you shouldn't marry a title, Stella, if you manage well. 'My lady' would suit her fine; don't you think so, Jacky?"

"I think," said Miss Jacky, with severity, "that you're a bigger fool than ever I took ye for, brother, and that is saying a good deal. And ye'll have lost your tram, moreover." And as Mr. Raeburn hurried out of the room, she subjoined in a tone of peculiar acidity, "Why the Almighty created men with so little sense, is what I've tried all my life to find out, and never yet succeeded. They go crowing round like cockerels on a fence, the whole clamjamfry of them, and no one ever knows what it's ab —."

Stella laughed, in spite of her vexation.

"And who's the young man that he means, my dear? Somebody that came in the boat with you from London? How did you get acquainted with him?" And then, by a series of questions, Miss Jacky won from the girl a recital of the events of her two days' voyage under Mrs. Muir's sheltering wing; a recital from which Stella carefully omitted all that was particularly interesting to herself, more out of shyness than from any wish to conceal the truth. Miss Jacky listened with her head on one side, and her eyes slanted towards the speaker, with something of the aspect of a serious cockatoo; but after all Stella's story did not impress her very much. Mr. Raeburn's inopportune warnings had led her to expect much more.

"Bless us," she said, "what's the good man fashing himself for, I wonder? The young gentleman couldn't do less than make himself agreeable; and to my mind it was no wonder if he was a little bit attracted by somebody's bonnie face—not 'but what beauty's only skin-deep," added Miss Jacky, hastily, for Stella's moral edification, "and there's no accounting for young men's tastes. Providentially, we haven't got to account for them; and so"—with a conviction that she was showing great conversational tact and finesse—"let us not try to do anything of the kind, but just come out with me into the garden, and then we'll look at your frocks, and get on with our day's work." What the

day's work was, it would have been hard for Aunt Jacky to define.

Stella was glad to quit the subject, and did obediently and joyously all that was required of her. She and her aunt lunched at home, under the eye of a solemn butler and a couple of footmen, who made Miss Jacky evidently so nervous that Stella was emboldened to propose a new departure on future occasions. "Don't you think, Aunt Jacky," she said, "that it would be more comfortable to have lunch in the little ante-room opening out of this big dining-room, and only one of the maids to wait on us?" She said this when the servants had at last departed from the room.

"Your father wouldn't like it, my dear. It would be much more comfortable, no doubt; but I am sure that he would say that it wouldn't be living up to our position. I daren't propose it, Stella."

"Oh dear, oh dear, what is our position?" cried Stella, a little dolefully, and then laughed at herself for asking the question.

Her heart was beginning to beat a little more quickly as the afternoon advanced. Would Mr. Hannington come, or would he not? She had gently to combat her aunt's proposition that they should go into the town together, do some shopping, and pay some calls.

"People should call on me first, you know, auntie," said Miss Stella, with an immense assumption of dignity. "I suppose they knew that I was coming home?"

"Hoity-toity, set her up! As if folk would call for *you*," said Aunt Jacky, with much scorn. "A wee bit lassie like you to expect people to call for her."

But, as both dignity and scorn were mere imitations of the real article, aunt and niece immediately laughed at each other, and sat down contentedly for a long chat.

Before the afternoon ended, however, Miss Jacky came to the conclusion that Stella had not been mistaken. People seemed to see things in the same light as she did, and called to ask after her. Mrs. Lyndsay, who lived in another great house in the Perth Road, came with her two daughters; and old Mrs. Balsilly, who had been the bosom friend of Stella's grandmother, dropped in and stayed for an hour. Aunt Jacky had never been loath to drink a surreptitious cup of tea at any hour of the day or night;

and she was only too glad to bustle about and order the servants, with great accession of dignity, to bring in afternoon tea soon after three o'clock. So that, when Mr. Hannington did make his appearance, in his leisurely London way, a little before the stroke of five, the teapot was cold, the cups and saucers stood here and there, and the room had the distracted appearance of one in which some half-dozen people had been moving and talking and drinking tea nearly all the afternoon.

Miss Jacky was inclined to apologize for the disorder, but Stella was not at all sorry for it. Looking at the room through Hannington's eyes, she again became conscious of its gorgeous ugliness. There was too much of everything, too much gilding, too much marble, too much satin brocade, too many exotic flowers. The whole thing was overdone. To Stella the only really pleasing parts of the room were the grand piano, recently ordered for her from Germany, and the broad plate-glass windows, with their magnificent view of the Tay. She was glad that Hannington commented at once on the grand sweep of the river between its picturesque hills and wooded banks, and turned his back on the flaunting splendor of the Thornbank drawing-room.

The call was short and rather formal; but it ended in an invitation to dinner, which Miss Jacky was as proud to be able to give as Mr. Hannington was pleased to accept. In two days he was to come, and then, as he gracefully expressed it, he would have the pleasure of making further acquaintance with Mr. Raeburn. Not with Stella; oh dear no!

Miss Jacky must be held responsible for a good deal. She had been exceedingly pleased when Mrs. Lyndsay had called, for the Lyndsays were great people in the commercial world; and she could not help letting out her pleasure with a certain arrangement in which Stella had been concerned.

"So kind of them, you know, Mr. Hannington," she said, simply, while Stella blushed hotly and wished that she could lay her finger over her aunt's mouth. "For I'm sure I said to myself, what's yon"—*yon* meant Stella, in this case—"but a poor, wee lassie that's just come home from school, and must wait awhile before she makes friends with her neebours! Wait awhile? Not she! She

hadn't been home a day before Mrs. Lyndsay and her two girlies came to call for her."

"To go out with them?" said Hannington, who did not quite understand.

Miss Jacky did not see where he had misunderstood her. She did not remember at the moment that the Southerner says "call on" where the Northerner says "call for," and she wondered a little at the drift of his question.

"Not to-day," she said; "they just called for her to-day out of pure friendliness, so to speak; but to-morrow she is to go out with them for the afternoon if it is a fine day, because Stella says that she has never seen Balmerino, Mr. Hannington; and they are to make a party and drive her over; because you know Balmerino is a place that ought to be seen."

"Is it really?" said the young man, with great apparent earnestness. "I ought to go myself, ought I not? I must get Donald Vereker to take me. I have often heard of the place, and meant to see it."

"Ay, and so should you," Miss Jacky assented, "and if Mr. Vereker of the Castle goes with you, you'll want no other introduction; but, as a rule, the keys are kept at the farm-house, and the goodman does not trust them into everybody's hands. I hope you'll have a fine afternoon to-morrow, Stella, my dear."

"I hope so, too," said Hannington, looking at her. Her eyes were downcast, there was the loveliest flush on her delicate cheeks. Hannington smiled. "Did she tell her aunt to let me know?" he said to himself. "Women do these things sometimes. She is not very skilful at setting traps as yet, poor little thing. I won't fail her, however; I will be at Balmerino to-morrow, too!"

The resolution showed how little he understood the motives that actuated Stella Raeburn.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECOND DAY.

MR. RAEBURN came home to his six o'clock dinner with the loveliest little watch in his pocket that Stella had ever beheld. He did not produce it until dessert was

on the table, and then he brought it out in its dainty Morocco case with great form and ceremony, and handed it to Stella on a dish, as if it had been something good to eat.

"There, young lady!" he said. "There's a watch that is worth looking at. Don't let me see that trumpery silver affair any more. It annoys me that you should wear a shoddy thing like that when I can afford you as good a one as any lady in the land."

"Dear papa, you are so kind," cried Stella. She could not resist the impulse to fly to his side and kiss him, although she noticed that he seemed a little taken aback by her effusive display of affection. "I shall always wear this one, but I shall keep the other too, and I shall be just as fond of it in my own heart, because you gave it to me."

"There, there!" said Mr. Raeburn. "You haven't looked at it yet. Sit down, my dear. I chose that because of the device on the back. It's just a wee bit fanciful, I'll grant; but girls don't dislike a thing on that account."

The device was that of a star in brilliants, with a rather large diamond in the centre. Stella and her aunt admired it extremely; but another surprise was still in store for them. Mr. Raeburn watched them silently, the worn, haggard look coming back to his face as he sat back in his chair and listened to their comments. Presently he smiled and produced two more cases, at which Stella gazed in surprise and Miss Jacky in consternation.

"Can't give one thing to you and nothing to your aunt, can I?" he said, appealing to Stella. "Hand that over to her, my dear. Something for you to wear at the next big dinner-party we go to, Jacky. And *that's* for you, my girl, and the more of that sort you get the better."

Aunt Jacky's present was a diamond brooch; Stella's a gold bracelet studded with diamond stars. The girl's thanks were warm and hearty; but she felt a little oppressed by the very magnificence of the gift. She had sense enough to know that so young a girl as herself ought not to wear diamonds, but she feared to wound her father's feelings by saying so. She slipped the bracelet on her fair, round arm, therefore, and gave herself up to a girlish pleasure in the flashing of the jewels in the lamplight. Miss Jacky looked less pleased than she did.

"They must have cost a great deal, Matthew," she said, after a rather awkward pause.

"And what if they did? Don't you suppose I can afford it?" said Mr. Raeburn, frowning at her angrily. "I can buy up any Dundee merchant twice over, I tell you; I'm a millionaire—a billionaire, if you like—and trade's going up. I mean to be as rich as Rothschild one of these days. There's no limit—no limit—to which I cannot aspire and—attain. We'll make our Stella a princess yet. There's an old story about a Princess Fair-Star in some silly book; we'll make our Princess Fair-Star a millionaire. That'll be a new ending for a fairy tale."

He laughed harshly and rose from the table, regardless of the fact that the ladies had not made a move. Miss Jacky watched him darkly as he left the room. She could not understand the changes of his moods. He behaved as if he had been drinking. And yet—she had not noticed that he took a larger quantity of wine than usual at dinner. There was something about him that made her very anxious now and then.

She turned to Stella; but Stella, though rather puzzled, had not sufficient experience either of her father or of the world at large to be alarmed. She was anything but critical by nature; and her father had shown himself loving and kind to her. That was sufficient to blind her eyes to his defects.

Besides, Stella had her own affairs to think about. Some instinct told her that Mr. Hannington intended to be at Balmerino on the following afternoon; he had not said so, but he had looked his intention, and Stella had understood. She was half charmed, half frightened at the prospect. He had no business to go to the fine old ruin just for the sake of meeting her, and yet—if he chose to go, who could prevent him? She certainly could not. And then her thoughts resolved themselves into an intense anxiety about the weather. She sat at the delightful Blüthner Grand for a great part of the evening, singing and playing Scottish airs for her father and her aunt; but her heart was not altogether in her music. It had flown far away from the present into a golden dream of future love and happiness.

The next day was cloudlessly fine. Mrs. Lyndsay and her girls—two rosy, merry lasses, who had a boundless admiration for their old friend Stella, with whom they used to go to school before she left Dundee for Brussels—

called at Thornbank at half-past one, and drove with her to the steamer, in which the whole party—horses and carriage included—would be transported from Dundee to the Kingdom of Fife. At Newport they would get into the carriage again, and be driven Westward to the fine old Abbey ruin at Balmerino.

Stella was delighted with every one of her experiences. She scarcely remembered crossing the Tay in her childish days, and as she walked up and down the deck with her companions, Katie and Isabel Lyndsay, she rejoiced like a child in the motion of the vessel, the light, clear air about her, the sight of the dancing waves through which the boat ploughed its way. The pretty villas and waving green trees of the village on the other side excited her highest admiration. "I should like to live there much better than in Dundee!" she cried. "How lovely everything is; how clear and bright!"

"I'm awfully glad you like it so much," said Isabel Lyndsay. "We thought that you would perhaps be spoiled for Scotland by living so long in another country."

"Spoiled for my own native land! Oh, never!" Stella cried. "Wherever I went I always sang, 'Hame, hame, fain wad I be!' I hope that I shall never leave Scotland any more."

"But suppose you wanted to marry an Englishman?" said Katie. "Like Isa, you know; she is engaged to a gentleman from London. What would you do then?"

Katie was only a child compared with Stella and Isabel, these two young ladies considered, therefore perhaps she did not notice Stella's sudden guilty blush, and the little involuntary pressure that she gave to Isa's arm, through which her hand was passed. But Isa noticed both, and constructed a romance upon the spot.

Newport Pier was reached at length, and the drive to Balmerino began. It was a very pleasant drive, but Stella found afterwards that she did not remember much about it. She was hardly conscious of what she said or did, until her feet were firmly planted on the green slopes on which the ruined abbey walls are set, and found herself suddenly face to face with Mr. John Hannington and a friend. And then she felt illogically ashamed of herself for having expected to meet him there.

Although she did not know it, she had seldom made a

prettier picture than when John Hannington encountered her. She was standing outside an arched door, which led into one of the few remaining chambers of the building. The solid masonry was almost hidden by the clustering ivy which had fastened on the stones for generations past; the long trails, on which the sunlight glinted, fell loosely over the wide opening, where the sombre darkness of the interior formed an excellent background for Stella's slender figure clad in white and green. The grey fragments of stone, the ruined walls, the broken window arches, half veiled in ivy, by which she stood, would have served excellently for an example of youth and age—warm, loving youth, alive and beautiful; age, dull, grey, solemn and cold. Such was the comparison John Hannington drew—and it must be added that he congratulated himself on his own acuteness in securing the affection of a girl who was handsome as well as rich. A beauty and an heiress! He was in luck.

Stella performed her part of introducing him to the Lyndsays with a quiet, shy grace which Hannington heartily approved. He in his turn asked permission to introduce Mr. Donald Vereker, and as that young man was one of Lord Esquhart's sons, his welcome by Mrs. Lyndsay was assured. Katie was charmed to find that this fair-haired, blue-eyed young fellow was what she called "very jolly," and while she and her mother monopolized him, Isa, who was of a sentimental turn, devoted herself to securing a few minutes undisturbed to her friend Stella and Stella's lover.

For of course he *was* Stella's lover; she was sure of that by the look in Stella's pretty eyes. So she led them away from Mrs. Lyndsay and Mr. Vereker, and when they had entered the half-lighted cavern which had once done duty for refectory or kitchen, she slipped quietly away, and Hannington was at liberty to say what he chose.

He had already given Stella his hand, because the floor was very uneven, and he knew by its tremor that he could go a little farther still. "Come this way and look at the window in the wall," he said, leading her deeper into the darkness of the ruined building. "You are not angry with me for coming here to-day? You are not sorry to see me, Stella?" His arm was round her waist.

"Oh, please——" Stella began, but she was not allowed to proceed.

"I could not keep away. I love you, Stella—do you

not know that? Do you not love me a little in return? Stella, will you not tell me that you love me?"

"It is so soon," she murmured, but her head was on his shoulder, and he knew that he might have his way.

"Not a bit of it. The moment I set eyes upon you in the Britannia I said to myself—that is the woman I should like to have for a wife. That is how all true love begins, my little darling."

"Oh, no." She nestled a little closer in his arms, however, as she contradicted him. "Not always."

"Yours did not begin so soon, dear?"

"No."

"But it is as strong now as if—as if it had begun with mine?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, eagerly, almost unaware how much she acknowledged by those words. And then she felt herself drawn close, and kissed as she had never been kissed before—on brow, eyelids, cheeks, and mouth—hotly and passionately, and as if his kisses would never end. She felt her face tingle, and tried to draw herself away, but he would not let her go. For, after his own fashion, Hannington was a little in love with Stella, and his love-making, whether genuine or not, had never failed for want of ardor. Her soft, fair face and sweet young lips had always appeared to him eminently kissable. But it did not at all follow that his fancy for her was of a purifying or enduring kind; for a man can only act and feel according to the laws of his being, and even his love will not ennoble him if he has not within him the root of something noble. John Hannington was not without his good points; but he was further below the level of a girl like Stella Raeburn than Stella herself could have imagined.

"We must not stay here; they are calling us," she murmured at last. Katie's clear voice was re-echoing through the low arches and along the broken walls. "Stella! Stella! where are you!"

"One kiss, my darling," Hannington whispered. "You have not kissed me yet."

Stella lifted her face in the darkness, and pressed her soft lips to his cheek. It was a very sober little kiss; but she felt it to be a vow of everlasting fidelity. To the man who won that kiss she gave her heart and life.

"Now, then, we will go," said Hannington. "Stella, dearest, you love me, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Say 'Yes, John.'"

"Yes, John," she answered, very sweetly.

"Then, darling, don't say anything about this to any one until I have seen you again." I want to consult you first, before I speak to your father. He will grudge you to me, I am sure, my beautiful one! Will you promise me to be silent? I dine at your house to-morrow, and then we will see."

"As you like, John," she said submissively. It was rather a trial to her to think of meeting Aunt Jacky's tenderly inquisitive gaze without immediately responding to it, and telling her the whole of her little love story. But of course "John" knew best.

"Thank you, my own darling. Only for a little time," he whispered, as he led her over the damp, dark, uneven stones to the light of the outer-day. Here the Lyndsays awaited them, and summoned them to a general exploration of the place.

"We had quite lost you," said Katie. "We did not know that you were there. Mr. Veréker says that he is an archæologist, and can tell us all about the building. Come and listen, Stella."

But, although Stella walked demurely at Mrs. Lyndsay's side, it is to be feared that she did not hear much of the Honorable Donald's explanations. She said presently that she was tired, and sat down on a long, low, boundary wall, which scarcely showed its stones amongst the grass. The trees were green and shady; the sunlight threw golden rays between their boughs on the soft turf at their feet. She looked at the mouldering walls, and wondered a little about the history of the men who had once dwelt between them; wondered if they had loved and prayed and striven as people do in our days, and whether maidens had ever before been wooed in the cold stone cells of Balmerino. Henceforward the place would be a sacred one to her.

"Not much of a ruin after all, is it?" said Donald Vereker's cheery voice. "Ever been to Dunkeld, Miss Raeburn? That's a fine place. You'd like it better than this."

"Should I!" thought Stella. But she did not reply in words. She plucked a little ivy leaf from the wall beside

her, flattened it carefully between her hands, and placed it (when she thought nobody was looking) in one of the folds of her purse. Only Isa Lyndsay—following the course of the little love-drama with loyal interest—perceived and understood.

"I'm awfully bowled over," said Donald Vereker that evening, with an expression of the deepest self-commiseration. "I feel that I have received my death-blow. 'Carry me out to die,' somebody. 'I am slain by a fair, cruel maid.'"

"Who is the lady?" asked one of his sisters laughing. There was a large party in the billiard-room at Esquhart Towers, and Donald's confession was evidently made for the public benefit.

"Her father is something in jute, I believe," said the Honorable Don, as his friends often called him. "Her name's Stella—star of my existence! Don't look so black, Hannington. I'm not going to poach. You should have seen Jack adoring her to-day at Balmerino; it would teach you a lesson."

"We don't need a lesson," said Lady Grace. "We all know Mr. Hannington." There was perhaps just a little malice in her tone.

"Don't mark my score to any one else, Lady Val," called out Donald. "You're marking, aren't you? That's mine. I declare I believe you were putting it down to Jack."

They all laughed. They were a merry party, and sufficiently familiar with each other for much jesting and badinage—more, sometimes, than Hannington quite cared for. He took up his position beside Lady Val—who was a cousin of the Esquharts, and whom he had known for years. She was a tall, handsome woman of six and twenty, with flashing, black eyes, a bold, haughty face—which yet had something in it that was fine and frank and irresistibly engaging—and a particularly bright and winning smile.

"Who is this girl?" she asked him, carelessly, but in a lowered voice.

"I think he means a Miss Raeburn whom we met to-day at Balmerino. Several girls were there."

She shot a keen glance at him. "Was Miss Raeburn's name Stella?"

"I believe it was," said Hannington, examining his cue rather attentively. "I think I heard her called so."

Unfortunately for him Don. Vereker heard the last words.

"You think you heard her called so? Oh, base deceiver! you know it as well as I do, for you told me her name yourself."

Lady Val's eyes flashed their black lightnings at Hannington, but that gentleman only smiled and shrugged his shoulders, which, under the circumstances, was perhaps the best thing he could do.

"Miss Stella Raeburn is about the prettiest girl I ever saw," Donald went on. "She has got perfect features, golden hair, blue eyes, a rose-leaf complexion, and—I assure you, on my honor—no Scotch accent. She has been abroad for some years—that's why. She'll have a pot of money, for her father's a regular millionaire—why, she's said to be the biggest——"

An interruption here occurred. Mr. Vereker was summoned to the door of the billiard-room, and asked to speak to the agent, who had just arrived from Dundee on business. He did not come back for several minutes; but when he returned his face was a little grave and pale, and his manner had grown subdued.

"I have just heard of a shocking thing," he said, while the company halted in their game and looked at him in surprise. "You know that I was speaking of that beautiful girl whom we met to-day? Well, this very afternoon—for aught I know, while we were amusing ourselves in the ruins at Balmerino—her father, Matthew Raeburn, shot himself in his own office—blew out his brains with a revolver, in, it is supposed, a fit of madness, and was found there dead when his clerk looked in at six o'clock this evening. MacIntyre has just brought the news."

"Oh, that poor girl!" cried Lady Val, and looked to Hannington for sympathy. But he did not reply.

CHAPTER V.

STELLA'S LOVER.

JOHN HANNINGTON felt puzzled as to the course that he should pursue. Ought he to call at the house of mourning? Ought he to write? Should he wait until Stella made some sign? If he had been deeply in love with her, these difficulties would probably have solved themselves. He would have flown to her side, and tried to make himself a comfort and a support to her. But then he was not particularly in love with Stella—only with her pretty face and her fortune. The pretty face would now, he reflected, be disfigured with tears; the eyes would not smile, nor the rosy lips return his kisses; he had better stop away. The fortune—thank Heaven!—was all the more secure because of Matthew Raeburn's death. No father would now be there to interfere, and Stella would not object to his using her money in his own way. Hannington built a good many brilliant castles in the air at this time. It seemed to him that his luck was about to change. He was of course very sorry for Stella. He hoped—and this was a serious consideration—that there was no taint of madness in the blood of the Raeburn family. Not even Stella's fortune—unless it were a very large one indeed—would gild that pill. What but madness would have led Mr. Raeburn to raise his hand against his own life? There were no reasons for the act; the man was rarely solvent, and Stella's million secure. •

He pondered over these matters a good deal, and grew rather absent-minded in consequence; so that his friend, Lady Valencia Gilderoy, popularly called Lady Val, asked him one day what was wrong. They were in the billiard-room together, for both were passionately fond of billiards; but after a rather perfunctory game, they had established themselves in a cushioned window-seat, whence they watched the driving rain that had fallen all day as if it would never cease.

"What a sigh!" said Lady Val, at last.

"What is wrong with you, Jack."

"I don't think anything is wrong with me, Lady Val."

"Oh, don't tell me that. You are not like yourself one bit. Is it money this time?"

They were very old friends, and Jack, as she called him, did not resent the questioning.

"No," he said, slowly, "it's not money exactly."

"Then," she said, very decidedly, "it's the little Dundee girl."

"I do not quite know whom you allude to, Lady Val."

"Don't get on your high horse with me, Jack. You know perfectly well. You've not been like yourself ever since we heard of that poor man's death, and Donald says that you were quite smitten by her *beaux yeux*—"

"*Les beaux yeux de sa cassette*," hummed Jack, almost below his breath; then, in a louder voice, "I assure you, Lady Val, that Donald knows nothing about it. I admired the young lady, certainly, but to be 'smitten' in Donald's sense of the term is quite a different thing."

Lady Val gave him one of the very keen looks that Mr. Hanhington did not altogether like, and held peace for a time. Presently she said, more seriously than usual:

"I'm sorry for that girl. She will be having a bad time of it. She has no mother, I hear, and no brothers or sisters—only an old aunt. She must feel uncommonly lonely, poor child. I wish it were the proper thing to go and see her; not that I should be much good as a consoler." And she laughed a little harshly. "Why don't you go, Jack?"

"I?" said Hanhington. "I—well!—would that be the proper thing?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. Never did know what was the proper thing, all my life long. I do what I feel inclined, and propriety takes care of itself."

"We are not all so privileged. You do the right thing by instinct, and need not care about conventional views. We poor men toil after you by slow degrees, and make a hundred mistakes to your one."

"I like you least of all, do you know, when you pay compliments," said Lady Val, carelessly. "Give me that box of caramels off the table, please, and let us mitigate the severity of the Scotch summer by French bon-bons. Do you like caramels?"

"Immensely—when they come from you."

"No compliments."

"It is no compliment. It is sober fact. I adore everything that comes from you!"

He dropped on one knee as he spoke, in an attitude of mock adoration. Lady Val, enthroned on the red cushions of the wide window-seat, laughed at him; and offered him her box of sweets. He declined, unless she would herself put one into his mouth with her own fingers. At first she refused, but after a little persuasion consented, and laughed to see him reduced to speechlessness by an unusually big caramel. She looked very animated and handsome, her eyes sparkling, the color flashing into her cheeks, her white teeth gleaming between those ripe red lips. Hannington heartily admired her. In fact, he thought her far more handsome than Stella.

What would Stella have thought of him if she had seen him kneeling at Lady Val's feet, crunching her bon-bons, laughing at her jokes? while she—the girl that he professed to love—was agonizing in the first sorrow of her young life—all the blacker and more terrible to her because the man who had won her heart was not at her side to enable her to bear it. Lady Val was innocent enough; she had not the ghost of an idea that there was anything definite between her old friend and "the little Dundee girl," as she designated Stella; but John Hannington himself could not be held blameless. He was not without pang of conscience. It would be wrong to suppose that he had no heart at all. But both conscience and heart spoke very feebly in the presence of self-interest, love of the world, and a desire to be comfortable.

"Do you remember," he said, rather more softly than he knew, "how we sat a whole afternoon together in the fork of an apple-tree ten years ago, with all the governesses scouring the park for you, and the Marquis threatening me with a horsewhip whenever I appeared?"

"I remember it. That was the first time you proposed to me," said Lady Val coolly.

"But not the last."

"Oh dear, no. We have gone through the form half a dozen times, have we not? Really, it has quite grieved me to put you to so much trouble."

"Has it! Perhaps you had better reconsider your decision?"

"Is that to count as the seventh?" she asked, with a haughty sparkle in her great black eyes. "No, no. Won't do, Jack. If we marry at all, we must marry money, you and I. We are both as poor as church mice, and we cannot afford to give up the world for each other, can we? We must each take our chance when it comes."

"I have often wondered why you never were married, Val."

"Not for want of asking, Mr. Hannington," she replied. He bowed at the implied rebuke. "My single estate suits me very well, thanks. I can do as I please; perhaps I couldn't, if I had a husband. And as for you, your destiny is decided."

"How?"

"Money, Jack, money. You know you must marry an heiress, or what will become of you? Perhaps the little Dundee girl would do; or somebody else with a few odd millions. Aren't you really going to see her?"

"Not in this weather," said Hannington, with a shrug of the shoulders. He stood leaning against the wall beside the window, with a slightly dissatisfied expression on his face. A talk with Lady Val often sent him away dissatisfied. He wanted more of her than he could get.

But when the conversation was ended and he had time for reflection, it struck him that her hint was a valuable one. Evidently, if he wanted to secure Stella's affection, he must not show himself neglectful of her in her trouble. He wrote a little note that very evening before dinner, and put it in the post-bag at the last moment with his own hand, so that no other eyes should rest upon the address. It was a skilfully-worded little note: short, tender, sympathetic, yet not sufficiently definite to commit him to very much in the future.

He was not surprised to receive an answer in less than twenty-four hours. Stella must have written within a very short time of receiving his letter. It was clear that she was longing to be comforted; that she thoroughly believed all his protestations, and that she had no idea of hiding anything from the man she loved. At the same time, he thought her letter a little cold.

"Dear Mr. Hannington," she wrote, "your kind letter has just reached me. I can quite understand why you did not write before. We are in great trouble. I cannot tell

you everything in a letter ; but if you will come to see me—
after Friday—we can talk together." Friday, Hannington
understood, would be the day of her father's funeral. Then
came the less composed, the more unstudied part of the
letter. "I am very, very miserable. I should be still more
miserable if I had not you to trust to. You will tell me
what to do—I trust you with all my heart. I have not
known you long, but I feel as if years had passed since we
came to Dundee together on board the Britannia. You will
forgive me if I have said too much.

STELLA."

"Dear little thing," said Hannington, as he folded up
the letter and put it into his pocketbook. "She is half afraid,
I can see, that I shall think that she has been too quick in
giving her heart to the first bold wooer. The modern
Galilee ! Let me see, what does the older one say ?—

"In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond,
And therefore thou may'st think my havior light :
But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true
Than those that have more cunning to be strange."

pretty creature ! I'll go on Saturday and allay her fears,
and dry her eyes with kisses. I don't see why we shouldn't
be married immediately. What will Val Gilderoy say to
that, I wonder ? If only *she* had the money, I know very
well which I should choose. But there's no chance. If I
can't make a great *coup* with an heiress before long I shall
be floored, indeed."

He spoke lightly about the matter even to himself ; but
he was rather unusually nervous when he set out on Satur-
day afternoon to pay his visit to Miss Raeburn.

He had not had much experience of women in distress.
His fair acquaintances had generally shown the sunny side
of their natures to him. He fancied that when they were
troubled they flew into hysterics, slapped their maids'
faces, shed oceans of tears, and were generally noisy and
irresponsible. That he could not imagine Stella doing any
of these things was nothing to the point ; he believed that
every woman had incalculable reserves of unreasonable
strength in her nature, and of course Stella could be no excep-
tion to the rule.

"Will you walk this way, Sir, please ?" said a solemn-

visaged maid in black, who opened the door to him at Thornbank.

The ponderous footmen, the irreproachable butler, seemed to have disappeared. Hannington noticed a look of forlornness about the marble-paved hall, where no masses of exotic flowers now exhaled their sweetness to the air; there was an oppressive silence in the great new house. He wondered, with a little shiver, whether he was to be called upon to go into the big, gorgeously-furnished drawing-room, the bright coloring and gilding of which would now seem more outrageously out of taste than ever. Even the great sunlit view of the river from the plate-glass windows would somehow be intolerable. But he was not required to bear with such incongruities. The maid led him to a small room at the end of a long passage: a place to which, as he suspected, the women of the family had betaken themselves in their hour of trouble. It was a small room, octagonal in shape, with low book-shelves running round it, a desk in one corner, a work-table in another. The window was narrow, and looked out upon a shrubbery. The room had an air of habitation which belonged to few other parts of the house. It had always been appropriated to Aunt Jacky's use, and had proved a veritable harbor of refuge to Stella during the past few days.

The room was not very light. The servant had shut the door before Hannington was quite sure that Stella was alone in the room with him. She came forward very quietly—a slender figure all in black—and held out her hand as if about to greet an ordinary visitor. He gathered her in his arms, and kissed her on the brow, but for the first few seconds did not say a word. The silent tenderness of his greeting almost overcame poor Stella's powers of endurance.

She lay, trembling from head to foot, upon his shoulder; he could just see her cheek, and noticed that it was very white; the little hands which clung to him were limp and cold.

"My darling, how you must have suffered!" Hannington said at length. He led her to a sofa and seated himself beside her, with his arm round her waist. He was surprised to hear no outburst of emotion, no sobs of grief. But outbursts of any kind were not in Stella's way.

She raised her head from the shoulder on which he had

tried to make it rest. Her eyelids were red and worn with weeping and sleeplessness, but her voice and manner were very calm.

"It has been hard," she said. "I suppose you know all—all about it—from—the newspapers?" The little catch in her voice was very pathetic, even to Hannington's ear.

"I know something, of course. It was very sad; but, my darling, you must not let your mind dwell upon it. He must have been ill, you know; not accountable for his actions at the time. It was a sort of delirium."

"Oh, yes, I know that," said Stella, quietly. "Dear papa was far too good to end his life in that way if he had been in his right mind. You do not know how good and kind he was!—always thinking and planning for others—for me, especially—"

She faltered a little and bit her lip, while a tear stole silently down her white cheek. Hannington caressed her gently. She was surely very brave, this little Dundee girl! Would she break down and make a scene before he went away? Her grief had not destroyed her beauty one single bit. He felt honestly, genuinely fond of her.

"He was always so generous," the girl went on, as if pleading with him for her father's memory; "so anxious to do good, and so upright and honorable all his life long! Every one respected him. He was a good man, John. You will never doubt it, will you? although his own hand took away his life."

"No, dear; I will never doubt it."

"So kind—so loving—so tender-hearted!" said Stella, with vehemence. "Nobody could doubt it who knew him—who knew him as well as Aunt Jacky and I! It shows how upright he must have been, that these business-troubles should prey on his mind so much, and then affect his brain at last! Half of it was for my sake, I believe. As if I would not have been just as happy in my cottage as in a palace—far happier indeed than in this big, overgrown, new place, which I don't like half so well as our old house in the Nethergate."

"He had business-troubles, then?" said Hannington, a sudden quail of fear assailing him.

"Oh, yes. Did you not know? It was in to-day's paper; but perhaps you have not noticed it. He was not

so rich as people thought him to be, and that preyed upon his mind. The doctors say that all his excitement and his eager way of talking about his riches merely showed the strain that he was undergoing. If he had made up his mind at once to retrench and to live quietly, he could have weathered the storm, they say. But a sort of madness seemed to have taken hold of him. He is not a bankrupt, but the house and everything will have to be sold at once, and Aunt Jacky and I will have only a pittance to live upon. But you must not be sorry for me dear," she said, suddenly breaking off at the sight of a strange expression on Hannington's face; "as long as I have you, I want nothing else! And you will not love me any the less if I am a beggar, will you?"

CHAPTER VI.

MR. HANNINGTON'S DECISION.

HANNINGTON was aghast. And, even at that moment, not only for his own sake. He was sorry for Stella, though he was sorrier for himself. Stella Raeburn a beggar! Could this be true!

"It is bad news indeed," he said, not able to keep the dismay out of his voice.

"You will not love me the less, will you, John?"

"No, dear; oh, no. But—we can't disguise the fact, Stella—it may make a material difference in our plans for the future. I—I—am not—rich." He could not give her this hint without perfectly genuine agitation. It seemed to him that fate had played him a cruel trick.

"I know," said Stella, slipping her little hand—oh, so confidingly—into his nerveless fingers, "you told me that in the boat. But we are young and strong; we can work and wait—surely? It may not be for so very long."

"Why? Have you any other prospect?" There was a new hardness in his tone.

"Oh, no, except that of earning money," said Stella, shyly. "I thought of taking a situation, if you would not mind—if you would not be ashamed of me. I speak French and German fluently, you know, and my music and singing are pretty good; I don't think I should find any difficulty in finding children to teach."

"You a governess! Nonsense! Is that necessary?"

"I think it will be," said the girl, her eyes filling with tears at the sharp edge in his voice. "I must see that my aunt wants nothing; and our income will be very small."

"What shall you do then?"

"Oh, John, don't look as if you were angry with me."

"I am not angry, dear; or at least I am only angry with circumstances—for your sake—that things should have turned out so——"

Stella turned towards him pleadingly. "If it is God's will that we should suffer, John, ought we to repine?"

Hannington had difficulty in repressing his usual characteristic shrug.

"It does not grieve me very much to have to work for my own living," she went on, her sweet treble tones wavering a little now and then. "If only I could have worked for my dear, dear father, how gladly I would have done it! There is nothing hard in working for those we love. What I grieve for is his death and his distress of mind before he died."

"I am afraid," said Hannington, "that everybody cannot be so unworldly as you, Stella."

She gave him a troubled, puzzled look. She did not see his meaning in the least.—"Don't you approve of my plan?" she asked.

"Did you mean to carry it out in Dundee?"

"No, not in Dundee. I could not bear it here; and it would be worse for Aunt Jacky than for me. Some friends of ours, the Sinclairs, have written to us to stay with them in Dunkeld for a little time, and if I go there I may be able to get some work."

"It is a horrible idea," said Hannington, suddenly rising to pace the room. "You are not fit to work. And—I am a poor, miserable dog, with barely a sixpence in the world. I—I don't see what we are to do."

His eyes fell; he could not bear to look her in the face.

"We must wait," said Stella, softly.

"Yes, we must wait," he said, in almost an eager tone. "We really cannot decide on anything just yet. If you go on your visit to Dunkeld, perhaps something will turn up—we must not be rash, you know, Stella; I must not let you be rash——"

He stopped abruptly and drummed with his fingers on a little table that happened to be near at hand. Stella sat with downcast eyes, the color stealing into her pale cheeks. Was he going to propose something rash on his own account? There are times when women adore rashness. If he had asked her to marry him in a week, Stella could not have found it in her heart to say him nay. But that proposal was not in his mind at all.

"When should you go!" he asked, advancing towards her, but not touching her—rather holding himself back a little rigidly as if under some restraint.

"Next week, I think. The sooner we are out of the house the better. There is to be a sale."

"I shall know where you are? I shall be able to write to you?"

"Yes."

"You see I shall not be able to stay much longer in this neighborhood," said Hannington, rather nervously. "My visit to the Esquharts terminates next week, and I—I don't quite know what I am going to do then. You will let me know your movements?"

For almost the first time Stella felt hurt and chilled. She lifted her eyes with a lovely reproach in their azure depths—"Of course I shall, John!"

He bit his lip. "And I shall see you again or write to you," he said. "I think I must really be getting off: I shall only just be in time to dress for dinner."

Stella was a little surprised. "It is five o'clock," she said. "I thought they did not dine till eight at the Towers. You will take some tea before you go?"

"Thanks; no, I would rather not. You will give kind messages from me to your aunt? I must see her another time." He was becoming extremely anxious to get away.

"May I tell her, John?"

"No, I think not, dear. Not just yet, darling," he said, turning his eyes away, and trying to speak softly. "I will write."

"You are not vexed with me, are you?" she asked, coming up to him, and laying her hand gently on his arm.

"Vexed with you? Certainly not. Why should I be vexed? I—confound it all, Stella, don't you see what a position I am in?" he said, actually stamping with vexation, and then relenting when he saw her frightened face. "Poor little darling! it isn't your fault. You are the sweetest, noblest, most perfect of perfect women! Dear Stella! you do care for me a little, don't you? You won't quite forget me!"

He kissed her as he spoke. She had no idea that he meant his kiss for an eternal farewell. She clung to him tremulously and looked piteously into his face. "Must you go?" she asked.

"I must, indeed. Good-bye, my little darling. Don't try to keep me, there's a good girl. I'll write."

She released him at once. Her face was very white, and her lips quivered, but she did not utter a single sob or a complaining word. She had heard it said that women were cowards and incapable of self-control. She would show her lover that she could be bravely mistress of herself. He kissed her again, and hurried out of the room, not daring to look back. In view of the resolution which he knew that he should ultimately take, he felt himself the meanest of the mean.

Stella watched him depart, and then, as was perhaps natural, she threw herself on a sofa, and burst into an agony of sobs. The interview had been wretchedly unsatisfactory; but what she wanted she scarcely knew. Some of Hannington's looks and tones returned to her with startling distinctness; but she did not yet know their full meaning. Any doubt of his fidelity would have seemed to her cruelly disloyal.

Hannington strode down to the railway station, whence he took a train to the village on the outskirts of which Squahart Towers was situated, and arrived at his host's bode about six o'clock in the afternoon. He went straight to his own room, and did not appear till dinner-time, having, in the meantime, thoroughly reviewed the situation, and made up his mind what to do. "A very near thing!" he said to himself. "I was as close to making a mess of it as ever I was in my life. Luckily nobody knew, and I

can back out of it in time. Why, if I am to marry a girl with no money, I might as well take Lady Val, who has pride and spirit and good blood, and can amuse a fellow when he's low. Stella's not a patch upon her after all, although she's a sweet little thing, and very fond of me. She'll get over it and be married in a twelvemonth. I must settle matters as speedily as possible. Jove! it was a very near thing!"

He looked as brisk and bright as usual when he appeared in the drawing-room before dinner, and Lady Val eyed him somewhat curiously. It fell to his lot to take her down to dinner, and no sooner were they established at the table, and a busy hum of talk was arising on every side, than she turned with one of her abrupt but not ungraceful movements, and said, in a quick, low tone:—

"Well, how about the little Dundee girl?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"You've been to see her, I know. How was she?"

"Oh, poor little thing, as well as one could expect," said Hannington, accepting the situation. "Feels it very much, of course."

"Is it true that she will have no money after all?"

"Quite true, poor girl. Going out as a governess, I believe."

"Then"—Lady Val's eyes flashed—"there was no truth in what Donald said? You are not going to marry her."

"Certainly not," said Mr. Hannington, tranquilly. "I always told you I should marry for money."

A dinner-table which holds a large party is not at all a bad place for confidential communications. After an interval, in which the servants were performing their usual offices, Lady Val resumed, with her eyes on her plate:—

"She's not disappointed in you, then?"

"My dear Lady Val! What cause could she have to be disappointed in me? Old friends like yourself may, of course, have good reason to feel that I don't always come up to their standard, but I have only a casual acquaintance with Miss Raeburn."

Lady Val tossed up her chin and looked sceptical; but as Hannington's tranquillity was perfectly unmoved, and he began almost immediately to talk of other things, she acquiesced and spoke no more of "the little Dundee girl." But she did not forget her for all that.

Meanwhile Stella was pouring out her heart on paper as she had never poured it out before. She wrote to John Hannington that she was afraid that she had vexed him; that she would do his bidding, and would renounce her scheme of becoming a governess, if he wished it; that all her desire was to please him, and that she was not afraid of poverty so long as he loved her. In short, she wrote as a woman only writes when she is devoted heart and soul to the man who receives such an expression of her feelings; and yet there was not a single word in which she might be held to outstrip the bounds of maidenly modesty and refinement. Her love was implied throughout, but it did not thrust itself into words. It was a letter which would have brought a true lover to her side at once, to comfort and console. But Hannington had never loved her as she believed; and her words embarrassed him so terribly, that he could not undertake to reply to them without deliberation. In a couple of days he sent her some half-dozen lines assuring her, coldly enough, that she had not offended him and that he would write again or visit her at Dunkeld, if he would only send him her address and the date of her departure from Dundee. He did not want, in fact, to do anything too definite before she left the neighborhood.

Stella sent a timid little note, which breathed in every line of a wounded heart, to say that she and her aunt were leaving Dundee on the Thursday of that week. She enclosed her address, and ventured to add a sorrowful hope that he would write to her very soon.

"The sooner the better, perhaps," said Hannington to himself. The task was a hard one even for him, and he had some difficulty in performing it. But the letter was written and despatched on the Friday.

Some delay occurred in Miss Raeburn's arrangements, however, and it was not until Saturday afternoon that Stella and her aunt arrived at Dunkeld and were met by their friends at the railway station. Mrs. Sinclair was not a constant resident in Scotland, but she had lived at Dunkeld when she was a girl, and was exceedingly fond of the place. She and her husband had taken a house for the season, and, as they were much attached to Stella, they had determined to keep her and her aunt with them for as long a time as they would stay. Mrs. Sinclair

was almost an invalid, and Mr. Sinclair had bookish and scientific tastes. They had not many acquaintances in the neighborhood, and were able to promise entire seclusion to their desolate guests.

Stella looked admiringly at the hills and the beautiful old town, as she was driven from the station in an open carriage towards St. Anselm's—the house which Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair occupied. For a little while the shadow of her great grief seemed to lift itself as she looked at the exquisite landscape around her, and heard the historic names of hill and vale. They drove slowly along the road until they came close to the bridge which spans the river Tay—here only a brawling stream, compared with its majestic volume as it nears Dundee, but far more beautiful in its swift career over rocks and stones, under the arches of the bridge beside the wooded banks and glades and heather-covered hills, than almost any other river in the world. Mr. Sinclair knew the place exceedingly well, and was in his element in naming the different points of interest to a stranger. Stella, usually full of intelligent attention, listened rather languidly. What had he been telling her? she wondered afterwards. “The Cathedral—the Duchess—salmon fishing—Duke John—Birnarn wood that came to Dunsinane”—it was all confused and mingled in her ear. Only the beauty of the scene remained clear. They halted by the bridge, so that she might see the view. She was struck by the golden color of the water as it lay in shallow pools beneath the sun—the water was low, and the stream looked very narrow between its banks—by the beauty of the rowan-trees, and the woods that were beginning to “color” beneath the autumnal touch. She had no conception that the moment was big with Fate.

Their course did not lie over the bridge, but along the road beside the river for some distance. Just as they started again, Mrs. Sinclair uttered an exclamation.

“I declare if I hadn't forgotten it till now! There has been a letter waiting for you since yesterday, my dear Stella. I brought it with me, in case you might like to have it at once. Open it or not, just as you please.”

She handed the girl an envelope, addressed to Stella, in John Hannington's handwriting.

Stella hesitated, with the letter in her lap. Then, seeing that Mr. Sinclair was speaking to the coachman, and that

Mrs. Sinclair was attending closely to Miss Jacky's crisp sentences, she ventured—in spite of the beating of her heart—to open the letter and peep at the contents

Then she looked up. The scene was what it had always been, but it had suddenly lost all charm for her. On her right hand flowed the gleaming river, on the left rose a bank of woody ground. The shadows of the trees lay across the road, in pleasing mosaic work of alternate light and darkness. The air was as fresh, the sky as clear and blue as ever. But for many a long day Stella had only to close her eyes and bring back a vision of that lovely scene beyond the Dunkeld bridge, in order to renew the sensation of deadly sickness, faintness, and utter despair. It was as if she had received her death-warrant upon that pleasant road beside the Tay. For in his letter John Mannington had not minced matters. He could not marry a poor woman; he would not—could not—ask her to wait for him; he renounced all pretension to her hand. In short, he gave her up, utterly and entirely—because she was poor. And that was how Stella's love-letter was answered.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE ROAD

STELLA did not faint or cry out. She sat perfectly still, the letter crushed in her hands, her face white to the lips. Before long, Mrs. Sinclair was struck by her extreme pallor, and drew Aunt Jacky's attention to it by an exclamation of horror.

"Why, my dear child! Look at her, Miss Jacky. Is she going to faint?"

"Not at all," said Stella, essaying to smile, and slipping the letter quietly into her pocket. "I have a little headache, that is all."

"You must lie down when we get home, and I'll send you up a cup of good, strong tea," said Mrs. Sinclair, with a friendly nod. "Poor dear, you've had a deal to try you lately, have you not?"

But the allusion to her recent sorrow was too much for

Stella to bear. She drew her veil down and said nothing, but Mrs. Sinclair saw that her hands were trembling and the tears dropping from her eyes. She turned delicately away, and for the rest of the drive confined her remarks to Miss Jacky, who had been going about, ever since the terrible day of her brother's death, with red eyes and a persistent habit of sniffing, but with undiminished energy and a sharper tongue than ever. Stella was for the present left alone.

The carriage presently left the main road and turned up a narrow lane to the left. Here slow and careful progress was necessary, as the ruts were deep, and an occasional stone lay in the way; but if Stella had been in her accustomed mood, she would have enjoyed the drive by this narrow ascent, where the trees met overhead and afforded only an occasional view of the distant water and the towering hills round "fair Dunkeld." St. Anselm's stood on high ground and overlooked the town and river; it possessed a splendid site, and the only thing to be regretted was the fact that the house itself was square, commonplace, and not particularly large. But Stella saw nothing; her eyes were blind with grief.

The poor child was dimly thankful to be left alone at last in the great chamber which Mrs. Sinclair had assigned to her. She threw herself on the bed and wept, as only young creatures can weep in the hour of trial—with an utter hopelessness and despair of the future, than which, we learn in later years, nothing can be more futile. Stella believed that she could never be happy again. Her misfortunes seemed more than she knew how to bear. Her father's death—so painful in its concomitant circumstances—the loss of her fortune, the desertion of her lover—these were troubles indeed. And what made it worse was her recollection of the trust that she had bestowed on John Hannington; the tender words that she had lavished, the offer to wait for him—oh, the shame of it! when he had not wanted to wait for her; the absence of reserve and caution, which, in her single-hearted acceptance of his apparent homage, she had never thought of maintaining. It occurred to her now that she had been much too ready to listen to him, that she had been too easily won to gain his esteem; and she resolved, in bitterness of spirit, that no one should ever again have reason to accuse her of

over-eagerness to listen to a lover. She would live and die single and heart-broken; she would earn an income for Aunt Jacky, and do her duty in the world, but the joys of life could never come to her. She saw herself, in imagination, growing old and grey, not cheerful, like dear Aunt Jacky, but stiff and rigid and unresponsive, and she sickened at the thought. Thirty, forty, fifty years of it, perhaps! Oh, if she could but die at once, and hide her sorrow and her mortification in the grave!

She was sufficiently prostrate next day to be unable to rise, and the doctor who was sent for talked about a severe nervous shock, and the advisability of keeping her quiet. Stella turned her face to the wall, and hoped and longed that she was going to die. Surely she could not go on living with the cold hand of despair upon her heart?

But youth is strong and life is sweet in spite of passionate asseverations to the contrary. In a few days Stella was downstairs again—out on the lawn—walking feebly at first, and then with growing vigor, along the shady lanes and over the heathery hills; and then she recognized the fact she was not going to die but to live, and that, in spite of the pain at her heart, she must begin to look for her work in life.

She did not think of answering John Hannington's letter. She burned it one day in a paroxysm of grief and shame, and never thought of wondering whether or no he had destroyed those loving letters which he had had from her. An older woman, of more experience, would perhaps have written to demand their restoration. The mere remembrance of them brought a scorching flood of crimson to poor Stella's cheek and brow; she certainly could not have borne to allude to them again. She wished the remembrance of them to be entirely blotted out; and she never imagined that Hannington might not be quite as anxious as she was to obliterate all traces of her first foolish dream of love. Stella's letters made very pretty reading, in Hannington's opinion; and now that he had shown her the facts of her position, he had no idea of depriving himself of the gratification which her expressions of devotion might some day afford to him.

When Stella grew stronger she began to take long walks; and as neither Mrs. Sinclair nor Aunt Jacky were strong enough to accompany her, she generally took them alone.

As the autumn advanced, she began to make some silent preparations for her future work. She inserted an advertisement in the local papers, and put an announcement in the windows of various shops, to the effect that a lady wished to give daily lessons in French and German (acquired abroad), English, music, and singing. It was a modest little advertisement, and seemed to attract no attention from anybody. But Stella was not dismayed. She made inquiries about lodgings in Birnam and Dunkeld, and consulted the clergymen of the neighborhood about her chances of success. One and all asked her the same question—why had she fixed upon Dunkeld as a place in which to start her career? When the visitors left it in the autumn there was not the least chance for anybody, without very special qualifications indeed, to find pupils.

“I suppose that I must go to Glasgow or Edinburgh,” Stella reflected, sorrowfully. “I thought Aunt Jacky would like Dunkeld better; that was all. And also, perhaps, that Mrs. Sinclair could find me something. But she seems to know nobody.”

It was in October when she came to this conclusion. She set out one afternoon for a long ramble—a longer one, indeed, than her aunt or her friends would have thought advisable; but she was a good walker. She was accompanied by a splendid collie dog which belonged to Mr. Sinclair, but had attached himself almost exclusively to Stella since the beginning of her visit. She passed through Dunkeld, and turned up the road which ran past the village of Inver, towards the Rumbling Bridge and the Hermitage Falls. It was her favorite walk, and she had plenty of time before her. The Braan would be especially fine in a day like this, for the previous two nights had brought heavy rain, and the stream would be “in spate,” a sight which Stella had heard of but had not seen. She carried a basket for roots also, as she had heard Mrs. Sinclair express a wish for some specimens of oak fern, which grows freely on the banks of the Braan.

She had got well up the hill, and was standing to look once more at the view—the little tributary stream with the village on its banks in the valley below her, and, further on, the towers of Dunkeld, with the ever varying background of hill and forest, and the canopy of a brilliant yet changeable autumn sky—when she was roused from her

dreamy mood by the sound of horses' hoofs on the road. She could not see the riders, because the road turned sharply at a little distance above the spot where she was standing; but the sound told her that several equestrians were advancing, and she did not care to be overtaken in the attitude of a tourist or a landscape painter, as she phrased it to herself, gazing at the scenery with abstracted eyes—an incarnate note of admiration! She called Laddie to heel, and walked on soberly in a purposeful and business-like way.

A party of some half-dozen riders came down the road. At the first two or three Stella did not even glance; but as the fourth passed, she became conscious that the gentleman had made a quick movement as if to raise his hat, and then refrained, seeing that she either did not see him or did not mean to look at him. Stella had just time to bow to Mr. Donald Vereker. She looked instinctively at the next couple; and then the color flashed into her pale face. It was John Hannington and a lady—a very handsome woman, by the by, with a good deal of color, and very black hair and eyes.

Hannington did an extremely foolish thing. He did not often lose his self-control, but for a moment he certainly lost it now. Without waiting for Stella to bow first, he impulsively raised his hat. In spite of the hot, tell-tale color in her face, however, Stella had spirit enough not to return the salutation. She looked him steadily in the face and passed him by. Hannington's dark face grew purple with rage and shame.

"The cut direct!" said his companion, no other than Lady Val, who never spared him when she got an opportunity of lashing him with her tongue. "What does that mean, Jack? Did not that uncommonly pretty girl recognize you, or does she mean to decline your acquaintance?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Hannington, giving a savage cut to his horse's flanks. "I suppose she does not remember me; or perhaps I am mistaken in her face."

"Impossible, with such a startlingly pretty one," said Lady Val. She turned round and glanced after Stella. "Very graceful, too. Distinguished-looking. Who is she?"

"Oh, I must have been mistaken. I thought it was a young lady I once travelled with from London, but she would have known me, I think."

"There is not much question as to whether that girl *knew* you. There was recognition in her eye, Mr. Jack, and a fine determination to have nothing more to do with you. Donald"—spurring her horse forward to her cousin's side—"who was that girl in black who bowed to you just now?"

"Why, Miss Raeburn," said Donald, unsuspectingly. "The girl whom we met at Balmerino, don't you know,—the very day of her father's suicide. She's lost all her money and has left Dundee—I didn't know she was in this part of the world."

"Oh," said Lady Val. She shut her lips rather tightly, and kept a thoughtful silence for some minutes; then joined her friends in front. Hannington was left in the rear, with a very sullen expression on his face.

"Confound the girl!" he said to himself. "I'd sooner that had happened before anybody rather than Val Gildero. She does badger one so, and she is so abominably sharp. What a fool I was not to pass her by as if I had never seen her in my life before! I would not have come this way if I had known that she was here. Mrs. Muir certainly told me that she had left Dunkeld. And really I should never have thought that Stella would show so much spirit! But it was deuced awkward for me, and I owe her a grudge for it. So look out, Miss Stella Raeburn; for if I can do you a bad turn by way of paying you out one of these days, I shall do it. I generally do pay my debts in that line; and by—I'll make you apologise or smart for it. You forget that I've got those pretty letters of yours at home. I'll keep them now."

Meanwhile Stella, with flushed cheeks and rapidly beating heart, was making her way at a very quick pace up the hilly road towards the point which she wished to reach. But she had forgotten all about her destination. She was conscious of nothing but the insult which, as she conceived it, John Hannington had put upon her, and of the desperate upheaval of pride and bitter anger that had taken place within her heart. How dared he bow to her? Did he think that she had taken his repulse so lightly that it was easy and possible for them now to meet as old acquaintances? He must think little of her, indeed!

Stella was too young to take such matters calmly. It would have been far better for her to treat Hannington as

a casual acquaintance than to proclaim to all the world that she looked upon him as her enemy. Such an action on her part told her story to a clever woman like Lady Val much more clearly than she or John Hannington ever meant to tell it. But she was unconscious of her mistake. She was in a flaming heat of anger, mortification, and wounded feeling, and felt vindictively glad that she had had the chance of showing him that she no longer wished for his acquaintance.

But anger and vindictiveness were not natural to her. Before long her steps slackened, her color fell, her eyes began to fill with tears. She turned aside from the road, and scrambled a little way down the hillside along which it ran. The murmur of the Braan below was full and strong in her ears, but she did not notice it. She had forgotten all about her desire to see the Hermitage Falls. She only wanted to get down amongst the trees, to seat herself in the heather and fern, lean her face on her hands, and cry her heart out. And that was what she did. "Oh, John, John! and I loved you so!" she whispered to herself. "If only I could forget you—for you are not worthy even of my love—but I never, never shall."

"Never," the proverb says, "is a long day." But Stella was thoroughly in earnest. She did not believe that John Hannington could ever be indifferent to her, or that she could ever love any man again.

Absorbed in her reflections, she had not heard the sound of footsteps on the road above the bank on which she sat. There had first been merry voices and steps not far from her; then these had died away. Next came a tall man of handsome face and stately bearing. He looked round him with a frown upon his brow; he paused in his walk several times, and when he saw Stella half-way down the hill-side, he made a step sideways, as if to turn in her direction and address her. But a second glance caused him to change his mind. Her slender figure, in its closely-fitting black dress, had nothing remarkable about it; even the knot of golden hair, in which the sunbeams seemed to be imprisoned beneath her black hat, did not attract his attention very much, but as he looked, it became clear to him from the movement of her shoulders that the girl, whoever she was, was sobbing uncontrollably; that the crouching attitude was that of grief, and that the collie

who stood beside her was wagging his tail and trying to lick her face, in that sympathy with sorrow which intelligent animals often show towards their masters and their friends. The gentleman turned hastily away, thankful that he had not intruded on her solitude. When he had gone some little distance, some feeling of remorse took possession of him. Ought he to have asked her if she wanted assistance of any kind—if she were ill or in pain?

"Pooh," he thought to himself, as he strode on again, "my wits must be wandering, to make me think of such a thing. A woman's tears! They come easily enough, and mean little enough, heaven knows! She has had a quarrel with her lover, perhaps; or her vanity has been wounded, or she is hysterical over the death of her canary bird; or"—a softer mood coming over him—"she is grieving over a friend's death, poor soul; and there nobody can help her but God. She wears a black dress; mother or father dead, perhaps. A sad lot for the young!" and he heaved a sigh, as if there were some personal reference in the words. "She may not be young, by the bye, I forgot that!" he continued, with a half smile. "She has hair like that girl on board the Britannia last summer—curiously brilliant, without a touch of red in it.

'Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow, like ripe corn.'

A commonplace young person, probably, seeing how she was letting that scamp Hannington make love to her; her yellow hair the only point of resemblance to 'the blessed Damozel' of the poem. But, of course, this girl is not the same. I wonder where those children have got to by this time? It is natural, I suppose, that as I am an old fogey, they should give me the slip. Hark! what was that?"

It was a shriek—clear, piercing, and intense. On the still autumn air, sounds were carried to considerable distances. This cry came from the vicinity of the water—of that the gentleman was sure. It was followed by an answering shout, meant to be reassuring, but dying away in a quaver of alarm. And there came another scream, unmistakably in a girl's voice.

"Molly!" cried the gentleman in the road. "Not in the water, I trust! God help us, if she is!"

He rushed down the hillside, tearing his way with con-

derable rapidity through clumps of gorse and bracken, and between the young stems of the undergrowths, towards the place from which he had heard the cry. The roaring of the water sounded louder and louder in his ear as he drew closer to the bank. It was a difficult thing to get quickly to the water's edge, for the hillside was steep and slippery. He was below the falls, which poured over the rocks with the vehemence of a stream in spate, its yellow foam scattering drops far and wide, its volume increased five-fold by the recent storms. A story crossed the man's mind as he made his way down the hill—so encumbered by the wild undergrowth that he could scarcely see what was happening until he was close upon the water—of a child's slip into the whirling, swirling pool at the foot of the Hermitage Falls. No rescue had been possible, and the child's body had been picked up bruised and battered, in smooth water further down. He shuddered at the thought, as he brushed aside the branches and stood by the water's edge. What did he see?

CHAPTER VIII.

MONCRIEFF OF TORRESMUIR.

A girl of fifteen years old—his own daughter Molly, as he was very well aware—had rashly made her way from boulder to boulder until she stood close to the deep pool which was well known to be the most dangerous spot in the swiftly rushing little river. Evidently her nerve had given way at this very point; the broken branch of a rowan tree that above showed that she had clutched at it, and that it had snapped in her hands; the fragments of a stick which she used as a sort of alpenstock were already whirling down the stream. She could not go forward; she was afraid to go back. Her body was half poised over the stream; it swayed a little, as if she were dizzy, and another frightened scream came from her white lips. Meanwhile a youth, somewhat older than herself, was hurrying across the bridge from the other side, and calling to her to be careful—not to move until he came to her help—not to touch her head. It was very plain that she had lost it

already. Another moment without help and she would have fallen and been dashed against the stones.

But help which Molly's father had not looked for was at hand. A slender figure in black, which he had seen already, was standing on the stones and holding out a parasol to the frightened girl. Stella had advanced as far as she could, and had not had time to feel alarmed until Molly clutched the parasol handle so violently that she almost lost her own balance. Then for a moment she did feel a qualm of fear, but she recovered herself instantly.

"Steady!" she said. "Don't jump. Step over; it is not far. There! you are on firmer ground now. Pass me and get to the bank."

She held Molly's hand until the girl had passed her, but the unlooked-for apparition of her father gave Molly another fright. She started violently, and dragged Stella forward in rather a dangerous way.

"Take care! take care! what are you doing?" said the father. He handed her hastily to the stones near the bank, holding out his other hand at the same time to Stella. It was fortunate that he did so. For Molly's hasty movement had caused Stella to slip, and although she did not quite fall, one of her feet and part of her dress went into the water. If no one had been holding her, it would have been doubtful whether she could have recovered herself; but as it was, she clung desperately to the strong hand that clasped her own, and was carried rather than led to the safe pathway, where Molly now stood crying. Her brother had arrived upon the scene panting, and white as a sheet with terror.

"Are you better? You have not hurt yourself?" said the gentleman, still supporting Stella with his arm.

"Thank you, I am all right; I was not hurt," she answered. Then she looked at him and he looked at her, and both gave the very slightest possible start. He recognized her as the girl with golden hair on board the *Britannia*, and she remembered that John Hannington had named him to her as Alan Moncrieff of Torresmuir. The remembrance did more than anything towards bringing the color back to her lips. She was very white when he landed her, for her fright had been severe.

Mr. Moncrieff raised his hat. "I cannot express my gratitude to you, madam," he said, in stiff, courteous ac-

ents, through which his real emotion had some difficulty in manifesting itself. "But for your presence of mind and timely help, my daughter would scarcely, I fear, have been rescued from her very perilous position. We are indeed deeply, most deeply, indebted to you. Molly"—a little earnestly—"surely you have something to say?"

Molly gasped out a few unintelligible words, and Stella tried to put a termination to the uncomfortable little scene. "I was very glad that I happened to be so near," she said. "I had really little to do—my parasol did more than—and you kindly gave me your help at the end. It was nothing at all."

She inclined her head slightly and was about to move away, when Moncrieff hastily interposed.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I see that you are exceedingly wet. May I ask if you have far to go?"

Stella looked with some embarrassment at her dress, which was certainly clinging to her in a very unpleasant way.

"Not so very far; it does not matter at all," she said. "It will dry as I walk."

"May I ask if you are going to Dunkeld?" said Mr. Moncrieff, with his resolute air of requiring an instant answer.

"To St. Anselm's," said Stella.

"St. Anselm's? The house on the hill? Four miles from here, I should think, is it not? But you must not go that distance in your present state; I cannot possibly allow it."

"You'll come home with us, won't you?" interposed Molly, breathlessly, drying her tears, and favoring Stella with a gaze of wide-eyed adoration. "We live very near,

"If Molly will allow me," said her father, with a dryness of tone which made the girl shrink back with a frightened look, "I was about to propose that you should avail yourself of the fact that my house—Torresmuir—is tolerably near. My housekeeper will see that your—your things—are before you go home. Molly will be only too glad to have an opportunity of doing you any small service in her power in return for the great one that you have bestowed on us; and, as for myself, I assure you that my house and all that it contains are entirely at your disposal."

Stella was inclined to smile at so much stateliness, which seemed to her like that of a Castilian don rather than that

of a Scottish laird. But she liked his face, grave and stern though it looked to her ; and she liked his children's faces.

Moreover, she knew something of him by report, and was aware that she was in good hands. A long walk home with these draggled garments clinging round her feet would be uncomfortable and perhaps dangerous ; and—the thought flashed suddenly across her mind—she might possibly meet Mr. Hannington and his friends again on her way home, and she could not bear the idea of their seeing her in this drowned-rat condition ! It was this consideration more than any other that induced her to accept Mr. Moncrieff's offer, and to turn away from the waterfall with his party.

" I must beg leave to introduce myself," said Molly's father, with a smile that made his face singularly pleasant. " My name is Alan Moncrieff—Moncrieff of Torresmuir—and this is my madcap daughter Molly, who deserves a good scolding for the fright she has given us. My son Bertie," he added, indicating the boy, who was standing at Molly's side.

" And my name is Raeburn," said Stella, frankly. " I am staying with my aunt at Mrs. Sinclair's, at St. Anselm's the house on the hill."

" You come from Dundee?" said Moncrieff, inadvertently, and then was angry with himself for saying it. He had been thinking only of her voyage in the Britannia, but he saw from her pained face that she imagined him to be alluding to the tragic death of her father, an account of which had, of course, appeared in every newspaper.

" Yes," she said, rather sadly, " I come from Dundee."

" What an idiot I am !" said Alan Moncrieff to himself. " I ought not to have mentioned Dundee to her. Ah, that was why she was crying when I saw her on the hill-side ; poor girl, she has had enough to cry for ! Her eyelids are reddened yet."

The boy and girl had slunk on together, as if glad to be out of their father's hearing, and he took the opportunity of saying quietly :—

" Let me tell you, Miss Raeburn, that I know your name, and that my father was well acquainted with your father in days gone by. Every one who knew Mr. Raeburn esteemed him most highly. I have never heard a man spoken of more warmly, and I have always had the greatest respect for him."

The manner in which the words were uttered—simple, unaffected; sincere—was more flattering to Stella's love for her father than even the words themselves. She tried to thank him, but could only raise her eyes, swimming in tears, for a moment to his face by way of answer. He relieved her by stepping on in front, as if to clear some loose branches out of her way; and the moments of silence and reflection that his action gave her restored her calmness before she had reached the road, where Molly and Bertie awaited them.

"If you will allow me, Miss Raeburn," said Mr. Monneff, "I will go on to the house and tell Mrs. Greg that you are coming. I can walk faster, perhaps, than you can, and she will make any preparations that are necessary before you arrive. Come, Bertie."

He set off, almost without waiting for an answer; and Stella felt exceedingly grateful for his consideration. The clinging of the wet gown round her ankles impeded her progress, and she could manage it more easily when she was walking with a girl like Molly than with two gentlemen. As soon as father and son were a few yards in advance, Molly began to chatter, as seemed her usual custom.

"What should I have done if you had not come up? I should have certainly fallen in and been drowned. Oh, that was dreadful! Thank you so much for helping me out, and I am so sorry you got wet. I ought to have said so before, but I never can say anything when papa is there. Now he will scold me fearfully when you are gone."

She pouted as she spoke, like a naughty child, although she was as tall as Stella and very well developed for her age.

She was exceedingly pretty in a certain style. Her features were not perfect, but her complexion was exquisitely though suggestive, by its very brilliance, of some delicacy of constitution; her hazel eyes were wild and bright, and her hair—hazel-brown, with threads of ruddy gold in it—danced and waved over her shoulders in marvellous proportion. Her brother had more regularity of feature; he was long and weedy, and rather sickly-looking; but he had wanted health to make him very like his father, which Molly certainly was not. Her dress was untidy, Stella noticed; it was torn in more than one place, and stained in others; her hat had a broken brim, her shoe-

lace was loose, and her hands were gloveless. She looked anything but what she was—the daughter of a man of no inconsiderable fortune, position, and attainments.

“What made you venture out so far?” Stella inquired.

“Oh, just for fun! Bertie said I daren’t; and I said I would. I know papa’s in an awful rage.”

“But you might have been drowned. I hope that you will not do it again, will you?”

Stella’s gentle tones chased away the cloud [that had been gathering over Molly’s face.

“I won’t, if you ask me not,” she said, heartily. “But if papa had lectured me, I *would*. Only, after all, he never lectures; it’s uncle Ralph who does all that. Papa only *looks* at me.”

Stella thought it wisest to change the conversation, and drew Molly into a lively discussion of the beauties of Laddie compared with her dog, Bran—a discussion which lasted until the gates of Torresmuir were reached.

The house was large, fantastically gabled, and of picturesquely different heights. The gardens were laid out in terraces, for the ground was too uneven for any large level space to be available for lawn or flower-bed. A gravelled terrace before the door, bordered with an ornamental wall, afforded one of the loveliest distant views that Stella had ever seen. She could not resist stopping to look at it, in spite of her wet clothes.

“Yes, it is pretty,” said Molly, with an air of proprietorship. “The river winding in and out is so lovely, isn’t it? Why, you can see ever so many miles—right away towards the Pass of Killiecrankie. Papa can tell you the names of the hills better than I can. Doesn’t Craig-y-Barns look beautiful from here? There’s papa making signs from the window, and here is Mrs. Greg; so will you come in?”

Stella had no reason to complain of her treatment. She was taken to a luxurious bedroom, where a fire, hot water, warm towels, and various articles of clothing awaited her, and Mrs. Greg was eager in offers of assistance. Stella put on a skirt of Molly’s—it was quite long enough for her—and Mrs. Greg promised to send her own back to St. Anselm’s as soon as it was dried. And when she was ready to depart, as she thought, Molly conducted her, almost by force, to the drawing-room, where tea had been

prepared, and where Mr. Moncrieff and his son awaited her.

They all made much of Stella. They waited upon her as if she had been a princess; it seemed as if they could not do enough for her. In fact, her sweet face and golden hair had quite fascinated the young people; and the fascination extended itself to Alan Moncrieff as well. He thought he had never seen a lovelier face than that of poor Matthew Raeburn's daughter.

Stella was sorry, however, to see that his eye grew stern and cold when it rested on Molly, and that the child shrank away from him as if she knew that she was in disgrace. A whisper from Bertie to his sister had already caught the visitor's ear. "He's in a fearful wax because he didn't take care of you. Says we both ought to be sent to bed like babies; and that you're to go to school next week." At which Molly's face assumed an aspect of great tribulation.

"I think I must really go now," said Stella, at last. "It will be nearly dark when I reach home; so I must make haste."

"The carriage is waiting, if you insist on leaving us so soon," said Mr. Moncrieff courteously. "Bertie, run down and tell Macgregor to drive round. I could not think of your walking all that distance, Miss Raeburn, after your experiences this afternoon. You must allow me to have the pleasure of sending you home."

Stella protested, but in vain. The carriage, drawn by two magnificent bay horses, was at the door; and Moncrieff put her in with his stateliest air, and a few words of heartfelt thanks, which she felt redeemed the stateliness. She wished that she could plead for Molly, who was evidently under her father's displeasure, but she hardly knew how far she might venture to go. She did say, however, with a pleading glance—

"And your daughter has promised never to be so rash again."

"I am glad to hear it," said Moncrieff, understanding perfectly well the meaning of that gentle speech. "If she has promised, I know she will keep her word, and so I need not be angry with her, need I?" He smiled and put his hand affectionately on Molly's shoulder as the carriage rolled away, and Stella was pleased to feel that she had won Molly's pardon before she went.

The drive did not seem long to her. She had much to think of, but her thoughts were by no means so melancholy as they had been that afternoon. The timely help that she had given to Molly, the deferential courtesy shown by Mr. Moncrieff, the sight of the quaint, beautiful old house, which she had scarcely had time to look at and admire—these things occupied her thoughts. It was quite a shock to meet once more the riding party that she had encountered in the afternoon, because it brought her thoughts back to a domain which, for the time being, they had left; but the shock was not very terrible. She turned away and caressed Laddie, who sat on the rug beside her, and hoped that in the gathering twilight they had not recognized her face. But they had.

"Wonders will never cease," said Lady Val, looking back. "That's the Moncrieff carriage. Moncrieff of Torresmuir, the proudest man you ever knew, sending the little Dundee girl home in his barouche! What does that mean, I wonder?"

"You can ask him to-night. He is going to the Maxwells' to dinner," said Hannington, rather ill-temperedly. He knew that Lady Val was going too.

"I will," said the lady, briskly. And she was as good as her word.

"Oh, Mr. Moncrieff," she said, later in the evening, looking with secret admiration at the face of the grave, stately man who was standing near her; "do tell me—don't you know a Miss Raeburn who is staying in the neighborhood?" She had not the faintest idea where Stella was staying; she drew her bow at a venture.

"She saved my little girl's life this afternoon," said Moncrieff; and then he told her the story of Molly's escapade.

"What a monkey your Molly is! Full of life and spirit!"

"Too much so, I am afraid. I must either send her to school, or find a governess for her."

"I have an inspiration," cried Lady Val. "Why don't you get Miss Raeburn herself to tame poor Molly's wild spirit?"

"Miss Raeburn herself? But—would she—"

"She hasn't a penny, and I heard that she was looking out for a situation some time ago," said Lady Val, with

her usual carelessness about facts. "I believe that you would be doing her a service, Mr. Moncrieff. I really do."

"Is she competent?" Moncrieff asked, quietly.

"Can you look at her face and doubt it?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing. I was in the post office to-day, and I saw a written notice, setting forth that a young lady in Dunkeld wanted to give lessons in French, German, music, and all the etceteras. Perhaps that is Miss Raeburn? You might follow it up and find out. The initials given were S. R.—I'm sure of that."

Mr. Moncrieff said that he thought it unlikely that Miss Raeburn would condescend to teach his little girl, and changed the subject.

It was odd that he could not get rid of a few lines from the poem, which he had previously quoted to himself that afternoon anent Stella's golden hair.

"Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven."

They were appropriate, he thought, to no woman upon earth. And yet there was a sense in which a good woman might be, to any man, "a blessed damozel" indeed. Was Stella Raeburn one of these "elect ladies" of the land?

CHAPTER IX.

MOLLY'S GOVERNESS.

BY VAL had been right. It was Stella indeed who was advertising her qualifications as a teacher; and, though Mr. Moncrieff gave no sign of acceptance of By Val's suggestion, he made a mental note of it. And the following afternoon he walked down to the Post Office in order to make inquiries. He went alone, but it was no unusual thing. Fond as he was of his children, he could not adapt himself to them; his manner was stern and cold, and the gravity which really arose from

a profound melancholy looked very much like severity. Molly was openly and vexatiously afraid of him; her tongue would fall silent, her movements become awkward if he were near; and Bertie, although he controlled his hands and feet better than did his hoydenish sister, was apt to be seized with fits of shyness and timidity which would have been excessively painful to a loving and observant father. But perhaps Alan Moncrieff was not very observant; and, if he were of a loving disposition, he kept the fact a secret from all but a chosen few.

In answer to his questions, he was furnished with the address of the lady who wanted pupils. As he expected, it was—

*Miss Stella Raeburn,
Care of Mrs. Sinclair,
St. Anselm's,
Dunkeld.*

He folded up the paper on which the words were written in Stella's clear, pretty handwriting, and put it in his pocket. Then he strode out into the street again, and, after a few moments' reflection, decided that it would be as well if he paid a call at St. Anselm's that very afternoon. He knew Mrs. Sinclair slightly, and it would seem natural enough that he should call to inquire after Miss Raeburn when she had rendered him so signal a service yesterday. He need not say anything about the teaching unless he had an opportunity. In fact, he felt conscious that a rather difficult task lay before him; for Miss Raeburn, being, as he could see, both proud and sensitive, might fancy that he was offering her a post out of mere gratitude; whereas, Mr. Moncrieff impatiently told himself, gratitude had nothing to do with it.

He made his way up the hill-side, by the grassy road which led from the highway past the gates of St. Anselm's and over the hill. Before he reached the gates he congratulated himself on his good fortune. There was Miss Raeburn herself, walking slowly along the road, with a book in her hand. As she neared him, he could not help remarking that she was sweeter-looking than ever. Her face was not now white and disfigured with tears as it had been on the previous day; there was a slight, delicate bloom on the fair cheeks, and the serious eyes were limpid and clear like those of a child. It would be impossible to

associate deceit with those candid eyes—that was the thought that crossed Mr. Moncrieff's mind at the sight of Stella; double-dealing, concealment of any kind, could never be the characteristics of a woman with that pure and honest-looking face. The thought was somewhat *naïf* and unsophisticated for a man of Alan Moncrieff's knowledge of the world, but he harbored it, nevertheless, and took a sort of pleasure in the conviction of Stella's truth.

He shook hands with her, and told her that he intended calling upon Mrs. Sinclair and Miss Jacquetta Raeburn, but evinced no special disappointment when told that these ladies were out driving with Mr. Sinclair.

"And you have not accompanied them?" he said kindly. Stella could not help feeling that he spoke and looked at her as if she were a child.

No; she preferred walking instead of driving.

"You are very fond of walking?" he said, pacing along by her side, as she turned towards the gate.

"Oh, very. I like my half-dozen miles a day when I can get them."

"But that must have been difficult when you were abroad?" said Mr. Moncrieff, pausing at the gate as if he did not want to enter the grounds. Stella perceived the hesitation.

"There was an English teacher with whom I used to talk," she replied. "We did a great deal of sight-seeing in Brussels. Will you come in, Mr. Moncrieff? Mrs. Sinclair is sure to be home almost immediately, and she will be so grieved if I have not offered you a cup of tea."

"Thank you, but I am afraid I must not wait. Miss Raeburn—excuse me—is it true that you want pupils? My question sounds abrupt; but our time may be limited, and I heard that you were anxious to teach if you could find scholars."

"Yes, but I do not think that I shall find them here," said Stella. "They tell me that I must go to Glasgow or Edinburgh, or even London!" and she sighed at the prospect, and looked at the purple hills with eyes that seemed ready to fill with tears.

"We might perhaps find you a pupil or two nearer home," said Mr. Moncrieff. What a caressing intonation his voice could take!—and yet she still felt as if he were

talking to her as a child. "You know French and German very well, I dare say?"

"Yes, I think so. And I can sing and play," said Stella.

"But, perhaps, in your long residence abroad you have forgotten all your English? I am taking the privilege of age, you see, and putting you through quite a catechism; I hope you will forgive my doing so."

"I am very glad to be questioned," said Stella, with downcast eyes. "I scarcely know what I can teach and what I cannot. I had some practice in teaching at Madame Beauvais', however; for I used to beg to help with the little ones, I loved them so much. And my English—I dare say it has fallen behind, because I have not had many English lessons since I left school at Dundee; and I was only thirteen years old then. I used to read history and literature with an old English clergyman in Brussels, and he lent me books—but that was all."

"Books! What kind of books? Novels?"

"Oh, no," said the girl, shaking her head. "I have read only Scott's novels and one or two of Thackeray's in my life. No; Mr. Morris made me read Gibbon and Hume, and Arnold and Mommsen, and Grote and Macaulay, and a great deal of old English literature—Chaucer and the poets, you know—and he taught me Latin, too and some mathematics, but not much."

She paused, for Mr. Moncrieff was regarding her with an interest not unmingled with amusement. "I think," he said, presently, "that you have been exceedingly well educated, Miss Raeburn."

"I am afraid that I know very little."

"You have laid a good foundation. I should be glad if my little girl, Molly, was likely to know as much at your age! Will you consent to give her some lessons and teach her as you yourself have been taught?"

"Your daughter, Mr. Moncrieff? But she is much too old for me—I wanted to teach little children only," said Stella, coloring up to the eyes in much confusion.

"She could not have a better teacher," Mr. Moncrieff said, calmly. "She has had many disadvantages, and should be glad to see her in wiser hands than mine."

As Stella did not speak—for she was quite too much overcome by the prospect before her to be able to say ver

much—Mr. Moncrieff continued, in his distinct low tones, with an occasional pause which made what he said additionally impressive.

“She has run wild of late years. She has no mother, no friend or sister to influence her. . . . I have had governesses, but they have left her in despair. She will not learn, she will not submit, unless she has a real regard for the person set over her. . . . She has taken a great fancy to you, if I may say so, Miss Raeburn, and with you would be, I believe, perfectly amenable to authority. . . . If you would help us I should be grateful, indeed; almost as grateful even,” he said, with a sudden, flashing smile, that wholly changed the character of his face, “as when you gave the child your hand across the stones and saved her from being whirled down the river to her death.”

“If I could do anything for her, I should be only too glad,” said Stella, earnestly. The two were still standing beside the gate; Stella on one side, with her back to the distant view of Dunkeld, Moncrieff on the other, his arm resting on the topmost bar of the white wooden gate. “If only,” she said, looking straight into her companion’s face, “if only I did not fancy that you were asking this simply out of a feeling—a fancy—that I had rendered you some little service, and that you ought to repay me!”

“Do you think that I should sacrifice my daughter’s education to a fancy of that kind?” said he, looking back at her as straight-forwardly as she had looked at him. “No, Miss Raeburn, I am not so unselfish. I ask you to teach my Molly, because I have never met any one who is likely, I think, to influence her more directly for good than you.”

“But how can you know that?” asked Stella, simply. He felt tempted to answer, “By your face;” but pronounced the saying, feeling that he must not derogate so much from his dignity as Molly’s father. So he replied, quite soberly, “I have some reason for knowing,” and proceeded to the consideration of hours and terms. He wanted a governess for Molly from ten to four o’clock, including an hour for exercise in the middle of the day, and a sufficient time for dinner. He proposed that Stella and her aunt should take lodgings in Dunkeld—there were rooms to be had not more than a mile and a half

from Torresmuir—and he promised to send a conveyance for her every morning when rain was falling, or the roads were heavy, and at night when the days were short or the weather was bad. This consideration he thought due to his daughter's teacher; but when he came to the question of pecuniary remuneration, Stella found him liberal indeed, but not lavish; he was guided by common sense and a wish to have value for his money, which earned her heartfelt approbation. She had no wish to feel that he was paying her more than she was worth because she had pulled Molly out of the water below the Hermitage Falls.

The two had therefore a plain, sensible, business-like, little chat, in which Mr. Moncrieff's respect for Stella's capacities was increased tenfold. He left her at last with the understanding that she would talk over the matter with her Aunt Jacky, and that if Aunt Jacky did not object the new arrangement should begin as soon as the Sinclairs left Dunkeld. And the time for their departure was drawing so near that Stella felt sure that she would set to work with Molly early in November. For Aunt Jacky never objected long to anything that Stella really wished.

Mr. Moncrieff quitted her at last, and strode away down the lane towards the high-road once more. Here, as he trod the shady path, his attention was arrested by the appearance of a man who loitered along the road before him. This man was rather undersized, lean, and of a pallid complexion; as Moncrieff neared him, a handsome, sallow face, with Jewish features and a great black moustache was suddenly turned upon him.

"Why, Ralph," said the Laird of Torresmuir, stopping short, and looking in unfeigned surprise at his late wife's step-brother—a man who for many years had made Torresmuir his home—"I did not know that you often came this way."

"I don't," said Ralph Kingscott, with an easy laugh. "But I happened to turn in this direction to day. I don't know why. It is a pleasant walk."

He did not mention that he had been tracking Alan's steps all the afternoon, or that he was in a state of concealed rage at the bare thought that any matter of importance had been transacted without his help.

"I've been at St. Anselm's," said Moncrieff, after a

little pause ; "and I have engaged Miss Raeburn to teach Molly every day from ten to four."

"The devil you have !" exclaimed Mr. Kingscott, in his heart. But he did not say the words aloud.

CHAPTER X.

"GONE IS THE LUCK OF EDENHALL."

MOLLY'S first greeting of her new governess was rapturous. She was waiting in the drawing-room when Miss Raeburn was announced, and she cast a demure glance at the door so as to be sure that her father was not immediately behind. Finding that he did not appear, she cast demureness to the winds, rushed at Stella and embraced her frantically, then danced round her with such evident delight that Stella was amused and surprised.

"You dear, delicious thing !" cried Molly. "How awfully good it is of you to teach me ! I never thought that anything half so good could ever happen. My other governesses have been such frightfully strict, frumpy old things !"

"I shall be strict too, I forewarn you," said Stella, smiling.

"You couldn't !" said Molly, positively. "With that lovely golden hair and those sweet blue eyes of yours you couldn't know how—now would you ? I am sure you will never, never be cross and disagreeable."

"I hope not, Molly. But I shall want you to be good and do what I tell you," said Stella, taking the girl's hands, and looking earnestly into the dancing, frolicsome dark eyes.

"Oh, yes, I'll be good. I've promised. Papa gave me the most awful lecture about you this very morning. He says if I'm not good with you, he'll send me away to the very strictest school he can find. And I'm to copy you everything, and try to be like you. That's what he said—oh, and he was sorry he couldn't be here, but he had to go to Edinburgh, and I'm very glad !"

"Molly, should you say that, dear ?"

"I can't help it ; I *am* very glad. Papa is so grave and

so awful. We are all much livelier when he is out of the way. Even Uncle Ralph enjoys himself when papa's in Edinburgh; he lets Bertie off half his lessons, and goes to sleep in the afternoon. Will you come down to the schoolroom, dear Miss Raeburn, and shall I show you where to put your hat and cloak?"

Stella was led off by the chattering Molly, and found it rather difficult to induce the young lady to settle down to her books that forenoon. At twelve o'clock the two were to have gone for a walk, but a dash of heavy rain against the windows put walking out of the question. So Molly proposed to show her new friend over the house; some parts of which were very well worth seeing; and Stella willingly agreed to anything that her pupil suggested.

Torresmuir was partly an old and partly a new building. The older portion was built of thick and solid stone; the tower at one end was of masonry, which seemed as if it would defy the flight of time for centuries, so cunningly had the great stones been welded together. This tower was little used except by Mr. Ralph Kingscott, who, as Molly informed Miss Raeburn, occupied two rooms, one above another, in this part of the building. "You see it's very awkwardly placed," said Molly, with a learned air. "When you leave the newer part of the house you go through this long gallery—a passage; it is only a passage, after all; then you come straight into the Octagon Room, which Uncle Ralph has made into a regular curiosity shop; then straight from the Octagon Room into his sitting-room, which looks out on the hillside and down towards the Braan. This winding stair, in the little space between the Octagon Room and the sitting-room, leads up to Uncle Ralph's bedroom, and to another room that nobody ever uses; and above that there is a roof where one has a most beautiful view—but we scarcely ever go up because Uncle Ralph does not seem to care about coming farther than the Octagon Room—if so far. It is a great shame," said Molly, in an aggrieved tone, "because the tower would make such a nice little retreat for Bertie and me. One can't hear a single sound from these rooms in the new part of the house. But Uncle Ralph keeps them out."

"He has grown fond of his rooms, I daresay," said Stella.

"I don't think he is very fond of anything," Molly answered, with a curious touch of cynicism in her fresh young voice, "but it is convenient for him, I daresay, to be able to go in and out just as he likes. There is a little door from his sitting-room into the garden, and papa never knows when he is out after midnight or not."

Stella thought this sort of conversation undesirable, and changed it by asking the names of certain curiosities which were ranged in glass cases on some side tables in the Octagon Room.

"Pretty, aren't they?" said Molly, carelessly, as she ran over the names with the air of one who had often rehearsed them previously; "but this is the most curious thing. Do you see that empty case?"

Stella looked, and observed that a large morocco case lined with velvet stood empty under a glass shade.

"There's a story about it," said Molly. "I remember when it used to hold a stone—a beautiful crystal, I believe, sparkling with all the colors of the rainbow. It was in the days before mamma died," and a sudden shadow came over her merry face.

"Was it stolen?" Stella asked, to break the pause that followed.

"That's the odd part of it. Of course it was, but there was no way of finding out how or why. Just before mamma died it disappeared. And you have no idea what a fuss the old servants in the house, and even papa himself, made about it. It was very ridiculous!"

"Was it valuable?"

"Not a bit, I believe. Only—do you remember a piece of poetry called 'The Luck of Edenhall?'"

"Yes; Longfellow translated it from the German."

"Well, there was just such another old story about this one and our family. It was said to have been brought from the East by one of our ancestors; and as long as it was in our possession we were to be lucky in every way, and when it went the luck was to go too. And now it has gone!"

"And the luck remains," said Stella, smiling at the girl's half-tragical tone.

"I suppose so. But I don't know. Nothing has gone since—nothing. Of course, it has nothing to do with the stone; I am not so stupidly superstitious as poor

old Jean, our nurse, used to be ; but still—ever since—we have been unhappy—I don't know why——”

The tears were filling Molly's beautiful hazel eyes. Stella looked sympathisingly at her, and took her hand, meaning to give the child some gentle advice respecting her own share in producing the happiness of her home, when an interruption occurred. The inner door of the Octagon Room, leading to the staircase, flew open, and Mr. Kingscott made his appearance. He paused, as if in surprise, at the sight of the two girls, and Stella, who had not seen him before, glanced inquiringly at Molly. But Molly pouted, frowned, threw back her mop of ruddy golden hair, and did not seem inclined to speak.

“ I must introduce myself, as my niece does not seem inclined to perform the office for me,” said Ralph Kingscott, showing his white teeth in a smile which Stella found singularly unpleasant. “ My name is Kingscott, Miss Raeburn—I think I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Raeburn?—and I have the honor to be Miss Molly's uncle, as well as the tutor of my nephew, Bertie. Our office should bring us together. We must have something in common, must we not ? ”

Stella only bowed ; the man's manner did not attract her, and she felt it impossible to do anything but look serious and dignified.

“ So you have been looking at our poor little curiosities ? ” said Mr. Kingscott, easily. “ And has Molly been explaining to you the loss of the luck of the house ? ”

“ It can't be explained,” said Molly, almost rudely. “ Nobody knows.”

“ And nobody ever will know,” said her uncle, in a mocking tone. “ Nobody will ever know—unless the Luck of the House comes back again, and that will not be in your time or mine. ‘ Gone is the Luck of Edenhall, as the poem says.’ ”

“ I believe you've got it ! ” cried Molly, so savagely that Stella stood aghast. “ If you stole it and hid it away—on purpose to vex papa ! ” She bit her lip and the tears again dimmed her flashing eyes. “ You would not mind—you know you don't care whether things are right or wrong—I've heard you say so—if only they are pleasant.”

“ Molly, dear, you must not speak in that way,” said Stella, in alarm. “ I hope you will excuse her, Mr. Kingscott——”

Ralph Kingscott gave a short laugh and turned on his heel. But the momentary whitening of his lips, the keen, steel-like glance that he shot at Molly from out his narrow dark eye, showed that her shaft had, in some way or another, gone straight home. "I can afford to despise Molly's tempers, Miss Raeburn," he said as he went back to his own apartment, "but I don't envy you the task of encountering them."

Poor Stella did indeed at that moment feel as if her task were likely to be heavier than she had anticipated. She tried to talk seriously, and yet gently, to her pupil about her behavior, but Molly turned rather sulky at the first hint of reproof, and did not recover her good humor until late in the afternoon.

Mr. Moncrieff stayed for some days in Edinburgh, and Stella had thus no opportunity of consulting him, as she had wished to do, about the plan of study which Molly was to pursue. After the first day or two, she found the girl tolerably easy to manage. The great difficulty lay in the fact that, while Molly had the physique of a woman, she had the spirits, the thoughtlessness, the waywardness of a child. Stella had a rather startling example of the difficulties which were to be encountered in dealing with such a character soon after her introduction to the Moncrieffs.

It was the second Saturday after Stella's duties had begun. Mr. Moncrieff was still away from home. Saturday was "a whole holiday;" but as the day proved still and fine, Molly and her brother (who was quite as much enamored of Miss Raeburn as was Molly herself) came to her lodgings, and begged that she would join them in an excursion that they were about to make to the Lochs of the Lowes. It seemed that they knew most of the owners of the mansions on the banks of the different lochs, and, save when the rights of fishing and boating were let to summer tenants of the houses, the young Moncrieffs had always been allowed to disport themselves as they pleased upon the waters. At present, Molly, who had met with the name of the Admirable Crichton in her lessons, was anxious to show Stella the very place where that prodigy of learning had been born; and it was with this laudable object in view that she at last persuaded her teacher to join her for the day.

She had brought a pony carriage to the door, and

begged hard that Miss Jacky would come too; but Miss Jacky stoutly refused, on the plea that she would "take her death" if she went out in a boat. But Stella started with her young friends: Molly driving and flourishing her whip in fine fashion; and Bertie lying back on the cushions, and talking in a lazy but intelligent way to Miss Raeburn. It was eleven o'clock when they set off; and Molly explained that she had brought luncheon, and that they would put the pony up at a farmhouse, row out to the island, and eat their luncheon in the shadow of the very building where the Admirable Crichton had been born. Stella assented merrily enough—knowing little, however, of the place, and not quite prepared for the adventure which she was expected to pass through.

The first part of the programme was accomplished satisfactorily enough. The pony and carriage were left at the farmhouse, and the trio walked up a long road and across a meadow, which brought them to the very edge of one of the prettiest of all the Lochs of the Lowes. The clear water was unruffled by a breeze, and reflected an expanse of cloudless sky; but the distant hills had the curious distinctness of outline and hue generally considered to be indicative of rain. In the centre of the clear water stood the little grassy island with its ruined castle, the grey walls showing a majestic front of still decay, in strong contrast with one's notions of the life that had prevailed there centuries ago. A little boat was speedily hauled out of a ruinous boathouse by the children, and Stella was invited to step in.

"But surely it leaks," she said, doubtfully, looking at the pool in the bottom of the boat.

"Not a bit," cried Molly; "or, at least, so little that one can bale it out as we go along."

"Is it quite safe?"

"Perfectly," said Bertie. "It is, indeed. We have often been in this boat before. The farmer uses it every day."

It might be safe, but it was not very clean or very agreeable, and Stella was glad when the island was reached. Here the three spent a couple of hours, exploring the empty chambers of the ruin (how Stella thought of Baime-rino!), eating their lunch in a sunny spot well sheltered from the wind, and casting pebbles into the smooth waters

of the loch, like children as they were! The only drawback to their happiness lay in the fact that Molly was inclined to be huffy with her brother, and that she turned silent and a little sulky during the latter part of the afternoon.

It was proposed at last that they should go home; and then Miss Molly resolved to give her brother and Miss Raeburn a fright. She would row to the mainland alone, and pretend that she was going to leave them on the island; but she would then run down to the farmhouse, take out the pony, and drive down to the water again—row to the island and fetch them back. This was her plan, and it was a comparatively innocent one, and Stella and Bertie, divining it, were not at all alarmed when they discovered—too late to stop her—that she had started off alone.

"It's just Molly's temper," said Bertie. "She wants to frighten us, silly child; but of course we shall not be frightened. She will row back or send some one else for us presently. You are not nervous, are you, Miss Raeburn?"

"Not a bit," said Stella.

But she began to feel a trifle nervous when the time passed on and Molly did not re-appear. The sun was low, the wind was rising, and the air was turning cold, and still they waited on the island—but the boat was safely moored upon the other side of the loch; and Molly did not come!

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE ISLAND.

STELLA and her boy-companion occupied themselves for some time in wandering about the island, startling the birds from their nests, and making a collection of the scanty, half-nipped weeds that lingered on the Southern side. Between four and five, however, when Molly had been gone for more than half an hour, Bertie began to shiver, and even Stella felt the cold.

"Where can that girl be?" said the lad, impatiently at last. He stood still, and began to stare anxiously at the other side of the loch.

"She cannot be long now," said Stella.

"She ought to have been back long ago. It is just like her to play us such a trick. She is a dreadful spitfire."

"I am afraid that we vexed her a little," said Stella, with the sweet frankness that was one of her most winning qualities.

"We!" exclaimed Bertie, coloring up. "I, you mean, Miss Raeburn, only you are too kind to say so." He spoke half-shyly, half-impulsively, and Stella's heart warmed to him as he made his admission. "I was wrong, I know, though Molly is provoking, sometimes. But I'm awfully sorry I vexed her, especially as she has included you in her revenge." And he smiled at her with eyes so like his father's that Stella was quite startled by the resemblance. "Ugh! it's getting very cold," he said, with a sudden shiver.

"You will catch cold; you must get inside the building," said Stella, anxiously. "There is a dry, sheltered room here; you should not be out in the wind."

"Thank you; I won't go in yet," the boy answered. "We had better walk up and down and try to attract attention. We can be seen perfectly well from the banks, you know, as long as it is light; and somebody will be sure to come to our rescue."

"Not many people seem to pass this way."

"No; and the bother of it is that the house over there is shut up. Miss F—— is away for the winter, and I daresay there is nobody in the place at all. The gardener or some of the men may be about—suppose I give a call? Sound travels a long way over water."

"Try," said Stella; and the boy curved his hands over his mouth, and gave a long, shrill call, which he repeated several times. But his voice was weak and his energy soon exhausted; he remained silent at last, his cry having received no answer, and looked gloomily over the darkening waters and the distant, shadowy land.

"It's no use," he said, in a low tone. "They will only think it's an owl."

"But Molly knows where we are," said Stella. "She is sure to come back or send for us. I hope no accident has happened to her."

"Not a bit of it. It's pure spite and ill-temper. She wants to get us into a scrape."

"But it is not our fault that we are left here; we can easily explain our lateness."

"I don't know," said Bertie. His face was flushed; his lips began to quiver, almost like a child's. "It will be all right for you, of course; but——"

"But what?" asked Stella, withdrawing him from the water's edge and forcing him to walk briskly up and down with her. "What makes you anxious?" She did not like to say afraid, although Bertie's changing color and agitated voice gave her the impression that he was not very courageous.

"Oh, nothing," the boy began. But in a second or two his voice faltered again. "It won't matter—only—papa is coming home to-night——"

"Well," said Stella, rather sharply, "what then?"

"He does not like me to be out so late," was the halting and uncomfortable answer. "And he—he does not like—the island."

"Do you mean that he has told you not to come here?"

"He spoke to Molly," said the boy evasively. "He never said anything to me. I don't know exactly what he said. He thought it wasn't quite safe, but that's nonsense, of course. The boat's leaky, you see, and he thinks that the Castle walls might give way some day."

"If you have brought me here," said Stella, after a little pause, "knowing that he did not wish you to come, and thus making me act against his wishes, you will have done exceedingly wrong, Bertie, and I shall be very much displeased."

"Oh, please don't say that!" cried Bertie. "We meant to caution you not to say anything about it as we went home, but you were so good-natured that we didn't think you would mind, and, as Molly said, this was the last day on which we could have any fun because papa was coming home."

"It seems to me," said Stella, indignantly, "that you talk about your father as if he were a tyrant and a gaoler, instead of one of the kindest, most generous, most noble-hearted men in all the country-side?"—(How did she know that? For, after all, she had had only three or four interviews with Mr. Moncrieff in her life, so she must have made up her mind very speedily).

Bertie looked at her in surprise. "I dare say he's all that—and more," he answered, slowly; "and it is just because he is so much above us that Molly and I don't

get on with him very well, don't you see?" An accent of shame and pain was audible in the boy's voice as he continued; "If we were a little better worth believing in, perhaps he would believe in us more."

The shadows had deepened around them as they walked up and down the grassy walk, and the wind came in cold and fitful gusts round the angles of the Castle. Seeing that Bertie shivered a good deal—from fear, perhaps, as well as cold—Stella insisted upon his entering the building, where they would at least be sheltered from the evening breeze. The night had come on so rapidly that there was no further chance of being seen from the other side; they must depend upon Molly's action, and upon the succour that she might send. Stella felt intensely disappointed in her pupil, and indignant with her and with Bertie; she was more vexed at being made to appear a participator in their rebellion against their father's authority than concerned on her own account. Her eyes filled with tears as she thought of Mr. Moncrieff's possible displeasure. He had been so kind to her—and she must needs seem thoughtless and ungrateful to him! Then there was the anxiety to Aunt Jacky, and the exposure to cold of the delicate lad, Bertie, and also the naughtiness—the extreme naughtiness—of Molly herself; with whom, nevertheless, it was always difficult to find fault when she tossed her mane of ruddy-gold tresses back from her face, and looked up at one with her mutinous, frolicsome, lovable hazel eyes! Stella felt that the management of a girl of fifteen was a more responsible post than she with her eighteen years ought ever to have attempted.

She was leaning with her elbows on the rough frame of an unglazed window, looking out at the gleaming water and the dark distant forms of hill and wood, when she felt a touch upon her arm. "Miss Raeburn, you'll be cold," said the boyish voice, with a slight tremor in it. "Please put on my overcoat; you have only that little jacket, and you will feel the cold more than we do, because you've been accustomed to a warmer climate."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind," said Stella, and she would not be persuaded, although the boy tried hard to make her don the overcoat, of which he himself stood far more in need. But the kindly offer, with the shy chivalry of feeling expressed in the lad's manner

touched her ; and she had a tenderness for Bertie ever afterwards ; a tenderness of which he was one day to be sorely in need.

Her spirits rose a little, and she beguiled the time by talking, telling stories, and laughing, so as to induce Bertie to be cheerful. But circumstances were certainly not conducive to cheerfulness. The room in which they had taken refuge was not so damp as might have been expected, for there had been a continuance of fine weather for some weeks ; but it was lighted only by the one little arched window, at which Stella still kept watch ; and strange, uncanny noises were heard from time to time, attributed by Bertie to the tribes of rats, owls, and other wild creatures which had made certain portions of the building their own. There were rooms in a tolerably good state of preservation, Bertie explained, but they were locked up, and it was only to the more ruinous parts of the Castle that stray visitors like the Moncrieffs and their governess had access.

"I wonder how long we have been here?" he sighed at last. "It must be the middle of the night! Aren't you very hungry, Miss Raeburn?"

"Rather. But I don't think it is so late. Let us have another walk to keep ourselves warm. I wish I could see the time."

But there was no moon, and the clouds had been sweeping up from behind the hills until even the faint light of the stars was obscured. They went outside and walked along the bank—and then Bertie stopped short and grasped Stella by the arm. "I hear something," he said. And, indeed, a sound of voices was borne upon the wind, and a flash of light from a lantern was seen upon the bank. Bertie shouted, but his voice was far too hoarse and feeble to be heard. And then came the still more welcome noises that showed the "castaways,"—as Stella had playfully named herself and Bertie,—that a boat was being pushed off from the shore. Nothing to Stella had ever been so welcome as the sound of the oars in the rowlocks and the regular splash of every swift and steady stroke.

Suddenly Bertie leaned heavily on her arm. "Let me sit down," he said, with a strange gasp; "I—I—am—faded." Then he sank down on the grass, and when Mr. Moncrieff—with a rather stern look upon his handsome

face—jumped ashore, and turned the light of a lantern upon the two disconsolate figures, he found that Stella Raeburn was kneeling on the bank, supporting with one arm the head of his son Bertie, whose white and death-like appearance showed that the day's adventures had been too much for his delicate frame, and that when the strain was relaxed he had simply fainted away.

There was no time for explanation or apology. Mr. Moncrieff had wisely brought a small flask of brandy, which, to tell the truth, he had more than half expected Stella to need: but although she did not require it, it was very valuable in restoring Bertie's strength when, with a sigh and a moan, he returned to consciousness. And then came a question of transit, rendered more difficult than it would otherwise have been by Bertie's feeble condition.

"We canna cross a' at once; it wadna be safe," said the man in the boat—one of the farming men, as Stella heard afterwards.

"I will stay," said Stella, quickly.

"Alone? certainly not," said Mr. Moncrieff's peremptory voice. "Do you feel strong enough to wait here with me, Miss Raeburn, while the man takes Bertie across? I think in his present state that he must have the precedence, if you will excuse his going first. The farmer's wife and Mr. Kingscott are on the other side; they will attend to Bertie while the boat comes back for us."

As Stella concurred in this arrangement, Bertie was laid in the boat—for he did not seem strong enough to stand erect—the boatman pushed off, and Mr. Moncrieff and Miss Raeburn were left together on the lonely island in the silence and darkness of the night.

"I hope you are not cold," said Moncrieff at last, more formally than usual.

"No, oh no. But oh, Mr. Moncrieff, you will think me so careless—so childish."

"Not at all. I understand from Molly that it was entirely her fault."

"But," said Stella, tremblingly, "if I had been wiser—older—it would all have been different. If I had known—oh, Mr. Moncrieff, please let me give up my situation as Molly's governess; I see that I am too young—I can manage her—and she should have an older teacher—"

"What?" he said, in a much more pleasant voice, "are you frightened by your first little difficulty?"

Stella was mute. It was not the question that she had expected.

"I know perfectly well that you were not to blame. You did not know that I objected to their visits to the island; indeed, I do not object when a person in authority—like yourself—is with them. You could not possibly help Molly's silly action—which was really more silly than blameworthy, as I will explain to you afterwards. So you see, Miss Raeburn, there is not the slightest reason for this proposed desertion of your office."

Stella could feel that he smiled as he turned towards her, but she was overwrought and unable to respond. She tried to say something, but in the effort to speak a sob escaped her, and another, and then she was obliged to cover her face with her hands. And this movement, in spite of the darkness, he could see.

"Tears?" he said, so softly that she would hardly have known the voice for that of Alan Moncrieff. "It is not worth a tear. You must not cry over this matter, my dear—Miss Raeburn." The addition of the name was but too manifestly an afterthought. "Why do you cry?"

"I thought," gasped Stella, "that you would be—so—angry!"

"And are you beginning to fear me already?" he answered, a little bitterly. "Oh, child, don't do that—don't be afraid of me, as my own children are. I am not so hard and severe as they think me, I am not indeed. The boat is almost here again," he went on, with a sudden change of tone; "it is at the steps. Give me your hand; I will help you in."

He took the girl's hand and held it, although they had to wait, as it turned out, several minutes for the boat. Nevertheless he did not let it go. And the strong yet gentle clasp gave Stella an odd feeling of rest and protection; the night isolated her from all the world beside, and it seemed for a moment as if there were no one living in the whole wide earth except herself and him.

CHAPTER XII.

ALAN MONCRIEFF'S QUESTION.

MOLLY'S explanation of her extraordinary behavior may be given in her own words. She visited Stella on the Sunday morning after church, and informed her governess with great gravity that she had come to make an apology.

"Papa sent me," she said, frankly, "or I should have waited until to-morrow, you know; but perhaps it is best for you to hear all about it to-day. Because I didn't leave you on the island on purpose—you know that, don't you, Miss Raeburn?"

"I am glad you didn't, Molly," said Stella, smiling, and rather evading the question.

"I wouldn't have left you there for anything. I meant to go to the farm and get the carriage out, and come back for you. I was slow about it, I know, because I was cross with Bertie. Besides, I met Uncle Ralph on the way, and stopped to talk to him——"

"Mr. Kingscott?" Stella said, with surprise.

"Yes, he had been for a long walk. I told him where you were and that I was going to fetch you, and he said that he would not disdain me, and went on. Well, just as I had got the man to put the pony in, a little boy came running to tell me that he had seen the lady at the big house (the lady who owns the property, you know) send out her boat for you; that you had gone into her house, and that she was going to send you home in her carriage. Well, I thought that so cool of you that I flew into a passion, and said to myself that I would drive home all by myself, and that you might come back in the carriage of anybody else you pleased."

"But, Molly, that was not a true story."

"No, of course it wasn't. The boy was telling lies."

"But why——"

"Oh, of course, he didn't know that it was lies. My opinion is," said Molly, tightening her lips, "that somebody had told him to say so, and that somebody was Uncle Ralph."

"Molly, dear, don't be so absurd."

"I believe so," said Molly, stubbornly. "He wanted to get us all into a difficulty. He hates Bertie to be out with us. He likes to get Bertie to come with him. I believe it was his revenge."

"How is Bertie?" said Stella, resolving not to listen to these statements.

"Oh, he has a feverish cold. He is in bed, and the doctor was sent for this morning. Miss Raeburn, dear, you don't think that I would be so horrid, so disagreeable and naughty, as to play you such a trick, on purpose? Indeed,"—and Molly's arms were suddenly thrown round Stella's neck—"indeed, I do love you, and want to be a good girl. Won't you forgive me?"

Of course, Stella forgave her on the spot, and was relieved to feel that she might do so with a good conscience. The mystery of the boy's report of her doings was impossible to solve at present, and she wisely counselled Molly to put it by as a thing which time would probably make clear. She found that Mr. Moncrieff had been angry, but less angry on his return from the island than before. When he first learned from Molly what had occurred—Bertie's continued absence—and inquiries at Miss Jacky's, leading every one to infer that the two were still upon the island, subject to all the discomforts of cold and darkness—Mr. Moncrieff had indeed been much displeased. "I thought he would have boxed my ears!" said Molly. "But he didn't—he never has done such a thing, so I don't suppose that he will begin! But he looked so angry! And he was angrier than ever after something that Uncle Ralph said to him."

Stella stopped the recital of Mr. Kingscott's sayings very decidedly. But what had been said transpired afterwards, much to her annoyance.

Ralph Kingscott had uttered a low derisive laugh when Molly faced her father and told her story. "What are you laughing at?" Mr. Moncrieff had said.

"I am laughing," Kingscott answered, "at the unnecessary trouble which you are giving yourself. Drive back, row over to the island, rescue the castaways, of course, without delay. But be careful that you don't arrive too soon."

"I shall be obliged to you if you will express yourself a little more clearly."

"My dear Alan, don't look so tremendously high and mighty. Do you forget that your son and your very pretty little governess are almost exactly the same age? I always thought that you had done a shockingly imprudent thing, you know!"

"Do you mean to imply——"

"I imply nothing," Ralph Kingscott said, provokingly. "Not even that it was what the Americans call 'a put-up job,' and that the two are at present chuckling over Molly's simplicity, and vowing eternal constancy beneath the moon! I should leave them there till midnight if I were you, and give them a thorough fright."

But, according to Molly's account, which did not reach Stella's ears till some days later, Mr. Moncrieff had peremptorily silenced his brother-in-law, and had at once ordered the carriage for his rescue expedition to the loch.

Certainly no trace of any suspicion of the kind indicated by Mr. Kingscott's words was visible in Alan Moncrieff's demeanor to the young stranger who sojourned daily for a few hours under his roof. He was uniformly kind and considerate to her; he evidently trusted her completely. Bertie, although of Stella's age by years, was such a child compared to her, that Ralph Kingscott's insinuation fell to the ground almost unheeded. Almost—not quite unheeded. For there was a fund of jealousy and suspiciousness in Alan Moncrieff's nature, which had been fostered by certain circumstances of his past life; and without his being as yet aware of it, distrust of all around him was rapidly becoming the mainspring of his life. It was this distrust which really alienated him from his children, as (report said) it had alienated him from his wife.

But this latent fault in his character was not visible to Stella. To her he was ever gracious and kindly, treating her with a confidence which her steady and patient work with Molly certainly justified. And the experience of the island sobered Molly considerably, and made her very submissive and loving to Stella, who had quite won her heart. A sharp attack of cold and fever prostrated Bertie for weeks afterwards, and it became natural for Stella to see a good deal of him, as, during his convalescence, he used to come to the schoolroom, and lie on a broad old-fashioned sofa near the fire, listening while Molly's lessons proceeded, or when Stella read aloud. Sometimes Mr. Moncrieff looked

on those occasions, and seemed always glad to find Bertie "in such good company." The only person in the house with whom Stella could not feel friendly and at her ease was Ralph Kingscott. She was certain that he had a peculiar spite against her, for he never lost an opportunity of catching up and exaggerating any little mistake that she might make in his hearing, and of setting her actions in the worst possible light (at least, if accounts given by Molly and Bertie could be trusted), and also, she was sure that he had a bad influence over Bertie. The boy, less cautious in Stella's presence than in that of his father, let fall phrases which showed that something underhand was going on; that he went to places and had companions of which his father would not approve; that his uncle connived at, if he did not encourage, these proceedings. These facts troubled Stella; she did not like to act the part of a spy, or a tale-bearer, but she could not help thinking that Mr. Moncrieff ought to have some notion imparted to him as to what was going on.

Meanwhile the winter passed away and was succeeded by a bleak and biting spring. In March, Mr. Moncrieff went to London. His absence made little difference to the household. Stella fancied, however, that Bertie was degenerating in mind and feeling, and she made up her mind that she ought to speak to Mr. Moncrieff about him as soon as he returned. And yet she was terribly afraid that he would think such speech presumptuous.

She did not find an opportunity for some time, however. Mr. Moncrieff paid a flying visit to his home in June, and when it was chiefly in order to arrange that Miss Jacky and Stella should take Molly to the sea-side for a little change of air, during the month of July. He said that she had been growing fast, and required a change; perhaps he also had an eye to Stella's rather delicate appearance, and wanted her to have the benefit of sea-breezes. At any rate, he persuaded Miss Jacky to agree to his plan, and commissioned her to find suitable lodgings at St. Andrews at his expense; and then he vanished as suddenly as he had come, taking Bertie away with him, and leaving Mr. Kingscott free to follow his own devices.

So it chanced that on one lovely day in July, Stella was seated in a shady nook of the Castle at St. Andrews, with a book in her hand, while Miss Jacky and Molly had gone

to the bathing-place, where Molly was (presumably) desporting herself in "the Ladies' Pool." Stella was seated in a window recess of the old grey wall; the book, as we said, was in her hand, but her eyes had strayed from it to the great expanse of blue water, flashing and glittering in the sunlight, breaking with long murmurous roll over the rocks below, a never ending source of beauty and mystery, of sorrow and of joy. As Stella watched it, she was conscious of the awe, solemn and yet tender, which the sight of Nature in its grandest forms often produces in us; a feeling of the limitations and narrowness and weakness of human life in presence of the Eternal. Her own sorrows seemed to die away in the consciousness of a greater life enveloping her own. She was experiencing one of those moments of true vision in which the plan of our whole life seems clear to us, our path of duty perfectly distinct, when we feel it impossible that we shall ever turn aside to the right hand or to the left; that all our days will ever afterwards be hallowed by the remembrance of that gracious hour. Such moments come to us too seldom; but they are full of blessing when they come.

And in this mood she was found by Alan Moncrieff.

She did not notice his approach until he was close to her, and then she started and half rose. He lifted his hat smilingly, and asked her to sit down again. "You have chosen a lovely spot," he said looking through the window in the wall to the mingling blue of sea and sky beyond.

"I was to stay here until Aunt Jacky and Molly came back to me," she said, coloring a little as she spoke.

He leaned against the old grey wall at her side and looked down at her. "Is Molly a good girl?" he asked, a smile curving his lip beneath his dark moustache.

"Very good indeed."

How handsome he was! she thought as he stood there, his face a little tanned after his Swiss tour, with a new light in his brown eyes, and strength and energy in every limb. No youth, certainly; but a vigorous man, full of manliness and purpose. She had never seen a man in whom she had found more to admire. John Hannington? Ah! the name had almost lost its power to wound; John Hannington was commonplace beside Alan Moncrieff.

"How is Bertie?" she said, forcing herself to speak.

"Better, thank you. And I hope—I trust—that he is losing his fear of me."

She was surprised to hear him speak so plainly. "It is unreasonable of him to feel fear of you," she exclaimed.

Mr. Moncrieff smiled as if well pleased. "You would not feel it, would you?" he said, and then caught himself up and went on in a different tone. "He tells me that you have lectured him on the subject. Perhaps it is not fair to repeat all that he has said. But, at any rate, he has made me sure of one thing: that I need an interpreter to stand between me and my children. They have no mother; and they need the gentle guidance of a woman's hand. Therefore, after long consideration—for I do not wish you to suppose that I am speaking rashly or on the impulse of the moment—I have come to St. Andrews to-day, Miss Raeburn, with one purpose—one only—in my mind; and that is, to ask you a question, or rather to make a request. Will you—some day—honor me so far as to become my wife?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A COMPACT.

FOR the moment Stella doubted whether or no she had heard aright. Sea, sky, castle, and fair green sward, all swam before her eyes. The color mounted to her forehead, and then receded, leaving her very pale. But she showed no other sign of emotion. Her hands, crossed over the book on her lap, did not tremble: her whole form was very still.

"I see that I have startled you," said Mr. Moncrieff, gently—he judged so from his general knowledge of women rather than from Stella's demeanor; "but I hope that you will consider my proposition seriously, and give me an answer when you can."

"It is so sudden—I was not prepared for anything of the kind," faltered Stella, finding voice at last.

"Is it too sudden? I have thought of it for some time," said her suitor, laying his hand softly on hers and possessing himself of the delicate fingers as he spoke. "Is it so very hard to answer, Stella?"

The utterance of her name was an experiment. He was not sure whether she would resent it or not. But she sat perfectly still.

"You are, I think, fond of the children," he went on after a few moments' silence. "You know my difficulties in guiding them—even in understanding them. You have a greater influence over Molly than any one I ever knew. You may be of incalculable use to her. I put this view of the question before you because I know that with you the prospect of doing good to others is the greatest inducement that I can offer. But there are, perhaps, other things that I should mention. Your aunt, whom you love so dearly, shall henceforth be kept from all anxiety and care; she shall be to me like a kinswoman of my own—if you will consent to be my wife. And you shall have every pleasure—every advantage—that my position enables me to offer you. As my wife, as mistress of Torresmuir, I think that you would have no cause to regret your choice."

Stella felt, though somewhat vaguely, the coldness, the practical matter-of-factness of his tone. She turned her face away to the shining sea and the purple heaven as she replied—

"Those advantages are not the things that attract me."

Moncrieff started and seemed to reflect.

"No," he said at last, in a tone that showed him to be moved. "You are not like other women. The way to attract you is, I believe, to show you the difficulties, the responsibilities of a position, and then to ask you to assume the one and surmount the other. Well, if that is the case, I have plenty of these to offer you. I am a busy man, obliged to be much away from home: I ask you to take my place when I am absent, to be a friend and helper to my unruly boy and girl, to entertain my guests and be my almoner to the poor. Will that suit your notions of duty, and will you undertake the task?" He was smiling a little, and she felt once more that vague sense of dissatisfaction—she knew not why. She kept silence: her delicate eyebrows knitting themselves into a very slight frown above her eyes. She was not angry, but she was puzzled and distressed.

Alan watched her, and a new expression crossed his face. "I had forgotten," he said, almost haughtily, "that

some one may have a prior claim. Is there any one—any one else?”

“Any one else?” said Stella, lifting her eyes to his. She really did not quite understand what he meant to say.

“Are you engaged to any other man?”

“Oh, no.”

The simple negative quite satisfied him. But he put another question for form's sake. “There is no one else, I mean, whom you—you—prefer?” He had a difficulty in choosing the right form of expression.

“No,” said Stella, quietly, and this was true.

“Then, may I hope that you will be my wife?”

There was a little struggle with herself, and the tears came into her eyes. “I don't know what to say, Mr. Moncrieff. Are you sure that you think it best?” she said, with the naive earnestness which he had often thought so charming. “I am so young and inexperienced that I feel—afraid.”

“If that is all, I cannot consider it a very serious objection,” he answered, without a smile. “Will you not trust me?”

“Oh, yes, I trust you.”

“Then you will be my wife?”

She held out her hand to him. “If you wish it,” she replied.

It was perhaps rather an odd wooing. And when he had bent his lips to the little hand that she had given him, and the compact was ratified by the kiss, Stella felt a rush of compunction, of dread of insecurity. What had she done? Had she not given her consent too readily to the most momentous step in life that a woman can ever take? What did she know of Alan Moncrieff, and how could she believe that he cared for her?

But then, she told herself positively, there was no pretense of “caring” on either side. He had not said one word of love: he had not asked for her affection. He had asked her to perform certain duties at his side: that was all. She honestly believed that she could do these duties—that she could be of more help to Molly and Bertie as their father's wife than in her present position. And she wanted to help them. She was fond of Bertie: she had grown to love Molly with all her heart. It was surely right to take upon herself the duty that was offered to her:

to do her best for the man who would be her husband, for the boy and girl whom she could also count as hers. She did not feel as if the task would be without its charm.

But she did not love him, she went on to say to herself. She admired and respected him; and surely that was enough? If her heart had never been won before, she might have looked for passionate affection in her lover; now she was only too glad to feel that he neither gave nor required any such thing. She was tired of the very name of love. John Hannington had won it from her once and flung it cruelly away; she had none now to give. Honestly believing, as young people do sometimes believe, that she had loved once and forever, it seemed a fair bargain to her to give her hand to a man whose heart was, presumably, buried in a grave, and who asked her only for help and service in a prosaic, matter-of-fact, but kind and even fatherly way. That was Stella's view of the question, and she gave little thought to the possibility that marriage would bring her either great happiness or great misery.

Meanwhile, Mr. Moncrieff looked at her, and thought of the poem that he had once or twice quoted when her sweet tranquillity was before him:

"Her eyes were stiller than the depth
Of summer skies at even."

But when he spake aloud, only prosaic words came forth. "How soon shall you be ready for our marriage, Stella?"

She started and colored. Oh, not yet," she murmured, rather nervously.

"I hope that it will not be very long before I can call you my property," said Moncrieff, rather lightly, but with a sudden softening of his stern, dark face. "I have heard you say that you wanted to see Staffa: we might go there before the season closes——"

But Stella gave him such a look of mingled surprise and dismay that he smiled and resolved to bide his time. More could not be said just then for Miss Jacky and Molly were seen approaching, and in their astonishment at Mr. Moncrieff's appearance, Stella's flushed face and drooping eyelids passed unnoticed.

Molly's lively tongue was, as usual, hushed in her father's

er's presence, and she soon seized an opportunity of drawing Stella away from his side, and leaving him to the companionship of Miss Jacky. He walked with them to their lodgings, and then bade them farewell, saying that he would return in the evening. And Stella found that he had made good use of his time, for, as soon as Molly could be shaken off, Miss Jacky seized her niece impulsively, and gave her a kiss of congratulation.

"And what's this I hear, Stella?" she said, her very bonnet nodding with mingled delight and agitation! "Mr. Moncrieff of Torresmuir, that has been everywhere and seen everything, to take up with a wee lassie like you! Well, wonders will never cease. You to be mistress of his house, and one of the greatest ladies in the country side! It's a proud man your father would have been, lassie, if he had lived to see the day! And do ye mind him saying that he meant to see you a duchess yet? Why, Moncrieff's as rich as many a duke, I believe, and a far grander-looking man than any I ever saw; and ye may well be proud of your conquest, Stella, my bairn!"

"Proud?" said Stella, smiling a little. "I think I am more perplexed than proud, Aunt Jacky. Do you think I am right?"

"If ye love the man, ye're right to marry him, be he lord or beggar," said Aunt Jacky, stoutly.

"But if you don't love him?"

"Ye're not thinking of marrying without love, are you, my dear? That's just an awful thing to do, it seems to me."

Stella stood silent for a moment. Her color varied, and her lips trembled as she replied—

"But—if I do not love him, I respect him, I admire him, I *like* him. Is that not enough? He has asked me to help him; and I want of all things to be a help and a comfort to him. Oh, auntie, do not tell me that I am doing wrong."

"But have you not considered, my dear, what a frightful thing it would be if you met somebody, some day, that you liked better than your husband? And if you don't love him, it seems to me just a possibility," said Miss Jacky, quite simply and solemnly, her eyes growing large with horror as she uttered her little warning. But, to her great surprise, Stella met it with a burst of tears.

“Oh, Aunt Jacky, I shall never, never do that! I shall never love anybody—I shall never be loved myself,” sobbed the poor child, on her aunt’s shoulder, as Miss Jacky hastened to console her. The old lady scarcely heard, and certainly did not understand, the words, but she saw that her beloved Stella was in trouble, and she at once forgot everything but her love for her brother’s daughter and her desire that she should be happy.

Mr. Moncrieff came to the house from his hotel that evening, and pressed the scheme of a very speedy marriage upon his betrothed with some assiduity. And, indeed, as he said, what was the use of waiting? If Stella had promised to marry him at all, she might as well marry him at once. And Stella, after that first protest, and in spite of some inward shrinking, was persuaded to agree with him. With her limited means there could be little question about wedding finery. Then it would be a pity to deprive Alan of his autumn holiday, and he told her plainly that he would not go away from Dunkeld without her, and that it would be much more convenient for him if she would become his wife with as little delay as possible. Stella was far too reasonable to oppose his will.

She wondered very much how Molly and Bertie would take the news, which Mr. Moncrieff insisted on telling them almost immediately. The result was unlooked for. Bertie seemed pleased by it in a shy and diffident sort of way; he wrote a letter expressive of great content with the new arrangement; but Molly, who had hitherto seemed so fond of Stella, raged and stormed for a day or two, and then fell into an aggrieved and injured frame of mind, which distressed Stella inexpressibly. Molly was sixteen now, and felt it very hard to have a stepmother only three years older than herself set over her head; for she had begun to dream of the delight of being mistress of the house, of going very soon into society and assuming all the importance which would attach to the daughter of the master of Torresmuir. Now she felt that she would have to resign herself to obscurity and submissiveness for some time longer; and she did not relish the prospect.

The marriage was celebrated early in August; and then the bride and bridegroom departed on their wedding tour. Molly was left with friends to pay several visits while her father was away; and Bertie and his uncle had some

shooting in the Highlands. It was late in September before Alan Moncrieff brought his young wife home to Torresmuir.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HONEYMOON.

STELLA had sometimes wondered at the fear entertained by Molly of Mr. Moncrieff, but during the days of her engagement and of her early married life she was fain to confess that the fear was justifiable. Alan Moncrieff was a grave man, whose manner was apt to be cold and austere; his will was strong, his judgments, founded on a very high ideal of conduct, occasionally seemed to her harsh and inflexible. There were certain sins and vices which he never condoned. Deceit of any kind was in his eyes unpardonable; cowardice, incomprehensible as well. He did not boast of his inability to forgive, as a weak man would have done; he was, perhaps, hardly aware of the force with which this characteristic struck an observer; but Stella could not help feeling that she should be sorry to incur his displeasure, and that she sympathised a little with his children's awe of him. His manner was so courteous, and he was so uniformly calm and kind and gentle, that she did not all at once discover the iron hand beneath the velvet glove, and even when she found it out she could not find it in her heart to like him the less, although she might fear him the more for it.

Her honeymoon was, however, a very enjoyable time to her. It might have astonished Molly to see how far her father could unbend when he chose to do so, how seldom the melancholy shades crossed his brow, and how ready was his smile, when he was with Stella. He took great pleasure in showing her fine scenery, old buildings, and interesting relics of antiquity; and, finding her a very intelligent listener, he developed a flow of talk of which nobody at his own home would have deemed him capable. Indeed, he was at his best when alone with his young wife; and, although she was not a person of demonstrative high spirits, her quiet serenity seemed to make him more cheerful every day. Stella long retained the memory

of pleasant drives over the hills, of charming strolls in garden or forest or busy street, of boating expeditions and a perfect week of lovely weather in the Hebrides; also of a couple of days at Oban which followed—days of sunshine and laughter and enjoyment such as she had seldom known. Alan Moncrieff certainly seemed to think that he could not do enough for her. He bought her dresses and jewelry and presents of all kinds, until she was obliged to entreat him to stop, declaring that she felt like a doll that a child was decorating. At which he laughed, and declared that all the decorations in the world could not make her prettier than she was already—a speech which sounded delightfully odd and out of character from Alan Moncrieff's grave lips. He had gone back ten years, it seemed to Stella, and made himself young and gay, to be a companion to her youth.

The last day of the bright, brief honeymoon came at last.

"We go back to-morrow, Stella," said her husband, as they sat on the beach at Oban, and looked at the motley groups of people who were strolling about before them. "Shall you be sorry?"

"Yes," said Stella, quite frankly. "For some things, but I shall be glad to see Molly and Bertie and Aunt Jacky again." She was giving her attention to a poodle belonging to a party of ladies on a bench near the one where she sat; the dog was a ridiculous creature with shaven haunches, frills, and a tufted tail tied with blue ribbon; he wore a silver collar and bracelets, and sat up and begged when one looked at him. Stella threw him a morsel of biscuit; she had macarons in her pocket.

"Would you like a dog of this kind?" asked Mr. Moncrieff.

"No, thank you; he is too artificial for my taste. I don't want a dog of society; I want a country dog, a collie or a deerhound. But what a funny creature a poodle is, Alan! Do you think Molly would like one?"

"Molly would scorn it, I am afraid."

Stella threw another morsel of macaroon. "I suppose so. Did you get her the brooch we saw this morning?"

"Yes, and one for you, something like it."

"You are much too generous, Alan."

Moncrieff laughed. "Not much generosity in buying a

twopenny-halfpenny thing of that kind, is there? You liked it, that was my reason."

"You are very kind," said Stella, altering her word.

"Don't you really care for ornaments, Stella?"

"Yes," she said, looking round at him with a smile.

"I like them very much, but I can do without them."

"Ah—some women can't," he answered drily.

"They must be poor creatures, then. Molly and I will be more sensible. I have no more biscuit, Mr. Poodle; shake a paw and say good morning. Do let us walk on, Alan, if you do not mind—this dog is begging for more, and I have nothing to give him."

Her husband laughed and rose. "Come then," he said. "I shall be glad to walk. I am a little tired of this din and glare and glitter."

"Oh, why did you not tell me so," said Stella, rather reproachfully, as she put up her dainty parasol and walked by his side. "I thought that you were liking it so much, and I never care for crowds of fashionable people, and bands and seaside amusements."

"I suppose we were each trying to please the other. It is a mistake to sacrifice one's own individuality for the supposed taste of another person," said Alan, a little bit dogmatically.

Stella looked up at him with some amusement in the blue eyes that gleamed so brightly beneath her pretty shady hat, but did not speak. "What is it?" he asked, glancing at her with an answering smile. "I believe, you little witch, that you don't believe me capable of sacrificing my individuality for anybody's taste—is that it?"

"You are capable of it, no doubt," said Stella demurely, "but—it is not easy to you, is it, Alan?"

She meant only to tease him a little, with that new sparkle of fun which circumstances were developing in her, but she was surprised to see that he took the remark seriously.

"I am very selfish," he said, with a half sigh, "but I did hope—I had been trying—that you should not suffer by my selfishness, my dear."

"Oh, Alan, you cannot think that I meant that. Why, you have been kindness and generosity itself! I was only jesting—I only meant that your strong individuality was hard to disguise; I had no critical intentions at all," and

Stella smiled at him very sweetly, but with a little look of anxiety in her blue eyes.

They had got beyond the crowd by this time, and reached a quiet and unfrequented part of the beach, where nothing but sand and sea lay before them, and where they could talk without fear of disturbance. Alan answered, gravely still.

"You make great allowance for me, Stella; I can see that you are not difficult to please. But I know well enough that I am morose and selfish and unattractive, and I must not let you sacrifice your youth and brightness to me."

"Why should you?" said Stella, with a sunny look. "I have seldom—never, I think—had so bright and happy a time as I have had—lately." He took her hand in his, as they walked along the sea-shore together. "Is that true, Stella? Lately—since our marriage, you mean, dear?"

"Yes, Alan."

He clasped her hand still more firmly. "Thank God!" he said, with a quick sigh. "I was afraid I had done wrong—afraid that you would not be happy with me after all."

Something rose in Stella's throat and choked her words. They stood still for a few moments, looking at the sea, over which the sun was beginning to set in a mist of crimson and gold. She wished that Alan knew—without her having to tell him—how sure she felt of her future happiness. He relinquished her hand at last, and looked down at her with a tender smile.

"I think I must have been mistaken," he said. "I think you seem content, Stella? Child, if you want to be happy, remember one thing—you must be frank and open; there must be no concealments, no half-truths—but why should I say this? You are truth and candour incarnate; I have never seen a shadow of insincerity upon your face. It is the characteristic that I love best of any in the world."

"And I, too," said Stella, in a low voice.

"Yes, and that was what drew me towards you, Stella. Your candor and truthfulness will be, I trust, the saving of my poor Molly." Stella shrank a little as he uttered his daughter's name. It was for Molly's sake, then, most of all, that he prized her? Mr. Moncrieff went on, unconscious of the storm that he was raising in her heart. "Molly

—you must have found it out for yourself—is not always perfectly frank. It is perhaps not her fault, altogether, poor child.” He hesitated for a few moments and then continued, in a much lower tone—and without looking at Stella: “I sometimes fear that she has inherited a tendency—an unfortunate tendency—I believe myself, that even hereditary tendencies are curable, but the task of curing them is always more difficult, and it is right that you should know——” Again he stopped, having involved himself in a sentence of which he could not see the end.

“Inherited?” said Stella—for once, somewhat thoughtlessly. “But you are truthful enough; she could not have inherited it from you.”

“From her mother,” he answered, shortly and sternly. It was the first time he had spoken to Stella of his first wife. “I feel it my duty to tell you—to caution you. Otherwise I should not have spoken.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Stella involuntarily, “I did not mean to ask——”

“You were right to ask. You ought to know. Molly is like her mother, in face, form, and feature. In character, perhaps. It sounds a hard thing to say; but I think I would rather see her in her grave than—in some respects—as her mother was.”

He spoke very bitterly, with his eyes fixed on the ground, and a dark look coming over his face.

“For a long time,” he said, presently, without looking up, “I thought that all women were like her, and I avoided them—till I met you. I was wrong—I believe that I was wrong; and perhaps I judged her harshly. I do not wish to condemn lightly; but I ask you, I beg of you, to guard Molly, to watch over her, to take care lest she should yield to any temptation to deceit and levity and folly. I commit her to your hands; do what you can for her. Heaven knows that I would not have said a word to throw blame on the dead if it were not for Molly’s sake—so that you may see how needful it is to watch her more carefully, and guard her more entirely than other girls.”

The thought flashed through Stella’s mind that he had not hitherto been very wise in his methods of guarding and guiding his children, but she repressed it as a disloyalty.

“I do not think that Molly is untruthful,” she said, in a low voice.

"She is careless about the truth," said Mr. Moncrieff, with a sigh; "I will say nothing worse of her. And Bertie, too, I fear."

"Do you think," said Stella, diffidently, "that Mr. Kingscott's influence over Bertie is altogether good?"

He turned to her with a start and a vexed contraction of his brows.

"Ralph Kingscott! Why, my dear child, Ralph is the most harmless fellow in the world! You don't object to his presence at Torresmuir, surely?"

Stella fancied that it would be very little use if she did.

"He has done everything possible for the boy's welfare," proceeded her husband, in a somewhat annoyed tone. "Borne with him, taught him, cared for him, like an elder brother, as few men of his age and standing would have done. I have the greatest confidence in Ralph Kingscott, and I hope, dear Stella, that you will try to be friendly with him when we reach Torresmuir."

"I will try," she answered, gently. She wished that he had said—"when we reach *home*."

They were both a little silent after this. It almost seemed to Stella as if some shadow had fallen across her sunshine, some cold breath of air had stolen across the warmth of her hopes. But as they turned, before re-entering their hotel, to watch the glimmering lights and the crimson reflections of the sunset sky upon the sea, she felt her husband's hand touch her arm, and draw her closer to his side.

"You see that star?" he said, in the caressing voice that was already as music in her ears. "You see how large and bright it is? I am beginning to grow old; it will soon be the evening of life with me; and you, Stella, you are the star that lights the coming darkness, and gives a radiance to the night. I fancy, sometimes, dear, that you will bring me back all my old light and joy, and that the happiness of Torresmuir will return to it with you—that we shall find in you the luck—or the *Glück*, as the Germans would call it—the good fortune, the happiness—of the house!"

And yet—it was an odd thing, when one came to think of it—Stella remembered afterwards that he had never once told her that he loved her!

CHAPTER XV.

STELLA'S HOME-COMING.

Two gentlemen were sitting in a small private parlor at the Birnam Arms. They were both pale and both dark: otherwise there was not much resemblance between them. One was somewhat effeminate in appearance; the other was tall, sinewy, and vigorous-looking—little altered from the man to whom Stella Raeburn had once given her maiden heart. John Hannington was bronzed by some weeks' shooting and fishing in the Highlands, and was, if anything, rather handsomer than in the days when he wooed Stella under the ruined arches of Balmerino, but his face had not improved in expression. It was more cynical, more discontented, more defiant, than it had been even a year ago. Life had not been going altogether well with him since then.

His companion, Ralph Kingscott, was leaning back in a large arm-chair, with a cigar between his lips. His small features were lit up with an expression of the keenest amusement.

"So she had a little love affair before she came to Dunkeld!" he was exclaiming. "This is most interesting. I thought she looked too innocent for this wicked world!"

"She's innocent enough," Hannington was beginning sulkily, but Kingscott interrupted him with his mocking laugh.

"Oh, she's a lily, a snowflake, a pearl—we all know that; Moncrieff's besotted on her babyface already. She's just the style he's likely to go mad about—fair, gentle, blue-eyed, goldenhaired, and all the rest of it—as great a contrast to his first wife as could possibly be imagined."

"What was the first Mrs. Moncrieff like, then?"

"She was my half-sister, you know. Well, she was like Molly, only there was a little more red in her hair and the tint of her eye. She was fair; of course you will say that constitutes a likeness to the present Mrs. Moncrieff, but

the two women were not alike a bit. Molly is not like the fair Stella, for instance."

"She is ten times handsomer," said John Hannington.

"I think so; Moncrieff doesn't," said Kingscott, quietly. "She was a woman with a temper, as wild and skittish a creature as you ever met; a demon of a tongue, and no capacity for restraining it—or herself. Molly's a spitfire, but she is not equal to her mother."

"You give your sister a nice character."

"Half-sister, if you please. It makes all the difference. Marie and I had different mothers; there was Basque blood in hers. I don't know how she would have lived with Moncrieff as long as she did if I had not been there to calm the two down when they had their little disputes. That I managed well, you may conclude from the fact that I have had free quarters at Torresmuir ever since. I am supposed to do something in the way of bear leading; but my cub will soon go to Cambridge, I believe, and the question will then be whether I am to remain or not."

"The new Mrs. Moncrieff will have something to say to that, I imagine," said Hannington, drily.

"Yes—confound her." He looked as if he would like to use a stronger word.

"Does she like you much?"—Hannington's tone was malicious.

"Hates me like poison, I believe. No. I suppose I shall have to go, bag and baggage, and make myself comfortable somewhere else. Not at once; she'll hardly have made her footing sure enough, or I should have had notice before now; but in six months or so, if nothing destroys her influence in the meantime."

"What *would* destroy her influence?"

"Well—I have an idea or two."

"Let's hear them."

"Are you on my side, Hannington? The girl behaved shabbily to you, you say—"

"Cut me in the presence of half a dozen of my friends. Yes, she made it rather awkward for me. You know Lady Valencia Gilderoy?—an old friend of mine. She made up her mind that I had given the girl good cause for offence, and has turned the cold shoulder to me ever since—done me a good deal of mischief, I can tell you!"

"Oh, nobody minds Lady Val; I know her," said King-

scott, with apparent carelessness, although he kept a very watchful eye upon his friend: "Still, Miss Stella must be a spiteful little minx. You would not object to see her pride have a fall, then?"

"No, I shouldn't."

"And it is, of course, my interest to lessen her influence as much as possible. Well, there are two ways in which to do it."

"Two?"

"One I'll keep to myself," said Kingscott, with an ugly smile. "The other depends somewhat on you. You say you have letters from her?"

Hannington's face flushed.

"I did not say I would show them," he answered, doggedly.

"You did not say so. But—what if you let Moncrieff have a glance at them?"

Hannington shifted uneasily in his chair.

"I don't see the use of that," he said.

"You don't?"—incredulously.

"No, I don't."

"Why, don't you know that Alan Moncrieff is the most jealous, the most suspicious man alive? If I know anything of women, my dear Jack, she won't have told him a word about you, or only what she pleases; and she will be mortally afraid of his getting to know the true state of the case."

"Well," growled Hannington, "the way to punish *her*, then, will be to threaten her, to hold the letters over her head, and give her a good fright. I shouldn't mind doing that."

"Our aims differ," said Kingscott, throwing himself back lazily in his chair, and lighting a fresh cigar. "You want merely to punish her—I want to spoil her influence with Moncrieff; there's the difference."

"Can't we do both?" suggested his companion, slowly. Then there was a little silence, during which each man smoked industriously, and revolved his own plans. When Kingscott next spoke, he seemingly changed the subject.

"So you saw Molly at the Lawsons this autumn?" he said. "She isn't a bad looking girl, is she?"

"Not at all."

"She'll have a fair fortune," said Molly's uncle. "She

has her mother's money—comes into it at her marriage, or when she is twenty-one."

"Indeed? Much?"

"Twenty-five thousand. Nothing to a fellow like you. But it will add to Molly's attractions."

He thought that he caught sight of an odd glitter in John Hannington's black eyes. But he went on discreetly.

"Moncrieff has the idea that he ought to tie her up very tight—I think he's married pretty Stella with the idea of getting a gaoler for his poor child. She'll not be allowed to come out till she is past her teens, or mix with the world at large until she's three-and-twenty. Before then, however, Alan will have found her a model husband, some worthy, prosy, neighboring laird, who will keep her in order, and bury her in a dull mansion in the Highlands nine months in the year; and that will be poor Molly's future fate."

"Not a bit!" said Hannington, abruptly. She'd not stand it, my dear fellow. She would bolt."

"She had better bolt before marriage than after," was Kingscott's cynical response. To which his friend made no answer, but sat with his eyes fixed intently upon the opposite wall, and his foot moving meditatively to and fro.

"We'd better be going, I think," said Ralph at last, after looking at his watch. "The train's due, and I must be on the spot to give Mr. and Mrs. Moncrieff their welcome. Will you come too?"

"Not I. I'll see Mrs. Moncrieff some other day—no fear."

"You won't call?"

"Don't know."

"I thought that you were so very friendly with Molly! She gave me quite a touching account of your attentions to her."

"She had better not say anything of that sort to her step-mamma!"

"No, no; I'll warn her. Shall I say that you are sorry you won't see her again?"

Hannington's lip curled. "You want to know my plans, I see? Well, they are not decided. But one thing I am sure of. I don't leave Mr. Pople's inn just yet, I can tell you. I am very well off where I am, and mean to stop."

Kingscott nodded and smiled. "All right. If you stay where you are for the next half hour you will see your old flame most likely. I ordered the open carriage to be sent down. Now I must go and find my cub—I hope he's all right. I left him in the bar."

"You can bring him here with you some night for a game of Nap," said Hannington. "He can get out at nights, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; thanks to the door in the Tower and his kind uncle. Ta-ta, Jack. I'll remember you to Molly."

And then Kingscott went downstairs to seek Bertie, with whom he meant to go to the railway station, to welcome the bride and bridegroom home. Molly had refused to come. She had returned from her visit to the Lawsons in a rather odd state of mind; she seemed excited and spiritless by turns; and in this condition her uncle had found it easier to make friends with her than he had ever done before. It had occurred to him that Molly might be useful in the furtherance of his schemes, and therefore he took pains to be agreeable to her. Molly, feeling sore and bitter still, because of what she styled "Miss Raeburn's treachery," was only too glad to find some one into whose ear she might pour her woes without rebuke. She soon told, moreover, that she had seen some one at Miss Lawson's whom she liked very much—a gentleman who had told her she was the most beautiful girl in the world—a Mr. John Hannington. And was it possible that Uncle Ralph knew Mr. Hannington—had known him for many years, and liked him very much? Molly's prejudice against her uncle went down like the walls of Jericho when the trumpets had been blown. And all this information was turned by Mr. Kingscott to the very best account.

He could not find Bertie for some time, and began to feel half vexed and half alarmed by the lad's disappearance, especially as he received a hint from the attendant that the young gentleman seemed a wee bit fond of a drap. "Fond of a drap!"—what on earth could the man mean! thought Kingscott irascibly. Bertie had surely not been such an idiot.

He never finished the sentence to himself. At that very moment, he heard a bell ringing, and ran with all his might up the hill to the railway station, where Mr. Moncrieff's carriage and half a dozen other vehicles were in

waiting for the arrival of the train from Perth. Kingscott was a little late, as he was vexed to see Mr. and Mrs. Monerick come out of the station just as he reached it; and his congratulations were somewhat spoiled in effect by the fact that he uttered them in a voice which showed that he was very much out of breath.

"Bertie came with me, but we stopped to say a word or two to a friend in the street, and I lost sight of him," said Kingscott, with admirable candour. "He is following me I suppose; we shall see him presently."

And then he halted in his speech. A terrible sight met his eyes. A group of little boys had set up a shrill hurrah at the sight of "a drunk man" yet not a man, but a slight, tall, handsome lad, whose eyes were wild, whose face was inflamed, who swayed from side to side in his endeavor to keep himself straight as he staggered across the roadway. Ralph made a rush forward, but Alan Monerick, with a face as white as death, laid a hand on his arm.

"Wait one moment," he said. "I must put my wife into the carriage first. Then you and I will get that wretched lad home between us. The only thing we can do is to hide his shame—and our own—the best we can."

And that was Stella's home coming.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHADOWS.

STELLA caught only a glimpse of Bertie's vacant face. She was hastily placed in the carriage by Alan Monerick, whose rigid lips would hardly frame the words of apology for leaving her alone, which he felt were due to her; and then, almost before she knew what had happened, she was being driven rapidly along the road towards the new home, which she had hoped to enter with her husband at her side. Alan blamed himself afterwards for not having left his son to Kingscott's care, for it occurred to him that Stella's drive to Torresmuir would be desolate, indeed, without any one at her side to encourage her; but at the moment itself he was absorbed in the thought of Bertie,

and too much shocked at the revelation of his state to be altogether regardless of the requirements of a young and timid wife.

Stella did what she was asked to do without raising any objection, but she wiped away a few tears as she was bowled along the road to Torresmuir. She had only a vague sense of what had happened. Alan's stricken white face, Ralph Kingscott's dismay, Bertie's strange looks, did not tell her the whole truth of the story. She decided that Bertie must be ill, and she dreaded the thought of encountering Molly without her husband at her side. Fortunately she remembered that Aunt Jacky was to be present at Torresmuir that evening; and if she were there the place would not be so unhomelike after all.

But the arrival was a trial to Stella's equanimity. At the ~~hedge gate~~, several of the out-door men, the gardeners and keepers, were collected to give the new mistress a welcome. There was a little arch of evergreens and flags over the gate; Mr. Moncrieff had quite forgotten that any such reception was likely to have been devised. Everybody set up a shout as the carriage came up, but the shout died away in rather a feeble manner when it was seen that Mrs. Moncrieff occupied it alone. But she looked so beautiful and smiled so sweet a response to their greeting, that it was renewed with tenfold the previous fervor. Indeed the carriage had to be stopped for a minute or two, so that an old gamekeeper might make his little speech of welcome, in which he wished happiness and good fortune to the new mistress of Torresmuir. Mr. Moncrieff had warned Ralph that he did not want any formal reception or welcome of any kind, but Mr. Kingscott had been unable to prevent some slight demonstration on the part of the out-door men, who, more than the in-door servants, were disposed to be pleased that there was now to be a mistress "up at the house." The house-servants were less inclined to be delighted. They had had their own way for so long that they feared a lady's rule—Miss Molly counting for nothing in their eyes.

Stella explained, with a little blush and sigh, that Mr. Moncrieff was detained at the station and would follow presently, but she added diffidently that she thought they had better not wait for him as he might be late, and—

and—was tired and unwell. So the men dispersed, and did not at once catch the meaning of the glance and the wink which the coachman on the box bestowed on them. They hung about the stables afterwards, however, to learn its meaning; and were very soon enlightened. Bertie's vacant looks and staggering footsteps needed no interpretation to them or to Mrs. Moncrieff. The whole household knew what had happened long before the master of the house came home.

It was Miss Jacky who flung herself in Stella's arms and gave her a really hearty welcome, as she had done not eighteen months before, when the girl came home from school. The servants were waiting in the hall, but they did not give the new mistress any very amiable looks, although they behaved with outward respect and decorum. Molly came forward languidly, with such an abatement of her old vivacity that Stella felt a pang of grief and alarm as she noted her altered manner, and kissed the cheek that was offered rather formally for her salute.

"Is papa not with you?" There was a touch of sharpness in Molly's tone. "And Uncle Ralph and Bertie—where are they?"

"They are coming presently; I left them at the station," said Stella, holding Aunt Jacky by the hand as she entered the drawing-room. "I think—I am afraid—Bertie was not very well, and they stayed to attend to him." She hoped that her version of the story might be true.

"Not well—they stayed, and you did not stay?" said Molly, looking at Stella with eyes in which a new suspiciousness had crept. "Why did you come away?"

"Your father wished me to come."

"I shall ask Macgregor," said Molly. She was darting to the door when Stella caught her arm.

"Don't go, Molly darling. Don't ask. They will be here very soon; there is nothing seriously amiss, I hope. Don't question the servants."

"Why should I not question them?" said Molly the impetuous. "They are all old friends of mine, and they would answer truly and faithfully, which perhaps you don't want to do, Mrs. Moncrieff." Stella shrank a little, and turned pale as the girl flung this taunt into her face. "I am not going to alter my old ways for any new comers," and with these words Molly escaped from the detaining hand, and rushed out of the room.

Stella sank down on the nearest chair. Her lips were trembling and the tears were in her eyes.

"Oh, my dearie, don't you fash yourself," said Aunt Jacky, kissing her, and then wiping her own eyes. "She's just full of tantrums, and she'll get over them by and by. You come up to your own room, my bonnie lassie, and lay by your bonnet. Your good man's on the road, I'll warrant, and he'll soon set things to rights." Aunt Jacky had an immense admiration for Alan Moncrieff.

She asked no questions, for she saw that Stella was near weeping, and affection gave her an unusual amount of tact. She went upstairs with her, and helped her to take off her walking things. "Dinner to be served at eight, and it is more than half-past seven now," she said. "Are you going to dress, my lammie?"

"I suppose I had better; I don't know what I ought to do," said Stella. "Yes, I will wear my silver-grey dress, Aunt Jacky; I think that perhaps I ought—though I feel very anxious—and very——"

She did not conclude the sentence, and Aunt Jacky still asked no questions.

"Won't you wear white, my dear? Surely you should look like a bride when your husband finds you in his home."

"Oh, not to-night—not to-night," said Stella, hurriedly. There was nothing of bridal joyousness in her heart just then.

As she was dressing, she heard the sound of wheels in the road outside, but the vehicle did not drive up to the front door. It stopped at a side gate. From the footsteps that she afterwards distinguished upon the gravel, she guessed that her husband and his companions entered the house by the door in the tower. She waited for a little while, but Mr. Moncrieff did not appear. Then she went to the drawing-room and sat almost in silence with Aunt Jacky and Molly until, at half-past eight, Alan came in and made a grave formal apology for his lateness. Ralph followed him, but Bertie did not appear. Molly began a question, but was stopped by a warning from her uncle. It was plain that Bertie's existence was for the present to be ignored.

Stella's first dinner in her own home as a married woman was one that she could never recall without a shudder. It

was so long, so dreary, so unspeakably uncomfortable. Her husband maintained almost entire silence, except when his office forced him to speak; he looked white, old, and dejected. Miss Jacky and Ralph Kingscott had so great an aversion to each other that they always found it difficult to keep the peace. Molly spoke only in monosyllables. Stella felt obliged to throw herself into the breach, and try to make conversation, but she was not very successful in her efforts. Nobody seemed better able to eat than to speak; and every one was glad when the meal came to an end.

Alan and his brother-in-law remained in the dining-room for some time longer, while Stella talked a little to Miss Jacky, and tried to interest Molly in an account of her travels. But Molly refused to be interested. She sat stiffly in an upright chair, and looked at a book of photographs while Stella talked. But in spite of her stiffness and her sulkiness Stella could not but notice how much she was improving in dress, manner, and appearance. Her visit to the Lawsons had done her good. She only wore a simple white frock and a silver ornament or two, but there was a neatness and daintiness about her way of wearing them which differed from her habits of former days. Her hair no longer hung about her shoulders, but was gathered into loose, picturesque coils about her shapely head. Her complexion was more dazzling than ever, and her eyes seemed to have gained fire and softness. In short, Molly was on the high-road to becoming a beauty, if she was not one already. And as she sat in a highbacked chair, with the soft lamplight gleaming on her ruddy bronze hair and the white and roseate tints of her clear skin, Stella scarcely wondered to see her father stop short for a moment when he came into the room, as though her appearance had positively startled him. Indeed, she learned afterwards that Molly was growing wonderfully like her dead mother, and that the likeness had never struck him so much as it did just then.

Miss Jacky rose at the stroke of ten, and declared that she must go home. The carriage was soon at the door to convey the good old lady to the pretty cottage, which, in spite of all loneliness, she had declined to leave. Mr. Moncrieff had suggested that she should make Torresmuir her home, but she had refused to give up her independence.

And she knew, besides, that Stella would take her proper place as mistress of the house more easily if she were not encumbered with an elderly maiden aunt. In all which, Miss Jacky showed her excellent sense.

When she was gone, Molly, with unlooked-for temerity, faced her father defiantly in the drawing-room. "I want to know, papa," she said, undismayed by Mr. Moncrieff's frown, "what is wrong with Bertie? I have been to his room, and he won't let me in. Is he ill?"

"I do not suppose that he is ill as much as suffering from the consequences of his own folly," said her father. His face was pale and set, his eyes looked hard as flint, from which, nevertheless, fire was being struck. "You will leave him alone for the present, Molly. I do not wish you to go near him."

"Why should I not go near him if he is ill?" said Molly; holding her head high. It was wonderful to see how much courage she had gained since her father's second marriage and her visit to the Lawsons. Stella gave her an entreating look, but Molly would not heed.

"Why not?" Alan Moncrieff spoke with exceeding bitterness. "Because he has disgraced himself and us—publicly disgraced us, as I never thought a son of mine would do. Because he has chosen—not for the first time, I hear—to drink and quarrel and bet at a public bar, and to appear intoxicated in the public streets. That is why you may not go to him; for until he has at least shown some signs of repentance and amendment, I desire that he be left to himself, and I forbid any one to go to his room save at my request."

Molly's color faded, and her lips began to tremble, but her eyes flashed.

"And so you want me to desert him!" she cried, in an angry, faltering voice. "I don't care what he has done; he is my only brother, and I love him. If you loved him, too, you would forgive him. But you don't care for us now; you only care for her"—pointing to the dismayed Stella—"and the sooner we leave you and get out of the way, the better you will be pleased."

And then Molly fairly burst into tears and rushed out of the room, which was perhaps the best thing that she could do, for her father's face was white with anger, and the frown on his brow would at any other time have carried

consternation to Molly's heart. He would have followed her to the door, had Stella's hands not fallen pleadingly upon his arm.

"Oh, Alan, don't mind! Her heart is very sore, poor child, and she does not know what she is saying. She will be sorry to-morrow; indeed, she will."

Mr. Kingscott had left the room, and Stella, finding herself alone with her husband, was impelled to put her arm half round his neck, and to lay her head caressingly upon his breast. Alan could not have torn himself away from that gentle bondage without a struggle. After the first involuntary movement he did not try. He drew her closer to him, and pressed her forehead with his lips.

"You are the only comfort that I have left," he said. "It has been a sad home-coming for you, Stella. I pray God that life may yet brighten a little—for us both."

CHAPTER XVII.

BERTIE.

BUT Alan Moncrieff's anger, hotly as it burned against the son who had disgraced, and the daughter who had defied him, died away into sadness and disappointment, which was much more lasting and much harder for those who loved him to endure. He was extremely shocked and distressed to find that Bertie had taken many steps in a downward course, which he had never dreamed that the lad was likely to tread at all. A few careful and confidential inquiries in the town elicited the fact that Bertie was by no means as quiet and home-loving as his father had always credited him with being; that he was well known in various very questionable resorts, and that he had a great love for cards. Whether the gambling passion had yet been excited within him, Mr. Moncrieff found it hard to ascertain. Bertie, on being questioned, acknowledged that he played for money, but only, he said, for small stakes. He had no debts; he did not care for betting; he drank only because "other fellows" did. When pressed to state "what other fellows?" he became silent, and looked utterly miserable. When asked who first introduced him

to the low society which he had begun to frequent, he at first refused to answer, and then said that nobody had introduced him; he had sought these people of his own free will. Mr. Moncrieff had scarcely any alternative but to believe him. And yet he was suspicious—of what, of whom, he could not exactly tell.

Stella's suspicions were much more definite. She firmly believed that Ralph Kingscott was at the bottom of Bertie's disgrace; and that he was responsible for the boy's gradual declension. But when she hinted this view of the case to her husband, she was met with an expression of cold displeasure which silenced her at once. Mr. Moncrieff had never been anything but satisfied with Ralph, he said. Ralph was a man of high character and good ability, who had given up his career expressly for the purpose of making himself useful to his sister's husband and children. Stella felt vaguely that Alan was mentally accusing her of jealousy, and of a mean desire to get his first wife's relative out of the house, and she forbore to speak another word. But she was not convinced of Ralph's honor and uprightness even yet.

She overheard a scrap of conversation which confirmed her secret suspicions in a rather curious way. She wanted to talk to Bertie—who had not yet made his appearance in public after his escapade—and Mr. Moncrieff had told her that she would probably find him in the Octagon Room, where he generally pursued his studies under Kingscott's superintendence. Thither Stella betook herself about six o'clock one evening. Two days had elapsed since her arrival at Torresmuir, and she had not yet seen the boy, over whom her heart yearned with a sensation of intolerable grief and pain. She came quietly through the long gallery—so quietly that her footsteps made no sound upon the polished floor—and paused for a moment before she drew the *portière* before the entrance to the Octagon Room. She paused simply to collect her thoughts, to renew her courage; but in that pause voices fell upon her ear.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Ralph Kingscott was saying coolly. "If you say one word about it, I'll tell your father the whole of that little transaction of yours with Vinner, and then——"

"No! oh, no!" Bertie's voice, full of agitation and

appeal, was heard to say, "Oh, don't tell him that. He would never forgive me. I will do anything you like—I won't say a word——"

And then Stella drew the curtain aside, and found, as she had already divined, that the door was open. Bertie was lying on a sofa, his head half buried in the cushions; Mr. Kingscott was lounging in an arm chair with his arm behind his head. He cast a look of positive hatred at Stella as she came in; a look in which malignity and cunning were so blended that she did not like to remember it afterwards, although at the time itself it produced little impression upon her.

"Mrs. Moncrieff!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet, with a sort of disagreeably exaggerated politeness. "We never expected this honor, did we Bertie? My young pupil and I seem to have had a prescriptive right to this part of the house for so long that we are quite unused to visitors. But of course we must look for changes now."

There was a subtle sting in this remark which was not lost upon Stella's perceptions, but she did not choose to attend to Mr. Kingscott's insinuations at that moment. She turned at once towards Bertie, who did not raise his face from the pillow against which it was pressed. She could read shame in the boy's very attitude, and she hastened to lay her hand gently on his head, without heeding Mr. Kingscott's presence.

"Bertie!" she said, softly, "Bertie! have you no word for me?"

She felt her hand taken and carried to the boy's lips, but he did not say a word. Moved by a sudden impatience, she looked round at Mr. Kingscott. "I should like to speak to him alone for a few minutes," she said. "You will excuse me if I ask——"

"Oh, certainly. You have every right to command," said Kingscott, bowing with the ironical politeness which he had already shown to her. "Will leave you with your stepson by all means, Mrs. Moncrieff."

Stella felt that there was something unpleasant—something even vaguely insulting—in his manner, but she did not choose to resent it. She waited, with her hand in Bertie's grasp, until his uncle had retired. Mr. Kingscott went into his own room and closed the door of communication. Not till then did Stella feel free to sink down

on her knees beside Bertie's sofa, and speak to him in soft, carressing tones.

"Dear Bertie, we are all so sorry. And you are sorry, too."

Then the boys' grief broke forth. He burst into a storm of choking, overpowering sobs, in which all his attempts at speech were lost. It was some time before the words became articulate.

"I didn't mean it—I never thought what I was doing—I shall never be able to look you in the face again!" These were the first words that became audible.

"I know, dear; I understand."

"Just when you came home—just when you expected a welcome—for me to disgrace you so! And my father—he'll never forgive me!"

"Oh! yes, he will, Bertie. If you are sure that you have told him everything that he ought to know—and if for the future you do right."

Bertie did not speak. From the tremor that ran through his whole frame, Stella felt that her words had gone home.

"Is there not anything that you have kept from your father, Bertie? Is there not something that he ought to know?"

"You—you heard me speaking—as you came in?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, don't tell, don't say anything to my father," said the boy, raising himself for the first time, and turning an anguished face upon her. "It is not my secret—at least, it is nothing—nothing much——"

"Then why are you so much afraid of his knowing?"

"I should like him to know! Oh, I wish I could tell him everything!"

"You mean," said Stella, slowly, "that your uncle, Mr. Kingscott, will not allow you to speak?"

The boy cowered down, with his face in the cushion again. Stella grew a little indignant.

"Why are you afraid of him?" she said. "Why do you not throw off his bondage, and be perfectly frank and open? You think he will tell your father of things that you want hidden? but why do you hide them? why not make a full confession of everything wrong, and start afresh? Be brave, dear Bertie, and tell your father all."

But Bertie only groaned and muttered, "You don't know. You would not say so if you knew everything."

"Then tell me everything, and let me judge."

"No, no; I can't."

"Then, Bertie, I think I must tell your father what I heard as I came in, and let him question you."

But at this Bertie fell into such a paroxysm of terror, and was yet so emphatic in his asseverations, that there was nothing to tell—nothing to conceal: that Stella was fairly bewildered. And when the boy added the most earnest assurances that he was resolved to give up his bad companions and to lead a steady and honorable course for the future; she felt that she was unable to do more for him, and could only hope that he would keep his word. Her late failure to impress Mr. Moncrieff with any doubt of Ralph Kingscott added to her reluctance to make any accusation of that gentleman. She made up her mind, therefore, to wait for a time and see what happened; for Bertie seemed sincerely repentant, and had promised to amend his ways, and if he did as he had promised there would surely be no need to say anything. She wondered afterwards whether a little cowardice had not prompted this decision, but she was not actually conscious of it at the time.

Alan Moncrieff was only too glad to be able to accord a free pardon to his boy, and Stella felt that her intercession had not been unavailing in bringing a reconciliation about at an earlier date than Bertie had expected. The boy was very much humbled by his disgrace; for it could not be denied that every one in the neighborhood was aware of the fact that he had been seen under the influence of drink outside the railway station, on the evening of his step-mother's arrival; and it was the publicity of the incident which added poignancy to his father's grief, as well as his own humiliation. It was decided that he should be sent to a tutor's at the New Year; and in the meantime he was to remain under Mr. Kingscott's tuition and guardianship. Stella would have been better satisfied if he had gone at once; but, as she soon found, her husband did not like precipitate action, and it was useless to urge him to do what he did not like. It was easy to perceive that although he was always kind and courteous and considerate towards her, it was not she who had influence with him in practical matters, but his first wife's brother, Ralph Kingscott. He was supreme, and Mrs. Moncrieff—although she sat at the head

of the table, and ordered the dinner, and supervised Molly's studies, and received visitors — Mrs. Moncrieff was a cipher in the house.

One of Stella's first visitors was Lady Valencia Gilderoy. Lady Val lived with a widowed sister at a pretty little house about five miles from Torresmuir, and she had known the Moncrieffs for many years. The sister, Mrs. Lennox, had laid aside all outward traces of widowhood, received a good deal of company, and was one of the most popular women in the country side. Lady Val was popular, also, but in a different way. She was reputed to be one of the most skilful and shameless flirts in the County, and Stella liked the report that she heard of her so little, that she half-involuntarily received Lady Val with much stiffness, and showed by her manner that she had no great desire to be a friend of hers. But Lady Val was undismayed. "I like the little thing, and I'm going to be friends with her," she remarked to her sister, as they drove home together after their first call; "so she needn't put on her company-manners for me, I'll soon get rid of that."

"She's very quiet," said Mrs. Lennox. "I don't see much to like in her, Val. I wonder what Alan Moncrieff married her for. Her pretty face, I suppose. I thought he had more sense."

"No man has any sense where a pretty face is concerned," said Lady Val, decisively. "But I think there's more than that in Mrs. Moncrieff. She must have some character, I fancy."

She did not say why she thought so; but she was thinking of that autumn day when she and John Hannington had been riding side by side towards Dunkeld, and when "the little Dundee girl" had given John Hannington the cut direct. She laughed to herself, but she set her teeth as though something hurt her even while she laughed, at the thought of Jack Hannington's face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY VAL'S NEWS.

WINTER came down upon the land and laid its iron grip upon the bounding streams, upon the trees and flowers and mossy ground; it enveloped the hills in a winding-sheet of snow, and hung a veil of hoar-frost over the casements of every house. In weather of this kind, the old and sickly were sure to suffer. Miss Jacky was neither very weak nor very aged, and yet she succumbed to the severity of the cold. A bad attack of bronchitis reduced her strength very seriously, and a heart affection, of which she had been silently conscious for many years, put an end to her life just when she seemed to be recovering. In January she was carried to her last long rest, and then Stella felt herself more than ever lonely and alone.

She had failed, apparently, to win Molly's trust and affection. The girl had been cold and unresponsive ever since Stella became her father's wife. It seemed as if she owed her stepmother a grudge which she could not forget or forgive, and although she was not outwardly rebellious—for she had lost some of her childish waywardness—she was neither companionable nor agreeable. Bertie was far more affectionate to his stepmother than was Molly; but Stella saw little of him, for Ralph Kingscott kept such watch and ward over the lad, that he was not often to be found, save "under *surveillance*." The scheme for sending him to England at the New Year had to be deferred, for he caught so severe a cold during the Christmas week that it was impossible for him to leave home, and Mr. Moncrieff decided that he must wait for warmer weather before any change in his manner of life was made. This fact, and Miss Raeburn's death, caused him also not to press Stella to go with him to London, as he had at first intended to do; he hardly liked to take her away from home, and thought that it might be as well to defer her visit to the metropolis until Molly was old enough to go and be presented at the

same time. He himself spent a few days in town, but soon returned to Torresmuir, where there was a magnet, the influence of which was stronger than he knew.

It seemed to Stella that she saw very little of her husband. She had dreams of companionship and guidance which had come to naught. She could not blame Alan, or think that he actually neglected her; he was always ready to do what she required of him, to pay calls, to drive or ride with her, to escort her with scrupulous care to balls and dinner-parties; but he did not seem to seek her society, or, if he sought it, Ralph Kingscott was always by to offer his companionship, and thrust himself into their company. It seemed to Stella that Ralph hinted continually that Alan would be dull with her alone; that he needed a man's companionship, and that a woman could not interest him. Time after time he diverted Alan's attention from her, or—as she occasionally found out—misrepresented her wishes, and prevented her husband from accompanying her when she went out. Yet it was impossible for Stella to protest, to explain; if ever she tried to do so, Alan immediately suspected some attack upon Ralph Kingscott, proceeding from feminine spite and jealousy, and silenced her at once. She could only feel a vague consciousness of disappointment in her married life; she knew not why. She said to herself that as long as Ralph Kingscott remained in the house she could never be happy; but there seemed no prospect of Ralph's removal. Even when Bertie went away it was arranged that he should remain—to act as Mr. Moncrieff's secretary and look after the estate. His look of satisfaction whenever he had managed to allure Alan from her side used to make Stella sick at heart.

The spring came on apace, and with one of the earliest fine days Lady Valencia Gilderoy made her appearance at Torresmuir. She had not visited it of late, and, in spite of Stella's want of friendly feeling for her at first sight, Lady Val's calls had been very much missed by Mrs. Moncrieff. Lady Val was so bright, so full of energy, so amusing, that Stella had been attracted half against her will. And she was unfeignedly glad, therefore, to see her visitor.

"Why, how white you look!" cried Lady Val, as she came in, rosy with exercise, her dark eyes sparkling, her riding-habit neatly tucked up in one hand. "You've been sitting indoors too much, Mrs. Moncrieff. I wouldn't allow that if I were your husband."

"Alan is away," said Stella, with a faint smile. "And Molly and Bertie are out together somewhere. I had a headache, I believe, and wanted to be lazy."

Lady Val nodded significantly.

"A headache! I've no doubt of it. I should think Molly keeps your hands full. She's a troublesome monkey. I know her of old."

The color came at once to Stella's cheek. "She is a very dear girl," the stepmother responded, warmly.

"She is a very pretty one, Mrs. Moncrieff. And she looks as old as you do yourself—especially since she has taken to long dresses and elaborate coils of hair. A girl of that sort attracts admirers very soon."

Again there was that significance in Lady Valencia's voice. Mrs. Moncrieff drew herself up with a slight, unconscious air of dignity.

"I dare say," she answered, with some stiffness of manner. And then, with a relaxing smile, "Poor Molly is hardly to blame for that, Lady Valencia."

"My dear creature, did I say that she was to blame?" cried Lady Val. "Do excuse me, Mrs. Moncrieff. I don't wish to be rude, or to take liberties; but you see I have known Molly all her life, and I can't help feeling interested in her. I know you will hate me if I say what I came intending to say; and yet I don't know what else to do. You wouldn't rather that I went straight to Mr. Moncrieff, would you?"

Stella looked at her in dismay. "Do you mean that there is anything to be told—anything wrong?" she asked.

"It may not be wrong; it may be all right," said Lady Val, brusquely. "All I can tell is, that people will soon begin to gossip, if they have not begun already. To ask a plain question—is Molly engaged to be married?"

"Molly! she is only a child. Certainly not."

"A child! Well, she's a very big child, Mrs. Moncrieff. She is seventeen, isn't she? Not much younger than yourself, you know, after all. And if she isn't engaged, it is time that somebody looked after her, for I don't think she's able to look after herself."

"You mean," said Stella, changing color sensitively, that I am not looking after her?"

"I don't mean anything of the kind. Everybody knows that you are a model stepmother. But—do you know Tom-garrow?"

"The little half-deserted village up the hill? Yes, I go there sometimes to see old Mrs. Cameron. What about it?"

"And you send Molly up sometimes to see Mrs. Cameron, don't you?" said Lady Val, with a shrewd look. "Well, I wouldn't send her there again—alone—if I were you. That's all. I felt it my duty to give you that hint, although, as I said, I know you'll hate me for doing so."

"You must tell me more than this? I must know what you mean," cried Stella, suddenly turning very white. "It is not fair to give me a mere hint of this sort and say no more——"

"Yes, it is," Lady Val answered, not unkindly. "There is, perhaps, no reason why I should say anything at all. I am sorry to make you uncomfortable, Mrs. Moncrieff, but I only want to put you on your guard with Miss Molly. Both these children want well looking after, I assure you, as, no doubt, you have found. I would not have come if I had not felt sure that the truth would be reaching your ears before long in some more disagreeable form. It is better that it should come from me."

"The truth! What truth? Oh, Lady Valencia, do speak plainly."

"I don't want to say too much," said Lady Val, rising and gathering up her skirts again, as if she wanted to get away as quickly as possible, "but I did want to say something. If pretty Molly has got a lover, there is no reason why it should be anything for you to alarm yourself about. Only, in my opinion, it would be better that he *should* meet her at proper times and in proper places, instead of waiting behind broken walls or in plantations, and wandering about with her over the moor. Tomgarrow—that's the meeting-place, Mrs. Moncrieff; and in telling you that, I am almost inclined to believe that I am doing a mean action."

"Do you know who—who—it is?" said Stella, in dismay. Lady Val looked at her very kindly.

"It's an old acquaintance of mine, Mrs. Moncrieff; I might say an old friend, only I don't think that his actions have been particularly friendly. That's why I don't like to go much further in my revelations. No, I won't tell you his name. I shall leave you to make your own inquiries. You will easily learn the truth now that you have a

suspicion of it. Good-bye, and believe me, I'm very sorry to be the bearer of such disagreeable news."

"I ought to be very much obliged to you.——"

"But you're not; and I don't expect you to be obliged to me just yet. You will be, by and by, and I can wait. Why, you're all in a tremble, poor little woman. Don't be afraid; Molly's skittish, but she's got no vice in her, as we say of horses. Good-bye, and don't forget Tomgarrow."

She hurried away, divining that Stella would like to be alone; but she did not guess the action upon which Mrs. Moncrieff instantly resolved as soon as her visitor was gone. Indeed, Lady Val had not yet formed a just estimate of Stella's character. She thought her amiable, engaging, kind; but she did not give her credit for much energy of will or keen perception of mind. She would have been amazed, indeed, if she had seen the rapidity with which Stella arrived that afternoon at a conclusion, and the decisiveness with which she acted upon it.

In five minutes after Lady Val's departure, Stella was walking quickly up the road which led to the tiny and half-deserted hamlet of which her visitor had spoken. It did not lie close to the road, but was reached either by a steep and narrow lane running at right angles to the highway, or by the fields which surrounded it. The inhabitants had for the most part deserted it; many of them had emigrated and left their houses empty; some of the buildings had been devastated by fire, and the broken walls only remained to show where once had been a home. A few of the older folks still clung to their dwellings; these were mostly aged Gaelic-speaking men or women, who had not had the heart to leave the place whence their younger relatives had departed. They maintained themselves by working in the fields from time to time, and by cultivating their little patches of garden; but their number was gradually dwindling, and the peat smoke rose from very few of the gaunt stone cottages, and the weeds grew rank and wild in the deserted squares of garden, and over the mouldering walls. The site of the place was very beautiful, and the women who lived there were distinguished by the Highland softness of speech and courtliness of manner which are eminently characteristic of their race. Hitherto it had been always a pleasure to Stella to visit them, and to convey little gifts to them either by her own hands or

by those of her stepdaughter. She remembered with dismay that she had that very afternoon asked Molly to take some tea to the old women, and Molly had replied very readily that she wanted a walk and would be glad to go. Stella remembered too that a quick glance of mutual understanding had then passed between the eyes of Molly and of her uncle Ralph—and that Bertie also had given his sister a quick, significant look. She had scarcely noticed this at the moment, but seen by the light of Lady Val's subsequent warning it assumed large proportions in her eyes. Were Mr. Kingscott and Bertie in the secret—if secret there were—of Molly's clandestine meetings with her lover? And who could this lover be? Surely, she was inclined to say to herself, surely Lady Val must have been mistaken! She must have mistaken some casual meeting with a friend for an assignation—of which Molly was as innocent as a baby. Molly—so young, so pretty, apparently so frank? It could not be.

As Stella toiled up the lane that led her to Tomgarrow, she could not but remember, however, the warning that her husband had given her respecting Molly's tendencies. She had not believed that he was right; she had almost forgotten what he said. She had trusted Molly entirely—foolish, weak, careless guardian of Molly's youth, she called herself as she thought of it. Oh, why had she not done her duty better?

Thus reproaching herself, she reached Tomgarrow, and there a full sense of the difficulty of her errand rushed upon her. After all, why had she come? It was not likely that Molly would be in the village now. But she might as well ask at one of the cottages if Miss Moncrieff had been there that afternoon. And even as she thought of this, and hesitated for a moment as to the course that she had better take, the sound of voices—of a laugh—fell oddly upon her ear. She turned instinctively in the direction of the sound.

A high wall that had once belonged to a house stood before her, blocking up the view. She skirted it slowly, still listening for the voices which now were still. Coming out on the other side, she saw two figures leaning against the wall as if sheltering from the cold East wind. A wide sunshiny tract of country lay before them; their backs were to the other habitations, and not another living crea-

ture was in sight. Molly Moncrieff was smiling up into the face of a tall, dark man, who had put his arm round her, and was holding her to his breast. It seemed as if he had been going to kiss her; but when Stella appeared at the extremity of the sheltering wall, he quitted his hold of the girl somewhat abruptly.

No wonder that he was startled. No wonder, perhaps, that she was even more startled than himself, for in the person of Molly's lover she saw the man whom she herself had once dreamed of marrying, the man who had cast her off because she was not rich enough for him to choose, the unscrupulous fortune-hunter—John Hannington.

CHAPTER XIX.

MOLLY'S WOOER.

MOLLY, who did not see Stella at once—not, indeed until Hannington's sudden change of expression showed her that there was something wrong—turned sharply round and uttered a cry of positive rage.

"There! I told you so!" she exclaimed. "She is always spying after me—watching me—prying into all my affairs! And now she has followed me here. Oh, what shall I do? Jack, dear Jack, save me from her! I know that she'll betray us!" And the girl hid her face on Mr. Hannington's shoulder, and clung to him, as if she feared that Stella would drag her away by force.

"Don't be afraid, my darling!" said Hannington. Was it Stella's fancy, or did his eyes light up with a gleam of positive triumph, his lips curl with a vindictive smile? Mrs. Moncrieff is the last person to do us an injury; you may depend upon that." And he calmly raised his hat from his head with an assumption of elaborate courtesy which could scarcely, under the circumstances, have been genuine.

Stella came forward, her face pale, but resolute.

"Molly," she said, quietly; "you know very well that I wish only for your good. Come away with me, and you can explain to me afterwards what all this means. Mr. Hannington will also, no doubt, explain to Mr. Moncrieff—if he can."

She looked at Hannington with defiance and mistrust in her eyes, which he could not fail to understand.

"I shall explain it when necessary," said he, coolly; "but I shall probably take my own time for doing so, Mrs. Moncrieff."

"My husband will be home to-night. I shall of course tell him what I have seen and heard."

John Hannington smiled a little, but did not speak. Molly tore herself away from his encircling arm, and faced her stepmother valiantly.

"You won't really do that, will you!" she said. "It isn't fair—indeed is isn't fair of you! There's no harm in my meeting John—Mr. Hannington—and I don't see why anybody need—need—make a fuss about it."

"If there is no harm in it, Molly, then there is no reason why your father should not hear."

Molly suddenly burst into tears. Mr. Hannington caught her hand and drew her towards him. "Don't cry, little one," he said, "there's nothing to be afraid about. I don't think you need fear Mrs. Moncrieff, even. When she recollects some little episodes in her own life she may not feel inclined to be so hard upon you."

"I have nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Hannington," said Stella, flushing to the very roots of her golden hair! But her old lover only laughed slightly and turned aside.

"Run away home, Molly," he said, kissing the girl's forehead lightly, and giving her hand a squeeze. "I want to have a little chat with Mrs. Moncrieff, and I think we shall manage to arrange the matter."

"Yes, Molly, go home," said Stella, quietly. "I want a little conversation with Mr. Hannington, too."

"Why should I go?" Molly murmured, rebelliously; but a look and a word from John Hannington sent her off without delay. He had evidently, found a way of ruling her mutinous spirit. She turned and took the path across the fields—it was the nearest way home, but also the least frequented. Stella looked after her with doubtful eyes; the afternoon was tolerably far advanced, and she scarcely knew whether to let the girl go home alone. Mr. Hannington interpreted, and replied to her glance.

"You need not be afraid for her. She has an escort at hand. Some one is waiting for her at the stile."

"Some one? Bertie?"

"I believe so."

Then he is implicated too. He has been deceiving us, and Molly too! Oh! what will their father say?" and a look of such real distress came into Stella's eyes that Hannington exerted himself not to let her think matters worse than they really were.

"No," he said, "I don't think you need disturb yourself about Bertie. I don't think he knew I was here. He let Molly come up to the cottages alone; because he said that he was not fond of old women. No, it is on Molly alone, Mrs. Moncrieff, and my unworthy self, that your anger must fall."

Stella gave him a reproachful look. "I have good reason not to trust you much," she said, slowly; "but I did not think that you would seek out Molly, of all people in the world, to turn *her* head by your attentions, and then—perhaps—to break her heart——"

"As I did yours?" said Hannington, coolly. "Is that what you mean to imply, Mrs. Moncrieff? I must say that I never saw any signs of a broken heart about you; you consoled yourself very speedily, I remember. And, besides, you talk as if I acted without motives. I have no particular wish to turn heads and break hearts, I assure you. But for unfortunate circumstances—upon which we need not enter at present—I should have been only too happy to make you my wife. As it is, I have every intention of asking Miss Moncrieff to take the vacant place as speedily as possible."

"That child?"

"Not so much younger than you were when you plighted your troth to me at Balmerino. Have you forgotten that? It is not two years ago."

"I wonder that you dare to recall it," said Stella, her wrath suddenly flashing out against him. "A gentleman would be ashamed to do so."

Hannington shrugged his shoulders. "It is easy to call names," he said. "I should never have recalled it to your mind if you had not thrust your presence upon me uninvited—you will excuse the freedom with which I speak, I hope? There is really nothing for you to excite yourself about, Mrs. Moncrieff. Your stepdaughter is very pretty; I admire her exceedingly, and we are very good friends. A little harmless flirtation will not do her any harm."

"It must cease at once. I do not wish to consider whether it will do her harm or not."

"Well, it shall cease. In fact, it *has* ceased—as flirtation. Molly has consented to be my wife."

"And you dared to win her affection without consulting her father first?"

"You were not quite so anxious that *your* father should be consulted before I won yours, Stella."

"Mr. Hannington, I am Alan Moncrieff's wife, and I am surprised that you should forget it so far as to insult me."

Mr. Hannington laughed again. "Come, he said, don't be so hot, Stella. I didn't mean to insult you in the least. I am very glad indeed that you are Moncrieff's wife, and hope that years of uninterrupted prosperity lie before you. Moncrieff is rather a stiff old fellow, isn't he? A little apt to be over-punctilious—a trifle jealous and suspicious? That used to be his character, I know, when his first wife was alive."

"I wished to speak to you about Miss Moncrieff, not about my husband, Mr. Hannington."

"Very well. Then we *will* speak about Miss Moncrieff," said the man beside her, his voice assuming the hard tone which always characterised it when he was annoyed. "I will tell you my intentions respecting Miss Moncrieff, and I will leave it to yourself to decide on your own future course. Molly is very fond of me, as no doubt you have seen, and any opposition will only make her more determined to follow her own will. As I said before I have asked her to marry me. She is young; I have no especial wish to marry her at once; therefore I should prefer to have no formal engagement for the present. All I want *now*, is admittance to your house, permission to see her now and then, and your assistance in gradually inducing Mr. Moncrieff to consent to the marriage. That is all."

"And do you think that Mr. Moncrieff will ever consent to it when he knows that you have persuaded his daughter to meet you here in a clandestine way, and have made love to her already without his permission?"

"No, I don't," was the frank reply. "But then, I don't want him to know anything about it, don't you see? Nobody will tell him, if you don't."

"But I must! I shall!"

"Just so. And if you do, are you under the impression that I shall not defend myself?"

He faced her as he spoke. The light of day was growing dim, and made his countenance look pallid, but it did not conceal the dark and almost malevolent expression that crossed his features, nor the sardonic glitter of his dark eyes. As Stella stood and looked at him, she wondered what glamour there had ever been thrown over this man to make him rank high in her esteem.

"I do not know how you can defend yourself," she said, after a little pause.

"It would be easy, Mrs. Moncrieff, to defend myself by playing on some very well-known characteristics of your husband. It would be easy to say that you—like many another stepmother—were anxious to put the worst interpretation on anything that Molly said or did. It would be easy to say that I had met Miss Moncrieff seldom, and only by accident, and that I had not said anything which need cause him anxiety."

"Not easy for a man of honor—not easy if you spoke the truth!"

Hannington bowed with sarcastic composure. "It would be a case of hard swearing, perhaps, but a man's honor allows him to tell lies, in order to protect the woman that he loves, Mrs. Moncrieff. As for me, I love Molly, and I shall do my best to win her. There would be nothing at all remarkable in Moncrieff's eyes in your opposition to the marriage if I hinted to him that you had had a previous attachment, and that no woman likes to see herself supplanted—and so on—he would be ready enough to believe that you found it impossible to be magnanimous—no doubt—and it would be a pleasant little piece of news to hear, perhaps, that his wife had once written very pretty and affectionate loveletters before her marriage to another man!"

To do Hannington justice, he did not intend to carry his threat into execution, but the look of white terror that came into Stella's face showed him that he had hit upon a very effectual method of managing her. At least, so it appeared to him just then. He had half expected to hear that Mr. Moncrieff had already been told of Stella's former attachment, and that it was for this reason that Mr. Moncrieff had of late shown himself so little friendly with

Hannington. But a look at Stella's face made him see his mistake. For a moment she was mute, but he read in her eyes that such a revelation of her past would be disastrous indeed for her.

"You would not tell him that?" she murmured, almost below her breath. She was too much startled to be prudent.

"But indeed I would. So you have not told him yourself, I see? Well, you were wise. He is a man who never forgives—never trusts again where he has been once deceived."

"But I never deceived him!"

"Oh, no; I did not say that you ever did. The story is of very little importance after all. Only if you interfere with my plan, Mrs. Moncrieff, I shall take care to let him know the reason; that is all. Let me have my own way about Molly, or I will send him your letters. You can choose."

"He would not read them!"

"Oh, yes, he would."

"You do not know him as I do."

Hannington only smiled. "Suppose he did not read them then. Suppose he burned them unread! Would he not always remember that there was something which he might have read? Would he be very likely to trust you again? Perhaps you don't care for his trust; if so, that is all right, and I stand aside abashed; but if you *do*—as a friend I would recommend that you kept those letters out of his hands; that is all."

Again there was a silence. He watched her white, quivering face with a faint, furtive smile; he felt very certain that he would ultimately gain his point.

"It is growing late," he said at last, "and this is a matter which possibly requires a little consideration. Perhaps you would rather give me your answer to-morrow, Mrs. Moncrieff? I take it for granted that you won't spring the matter on your husband the moment he comes home to-night? That would be rather too unkind. To-morrow afternoon, shall we say?"

CHAPTER XX.

"ONLY ONE WEEK!"

STELLA consented to the delay. It seemed to her that it would be better to talk to Molly before doing anything else, and that perhaps Molly's own anxiety to clear herself from double dealing might simplify the matter. So she said very gravely that she would postpone further conversation till the morrow "And then," queried Hannington, "will you meet me here?"

She hesitated, and her lip quivered. It seemed to her almost as if she partook of Molly's blameworthiness, as if she would be deceiving Alan Moncrieff by consenting to meet John Hannington in private. But there was no other way out of the difficulty. She felt that she must speak to Molly before deciding whether to tell her father or ignore the whole affair, and in that case she must see Mr. Hannington again. And so, very reluctantly, she consented to meet him next day at five o'clock in the afternoon.

Then she turned her face sadly homewards, and arrived at Torresmuir only just in time to dress for dinner and to meet her husband, who was inclined to express surprise at her being out so late—even for the sake of the people who lived at Tomgarrow. The dinner was a tolerably cheerful one, in spite of the weight that lay so heavily upon the hearts of certain persons present. Alan was in an unusually lively mood, and entertained the party with some racy stories which he had learned during his recent visit to Edinburgh. Ralph Kingscott was always ready to attune himself to his brother-in-law's mood, though on this occasion he looked a trifle uneasy now and then, and cast some furtive, anxious glances at Mrs. Moncrieff and his niece. Stella, eager to hide her own discomfort, laughed and talked with the others, and Molly, with eyes and cheeks aflame, was full of almost hysterical mirth. It was only Bertie who seemed to suffer, and what he had to do with the

matter Stella could not divine. He sat almost silent, white and downcast, scarcely touching food, and so depressed in manner that even his father, not usually observant, turned and asked him whether anything was wrong, whether he did not feel well, or had been annoyed in any way. There was nothing the matter with him, Bertie replied, with an involuntary twitching of the lip and a crimson blush which made his father look at him anxiously for a moment or two. And then Alan Moncrieff sighed, knitted his brow, and went on with his stories as cheerily as ever. They had seldom seen him so jubilant.

Of course Stella did not get a chance of speaking to Molly all the evening. But at night, when Alan and Ralph had gone to the smoking-room, she made her way to Molly's pretty bedroom—a place which Mrs. Moncrieff had never penetrated since her marriage—and would not be sent away. Molly, with her ruddy gold hair all down her back in a magnificent mane, was writing a letter at her writing-table. She covered it up with a sheet of blotting-paper, and pushed it away when Stella entered the room.

"Won't you let me speak to you, Molly?" said Stella, rather sadly.

"I don't see what you can have to say," was Molly's hot response. "I am not a baby—not a child that you can coerce, Mrs. Moncrieff. I am a woman, and I will not be interfered with."

The petulance of her tone was rather childish than womanly. "My dear," said Stella, "I do not want to interfere. But your father has surely a right to know that his daughter's heart has been won—or rather that somebody has tried to win it. I am quite sure that the most honorable way would have been to go to your father first."

"Have you told him?"

"No—not yet."

"Then you mean to betray me? I never thought that you were so false."

"False, Molly? What falsity is there in telling your father that Mr. Hannington wishes to make you his wife? That is the truth, is it not?"

"Yes," said Molly, hanging her head and blushing hotly.

"Then why should he or you be ashamed to say so?"

"We are not ashamed," said Molly, lifting her head.
"But we—we—were—afraid."

"What were you afraid of?"

"Papa is sure to say that I am so young!"

"You are not very old, are you, Molly?"

"And Jack is poor."

A sort of stab passed through Stella's heart. It was not that she regretted the loss of John Hannington, but the old pain began to throb when she heard him spoken of familiarly.

"If he is poor, dear, how does he mean to maintain you?"

"I shall have money; I am rich enough for us both," said Molly, proudly.

"And if he were marrying you only because you were rich, what then, Molly?"

The girl flamed out at once in indignant rage.

"You have no right to say so. Jack is not a fortune-hunter!" she cried. "He is noble, good, and generous in every way, and I will not hear a word against him."

"If he is so noble and good, why did he not come to your father before trying to win your heart, Molly?" said Stella, rather mournfully. "Was it right, do you think, that he should gain your confidence, your affection, in this unauthorised way? And how long were you to go on deceiving us?"

"There was no deception about it. I love him and he loves me; there was no necessity for us to take all the world into our confidence."

"Not all the world, but your father, Molly. It was not right, and you know it. What are we to do now?"

"How—what do you mean?"

"Am I to tell your father what I have heard and seen? or will you tell him all about it? or will Mr. Hannington come to see him?"

"Neither," was Molly's petulant answer, as she turned her shoulder sulkily to the questioner.

"Then will you give him up?"

"I don't know how you can ask me such a question, Mrs. Moncrieff!"

"One of these three ways must be chosen, Molly," said Stella, rather wearily. "Indeed I do not want to have to tell your father the story; you had better tell him yourself,

or induce Mr. Hannington to do so; or—better still, perhaps—give him up altogether—at any rate, until you are older.”

But at these words Molly burst into passionate tears. It was impossible to get her to listen any longer, and Stella at last quitted the room, telling her very gravely that a decision must be reached before twenty-four hours had passed, and that she had better resolve at once to inform her father of John Hannington's desire to marry her, and risk his anger rather than deceive him any longer.

She sought another interview with Molly next morning, but the girl would not listen to reason, and shut herself up in her own room, refusing even to see her stepmother. Stella received a little note from her in the middle of the day, containing these words only—“I can never, never give him up; it is too much to ask of me. If he likes to speak to papa, he can; and if not you may do your worst.” Do her worst! The expression wounded Stella sorely. Was she not trying hard to do what was best for Molly—and even for John Hannington?

She had some difficulty in making her way to Tomgarrow at the appointed time; but, fortunately, the visitors who arrived inopportunistly at four o'clock did not stay very long, and she reached her *rendezvous* at a quarter-past five. She found Mr. Hannington looking remarkably patient and at ease; he was leaning against the wall smoking a cigar, and greeted her with an affable remark about the weather.

“Beautiful day, is it not, Mrs. Moncrieff? I began to be afraid that you were not coming.”

Stella took no apparent notice of this remark. But her eye glowed as she said, quietly:

“I hope you have made up your mind to go to Mr. Moncrieff yourself, Mr. Hannington.”

“No, indeed, I have not. It is the last thing I intend to do at present,” said Hannington. He did not look at her as he spoke; it was the only sign of grace he showed—he was a little ashamed to look into her face.

“Your watchword seems to be ‘Secresy,’” said Stella, bitterly. “I remember that once before you asked a girl not to tell her friends of your professions of attachment. Are you anxious to ascertain the amount of Miss Moncrieff's fortune before you declare yourself?”

"I know all about Miss Moncrieff's fortune, thank you. I have my own reasons for keeping silence."

"I know you too well to suppose that they are good ones."

"You do me too much honor," said Hannington, sarcastically. "You seem to have given a good deal of attention to my character."

"How can you speak in that way—that heartless way?" cried Stella, the tears rising to her eyes in spite of her efforts to check them. "Surely you have a better self—the self that I thought I knew in days gone by? Was I altogether mistaken? Is it really true that you care only to amuse yourself, or to gain something for yourself? At any rate, if you did not care to spare me, you might spare poor Molly—her father's only daughter, a motherless girl, innocent and loving and inexperienced! Have a little pity upon her; don't win her heart and throw it away! If you do not care for her, it can be no real trouble to you to give her up. She will soon forget you—for she is only a child—and you will make her life utterly miserable if you persist!"

"You are delightfully flattering, Mrs. Moncrieff. You don't know how much you tell me about your own feelings while you plead for Molly. And you are quite wrong about Molly, too. She is not such a child as you fancy; and I do care for her. I assure you that I do love her, and I mean to make her my wife."

"Certainly; make her your wife if you can win her. But do it openly; go to Mr. Moncrieff."

"In my own time and my own way."

"Unless you speak to him at once, you must not meet Molly again," said Stella, bravely, although she felt as if she were spending her strength in vain. "It cannot be allowed. She *shall* not carry on any secret intercourse or correspondence with you; I shall prevent it."

"You will have a hard task; Molly is a clever little soul."

"I shall tell Mr. Moncrieff, then."

"Oh, no, you won't do that," said Hannington, with a smile, "because—you know the penalty."

"I cannot help it," said Stella, turning pale, but standing her ground courageously. "This thing must not go on."

"You mean that you do not object," said her companion slowly, "to my sending copies of the letters which you once wrote me to your husband?"

"Object! I do object, of course," Stella answered, clasping her hands tightly together in her agony of pain and fear. "I dare not think of it; but it cannot be helped. I must do right."

Hannington laughed. He was really a little touched, but he did not wish to betray the fact. "My dear Mrs. Moncrieff you are making much ado about nothing," he said, almost kindly. "I have not the least desire to destroy your domestic happiness, and you know it would be destroyed once and for all if I showed your husband those little documents, unless you had previously confessed their existence, which it seems you have not done! But if you cross my path I must take measures to protect myself. Let us compromise the matter a little. If, at the end of a week I have not spoken to Mr. Moncrieff and formally proposed for Molly's hand, *then* tell him what you choose. Grant me a week's respite, and I'll reserve the letters—perhaps I will even burn them; but give me a week."

"A week—why a week?" said Stella, hesitatingly.

"For deliberation—consideration of my affairs; all that sort of thing. Just one week—and then the whole thing shall be cleared up."

"Will you promise not to see Molly during that time?"

Hannington reflected. "Well," he said, with some reluctance, "I will promise if you desire it. Yes, Mrs. Moncrieff, I promise."

Stella sighed. "I don't know," she said, "whether I ought to yield this point; but if you will promise not to see her again, nor write, and at the end of the week to speak to Mr. Moncrieff, I will keep silence—until then—but only until then!"

"I will not see her again. I will not write, unless my letters go through the authorities' hands. I will let Mr. Moncrieff know everything by the end of the week. Isn't that enough?" said Hannington, laughing rather oddly. "What a diplomatist you would make, Stella! Come, you need not be offended," he continued, as he saw her color and frown. "You gave me permission to call you Stella once, you know."

Was it by design that he said those words so clearly?

It was at that very moment that Stella saw two gentlemen approaching her; they had turned the corner of the wall just as John Harrington spoke; it would be a miracle if they had not heard what he said. Stella's face flushed crimson, and then became white with despair: for the gentlemen were no other than Ralph Kingscott and her husband. Alan Harrington, she was speechless with surprise, she felt that she looked like a culprit, and that haughty acquiescence was written on every line of her husband's handsome face. How could she explain that was the question that immediately occurred to her; but his silent suggestion went so readily. It would be impossible by mere explanation, if Alan wanted one, until the work was past. Until then she would have no right to tell him that she had been Harrington simply in order to talk with him of truth, and quit then, therefore, she must endure his acquiescence, his perplexity, and perhaps his blame. She felt that her position was, for the time being, exceedingly hard.

CHAPTER XXI.

STELLA'S VISIT.

“It is a matter of no number of the little group said a voice. Then the gentlemen saluted each other very politely; and Mr. Harrington turned gratefully to his wife. “Do you remember your son?” he inquired. And as Stella looked surprised that she was coming, he offered her his arm as the most courteous proceeding on his part, as well as that of such a place; but designed, no doubt, for Harrington's sake, to honour to show that Stella was his property, and that it was his intention to take care of her. The husband and wife walked away together, leaving Kingscott and Harrington face to face. There was a pause, then when the Harringtons were out of sight, Kingscott burst into cheerful laughter, while Harrington looked sad and silent, as if he did not altogether like the tone that others were taking.

“What,” said Kingscott at last, “treating himself as a son of mine, in his friend's face? You're put your eye out of your head, and he mistake it.”

"What do you mean?"

"Did you not see Monctieff? Were not your last words distinctly audible? What do you suppose he will think?"

"I suppose she will explain everything," said Jack, taking out his ~~eyes~~ pipe and lighting a cigar. His usual self-confidence seemed to have deserted him; vexation and perplexity were both written upon his brow. "It is unlucky."

"You think she'll tell?" asked Kingscott, significantly.

Hannington hesitated, and took a whiff or two at his cigar. Then he crossed his arms, leaned back against the wall, and allowed a faint smile to creep into his handsome dark face.

"She promised to say nothing for a week," he said. "I do not know whether one may trust her to keep her word."

"I think you may," said Kingscott.

"You think she'll be too afraid of her husband to speak out. Too timid to exculpate herself?"

"No, not that. She looks timid and gentle enough; but there is plenty of character behind that fair little face and the pretty blue eyes. She is quite capable of circumventing us all, Jack, and I am not sure that we have not made a mistake in taking it for granted that she would be easily frightened. What I rely on—and I have watched her pretty carefully during the last few months—is her sense of honour and her strong will. If she told you that she would hold her tongue for a week, you may confidently depend upon it that she will keep her word."

"She made a condition," said Hannington, drily.

"Of course. Women always do. What was it?"

"That I should not see Molly during the week, or communicate with her, save through the higher powers. I may walk up to Corrosmut and offer myself as a son-in-law to Monctieff, of course, if I choose to do so!"

"I see. . . And you mean to stick to that?"

Jack Hannington shrugged his shoulders. "All's fair in love or war," he said, averting his eyes from Kingscott's face. But it was plain that he had some shrinking from the business in hand; some little grain of conscience made him sour. And Kingscott, with his usual shrewdness, divined the feeling and responded to it.

"Keep your word if you like," he said. "You need

not see Molly for the next few days. You can send letters to her, you say, if you send them through the higher authorities—of whom I am surely one! I'll take your letters, Jack. Trust them to me."

"You!"

"Yes; by virtue of my relationship. 'Save through the higher powers,' you said. Well, am I not one of them? Have I no claim to be considered? I am Molly's uncle, and—gad! I mean to have a hand in her fate."

Hannington uttered a short, reluctant laugh. "So you will take charge of our letters? You approve of my suit? Come, Kingscott, tell the truth; why do you take this kindly interest in two romantic lovers? What do you hope to get out of us?"

"Well," said Kingscott, modestly, "I think I may hope for a fair share of gratitude."

"Translated, I suppose, into l. s. d.?"

"You put it rather coarsely, Jack. I should certainly like to see Molly married to a friend of my own."

"I may put it coarsely, but it is just as well to be frank," said Mr. Hannington. "You will not have free quarters in my house, if I marry Molly, as you have had at Torresmuir."

"It is kind of you to forewarn me," said Kingscott, with equal coolness, "but unnecessary; because I mean to go in for a little independence before long. I am tired of humoring Moncrieff and bowing down before Madam Stella; I am tired of bear-leading and keeping guard. I am going to London before long—but I want an income—small it may be, but secure."

He kept his eye watchfully on Hannington as he spoke.

"Do you think that you will get one from me?" said Hannington, sneering.

"Oh, no. I don't count on such generosity from you, Jack. Still, it occurred to me that if I could assist you now, and if my assistance were worth anything, you might find it pay you to promise me a little regular help in the future. Fifty pounds a year or so would not hurt you—when you have the handling of Molly's fortune, you know."

"You are sure about that fortune?" said his friend, a little uneasily. "She gets it at her marriage?"

"Of course." Kingscott smiled in a rather unpleasant manner. "No doubt of that, my dear fellow; no doubt

at all. I thought you had examined the will for yourself under which she inherits?"

"No, I hadn't time. I am taking it on trust. If you deceive me——"

"Now, really, Jack, is it to my interest to deceive you?" What should I gain by it? I want to further your happiness in every possible way. It is folly of you to harbor these suspicions of my good faith."

Hannington threw back his head scornfully. "Your good faith is so very much to be relied on! Don't you suppose I have heard the stories current at Homburg and Monte Carlo? Don't I know that there are places in London where you daren't show the tip of your nose? What reason have I to pin my trust on you, I should like to know? Why, it is one of the greatest drawbacks Molly will have to contend with when she goes into the world—if it is ever known that she is Ralph Kingscott's niece."

"Don't try me too far, Hannington." Even in the dim light it could be seen that Kingscott's lips were white, and that his pale cheek was twitching with anger or agitation. "No need to rake up old stories. They were mostly lies—and they have been forgotten long ago. Besides—you are not blameless yourself."

"I may have played high, and lost a good bit on the turf at one time or another," said Hannington, sharply, "but upon my soul, I swear I never cheated at cards."

Kingscott made a passionate gesture, as if he would have struck the man that taunted him; then he drew back his hand, with a look of almost inconceivable malignity. "No," he muttered, more to himself than to his companion; "no—not yet. Some other way." Then, aloud, and with recovered dignity, he said, calmly—

"Your insulting language is only pardonable when I consider that you are in a difficulty, and in trouble of mind, Hannington. On that ground I am ready to overlook it, and to continue the offer of my services in your little love affair. Remember that without me you are helpless."

"Bertie is on my side, I believe. He has brought his sister here several times. Bertie is on the side that I tell him to take. Bertie is under my thumb. He is too much afraid of some of his little money transactions coming to his father's ears to disobey me. He will ask my permission for anything he does."

"And is Molly obedient?"

"Molly is not obedient at all. You will find that out if you marry her. Do you want me to do anything for you, or do you not?"

Hannington smoked steadily for some moments without answering. But when he spoke it was with unusual decision.

"Yes," he said, "I do."

"Letters, I suppose?"

"Letters of course."

"And—any other arrangement?"

Again Hannington was silent. There was evidently some doubt, some sort of struggle going on in his mind.

"Look here, Kingscott," he said at length. "You must excuse me if I spoke hastily just now. I am—as you guessed—in some trouble—some perplexity; the fact is, I hardly know what to say or do next. I'm regularly done for—up a tree—this time; and one is naturally a bit short-tempered at such a conjuncture."

"Oh, of course. Don't think of it, old fellow. What's wrong?"

"You don't suppose," said Hannington, who seemed incapable that evening of pursuing a conversation in any connected manner, "that Moncrieff would give his consent to his daughter's early marriage?"

"No, I do not."

"I cannot afford to wait," said the young man, almost as if he were ashamed of the confession.

"Then don't wait," returned Kingscott, smiling.

"What—make a bolt of it?"

"Why not?"

"Molly would never consent."

"You don't know much of girls if you really think so. The romance of the thing would delight her."

"And what would Moncrieff say?"

"He would storm and rave, no doubt. But he would give in."

"And even if he did not give in, there is no mistake about Molly's money, I suppose? I could touch it at once? I don't want to make ducks and drakes of it; but it would be a convenience to get a few hundreds into one's own hands just now."

"I have no doubt it would," said Kingscott to himself,

and his mouth expanded in such a malicious grin that if Hannington could have seen it in the darkness it might have startled him. But he could not see his companion's face for the shadows that had fallen fast about them. And after a pause, Ralph answered in a tone of suave conviction: "There is no mistake that I am aware of. Molly's fortune will come into her hands and her husband's hands on her marriage, if that takes place before she is twenty-one. So long as she is in a good temper and a generous mood, you never need fear poverty." The world will have its say in the matter; it will call you a fortune-hunter; but I suppose you don't mind that?"

"Not a whit," said Hannington, with a laugh. "Nothing succeeds like success."

"If you have a clear conscience," continued Ralph, in a tone of affected simplicity, "you can afford to defy the sneers of worldlings base. Of course I trust in your love for my dear little niece, and do not wish her to be sacrificed to your pecuniary necessities——"

"Come, Kingscott, that will do," said John Hannington, decidedly. "I don't like that sort of thing. You know you don't care a rap what becomes of your niece, and you need not set up to be virtuous and affectionate all of a sudden!"

"Exactly," said Kingscott, changing his tone; "but at the same time I should like to know, as a matter of curiosity, whether you are fond of Molly or not?"

"Molly's a nice little girl and uncommonly fond of me. A man must marry some time."

"That's all, is it?"—in an undertone.

"Isn't it enough?" exclaimed Hannington, almost savagely. "I like her—she likes me—what more can you want? A man never marries his first love—seldom his second or his third. There is nothing uncommon in my mode of proceeding, is there?"

"Nothing at all. I am only surprised to hear that you ever had a first love, Jack. Where is she, then? Was she rich, too?"

"No, worse luck," said Jack, so sullenly that Kingscott felt surprised, for he had not imagined that there was any seriousness in his companion's remark. "Poor as a church mouse, confound it! Else I wouldn't have played the fool with Stella Raeburn and Molly Moncrieff—you may take

your oath of that. *She* was worth the whole of them put together; but we couldn't afford to marry each other, and so we agreed to part."

"Is she married?"

"No. You needn't think you're going to worm her name out of me. Let the subject drop, if you please," said Hannington, flinging away the end of his cigar, and turning as if to go. "I don't care to talk of it—or to think of it for that matter. Are you ready? It is abominably cold here."

"You have no message for Molly?"

"I will write, if you will take the letter to her. I'll see you in Dunkeld to-morrow at noon."

"You will have to be quick with your arrangements," said Kingscott, slowly. "You have silenced the fair Stella for a week, remember; only for a week. You have a week's chance—that is all."

"It will be enough," said Hannington, striding away. His voice was rough and hoarse; there was no inducement in his manner for Ralph to follow him, and accordingly that gentleman looked after him with a smile, and did not attempt to track his footsteps. Jack went blundering along the rough road, stumbling now and then over stones half buried in the rank grass, growling to himself at the darkness of the night. Kingscott listened intently until the noise died away. Then he smiled, and ensconced himself snugly in an angle of the wall, where he was protected from the wind. Presently he took out a cigar and began to smoke. He was not cold—he liked the feeling of the fresh air upon his face, and he wanted a little quiet time in which to review the situation, which was by no means so clear to him as he would have liked it to be. If his thoughts had been translated into words, they would have run something after this fashion:—

"It seems to me that I have a chance at last of doing what I have tried to do all these years. Success is near me now, I fancy; fresh complications crowd on me on all sides. I can hardly miss my aim.

"What is it that I have been trying to get ever since Marie died? A hold on that fool Moncrieff, with his antiquated notions of truth and honor and honesty; a hold on him, a place in his household—why? Not for his benefit, of course. For mine. Because I want a competency.

I look forward to a time when I shall call myself master of a good round sum, and spend my days as I choose. For this I have wasted years of my life in courting Alan, and frightening his wretched son—alienating the man's heart from his children, and steadily laying up a hoard for myself. But the gains have been few; it is a slow process. I have not made nearly enough for myself as yet, and I was just devising ways and means of increasing the spoil, when he must needs go and marry this wretched slip of a girl—ay, and if I am not mistaken fall in love with her too. I never was more astonished in my life.

“He trusts his accounts into my hands. He writes cheques without inquiring why they are wanted. He accepts my stories of what is needed on the estate without a murmur. In short, he acts like a fool. And yet—it is an odd thing—I never feel safe with him: I never feel sure that he will not wake up some day and ask awkward questions—and where should I be then? It is just that dread which has made me so moderate; which has kept me from plundering wholesale (as people would call it)—that is, which has made me content with so small a percentage on my transactions with him. Why, confound the man! does he think that I shall do his work for nothing? or for the beggarly pittance that he pays me for drilling Bertie in his Latin grammar? I'm not such a fool.

“When he married, it certainly did seem to me as if my game were very nearly played out. His wife softened him to the children, and was instilling her own suspicions of me into his mind. I thought that my time at Torrèsmuir was likely to be short, and that I had better make hay while the sun shone. I think I was a little imprudent once or twice. I see now that I had no need to distrust myself. Things are working round just as I would have them: they could not have been better if poor Marie had been alive to put money into my pocket as she used to do. In a short time I shall have matters entirely my own way. I don't despair of seeing Alan separated from his wife and parted from his children, dependent for sympathy and companionship on his faithful friend and brother-in-law, Ralph Kingscott, for whom he has made a large provision in his will, and in whose hands are the reins of government with respect to his estates in Scotland and England. That would be a fine position for me. And it is far from improbable

—NOW.

“For *now* Moncrieff is fool enough to suspect his wife of deceit, and if he believes that she can deceive him he will never care for her again. Molly is on the brink of elopement, which he will never forgive. And if he thinks that Bertie has had a hand in it, he will never forgive him either. Is there any way of deepening his displeasure? any way of affixing a stain to his name that he will think can never be wiped out? I must consider.”

He considered very seriously, with his eyes fixed on the forms of the hills before him, now vague and shadowy in the faint starlight. He considered, evidently, to some purpose, for presently he said to himself, “I have it,” and laughed aloud. There was something weird and uncanny in the sound of that low laugh in the midst of the silence that reigned around. Even he felt the influence of the hour and of the scene; for no sooner had he uttered that strange laugh than he started and looked round, as if afraid lest any one should have heard. But nobody was near.

“It is growing chilly, and I have had enough of it,” he said at last, as he came to the end of his cigar. “I have got an idea, and I think that I shall be able to work it out. It is odd to know that the happiness of that whole family depends upon me. I hold the luck of the house in my own hands—in more senses than one. Ay, Alan Moncrieff, little as you may think it, your future is a matter for me to decide, because you are too blind, too stupid, too proud, too *honorable*, as the world would say, to decide it for yourself. If you cast away your own good fortune, then it is for the first comer to pick it up.”

And having uttered these enigmatic and ominous words, he turned away from the half-ruined clachan, and bent his steps once more to Torresmuir.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE SNARE.

STELLA'S walk homeward with her husband was an exceedingly unpleasant one to her, and probably it was not any more agreeable to Mr. Moncrieff. As Hannington had noticed, Alan gave his wife his arm in turning away; and

he was right in supposing that this action proceeded less from a wish to support his wife's steps than to show that she belonged to him, and to him only. There was an impulse of protection in it, certainly, but also an expression of wounded pride. And Stella was less conscious of his righteous indignation at Hannington's familiar tone and his sudden fury of desire to defend her from all harm, than of the anger which she thought she discerned in every line of his rigidly set features and in the coldness of his averted eyes. She did not venture to speak for some time; he walked fast and did not seem to notice that she could hardly keep up with him. It was only when they had left the rough ground about the village and in the lane, and were out upon the smooth high-road, that Mr. Moncrieff paused for a moment and glanced at her with some compunction.

"I have walked too fast, I fear," he said, politely.

"A little—I shall be all right directly. We are on a level road now," said Stella. She would not for worlds have told him that her loss of breath came from fright as much as from undue haste, and that her heart was beating so violently that she wondered whether he could not hear its throb. She withdrew her hand gently from his arm, and stood in the road without speaking.

"Are you better now? Shall we go on?" he asked after a moment's silence, in a grave but much gentler tone.

"Thank you. . . . Oh, Alan, don't be angry with me!"—The words seemed wrung from her, half against her will.

"I do not know that I have anything to be angry about, Stella," said her husband.

"I don't think you have, Alan."

"Except," continued Moncrieff, in his most freezing tones, "*except* that you appear to have relations with Mr. John Hannington—a man whom I particularly dislike—concerning which you keep me in entire ignorance."

"No, indeed, Alan; at least—oh, it is very difficult to answer you when you put it in that way!" said Stella, the hot tears breaking forth.

"I do not wish you to answer unless it is quite agreeable to yourself," said Alan, in a tone that more than ever showed him to be displeased. "I prefer to ask no questions."

"I will tell you everything—some time," said his young

wife, tremulously, "but not just now. Alan, please do not ask it—some other time——"

She was hardly prepared for the exclamation, that followed. "There is something to tell then! Some secret? God help us! I thought I had done with secrets now, but it seems that all women are alike."

It was on the tip of Stella's tongue to say: "This is not my secret"—when she refrained. After all, it was partly her secret. Her youthful semi-engagement to John Hannington flashed into her mind, and made her hang her head. But for that, Hannington would have no hold over her, and she could have spoken out and been a help to Molly, a comfort to poor Alan. Oh, why had she not told him everything on that sunny day at St Andrews, when he asked her to be his wife? She had never thought of it as a secret before; it had scarcely occurred to her that it would be wiser and better to tell him everything before her marriage; and now she saw that she had made a great, perhaps an irreparable, mistake. And just now, at any rate, she must hold her peace; she could neither clear herself, nor blame herself openly; she must be silent for at least another week. What a penance that week would be to her! Seven whole days! But seven days would end at last, and then she would tell her husband all. The thought gave her courage and serenity; she spoke with a renewed calmness that took him a little by surprise.

"Have patience with me, Alan," she said, softly. "I think—I hope—I am not concealing anything from you for my own good simply. I want to do right, and to tell you everything; but give me a little time—I have a reason for not telling you to-day——"

"I believe that you mean well, Stella." The words fell coldly upon her ear. "I think that you want, as you say, to do right. But it is *possible* that your judgment may be at fault." There was a touch of irony in his tone. "You are young; you have not seen a great deal of the world; it might perhaps be wiser if you would allow your husband to judge for you."

A rush of tears blinded Stella's eyes. The tone more than the words hurt and grieved her. A hundred pleas, excuses, cries for sympathy and trust sprang to her lips; but again she refrained herself. She could not say to her husband that she had promised not to tell him what she

knew. She had given the promise without thinking of all that it would involve ; and she writhed in its bonds like one taken by guile in a cruel snare.

Alan waited for her to speak—waited more anxiously than she knew ; but when no word issued from her lips, he folded himself all the more closely in his cloak of reserve and pride. For a few minutes the two walked on in silence—broken only by Alan when he swung open for his wife the heavy gate that led into the grounds of Torresmuir.

“You will follow your own judgment, of course,” he said, in a tone of great gravity and coldness. “I do not attempt to force your confidence. One thing, however, I can hardly pass by without remark. You may at some past time, in an unguarded moment, have given Mr. Hannington the right to call you by your first name ; but you must now make him understand that in future you are ‘Mrs. Moncrieff,’ and not ‘Stella,’ to any but your friends.”

If he expected any answer to that speech, he was disappointed. In the darkness, Stella felt her face tingle with the hottest blush of shame that she had ever known. For something in his voice had recalled to her that little incident on the steamer at the Dundee wharf of which he had been a spectator ; and the kiss that John Hannington had pressed upon her hand before he said good-bye seemed to burn her fingers still as she remembered the steady gaze of Alan Moncrieff’s cool and critical eyes. It had almost slipped from her memory until now. How was it that she had forgotten, and that he had never questioned her ? It was not his way to question ; Stella knew that too well !

She stood still for a moment or two, feeling as if she were deprived of the power of movement as well as of speech. Her husband glanced at her keenly—the light of a lamp above the gate had let him into the secret of that burning blush—and then turned away, considerably anxious to spare her feelings as much as possible. When he was a few yards in advance of her, Stella’s strength returned. She made the best of her way to the front-door, but she did not look at or speak to her husband again. She felt inexpressibly grieved, hurt, distressed ; but she was incapable of defending herself in the present situation of affairs.

She went up to her own room to rest for a while before dinner, and was half inclined to send word that she would

not come down again ; but on reflection she felt herself scarcely justified in disorganising household arrangements simply because she felt troubled and depressed. She had great difficulty in suppressing tears even while the maid was helping her to dress, and when she came downstairs the effort which she had been making caused her to look so white and weary that Ralph Kingscott (who had managed to arrive home and dress with superhuman celerity) made a slightly malicious remark on her appearance.

"Your walk was too much for you, I fear?" he said, with mock politeness.

Stella looked at him without answering. For the first time it crossed her mind that *he* was perhaps responsible for her husband's inopportune appearance upon the scene while she was talking to John Hannington. She did not quite know why this thought occurred to her ; it was one of those guesses, those flashes of intuition, by which women sometimes read the course of events so clearly as to surprise slower-witted masculine minds. Ralph saw that he was suspected, and said nothing more.

The evening was dull. Mr. Moncrieff scarcely spoke, and the rest of the family followed his example. Stella at last went to the piano and began playing the soft, melancholy airs which she knew that her husband loved, as her father had done before. But in the very midst of his favorite melody Alan got up and walked out of the room. Stella went on playing, but her eyes filled with tears, and the heart seemed to have gone out of her music.

It was well for her peace of mind that she did not hear a conversation that passed between Alan and his brother-in-law at a later period in the evening. The two men went into the smoking-room together. Alan threw himself into a low easy chair, crossed his arms and fell at once into a deep reverie. Kingscott noticed it as a bad sign that he did not begin to smoke. He himself selected a fine cigar with great care, and lighted it in a peculiarly deliberate manner before speaking. Then he said quietly :

"Don't you want to hear what Hannington said to me?"

"No," said Moncrieff, with an impatient movement of his head.

Kingscott studied his face attentively in the pause that followed. "I am sorry to trouble you," he said at length,

in his coolest and most caressing accents, "but I think that it is my duty to speak—and yours to listen."

"I am not so sure of that," said Alan, frowning. "However,"—with a sigh—"what must be must; and if I am to hear, let me at any rate get it over quickly. What do you want to say?"

"Your wife——"

"I would rather not hear anything against my wife."

Kingscott raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. "My dear Alan, I would not say anything against your wife for the world. I have the very greatest admiration and respect for her. What on earth makes you think that I meant to say anything to her discredit?"

"I don't know; I beg your pardon, Ralph."

"Should you not rather beg your wife's?" said Mr. Kingscott, with a decorous air of offended virtue, which might have amused an impartial observer if one had been by to see. Alan only heaved another great sigh by way of answer, and then leaned with his elbows on his knees, and his hand in an arch over his eyes—the attitude of a man in pain or trouble of some kind. "Go on," he said at last when the silence had been protracted for some minutes.

"It seems," said Kingscott carelessly, "that she and Hannington were engaged before she left Dundee."

A sort of start ran through Alan's whole frame, but he did not look up.

"She has that curious sort of shame and dislike to the subject which many women show on the subject of their first loves," Ralph went on, in the tone of a dispassionate judge, "and she seemed to fancy that Jack Hannington had kept her letters, and that she might get them back in a personal interview."

"It was a planned thing, then—this meeting?"

"Oh, yes."

"She wrote to him, perhaps, to meet her there?"

"I could not say, really. There are always plenty of opportunities for a woman, if she wants secret interviews—especially when a woman has as much freedom as you accord your wife."

"Yes," groaned Alan, uncovering his face, which had grown white as death. "I have never been hard on her, have I, Ralph? You used to think me hard on poor

Marie ; but Stella—Stella—never. I was never harsh or unkind to Stella, I am sure." There was a strange tone of repressed anguish in his voice.

"Unkind! Certainly not," said Kingscott, as if he did not see the point of his brother-in-law's remark. "Why should you have been unkind? You are generosity and gentleness itself: few women can have so ideally perfect a life as Stella, just as few women can be as sweet and lovely as she is. No wonder she had admirers before her marriage."

Alan set his teeth. "Did Hannington keep her letters?" he enquired with a low voice.

"I don't know, I am sure. He did not say, and I did not like to ask." (Kingscott had no scruples about telling a falsehood, when he thought it would serve his turn.) "I suppose the conversation was not finished when we came up."

"What made you take me that way, Ralph? Had you any idea—any suspicion?"

"Good heaven, no, Alan! I went in that direction quite casually. It is a short cut, you know. Why, if I *had* thought that a private interview was going on, of course I should have avoided the place. Not but what it was a harmless interview enough, no doubt. Women are a little nervous and cowardly sometimes, you know; I fancy that your wife imagined that poor Hannington might send you the documents to look at."

"I have no doubt the letters contained only what was perfectly justifiable," said Moncrieff, with a somewhat distant air. He would not hear Stella slighted, he told himself, although his heart was wrung with jealous pain and rage. "Of course, if she was engaged to him——"

"We must make allowance for women's whims," said Kingscott, laughing. "The letters are probably rather tender effusions, and she is ashamed of them now. Pope says that 'every woman is at heart a rake.' I am quite sure that every woman is at heart a flirt; so we need not be surprised even if Hannington *was* dismissed rather unceremoniously——"

"Good-night, Ralph," said Alan, suddenly rising from his chair. "I think I won't hear any more, thanks. Stella is going to tell me the whole story herself, and I would rather hear it from her."

"I won't anticipate the recital," answered Kingscott, with a careless smile. "Are you going? Good-night."

Alan left the room, shutting the door behind him. But almost immediately Kingscott crept towards it, opened it again very softly, and listened. The sound of Alan's footsteps told him that he was not yet going upstairs. Mr. Moncrieff went to his private study, and locked himself in. Kingscott heard the key turn in the lock, and nodded with secret satisfaction. Then he closed the door, and walked back to the table, where he stood for some minutes smiling to himself as he mixed a glass of hot whisky and water for his own delectation. "I think the poison works," he said to himself, as he slowly stirred the sugar into the hot mixture, and held the glass to the light before tasting the contents :

"I think the poison works."

The poison worked indeed. Alan Moncrieff's mind was thrown into a state of indescribable agitation by the half-true, half-false report of Stella's doings which Kingscott had brought to him ; and, although he fully believed that his wife meant ultimately to tell him the whole truth, yet he had a feeling of distaste, of repulsion, almost of positive disgust, at the thought of her former attachment to Hannington. His faith in her candor and uprightness was rudely shaken. If she had been engaged to any man before she knew him, if she had written letters—"tender effusions," as Ralph called them—to any man, she ought to have let him know. She had deceived him, he said to himself, bitterly ; and the only redeeming point about the whole business was her determination (as he understood it) to tell him the story in a few days. For what else could she have to tell him? The notion that her communication might refer to Molly and not to herself never crossed his mind. She meant to tell him—"some time," she had said. Some time ! He would hold her to that ; it was better than nothing. He would give her a few days' grace, and then he would have the truth from her black and bitter as it might be.

Stella was painfully conscious of the change in his manners during the next few days. It was as though he were holding himself back, trying to be patient and courteous while suffering from a constant sense of injury and anger. A sort of half-suppressed irritation and resentment

showed itself in his manner. She could not understand it. She knew that she had vexed him by her refusal to divulge the secret of her interview with John Hannington, but she felt that he ought to trust her a little, especially when she had said that she would tell him everything by and by.

She spoke gently and sympathetically to Molly, telling her that she had promised Mr. Hannington a week's grace, and that she hoped he would then speak to Mr. Moncrieff. Molly tossed her graceful head, and looked at her step-mother with scornful eyes.

"Of course you will do what you can to separate us," she said.

"What makes you say so, Molly? If your father approves I shall approve too."

"But you will do your utmost to prejudice my father's mind; I know that!" cried Molly, flushing to the roots of her hair. "I understand it all; Jack told me."

"Told you—what?" asked Stella, as the girl hesitated. But Molly would not speak. She grew redder and redder, hung her head like a bashful child, and turned away. Stella could only conjecture that some garbled version of her acquaintance with John Hannington had been poured into her ear.

An air of gloom and mystery seemed to have settled over the household. No two persons were happy in each other's company. Misunderstandings abounded on every side. The whole family appeared to be at cross-purposes—the most disagreeable state in which a family can possibly be. Stella and Bertie were more comfortable together than any other couple; and they, by tacit consent, avoided all themes which might breed perplexity or discussion. Bertie was under the impression that Molly's intercourse with Hannington had been broken off; and although he had not known much of it, he had known enough to make him vaguely uneasy. He felt genuine relief in the conviction that Molly was no longer carrying on clandestine relations with a man whom his father so thoroughly disliked.

At the same time, he was a little puzzled by the new friendliness which seemed to obtain between Molly and Uncle Ralph. He came upon them once or twice in deep converse; once he was certain that he saw his uncle hand her a letter, and he knew that they went for long walks

together—but, after all, there was nothing so remarkable in these facts as to cause suspicion that anything was wrong. It was only that Bertie knew his uncle well enough to suspect his motives in every action of life; and that he did not trust too much to Molly. He did not like to confide his suspicions to Stella—who, perhaps, might have been set on her guard if she had but known them in time; he could only resolve to wait and watch for further developments.

It struck him as odd, when he went into the Octagon Room one day, that Ralph was standing in the middle of the room, with a ring in his hand which he was idly fitting on his little finger. As soon as he saw Bertie he thrust his hand into his pocket, so as to conceal the ring, and asked rather fiercely what he was doing there.

"It is the room in which I usually sit," said Bertie, with a touch of cool dignity which struck Ralph instantly as something fresh in his manner, "and I don't know why I should keep out of it. Why have you got Molly's ring?"

"Molly's ring? I have not got any ring of Molly's; what do you mean, sir?"

"I mean the ring that you had on your finger," said Bertie, steadily; "A ring with one red stone set with brilliants. I saw it as I came into the room."

"You are quite mistaken," said Kingscott, suddenly recovering his coolness. "The ring I am wearing never belonged to Molly at all; it was an heirloom in our family, and I was trying it on in sheer absence of mind. I wish, my dear boy, that you would mind your own business."

And then he left the room, but—as Bertie noticed—without offering to convince him of his mistake by showing him the ring, which must have hung very loosely on his finger, for he drew his hand out of his pocket without it.

These vague suspicions, these sensations of something unexplained, sufficed to make Bertie wakeful for the next two nights. As he lay sleepless, he could not rid himself of the idea that there were strange sounds in the house, stealthy footsteps going to and fro, a light gleaming for a moment where no light should be. On the second night this impression was so strong that he got up and partly dressed himself; then opened his door softly and went out into the corridor, where the struggling moonlight lay in fitful gleams upon the polished floor. He had armed himself

with a revolver—a pretty dangerous toy, which he had bought in London, and was boyishly proud of keeping loaded beside his bed.

Bertie went up and down the passage, looked into one or two rooms, stood and listened intently, but could hear nothing more. He had fancied that burglars might be in the house. Wanting as he might be in moral courage, Bertie was physically no coward. His blood warmed at the thought of a hand to hand encounter with robbers. He might, he fancied, win back his father's trust and affection if he displayed striking bravery and presence of mind. He felt something like a thrill of positive satisfaction when at last he was certain that he did hear a footstep, that he did see a glimmer of light beneath the door of his father's study—where no light was usually to be seen between the hours of one and two in the morning. He drew back into a dark recess and waited for the footsteps that were drawing near.

The study door opened, a flash of light came forth. It came from a lantern in a man's hand, and the light gleamed upon the man's face as he walked. Bertie started; his revolver nearly fell from his hand as he looked. This was no robber, then?—merely Ralph Kingscott, who had been wandering about the house by night, after his well-known, uncanny fashion. He had a roll of papers in his hand, and his face was pale; his eyes gleamed in a restless way as he glanced furtively from side to side.

Bertie drew back as far as possible. At that moment he did not want to confront his uncle. Relations between the two had been somewhat strained during the last few days. He was lucky. Ralph stopped and extinguished his lantern before he reached the dark recess. If he had kept it alight, he would have seen his nephew's shrinking figure as he passed down the corridor. He went to the Octagon Room; thence, as Bertie knew, he could pass into his own apartments. Some impulse urged him to follow. He made his way softly and stealthily to the Octagon Room, holding his loaded revolver firmly in one hand.

The Octagon Room was dark. The door into the Tower stood open, and a breath of cold night air blew on Bertie's face, as he approached it! he knew what that meant. The door from Ralph's room into the garden must be open too. Voices fell suddenly upon his ear.

He stopped to listen, for surely one of them at least was well known to him. Molly; what could Molly be doing in Uncle Ralph's room at that hour of the night? And there was Kingscott's voice, and another—whose? not John Hannington's? What did this mean?

A burning tide of indignation rushed through Bertie's veins. He dashed forward, hardly knowing what he did. He had a glimpse of a dimly lighted room; of Molly in her hat and cloak, holding by a man's arm, of Ralph Kingscott's furious look. The light was suddenly blown out: there came a cry, a scuffle; the sound of a loud report as the revolver was wrenched out of his hand and fired—by whom he could not tell. A heavy blow was planted well between his eyes; there was a moment of bewildering pain, of flickering lights, confusing noises, quivering nerves and then came the blackness and silence of complete unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEMESIS.

GLASGOW on a dull, dreary, drizzling day; Glasgow with East wind in full predominance, with pavement deep in mud, with lamps lighted in the streets at four o'clock in the afternoon, although the month was April, and in the country, at least, the daylight hours began to lengthen pleasantly. But the great city was wrapped in gloom, and the cheerlessness of the day was reflected in the countenances of those unlucky persons whom business (it could not have been pleasure) obliged to be abroad.

A gentleman passing along Bath Street, however, did not seem to share in the prevalent gloom. He was holding his handsome dark head high; there was a glow in his eye and in his face which rendered him evidently independent of surrounding circumstances; he looked like a man who had just carried out a lucky *coup*, and had secured for himself something that was worth winning. Withal, there was defiance in his air; he was at war with mankind, with himself, with God, perhaps; he felt himself to be fortunate, and he was yet not entirely happy. He was certainly little in the mood to notice the people whom he passed in the

street; hence it was, doubtless, that he did not catch sight of a lady who was standing with her maid on the steps of a highly respectable family hotel, patiently waiting until the door should be opened to her knock. With that look of high excitement on his face it was not likely that he would see even an old acquaintance like Lady Valencia Gilderoy.

But Lady Val was not to be discouraged. She uttered an exclamation, then ran lightly down the steps, pursued the unobservant gentleman, and touched him on the arm. "What have I done that you should cut me, Jack?" she said.

John Hannington stopped and stared violently. All the glow went suddenly out of his face. He did not speak.

"You look as if you had seen a ghost," said Lady Valencia.

"I have," he answered, rather hoarsely. "The ghost of—of other days." Then he laughed, offered her his hand, and went on as if to efface the memory of his words. "Where are you staying, Lady Val? Or, surely, you are not staying anywhere? You are the last person that I should expect to see in a Glasgow street."

"Am I not?" said Lady Val, laughing in her turn, but in a gayer fashion than he had laughed. "I have had business in Glasgow. Perhaps that is also the last thing that you expected to hear? Such business, Jack! It is settled now, thank goodness; and if you can give me a few minutes I'll tell you all about it; you will be as glad as I am, I fancy, when you know!"—and she looked up at him with shining eyes, and wondered vaguely why he turned away and said nothing.

"Can you spare me ten minutes?" she continued. "It is the greatest piece of luck I ever experienced—save one—meeting you here in the street, as if you had fallen from the skies! I was just wishing to see you; I really have some news to impart, and you are going to listen to me, are you not?"

"I have not very much time to spare, I am sorry to say, Lady Val." Hannington was visibly embarrassed.

She stared at him and then laughed again—she would not be repelled. "It's the first time you were ever rude to me, Jack; it is going to be the last, I hope. Come, you can't be so very busy as not to be able to give me ten minutes or so."

"Oh, no: I can even give you half an hour," said Hannington, recovering himself, and smiling back into her face almost frankly. "I have some news for you too; but mine will keep."

"And mine won't: that is all the difference. Now turn back with me. That is my maid on the steps: old Grimsby—isn't it an appropriate name? See how grim she looks. She does not approve of my running after you in the street. We are to stay until seven o'clock at this hotel, and at seven my sister will call for me and fetch me away from this Babel of a city. We have been here for three days transacting business, and now the business is done."

"Is Mrs. Lennox then with you?" said Jack, only half comprehending the purport of her words, as she ascended the steps before him.

"No, she is having afternoon tea with some people that I hate, in George Square, and I declared absolutely and once for all that I would not go with her. Come this way." And Lady Valencia inducted her guest into a private sitting-room, away from the street and the occasional spurts of bustle in the entrance hall; and in this room they found a bright fire, some cosy-looking chairs and a sofa, and tea laid for two on a small table drawn close up to the hearth.

"Ah, that looks comfortable," said her ladyship, briskly, "and now, Grimsby, you can take my hat, and bring in the teapot and the scones. Jack, you and I will have a delightful little tea all to ourselves, and if Grimsby doesn't think it strictly proper, why, she won't tell, and neither must you."

The grim maid's lips relaxed into rather a sour smile as she took her mistress's wrappings, and Lady Val glanced at Jack, expecting to find a laughing answer ready. But, to her surprise, Hannington's face had grown gloomy: his impenetrable dark eyes were lighted by neither mirth nor pleasure, and he was pulling at his long black moustache with what she perceived to be a rather nervous hand. Moreover, he stood up on the hearthrug in a constrained and formal attitude which astonished her—well as she knew John Hannington, there was something in his demeanor which perplexed her now.

But she was a clever woman in her way, and she

thought it wisest to see nothing, so for the next few moments she busied herself at the tea table, scolded Grimsby in a light, bright, cheerful style, scoffed at the weather, the streets, the hotel, and allowed her guest to recover his self-possession and his gaiety as best he might. Her treatment was perfectly successful. When Grimsby had retired, and Lady Val had given him a cup of tea—made exactly as he liked it, by the by, for she had long ago learnt his tastes by heart—and when she had established herself in a low chair by the fire, and he stood looking down upon her from his position on the rug, with his arm on the mantelpiece—then the clouds began to clear away from his brow, and he smiled a little at her lively sallies and regarded her with the old admiration in his eyes.

Was it his fancy, or was she really handsomer than ever? The glancing firelight was favorable to her appearance, because the mingling shadow and shine concealed the slight lines that care had begun to trace upon her brow and emphasised the color in her cheek, the splendor of her eyes, the massive coils of her raven hair. Then her dress was exceedingly becoming to her figure and complexion: it was of a deep Indian red, trimmed with a good deal of dull gold Eastern embroidery about the body and close-fitting sleeve. Hannington vaguely noticed that she had been careful that every adjunct of her attire should be in keeping: that even the stones in her brooch and her rings were red, and that the one gold bracelet which she wore was a serpent with ruby eyes, that the dainty slippers which she had retired for a moment to don were embroidered very finely with small ruby-colored beads. He was a man on whom such small details were not lost, and he liked them to be complete. Lady Val had always satisfied his taste better than any woman he knew.

He was thinking this, as he stood and looked at her in the firelight, when suddenly she lifted her dark eyes and met his gaze. Involuntarily he drew back into the shadow. But she did not draw back; she only laughed in her frank, gay, yet enigmatic fashion.

"Well, Jack, are you better; ready to hear my news now?"

"Yes, I am better. A cup of your tea and the sight of your face have refreshed me wonderfully."

She held up a warning finger. "No compliments, sir! I have a weighty communication to make to you. Will you listen?"

"For ever!"

He intended it only as idle compliment, and as such Lady Val had always accepted the half-jesting devotion that he had offered her for so many years; but on this occasion her eyes fell, and her face flushed as if she had taken it more seriously than usual.

"Only for five minutes, at present!" she said, with the whimsicality of tone which he was accustomed to associate with her utterances. "Then, my dear Jack, you can judge as to whether you would like to hear more. It is a matter of law and business, and I shall want to have your advice. Do you know much about stocks and investments in general?"

"Not so much as I should know if I had anything of my own to invest," said Hannington, laughing. "Is your ladyship about to speculate?"

"Yes, indeed; and in a very hazardous way."

"Let me advise you not to do that. Consult your lawyer first."

"Suppose I prefer to consult you. Would you help me?"

"I! Certainly, if it were in my power."

"I thought that you would. You were always a friend of mine, weren't you, Jack? Friends through thick and thin we have been, after all, have we not?"

"I hope so," said Hannington, uneasily. "What do you mean, Lady Val? There is nothing—I hope—likely to sever our friendship just now, is there?" In his heart he thought there was, and he dreaded to hear it from her lips.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," Lady Val responded, briskly. She touched her eyelids with the cobweb handkerchief which had been resting in her lap—was it possible that they had been moist with unshed tears?—and went on in her usual rapid manner. "I was only afraid that you might resent something that I had done; and I thought that I would make open confession to you when I had the opportunity. Look here, Jack; you have been making love to Alan Moncrieff's pretty daughter, have you not? And Mrs. Moncrieff has been putting a spoke in the wheel—eh?"

"She tried to do so."

"I expect that she will be successful," said Lady Val, with a laugh which showed some nervousness; "and if she is, I shan't be sorry."

The words which Hannington had been about to utter suddenly died upon his lips.

"Did you never wonder who told her? It was I. People had begun to talk about poor Molly's meetings with you, Jack, so I went to Mrs. Moncrieff and put her on her guard. I did not mention you by name; but I suppose she found you out?"

"Yes, she did. May I ask whether you call that a friendly act—to try to defeat my schemes in that way?"

"Yes, I do. And when you know all the circumstances, I think that you will own that it was. I would have spoken to you if I could have got hold of you, but you carefully absented yourself from me all the time."

"You know why," said Hannington, sullenly.

Lady Val's eye glittered. "*Do* I know why?" she asked.

"Of course you do. You are the only woman in the world that I ever cared for—I have told you that twenty times, and I tell it you once again. If I had seen much of you then, do you think that Molly would have held me for a moment? You had only to hold up your little finger, and say 'Come!'"

"Oh, no, I hadn't, Jack," she said, softly. "There was a very good reason for our holding apart, you know. We agreed that neither of us could afford to marry a poor person. Was not that the case?"

"I suppose so," he said, sighing very genuinely. "It would have suited neither of us—you less even than myself."

"I don't know that. I should have made a capital poor man's wife, I believe. I should have liked very well to scrub the floors, and make the puddings, and darn the stockings: I have no dislike to poverty at all."

"You are never likely to be tried."

"No," Lady Val answered, still softly, but with an odd little smile. "I am never likely to be tried."

"I know what it is," said Hannington, taking a step towards her, and contracting his dark brows as he spoke.

"You want to tell me that you are going to be married—

some millionaire has asked you to be his wife, and this is the fashion in which you announce your marriage! "I wish you joy, Lady Valencia: and I congratulate you on your success. We have both been fortunate."

"Don't be cross, Jack"—very gently—"no millionaire has asked me to marry him yet."

"But you are going to be married?"

"Perhaps."

"Then my congratulations——"

"Oh, how stupid you are!" she said, getting up from her low chair and standing before him—so close that she touched him with her dress, with her arm, with her filmy little handkerchief, as she spoke. "Do listen to the news that I have to tell you, and don't make all these silly guesses beforehand. First and foremost, will you forgive me for what I did about Molly, if I can prove to you that I was acting in your interest all along, and have been justified by the event."

"Certainly," he said, and, yielding to temptation, he took the white hand which grasped the handkerchief into his own. "I'll forgive you, too, without hearing your excuses."

"No, I don't want you to do that." She let her hand stay in his; her breath came and went a little more quickly than usual. "You may have heard an old story about an uncle of mine who made an enormous fortune in America many years ago. There was a lawsuit about his money: it has been going on for some time, and none of us thought that we should ever benefit by what he left. We have gained the case."

"I saw that in the papers. Also, that the costs of the proceedings had swallowed up nearly all the fortune."

Lady Val laughed. "Nearly—not quite. Some land was left. Well, on this very piece of land our agents have 'struck ile,' as they call it: there's petroleum flowing night and day, I believe, and producing piles of money, all for my brother, my sister, and me. The old man's will provided that we should share and share alike, you know. I suppose that I myself shall soon be a millionairess, if there is such a word. What do you think of that, Master Jack? Oh, Jack, I'm so glad!"

She stretched out both her hands to him. There was the loveliest look of joy and tenderness in her eyes.

Hannington held her hands, but made no other sign. He was growing white about the lips.

"Do you see, Jack?" she went on. "I was hoping that this would come true; and I did not want you to throw yourself away on a child like Molly Moncrieff for the sake of her trumpery little fortune. Did we not always say that when either of us was rich we would share with the other? That is what I meant, Jack, because you know you always said that you cared for me, and that if only I were not poor, you would be happy with me as your wife. It is not exactly the right thing for me to say this, is it, dear? But things are so upside down and so very like a fairy tale, that I feel as if I had the right to reverse our respective *roles*—and make you the proposal!" But, in spite of her brave words, she blushed very deeply as she spoke.

"Why didn't you warn me? Why didn't you tell me this before?" said Jack, wringing her hands wildly in his own without thinking what he did. "Oh, Val, if I had but known!"

"But what difference does it make?" said Lady Val, with wide-open, unsuspecting eyes. "I could not tell you then because I was not sure—indeed, I did not know till within the last few days that the oil springs had turned out so well. And, of course, you could not pursue your scheme about Molly—you see; I can guess the reason why you made love to her; and, indeed, Jack, I think you are behaving very badly—and why do you hurt my hands so? What is the matter with you, Jack?"

He dropped her hands suddenly.

"What do you mean by saying that I could not pursue my scheme?"

"Not after I had spoken to Mrs. Moncrieff and told her of your meetings with Molly—why, of course you could not, because that was the very thing that would vex Alan Moncrieff beyond everything."

"And why on earth should I care whether Moncrieff was vexed or not? For heaven's sake, come to the point."

Lady Val looked at him full in the face and bit her lip.

"If you wanted to marry the girl for her money, Mr. Moncrieff's vexation is very much to the point. You see I am not giving you the credit of supposing that you

wished to marry her for love; and, considering how I used to preach up the necessity of marrying for money, I can't say much against it to you, Jack, but I don't think it right, after all. And you know, of course, that Molly won't be able to touch a farthing of her money until she is twenty-one, if she marries without her father's consent. As she is barely eighteen now, it would hardly suit you to marry her and wait three years in poverty, would it?"

She was startled by the ejaculation that fell from Hannington's lips.

"I have ruined myself for nothing, then!" he exclaimed.

She looked at his pale face and frowning brows, and a faint suspicion began to creep into her mind.

"What have you done?" she asked.

He turned towards her and caught her in his arms.

"I never knew till to-day that you cared for me, Val," he said. "If I had known—oh, my God, how different life would have been for both of us! Kiss me, darling—just once; kiss me and tell me that you love me, I have loved you all these years, and tried hard to fight it down. You are the only woman in the world, as I have often told you, that I ever loved!"

She was not frightened by the hoarsely spoken words, by the rough embrace, or the man's passion of love and grief—passion such as she had never thought him capable of before. She lifted her face and allowed him to press his lips to hers for one moment of mingled bliss and agony. Then she drew her face away.

"There!" she said. "Yes, I love you, Jack, with all my heart, and I always have loved you, and I have always done my best, as far as I knew it, for your welfare. It is because I love you that I don't want you to do or say anything now that you may live to regret. So tell me plainly what all this means."

"It means, Val," groaned Hannington, heavily, "that—although I loved you—I married Molly Moncrieff this morning, and that she is here in Glasgow with me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE EVIDENCE.

THE household at Torresmuir had been aroused at dead of night by noises which were as alarming as they were mysterious. A cry, a scuffle, and a pistol shot, followed (as some of the servants declared) by the sound of hastily retreating footsteps and carriage wheels along the road, caused much excitement, and it was generally thought that the place had been entered by burglars who had been disturbed at their work. This theory was at first corroborated by the fact that Mr. Moncrieff, on proceeding to the Tower, found the doors open, and his son and brother-in-law lying incapacitated on the floor of Kingscott's sittingroom. Bertie was quite unconscious: he seemed to have been stunned by a severe blow on the head; and Kingscott's left arm was found to be broken, and even shattered, by a shot from the revolver, which, as Moncrieff noted with surprise, bore Bertie's name engraved upon it, and could not, therefore, be a burglar's weapon! He was alarmed also to find that Ralph was for so long unconscious, and apparently unable to give any account of the affray: it was quite ten or fifteen minutes before anything intelligible could be extracted from him, and Moncrieff was somewhat puzzled by this curious inability to speak. As a matter of fact, Ralph Kingscott was too wary to come to himself as soon as he might have done. He did not want to put Moncrieff on the track of his friend Hannington; and the longer pursuit could be delayed, the greater chance had Hannington of getting clear away. Search was of course made at once in the grounds and woods about the house, but nobody could be found, and it was some time before one of the maids declared that she had heard the sound of wheels on the high road.

"Wheels! Of a cart, do you think?" Mr. Moncrieff asked her.

"It was heavier than a cart, sir. It was mair like a carriage and pair."

"Nonsense!" Mr. Moncrieff said, impatiently. "What would a carriage and pair be doing there at that hour of the night?"

Strange to say, however, the gardener, whose cottage was close to the road, corroborated the maid's statement. He also had heard the sound of wheels; and, on looking out of his window, he had seen a carriage and pair driving furiously down the road.

"Then that had nothing to do with this affair," said Mr. Moncrieff, decisively. "Robbers do not come in carriages."

He was turning away, when his attention was arrested by a word from Kingscott's lips. Stella was bending over him and trying to do something for his arm; but the word he uttered made her hand fall suddenly to her side.

"Hannington," he said.

Stella half raised herself, glanced round her, and said, almost below her breath,

"Where is Molly?"

She thought that Alan would, if he could, have annihilated her on the spot. "In her room, of course," he answered sternly. "You are unnerved, Stella. What is Ralph saying? Attend to Bertie—I will look after Ralph. Do you know me, Ralph? Who did this? Who has been here?"

"Hannington."

"Hannington! He does not know what he is saying," said Alan, for the benefit of the listeners around him; but his face blanched a little at the sound. "You need not crowd into this room," he said, addressing himself to the servants. "There is no further cause for alarm. We will get Mr. Kingscott to bed, and Mr. Bertie also; I hope that the doctor will be here presently. Now, Ralph?"

Kingscott opened his eyes. A contraction of pain crossed his brow. "What! Did he shoot me?" he asked, trying to sit up, but turning whiter than ever with the effort as he moved. "The young scoundrel!"

"Of whom are you speaking, Ralph?"

"Of Bertie, of course. Isn't his revolver anywhere about? He shot me, I tell you, whether by accident or

not, I can't say. I think I knocked him down in return. Good heavens! my arm!"

"What are you talking about, Ralph? Did not burglars get into the house?"

"Burglars! certainly not. John Hannington did—if you call him a burglar—he has stolen one thing, at any rate. Have you some brandy there? This pain makes me feel uncommonly sick."

Alan was obliged to control his impatience while he gave the brandy; but before Kingscott had swallowed it, a woman servant came flying into the room with news. "Oh, sir, oh; mem! Miss Molly's no in her bed, nor in her room, nor anywhere! She's may be hiding, or cairryit aff by the robbers."

Stella, who was now attending to Bertie's wants, turned so white and scared a face towards her husband that even in that moment of anxiety he was struck by its expression.

"Send the woman away," Ralph murmured faintly. "I think I can explain."

Mr. Moncrieff sternly ordered the girl out of the room, and then Ralph murmured his explanation in his brother-in-law's ear. "I'm afraid that Molly—Molly—has eloped with Hannington," he said. "They were stealing out by the door in the Tower when I came upon them. Molly had a bag; she was in her cloak and hat. Bertie was with them—perhaps he meant to go too: I can't say. I rushed forward to stop Molly—and you see the result."

Stella sprang up with a cry. "Oh, it can't be! it can't be!" she exclaimed, hastening to her husband's side. The grey change in his face alarmed her. "Alan, it can't be true."

She put her hand on his arm, but he repulsed her, speaking harshly in his grief. "Was *this* your secret?" he said. "Were you helping my daughter to bring disgrace upon my name?"

"Alan, don't say such a cruel thing. I knew that Mr. Hannington had met her—I was trying to put an end to it—I had no idea that Molly ever thought of leaving us in this way! Oh, cannot we stop her? Cannot we bring her back?"

"Too late," said Alan, grimly. "If I could, I would not now. Molly is no longer a child of mine. I have done with her for ever. And if Bertie has helped her to disgrace herself in this way, I will——"

"No, Alan, don't say anything just now," said Stella, clinging to him, although the sight of his rigid and repellant attitude, his fiery eyes and sternly set face, would usually have been enough to startle her into silence and submission. Kingscott, watching her cynically in spite of the pain that he suffered, thought to himself that he would as soon have thrown his arms round the neck of an infuriated lion. But Stella was carried out of herself and beyond the dominion of fear.

Alan's hand had clenched itself fiercely; the words upon his tongue had been harsh and bitter, and even terrible to hear from a father's lips. But the hand relaxed, the words died into silence, and his fair young wife clung to him and gazed pleadingly into his face. A look of anguish took the place of fury; he turned away, placing his hand over his eyes, as if to shut out the vision of wife and son and absent, erring daughter. Stella was obliged to release him, but she felt—afterwards, for she was too much bewildered and distressed to think anything just then—that her interposition had not been without effect. Alan staggered a little in his walk as he went blindly toward the door; but he refused all offered help, straightened himself, and walked out of the room with head held high, but a face like marble and eyes like living coals.

Kingscott sank back with a groan of pain, and called to the old butler to give him more brandy. Stella hastened to Bertie's side, for the lad's eyes were unclosed, and he had raised himself on one arm with a bewildered air. She could not leave him to the servants at that moment, although her heart yearned after her husband in his agony of wounded love and pride.

"What is it? What does it mean?" murmured Bertie.

"Don't talk yet," said Stella, gently. "Do you feel any pain? We must have you taken to your room when you are able to move, and the doctor will be here directly."

"I'm not hurt, sa... Bertie, in a stronger voice. "Only a little dazed, I think. What was my father saying about me? I did not understand—"

"You had better hold your tongue," said Kingscott from the couch on which he was lying, in tones rendered harsh, presumably by pain. "You can do no good by talking."

Stella was sorry to see that the lad cowered when these

words were spoken as though they contained a threat. She redoubled her attentions to him, and was rewarded presently by finding that, although still sick and faint, he was able to move without difficulty, then, thinking that she could be of no use at present to Kingscott, she went away from the Tower to make inquiries about Molly, and to give any orders that might be required.

Alan was invisible; the responsibility for every kind of action seemed at once to have fallen on her shoulders. The servants turned to her as if knowing instinctively that her head was sure to be clear, her judgment sound, and her will decided. She had to restore order, as far as possible, to the distracted household, and provide for future contingencies. Notwithstanding Alan's declaration that he would have no more to do with Molly, she sent messengers in one or two directions—the coachman to the railway station with orders to telegraph to the station-master at Perth—a groom in another direction with somewhat similar injunctions. She thought that there might still be a chance of finding Molly and bringing her back.

But her hopes grew small when, after a considerable search, she found a letter addressed to herself in Molly's room. It was short, but clear enough.

"As you are so determined to prevent my marriage with Jack," wrote Molly, "we have thought it better to take matters into our own hands. Jack is waiting for me with a carriage in the road. We shall not go to Dunkeld or to Perth, so you need not look for us there. We shall be married to-morrow morning, and then I will write again. I have written to my father, and I hope that he will not be angry with us. Indeed, I would not have taken this way if you had not driven me into it by trying to come between me and Jack. I am sorry for my father's sake, but not for anything else, because I love Jack better than anybody in the world."

She had signed her full name at the end—"Mary Helen Montcrieff."

Stella was cut to the heart by one sentence: "I would not have taken this way if you had not driven me into it by trying to come between me and Jack." It was hard to make her responsible for Molly's wilful rashness! What an accusation it was! She could not condemn or acquit herself exactly. She had erred in trusting the lovers too

much; she had credited them with a sense of honor which it seemed they did not possess. But then, who would have thought that John Hannington, a man of good family if not of wealth, would have so far forgotten the traditions of his race as to urge an inexperienced girl of eighteen to elope with him! The thing was incredibly disgraceful in Stella's eyes; and she knew that it would be— if possible—even more so in the eyes of her husband.

Must she show him this letter, in which that accusing sentence seemed to stand out with such terrible distinctness? She winced at its latter words—"trying to come between me and Jack." What would Alan think of that? She dared not consider; she thrust the letter into her pocket, resolving to show it to him at once, without regard to consequences. But this she found to be impossible. He had locked himself into his study, and answered when she knocked with a request that he might be left alone. His tones were muffled and unnatural. Stella thought, as she lingered wistfully outside his door, she was almost certain that she heard the sound of those heart-rending sobs which are the last expression of a strong man's agony. Then she was summoned away by the announcement of the doctor's arrival, and found herself obliged to explain the state of affairs to him, and to conduct him to his patients.

Kingscott's arm was seriously hurt, and he did not scruple to attribute his injury to Bertie's hand. His ingenuity did not desert him in the midst of all his pain. He was quite ready with an elaborate and highly-colored version of his experiences, by which it was made to appear that he had been utterly surprised by the appearance of Hannington and Molly, that he believed Bertie to be helping them to elope, and that he had done his best to prevent the catastrophe that had followed. Even Stella did not know what to believe when she heard his plausible tale. It sounded so rational, so consistent! She could not imagine that Ralph Kingscott had any reason for wanting to see Molly married to John Hannington, and it did not seem likely to her that he would invent the story that he told. On the other hand, she could not make up her mind to believe that Bertie was so careless of his sister's fate, so weak and deceitful, as to act in the manner indicated by Kingscott. She hoped that Alan would be able to solve the mystery.

Bertie had been stunned by the blow on his head, and felt faint and languid when he recovered consciousness; otherwise he was not hurt. The doctor sought and obtained a few minutes conversation with Mr. Moncrieff, who received him courteously, with no trace of past emotion, and listened to his report of the patients' condition with cold attention. "He's just like a stone," the doctor said to himself as he came away. It was only Stella who guessed the intensity of the torture from which Alan was suffering just then.

She herself did not gain access to him until the afternoon, when, on passing the door, she saw that it was ajar, and heard him call her by name. He had known her footsteps, and wanted to speak to her. She was shocked to see how gaunt and haggard and old he was looking all at once. He stood in the middle of the room, with one hand resting on the table; in the other he held a letter which he proffered her to read.

"You can see it," he said, hoarsely, "it is from her."

"I have one too. I have brought it for you to see," said Stella.

He took it from her hand, but did not read it immediately. He seemed to wish that she should first read his daughter's letter to himself.

Stella was astonished by its tone. It was utterly different from the tone adopted in the epistle to herself. Three pages were filled with protestations of penitence and affection; there was a humble plea for her father's forgiveness which did not sound as if it came from Molly at all, and there was an intimation that letters would find her at a certain hotel in Glasgow, from which place, she said, "Jack" intended to go to the Trossachs for a time.

When Stella had put down the letter—not knowing exactly what to say or think of it—Mr. Moncrieff began to read the note that Molly had written to her stepmother.

"Ah, that is genuine," he said, with a sigh.

"You don't think the other is?"

"No. I suppose that it was 'inspired' by Hannington. Molly was never so affectionate to me in her life."

There was a pause. "I wanted to tell you," Stella began, but her husband hastily interrupted her.

"Not just now. Tell me nothing at present. I have not heard Ralph's story yet or Bertie's."

"But mine ought to come first," said Stella, quietly.

He looked keenly at her. "Well," he said, wincing a little as if something hurt him in her aspect, "tell your story then—in as far as it refers to Molly only. If you have anything else to say, let it wait. I want to know about *her* affairs only for the present."

Stella would not let herself be wounded or dismayed. She began her story at once—the story of Lady Valencia's warning, of her expedition to Tomgarrow, and her interview with Hannington and Molly. Her voice faltered a little as she told of the week's respite that she had given the lovers—never dreaming that they would take advantage of her trust in them to cut the Gordian knot in this discreditable way. There was a moment's pause when she had finished.

"This is all you know!" said Alan, in the dry, hard voice which sounded so little like his own.

"Yes."

"And it did not strike you that your first duty in the matter was to me?—that I ought to have been told at once?"

"I am very sorry," murmured Stella.

"You ought to be sorry," said her husband, bitterly. "With a little more judgment, a little more wisdom on your part, this misery might have been avoided. You must know that."

He checked himself, for, with all his anger, he could not bear to see the look of pain and grief which his words brought to his wife's white face and quivering lips. He did not quite mean what he said. It was true, perhaps, that an older and more experienced woman might for a time have staved off an elopement, but he acknowledged to himself that where persons of Molly's unbridled temper and Hannington's lack of principle had been brought together, no bonds could possibly restrain them effectually. He would have told Stella so: he would have gathered her into his arms and comforted himself in comforting her, but for that secret root of evil—the suspicion of her truthfulness, which Kingscott had implanted there. If she loved another man, why should he care to soften his tones or extenuate her womanly weakness? There was nothing so abhorrent to him, he told himself, as deceit.

He stood silent for a moment, conscious, without lifting

his eyes, of the tears that were fast falling over poor Stella's pale cheeks. She wiped them away very quietly, as if she hoped that he would not remark them, and her silence half softened, half irritated him. There was stern impatience in his tone when he spoke at last.

"You have no more to say at present, I suppose? There are other things to be touched on later—just now Molly's affairs must come first. I have sent to ask Ralph if he can see me, and he is waiting for me, I believe. I have sent for Bertie, too; and I shall be glad if you will accompany me to Ralph's room. By a comparison of evidence, we shall perhaps get at the truth of the story."

Stella did not know exactly what he meant; but she followed his directions meekly, and went with him to Kingscott's rooms in the Tower. Ralph was in bed, evidently suffering much pain, but quite disposed to give his version of the story at any length that might be required. Bertie was also present. He looked white and distressed, and did not venture to sit down until his father curtly told him to take a chair. And then Ralph was requested to state what he knew.

He gave his account much as he had given it before, but not without interruption. At one or two points Bertie burst forth indignantly. "I knew nothing: I was *not* in league with Molly. It was not I who fired the revolver." And last of all, "Then what were *you* doing in my father's study at one o'clock—just before Molly went away?"

Kingscott shook his head pityingly. "It is a pity that you should try to affix blame on me, dear boy," he said. "The only excuse I can make for you is that you are suffering from delusions caused by an over-excited brain."

"Pray, what were *you* doing to be out of your room at that hour of the night?" said Moncrieff to his son.

Bertie answered by telling his own story; but it was easy to see that Moncrieff did not in the least believe it. He believed in Kingscott, apparently, and in nobody else. Neither would he credit Bertie's statement that he knew nothing ("or very little"—a damaging qualification—) about Molly's meetings with John Hannington. Matters became worse when Bertie, in passionate self-vindication, turned upon his uncle and accused him of treachery. Mr. Moncrieff silenced him, angrily—all the more angrily because he was certain, from a look in Stella's face, that

she trusted Bertie and not Ralph Kingscott. And then Kingscott smilingly dropped a word or two which seemed innocent enough, but which brought the look of terrified submission back to Bertie's face at once. "You had better be quiet for your own sake," Ralph Kingscott said. The words were unintelligible to Stella : they passed unnoticed by Mr. Moncrieff; but they contained a veiled threat that if the boy did not hold his tongue, he, Ralph, would tell his father the story of some money transactions which Bertie was particularly anxious that his father should not know. And so the lad succumbed before the stronger will, and resigned himself to bear a burden of blame which he did not deserve.

"There is one thing that I have kept to the last," said Moncrieff, when Bertie was silent. He spoke deliberately, but the tightening of the lines about his mouth told their own history of pain. "Do any of you know this ring?"

He held up a little gold ring, with a red stone set in brilliants in the centre.

"Molly's!" exclaimed Bertie. Then he glanced at Kingscott, flushed deeply, and was dumb.

"Molly's, I believe. I found it in a locked drawer in my study," said his father, gravely. "I suppose it is easy to see that Molly must have been there. To you three and to you only will I tell what has occurred. Molly, it seems, would not leave the house without possessing herself of her mother's jewels. They would have been hers in due course: I hardly blame her for that. But this is not all. She has taken papers, representing property to a considerable amount; and—and money." His voice grew thick, and his head sank as he spoke. "She knew that she was safe—that she might keep her ill-gotten gains. But I—I would sooner have lain in my grave than been obliged to acknowledge that my daughter—my only daughter—was a thief."

CHAPTER XXV.

HALF-CONFESSIONS.

BERTIE sprang to his feet. "It's not true!" he exclaimed, in great agitation, "Molly had lost her ring: it was not Molly who left it there——"

He stopped short. Kingscott's eye was turned upon him. He stood, panting and trembling, unable, apparently, to utter another word.

"Do you," said his father, slowly, "do *you* know anything of this robbery?" He raised his eyes, and fixed them stedfastly on his son's face as he spoke.

"No!" cried the lad, almost angrily. "I know nothing of it—how should I know? All I say is that if you condemn Molly on the ground that her ring was found in your drawer, you condemn her on very insufficient evidence. But you always think the worst of us—you always suspect us of wrong-doing!"

"And have I never been justified in my suspicions?" said the father. He did not speak sternly, but in slow, sad tones, as of one who had lost all hope. "I did not wish to be unjust," he said, laying the ring on the table, and leaning his head wearily on his hands; "but it seems that I have never understood my children."

An odd little silence fell upon the group. Nobody could contradict him: nobody dared to comfort him. They all looked at him for a minute or two, as if he were a stranger for whom nothing could be done; and then Stella's heart went out to him with a rush of passionate pity which she would have given worlds to express. She ventured to touch his shoulder with one tender little hand, but he took no notice of the mute caress. He rose up suddenly, indeed, as if he wished to shake it off, and Stella, turning rather pale, felt that he was resolved against consolation from her. He blamed her in part for his misfortunes; and oh, she said to herself, she had indeed been to blame!

It was Bertie who broke the pause. He had become first red and then white as his father's words fell on his ear; but his eye did not flinch, and a look of strong determination had settled upon his face. He stood, grasping the back of a chair with his hand, as if he wanted support; but the appearance of extreme agitation had suddenly disappeared. He was now calm, but firm. Kingscott glared at him angrily from his pillows, but Bertie would not look at him. The spell was broken; the lad's spirit was set free.

"You have been justified—you have never been unjust," he said, quickly. "Rather it is I who have never understood you: I have been afraid to trust you as I ought to

have done. If you will try to believe me—I know it will be hard—I will never hide anything from you again.”

“What have you hidden hitherto?” said Alan, catching at once with the suspiciousness that seemed to have become a part of his nature at the hint of something concealed. His brow did not lighten as he looked at his son.

“Several things of which I am ashamed, said Bertie, straightening his shoulders and looking his father full in the face. “I have debts, sir, that I had no business to contract, in the town. I have gambled and lost money, and, what is worse, I—I was mad, I think—I altered a cheque that you gave me three months ago: I turned eight into eighty—it was easy to do—and I yielded to the temptation because I was so distressed for money at the time.”

He ceased, looking very white, and still avoiding Ralph Kingscott's eye, but retaining the determined expression which, as Stella had often noticed, gave him so strong a likeness to his father. Kingscott's face was livid, but for the moment nobody noticed him. It was the effect of this confession upon Alan Moncrieff which absorbed the attention of his wife and son, who knew so well the exceeding bitterness of the cup of humiliation that he was being made to drink.

He reeled as if struck by a heavy blow. His face, which had been pale before, was now of an ashen-grey. “It can't be true! It can't be true,” he murmured to himself.

“It certainly cannot be true,” said Kingscott, sharply. “Bertie must be raving—or, at any rate, exaggerating strangely. Take care what you are saying, boy.” And then, in a rapid undertone, which did not reach the ear of the unhappy father, he added—“Do you want to kill your father outright by your ill-timed confession?”

“Better that Bertie should speak the truth at once and for all, Mr. Kingscott,” said Stella, firmly. “His father will be less hurt in the end by a frank acknowledgment of wrong-doing than by concealment.” The look that passed between Ralph's eyes and hers was like a declaration of war. “Speak out, dear Bertie, and let us hear the whole truth. Your father can bear it—can you not, Alan? And you will forgive him by and by.”

“I *must* bear it, I suppose,” said Alan, with a grim, grey face set like a rock, “although it is hard to know

that both my children—both——” He could not finish his sentence.

“Not Molly,” said Bertie, quickly. “I am sure you may trust Molly—she is not like me.”

The genuine shame and contrition in his manner moved Stella to pity, but did not seem to affect his father in the least. “Speak for yourself,” he said, coldly: “leave Molly’s name alone. You altered the figures in a cheque, you say: you got the money: how was it that I did not know? I surely must have noticed the discrepancy between the sum on the cheque and the counterfoil——”

He stopped short: some notion of his own carelessness in these matters crossed his mind. He turned abruptly to the bed where Kingscott lay.

“Ralph,” he said, almost appealingly, “explain this. It must have gone through your hands. You must know.”

The tears of perspiration were standing on Kingscott’s brow. He was furious, and yet he was afraid. Know? he had known all along! It was he, indeed, who had first suggested the alteration in the cheque and had helped Bertie to carry out his fraud successfully. Hitherto he had procured Bertie’s co-operation in many projects, by threatening to reveal the true history of that unlucky cheque. Now Bertie had thrown him over: well, he could play the same game, and, as he thought to himself, he should probably play it very much better than Bertie had ever done.

“I know only what Bertie told me,” he said, looking fixedly at the lad as he spoke. “Bertie brought me the cheque for eighty pounds, and ingenuously explained that you had written *eight* in your cheque book—which you had then left open on your desk. I, myself, at his request, took upon me to alter the figures on your book—legally, of course, involving myself in fraud and forgery, but simply because of my trust in Bertie’s word. In fact, I thought so little of the matter that I never even asked you about it; and the item passed unchallenged, you will remember, Alan, in your accounts.”

Moncrieff had seated himself again during this explanation: he sat silent, with head bent and arms crossed upon his breast. It was his own carelessness, he knew, that had made this fraud possible; and he was too honest a man to acquit himself of blame. But Bertie flamed into sudden wrath.

"I can't stand this!" he exclaimed. "Uncle Ralph, your story is false from beginning to end. You knew—you knew everything! You helped me to deceive my father: you used to take me down to the town at night when everybody thought that I was in bed: your little door in the Tower was constantly used at night when we went out and in. And now you pretend that you know nothing about it. I would have shielded you if I could; but this is too much!"

"I think you will want 'shielding' yourself: you need not talk of shielding me," said Ralph, with irony. "Your stories are as unfounded as they are malicious; and I am sure that your father will give me his confidence so far——"

"Yes, yes, Ralph, yes, I believe you," said Alan, wearily. "Whom should I trust if not you?"

"Father, father!" Bertie's cry was full of anguish. "I swear to you that I am speaking the truth: Uncle Ralph is not worthy of your trust——"

"And you are?—is that what you would imply?" said his father, the sarcasm sounding more sad than bitter, as it fell from his pain-drawn lips.

"I am not—I am not—but I *will* be!"

And then, by a sudden movement which no one could have anticipated, the lad threw himself at his father's feet and clasped his knees. "I have been wicked and weak, I have done everything that you despise," he said, vehemently, "but if you will forgive me, father, I will show you how I repent what I have done. You shall not always be ashamed of me: you shall see that I—that I——"

He broke down in a passion of sobs and tears, such as could not be deemed unmanly by any one who appreciated the sincerity of his repentance. Stella's fear that her husband would mistrust it amounted just then to positive agony. If he were hard, stern, obdurate now, she knew well that poor Bertie would be driven to desperation. No such moment of self-humiliation could occur twice in a young man's life. If his father did not forgive him then, would Bertie ever ask again for his forgiveness?

Kingscott looked on sardonically. Between Bertie's choking sobs, the sound of a low, grating laugh jarred unpleasantly on the ear. Ralph knew the value of ridicule.

"Repentance without confession? Very genuine indeed!" he sneered.

Alan Moncrieff's bent form straightened itself a little. He had been sitting in a dejected, listless attitude, his head hanging upon his breast, his gloomy eyes fixed upon the floor. When Bertie touched him he raised his eyelids and looked steadily at the bowed dark head, the slight form shaken by uncontrollable sobs before him. A sort of quiver passed over his set grey face. Ralph's words seemed to rouse him: he turned hastily towards his brother-in-law, and addressed his reply to him.

"Confession has been partly made, Ralph. The rest will come later." Then he laid his hand on Bertie's head. "I cannot afford," he said, with unusual gentleness, "to think that my son wishes to deceive me *now*."

Bertie could only gasp out some inarticulate reply. Kingscott let himself sink back upon his pillows with a look of vexation and dismay, while Stella, relieved of her anxiety, drew nearer to her husband and his son.

"I am sure," she cried, "that he is sorry, Alan. Dear Bertie, we will trust you for the future."

The sigh that came as it were involuntarily from Alan's lips, the reproachful glance that shot from his eyes to hers, startled her a little. She did not understand their meaning: that had still to be explained.

Mr. Moncrieff stirred and helped Bertie to rise; then, holding him by the arm, he said a few words very earnestly.

"I pray God that you do mean to amend your courses, Bertie. Without amendment there is nothing but misery before you—misery that will touch us all as well as yourself. I will try to trust you, and, if I cannot do it all at once, you must remember that when trust has once been lost it is not easily given again. But I am willing to try—it is all that I can say just now."

"Enough, surely!" muttered Kingscott. Possibly he intended Alan to hear.

"If you think it too much," said Moncrieff, turning quickly towards him, "I will hear your reasons at another time. I have shown great carelessness myself, but it seems to me that you have been quite as careless as I. There are several points which require to be elucidated before my mind can be set at rest."

"I should be much obliged to you if you would defer the elucidation," said Kingscott, with an attempt to recover his usual suavity of manner. "You seem to forget that I am something of an invalid—that my arm is exceedingly painful, and that the doctor told me to beware of fever."

"I beg your pardon," said Alan, in a mechanical way, which showed that his thoughts were far away from the words that he uttered. "I will disturb you no longer. Come, Bertie."

There had never been more tenderness in his voice than when he called his son to accompany him, never more gentleness in his manner than when he placed his hand within Bertie's arm, and leaned slightly upon it as he left the room. It was a sad sight to see him so bowed and broken—the blow had been a heavy one, and had turned him from a tolerably young man into an old one. It gave Stella a pang to notice that he would not look at her as he passed out. She paused for a minute or two to give Ralph some water, for which he asked.

"I hope," she said, as she took the glass from his hand, "that we have done you no injury by talking so much in your room while you were ill?"

"Is that meant for satire?" asked Ralph, irritably.

"Satire: certainly not."

"You are exceedingly kind, Mrs. Moncrieff. I can hardly say that I have not received an injury in the course of the evening's conversation, but I think I know how to protect myself."

"Not, I hope, at the expense of any one's reputation," said Stella, gravely. She was thinking of Bertie, but his reply showed her that he attached a different meaning to her words.

"A lady's reputation is sometimes hardly worth preserving," he said, with the malignant look that she was beginning to know so well. "You may be quite sure that I shall guard mine at *any* cost."

She felt it useless to answer him, and left the room, therefore, almost immediately. A nurse, hastily summoned from the town, was in attendance in the next room; and great was her indignation at the state in which she found her patient. It had indeed been unwise on Alan Moncrieff's part to allow so exciting a scene to take place in a

sick man's room ; but he was hardly capable of considering anything but his own troubles at that moment, and he had certainly never expected the confession that Bertie had been impelled to make. He would have gone into the matter more thoroughly then and there, but for a glimmering recollection that Ralph was ill. And there were so many points to discuss, there was so much that was puzzling in the case, so much that filled him with sorrow and dismay, that he felt himself incapable of grappling with the whole affair just yet. Bertie's heartfelt grief softened him: he could not bear to believe the boy anything but sincere. It was a relief to his overburdened spirit to think that he had yet some one to love—some one, even, though with reservations, to lean upon and trust.

He did not turn to Stella for comfort. He was hurt and indignant with her still. He would not question her again, and yet he felt that there was something untold which he wanted to hear. What it was he did not know, but he was miserable until it was told.

Little by little, during the next few days, he pieced the facts of the case (as he thought) together. He was resolved, in spite of Kingscott's insinuations, to believe that Bertie was guiltless in the matter of Molly's flight from home. Bertie swore that he knew nothing of it, and his father trusted him. On the other hand, he was equally averse from believing that Ralph had been concerned in it. Accusation and counter-accusation between Kingscott and Bertie he put down to jealousy and ill-temper. Ralph had been careless, no doubt, but Alan was not the man lightly to forsake an old friend. Careless, but not treacherous: that was his version of the story, and the more Stella and Bertie blamed "poor Ralph," the more determined was Alan to stand by him through thick and thin.

And so, after several long conferences with one person after another, Alan Moncrieff made up his mind how to act. Molly, he decided, was guilty in many ways: she had deceived him, robbed him, disgraced him; the country was ringing with the news of her elopement, and there were paragraphs about it in the papers which stung him to fury. If Kingscott had not been invalided at the present moment he would have gone abroad. But business of various kinds had to be transacted, and he could not easily leave home. Every chance remark that he overheard,

every sentence that he read, added intensity to his deep displeasure with his daughter. She who ought to have been the brightness of his house, the joy of his life, had inflicted upon him a torture of shame and grief which he felt that he could never forget—and which he firmly believed that he could also never forgive.

He addressed a few lines to John Hannington at the Glasgow hotel, but sent neither letter nor message to Molly. The substance of his communication was very unsatisfactory to Hannington. Mr. Moncrieff informed him that Molly's fortune (the bulk of which was inherited from an old uncle, and not to any great extent from her mother, as Hannington had thought), was tied up until she attained her majority, or until her marriage, if she married before the age of twenty-one with her father's consent. As she had not chosen to ask that consent, neither she nor Mr. Hannington could be surprised if he chose to abide by the terms of the will, and he thought that trouble and perplexity might be saved if he at once informed Mr. Hannington of these facts. He begged that he might receive no letters from his daughter, and referred Mr. Hannington to his lawyer if he wished for any further information. Mrs. Moncrieff would forward Mrs. Hannington's personal possessions to any address that might be given. He had taken means to assure himself of the validity of the marriage contracted between his daughter and John Hannington in Glasgow, and in doing this he conceived that his duty towards her ended for the present.

The tone of the letter was cold, measured, and severe; but it was not the letter of a man in a passion of anger, and therefore it was all the more impossible to controvert. Neither Molly nor Hannington wrote in reply; but an address was enclosed to Stella, and to this address she sent Molly's clothes and books and ornaments with a letter full of tender pity and counsel to the foolish girl herself. Silence followed it: and what had become of the runaway couple nobody seemed to know.

For some days a slight but perceptible coolness existed between Mr. Moncrieff and his brother-in-law. Alan could not entirely acquit Ralph of carelessness in the charge of Bertie, and Ralph thought it wisest to accept no blame at all. But the coolness did not last. How could it last when Ralph was working night and day to undermine

Alan's trust in everybody but himself? Alan was drawn closer and closer to him by the common bond of suspicion and distrust. Stella had small chance of regaining his esteem when Ralph was constantly whispering evil suggestions in her husband's ear. Of the last and worst she was thoroughly unconscious.

"The fact is, my dear Alan," Ralph said, one day in his most caressing and compassionate tones, "you married a woman who was in love with somebody else, and that somebody else was John Hannington. Hence these complications!"

And Alan believed him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LADY VAL SPEAKS OUT.

WHEN John Hannington had uttered the fatal words which were to divide him for ever from the only woman that he had ever loved, Lady Valencia started away from his embrace and stood looking at him, the color ebbing away from her face and lips for a moment or two, and then flooding cheeks and brow in a great crimson tide.

"Married!" she said, in a very low tone, at last.

"Yes."

He set his teeth and stood silent before her. No excuses ever availed him, he knew, with Lady Val.

"You have married Molly Moncrieff for her money?"

"It pleases you to say so."

She struck the ground imperiously with her foot. "It *pleases* me to say so. What does the man mean? Answer me, sir, if you please. You have married Miss Moncrieff!"

"Yes."

"And for her money?"

The two looked into each other's eyes. "Curse her money!" Hannington then broke out furiously, "I wish her money was——"

"Speak civilly, please," said Lady Val, "I only wish to know the truth."

He took a humble tone at once. "It is very hard for me to tell you. What could I do? You yourself advised me often enough——"

I never advised you to run away with Alan Moncrieff's daughter—a child of seventeen or eighteen! Why, it's madness! You will be cut by all his friends. You have ruined yourselves—both of you! And, besides—oh, Jack, it was a horribly mean thing to do!”

She tried to control herself and to speak in her ordinarily brusque, off-hand manner; but her voice trembled in spite of her attempt. Turning sharply away, she stood motionless for a minute or two, and then, putting her hands before her face, she burst into honest, passionate tears, and sobbed heartily, while Jack leaned on the mantelpiece and felt guiltier and more wretched than he had ever felt since the days of his boyhood, when he used to get into trouble for bullying little Lady Val.

“Oh, Val, Val!” he said, hoarsely, at last, “I can't stand this kind of thing. Don't cry, for God's sake, my dear. I'm a cur and a villain, I believe, but I never thought you cared——”

“I did care, Jack,” she sobbed, piteously.

“If you had but let me know Val!”

“How could I let you know?” she cried, the old impatience making itself visible once more. “It was no use. I would not have had you while we were poor, and you would have been very sorry if I had. It is folly to talk in that way. You know that I—that I liked you, to say the least; and if”—facing him defiantly with a proud flash in her beautiful eyes—“if you had done your wooing openly—if you had gone about your suit as any other gentleman would have done—then I could have let you know in time, and you might have chosen between Molly Moncrieff and me!”

“There would have been no hesitation on my part,” said Hannington, closing his lips firmly and turning very pale.

“Perhaps not. I am much richer than Molly will ever be, poor child!” said Lady Val, with a queer, shaky little laugh. “I should have been a better bargain, Jack. And what have you gained? You have behaved like a sneak, and everybody will say so——”

“If you were not a woman, I——”

“You would knock me down, eh, Jack? But what I say is true, for all that. You have behaved *badly*, I tell you, and you will hear plenty of remarks to that effect.

I have no doubt that the society papers will take it up. And you are not rich enough to override gossip: you will go down like a stone. Even when your wife's fortune comes to you, you will not be able to retrieve yourself. You have done a dishonorable thing, sir, and I am very much mistaken if the world will not tell you so."

"The world," said Hannington, pulling at his moustache and looking down, "is generally lenient to a—a—romantic marriage."

"Where there is love on both sides," said Lady Val, quickly, "the world is lenient. But it will soon find out that you married Molly for her money, and it will revile you when it finds out that she has none."

"You are cynical," said Hannington, whose face had grown ominously dark, "and not particularly lucid. How will the world find out that I am not desperately in love with Molly, since I have eloped with her?"

"Are you so sure that you can disguise your real feelings?"

"Not at all. But I know the world better than you, and I think that the world will not care very much."

Lady Val shook her head. Evidently she did not care to argue the matter, but she was not convinced.

"You don't think so?" Hannington continued, quietly. "Very well. I'll grant you your point. The world will despise me, the world will drop me as unworthy of its notice. I am ruined. Good. I have lost my character, my fortune, my ambitions, my love—everything that makes life worth living—that is what you mean to imply?"

"Yes," said Lady Val, steadily. "That is what I mean to imply."

"And you are content to leave me in the abyss?"

"What do you say, Jack?"

"I ask if you are content to leave me to my fate?—to leave me to go under, as you prophesy!"

"Certainly not *content*."

"Won't you give me a helping hand out of it, Valencia?"

"I don't see what I can do, Jack," said she, simply and earnestly, "but what I can do I will. I made a great fool of myself just now, I know, and the best thing for us will be to forget all about what I said. I shall not break my heart because you have refused me, you know."

"But I shall, Valencia—if you refuse me."

He caught her hand as he spoke, and tried to draw her towards him, but she drew it away with a look of cold repulsion in her eyes.

"Don't talk nonsense, Jack."

"I am speaking in sober earnest. You acknowledge that I can hardly damn myself deeper than by what I have done already. What I propose will make matters no worse for me than they are at present. You are not a woman to be bound by conventional scruples, Val. I know you better than you know yourself, and I am sure that you would glory in breaking the trammels that we both despise. Break them for me and with me, if you want to make me happy."

"You seem to think yourself the only person to be considered in the matter," said Lady Val, with wonderful composure, although she had changed color more than once during Hannington's speech. "May I ask whether you are also considering your wife's welfare—and mine?"

"I am considering yours—because I am sure that I could make you happy—happier with me than with anybody else."

"As I cannot remain more than about five minutes longer with you," said she, with some flippancy of tone, "I don't see that we need discuss the proposition."

"Val—Val—be serious. Do think of what I mean."

"I am serious, sir," she said, suddenly drawing up her head and facing him haughtily, "and, being serious, I am utterly unable even to *imagine* what you mean. Is that answer not enough?"

It would have been enough for any ordinary man. But John Hannington was bolder than most men, and not in an ordinary mood. With his face blanched by emotion and his dark eyes on fire, he caught her by the wrists, and looked undauntedly into her defiant face.

"You *shall* listen to me," he said. "We have fooled each other long enough. There shall be no want of plain speaking now. You must understand what I mean, and I must have a positive answer—yes or no."

"No, then, without further parley, Mr. Hannington."

"That is folly. I will speak and you must listen."

"Let my hands go. Yes, I will listen—for two minutes. Then you may go—for ever. You were always a bully, Jack, and you always will be; but you have no power over me now. Drop my hands at once, please."

He released her wrists immediately. There was something about her which he found it difficult to disobey. The scornful nonchalance of the air which she assumed when she gave him permission to speak almost robbed him of utterance. He admired her more passionately than ever when she disdained and derided him.

"I want you to come with me, Val," he said, in a voice so hoarse and so unlike his own that it was quite unrecognisable. "Leave Glasgow with me to-night, and let the whole world go by. We could lead a very happy life on the Mediterranean coast, or in some Greek island where Englishmen and Scotchmen are never seen. Why should we not make the best of our youth? Life is passing swiftly by: neither of us can be said to have yet tasted the fulness of its joys. I love you, Val, and you love me: can we not be happy together yet?"

"May I ask," said Lady Valencia, "what you intend to do with Mrs. Hannington under these circumstances?"

She was utterly unmoved by the fervor of his pleading. Her eye was cool, her mouth steady. Hannington restrained himself with difficulty from uttering an angry imprecation on poor Molly Moncrieff.

"We were married this morning," he said, after a moment's pause. "Legally I should do her a wrong, no doubt, but the law would soon dissolve the verbal bond between us. She would go back to her father, be forgiven, and in due time marry the man that he chose for her. There would be no barrier between you and me, then, Valencia."

"And what would she feel about it?"

"She is a chit of a school girl. She has no heart to break as you have, Val."

"And yet she has given up home and friends for you—cast herself on your mercy entirely—and you say that she has no heart!"

"Why do you think of her? Why not think of the long glorious days that we might pass together? Why should we let anything stand between us and our happiness, dearest? It is in our own hands."

There was a moment's pause. Then Valencia gave him an oddly sorrowful, regretful look—a long look, which haunted him for many a day—and quietly held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Jack," she said. "For auld lang syne, I'll

say good-bye, you see. But I will never willingly speak to you again."

He stared ruefully at her, scarcely crediting her words. She let him hold her hand as she went on speaking.

"You're a bad man, Jack; I never really thought you bad before. But now I think that you are heartless and worthless and wicked. I did love you—that's true enough; and it is possible that I love you still—but not in the same way. You have killed the old love effectually, because I despise you now, and I can't love where I despise. Why didn't you hold your tongue, Jack?"

"You had told me you love me: why did you put temptation in my way?"

"I did not know that it would be a temptation. I am sorry—sorry for you, sorry a little for myself, and, most of all, sorry for your wife."

He growled something of which she could not distinguish the syllables; but the tone told her its tenor well enough.

"You need not curse her for that," she said drily. "You asked her to marry you, remember: you beguiled her from her home. Nothing you can do for her will ever be too much, considering the injury that you have done her already. You have alienated her from all her friends: you will have to make up for the loss. Now listen to me, John Hannington," she went on, drawing her hand away and looking frankly into his face. "If the world knew all I know it would call you a scoundrel: do you know that? If I do not call you so, it is only because I have a regard for my old playfellow, and I hope that I shall one day be able again to call myself his friend. At present, we had better be as strangers one to another."

"You will join the world in hunting me down, you mean?"

"No, I don't. I will do anything for Molly—your Molly. I will be *her* friend if she likes; *your* acquaintance only. I do not want to harm you, and I shall do you the greatest service in my power, Mr. Hannington, if by any means I can make you thoroughly ashamed of the words that you have spoken to-night. What have I done that you should so insult me? To tell you before I knew of your marriage that I returned the affection which you have long professed to feel for me, ought never to have laid me open to this shameful proposal of yours. I feel degraded by it; but I

am not degraded; it is you, in your wicked folly and madness, that have degraded yourself, and I can only hope and pray that you will some day feel as deeply as I feel the depths to which you have sunk, and the contempt which I and every good man and woman must feel for you."

She uttered her biting words clearly and distinctly, with a ring of scorn in her voice, beneath which any man might well have slunk away ashamed. Hannington was bolder than most men in his way; but even he listened to her with white lips, and a hang-dog look which veiled a real remorse. For once he was bitterly hurt; he smarted as if she had lashed him with a whip; yet—such was her power over him—he did not resent her words.

"I know that you are in the right," he said, half-sullenly, half-sorrowfully, at last. "That does not make it any the better for me. Well, I'll go. Good-bye, Lady Valencia. If apologies would make things any better I would apologise, but I know that it is of no use."

Lady Val gave him a rapid, scrutinising glance. "No use at all," she said, decisively. "We had better say no more about it, Mr. Hannington. I shall be glad if you will go now, if you please."

He started slightly, took up his hat, and moved reluctantly towards the door. She watched him as he went—noting his bowed head, his frowning, discolored countenance, his cowed demeanor—and she clenched her little hands at her side to keep herself still. For her heart yearned over him in spite of his degradation and in spite of all the bitter things that she had said; and she would have been glad indeed if he would have given her the chance of saying a gentle word to him before he went back to his unloved and deluded wife.

He gave her the chance. The handle of the door was between his fingers when he looked back and saw her watching him. Her face was calm and cold, but her eyes were softer than she knew. He made a sudden step backwards into the room.

"I *can't* go," he groaned, "until you say that you forgive me."

She hurried to his side—her pride, her self-control, had gone to the winds. She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" she said, "how *could* you do it? Yes, I do forgive you; at least, I will forgive you if you

will only go home and be kind to poor little Molly. Make her happy, Jack, and I will forget all that you have said."

He took her hand and kissed it : he did not attempt to touch the beautiful face, which was yet so perilously near. She had raised him to her own height for a little time. For her sake he was willing at least to try to do his duty.

He scarcely knew how he got out into the street. She must have put him out and closed the door behind him. He walked on, not seeing the road before him, not caring whither his footsteps led him. Molly was forgotten. His own misery, his own shame, were present with him : everything else was a blank. When he came to himself a little, he found that he was sitting on a bench in some public place, his elbows on his knees, his hands before his face, his eyes dim, and his cheeks wet with tears. Who would have believed it of John Hannington? He rose up, dashed the moisture from his eyes, and began, slowly and sadly, to collect his thoughts. They were anything but pleasant.

And, after meditating in some aimless and hopeless fashion for the best part of an hour, he made his way back to the hotel where he had left poor Molly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHARLIE RUTHERFORD.

A MONTH later, Mr. and Mrs. John Hannington had left Scotland and taken up their quarters in a London hotel. It was an expensive mode of living ; but Hannington was in a reckless mood, and did not scruple to fling away the very few hundreds that he had been able to raise for himself before his marriage. He had not yet relinquished the hope that Mr. Moncrieff would relent towards his daughter, and pay over to her the money to which she would have been entitled if she had married with his consent ; but he began to fear that the father's heart was harder than he had imagined, and in that case he foresaw that his marriage would prove an utter failure as far as his worldly prospects were concerned.

The husband and wife had just dined in a pleasant,

bow-windowed room overlooking Piccadilly. Dinner had been ordered early—at six o'clock—as Hannington wanted to go out for the evening; and now, soon after seven o'clock, the spring sunshine was growing dim, and lighted wax candles, with their pretty crimson shades, had been set upon the damask-covered table. The blinds were not yet drawn down, however; and the ceaseless noise of rolling wheels in the street below was distinctly heard through the half-open window.

"What a noisy place London is!" said Molly, as she listened to the sound.

"Think so?" asked Hannington, indifferently. "I never notice it."

"It was so quiet at Torresmuir."

"Deadly quiet, I suppose. And deadly dull."

A faint little sigh issued from Molly's lips. But if her husband heard it, he was resolved not to show that he had heard. He had lighted a cigarette, and was lying back in his chair with his face turned toward the window. Apparently he did not wish even to glance at his wife, although she made a picture at that moment which might well have charmed the eye of any man.

He had been rigorous in his requirements during the last few days, and Molly had done her best to fulfil them, seeing in his critical observations and sharp scrutiny only love for herself and anxiety that she should look her best in the eyes of his friends. As yet his friends had not taken any notice of her. Possibly, she thought, they did not know that he was in London with his wife. But in view of future calls, invitations, drives, and rides, Molly had dutifully visited fashionable dressmakers, milliners, and coiffeurs, all of whom her soul would have loathed in the untrammelled life at Torresmuir. The result had been transformation. Molly was no longer a lovely hoyden; she looked as if she had stepped out of a fashion-book. Her hair was piled up on her head in countless soft, shining rolls; it was cut and curled in front, and crimped out of all its much prettier natural waves; her dress showed more of her neck and arms than would have been considered quite decorous at Torresmuir, and was composed of some soft, creamy white material intermixed with daintiest lace, over an underdress of *eau-de-nil* silk. Knots of ribbon of the same shade fastened a cluster of tea-roses at

her breast, and she wore ornaments of aqua-marine and gold. The greenish-blue tint was admirably becoming to her dazzling complexion and the ruddy gold of her hair ; and Molly knew it ; yet, strange to say, she was not happy in the consciousness of her own beauty. She began to find that it did not do so much as she had expected it to do. A frightened sense of powerlessness had been growing upon her during the last few weeks.

Hannington had rather a jaded and irritable look. The anxieties of his position were telling upon him. But as yet he had said nothing of these anxieties to Molly.

"When are we going?" said Molly at last.

"Going!" He started a little as she spoke. "Oh, I forgot to tell you ; I have changed my plans. We can't go to the theatre to-night."

"Oh, Jack! Why not?"

"Business," said Hannington, curtly.

"And we have such nice seats. Oh, what a pity! Can't you put off your business, Jack, dear?"

"No, of course I can't. Business won't be put off, as you ought to know."

"Then—have you to go out to-night?"

"Yes."

There was a little pause. "You were out last night without me," said Molly, softly, "and the night before—and to-night."

Hannington glanced at her impatiently. Her eyes were swimming in tears ; a drop fell over her rose-leaf tinted cheek.

"If you are such a baby as to cry about a theatre, I really don't know what will become of you," he said, contemptuously. "I cannot insure you against *all* the accidents of life, I am sorry to say."

"It isn't the theatre," said Molly, quickly. "It is because you will be away from me, Jack."

"Of all things I hate," said Hannington, half-closing his eyes, "I hate most a man who is tied to his wife's apron-strings."

Molly pressed her hands tightly together under the table, and tried to force back the tears that continued to gather in her eyes. She was learning her first lesson of self-control.

"I don't want you to stay with me," she said, in a choked, mortified voice, "if you don't care to stay."

"All the better," said her husband, drily; "for I have something else to do to-night."

Molly sat silent, biting her lips. A thundering double knock and a peal at the front door-bell suddenly resounded through the house, and made Hannington rouse himself.

"You had better dry your eyes and not make a fool of yourself," he said, sharply. "I expect that that knock is for us. Donald Vereker and a friend were to call for me at 7.30. I hear them coming up now."

Molly hastily rubbed her eyes with her handkerchief, but succeeded only in making them look rather redder than they would have been without this process. Hannington's frown as he glanced at her added to her agitation. It was a beautiful but very pathetic little face which met the view of the gentlemen who entered; and Hannington would, on the whole, have preferred to see her radiant and smiling.

"Mr. Vereker—Captain Rutherford—my wife"—the introduction was effected in very brief fashion by John Hannington, who wanted to make his escape as quickly as possible, but was annoyed to find his friends in no hurry to depart. Mr. Vereker always loved a pretty face, and he had heard enough of Molly's story to be curious about her. While Captain Rutherford—Charlie Rutherford, as his friends usually called him—having neither heard of Mrs. John Hannington before, nor being remarkable for his appreciation of women's beauty, amazed his companions not a little by seeming quite unable to take his eyes off Molly's face, and showing no disposition at all to hasten away. Hannington was half-vexed, half-flattered by this evident admiration of his wife, and he wished very much that he had not acceded to his friends' desire to call for him on their way to a music-hall and gambling-house, where he intended to spend the evening.

Molly was not greatly taken by the appearance of Donald Vereker, who had lately grown red and fat, and was too jovial-looking for her taste; but she found Captain Rutherford attractive. He was a man of five or six-and-twenty, tall, fair, broad-shouldered, and muscular, with a fair skin bronzed by exposure to sun and air; he had fair hair and a fair moustache, and his blue eyes, though not particularly beautiful in shape or color, were so frank and honest and manly that it was a pleasure to look at them.

He had a gentle, pleasant way of smiling and talking, moreover, and he managed to make himself very agreeable during the few minutes of his stay in Mrs. Hannington's sitting-room, although he spoke neither so much nor so loudly as the Honorable Don.

"Well, I don't wish to hurry you," said Hannington at length, doing his best to speak pleasantly, "but I think we had better be off."

"And are we going to leave Mrs. Hannington all by herself?" asked Donald Vereker. "That's hard lines, isn't it?"

"Oh, I shall be quite happy," said Molly, innocently. "I have a novel to read."

"She is an ardent novel-reader," said Hannington, with a smile. "She will be quite absorbed in her three volumes as soon as we are out of the door; won't you, Molly?"

"If it is a nice one," said Molly, smiling back brightly. "I'm afraid that it won't be quite as nice as the Lyceum."

"Did you want to go to the Lyceum then?" said Mr. Vereker.

"Oh, we had tickets for to-night," replied guileless Molly, "but as Jack has a business engagement he cannot go, so I"—and she laughed a little—"am left at home lamenting."

There was a very slight pause; in which it dawned upon Molly that she had said the wrong thing. Her husband's face had grown white with anger; Mr. Vereker lifted his eyebrows comically: Captain Rutherford had turned aside, and was fingering his moustache. Both visitors knew that Hannington's "engagement" was one of pleasure, and not of business at all, and if Molly had been a plain and insignificant little creature Donald Vereker would have considered her ignorance rather a joke than otherwise. But for such a very pretty woman to be left to cry her eyes out over Jack Hannington's absence (he was sure that she had been crying when they entered) was, after all, rather a shame. What Charlie Rutherford thought of the matter did not transpire; but there was a steely look in his blue eyes which might have proceeded from indignation when he turned round again.

"Oh, look here!" cried Donald. "We'll give up our engagement, Jack—important as it is," and he bestowed a facetious wink upon Hannington, which annoyed that

gentleman very much indeed; "and we'll all escort Mrs. Hannington to the Lyceum. What have you got—stalls, a box? If it's a box, we can all go, you know."

"It is not a box, unfortunately," said Jack, coldly; "we had stalls. I am exceedingly sorry, but even if your engagement is not of pressing importance, mine *is*, and I cannot give it up."

Mr. Vereker burst out laughing. "I'm afraid mine is as important as yours," he said in a low tone of suppressed enjoyment, which Molly could not understand.

"Oh, it is of no consequence," she said, hurriedly. "I shall be *quite* happy and comfortable here at home; and we shall have plenty of other chances of seeing Irving, shall we not, Jack? You see," she added, with a prettily apologetic air, "I have never been in London before, and I keep forgetting that I am not going away again—just yet."

"Can I be of no use?" said Captain Rutherford, eagerly. "Perhaps I might be allowed to escort Mrs. Hannington this evening? I"—looking full at Hannington—"have no engagement of any kind, as Mr. Vereker knows. I was now on my way home, and shall be delighted if I may have the honor."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure, Charlie," said Hannington. "Well, if you don't mind the trouble, my wife will be charmed. It *is* rather a pity to sacrifice two tickets."

Molly looked anything but charmed. Married woman as she was, and under John Hannington's tuition, she was very ignorant of the privileges of her position. To go to the theatre with a young man whom she had never seen in her life before seemed to her a startling prospect. She would very much have liked to ask her husband in private what it was "proper" for her to do: but as such a question was impossible, she could only look at him and at Captain Rutherford in turn with such wide-eyed dismay that Hannington, secretly raging, felt it incumbent upon him to offer some excuse for her *gaucherie*.

"My wife is quite taken aback by this pleasant surprise," he said, coolly. "but she will no doubt express her thanks to you by and by. If you really mean it, that is, Charlie—if you have no other engagement—"

"Not in the least. I shall be most happy to go with Mrs. Hannington. I want to see Irving immensely."

"Run away and get your cloak, then, Molly. I will send for a cab at once."

Under cover of this excuse he followed her into the next room, and there spoke somewhat sharply.

"You may as well say a civil word to Charlie Rutherford, Molly: don't behave like a girl in the schoolroom, for goodness' sake."

"Oh, Jack!" cried Molly, clinging to his arm, "ought I to go? I don't like going with Captain Rutherford and without you. I have never done such a thing before."

"Don't be prudish," said Jack. "You are a married woman now, remember, and don't require a chaperon."

But as he paused and looked down at her, it struck him that she was very young and fair to be left by her own husband not six weeks after her wedding day—and left, too, for *such* a reason! The momentary sting of compunction passed away, but it caused him to speak kindly, and to bend and kiss her lips as he spoke.

"You will be all right with Charlie Rutherford, dear: he is as dull and steady as old Time. He'll take care of you as if he were a dowager. Of course I should not allow you to do anything unsuitable; you must leave me to decide these matters, you know. Now, don't look doleful: give me a kiss and be a good girl."

Molly's eyes brightened as she returned her husband's salute. It was not often that he spoke so affectionately nowadays: she had found out that the time of compliments and caresses was passing by. Even in the early days of their married life she had noticed that his moods were fitful, and that his affection for her seemed of an intermittent character. She had not the key to these changes of behavior, and they perplexed her greatly. Of late the moods had been less changeable, but the coldness more persistent. Her husband was a riddle to her, and the consideration of this riddle was bringing a new, strange shadow of doubt and distress into her hazel eyes.

When Molly had driven off with Captain Rutherford, Hannington turned rather curiously to his friend Vereker. "I don't understand all this," he said. "Wasn't Rutherford coming with us?—or did he back out of it for the sake of doing the polite to my wife?"

"He had backed out of it already," answered Donald Vereker. "He swore that he had had no idea what the

engagement meant ; and that he would no more go to that music-hall and then to Lulli's with us than he would fly."

"I didn't think he was a milksop, I must say."

"Oh, I knew there was a strain of it in him, but I thought that we should work it out a bit to-night. I should have liked to set him down to cards at Lulli's: he could stand a good bit of play without getting broke, I fancy."

"Wealthy, isn't he?"

"Tremendously so. A very good pigeon, indeed, for you, Jack. But he declines to be plucked, you see."

Hannington did not like the joke, and frowned in reply. But he was sorry that he had missed the chance of "rooking" Captain Rutherford: his funds were growing low, and to win a few hundreds at play seemed to him the only way by which to recoup himself for recent losses. He had vowed to leave off play when he married a rich wife ; but poor Molly—although she might be rich one day—was at present almost penniless. Therefore, he argued with himself, another attempt to win back his luck at the green table was "absolutely necessary."

Meanwhile Molly went to the theatre with Captain Rutherford, and was much impressed and delighted by all that she saw and heard. She found him also a very charming companion. He talked to her between the acts with a gentle, respectful courtesy of manner, which she thought exceedingly pleasant ; and yet there was a youthful gaiety of heart about him which made him seem to her like a brother or a playmate. He reminded her of Bertie, and she told him so, with a confiding simplicity, which he in turn found adorable.

"Where *did* Hannington meet her?" he thought to himself, as the youthful loveliness of her face impressed itself more and more upon him. "She does not look more than seventeen, and she seems to have no friends in London. What business has that man to neglect her in this way? Who is she, and how did she come to marry that hard-hearted scamp?"

By which meditation it may be seen that Captain Rutherford did not read society papers.

He soon found out what he wanted to know. A chance reference to Dunkeld brought the color to the girl's face, the moisture to her eyes.

"Oh, do you know Perthshire?" she cried. "Perhaps you know my father? Mr. Moncrieff of Torresmuir."

"Is he your father? I have met him several times, and my father knows him exceedingly well. You may have heard of my people, Mrs. Hannington?" the young man went on questioning. "My father's place is further North, but I think that Mr. Moncrieff visits him sometimes."

"Is Sir Archibald your father? I know *his* name," said Molly, with some little confusion of manner. "I think that I have heard of you too."

"I am sure you have—just as I have heard of you," said Captain Rutherford, heartily. "But how was it that I knew nothing of your marriage, I wonder? I was at my father's in March, and he never mentioned it——"

He wondered why Mrs. Hannington's cheeks had so suddenly assumed a vivid tint of red.

"Oh, stop, please," said Molly, in a very low voice. The orchestra had just struck up, and he could hardly hear what she said. He bent his head to listen. "I don't think anybody knew," she went on, flushing more and more. "It was—very quiet."

"Oh, I see," said Captain Rutherford. But he did not "see" at all. He was very much puzzled.

Molly played with her feather fan, and was silent for a time. At last, in an odd, abrupt kind of way, she said—

"Of course, you will hear all about it sooner or later, so it is no use for me to make a secret of it. Jack and I ran away together—didn't you know that? We only wrote to my father afterwards. If you are my father's friend, I think you ought to know. Because papa is angry with me, I believe, and perhaps you would rather not—rather not—be friends with me any longer—when you know."

It was a good thing that John Hannington did not hear the childish speech. But Charlie Rutherford felt as if he could fall down and kiss the hem of Molly's pretty silk gown upon the spot. And then the curtain went up and he could not reply.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOLLY'S AWAKENING.

CAPTAIN Rutherford did not hear much of the dramatic performance that followed. His mind was entirely fixed upon the information that Molly had just given him—

information which he found intensely disagreeable. He had never known John Hannington well, and he had been taken to that gentleman's hotel by Donald Vereker without knowing that there was a Mrs. Hannington at all. Vereker, it should be explained, had written and obtained Hannington's permission to call for him ("with a friend") that evening, but Charlie Rutherford, Captain of Hussars as he was, had not been thought important enough to have the position explained to him beforehand by the Honorable Don.

He remembered, clearly enough now, that he *had* heard of Miss Moncrieff's elopement when he was last in Scotland. He had not noticed the name of the man with whom she had gone off. His father and mother were people of the old school, dignified, reserved, loyal in word and deed: they had not gossiped about their friend's troubles, nor gloated over the recital of Molly Moncrieff's imprudence and her stepmother's carelessness, as many of poor Alan Moncrieff's acquaintances had done. The little that Charlie had heard about it had been uttered in a tone of grave pity and regret: and the grief that Alan Moncrieff had suffered was dwelt upon rather than the misconduct of his daughter.

But that it *was* misconduct, Charlie Rutherford was as strongly of opinion as were his parents. That a young girl, tenderly nurtured, gently bred, should—without any great reason—run away from her father's house at the age of seventeen with a man who had wooed her clandestinely—this seemed to Captain Rutherford a disgraceful act indeed. And yet this lovely, graceful girl, whose charm consisted largely in the candor of her glance, the seeming frank transparency of her whole nature—this young creature, whom Charlie had already characterised as the most beautiful woman that he had ever met—she, of all people, had acted in this way, and he had not the heart to condemn her! Of course it was her husband's fault. Every one knew, he thought indignantly, that Hannington was a cad, a cur—anything but a gentleman! No doubt he frightened the poor girl by some means into marrying him! And she was so young, so pretty, and it showed such honorable feeling on her part, to tell him the story! In short, he made out a good case for Molly, as every other young man in his place would have

done, regardless of the fact that he had quite agreed with his mother when Lady Rutherford said a month before that she was afraid poor Alan Moncrieff's daughter had been a sore trouble to him, and a sad disgrace to all her family. And here he was sitting side by side with this disgrace to her family, and—if she had only not been John Hannington's wedded wife!—quite ready to fall in love with her at first sight, as young people used to do in the days of old romance.

Molly, unconscious of the turn his thoughts were taking, was yet not unmindful of the sternness that had crept into his face as he sat with folded arms and blue eyes fixed absently upon the floor instead of on the stage. Her marriage had made her more susceptible to influences from without than she had been in her early days. She felt that he had been startled—perhaps even shocked—by her story; and for the first time she realised a little how the story sounded in the ears of strangers, and what aspect it would wear in the eyes of a duty-loving, God-fearing, high-minded man or woman.

When the curtain had dropped again she did not speak until Captain Rutherford asked her whether she would take an ice or some coffee. Molly refused both hastily, and then summoned up courage to look at him. His face was not at all stern now, she thought: his blue eyes were quite gentle and friendly.

"I hope you are not—not very much shocked?" she faltered out.

Charlie Rutherford did not think that he ought to smile, but he could not help it. The question was so very *naive*.

"Our fathers are good friends," he answered, evading the difficulty. "I think that we ought to be good friends too, Mrs. Hannington. I have been wanting to make your brother's acquaintance for some time."

"Oh, how nice of you!" said Molly. "And how nice for Bertie!"

Charlie laughed outright now. It was more than ever impossible to help it, although Mrs. Hannington looked surprised.

"It will be very nice for *me*," he said. "I am going to Scotland soon, and will look him up. He is at home, I think?"

"I think so," said Molly, blushing. "But—I don't

know exactly. He hasn't—they don't write to me. She did not know by what impulse she told this fact to a comparative stranger; but she did tell it in the artless way in which a child will recount its woes to any one who seems kindly disposed.

Captain Rutherford looked grave. "I am sorry," he said, involuntarily, and then paused. "You have written to them, of course?" he asked, feeling himself obliged, out of sheer pity, to take a confidential tone with this impulsive, imprudent child.

"Yes, I wrote at once," said Molly, with downcast eyes. "And I have written again, but papa would not read my letter. Don't you think that it is very hard? I thought that he would forgive us directly—of course I know that I was disobedient and naughty and all that—but he won't. It makes me very unhappy."

"It *must*," said Charlie, with quite unintentional fervor. He was a simple, direct, affectionate young fellow, and the position of this girl, whose father's heart was alienated from her, appeared to him truly pitiable. Molly raised her eyes for an instant, looking as if she had received a rather new idea.

"And I suppose you have not many acquaintances in London yet?" he went on after a pause.

"Not one," said Molly. "Jack says that I shall have more than I know what to do with before long, but I don't know. I suppose that he has a great many friends in London?"

"Of a sort," said Charlie to himself, but of course he did not say it aloud. He answered discreetly. "I believe that Mr. Hannington has a very large acquaintance. Mr. Vereker seems to be an old friend of his. The Esquharts are in London now, I believe. I dare say you will see something of them. Lady Agnes Vereker is a very nice girl. My mother always comes up to town in May; she will be here next week, and I am sure she will be very glad——"

Fortunately for Charlie's veracity, a burst of music drowned the conclusion of that sentence.

"It is very kind of you," said Molly, rather forlornly. "I should like to have somebody to talk to—of course—Jack is obliged to go out sometimes."

"Yes—to music halls," was the young man's silent comment. He added aloud,

"There is a lady Valencia Gilderoy whom I think you must have met near Dunkeld."

"Oh, yes, we knew her very well."

"She is in town now. She was a friend of the Esquharts, and I think she knows Mr. Hannington. Shall I tell her where you are staying? I often see her."

"Please do, said Molly eagerly. Then she hesitated. "I don't know. She is a friend of papa's. Perhaps she will not come."

"She shall come if I can make her," said Captain Rutherford stoutly. And then the play went on.

It seemed to Molly as if she must have known Charles Rutherford for many years. His name had long been familiar to her, and to meet him in London was like meeting a countryman in a foreign land. She could not treat him like a stranger.

He drove back to the hotel with her between eleven and twelve, parting from her at the door with a sensation of entire devotion which would greatly have astonished simple-minded Molly, could she but have known it. Her husband had not come in, and she did not wait for him. She was tired and went at once to bed, where she slept so soundly that she was not alarmed by the fact that Jack did not return until six o'clock in the morning, when he stumbled into his dressing-room and threw himself down on a couch to sleep until noon. She found him there when she was dressed at nine o'clock, and, like a wise little woman, forbore to disturb him.

He appeared in the sitting-room at one o'clock, ordered brandy and soda, and complained of a headache. He certainly looked ill, his face was lividly pale, and he had black marks under his eyes. Molly hastened to wait upon him but got snubbed for her pains. He lay down on a sofa, turned his back to her, and told her roughly to hold her tongue.

After ten minutes' silence, however, he addressed her again.

"Molly, when did you write to your father?"

"Last week, Jack, dear."

"And he sent back your letter unopened?"

"Yes, Jack."

"Confound him!—Molly!"

"Yes, Jack, dear?"

"Open that pocket-book and take out the key that you'll find inside. That's it. Now go and unlock my dressing-box and see how much money you can find. I want to know. Bring it all to me."

Molly wonderingly did her lord's behests. "I've found such a lot," she said, when she returned. "What do you keep it there for, Jack? it might get stolen. There are one hundred and twenty pounds in notes, and fifteen pounds, seventeen shillings and four pence in silver and copper."

"Is that *all*?" said Hannington, blankly.

"Isn't it enough? Yes, that is all, I am sure."

"A nice look-out for us," muttered her husband, turning his face away. "That's all we have got in the world, you may be pleased to know; and thanks to your father's infernal obstinacy, that is all we seem likely to get until you are twenty-one."

The color faded from Molly's cheeks at the tone of his voice rather than on account of the words he uttered. She felt vaguely afraid and dismayed.

"I thought you—you—had—plenty," she faltered.

"Plenty! It depends on what you call plenty! I had more than this last night, certainly: I was cheated out of a lot of money—fool that I was! Look here, Molly, I shall be ruined—if I am not ruined already—unless I can get something out of that precious father of yours. You won't have bread and butter to eat before very long, if something does not turn up. I shall have to go to the Continent, and you back to your father: that is what will happen to us."

"Oh, Jack, if you were ever so poor, I should never desert you!" cried Molly, who was in tears by this time.

"Like Mrs. Micawber," said Jack, drily. "But I am afraid that I should have to desert you, my dear—unless you can mend matters for me."

"How, Jack? I will do anything that I can."

"Sit down and write a moving appeal to your father, then. Say anything you like: promise anything you like, but get him to give an income."

"Ask him for money? Oh, that is impossible," said Molly, suddenly flushing scarlet, and drawing herself up.

"Just now you said you would do anything for me, and yet you hang back the moment a disagreeable task is sug-

gested to you," said Hannington. "I acknowledge that it is disagreeable: there are many disagreeable things in this world, unfortunately; but they have to be faced. However, I shall now know how much faith to place in your professions."

He turned his eyes angrily to the wall, and kept silence. He knew very well the way in which his demeanor would affect poor Molly's feelings. She also was silent for a few minutes, but then she burst out passionately—

"You ought not to say that! You know that I profess nothing that I do not feel. I have given up a great deal to show my love for you: I have given up my home and my friends. It is very hard to ask for money when all I want is my father's forgiveness.

"You have never seemed to think much about your father's forgiveness before," said her husband with a sneer.

"I know that I did not. I have begun to think about it lately. I wish—I wish——"

"Perhaps you wish that you had not married me," said Hannington, sarcastically. "Does your repentance extend so far?"

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" She flew to him at once, and knelt beside him, showering kisses on the hand that was within her reach—he would not let her kiss his face. "How can I repent it when I love you? You are my own dear husband—my love—my darling! I cannot repent that I came away with you!"

"That's all very fine, Molly, but heroics and hysterics won't give us bread and cheese. Are you or are you not going to manifest your love for me in a practical manner? If you care for me half as much as you say you do, you won't scruple to write a little note to your father on my behalf. If you won't do that small thing for me—well I shall know what to believe and what to expect."

"But it does not seem a small thing to me, Jack; it seems very large," cried Molly, piteously. "It seems a *dreadful* thing to me."

"And you refuse to do this—this large and dreadful thing for me?" He turned towards her and looked at her with those dark, handsome eyes of his, which had first won Molly's heart. Won't you try to help me, Molly?" he said subduing his voice to a coaxing tone. And Molly burst into tears and promised that she would; and he, as

a reward, put his arm round her and kissed her, calling her by all sorts of pet names, and vowing that she never should repent that she had become his wife. And in this he was in part sincere and in part dominated by baser motives. He wanted to keep Molly in what he called "a good humor," and he was also fond of her, and admired her beauty very cordially.

So at last Molly sat down to the writing-table and indited another letter to her father. John did not suggest any sentences, as he had done once before with somewhat disastrous effect; doubtless he knew by this time that Molly's style and his own were wide as the poles asunder. And Molly's letter, which she dutifully brought to him, was, he assured her patronisingly, a very creditable effusion. Indeed, it was a pathetic and perfectly sincere little letter, which deserved a better fate than the one which ultimately befel it.

She enclosed it in a note to Bertie, begging her brother to place it in their father's hands. In four days an answer was received—but not from Mr. Moncrieff or Bertie; it was written by Ralph Kingscott.

"My dear Molly," wrote her uncle, "your father wishes me to say that he cannot conceive why you should write begging letters *already*. You must surely have sufficient for your present needs, considering the circumstances under which you left his house."

"What can he mean?" said Molly, when she read this letter rather tremblingly aloud to her husband.

Hannington shook his head.

"Can't imagine, I am sure. As I took nothing out of his house but yourself, my dear, there does not seem much point in his observation. Go on."

Molly continued to read.

"He is of opinion that you have already received sufficient, and that he ought not to be called upon for more."

"More!" cried Hannington, fiercely; "what does that mean?"

"He therefore requests that no more communications may be addressed to him or to any member of his family... Thus far, my dear Molly, I have written at his dictation, and I can now add a few words of my own. In robbing him of yourself, you see, your father looks upon poor Jack as a mere thief, and refuses to increase his wealth by gifts

of filthy lucre, which is unfortunate for Jack, I daresay, as he knows the worth of filthy lucre as well as any one with whom I was ever acquainted. Your father is somewhat annoyed also at the way in which your letter was forced upon his notice; Mrs. Moncrieff, to whom Bertie confided it, having placed it open upon his desk. The matter has become a sore point with him altogether, more particularly as the fact of your husband's previous engagement to Mrs. Moncrieff——"

Here Molly broke off. "Your engagement to Mrs. Moncrieff!" she said, in an incredulous tone.

"I think I told you about it," he answered, trying to speak carelessly. "Mrs. Moncrieff, when she was Stella Raeburn, was——"

"In love with you! I know that; Uncle Ralph told me so, and you acknowledged it," said Molly, quickly. "But an engagement!——"

"Well, why not? It was roken off, my dear child, if ever there was one, long before I knew you."

"Yes, yes, of course it was, but you never said that you——that you——"

"That I—*what*? Don't stammer and whine, for mercy's sake. What do you mean?"

"You must have asked her—you must have paid attention to her—or she would not have shown that she liked you!—You could not be engaged to her without having made love to her!" Molly broke out jealously. Her breast was heaving; her dilated eyes gleamed through a mist of tears.

"Naturally," said her husband, coolly. He had by this time lost his temper. "I never implied that Stella Raeburn gave me her affection without my asking for it, did I? Of course I made love to her; what else do you expect to hear?"

"You loved her first?" cried Molly. Her face had grown pale, and her hands clenched themselves at her side. There was something tragic in her look.

Hannington laughed scornfully. "Loved her?" he echoed. "I have only loved one woman in my life—and that was not Stella Raeburn."

"Oh, Jack, Jack! say that you loved *me*!" cried Molly, stretching out her arms to him, beseechingly. He looked at her and did not answer. "You have loved one woman,"

she went on, fearfully, "don't you mean *me*, Jack? You have always said that you loved me; and I—I am your wife."

"Worse luck for me," growled Hannington, savagely. He said it between his teeth, not exactly meaning her to hear; but when he saw from her stricken look and the shrinking movement of her whole body that she had heard, he did not attempt to mend matters. He cast a guilty glance at her, shrugged his shoulders, and then went straight out of the room. He had come to the conclusion that it was useless to "humbug" Molly any longer. The sooner she found out that he did not care for her more than husbands usually care for their wives—such was the cynical way in which he put it to himself—the better for her—the better for them both.

CHAPTER XXIX.

STELLA RAEBURN'S LETTERS.

MOLLY sank into a chair when her husband left her, and sat like a stone, cold, motionless, and indifferent to all surroundings. It seemed to her that life was at an end, that her happiness was entirely destroyed. John Hannington, for whom she had sacrificed so much, had never loved her after all—she could not but be sure of that. It was some other woman whom he loved; perhaps Stella, perhaps some one else. And what was left to Molly for her share of this world's good? She had given up her home, her father, brother, friends; she had turned from wealth to poverty—a small matter when love was present, perhaps, but not without its importance—she had even lowered her own fair reputation—and for what? For the sake of a man who did not love her. But why had he married her? That was poor Molly's question; and the answer did not make itself clear for some little time. "He must have loved me a little, or he would not have married me," she said, childishly, thereby revealing the depths of her ignorance of man's nature. But Molly, in spite of her beauty, of her high physical development, of her strong will and passionate nature, was as yet only a child in soul.

She had no mental resources, no real strength of character to fall back upon when natural hopes of love and joy had failed her. Her mind might grow, and latent powers of intellect and conscience awaken; but at present she was capable of but little feeling, and entirely governed by her emotions.

She sat still for some time. All her strength seemed to have left her. At last the tears began to flow—slowly at first, then faster; and with the tears came a rush of warmer feeling—of resentment, jealousy, anger, instead of the coldness of despair. She cried her heart out like a hurt child, before she bethought herself of any plan of action or any arrangement for the future, now that she was bereft of her husband's love.

When she was a little calmer, she noticed that she had seen her uncle's letter drop to the floor, where it lay crumpled and half unread. She brought herself at last to make the effort of picking it up; and when she had smoothed it out, she sat down listlessly to read the last page. It was a dangerous thing to do at that moment; for she was in a keenly susceptible state, and Ralph Kingscott's suggestions were apt to fall upon susceptible minds like lighted matches upon tow.

"The matter has become a sore point with him altogether, more particularly as the fact of your husband's previous engagement to Mrs. Moncrieff"—Molly now read on with interest—"has but lately been made known to him. He is anxious and uneasy concerning some letters that Mrs. Moncrieff once wrote to Jack. If you want to do us a service, my dear, you had better get Jack to send them back. Your father will know no peace until they are destroyed, for he cannot bear the thought of their existence. He will be much more likely to forgive your husband if he gets those letters away from him. But perhaps they are destroyed already. Could you not ascertain this, and let me know? You can write to me as much as you please. I still hope to soften your father's heart towards you.

Your affectionate uncle,

"RALPH KINGSCOTT."

Kingscott had probably calculated upon the effect that his letter was likely to produce, and had worded it so that it should have a perfectly innocent and friendly sound.

He had no reason for wishing to sow dissension between Mr. and Mrs. Hannington, but he wanted to keep Molly away from home, he wanted to separate Alan and Stella, and he particularly wanted to retain his own powerful position. To set Molly searching for Stella's letters, and to get them into his own hands, would be to secure two very desirable results.

Molly rose up from the reading of that letter with her brain on fire. Jack had letters from Stella Raeburn—now Stella Moncrieff, her father's wife—and would not give them up? What did that mean but that he still, in spite of his denial, loved Stella and cherished her memory. Molly set her teeth and pressed her hands closely together as she considered this possibility. And then there came an overwhelming desire to see for herself the letters of which her uncle spoke. She had no thought of making use of them for her own or Kingscott's ends; she only wanted passionately to see them. Did her husband keep them still? If so, had she not a right to find them and read them, as if they were her own?

Poor Molly was not of a bad disposition; she would never develop into a wicked woman; but she was utterly untrained and uncontrolled. Stella's influence had been exerted for too short a time to retain its power over her; her father's authority had been authority simply, and had not made her reflect about questions of right and wrong. She was a spoilt, passionate child—that was all; but she was in a position where the indulgence of her impulses were likely to have disastrous results for other people.

It was with a face in which the hot color burned like two red flags of defiance, with cold and shaking hands, and limbs that trembled under her, that she left the snug little private sitting-room at last, and made her way into Hannington's dressing-room. Here she looked round hopelessly. Where should she begin to search? He was not likely to leave his private papers in any place where she could find them easily. They were probably in that brass-bound desk of his, or in the despatch-box—both safely locked and put away in a big trunk. And the keys would probably be in his pocket. Molly could not imagine herself picking a lock, although the moral guilt of doing so might not be greater than that of reading another woman's letters to her husband. She sighed and almost gave up her scheme in that moment of discouragement.

But what did she see upon the dressing-table, as if on purpose to tempt her to do amiss? Her husband's keys lay there in a little heap: some half-dozen tiny glittering things on a steel ring which he generally carried in his pocket, and seldom indeed forgot. John Hannington was rather a careful man about small matters: it was rare indeed for him to leave things lying about. Molly hesitated for a moment only, and then seized upon the keys. Her heart beat violently as she opened the trunk and took out the despatch-box: her hands trembled so that she could scarcely turn the key. If her husband came in while she was so engaged, she guessed that his wrath would be something terrible. But she was too eager and excited to be timid. Until she had found what she wanted, or given up the search in despair, the reaction was not likely to set in.

In the despatch-box she found many bundles of letters and papers, for the most part neatly tied up and docketed in a severely methodical manner. She tossed them over with hot, trembling fingers: she saw none in the handwriting that she had learnt to know so well when Stella was her governess. She almost relinquished the task in despair. Then, at the very bottom of the box, her eyes fell on two slim papers tied together with a bit of black ribbon: one was black-edged, both were covered with the fine and pretty characters that betokened Stella's hand. Molly drew them out. She had found what she wanted, then, at last!

Two: were there only two? She turned over the other papers, but could find no more. She looked into the desk, into the other boxes and the drawers, but her search was unsuccessful. At last she reluctantly turned the keys, and, resolving to put back the letters when she had read them, she crept into her own room and seated herself at her dressing-table to examine them.

Only one seemed to be of any length or importance. The first was the letter written by Stella soon after her father's death, begging John Hannington to come to her. The next—ah, this was what froze Molly's heart as she read it—the next was that outpouring of girlish tenderness which Hannington had found so embarrassing, so difficult to answer. Not knowing exactly how he had answered it, not knowing what had preceded it, but imagining all sorts

of vows and protestations and caresses on his part, Molly worked herself up to a state of indignation and fury, in which it seemed as though every softer feeling had deserted her.

"And he could ask me to be his wife after all this!" she exclaimed to herself. "And *she* could come among us with her soft looks and pretty ways and pretend that she had never cared for any man before! I know she pretended that, for I heard old Miss Jacky talking to papa one day, and solemnly assuring him that dear Stella had never cared for anybody in her life—except himself! She was false—false all round. I may have deceived papa for a time," thought Molly, beginning to cry at the remembrance, "but I never, never deceived him as much as Stella Raeburn did when she consented to be his wife. And I was deceived too. Deceived by her, deceived by Jack! Oh, what can I do to punish them! They deserve punishment! they deserve it!"

She sobbed tempestuously for a time, her tears falling on the letters as Stella's had fallen when she wrote them those years before. When her sobs at last ceased she had grown quieter and gentler in feeling: she had come to the point of excusing her husband even if she could not forgive Stella. Towards Stella, indeed, her thoughts were of unmixed bitterness. Odd contradiction of feeling as it may seem to be, she was angry for her father's sake as well as for her own. He ought to have known—and she was sure that he had not been told before his marriage even if he had heard the truth later. The remembrance of her uncle's letter came back to her, and brought a strange gleam into her eyes. "No wonder they want to get these letters back! Has Jack ever shown them to any one, I wonder? He shall not have the chance. I shall send them to Uncle Ralph: he says that papa wants them, and I am sure papa has a right to them. We will see what Madam Stella will say to that! And if Jack dislikes it—so much the better: they had no business not to tell me!"

She rose from her seat and began to look for writing materials. She put Stella's letters inside an envelope, and addressed it to her uncle at Torresmuir.

"He may do what he likes with them," she said, with a firm setting of her lips. "It is time they were destroyed."

Without waiting for further reflection, she hastily donned

her hat and ran downstairs with the letter in her hand. There was a pillar-post not far from the hotel, and she felt as if the letter would be safer if she posted it with her own hands instead of giving it to a servant.

She had never been alone in a London street before, and she had a sense of being very adventurous as she dropped her letter through the slit in the box. And when it was gone, a wild fear of consequences suddenly attacked her; and she would have given anything to recall the deed. She stood looking at the scarlet pillar, quite regardless of the fact that she was attracting the attention of the passers-by. At that moment a postman appeared upon the scene, and, depositing his bag on the ground, unlocked the box and began to clear it of letters. Molly gave a sort of gasp of relief; her experiences of postmen were based only on the routine at Torresmuir and other country places, where postmen were personally known to all the country district, and were somewhat amenable to private considerations.

"Oh, postman," she said, "I—I've put a letter in by mistake: can you give it me out again?"

The postman was inclined to deem this a foolish joke and was on the point of returning a surly answer, until he saw Molly's pretty troubled face and dainty clothes. Then he smiled, shook his head, and answered,

"Very sorry, Miss. Couldn't do that."

"But I will show you the letter!" said Molly, piteously. "I'll give you half-a-crown for it, if you'll let me take it out."

"No use, Miss. Couldn't do it at any price," said the postman. "And if you'll excuse me, Miss, I'm in a hurry."

"But, postman——"

"Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Hannington?" said a voice behind her. And turning with a start, Molly found herself face to face with Captain Rutherford, whose kindly blue eyes and friendly smile gave her a sensation of unwonted peace and confidence.

"Oh, I am so glad it is *you!*" she exclaimed, impulsively. "I thought it was——"

Could she have been going to say "her husband?" The quick, scared look over his shoulder, the sudden hot blush, filled Charlie Rutherford's heart with sorrow.

"I have put a letter in here and I want it out again," she went on. "Can't I get it out?"

"I'm afraid not," said Captain Rutherford, smiling at the proposal. "Was it very important?"

By this time the postman had shouldered his bag and tramped away again, not without a smile at the futility of the young lady's request.

Molly, finding that he had gone, drew a long breath and glanced timidly at her companion.

"I thought that he would have given me my own letter back," she said, plaintively.

"A post-box is the very mouth of Fate," said Charlie Rutherford, shaking his head. "What is done cannot be undone, I am afraid."

"I'm afraid not," said Molly, in a low voice.

"Are you going anywhere else? are you shopping, may I ask?"

"No, I came out only to post my letter."

"May I walk back with you?"

"Oh," said Molly, impulsively, "I shall be so glad if you do."

She was hardly aware of the traces that tears and a mental struggle had left upon her face. Her eyelids were reddened: her cheeks were woefully pale, and her drooping lips twitched from time to time as if she could hardly restrain herself from tears. Captain Rutherford, however, saw it all, and he noted her silence, her evident depression, as they walked the few yards distance between the pillar and the hotel. When they reached the door, he paused, lifting his hat as if to take his leave. Whereupon Molly said, quite simply,

"Won't you come in?"

She was so utterly friendless that Charlie's appearance put fresh heart into her, and made her reluctant to see him depart. And, after a moment's hesitation, but with a look of trouble dawning in his clear blue eyes, Charlie Rutherford followed her to her little sitting-room.

"I hope you were not tired after your dissipation of the other night," he ventured to say.

"Oh no, not at all. I don't think that I ever enjoyed anything so much in my life: I shall *never* enjoy anything so much again—never!" cried Molly, with a burst of childish passion, which took her hearer by surprise.

"I should think that you will enjoy a great many things much more," said Rutherford, kindly.

"Oh no, I shall not. . . . And I don't deserve to enjoy anything. . . . I know I vexed my father very much, but I never thought that he would not forgive me. . . . It is that which is troubling me to-day." Molly put her handkerchief to her eyes and hastily dashed away a gathering tear.

"You have heard from him again?"

"I have had a message." Molly's chin quivered as she spoke. "He does not want to see me or hear of me again."

"I am very sorry. But he will yield—in a little time he will change his mind," said Charlie, with eager unreasonableness. "He cannot always be so hard."

"Oh, I don't know," said Molly, looking away. "He was always rather stern to us. And I hardly thought that I had done wrong until—until—you looked so grave and surprised about it the other night. Since then I have felt—differently, somehow."

If she had been the most accomplished coquette in the whole of Christendom she could not have chosen words more likely to inflame young Rutherford's ardor in her cause.

"Can I do anything for you? Should I ask my father to talk to Mr. Moncrieff? They are great friends, you know."

"I'm afraid it would be of no use."

"I can't bear to see you in trouble," said Charlie, with a little break in his manly voice.

Molly looked surprised. "It's very kind of you," she said. Then, with a sudden effort at sincerity: "It isn't only *that* makes me miserable. I had—other reasons." She stopped short, and colored over cheek and brow.

"If I can help you in any way, I shall always be ready," said Captain Rutherford, in low, moved tones.

Molly had no time to reply, for at that very moment the door was opened and John Hannington walked in. He cast a very sharp glance at Molly's flushed face and then at Rutherford, but he greeted the latter with his usual affectation of semi-jocose frankness, and did not seem in any way astonished by his presence. Indeed, when Rutherford declared that he must go, Hannington invited him.

very cordially to dinner on the following evening, and would take no refusal. When the young man was gone, he turned back to his wife, who was sitting with her face averted from him, and touched her lightly on the cheek. "Come, Molly," he said, good-humoredly, "don't sulk. I said more than I meant. There is no need for you to look so tragic."

"Oh, Jack," she said, the tears beginning to stream over her white cheeks again, "do you mean—do you really—love me—after all?"

"Of course I do, as much as husbands generally love their wives, at any rate. I can't get up romantic sentiment, Molly, and I don't mean to. We may as well jog along as well as we can."

He drew her towards him and kissed her. She neither looked up nor returned his kiss: a terrible feeling of guilt, anger, disgust, had taken possession of her. And she dared not tell him that she had purloined Stella's letters and sent them to Ralph Kingscott, nor ask him whether it was herself who was "the only woman that he had ever loved."

CHAPTER XXX.

A CRISIS.

MEANWHILE at Torresmuir life seemed to have resumed its usual course. By the time the East winds had ceased and the June flowers begun to blow, Ralph Kingscott was nearly well, and could attend to his duties on the estate. Bertie was sent to a tutor; and Stella tried to take up the threads of her life—although they had snapped of late in so many directions that she felt as if its warp and woof were fatally strained asunder. And in some respects she tried in vain.

There was a certain day in spring that lived long in her remembrance. It was before Bertie went away—before Ralph Kingscott had returned to active life. It was shortly after a letter had been received from Molly, asking once more for her father's forgiveness: a letter which, as we already know, had been answered by Ralph Kingscott, who took upon himself to heighten considerably the effect of Alan Moncrieff's displeasure in the message that he gave.

Alan's own words had not been nearly as harsh as they were represented, and he had never meant to refuse definitely to help his daughter in her need. But his words of inquiry as to the reason of her distress for money were capable of being twisted a good many ways; and it was Ralph's interest to divide the father and daughter as much and as long as possible.

After the despatch of Ralph's letter, Mr. Moncrieff was noticeably restless and uneasy. He did not say to any one that he wanted to hear again from Molly, but Stella surmised that he was anxious on that account. He had shown considerable anger when she had placed Molly's letter before him, but she knew that he had made a half apology to her afterwards for his irritability. And then on a certain May morning, Molly's answer came.

The post-bag was brought to Mr. Moncrieff about noon. He was in the porch of the house when it arrived—talking to Bertie about fishing-tackle, and engaged with the lad in an examination of the fly-book. Stella had stepped into the porch for a moment also, to enjoy the clear, bright sunlight and the exquisite view of purple distances, winding silver streams, and budding green foliage. She was glad to see her husband and his son together—glad to hear Bertie's laugh—clearer and franker than it used to be—once more, and to note that Alan's tone was cheerier than it had sounded for many a day. He gave her a smile of greeting as she approached. Something warm and bright seemed to have come into his face. He had been fighting a hard battle with himself ever since the news of Molly's elopement had reached him; and now a crisis had been reached, and he honestly believed that he had won the victory. He could afford to smile in his old kindly fashion when he had made up his mind to accept the truth of his daughter's penitence, and forgive her for the wrong done to himself.

The letter-bag was brought to him by the butler, and Stella handed him the key. She saw that his hand trembled a little as he put it into the lock.

There were half a dozen letters for himself: none for Stella, three for the servants, one for Bertie, one for Ralph Kingscott. It was over this letter that Alan lingered for a moment. He handed the bag back to the servant with the letters for cook and housemaids, gave Bertie his own,

put the envelope for Ralph face downwards on the window-sill, and began to open and read his own letters. But Stella's heart gave a sudden leap, for she had seen the handwriting on the letter addressed to Mr. Kingscott. It was another communication from Molly—perhaps more satisfactory than the last.

In five minutes Alan stuffed his own papers into his pockets, and said, rather abruptly—

“I'll take Ralph his letter.”

Then he strode into the house and went towards the Tower, where he knew that at that moment Ralph was engaged.

Stella went to the drawing-room, hoping that he would come to her and give her news of Molly. But an hour or two passed by, and she saw nothing of him. The luncheon-bell rang—but he did not come to luncheon. Ralph came, with a curiously cold smile lurking about the corners of his lips, as if he knew something that he did not choose to tell; but Stella would not question him. Alan had gone out, he said incidentally in the course of the meal, and would not be back till dinner-time—if then. Stella silently surmised that there had been bad news in that letter from poor Molly.

She did not see her husband again until the dinner-hour; and then she felt rather than saw that a change of some kind had passed over him. He was unusually pale, very silent, and somewhat restrained in manner; he avoided meeting Stella's eye, or entering into conversation with her; and shortly after dinner went away to his study and did not re-appear in the drawing-room.

Stella's anxiety overleaped all bounds. She would not ask Ralph Kingscott for news of Molly, but she surely might ask Alan. He could not be angry with her for that. Molly perhaps was ill or in trouble. Stella did not think that John Hannington was likely to prove a very loving husband. At the risk of being thought troublesome and intrusive, she decided upon going to her husband to inquire.

It was after ten o'clock when she knocked at the study door. She heard Alan's footsteps as he paced up and down the room. The sound stopped: she heard him walk to the door and unlock it. Then he said “Come in.”

But when she presented herself in the door-way, she

was certain that some trace of surprise was visible on his grave, pale face. He did not, however, show it in words: he hastened at once, with even more than his usual courtesy, to close the door for her, to set her a chair, and to ask—formally enough—if there were anything that he could do for her?

Stella sat down. The room was very dark, for the fire sent out only a dull, red glow, and the lighted lamp on the writing-table was covered with a green shade. Such light as there was fell full upon Stella's face, but Alan—moving backwards and forwards beside the table as he spoke to her—kept his countenance in shadow.

"Can I do anything for you?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, Alan," the young wife broke out earnestly, "I am so afraid that you have had bad news to-day!"

"Bad news?" he repeated, mechanically; and then he stopped short, laying one hand on the table at his side. "Yes," he added, in a lower tone, "yes—I have had bad news."

"About Molly?" she breathed—almost afraid to speak aloud. "From Molly herself?—I saw her writing——"

"It was nothing," said Alan, resuming his slow walk without glancing at her face. "Nothing, I mean, that you would care to hear. It would be no pleasure to you."

"Of course, no trouble of Molly's would give me any *pleasure* to hear of," said Stella, almost, indignantly.

"But I might be able to help—to sympathise—if you were grieved about it, I should be grieved too——"

She had difficulty in uttering even these few and disconnected words. His silence, his bowed head and shoulders, gave her a strange sensation of fear.

"Is there nothing for me to hear?" she said at last, almost desperately.

Moncrieff stopped short again, placed both hands on the table, and leaning forward a little, looked at her steadily.

"Why," he said deliberately, "should you be so anxious about the matter?"

"Because I see that you are anxious, Alan, and I want, if possible, to help you."

"My anxiety is so important to you?"— Was there a slight sneer in the tone of his voice?

"Yes, indeed it is. How should it *not* be important to me? Oh, Alan, do you forget that you are my husband?" Stella cried, with an accent of reproach that cut her listener to the heart. "Alan, Alan, what can you mean?"

"Forget it? No," he answered, slowly. "I remember it—but too well."

"I mean," said Moncreiff, moving towards her, and still regarding her with the same steadfast look, "that our experiment has failed. I told you some time ago that I had certain matters to discuss with you: I had resolved to drop the subject, but an enclosure from Molly this morning disposes me to speak more freely. I asked you to marry me in order to help me—that, I think, was the way in which I put it? a plain, perhaps even a brutal, way, but one which you did not seem to resent—"

"No," Stella's dry lips answered in dumb show, for she could not speak a word. And Alan went on—

"You have done your best: you *have* helped me—in many respects, as you promised to do. But—one thing I did ask for: not your love—I did not think it fair to ask for your love—but for truth and candor; and these, I scarcely think, Stella, that you have shown."

His voice was peculiarly gentle, and yet very cold. Stella's face flushed crimson, but she spoke out bravely.

"I do not know how I have failed in these," she said, "except by delaying to tell you of the entanglement that I had discovered between Molly and Mr. Hannington—and that was an error of judgment, not proceeding from untruthfulness. And then there was my own engagement—if you can call it an engagement—to Mr. Hannington, before I knew you: it lasted for a few days only, and was—surely—scarcely worth the telling. But I would not have been silent about it if I had thought that you cared to know."

Alan paused, as if to consider.

"And yet," he said, quietly, "when I asked you whether there was any man whom you preferred—"

"I said no," said Stella, rising from her chair in uncontrollable agitation, "and I say so again."

Her face burned, but her eyes looked straight into her husband's, and, if he had not been blinded by prejudice and suspicion, he must have seen that she was speaking the truth.

"You say so again?" he repeated slowly. "That has nothing to do with the matter. I am speaking of the day at St. Andrews when you promised to marry me. Then—then—was there no other man whom you loved better than myself?"

The change in the form of the question disconcerted Stella. She stood silent, with downcast eyes.

"The answer to the question lies here," said Alan, suddenly throwing an envelope which he had produced from his pocket, upon the table. "You had written these letters to John Hannington not so very long before: does a woman's heart change so quickly? Rather, I am inclined to believe, you chose to say what you did not quite mean; you chose to make me think that you preferred me, so that you might not lose your chance of making what the world calls a brilliant marriage. Well, you had what you wished for; and you now see the result. A marriage that begins in deceit is sure to end in loveless misery."

His voice had grown so harsh, his tone so bitter, that Stella was stimulated to say a word in self-defence.

"I never voluntarily deceived you, Alan."

He pointed to the envelope on the table.

"Perhaps you have forgotten what you wrote there? May I ask you kindly to glance over those letters—which, by the by, you may keep, as I have no wish to retain them."

Stella's hand closed on the envelope. She moved away from the table as if about to leave the room, but her husband's voice detained her.

"I should prefer your looking at them now, if you have no objections."

Stella *had* an objection—she had many objections, but none of them would, she knew, prevail against the force of her husband's will. With trembling fingers she opened the envelope and took thence those two piteous little letters to John Hannington—letters written in such anguish of soul, but also in such perfect trust and love. She tried to read the words, but they danced before her eyes.

"You have read them?" said Alan's voice at last. It had lost its momentary vehemence, and was calm and suave as usual. "You have read them?"

"I remember what I said," returned Stella, with difficulty.

"And—what else? You did not mean what you said, perhaps? You have also some explanation to give—some excuse——"

"No," said Stella, becoming calmer as she spoke. "You are quite mistaken. These letters do not want explanation. I meant every word of them—every word."

Alan's face turned still more pale. "Yet you tell me that you have not deceived me?" he said, with shaking voice. "You loved this man when you married me—and you told me—— You juggle with words as all women do. The fact is plain enough; you led me to believe that your heart was free, and at the same time it was given to another man! I call that deceit: I say that you made me believe a lie."

Stella looked at him gravely, soberly, from out those beautiful eyes, the tranquillity of which had always been to him their greatest charm. Her agitation had vanished: she was perfectly collected and unmoved. The shock of his unjust judgment of her had steadied her trembling nerves.

"You are wrong," she said, with curious quietness. "No; hear me, Alan: I must and will speak now. You have read my letters, it seems—a thing that I should scarcely have expected you to do—but I will forgive you for it if we are led thereby to a full explanation: a clearing away of the cloud that has lately hung about us. You seem to think that I wrote those letters immediately before I promised to marry you. If you look at the dates you will see that they were written a year before. A year is a long time in a young girl's life, Alan. John Hannington had indeed won my girlish love, but he had cast me off when he found that I was poor: he wrote to me—rejecting the love that he had won——" A little catch in her breath made her pause: the color mounted to her brow at the remembrance of the treatment that she had received; and Alan's brow grew black as night at the thought of it. Presently, however, she resumed, in the same tranquil voice. "I was pained—humiliated—for a time I even thought that I was heartbroken. But little by little I learned that it was not so. My fancy had been touched; but I had never given my whole heart to John Hannington. I had kept that for—another—for a worthier man."

She stopped short again, breathing quickly. Alan looked

at her eagerly : he even made a step towards her, but he did not speak.

"It took me some time to find all this out," said Stella, after a little pause. "I did not know—I could not tell—at once. When you asked me to be your wife, I felt that my greatest happiness would be to help you. I had lost all my love for Mr. Hannington, but I did not know—I was not sure whether I could care for anybody else in the same way. And it has never been the same way. The love that I have borne to my husband has been deeper, truer than any I ever knew before : it is different in its essence from any other : I gave him—long ago—my whole heart, my whole soul."

"Stella ! Stella !" cried Alan, stretching out his hands. But she would not take them : she drew herself up to her full height, and let him see that her tranquil eyes could flash indignant fire.

"Not yet !" she said. "Not yet !—I have more to say. I did not find this out for some time, but I knew enough of my own heart to be able to say, truthfully, that there was no man who had a claim to me, no man whom I preferred. It was much less than the truth—but a woman is not bound to give more than she has been asked for, Alan, and you—*you* never asked me for my love. I gave that to you unsought."

"You gave it to me ? You loved me all the while ? Stella, my darling——"

"Listen," she went on inflexibly. "Everything must be said now if ever it is to be said at all. I loved you, I say ; and you threw my love back into my face. You have distrusted me—insulted me—been harsher and crueller and colder to me than John Hannington himself ; and I have not been able to bear it, Alan ; I think love will bear anything but injustice to itself—disbelief in its existence. That hurts it, maims it—kills it finally ; there comes a day when you look for it and it is dead."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"NOT IN THE BOND."

"Is your love for me dead, then, Stella?" Moncrieff asked.

She had sunk back wearily in her chair, and he stood before her, with arms crossed upon his breast, with a grey pallor about his lips, and a look of bitter pain in his deep set eyes. She sighed as she made answer.

"I am afraid so."

"You mean that I have killed it? I—I don't understand. I am very obtuse, I know, but—what have I done? Let me have the whole truth: I want to know the worst."

"What have you done? Can you ask the question of me? Ask yourself."

"I do ask myself," said Alan, in a tone where a suppressed vehemence began to make itself audible, "and I do not see that I have much to reproach myself with." She looked at him mutely, and the silent mournfulness that had crept into her eyes cut him to the heart. "What have I done? Are you so different from other women that I must not think of you as I have thought of them? I suppose that is my fault: I have not set you up on a sufficiently high pedestal: I have not pretended to worship: I have been too sincere——"

"What right have you to judge women as you have judged them?" Stella asked.

"The right of long study, the right of a man who has been duped and tricked all his life long." Alan spoke out, passionately. "Why should I, of all men, have any faith in them? My mother broke my father's heart. My wife married me for my money. My daughter has robbed me and run away from home. You, Stella, you——"

His voice broke, he could say no more.

"I," said Stella, gently, "have often been foolish and ill-advised, but never untrue. You have condemned me unheard all along—from your experience of other women, not from your experience of me."

He looked at her and set his teeth, but he could find no words in which to reply.

"You have not meant to be cruel," she went on, the tears coming to her eyes: but you have often been very cruel to me, Alan. You have been suspicious and unjust. It has been with your children as with me; you have never trusted them or let them feel that you loved them. It was worse for them than for me—I should not say that it is the same—for they at least had a claim to your love: it was their right, and you hid it from them until they thought that it was not there at all. Can you wonder then if they distrusted you in turn?"

"It was your right, too," he said, hoarsely. "You had a wife's claim—"

"No, no, indeed I had not," cried Stella, suddenly bursting into tears. "That was not in the bond, Alan, and that is the worst of it. You never asked me for my love, and you never gave me your own. That is why our marriage has been such a failure, such a mistake. I ought not to have answered you when you asked me to marry you."

"Because you did not love me?"

"Because you had no love for *me*," said his wife, passionately, "and because no woman should give herself for anything but love. I was weak enough to think that I could conquer your coldness to me. It was not long before I learned that I loved you; that I would give all the world for a smile from you, a really tender, loving word. I did not find out how much I cared until I was your wife. And then I hoped—I tried—I prayed. Oh, what use was it all? You were like a rock: you had no heart, no pity: you wanted a chaperon for your daughter—that was all; and as a friend you preferred Ralph King-scott's society to mine. Do you think I have not suffered? Do you think my life has been a very easy one? You promised once to make me a happy woman; but you forgot that promise when you brought me to Torresmuir."

Moncrieff's face had grown very white as she hurled her words at him; he was aghast at her vehemence. He had never seen her so intensely moved before.

"I tried to make you happy," he said, in a low voice.

"Did you think that I could be happy when you treated me like a child?" she asked. "When you gave me fine

clothes and jewels, and made me the mistress of your household, did you think that I should be satisfied? Oh, there has been something wanting from the very first; there has been a gap which nothing could fill. I wanted your love, Alan; I asked for bread and you gave me a stone.

"Stella—Stella—you have not understood me."

"Not understood you? Have I given a wrong version of the story of our married life? will it be a better one if I go on to the next phase of it? coldness followed by distrust, by displeasure and reproaches. Was that any more consoling to me? Was it the way to make me happy?—to show by every look and every word that you had no confidence in me, that you believed me ready to deceive you at every turn? I could forgive the coldness—I can not forgive the distrust."

She turned away, covering her face with her hands, her whole form shaken by her sobs. Alan stood regarding her with a look strangely compounded of amaze, sadness, self-reproach, and a tenderness for which she would hardly have given him credit. At last, and when her sobs were dying away, he spoke in a voice kept studiously low and calm.

"I suppose it is no use to try to justify oneself, Stella; but there are one or two things that I think I must say. As regards the coldness, I—I—think you were mistaken. I did not feel coldly. I— Well," observing a slight shudder run through her frame, as though her whole being revolted against what he said, "I need not continue on that tack, I see. As to the distrust—yes, I acknowledge that it was there. It came from my general idea about women; I thought that all women were deceitful and un-candid; I made no exceptions—even for my wife. I confess this, Stella, and I will also add that you have conquered me; I do believe in your truth, and I will never doubt it again. Will this suffice?"

"It is too late," she murmured.

"Too late for what? Not too late to show my trust in you! Stella, you shall never blame me again for want of confidence. Can you not believe me?"

His earnestness made her lift her drooping head and look at him with her pathetic, tear-filled eyes. But there was no sign of relenting in her face.

"I would, if I could, Alan," she said, wistfully. It is

not by my will that I seem hard and cold. It is because I know that if you have distrusted people all your life, you cannot suddenly change your habit of mind at the word of command—you cannot really believe where you have doubted simply because you wish to believe.—It is impossible.”

“It is not impossible, Stella, because it is true.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, and drawing in her breath a little, “it *can't* be true—Look, Alan,” she went on, with sudden energy and decision, “when lives have gone wrong as ours have done, it is useless to think of putting them right by a few words of apology and pretence. You are sorry, I believe, to see that I take the matter so much to heart; you do for the moment feel as if you trusted me; but to-morrow there will be some new little cause for suspicion; Mr. Kingscott will say something slighting, or you will see me do a thing that you do not perfectly understand; and you will go back to your old views of women, and your old views of me, and it will be ten times harder for me to see you relapse into the old distrust than if I had never listened to what you say to-night.”

“It shall not be so, Stella; I swear it!”

“It is no use. Where is your common sense, Alan?” she asked, more quietly, but with as much decision as ever. “We are not two silly fools, you and I, who think that we can change nature at a word. You cannot alter your convictions of years' standing, because you are sorry to see me cry. For once you are unreasonable!”

“You are hard on me, Stella,” said the man, turning aside a little. “I have not, perhaps, mistrusted you quite as much as you imagine.”

“Oh, hush, hush!” she cried, almost indignantly. “Don't palter with the truth—even to make amends to me. It is a waste of time on your part. I have a better plan than that for restoring your peace of mind—and mine. We have failed to be happy together, and I have been of no use to Molly; I can be no use to her now, for you will not listen when I plead with you to forgive her. You are merciless to her as you are merciless to me.”

“God knows,” said Alan, between his teeth, “that I am not—I have never meant to be merciless.” Hé spoke doggedly, but without softness.

"Then be merciful now," said his wife, quickly, "and set me free."

"Set you free! What do you mean?"

"Let me go out of this house," she pleaded. "Let me leave Torresmitir. I will make no scandal. I will go quietly and openly—as if I were going for a long visit somewhere—and nobody will know that I do not mean to come back again."

"Stella, are you mad?"

"Indeed, indeed, I think it would be the best way," she said. "We do not love each other: how can we be happy."

"That is not the question," said Alan, almost harshly. "You have a duty to me, and I have one to you; we can not be free from one another."

"Other people have been made free; it is not an unheard-of thing. Why should you want me to be miserable? I could go away to London, or to some quiet country place, and get pupils; I think I could take care of little girls, and I should be at rest and at peace. It is cruel to keep me here—now!"

"My poor child," said Moncrieff, very slowly and pityingly, "I would do anything in the world to make you happier, if it were right; but this is not right. I have sworn to take care of you to your life's end; I must not break that vow. And you have promised me too."

"But you could release me!" she said, eagerly. She turned and looked at him, her soul in her eyes, her breath coming and going quickly between her parted lips. He also looked, sadly, searchingly, intently, and replied:

"I shall never release you. You are my wife."

Then as her whole form seemed to collapse before him, as the tension of her nerves gave way, he caught her in his arms and held her, half-fainting, closely to his breast.

"You are my wife," he said, in a tone of dogged resolution, "and I will never let you go—you shall forgive me first."

He could not tell—he did not much care—whether she heard his words or not. When he looked at her fair face it was white as death, her eyelids were closed, and her head fell heavily against his breast. The strain had been too much for her, and she had fainted in his arms.

Stella did not remember (although she was afterwards

bold) that she was carried up to her room in Alan's arms ; but she had a faint, vague sense, as she came to herself, that some one was holding her closely, kissing her cold face, and murmuring broken, passionate words of love—but when she moved and opened her eyes she thought that it must have been a dream, for no one was near her but her maid, and Alan had evidently gone downstairs again.

"How did I get here?" she asked feebly, by and by.

"Master carried you upstairs, ma'am, and called me," said the maid. And then, with a furtive glance at her mistress's face, she added: "He was in a great way about you, ma'am—holding your hand and kissing you—"

"Give me the *sal volatile*, please," said Stella. "You can leave me now, Jackson; I am better."

And Jackson had to go.

Stella was unable to rise from her bed, however, for the next day or two. She felt weak and broken, as if she had had a severe illness. As soon as she lifted her head from the pillow she turned dizzy and faint; and the doctor, whom Alan had called in, recommended perfect rest and quiet. This could easily be obtained: there was nobody, as she thought to herself with a great swelling of heart, nobody to visit her, to sit by her and nurse her and console her if she were ill. Poor Molly was far away: Aunt Jacky lay silent in the grave. Stella had not made many women friends in the neighborhood; and Lady Val, who would have been genuinely kind to her if she had had the opportunity, had taken a house in London. Jackson, the English maid, was a kind but solemn person: Bertie, who was just starting for his new tutor's house, came to ask after her once or twice and then to say good-bye. She saw nobody else. Mr. Moncrieff inquired at the door, and was answered by Jackson, but he refused to come in. Stella was glad of it: she felt too weak and weary and hurt in mind to wish to see his face again.

But on the fifth day, the sun shone brightly into her room and inspired her with a wish to get up. As the doctor had ordered that she should do exactly as she pleased, there was no difficulty about this; and at four o'clock she was seated in a comfortable chair near her dressing-room window, whence she could see the trees and the hills. It was not the most beautiful view to be obtained from the

windows of her room, but she felt less liking than usual for the sparkling brilliance of the view of the distant valley, and was glad to look at simple green trees and ordinary grass. She was not able to bear much light, and her eyes soon grew dim and tired: she closed them for a time, and must have fallen into a quiet doze, for when she looked up at last, with a sudden start, she found that she was not alone. Alan had come softly into the room, and stood leaning against the window, watching her as she slept. In the first moment of waking, Stella could almost have thought that she read a new expression in his face—a look of tenderness, a look of contrition and concern. But when she started up, the softness of that new expression passed away: his face was once more grave and rather stern, and at the sight of it she felt her heart begin to beat painfully fast and her breath to come short and fast with a sensation of fear and distress.

He noticed her change of demeanor, and a look of acute pain passed over his face.

"I came to see for myself how you were," he said, coldly, but with an accent of embarrassment. "I hope you are feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you," said Stella, not daring to look up. Her color fluctuated sadly.

"I brought you some flowers," Alan went on—the constraint of his manner becoming more and more apparent as he spoke. "You have not been outside the door for so many days that I thought you might care for these."

Stella looked up, not roused to any vivid interest. What did she care just then for flowers—exotics, she supposed, grown in a hothouse, and bought with the coin of which he was always lavish? But when she saw what was in his hand she uttered an involuntary little cry of surprise and delight.

Violets, blue and white, primroses, anemones, the damp earthy smell still clinging about their stalks and leaves, an orchid or two such as grow wild in that part of the world, a host of delicate ferns, newly uncurled from their nests in the warm ground—these formed just such a posy as Stella loved. True, they were badly put together: the stalks were uneven, the leaves ragged, the whole as unharmonious as spring flowers ever could be, but the scent of the wild sweet blossoms was delicious, and the suggestion of spring and sunshine irresistibly grateful to Stella's senses.

And the giver? Never did donor of a bouquet look more unfitted to grope amongst wet leaves on damp hill-sides in search of spring flowers than Alan Moncrieff, with his grave, proud face and stately presence! And yet he lost no iota of his dignity as he laid his little offering on Stella's knee, with a simple gravity which made the action seem natural and in keeping with his character. Stella looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you—oh, thank you: I like them so much."

He watched the white fingers—they had grown thin of late—as they toyed with the fragrant flowers and held them to her nostrils, and then, still watching them, he said—

"I have—if you will allow me—a request to make."

"Yes," she breathed, the brightness vanishing hastily from her face.

"I should like to ask you," said Alan, "to promise me—if you will—to take no steps without informing me—I mean concerning the—the proposal you made on Monday night. You will not leave Toresmuir, for instance, without at least *telling* me first."

"No," said Stella, faintly.

"When you are stronger," her husband went on, "we can discuss the matter further, if you like. But you—you will not do anything without consulting me—you promise?"

"I promise."

"Thank you." It was wonderful to hear with what earnestness he spoke. "Now, I shall feel secure."

"But—suppose I break my promise?" some strange influence prompted Stella to say. "You trust no one: do not trust me."

"I would trust you with my life," he answered, in a tone of curious intensity. "My life—my—honor—my all"

She shrank a little, and began nervously to rearrange the flowers. After a short pause he spoke in more ordinary tones.

"I had one thing to tell you. I have written to—Molly and Hannington. I have given them the money they wanted. I thought you might like to know."

"And—your forgiveness?" said Stella, quickly.

But to this question she got no answer. Jackson entered with a cup of tea, and Mr. Moncrieff, succumbing beneath her disapproving glances, was obliged to quit the room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

[LADY VAL'S FRIENDSHIP.]

"WHY should I go to see your new little friend?" said Lady Val, idly. "I'm not philanthropic, Charlie."

She was sitting in a low chair beside a little scarlet tea-table, in a pleasant, luxuriously-furnished room overlooking the Park. Through the high windows one could catch glimpses of soft blue sky and pale green foliage that showed the approach of summer days. Every table in Lady Val's drawing-room was crowded with pots and vases of flowers: they were "her one extravagance," she used to declare. Other people thought that she had considerably more than one.

Opposite Lady Val, on another low chair, sat Charlie Rutherford. He was stooping forward to play with the silky ears of a dainty little dog—Lady Val's latest favorite—but the attitude was evidently assumed to conceal some trace of nervousness or embarrassment, and his hostess's quick eye noted the reason without loss of time.

"Don't tease Chico," she said, "but sit up and tell me all about your *protégée*—oh, that isn't the right word, I see! Never mind. Who is she, and why should I take an interest in her?"

"She comes from your part of the country, Lady Val," said the young man, solemnly, "and she is very unhappy and in want of friends."

"Yes, but, my dear boy, I can't go and see everybody who is in want of friends! Why is she in want of friends? Isn't she in our own set? I will have nothing to do with any Quixotism, remember; it is not in my line."

"You have changed, Lady Valencia," said Captain Rutherford, reproachfully. "You used to be always so ready to help."

"That was in the days when I was a nobody," said Lady Val, composedly. "It did not much matter then what I did or where I went. Times are changed, Charlie, and I have changed with them—perhaps."

"But not in that way!" said Charlie, with the warm-hearted simplicity which was always characteristic of him. "You cannot have grown less kind, less sympathetic than you used to be, although you are so much richer and grander, Lady Val! If I thought that, I should regret the change indeed. But everybody knows that you are one of the most generous women in London."

"Does your young friend want a five-pound note?" said Lady Val, with a pleased but mocking light in her fine dark eyes. "I am quite open to flattery, I acknowledge; but the sooner you let me know what is required of me, the better, Charlie!"

"She is not in want of money as far as I know," answered Charlie—far too much in earnest to respond in a suitably light-hearted manner to Lady Valencia's jesting; "but she wants friendly counsel and advice. She is a mere child, although a married woman; and as she married against the wish of her friends, they are not taking any notice of her—"

Lady Val had taken up a great scarlet and black fan which lay on a painted milking-stool beside her, and was swinging it slowly backwards and forwards. She now let it rest against her lips, and listened more intently, a slight frown making itself visible on her curved black brows.

"And she is awfully grieved about it: she seems to be so fond of her father, and it is so sad for her to be all alone in London without a friend. Her husband—well, I suppose she's fond of him, but a man can't always be at home, you know, and she sits alone and—and—cries her heart out." And then Charlie leaned back in his chair looking quite overcome by the picture that he had drawn.

"It cannot be," said Lady Valencia, with more than her usual crispness of enunciation, "that you are trying to enlist my sympathies on behalf of Alan Moncrieff's run-away daughter?"

Charlie looked at her. "I never heard that it was a crime for a girl to marry the man she loved, even if it were against her father's will," he said, stiffly.

"Against her father's will! Her father never was asked," said Lady Val, drily. She laid down her fan: the hot color had leaped into her face, and her eyes were unnaturally bright. "Excuse me, Charlie, I know the circumstances, and I know Molly Moncrieff—that is to

say, I used to know her. She behaved very badly to her father—who is one of the most upright, honorable, kind-hearted men in Scotland—and I cannot say that I am altogether sorry if she now finds her position disagreeable.”

Charlie rose from his chair. “If that is the view you take of it, I won’t trouble you any longer, Lady Val,” he said, with a fine dignity, which was perhaps a little bit impaired by something of boyish tremor in his voice. “My father and Mr. Moncrieff were friends so long that I can’t help thinking of Mrs. Hannington as a friend too, and I don’t like to hear her conduct put in what seems to me an unjust light. I think I must be going now, and I’ll—I’ll—wish you good afternoon, Lady Valencia.”

He bowed and made his way to the door, quite forgetting to shake hands with his hostess. Lady Val let him make his way down the long drawingroom without a word of reply: but she watched him with a very inscrutable look in her eyes, and when he was fumbling with the door-handle she broke into a little laugh and called him back to her.

“Don’t go like that, you dear silly boy—excuse me, Charlie, but you know I always look on you as one of my younger brothers, and I take the privilege of speaking my mind. Come back and tell me about Molly: I’m really sorry for the poor child, although she did make such a—such a fool of herself! Perhaps it was not altogether her fault, however; she is certainly a child—a mere child!” and a quick sigh followed the words.

“Yes, indeed, Lady Val,” and so innocent-minded and candid,” said Charlie, much relieved by his hostess’ change of front, and eager to seat himself again and talk of Molly’s many perfections. “Of course it was not her fault: it was all that fellow, John Hannington’s, no doubt. I hope he knows what a prize he has got, that’s all.”

“I hope he does,” said Lady Val. “Molly has no harm in her—I am sure of that; and a pure-minded, affectionate girl, even if she has been a little silly to begin with, might still make him an admirable wife.”

“Far better than he deserves!” growled Captain Rutherford.

“Well, Jack Hannington used to be rather a great friend of mine,” avowed Lady Val, courageously, “and

I'm not going to hear him abused by you, Master Charlie. I must say I think the two have made a great mistake. But it may turn out well in the end."

"You don't take the romantic view: some people say 'all for love and the world well lost;' don't they?" said Charlie, rather awkwardly.

"They do. And I'm not sure whether I don't agree with them. But 'the world well lost' where John Hannington is concerned?"—she spoke bitterly—"can you imagine that he was so simple-minded?"

"You don't mean that he did not care for her?" said Charlie, turning very red.

"No, no, of course not," she answered, hastily. "What was I saying? I only made a general remark, and you need not ruffle up your feathers over it in that way, Charlie. I hope, by the by, that you are not going to pose as poor Molly's defender and *preux chevalier*? That is not the way to do her any good. A young pretty married woman wants friends of her own sex, not men of your age. Don't go round championing her as you have been doing to-day."

"If she wants friends of her own sex, Lady Val," said Charlie, ingenuously, "won't you be one of them?"

He could not imagine why Lady Val looked sad and grave for a moment. But then she smiled so kindly that he felt as if he had won a triumph.

"To please you, I will, Charlie," she said; "on condition, at least, that you don't behave foolishly. Mrs. Hannington is very pretty and charming, and you may be very sorry for her position; but, believe me, you will do nobody any good by showing strong feeling about it."

Charlie fidgeted and looked straight before him as she spoke. After a little pause he said, manfully—

"I hope you don't think that I would do anything that a gentleman might not do, Lady Val?"

"No, I don't," said Lady Val, with her brightest smile, "but I was afraid that you might be a little imprudent. If you are very good, I will tell you what I will do. I will call on Mrs. Hannington to-morrow, and I will try to make friends with her. She shall come here, and I will do my best to prevent her from feeling lonely any more. Will that satisfy you?"

"You are most kind," the young man declared, warmly.

"I thought that I could count upon your sympathy, Lady Valencia. And I will be careful—but you must not misunderstand my friendly feeling for Mrs. Hannington: our fathers, you know, have been close friends for years."

"All right, Charlie, I understand. And now I must send you off, for we are to dine early to-night, and I have to go and dress. I will look after Mrs. Hannington: never fear."

But, although she dismissed him so summarily, Lady Val did not go to her dressing-room for more than half an hour after his departure. She lay back in her chair, looking dreamily before her: now and then a great sigh seemed to come from the very bottom of her heart. She looked as few people had ever seen her look—utterly weary, utterly depressed.

"How foolish I am!" she said to herself at last, as she roused herself and rose from her chair. "There is no use in crying over spilt milk, as the homely proverb says. I ought to be only too thankful that I have a chance of helping that poor child—perhaps of helping her husband too. Now, if things had been 'ordered' differently, as some of my friends would express it, we should all have been shuffled like a pack of cards. Charlie Rutherford is the *beau ideal* of a husband for little Molly—brave, simple, honest, handsome, rich; and poor, battered, disreputable Jack would have suited me admirably, for I could have managed him, poor boy, which Molly will never be able to do. Heigho! 'how easily things go wrong!' And when they do—well, nothing can set them straight.

"Then follows a mist and a driving rain,
And life is never the same again."

"To think that I should fall to quoting poetry!" And, with a shrug of her graceful shoulders, a smile and a sigh, Lady Val went upstairs to dress.

The part of *grande dame* was one for which she was admirably fitted. Her new wealth did not spoil her: it was noticed that a touch of softness had been added to her charm of manner, and a faint suggestion of sadness that sometimes crept into her eyes made her brilliant beauty altogether gentler and more lovable. She rented a pretty little house near the Park, and seemed resolved to take advantage of all the privileges which her posi-

tion, her striking personality, and her wealth, were likely to afford her. For Molly Hannington, unknown, unloved, and perilously pretty, there would be no greater stroke of worldly good fortune than to be "taken up" and introduced to society by Lady Valencia Gilderoy. For although Lady Val was still unmarried, and had for some time been known in connection with a rather fast set of men and women, her undoubted brilliance and the position of her family, as well as her vein of dauntless cynical good sense, had always sufficed to give her a considerable standing in the London world; and now that she was the mistress of incalculable wealth, it was highly probable that she would in good time become one of the "leaders" of society.

All this John Hannington knew and gnashed his teeth over. Not only from love of Valencia Gilderoy as a woman, but out of envy and malice, and all uncharitableness. What were Molly's trumpery hundreds in comparison with Lady Val's thousands? What were Molly's girlish freshness and innocent beauty when set against Lady Val's modish brilliance and *savoir faire*? He could have hated his wife sometimes for the mistake which she had caused him to make.

He came home one afternoon and found her radiant, yet tremulous.

"Oh, Jack," she said, flying to him with shining wet eyes and lovely color in her face, "*who* do you think has been to see me? It was like a bit of my old home! I cried when I saw her, I was so glad! Guess who it was!"

"Mrs. Moncrieff?" asked Jack, moodily.

"Oh! no, no; she is not in London, is she? No, somebody whom you used to know very well. She told me that she was an old friend of yours."

"Not.——"

But the name died on Hannington's lips. The habitual frown upon his forehead suddenly deepened; a strange light came into his eyes. Molly was not wise enough to read these ominous signs.

"You have guessed, I am sure," she said, laughing with all her old gaiety of heart. "Lady Valencia Gilderoy! What do you think of that, Jack? And she has come into a lot of money, more than she knows what to do with, she says, and she has a house in Park Lane and——"

"And came here to gloat over our poverty and enlarge on her own magnificence, I suppose!" said Hannington, savagely. The veins on his forehead were swollen until they stood out like cords.

"Oh, no, Jack! How could she be so mean?" said Molly, a little intimidated by his manner, but not in the least understanding it. "She came out of kindness, Jack, because she thought that I should be lonely sometimes, as I know so few people in London. She wants me to go for a drive with her to-morrow, and she says that I must go to lunch on the next day, and then she can introduce me to some of her friends——"

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Hannington, sternly. "You will see as little of Lady Valencia Gilde-roy as you can. I do not wish you to make a friend of her."

Even Lady Val herself would hardly have known him if she had seen him looking as he did now, with that red flush upon his face, that black frown distorting his features, that malignant light in his dark eyes.

"But—why—why not?" said Molly, shrinking back.

"Because I choose."

"I thought you were friends, Jack?"

"Friends! What is that to you? What do you know about friendship? You will not cross Lady Valencia Gilde-roy's threshold, do you hear? I will not have it."

"But I promised," said Molly, the tears rapidly gathering in her lovely grieving eyes. "I said that I would—and, indeed, Jack, it would be such a pleasure to me—I get out so little, and I see so few people!"

Hannington uttered an oath which made her start; she had never heard him swear before. "Do you mean to obey me or do you not?" he asked with unwonted fierceness.

"Not any the more because you swear at me!" cried Molly, firing up. Her eyes flashed at him indignantly.

"You will do what I tell you whether you like it or not, madam. I'll have no insubordination of that kind. You will not go to Lady Val's house unless I give you leave."

"She was my father's friend before I ever saw you," Molly burst out, her temper as usual getting the better of her prudence, "and I do not see why I should give her up."

She thought at first that he was going to strike her. The gesture of his clenched fists was certainly threatening. But, after a moment's pause, he lowered his hand; the suffused red of his countenance gradually gave way to a livid pallor, and when he spoke, his voice, though thick, was perfectly calm in tone.

"You don't see? Then I'll give you a reason. You will not have more to do with Lady Val than you can help, because you will find it wiser to keep her at a distance. I told you once that there was only one woman that I had really loved. It was not yourself, as you were vain enough to think. It was Valencia Gilderoy; and if she had come into that accursed money of hers a week earlier, I would have married her and thrown you over at a moment's notice. I wish I had—and risked the loss of money. For I suppose I am tied to you for life, and I love her still. *That* is the reason why I warn you not to see too much of Lady Valencia Gilderoy."

He turned and walked out of the room, while Molly sank down on the sofa, a crushed heap of helpless misery. And this was what her runaway marriage had come to—not four months after her wedding-day!

CHAPTER XXXIII

DISENCHANTMENT.

LADY VALENCIA waited and wondered in vain next day, when at the hour fixed for the drive Mrs. Hannington did not appear. Later in the afternoon a little note from Molly reached her, couched in very cold and ambiguous terms. The writer was unable to drive out that afternoon, she said; and she neither gave a reason nor expressed any sorrow for her defection. This was rather a rude way of treating the proposal, and Lady Val flushed with vexation as she read the note.

"What does the child mean?" she said to herself. "She seems to have forgotten her manners—she never was distinguished for them, after all." Then came a sharp, stinging thought. "Can she have found out?—Can he have told her that I—that I offered myself to him on his

very wedding-day? Surely he would not do that. Bad as he is," said Lady Val, bitterly, "he would not forget so utterly that he loved me once!"

But in spite of these doubts and fears, she turned a bright and smiling face on Captain Rutherford when she met him at a dance that evening and read the question in his eyes that he did not like to put into words.

"I *have* called," she said, with a little nod. "I am doing my duty, you see."

"You are the very kindest person in the world, Lady Valencia."

"I'm afraid it won't be of any use, Charlie. She does not like me."

"Oh—impossible!"

"Quite possible, on the contrary. There are numerous people who don't like me," said she, with a light laugh. "Never mind: I will do what I can for her; and even if she does not come to me I'll get some other people to call on her, and she can go to their houses."

"But why shouldn't she like to come to you?" said Charlie, in a puzzled tone.

"Ah, why, indeed! She associates me a little too much with her old home-life, perhaps," said Lady Val, coolly: "she used to see me at Torresmuir, and she may think that I sympathise too much with her dear little stepmother, who is the sweetest and gentlest young thing whom I have seen for a long time."

"Indeed! I had an idea that the stepmother had been unkind to her or something——"

"I don't think Molly told you that," said Lady Val, with a flash of honest indignation.

"Oh; no, no; she said nothing about her. Some one said so at the Club, I believe: I suppose it was a mistake."

"Quite a mistake. Mrs. Moncrieff is a charming little woman, with the kindest heart in the world; but she was not experienced enough to keep a tight hand on her stepchildren. It has been a great trouble to her. But Bertie adores her," said Lady Valencia, catching herself up with a sense that it was not becoming to talk of the Moncrieffs' affairs to their friend's son, "and I am glad of that, for he is really a nice boy, although a little weak in character."

"Is he in London?"

"He is either come or is coming shortly. You might look him up, Charlie; it would be a kindness."

"I shall be delighted."

"I will get his address for you. Keep him out of mischief, if you can."

Captain Rutherford was only too pleased to undertake the commission. As soon as Bertie was settled in London, therefore, he found a very congenial and a very desirable friend ready to hand; and Mr. Moncrieff was grateful to young Rutherford for thus making himself known. It had been one of Alan Moncrieff's initial mistakes in the training of his children to keep them secluded from acquaintances: the consequence was that, debarred from suitable friendships, they had made unsuitable ones for themselves, and the lives of both had been darkened and saddened through evil influences. Bertie was sincerely anxious to amend his ways and regain the confidence of his father; and it soon became a pleasure to him to spend as much of his time as possible with a man like Charles Rutherford, whose frank and honorable spirit was a perpetual spur and stimulus to his own.

Rutherford's regiment was quartered at Aldershot, but he found it easy to get frequent leave, and was as much in London as possible. He kept his word to Lady Valencía, however, and was careful not to go too often to the Hanningtons'. He had found it necessary, for his own conscience's sake, "to pull up," as he said to himself, "in time." For it was becoming a pain and an irritation to him to see Molly's pale and unhappy looks. He still maintained that he was interested in her solely because of his father's liking for Alan Moncrieff; but it was rather difficult to continue to look on matters entirely from this point of view. To remember that his father and Moncrieff of Torresmuir had been schoolfellows together would not account for the fact that he could not forget Molly's wistful eyes, that her wan face haunted him night and day, and that he was possessed with such a desire to do her service that he would willingly have gone to the ends of the earth for her if she had so desired.

But it must also be said that Charlie Rutherford's admiration for Molly was of the purest and most reverential kind. If he had never seen her distressed or lonely, he might never have thought twice of her, save as an ordinary acquaintance: it was just because he had seen tears in her eyes, and suspected that her husband neglected her, that

his chivalrous nature was so stirred. He vowed to be her friend, her brother, to the last day of his life; and he told himself that it was well for her that she should have one trusty "servant," to use the parlance of an older world, one who would be always faithful and helpful, and ready to maintain her cause against all comers. Having made up his mind in this way, he did not keep entirely from the Hanningtons', as Lady Valencia would have advised him to do, but went there discreetly, dining with John Hannington, and even playing cards with him when asked, but never for one moment altering the gentle respect of his manner towards the woman who—although he hardly knew it—now occupied the first position in his heart and mind.

The summer came to a close, and people began to leave town for their holiday rambles. Rutherford was due at his father's house before the end of July, and he was going to travel North with Bertie Moncrieff. Lady Valencia Gilderoy was bound for Norway with a select party of friends. Charlie came to see the Hanningtons before his departure. He wondered what they were going to do: he had not heard their plans, and Bertie had been unable to give him any information. Bertie was not very fond of going to his brother-in-law's apartments. He had developed as strong a dislike to John Hannington as his father and his friend had done.

Captain Rutherford found both husband and wife at home. Molly was looking exceedingly white, he thought, but she professed herself quite well—only a little tired by the heat. Hannington seemed to listen to the visitor's remarks with suppressed impatience, and answered almost rudely when Charlie once turned towards him. The flush of shame or alarm which instantly suffused Molly's pale face made the young man indignant for her sake, and yet all the more anxious to keep the peace. He asked her where she was going for the autumn.

"I don't know yet," she answered, timidly glancing at her husband. "We have not decided."

"It will probably end in our going nowhere at all," said Hannington, irritably. "And I hope you will like it if we do." The last words were addressed to Molly, who again flushed vividly and painfully.

Charlie began to wish that he had not come. He could not run away just yet, however, for Molly had given him

a cup of tea, and he could not put it down untasted. John Hannington also seemed to feel some embarrassment at the turn the conversation had taken, for he pulled out his watch, declaring that he had an important engagement to keep, and that he was sorry to say he really must be off. And then he quitted the room, but, as Charlie noticed, without a word of farewell or apology to his wife.

It struck Captain Rutherford that these two grew colder to each other in manner every time he saw them ; and such was indeed nearly the case. For after that revelation made by Hannington of the real state of his affections—a revelation which she could never feel to be anything but unspeakably brutal and degrading to herself—Molly's girlish love for her husband had died a painful death. The veil of romance was torn from her eyes, and she saw him for what he was—or rather, she saw the very worst side of him, and nothing else. She was not strong enough by nature to dominate and make a fairly good man of him, as Lady Val had declared to herself that *she* could have done. She was helpless: she trembled before him with the nervous timidity which harshness or injustice had always excited in her. She saw that he was selfish, sensual, and hard ; and she was too much shocked by her discovery to look for the few scattered grains of gold which existed in the baser metal of his character. It seemed to her that her whole life was ruined: she had shattered all possible happiness for herself, and she looked for nothing more.

"You are not really thinking of spending the autumn in London, are you?" Charlie asked, in a tone of dismay, when Hannington had left the room.

"I don't know," said Molly, faintly. "I expected"—she looked aside, and her voice trembled—"that we should go—*home*. But they—I suppose they have other plans."

Charlie remembered Bertie had told him that the Moncrieffs were going abroad for the months of August and September. His heart swelled with indignation and pity. They were going abroad to enjoy themselves, while she was left in the stifling heat of London, without the prospect of a change of any sort. Had they then no heart?

"I hope," Molly went on, "that my husband will go to Scotland by and by. I'm afraid it is my fault that we have managed so badly. I misunderstood: I thought that we were sure to go to Torresmuir—but the place is to be shut

up, I hear, and so our plans have failed. It was stupid of me"—with a weak little smile—"to make the mistake. And John is—rather—vexed."

"They would not have gone abroad if they had understood that you thought of going to them, of course," said Charlie, rather hotly. "Bertie was regretting only the other day that you could not join them at Torresmuir."

Molly kept silence, and Rutherford suddenly felt, without being told, that Mr. Moncrieff must have failed, or even perhaps refused, to ask his son-in-law to Torresmuir. He felt an unreasoning anger against Molly's father for not helping her out of her present difficulty; though there was this to be said, that probably Alan Moncrieff did not know of it.

"I wish I could be of any help to you," said Charlie, rising to take his leave, and scarcely knowing how to express his vague good-will. "Can I take any messages—or—or parcels—or anything to Scotland?"

"No, thank you. Bertie will take mine." She looked up at him smiling, and then her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Oh, Scotland, dear Scotland!" she murmured. "Oh, if only I were going back! If only I could see it again!" And then she covered her face with her hands, and burst into low, tremulous sobs that rent the listener's heart.

Charlie could not bear it. There were two things he could do—he could fling himself at her feet and beg her not to cry, or he could take up his hat and walk out of the room—like a brute, as he told himself afterwards indignantly. But the former alternative would have been worse. He could never have come into Molly's presence again if he had so far forgotten her dignity and his own manhood. He walked straight out of the room and into the street, where for a minute he stood feeling absolutely sick with pain of heart, but knowing in a dazed sort of way that he had won a victory. It was not *his* part to comfort Mrs. Hannington in her troubles.

But he sought out Bertie, and after some circumlocution, impressed his views upon his mind as far as he could do so without betraying how deeply he was concerned. Bertie heard and understood. And when, a few days later, he went down to Torresmuir, he summoned up courage enough to go to his father and ask point-blank

whether he knew that Molly was pining for fresh air, and that Hannington had said that they were going to stay in London all the autumn.

"I did not know anything about it," said Mr. Moncrieff, looking startled and pained. "She did write, hinting that she would like to come to us, but I thought that he would not care to bring her here so soon. Why are they not going away? They cannot be in want of funds, surely: Molly has her own money."

Bertie noticed that the name, so long unspoken, fell naturally from his lips, as though it had been much in his thoughts.

"I expect that they do want money. Hannington lives in an extravagant way—he spends freely."

"Ah. He gambles, perhaps."

"I believe he does."

"He has not induced you to join him, has he, Bertie?" The father's voice trembled a little as he spoke; then he added hastily, "Don't think I mean to suspect you. I know I have a tendency to be suspicious, but I do believe, at the bottom of my heart, that I may trust you, my boy——"

"That is more than I have any right to expect," said Bertie, humbly, yet manfully too. "I give you my word, if you will take it, sir, that I have not played for money since I went to London, and that I never will. I know I can't stand it: the excitement gets into my veins like fire. I have taken a pledge of abstinence from any sort of gambling."

"I am only too glad to hear it," said Moncrieff. He stretched out his hand, which Bertie took eagerly and warmly. "There has been mischief wrought in our family by the gambling instinct already, and I should be sorry to think that it was inherited by you. Now about your sister. It is no use, I suppose, to put Torresmuir at their service for a couple of months? Shall I send her a cheque, and tell her to go where she likes?"

"That would be a splendid plan."

Mr. Moncrieff wasted no more time. He sat down and quietly wrote a cheque, which he then handed to his son, who was gratified and astounded at its amount. "Father, you are very good to us," he said, raising his eyes to Alan's face with a look which his father found very satisfactory.

"Do you think it will be enough?" said Moncrieff.
"Write to her yourself and send it."

"Are you not going to write?"

"Well—no."

"You have written to her, father, have you not?"—
Bertie realised, with an odd thrill, as he asked the question, that his old fear of his father had gone for ever. A year ago he could not have spoken as freely and as frankly as he did now.

"I have written once—a short letter. But I would rather not, Bertie. You can give her my love. Tell her to make what use of the money she chooses."

Bertie did not venture to remonstrate: the way in which his father answered showed him one thing, that although Molly had been formally pardoned and very generously treated, she was not yet truly and tenderly forgiven.

He could not resist seeking his stepmother in order to make her a partaker in his gladness at the unexpected success with which he had met. He found her in the drawing-room—alone, as usual, with a book in her hand—and he poured his story eagerly into her ear.

"My father is awfully good to us," he wound up, in boyish fashion. "And we've behaved abominably to him. Isn't he good, Stella?" He always called her Stella now: she was too dear to him to be called Mrs. Moncrieff; too young for the title of "mother."

"Yes, he is very good," said Stella, dreamily. And then she sighed.

"He has not quite forgiven Molly, though. He will—some day, will he not?"

"Surely," she answered.

"Can't you persuade him, Stella?"

"No, dear, no."

"But you want him to forgive her?"

"Ah, yes, indeed."

"If he won't do it for you, he won't do it for anybody in the world," said Bertie, quickly.

Her fair face flushed: she looked at him with a question in her eye. "Of course," the lad went on, quite unconscious of the effect that he was producing, "he thinks more of you and your opinion than of any other in the world."

"Oh, hush, Bertie, hush!"

"You don't think I mind, do you?" said the lad, with an amused laugh. "I'm only too glad that he has somebody to care for."

"I did not know—I did not think——"

"That he showed it so much?"—happily misunderstanding her. "But he makes it plain to the whole household. He never takes his eyes off you when you are in the room."

"You silly boy!" said Stella, turning away. "He does nothing of the kind."

But in spite of herself she felt a curious warmth and stir of pleasure at her heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE END OF IT.

MR. AND MRS. HANNINGTON found the cheque sent by Alan Moncrieff very acceptable indeed. Most of it went for John Hannington's delectation, it was true; but Molly got some sea-breezes, and was glad that her husband was in better temper than he had been for some time. They came back to town late in September, and removed into a small furnished house which they took for a few months. Bertie returned to London in October, and of course he went to see his sister; but no confidences passed between them. He thought that Molly looked very far from strong, but he took her word for it when she said that she was well. She would not talk about herself at all, and questioned him eagerly respecting Torresmuir and his own doings. And Bertie was in an unusually bright mood: he had had a pleasant holiday, and was much gratified by a proof of trust which his father had given him. The clergyman at whose house he had been quartered had fallen ill, and was unable to receive him. Bertie had therefore gone into lodgings, and went, as he informed Molly, "to a crammer's" every day, "as other fellows did." It was quite plain that he considered it a delightful novelty to be allowed this form of independence, and possibly his father had seen that it would do him good.

Molly listened to his story, smiled at his harmless

vanity, and promised, almost with her old gaiety, to take tea with him some afternoon at his lodgings. She made a careful note of the address; but as the weeks wore on, Bertie found that she made no exertion to come and see him: she looked white and more worn than ever, and once even burst into tears as he kissed her, and begged him not to visit her again. John did not like it.

"He is a perfect brute," said Bertie, recounting this incident to Captain Rutherford one evening—without any thought of breach of confidence, for by this time he was in the habit of pouring out all his thoughts quite freely to his friend. "I wish we had never seen him."

Rutherford did not speak, but he mentally re-echoed the wish.

"It's impossible for her to be very happy with him," Bertie went on, vehemently. "Why, he is away from her more than half of his time. I don't think London suits her, either. I wish we could get her back to Torresmuir, and pension him off, somehow."

Charlie smiled at this boyish simplicity. "She might not approve," he said, briefly.

"I should think that she would be very glad. How the wind blows to-night! Is it raining, or freezing, or anything?"

"Raining, I think. It is warmer than usual for the end of November."

He started a little as he spoke, for at that moment a loud knock was heard at the front door.

"Christmas will be here directly," said Bertie, with the air of one who makes a wise remark. "Now, if I can get my father to ask Molly to spend Christmas with us——"

"What's that?" said Rutherford, suddenly. There was a startled look in his eyes. Bertie listened. Voices were heard in the passage, and steps, and opening doors. Something unexpected had evidently happened in the house.

Bertie's landlady now presented herself, with a puzzled face.

"There's a lady wanting to see you, sir," she said, doubtfully, and, before she could explain, a wild looking, wet, bedraggled figure had stumbled rather than walked into the room. Both young men sprang to their feet with an exclamation of dismay. For it was Molly who

stood before them, and who, after a moment's pause, threw herself into Bertie's arms and burst out sobbing upon his shoulder.

"I've come to you: I had nowhere else to go," she panted. "He's turned me out—turned me out into the street!"

"Molly! not your husband?"

"Yes, my husband," she said, with passionate emphasis, lifting her head and showing her flushed wet face; "the husband for whom I deceived my father and left my home! Oh, they can't say that I have not been punished now!"

She had no hat or bonnet on her head, and her hair was darkened and straightened by the rain-drops that had fallen upon it. A great cloak had been wrapped around her; but, dropping loosely from her shoulders, it showed that she was in evening dress—a soft primrose-colored silk which left her white neck and arms bare save for some softly clustering laces and pearl ornaments.

"But you have not come like this! You have not walked!" cried Bertie.

"Yes; I had no money."

"But I could have paid a cabman at the door! To think of you walking through the streets at this time of night like this——"

"Oh, it's nothing: I did not mind that," said Molly, wearily. She disengaged her arms from her brother's neck and sank into the nearest chair. Then, for the first time, she became aware of Captain Rutherford's presence. But nothing seemed to startle her. She looked up at him with a passionately pleading expression which struck him dumb. "I can't help it!" she broke out. "You need not condemn me a second time! It is *not* my fault."

"Molly, Molly, hush! Why should Charlie Rutherford condemn you?" said Bertie, in his bewilderment. "He is only sorry for you—as I am—as we all——"

"Are you sorry for me?" said the girl. "Oh, that is perhaps the worst of it! That you should all have to be sorry for me—and I was once so proud and so light-hearted and so sure of my own good fortune. And what am I to do now?"

"Is there nothing that we can do for you?" said Rutherford, in a choked voice. "If you could only make

me useful— you could send me anywhere or tell me to do anything for you——”

“There’s that fellow to be punished!” Bertie burst out in a fury. “I’ll go myself—I’ll telegraph to father—he deserves a thorough horse-whipping.”

Charlie Rutherford wished that the boy had held his tongue. He agreed with the sentiment, but thought it would have been better to leave it unexpressed until punishment had been inflicted. He was afraid of the effect on Molly’s mind. John Hannington would have had a very poor chance indeed if he had been just then at the mercy of these two indignant, hot-headed, hot-blooded young men. And the knowledge of this was suddenly revealed to Molly, in her newly-purchased wisdom of womanhood: the knowledge of the harm and the scandal and the disgrace which were impending, and which she, and she only, could avert.

She looked from one to the other, and then, moved by a sudden impulse, she gave her hand first to her brother for a moment, and then to Rutherford.

“You are both kind—both my friends,” she said; “and I shall trust you both. But there is nothing for you to do. Neither of you must lay a finger on my husband. If you do, I will never speak to you again.”

Charlie flushed up: Bertie gave a quick, sharp exclamation of disgust.

“That’s a woman’s view: a girl’s view,” he said. “We cannot—I cannot promise to sit down and do nothing.”

“You are only a boy,” said Molly, with a little gasp which was perhaps meant for a sort of laugh; and you cannot do anything yourself. And it is not Captain Rutherford’s business. I shall leave everything to my father. I shall tell him all. He will know what must be done.”

“Shall I telegraph to him for you?” said Charlie, quickly.

“Thank you. Yes—directly. Wait a moment. You must not think things worse than they are. I provoked him—and he had taken too much wine.” She began to tremble as she spoke. “I reproached him with—with one or two things that he had told me, and he grew very angry; and then I told him of one wicked, foolish, mischievous thing that I had done—I took some letters of

his once, and sent them away to a person who—oh, I can't tell it you all, but I acted very badly, and in my own anger I told him of it for the first time. You see he had some right to be angry. He did not know what he was doing—I am sure he did not, for he had never struck me before——”

“*Struck* you? Molly, Molly!”

As if involuntarily, she glanced at her arm, from which the cloak had slipped down. There was a bruise upon the slender wrist. She drew her draperies over it, and held them there while she went on.

“He did not know, he was never unkind in that way before. But he was mad with anger and with what he had drunk, and he took me by the shoulders and put me out at the door, and said that I should never darken his house again. I snatched up this cloak as I went through the outer hall. I believe he meant to take me in again, for when I had gone down the road a little way, I heard him open the door again and call me. But I was frightened—so frightened that I ran on and on; and I asked my way of a policeman, and at last I got here.”

Charlie Rutherford's face was white with rage.

“Look,” he said to Bertie, abruptly. “I am going. Your sister should not sit in her wet things. Get your landlady to attend to her. I'll telegraph to your father in your name.”

“Wait, please,” said Molly. It was strange to hear the decision that had come into her fresh young voice. “Come here for one minute, Captain Rutherford. You say you will be my friend?”

“Always.”

“Then please go to the telegraph office, and send a message from *me*, not from Bertie. ‘I have no home now; may I come to you to-morrow?’ That is all that I want to say in a telegram. I do not think that my father will refuse to take me in.”

“No. No, indeed.”

“And then, Captain Rutherford, you will go straight home, will you not? And you will see me off with Bertie to-morrow morning? I shall start at ten o'clock, whether I hear from my father or not. And you will do nothing else?”

He was obliged to promise that he would do nothing

else. He saw that she was afraid lest he might try to precipitate matters—see John Hannington, perhaps, and be unable to control his indignation. And her look of relief and gratitude was the more pronounced because she had suffered a moment's fear when she saw his stern, set face.

It was not very late, and he was able to telegraph at once. He knew that the message would not reach Torremuir until the morning, as the house was some distance from the telegraph office: nevertheless, he felt a sense of having accomplished something when it was despatched. And then he wondered restlessly whether Bertie was looking well after his sister—whether the landlady would give her dry clothes and warm drinks and a comfortable room—and he wished with all his heart that his mother had been in London then, so that he might send her to Molly's aid. For Lady Rutherford was a kind-hearted woman, and would have come at a moment's notice to the daughter of her old friend Alan Moncrieff.

There was Lady Val! would not she be of use! She was always kind-hearted—but Mrs. Hannington did not like her, and, as Charlie knew, the two had now not met for some months. It certainly might be a good thing to let Lady Valencia know the truth of the story. She could be trusted absolutely to speak or to hold her tongue in the right place. But how could he find her at ten or eleven o'clock at night? She would probably be out. At any rate, he might try. And so, after some hesitation, Charlie jumped into a hansom, and gave the man Lady Valencia's address.

Wonder of wonders, she was not out. She had had one or two visitors, but they were departing when Charlie's card was brought to her. Under his name he had written in pencil a brief request that he might see her alone for two minutes "on important business." Lady Val laughed a little over the card, and called him a dear impulsive boy, in her own heart. And then she went down to the little library into which she was told that he had been shown. She found him pacing up and down the room like a wild beast in a cage, and a glance at his face told her that there was something seriously wrong indeed.

She had not long to wait. He poured his story into her ear without a moment's delay. And he could not accus-

her of want of sympathy. He had never seen her face change as it changed when she heard what John Hannington had done. The color went out of it completely: she sat looking at him helplessly, with ashen lips, like some ghost of her brilliant self.

"And you have telegraphed to the Moncrieffs?" she said, slowly.

"I have. She says that she will start in the morning."

"Is she strong enough to do that?"

"I don't see what else she can do. She cannot stay with Bertie. She cannot go back to her husband."

"No, indeed!" And the color rushed back to Valencia's face in a full, warm tide. "She had better stay at Torresmuir, poor child. Well, Charlie? Why did you come to me?"

"I thought you might help her, Lady Valencia," said the young man, meekly. "I suppose she has no gowns or things. I don't know. It seemed better that some other woman should know all about it."

"You are a sensible boy, Charlie." Lady Val's voice had grown natural again, but her eyes were unusually bright. "I shall go round to her at eight o'clock tomorrow morning and see what I can do. It is no use going to-night."

"I did right in coming to you, then? It was the only thing I could think of."

"Perfectly right. I am always ready to help the Hanningtons when I can."

"Mrs. Hannington," said Charlie, significantly.

Lady Val looked at him keenly. "And Mr. Hannington too. Don't you see that the poor, miserable man wants help even more than Molly does? There, you don't understand. Never mind, Charlie, I will do my best for her. Good-night."

The dismissal was a trifle abrupt, but Charlie did not care. He had got all he wanted, and he was ready to go. He knew that Lady Val was a woman of her word, and that she would be as a tower of strength to the grieving, heart-broken, childish Molly.

What he did *not* know—what he never imagined—was the silent anguish in which Valencia Gilderoy spent the hours of the night. There could be no greater pain for her than to witness the gradual declension of the man who

had been first her playmate, then her friend, and then her lover. She could bear to be parted from him: she could bear to think that he loved another: she felt as if she could not bear to know that he was so unworthy of any good woman's love.

But no traces of her vigil were visible on the bright face that presented itself next morning in Molly's bed-chamber.

"My dear," she said, putting her arms round Molly's neck at once, "I know you don't much like me; but you must put up with me and let me help you if I can. Charlie Rutherford came to me last night."

Molly resisted for a moment, but womanly affection was very sweet to her, and there was something in Lady Val's face and manner which compelled confidence. She let herself be kissed, and then burst into tears on her visitor's shoulder.

"Don't cry, child," said Lady Val at last. "You had much better go home and take care of yourself. Or—will you come to me for a few days?"

"No, no. You are very good—but I want so much to go home!"

"Very well. Then I will go with you."

"You?" said Molly, lifting a quivering face and startled eyes to her interlocutor. "You? Why?"

"Because I don't think you are old enough or wise enough to travel alone, my dear; and I don't call even Bertie a sufficient protector. Nobody can say a word against you if I am with you, Molly."

The eyes of the two women met. There was a little silence, and then Molly held out her hand. "I was unjust to you in my thoughts: forgive me," she said.

"What did you think of me then?"

"Oh, I can't tell you—I can't."

"I can guess, my dear. You thought that I wanted to take your husband's heart from you. Is that not so? You were mistaken, Molly: I have prayed every night and morning for the last year that he might always love you as you loved him. I had no stronger wish than that you two might be happy. Won't you trust me, Molly?"

And Molly, looking into Lady Valencia's honest eyes, said fervently.

"Indeed I will."

CHAPTER XXXV.

LADY VAL TO THE RESCUE!

THE telegram which reached Bertie's lodgings just before the travellers left the house was from Stella Moncrieff. "Come at once," it said. "Your father is away, but I am sure that he will welcome you."

"Oh, I wish that he had been at home," sighed Molly. "I wish that there had been a message from himself."

She was very white and nervous, and had to be reassured by Bertie and Lady Valencia as to her father's kind intentions towards her before she could proceed. Lady Val had sent for a medical man in order to convince herself that Molly was able to take so long a journey; but when she described the mode in which the journey would be made, the doctor smiled and said that it could not possibly hurt her in the least. Lady Val was accustomed to travel in a luxurious way, and she did not mean that Molly should suffer from over-fatigue or over-exertion. And unlimited means can make a good deal of difference to the effect of a journey upon a delicate woman.

So Molly travelled North in state, like a young princess, but she took small note of her surroundings, and lay back on her cushions with face averted, doing little but weep silently all the day. Lady Val insisted on staying the night in Edinburgh and telegraphing again to Stella as to the hour of their arrival on the following afternoon, and it was perhaps well that she did so. For Molly was very tired at the end of the day, and Lady Valencia felt that she had taken rather a heavy responsibility upon her shoulders.

It was not until four or five o'clock on the following day, therefore, that the little party made its appearance at the doors of Torresmuir. A sad little party, indeed! For Molly, the once merry, high-spirited girl, had come back a crushed and broken-hearted woman; and Bertie was bowed down by sympathy for her troubles, and Lady Val

had sorrows of her own. And Stella, who received them, also had her share of grief, and looked as if she had spent many hours of weariness and anxiety during the year that had elapsed since Molly's marriage.

No question was asked or answered at first. Molly fell into Stella's arms as naturally as if she had been a child coming home to her mother, and Stella folded her close to her breast, as if she could not bear to let her go. There was some sweetness to be got out of this sad home-coming, after all. And then Molly had to be put to bed, and comforted and tended, and it was touching to see how gentle she had grown, how grateful for words and deeds of love. Stella was almost frightened by the change in her. She could hardly believe that Molly was once more before her—once more in her arms. And, indeed, this softened, spiritualised, sorrowing woman, whose soul seemed to look out from the wistful eyes as from a prison whence it would fain escape, was not the buoyant, unchastened Molly of ancient days.

"You will forgive me, will you not?" Molly whispered, with her arms round Stella's neck, before she had been in the house five minutes. "Will you forgive me—everything?"

"My darling, yes."

"Even—about those letters?"

"I had forgotten them. They did no harm."

"But I meant them to do harm. Oh, say that you forgive me!"

"I do, dear Molly, from the very bottom of my heart."

And then Molly drew a long breath and lay back content. But she was too weary to say much; and she soon fell into a sleep of utter exhaustion, and could be left in the care of a maid, while Stella provided for Lady Valencia's comforts, and held a private conference with Bertie.

She was not on very familiar terms with Lady Val, and had been startled to hear of her visit. She was grateful for Lady Val's care of Molly, but she felt that she did not understand it, and supposed that it would have to go unexplained, in common with many other things. But Lady Val was not minded to have it so. Later in the evening, she begged her hostess to sit with her for a little while over her bedroom fire, so that she might talk with

her before going to rest. Stella came willingly; yet she was conscious of a certain fear of what Lady Val was going to say. For Lady Val was not apt to mince matters, and there was no knowing what view she would take of John Hannington's delinquencies.

So Stella, with her pretty golden hair all down her back, rested by the fire, and waited rather nervously for her visitor's communications. Lady Val sat on a stool, almost at Stella's feet—for Mrs. Moncrieff had been installed in a great chintz-covered chair, which Lady Val called the seat of honor—and for some time did not speak at all.

"I am going to make a general confession to you, Mrs. Moncrieff," she said at last. "Or—may I not call you Stella, as Bertie does? I should like to, if you will let me; and I hope you will reciprocate, and call me Val."

"I shall be very glad."

"It is about Molly and Jack Hannington that I want to talk. You know that he is one of my oldest acquaintances, perhaps."

"I have heard so."

"Yes, we knew each other very well, Jack and I," said Lady Val, leaning her chin on her clasped hands and gazing thoughtfully into the fire. "We were playmates, companions, friends—lovers, afterwards; and enemies now, I am afraid. No, not enemies; I can never be Jack's enemy, although he is mine and Molly's and yours, and his own to boot."

Stella had started slightly at the word "lovers," but she did not speak.

"Jack Hannington," Lady Val went on, "has a heart, though you may not think it. I am going to tell you something, Stella, that I have never told to mortal ears before; because I want you to understand his position a little better. He has a heart, and he has—or *had*—some sort of a conscience; but both, I acknowledge, are in a bad way. He was brought up to be a rich man and he was made a poor one by the fraud and trickery of a near relative—it is that which ruined him. He got into debt; he was in constant difficulties, and the one thing that everybody pressed upon him was the necessity that he was under to make a wealthy marriage."

"It does not seem to me," said Stella, as Lady Valencia

paused, "that you have chosen a very opportune moment for his defence."

Lady Val's eyes suddenly flashed. "Why not?" she said. "This is just the very time, in my opinion. He has thoroughly disgraced himself; nobody will ever forget, who hears the story, that he turned his wife out of doors on a stormy night in November; even the world, which is so ready to pardon, will not pardon that. Is it not the very time, then, for a *true* friend to say what she can in his defence?"

"You are right," said Stella, with a sigh, "and I was ungenerous. But when I think of what Molly suffers——"

"We have all suffered," said Lady Val, who always laughed when other people would have cried, "all suffered at Jack's hands, have we not? My dear, don't look so shocked; I don't mean to be flippant; but"—taking Stella's hand caressingly—"is it not true? You were engaged to him for a little while, I believe? And he broke it off——"

"Did he tell you?"

"I gathered it chiefly for myself, by putting two and two together. He proposed to you because he thought you were rich, and then when he found you were not he broke off the engagement. Was it not so? Well, you were lucky. With poor Molly he thought that he had found a prize. And she is not so rich as he fancied, and he is disappointed."

"I was not his wife; he had a right to break off his engagement with me if he chose. I am very thankful now that it happened so," said Stella, the color rising in her cheeks. "But that is no excuse for his treatment of Molly."

"Of course it isn't. I am not making excuse for it. I only want you to understand him a little better. Let me tell you what happened to myself, Stella. When we were boy and girl we loved each other: yes, he loved me, little as you may think that he knew how to love; and we hoped at one time that we should be able to marry. But the everlasting money question rose up. He had a pitance, and so had I; but even the two together were not thought enough to justify us in marrying. So our parents kept us apart until we had grown more sensible. When we were a little older, we made love as a sort of joke

whenever we saw each other ; but we had not the least serious thought of marrying. I used always to advise him to marry for money : I used to point out rich heiresses to him, and plan good matches for him till I was tired. I advised him to follow up his acquaintance with you, I remember. That does not vex you *now*, does it ?”

“ Not in the least.”

“ I have often thought,” said Lady Val, breaking off her reminiscences, and looking reflectively into the fire again, “ that all our miseries came from our worldliness. If, a few years ago, he and I had had the pluck to say, ‘ we’ll go out into the world together and work for a living : we will be economical and laborious, and love one another,’ how much we should all have been saved ! Molly would be still a child at Torresmuir : you, Stella dear, would not have had the pain which I know you suffered once ; and I—I—I might have been a happy wife and mother, and my poor Jack a good man after all ! You remember Browning’s lines—

‘ This could have happened but once,
And we missed it, lost it for ever.’

By our own fault, too. We were worldly, cowardly, and base ; and we reap exactly what we have sown.”

Her dark eyes were softened beneath a mist of tears. Stella put her hand caressingly round her neck, and for a few moments they were silent. Then Valencia brushed away her tears and smiled.

“ I don’t often lapse into the moralising vein, I fancy ; and no doubt you have had enough of it. Let me come back to the relation of my experiences. I heard that Jack was making love by stealth to Molly, and I told you of it, thinking to put you on your guard. Jack was too clever for you, Stella. He got Molly away and married her. And I, like the great fool I was, thought that as I had warned you, the matter was settled, and so deferred to tell Jack of the prospect of wealth that was just then before me. If I had told him in time, I don’t think that it is derogatory to Molly to say that he would have broken with her at once as he did with you. But, unfortunately, I did not see him early enough. I met him one day in Glasgow, and persuaded him to have tea with me while I told him my news. I was rich—I could give

him everything he wanted, and I loved him: would he marry me? That was, in effect, what I said to him, Stella, and you can guess what answer I got for my pains."

"It was too late?"

"He had married Molly that morning."

"And then?"

"Then! What was there to do but to say good-bye?"

"Was he so faithful to Molly?"

"Oh, Stella, you are a witch!—I suppose if I had been weak, he would have been weak too—and cursed me for it afterwards. Men are like that, you know. They always say, 'The woman tempted me,' as soon as the apple turns to ashes in their mouths. That is all I can tell you. We did say good-bye, and—we are here."

"You must have been very brave, dear," said Stella, softly.

"Brave? Not I. But I was angry, which did as well. The upshot of all this is, Stella, that Molly has got wind of my love for Jack, and that it has helped to cause her unhappiness. I am sure of that; although we have *said* nothing. You know how things are understood without saying, amongst women. But she is needlessly unhappy about it; and I want her to know that since that day I have never spoken to her husband—never seen him, save at a distance. Don't you think it would be well if she knew this?"

"It might be. But it is a difficult matter to speak of—unless she were to mention it."

"I don't suppose she will ever do that," said Lady Valencia, with a sigh. A few minutes' silence followed, and then, rousing herself, she added more briskly, "I'm an old friend of the family, Stella, and therefore I dare ask questions which nobody else can put. What makes Alan Moncrieff so unforgiving to his pretty daughter? Why have not she and Jack made their footing good here? It is a little mysterious to me."

Stella blushed vividly. "I cannot tell you," she said.

"There was something beside the mere running away, then? I thought there must be. That was hardly enough to account for the long estrangement. But I suppose I am not to ask?"

"I think not—please."

"As I have so much interest in all of you, I almost

think that I ought to know," said Lady Val, carelessly. "However, it is, of course, for you to decide. I know a case in point; a girl who eloped and took her mother's jewels with her, and——what's the matter?"

Stella had been unable to conceal a little shiver, a slight twitch of the fingers, which told the keen-witted Lady Val half if not all the story.

"You were not born for a conspirator," she said, shrewdly. "I have guessed it, have I? Somehow, I did not think that either of them would do that. You had better tell me all the story, Stella."

"I cannot believe it either," said Stella, "neither does Bertie. But Alan forbade us to question Molly, and we have no means of getting at the truth. I will tell you the whole, as you have guessed so much."

Lady Valencia listened attentively while the story was told.

"I know very little of Mr. Kingscott," she said at its close, "but it sounds to me as if he knew more than he chose to say. Do you trust him?"

"I cannot."

"Mr. Moncrieff does?"

"Perfectly."

"It will be rather hard to disentangle the truth. May I try my hand at it, Stella?"

"I cannot give you permission: you must ask my husband."

"Very well. When will your husband be back?"

"The day after to-morrow. But I am afraid that he will not allow you to speak to him about it—he feels it so deeply——"

"Then I won't speak to him about it. I'll act without. I'll take all the responsibility on my own shoulders, so do not you be alarmed. I am perhaps wiser than you think. At any rate, we can face the position better now that we have had this talk, can we not, Stella? And I will keep you up no longer, for you look terribly pale and fagged. Good-night, you sweet star—does Alan never call you the star of his existence?"

But the question brought a flush of color and a tear that decided Lady Val not to ask another.

Stella did not know where letters would find her husband, as he was travelling from place to place; and those

which she wrote during the next few days certainly did not reach him before his return to Torresmuir. When at last, in the first week of December, a telegram came announcing the date of his arrival, he was still uninformed respecting Molly's presence in the house. For this reason alone, Stella would have been anxious for his return; and before long she had another cause for anxiety. The journey, which Molly seemed at first to have borne so well, had overtaxed her energies and brought on illness of an alarming kind. For some hours her life trembled in the balance, and even when the worst seemed to be over, and a beautiful little baby-girl lay in the young mother's arms, a terrible fit of hysterical weeping again hazarded her safety and made her attendants nervously watchful against excitement of any kind. It was no wonder, therefore that, although Stella felt a sense of relief at the thought for Alan's arrival, that relief was not unmingled with something which bore a strong resemblance to fear.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"MY STAR!"

KINGSCOTT was for once as ignorant of Alan's whereabouts as Stella; and his ignorance was excessively annoying to him. It would have been his greatest possible delight to steal a march on Stella and to represent her to her husband as defying his commands and utterly neglecting his wishes: he could, he fancied, have drawn a very striking picture of "Stella in revolt," as he phrased it to himself, Stella opening the doors of Torresmuir to the disobedient runaway daughter whom Alan had never intended to invite to his home again. This was all, no doubt, a fancy picture: but it would have been extremely gratifying to heighten its hues and intensify its distinctness in Alan's eyes. The provoking part of it was that Alan had not chosen to leave him his address. It was almost the first time that this had happened; and Kingscott was obliged to see in it what he had for a long time suspected, that Alan did not trust him as much as in former days, and was rapidly learning to dispense with his services.

Under these circumstances he began to wonder whether it would not be best for him to take his leave of Torresmuir at a somewhat early date. He had reason to be well satisfied with his gains: he had secured for himself a large sum of money which he had carefully invested in foreign securities: he would be able to decamp at a moment's notice, if necessary, without sacrificing a farthing. The game was almost played out now. If Molly and her husband were to be installed at Torresmuir, he knew that he must take to flight. For of all the people whom he had traduced or injured in his life, he had most reason to dread Alan Moncrieff and John Hannington, especially in conjunction.

What he could do at present, however, was to make Stella exceedingly uncomfortable by a pretence of knowing Alan's address and withholding it. She could not tell that this was untrue; and it threw her into a fever to recollect from time to time that he might all this while be corresponding with her husband, giving him the details of her life, traducing her motives, vilifying her deeds. She believed him—rightly enough—to be capable of all this. And she could not be content in the thought of its possibility; for although she told herself repeatedly that she did not now love her husband she was strangely sensitive to his opinion of her. She still shrank from the idea that her actions were misrepresented in his eyes, and at the same time she told herself that it was useless to care what he thought of her. Such contradictions of feeling will sometimes exist in the most logical persons alive; and Stella did not try to reconcile the two; she let them flourish side by side, and the one might choke the other if it could.

The antagonism between herself and Ralph Kingscott was now carried into the veriest trifles, and it was not to be wondered at that it manifested itself at the time of Alan's return. Who was to meet the master of the house? What carriage should be sent? Stella said that she would go herself; but Mr. Kingscott calmly assured her that this was impracticable, as the bay horses had fallen lame, the landau was out of repair, and finally that Alan had told him to come himself in the dog-cart. Stella, flushing with annoyance, ceded the field. Ralph must meet him then; and Alan must hear the first account of her doings from Ralph's malicious tongue. There was no help for it, and she could not even protest.

Moreover, she had to keep her face calm and cheerful, for Molly, still terribly weak and excitable, must not know that anything was amiss. So, in spite of a very heavy heart, Stella was her sweet, serene self in the sick room; and if, when Molly was sleeping, a few tears fell on the little red face of the baby that Stella loved to hold, nobody was the wiser, and the tears were hastily wiped away without leaving any trace behind.

Mr. Kingscott had driven off in the dog-cart about three o'clock, but he had some business in the town, and was not to meet Alan until a little after five o'clock. They would hardly reach Torresmuir before six.

Lady Valencia, who was still in the house, noticed Stella's pale cheeks, and persuaded her to go out for a stroll about two o'clock. "I'll sit with Molly," she said, "and take care of Miss Babs. What will Mr. Moncrieff say to that white face? Go and get a little fresh air, dear, and you will be all the better able to give your husband a welcome."

Possibly she was right, thought Stella, as she went to look for her hat: it would be well to steady her nerves and raise her spirits a little before she encountered Alan. There would probably be a battle to fight with him: he would no doubt be angry with her for telegraphing to Molly to come home, and he might not credit her with not having known where he was staying. Besides, if Ralph knew, he might have been leading Alan to believe that she had acted out of mere wilfulness—oh, there was no end to the complicated possibilities of vexation that lay before her! She tried to string her courage up to a high point, but her heart would beat faster at every thought of her husband, and her hands would turn cold when she pictured his look of stern disapproval! Her efforts were useless, and she decided that it was better not to think of him at all than to distress herself by these anticipations; and so she tried to turn her attention to the wintry scenes amongst which she walked, and to notice only the contrasts of sunlight and shadow on the snow-clad hills, or the glitter of hoar frost on the trees and shrubs on either hand.

She had taken the road that led towards Dunkeld, and did not intend to go very far. The day was cold but bright, and walking was very pleasant. She went for some little distance, gathering a winter bouquet on her way—a

few red berries, a yellow leaf or two, a mossy twig, and by and by she began to rearrange her little nosegay, looking down at it instead of straight before her. So it happened that she did not in the least see that any one was approaching, and when, at the sound of a halting footstep she raised her eyes, she started violently to find that they met those of her husband, who was standing in the road before her.

"Stella!" There was the most extraordinary pleasure in his face and voice. "Did you come to meet me?"

"No," said Stella, hastily. "Oh, no, I did not think that you could come until six o'clock." She shrank and colored as she spoke, and saw the light suddenly die out of his face and eyes. "Mr. Kingscott has gone to meet you."

"Indeed? I did not see him. You were on your way somewhere, perhaps: do not let me detain you"—with freezing politeness.

"I only came out for a stroll. I am going home now. I will walk back with you."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself. Don't turn back if you want a walk."

"I want to walk back with you," she said—an insistence which struck him as unusual—"if you will let me."

"I shall be most happy to have your company," he answered, in the formal voice that she had learnt to know so well. And then he glanced curiously at her flushed face, as if he wondered at her discomposure; and they walked on together.

"I suppose you know," she said, after a little pause, "that I had not your address?"

"I suppose not. I did not think that you would want it."

"I have written several times to places where I thought you might be found, but you have not got my letters."

"No. You—you—*wanted* me, Stella?"

"There was some news for you to hear."

"Oh, that was all." His voice grew indifferent at once.

"It is a great deal. It is very important. Mr. Kingscott did not tell it you, then?"

"I have not seen him since I came back."

"I thought that he might have written."

"He did not know where I was. Do you think that I should tell him my address when I had not told you?"

Stella was conscious of something unusual—something indefinably warm and caressing—which crept now and then into his tone; but it was so quickly succeeded by coldness, that she had scarcely time to realise it before it was gone.

"I wanted to be alone for a time—not to be troubled with business letters," he went on. "There was nothing for which I was likely to be needed at home. I have been walking—and thinking: that is all."

"I have a great deal to tell you," said Stella, tremulously. "Molly is here."

"Molly?" She had somewhat expected the quick, stern look of inquiry, the bending of the haughty brows. "And her husband?"

"Her husband turned her out into the street one cold, stormy night. She went to Bertie's lodgings. They telegraphed here to know if she might come."

"Hannington turned her out? Turned Molly out?—his wife?" He stopped short in the road, as if he could not go on, his lips working with emotion: suddenly he broke out with a violent ejaculation. "The scoundrel! the brute! And I not here to horsewhip him! Well, what next? What did she do? She came here—of course. Well?"

"Oh, Alan, I was afraid that you would not like her coming!" was Stella's involuntary cry.

"Not like it? My own daughter? Do you think that I am such an inhuman father, then? You *could* have no doubt about it, Stella! You telegraphed to her to come, did you not?"

"Yes, at once."

"Of course you did. I had no need to ask the question. And he—what did he do? Has he been here too? What a fool I was to leave no address! But I thought—well, never mind: tell me everything."

"We have not heard from Mr. Hannington. Lady Valencia had a letter from a friend of hers, who told her that he had not been seen for some days—that people thought he had gone abroad. Lady Valencia and Bertie came with Molly. She has been very ill, Alan: I thought that we should have lost her."

And then her eyes filled with tears and her face paled a little. The fear of her husband, so suddenly removed,

the remembrance of past anxiety, unnerved her. She could not speak or walk for a minute or two: she stood still in the middle of the lonely road, and was surprised to find Alan's strong arm round her, his voice begging her to lean on him, to be comforted, to remember that he was near. His words were so incoherent that she thought she could not have heard them aright, and when she was able to glance up into his face he suddenly became silent and looked confused and ashamed.

"Molly is better now," she said, "and the baby, Alan, is such a dear little girl."

She felt herself drawn a little closer to him. She did not quite understand his emotion, and she went on softly:—

"I think Molly will be happier when she has seen you. We have all wanted you——"

"All wanted me? Even you?"

She did not answer. He felt her quiver all over within his arm. Some new sensation caused him suddenly to relinquish his hold. He turned away from her and stood with his face averted for several seconds. She thought that she had vexed him by her silence, and ached with the effort to speak—to explain, to justify herself, and yet she could not do it. Something withheld her tongue from speech.

"Tell me all about it," he said at last, in his usual calm, cold way. "Are you well enough to walk on? Tell me about this scoundrel of a fellow. Has nobody done anything?"

Stella found her voice in order to reply. She told him the whole story, as far as she knew it, in detail; and Alan's wrath broke out afresh when he heard it.

"My poor child!" he said, striding along so fast in his indignation that Stella could scarcely keep up with him. "My poor little Molly! she has suffered indeed! She has expiated her wrong-doing, certainly. Well, we will keep her with us—her and her child; and try to make her happy, poor wounded heart? Shall we not, Stella?"

"I shall be only too glad to keep her."

"I ought to have been at home. I ought never to have done such a wild thing as to go off in that way, as if I did not care what befel any of you. I shall never forgive myself. But I certainly had an idea that I left an address

with Macalister. I suppose I forgot it. I meant to have important letters forwarded. I was a fool—a fool. A selfish fool, too, for I went for my own satisfaction only. If I tell you *why* I went, Stella, I wonder whether you will think it possible ever to forgive me for my neglect of you.”

“Tell me,” she said, softly.

“My dear,” he said, stopping short and looking fixedly at her, “I had been finding out that I could not bear the state of things between us—the life we lead—any longer. And I went away that I might, in the course of a few lonely days, settle one or two matters with my conscience. I wanted to decide whether you were right or wrong in the accusation you brought against me. I thought—even on that night when we talked together in the library—that you were wrong. Do you remember? But the more I think of it, the more I am certain that you were right.”

She wished that she could stop him, but the strange dumbness which had beset her before made it impossible for her to utter a word. He went on.

“I acknowledge the truth of everything that you said to me. I have been harsh, tyrannical, suspicious, overbearing. My children did well to distrust my love: it was not great enough to give them what they needed. And you were right to reproach me—even to despise me; for I had been wilfully blind to the light that shone upon me—the light of the star that might have guided me. It does guide me in spite of all: it leads me back to yourself. I come back, Stella, to tell you in all humbleness and sincerity that I see my error, and that, as far as it is possible to me, I do repent of it. And if this does not content you, and you still find it a horrible and grievous thing to live in my house after the way in which I have behaved to you, why, then, my dear, there is still one way open to us: I can relieve you of my presence. I will go away, if you wish to be rid of me, and I swear I will not trouble you again. I said that I would never let you go; and I never will; but if you bid me I will go myself. You shall decide. And that is what I have been thinking of in these days of my absence, while you were bearing my burdens and helping my children, and I was selfishly loitering away my days on the hills and moors. I repent, Stella, but I know very well that repentance does not

undo a wrong. I ask you to decide our future: that is all. I dare not ask you to forgive me."

Then, as she was still silent, he added, in a low tone:

"Tell me, Stella, shall I go or stay?"

"Stay," she said, almost inaudibly.

"You say that out of kindness. No, that will not do. My life here is intolerable—if you do not want me."

"I do want you, Alan."

"But, my dear, you don't understand. I am such a blunderer. What I mean is that, in finding out that you were right, I found out also how much I loved you. Yes, with my whole heart and soul, Stella. I cannot bear to live in the same house with you, my darling, unless you can love me a little and forgive me a great deal."

She forgot that they were in the open roadway, where travellers might come and go at any moment. With a movement so quick that it took him by surprise, she threw her arms round his neck and looked into his face.

"Oh, Alan, Alan!" she said, "I have been as blind as you, and far, far more unjust than you. Did you believe me when I said that my love was dead? Darling, I have loved you all the time. Oh, it *is* good to have you here, to know that you are home again, and that you love me too!"

"My star! my blessed guiding star!" he murmured as, for the first time, their lips met in the loving kiss so long desired—so long delayed—so perfect when at last it was given and received. "I have strayed from you too long: God helping me I will never leave you again, never close my eyes again to your brightness, you sweet star of my life."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HIS ONLY FRIEND.

It was a new experience to Molly to have her father's arms about her, and to recognise with surprise and delight the love that shone from his eyes, the tenderness breathing in every accent of his voice. It was a revelation to her. She had never known, as she said naively to Stella afterwards, that her father "cared so much." She was too weak and

languid to talk a great deal ; but there was great comfort for her in the assurance of his forgiveness, and the kisses that he pressed on the face of her baby-girl as well as upon her own.

One anxiety alone possessed her. She found it difficult to speak of her husband without tears and agitation, and the subject of her marriage was therefore generally avoided. But she insisted on begging her father not to try to see Hannington—not to take any notice of the past, but to let her stay quietly at Torresmuir, and leave him to go his own way. Mr. Moncrieff was obliged to promise that he would do nothing—at any rate until she was stronger—and that he would tell her if John Hannington wrote or came to Torresmuir.

“He had better *not* come,” said Alan to his wife, with an ominous darkening of his brows. “He shall never enter my doors.”

But it is easy to say what shall or shall not happen ; not as easy always to control Fate.

To Lady Val's observant eye, the change in the relations between Stella and Alan Moncrieff was very plain. She saw at once, too, that her own presence was something of a superfluity. Molly was slowly recovering ; Bertie and Kingscott were outwardly civil companions to one another, although no longer friends ; Lady Val felt herself one too many, and thought it better to announce her immediate return to London. She started two days after Alan's arrival ; and reached town on the 17th of December, when Christmas preparations were in full swing, and the “Christmas rush” was just beginning.

Owing to her sudden departure from London, which had upset all her previous arrangements, she found herself alone in her pretty little house near the Park, without occupation or engagement. She had a good deal to think about, and was not sorry to find herself thus unencumbered. The matter of the jewelry and the papers which Molly was said to have abstracted weighed upon her mind. She knew that not a question had been asked of the poor young mother ; her father's forgiveness had been accorded freely and fully, and he had resolved to bury the whole matter in oblivion. But it was not altogether easy for Lady Valencia to do this. For she had loved John Hannington, and it was the bitterest sorrow of her life to think him base.

On the second day of her arrival in town she received a call from Captain Rutherford. She had written to tell him that she was returning, and was not at all surprised to see him when he appeared. She noticed that he looked harassed and anxious, and she hastened to give him, in her usual light and cheerful way, some reassuring news of Molly, of whom she felt sure that he wanted to hear.

"I am glad she is safe at home," he said at length, with a heavy sigh.

"So am I," said Lady Val, briskly. "But you look dreadfully worried, Charlie. Anything wrong?"

"It's—John Hannington," muttered Charlie.

He did not see the change that passed over Lady Valencia's face. She sat erect, and pressed her hands tightly together, but her voice did not alter as she said:

"Well, what of him? Is he not in Paris?"

"No, worse luck. He's at home as usual—and from what I hear he's drinking himself to death."

"Drinking! Are you sure?"

"His servant went to Donald Vereker a day or two ago and asked him to get his master to see a doctor. Donald, having heard of the way in which he had treated his wife, refused to go near him. He told me so, and took great credit to himself for being so virtuous. I don't see it in the same light—although I loathe John Hannington with all my heart. It was almost impossible for me to interfere. But I did what I could."

"What did you do, Charlie?"

"I hunted up the doctor that I knew they used to see sometimes. He would not go for a long time; he said it would be an intrusion. However, I persuaded him; and he went this afternoon, as if to pay a friendly call. He was admitted, and he saw John Hannington."

"Well?"

"He was in a very queer state," said Captain Rutherford, slowly. "He was half-stupefied. He must have been using some drug as well as drinking brandy. He did not seem to resent the doctor's visit, but he would not promise to follow the advice that was given. It seems doubtful whether he quite understood it."

"What was the advice?" said Lady Val, sharply.

"First and foremost, to give up brandy and opiates, of course. Then, to change his habits of life completely—

go into the country, live a great deal in the fresh air, travel and amuse himself. If not——”

“Well, if not?——”

“He will either have an attack of delirium tremens before long, or he will continue to stupefy himself until his brain softens and he lapses into imbecility.”

“Oh, that is dreadful!” said Lady Val, with a sudden shiver. “Can nothing be done? Can you do nothing, Charlie?”

“How can I?” said the young man, gloomily. “I am not his friend. For—for Mrs. Hannington’s sake I am sorry for his condition; but it—it is his own fault, Lady Valencia. It is no misfortune; it is a sin—a crime—to drink and to drug oneself until one’s self-control is lost. If he has a friend in the world, let his friend be told, and let his friend help him; but I can’t.”

“I am his friend,” said Lady Val, rising hastily from her chair. “I am the only friend he has left. I’ll go to him and tell him what he must do.”

“You, Lady Valencia! But that is impossible,” said the young man, rising also, and looking at her in alarm. “You could not——”

“Yes, I could, Charlie! And you are going to help me,” said his hostess, turning very pale, and clenching her hands against her side. Her eyes glowed like coals of fire beneath her black brows. “If you think that I am going to stand by and see him drift down to madness or death without holding out a helping hand to him you are mistaken. I am going to him this moment, under your escort, Charlie, and between us we will bring John Hannington to a better mind.”

“But Lady Valencia,” stammered Charlie, “you cannot go. Let me go; I will do my best——”

“You don’t know John Hannington as I do,” said Lady Val, resolutely; “and, as you said just now, you are not his friend. What are you afraid of? Mrs. Grundy? You ought to know by this time that she has no terrors for me; I can afford to despise her when I am doing only what is right. What does conventionality matter when a man’s life and reason are at stake? Let us throw all foolish, selfish notions to the wind, and do our best to make this poor wretch a better man and a better husband than he has ever been before.”

“You would never send him back to her?”

"Ay, but I would," said Lady Val, vehemently, "if it were to beg her to pardon him and promise to make amends. If there are symptoms of disease, as the doctor says, don't you see that they make all the difference in the way in which she can look at what he has done? I should feel so, at least. But it is no use talking it over, Charlie: will you go with me, or will you not?"

"Really, Lady Val——"

"Because, if you won't, I shall go alone."

Charlie yielded the point. He had unlimited faith in Lady Valencia, and he thought that she was behaving with heroic courage, but he was not well convinced of her wisdom on this occasion. And, indeed, her action had a Quixotic look, and contained within it certain elements of danger; but then Charlie Rutherford did not understand the whole of the story, and Lady Val was not a person easy to restrain when she wanted her own way.

It was only about four in the afternoon when the two visitors arrived at the house which Mr. and Mrs. Hannington had occupied for the last few months. Mr. Hannington, they were told, was up and dressed: he was in the little drawing-room, which opened out of a large apartment. In this larger room Lady Val begged Charlie to stay, while she, with apparently undaunted courage, knocked at the inner door, opened it, and walked in, shutting it behind her. She would never have acknowledged how fast her heart beat, or how she felt for a moment or two as if she were walking straight into a lion's den.

The lamps were not lighted, but the red glow of the fire fell full upon the figure in the arm-chair which had been dragged forward on the hearthrug. John Hannington lay rather than sat in its capacious embrace: he was wrapped in a great fur overcoat as if he felt the cold, and he seemed to be half asleep. Lady Val's quick eye noted immediately that on a little table beside him stood a tray containing a half-emptied bottle of brandy, a glass, and one or two smaller bottles. For a minute or two she stood looking at him, while he slumbered, or seemed to slumber, unconscious of her presence. A harder expression came into her face as she gazed.

"Mr. Hannington," she said at length, in a peculiarly clear and penetrating voice; "I have come for a little talk with you, if you can give me a few minutes."

He stirred uneasily and opened his eyes. "Val!" he said, hoarsely, at last. He looked up at her for some seconds, with a dazed expression in his face. Then he suddenly uttered a groan, and dropped his head upon his breast. The look, the action, made Lady Valencia turn very pale.

"Are you ill, Jack?" she asked, laying her hand on his arm.

"I have been ill; yes, I am ill now."

"Shall I go away?"

There was a little silence. "Why have you come?" he muttered.

"To see whether I could help you. You are ill and in trouble, and I am your friend, Jack, and want to help you if I can."

The words seemed to rouse him. He raised himself into a sitting posture, rested his elbows on his knees, and began passing his hands up and down his forehead as if trying to banish some strange haziness of thought. Lady Val took away her hand, and watched him keenly. What would he do next?

She was hardly prepared for the next action. He lifted his face again, looked towards the little table and stretched out his hand for the brandy. Quick as thought her fingers alighted on the bottle first. "No, Jack," she said, keeping a firm hold upon it, "not that. You are killing yourself."

"And why should I not?" he asked, fiercely. The light had come back into his sullen eyes.

"Are you so ready to die?" she said. And then she removed the little table to some distance and stood between it and his chair. There was again a short silence, during which it was evident that Hannington was endeavoring to recollect himself and to recover his scattered senses. It was only Lady Val's presence that could have caused him to make so great an effort over his inclinations. He roused himself more and more, and finally he uttered a short, vague laugh, and staggered to his feet.

"I have been dreaming, I think," he said. "I don't quite know what I'm doing. No, it is not brandy, as you think, Lady Valencia. And it is not illness."

"What is it, then?"

"Opium. Give me a glass of cold water, if you have one there. I shall be better directly."

She did as she was requested. He drank it off, pressed his hands to his head once more, and then turned upon her with a new look in his eyes. She saw at once that he was sullen, irritable, perhaps even ashamed; but he was perfectly sober, and he was sane.

"I do not know to what I am indebted for this visit," he said, in a hard and slightly sneering tone. "My wife is not at home, as probably you are aware."

"I come almost straight from her," said Lady Val, straightforwardly. "I have been a good deal with her ever since the night when you turned her out of doors into the street."

He turned aside as if stung. "You know well enough that I never meant her to go," he said, sullenly. "I called her back directly—I was mad with rage and—"

"And drink," said Lady Val in her clear, concise way.

"Well," he said, doggedly, "if you like to have it so, you may. Drink. Who drove me to that, I should like to know?"

"No one drove you to it," said she, facing him courageously. "You drifted into these habits through your own folly and weakness; and now you have disgraced yourself—ruined yourself—broken your wife's heart, and made your friends—your best friends—despair of you."

"Then," said Hannington, with a short, hard laugh, "I had better put an end to it all as soon as possible. Will the brandy bottle do it quickly enough? Perhaps a pistol would suit you better! It will end in the one way or the other, you know."

"No, it won't," said Lady Val. "You have behaved disgracefully, Jack; there's no doubt about that. But you are not going to behave in that way any more. I defy you to look me in face and tell me that you are going to make me ashamed of you for the rest of my life. I have a claim on you as well as Molly. And if Molly and I cannot plead sufficiently with you, there is another claimant, Jack—one that I think you cannot refuse."

"What do you mean?" he said, in a lowered voice. He had looked her full in the face at the beginning of her sentences, but towards their close his eyes fell. He half-turned away as he asked the question.

"Oh, Jack, don't you know?" said Lady Valencia, softly.

"Not in the least."

"Not that you have a little daughter? and that for her sake, as will as ours, you *must* be good?"

It was the simplest possible appeal, and yet it was curiously effective. Hannington looked at her again for a moment, and then suddenly sat down as if his strength had given way, and covered his face with his hands. In the silence that followed Lady Val heard a sound that was suspiciously like a sob.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST CHANCE.

"I NEVER knew," he said, without looking up, when the silence had lasted for some time.

"I thought you did not," said Lady Val.

"You always knew me best, Val," he murmured, with his face still hidden in his hands.

"Did I? I began to think I had been mistaken, Jack."

But to this he made no answer.

Presently, however, he let his hands fall from his face, sat up, and laughed aloud. The laughter made Lady Val stir uneasily: until she saw that in spite of his laughter, his face looked strained and pale, and that his eyes were dull with suffering.

"What difference does it make?" he said. "I have been proved a—a sort of—brute to the whole world already; and this only makes matters worse. I shall never see the child—or its mother. Moncrieff will take care of that. I shall go on in the way in which I have begun."

"No, Jack, you won't."

"And why not? Why should you stand in the way of my going to destruction? It is your own fault. If—when we were younger—you had been kinder to me, if you had not yielded when your father said that I was too poor to marry you, we should not be where we are to day. You ruined me yourself, and it is too late to change."

"It is too late to change the past," said Lady Valencia, steadily, "but that is nothing to do with the future. You are a young man, John, young and strong; if you

choose, you may have many years of a happy and prosperous life before you. If, because you have erred, you are too much like a petted child to say to yourself that you were wrong and now mean to do right, why, then, ruin is before you, and you will deserve it; but I believe in your manliness still."

"Of course it was all my fault," said the man, sullenly.

"No," she said, quickly, "I acknowledge my own. If I had not been so worldly and cowardly we should both have been happier. I see that now, and I ask for your forgiveness, Jack. When you have forgiven me, you will be better able to forgive yourself and start afresh."

"There is no fresh start possible for me."

"Oh, yes, there is. Do you know that I have been staying at Torresmuir?"

He started, but did not reply.

"Molly is there. I travelled North with her," said Lady Val, quite smoothly and calmly, as if she had been narrating the most ordinary incident in the world. "I took the greatest care of her, but we could not prevent her feeling the fatigue of it——"

"We," Hannington repeated, below his breath.

"We—Bertie and I," said she, tranquilly. "We two, and my maid. Poor Molly was very ill for some time after we arrived at Torresmuir. We were afraid that she would not get over it."

"Why was I not told?"

"Nobody liked to write to you just then, I think a letter has been sent to you by Mr. Moncrieff. Not a very pleasant letter, perhaps. You have read it?"

Hannington hesitated. "I have opened no letters during the last few days," he said.

"Ah—that accounts for your not knowing anything. Well, Molly has pretty well got over the danger, but she is very weak. The baby is a sweet little girl: they think of calling it after me if you don't object."

"I!" he exclaimed. "I—object?" His voice expressed utter humiliation. "How can I object to—to—anything? Besides—you know that I would rather she were named after you than any one. But how—how——"

"How did it come about?" asked Lady Val, briskly. "I don't quite know. Jack, I was sorry for Molly—I think that was all."

"But she——"

"She lets me be sorry for her. More than that: she trusts me, and I think that she loves me a little, too. I have a message from her to you."

"From her—to me?"

"Yes. We talked about you before I left Torresmuir. We did not know where you were—we were told that you had gone abroad. But *if* I saw you your wife said I might tell you that she asked you to forgive her for what she had said and done to provoke you, and—well, the rest depends upon what you say to that, and I am not bound to tell you any more!"

"What should I say to it?" said Hannington, looking up with a face that was white and set. "She has no need to ask *me* to forgive her. I suppose she knows—as all the world knows—that I behaved badly to her. I repented it as soon as she was gone. My God! I wish I had had the resolution to put a bullet through my brain! The whole world knows and condemns me now."

Lady Val paused for a moment. It occurred to her, as she glanced at him, that our punishments mostly come to us through what we love best; and that, as John Hannington had loved the world, his scourging was to come from the world's hands: a sort of retribution that is less rare than some people seem to understand.

"To take that way out of your difficulties," she said, eyeing him keenly, "would be only to heap more misfortune on her head. Be a man, Jack; go to your wife and ask her to forgive you, and see whether you cannot manage to be happy yet. She told me that she wanted to see you! I think that you ought to go. It is your only way—your last chance."

"Go to Alan Moncrieff's? Not I."

"I am sure that—for Molly's sake—he would admit you."

"It's impossible," he answered, shortly and sullenly. "I could not do it. It's not so easy for a man to sue for pardon, Valencia."

"Ah, that is always a man's way of talking!" cried Valencia, impatiently. "You will let a woman die rather than do a thing that is not easy! Who supposes that it is easy? Of course, you must—if you have a spark of goodness in you—feel it a terrible thing—a degrading thing—to have acted as you have done to poor Molly; and it is diffi-

cult to think that she will forgive you, and so you won't stoop to say that you are sorry! Oh, I have no patience with that kind of pride! There's no manliness in it, no real strength or nobility: it is sheer cowardice and weakness! The man that I could respect, Jack, is not the man who never falls, but the man who has the pluck to pick himself up when he has fallen, and to say—'I am sorry, but I'll do better next time!' That is the man I honor, not the man who does not know what temptation means!"

Hannington stood silent, thrilled by her words as he had seldom been thrilled in his life before: with knitted brows, eyes averted, and breath quickening he waited until she had ended her tirade, then walked to the mantelpiece and laid his arm upon it and his forehead on his arm. There was a look of irresolution in the pose that he had adopted, which Valencia was quick to remark.

"If you won't take the *manly* way out of your troubles," said Lady Val with a ring of scorn in her clear voice, "then, at any rate, take a rational one. Give up these drugs, these poisons: leave London, emigrate, work for your own living, and make yourself to some extent a useful member of society. Your friends will see that you have work to do. All that is wanted is your own will, and your own conscience. Waken *them*, and there is every hope for you; without them there is none."

"You were never very much in the habit of sparing me, Lady Val," said Hannington, lifting his head from his arm, "and you certainly don't spare me now."

"Why should I spare you? If only I could make you see the thing as I see it—as others see it!—but I know I can't. Oh, Jack, Jack"—suddenly lapsing into a tone of passionate entreaty—"can't you see what I mean? doesn't it seem worth while to you to try?"

"It does while you are speaking," said Hannington.

"Think of me as always speaking!" she cried. "Remember that I think of you—I pray for you—night and day. We are old friends, Jack, and I, for one, never forget old friends. For the sake of our friendship, I beg of you to go to your wife and child—ask Molly to forgive you, and begin a new life with her. It is the only thing I wish for in the world! The only thing that can make me happy any more."

"Is it so?" he asked with a sigh. "Well—it won't

be much good, Valencia: I warn you. But for your sake—I'll try. I'll ask Molly to forgive me, and I'll do my best to be less of a brute—will that do? Will that satisfy you?"

She held out both her hands to him: her eyes were full of tears. "I always believed in you," she said, simply. And Hannington hung his head as he pressed her hands and let them go. Lady Val's trust in him had never been without a restraining power.

"There's one thing more that you must do," she said, after a few moments' pause. "There's a mystery that you must try to clear up. In my own mind I am quite sure that Molly is innocent, but an imputation has been thrown on her character which you must clear away."

"What do you mean?"

"Will you tell me what Molly took away with her from Torresmuir?"

"Took away with her?" said Hannington, staring. "Some clothes in a black bag: that was all."

"Jewels?"

He laughed rather harshly.

"I never saw any."

"Papers of value?"

"Certainly not. I should have seen them. What do you mean?"

"I mean that her mother's jewels, a large sum of money, and some papers were stolen from Alan Moncrieff's study on the night when Molly left home. Her father took it for granted, apparently, that she stole them; and that is the reason why he has been so obdurate. I am quite sure that she never did anything of the kind."

"Of course not. Moncrieff believed *that* of his daughter, did he? Good heavens! what a fool that man must be!"

"Mr. Kingscott seems to have fostered the suspicion?"

"Kingscott?"

"Bertie blames him for the long misunderstanding. He says that Mr. Kingscott has always made as much mischief as possible between Alan Moncrieff and his children."

Hannington paused a little, with a troubled, downcast look.

"I can't understand it," he said at last. "Kingscott is a scoundrel—I know that; but why should he try to throw suspicion on his niece?"

"To cover his own dishonesty, perhaps."

"If that is the case, I'll make him rue it. He has done me harm enough already. I'll have the truth out of him now."

"Don't be too hasty, Jack," said Lady Val, feeling the need for a little caution. "I only surmise——"

"Your surmises are generally very near the truth, Val. I am much obliged to you for letting me know," said Hannington. His languor had entirely disappeared: there was a new fire in his eye, a new vigor in the tones of his voice. "I must get to the bottom of this. Even if I had no other reason, this would be a good reason for my going to Torresmuir at once. Whatever I may have been, no man has ever had cause to call me dishonest."

Lady Val was not displeased to see him roused from his apathetic indifference, but even she was surprised at the decision and the energy which he suddenly manifested. She had reached his most vulnerable part: an imputation on his honor was evidently a thing which he could not brook. To her astonishment, he declared himself ready to start for Scotland that night: he would go by the express, he said, and sleep in the train. He maintained that he felt perfectly well and strong, and that there was no reason why anybody should feel anxious respecting him. For the time being, excitement had given him back all his accustomed strength.

Captain Rutherford almost gasped with astonishment when Hannington—pale, jaded, but self-possessed and resolved in manner—emerged from the room where he had shut himself up for so many days. Charlie looked at Lady Valencia with admiration verging on reverence. What a wonderful woman she must be, he thought, when she could so completely transform a man's course of action and state of mind! Lady Val did nearly all the necessary explanation. Hannington scarcely said a word.

"Come, Charlie; we must be off," she said, briskly. "Mr. Hannington is going out of town and wants to pack. Can we do anything more for you, Mr. Hannington? No? Then—good-bye—and good luck to you."

She gave him her hand. He pressed it silently, and there was a look in his face which caused Charlie Rutherford to turn away on some pretence of finding a stick or an umbrella. His absorption in this task gave Hanning-

ton an opportunity of uttering a word or two that otherwise would have been left unsaid.

"If I have any good fortune, it will all be owing to you," he murmured.

And Lady Val, with a momentary seriousness and gravity which made her face very sweet, answered in a still lower tone. "God be with you, Jack!" she said. "It is the old form of 'good-bye,' you know—and it is the best wish I have to give."

They parted, with the same self-contained gravity. Lady Val was escorted to her own home by Charlie, whom she dismissed at the door with *beave*, laughing words; and then she went up to her own room to weep her heart out, and to pray upon her knees for the reformation of John Hannington's erring, sin-sick soul.

Hannington got away by the express, as he had intended to do, but not without a struggle. When the magic of Lady Val's presence had been removed, his spirits fell once more to zero. In this depression of mind, it was natural to him to think of his usual sustainer and consoler—the stimulants or the opiates on which he had almost lived of late. But his new resolution was sincere, and by a great effort he mastered the craving which seemed at first as if it would utterly subdue him. He locked the bottles in a cupboard, and, in a moment of angry desperation, threw the key into the fire. It was curious to him to observe the feeling of lightness and relief that this rather unreasonable action gave him. The throwing away of the key was like a casting-away of bonds in which he had been enthralled.

The journey Northward was somewhat unfortunate. Snow had been falling heavily in some parts of the country, and a great drift impeded traffic in the neighborhood of Carlisle. He was so much hindered that he did not arrive at Dunkeld until the afternoon of the next day; and then it seemed to him that the best thing was to take a room at the hotel and write a note that night to Molly's father.

The note was a difficult one to write, but, all things considered, he did it very well. There was more sincerity, more humility in his letter, than Alan Moncrieff had expected to find. It set forth simply and unaffectedly that he knew how badly he had behaved to his wife—

that he deeply regretted his conduct, and begged for an interview with her. He dared not write to her himself, he said, knowing that she was still weak and ill, and fearing to startle her; but he begged for her father's pardon and her father's help.

It was the first time in his life that Hannington had ever written such a letter, and without Lady Val's influence it would never have been written at all. But he was genuinely ashamed of himself, and anxious to be at peace with his wife, and—as it was hardly possible that his motives should be free from alloy—reinstated in the world's good opinion. He had softer thoughts, too, of Molly and of his child; and, growing stronger every hour, there was the conviction that his last chance had been given to him, and that he must reform his life or go to ruin once and for all.

His last chance! 'It was an easy thing to say; and yet what infinite possibilities of good and evil were contained in those three words! In a far deeper sense than he imagined, he was indeed having his last chance.

Late in the evening a note was brought to him. Mr. Moncrieff wrote formally and coldly, but he fixed an hour at which he would call upon Hannington at the hotel. They could then talk freely, he said, and could consider the advisability of the proposed interview with Molly. The young man drew a long breath of relief when he read the words. Yes, he did want to see Molly—he was beginning to wonder how she looked and what she would say to him—and a flood of shame filled his heart at the remembrance of the past. For, as Lady Val had said to Stella, John Hannington had some sort of a heart, some sort of a conscience, after all; and if they were roused, the man might still be saved.

Mr. Moncrieff would come to him at five o'clock next day. He wondered why the hour was so late, never suspecting that Kingscott's influence had again been exerted to fix it as late as possible. Ralph Kingscott scented danger in the air, and had resolved to make his escape before Alan met John Hannington. But he had a few last arrangements to make, and therefore he had taken care to secure some hours before Molly's husband could arrive at Torresmuir.

Hannington grew nervous and uneasy as the day went

on, and soon after luncheon he determined to go for a long walk by way of working off his disquietude. He went past Torresmuir, resolving to turn back in good time, so as to be at the hotel at five o'clock precisely. A fancy took him to look once more at Tomgarrow, where his meetings with Molly used to take place. He reached the narrow lane which led to the little hamlet, and walked slowly up the ascending ground. The day, which had been mild and cloudy, was already closing in. The gathering darkness made him scarcely aware of the approach of another wayfarer from an opposite direction until the two were almost face to face. And then Hannington roused himself from his reverie, and came to a sudden standstill, barring the other man's advance.

"I've a word to say to you, Ralph Kingscott," he said, in harsh, decided tones.

Ralph Kingscott also stopped short, and the two men looked into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JOHN HANNINGTON'S FATE.

"WHAT have you to say?" said Kingscott.

There was a scarcely suppressed impatience in his tone. He glanced up and down the narrow lane as if he wanted to estimate his chance of escape from his interlocutor.

"I want a good many things," replied Hannington, doggedly. "You have several matters to answer for——"

"Not to you, I think!" said Kingscott, with a sneering laugh. "You have surely enough to do in settling your own accounts."

"I'll take care of my own accounts. I want the truth of this story about Molly. You know as well as I do that she never took from her father's house a farthing's worth that did not belong to her. I hear that you—you of all people!—helped to throw suspicion upon her."

"There was no need for me to do that. The matter was as clear as daylight. Who would take her mother's jewels but Molly herself? She had a perfect right to them. And as for money—we all know how much you needed it——"

"Stop that!" said Hannington, harshly. "You had better not go on. I have heard the whole story from Lady Valencia Gilderoy—I know the proof on which they relied: the finding of the ring which Bertie had seen on your hand a short time before. To Alan Moncrieff the proof of Molly's guilt may seem positive; to me, it is only a token of your own guilt."

Kingscott laughed, but his face had turned pale.

"You are romancing," he said, contemptuously, "and I have no time to listen. Let me pass; I shall see you again, no doubt."

"I hope I may never see you again as long as the world lasts," said Hannington, the long-harbored resentment against Kingscott suddenly bursting into life. "This will be the last time, I assure you."

"What do you mean?" said Ralph, somewhat uneasily.

"Oh, I don't mean any harm to you. I am not going to hurt you. I mean only that I'm going to make a clean breast to Moncrieff of all the dealings I have ever had with you—including the way in which you used to bully Bertie Moncrieff, and the help I got from you when I made love to Molly. I don't suppose he has ever heard that *you* used to plan our meetings, or that *you* arranged the details of that elopement. It will be a little surprise for him."

"Tell what you like," said Kingscott, coolly. "It will make no difference to me."

"It will probably make this difference: you will be kicked out of Torresmuir."

Kingscott laughed lightly and made a step forward. "I've provided against that contingency," he said.

Hannington's perceptions were keen. His eye fell upon Kingscott's attire—it seemed to him like that of a man ready for a journey; he carried a large bag in one hand. "Oh, I see. So you are going to bolt at last," said Hannington, softly.

Kingscott smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear fellow, you are too clever by half," he answered. "I am going to pay a short visit to London, that is all. Settle your affairs with Moncrieff as you please; I shall arrange mine pleasantly enough."

"Excuse me," said Hannington, in a very determined tone. "You won't get off quite so soon as you think. I

insist on your turning back with me now to Dunkeld, and being present at my interview with Molly's father. We must have that matter of the robbery cleared up as soon as possible, as far as Molly is concerned."

"I know nothing about the robbery. Appearances were against Molly and yourself. I only agree with Moncrieff in thinking that you——" He stopped short. Hannington had seized him in a strong masterful grip and was shaking him as a dog shakes a rat.

"You lie!" he said. "And you know that you lie."

Kingscott was apparently much the weaker of the two men. He was shorter and slighter than John Hannington; but Hannington was out of training, and had lately led a peculiarly exhausting and unhealthy kind of life. On the other hand Ralph was less courageous than his old acquaintance, and was inclined to make his way out of a difficult position by cunning, where Hannington would probably sink to brutality. His very lips looked pale in the waning light, while Hannington's face glowed with the burning red of anger and excitement.

"Let me go, you great fool!" said Kingscott.

"You will come with me to Dunkeld, then?"

"Not I."

"I'll make you."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Let go! I tell you, I'll come back!"

"You'll come with me now and clear my wife's name."

"How long is it since you have been so fond of your wife?" said Kingscott, with a sneer.

It was an ill-advised remark. Hannington's hand closed more tightly than ever upon his collar. The two men closed with one another; in the struggle it soon became evident that Hannington's superior height and weight, as well as his frenzy of anger, told in his favor. Kingscott defended himself but feebly. He seemed to know that it was useless to contend for victory.

"There you are!" said Hannington at last, as he held his opponent down upon the ground and looked at him with grim vindictiveness. "I have you now. What will you do? Will you walk quietly back to Dunkeld with me and hear what Moncrieff has to say to all that I can tell him? or will you take the thrashing that you deserve?"

"Neither," said Kingscott, viciously.

Hannington had slightly loosened his hold. Kingscott wrenched his hand free and thrust it into an inner pocket. He kept his eyes fixed on his enemy's face: the savage hatred in them fascinated Hannington's attention for one moment and in that moment he was lost. For Kingscott was now a desperate man.

The report of a revolver rang out to startle the silence of the lonely hills. To the man who fired that shot it seemed as if its echo would never die away. Although the lonely lane in which he stood was far removed from the habitations of man, he could not but fancy that the sound would rouse the avengers of blood and bring them from scores of nooks and corners to punish the murderer for his crime.

For Hannington had fallen to the ground and lay as one dead, while, for a moment or two, Ralph Kingscott—crouching beside him—watched and waited for any sign of life. But none came.

Kingscott rose to his feet. With a shaking hand he put the revolver back in his pocket, picked up his bag, and stood still, looking and listening. There was not a sound to be heard, save the chirp of a startled bird in the hedge. The grey sky seemed suddenly to have grown darker; the wind was rising and rustled among the leafless branches of the gaunt brown trees. Kingscott shivered, and then laughed. He wanted to convince himself that he was not afraid. "The sooner I'm off the better," he said, eyeing the body at his feet with strange invincible reluctance. "Is he dead? I'll look—no; I will not. What does it matter to me whether he is dead or alive? My business here is done. At any rate I have paid him out for what he has made me suffer. I knew all the time that it was he who shot me at Torresmuir." He turned to go, but after taking a few steps, he returned to Hannington's side. "I might as well *know*," he muttered, "how much mischief I have done."

He moved the inanimate form, of which the face was hidden in the roadside grass, laid it on its back and placed his hand carefully on the man's heart. At first he thought that there was no movement of the pulse: but a faint throb made manifest by and by that life had not departed. In spite of his callousness, Kingscott felt relieved—not on Hannington's account, but on his own. To have com-

mitted a murder was a different thing from having played fast and loose with his brother-in-law's money or throwing aspersions on the character of his niece.

He turned away and strode hastily up the lane. He did not want to be seen in the high road now. He would strike across the fields and take a devious route towards Blairgowrie, thence to the nearest seaport town. He meant to make the best of his way to Spain. He disappeared into the gathering darkness, therefore, and left John Hannington to his fate.

The injured man became conscious after a time. He lay as Kingscott had left him, with his face turned up to the cloudy sky. The air was very cold, and a chill numbness took the place of pain. But he did not yet pass into insensibility again. His mind gradually acquired an extraordinary clearness; the whole of his past life seemed to unroll itself before him in the vivid light cast by the coming Eternity. For the first time he judged himself; for the first time he wished that he had his life to live over again and vowed to himself that if an earthly future were spared to him, he would spend it differently. But he had no hope of life. Something in his sensations told him that he was doomed. He only longed intensely that he might not die without being able to say one word to Molly, to send a message to Lady Valencia, to ask pardon from Alan and his wife. He calculated the chances of his being found alive, and rated them very low. It was more than probable that he would lapse into unconsciousness, and pass gently before morning from unconsciousness to death. The bitter cold was more than his strength could bear.

The process was already beginning when help came. A working man passed up the lane from the high road to Tongarrow. Hannington had heard the footsteps of several passengers along the road, but had known that it was useless to try to summon help. He did not greatly care. His brain was becoming confused: it seemed to him as though a pleasant sleep were overtaking him, when the tramp of heavy footsteps roused him from the stupor into which he was fast falling. He heard a man's voice, he heard the summons for help; he was painfully aware of being touched, handled, examined—and then he knew no more. Movement was torture, and a dead swoon was the greatest blessing that his best friend could have wished him then.

When he awoke to consciousness, he was dimly surprised to find familiar faces were about him. He had been carried to Torresmuir, for the man who had discovered him knew that he had married Mr. Moncrieff's daughter, and had taken it for granted that he would be nursed at his father-in-law's house. At another time some embarrassment of feeling might have been aroused by this turn of events. At this time, he could but feel dumbly, passively grateful for the care and the tenderness lavished upon him, and renew within himself the determination that if life were spared him he would make of it a different thing.

But this was not to be. His hours were numbered; he had had his "last chance" on earth. Other chances might be waiting for him elsewhere, but for this life at least his time of probation had expired. All that he could do was to make the best of the hours that remained.

He lay for the most part in a dreamy state, not suffering much pain, but growing weaker every hour. It seemed to him that he was wrapped in a sort of mist, from which faces occasionally emerged with puzzling distinctness. They were all kind and friendly faces but he had not energy to respond much to the kindness. Now it was Stella's soft eyes that rested on him pityingly; he roused himself to ask her to forgive him for all that he had done. Then Alan Moncrieff bent over him and asked him some questions, and to these he did his best to reply. But it was hard to fix his attention, to call his mind back from the floating mists in which it was enveloped.

"Had Ralph Kingscott anything to do with this?" Alan asked. There was a pause for the feeble answer came: "It was all my fault."

"All your fault?—you had quarrelled?"

"It was about—Molly; I can't tell you now. She never robbed you—nor did I. I believe that it was Kingscott."

"Yes: I believe that it was Kingscott."

"You know that it was not Molly?"

"I know—I am sure of it."

"That's right," said Hannington in a tone of weary relief, and then his eyes closed and the mist seemed to have engulfed him once again.

When he opened his eyes they rested on Molly's white worn face. She was sitting beside him.

"Molly," he said feebly. "Is it really *Molly*?"

"Yes, dear Jack."

"There's something I wanted to say. Will you forgive me, Molly?"

"I forgave you ever so long ago, Jack. When baby came I forgave you."

"You'll let me see it—the baby—before I go?"

"She is here," said Molly.

"I can't see it. Everything is so dark."

She guided his hand to the little head of the child which was now given into her arms. Then he asked if he might kiss it.

"It is a girl, isn't it?" he said. "She'll be a comfort to you, Molly. Somebody told me what you were going to call her——"

"Valencia," said Molly softly.

"Valencia: yes." A clearer look came into his eyes: he lay silent for some moments as if thinking deeply. "Molly," he said at last, very gently, "if I had lived, I meant to be a better husband to you. I wanted to be a better man. But I haven't the chance."

"Dear Jack," she said, the tears falling fast as she spoke, "I was not a good wife to you. I meant to be better too. Perhaps God will take what we meant to do as if it had been done."

"Perhaps," he murmured, and then lay very still.

Molly was warned by the nurse that she ought to come away: she was not really fit to leave her bed, but she had been carried into Jack's room, so that she might see him once again. But before she went she had one more word to say.

"Jack," she said, "is there no one whom you want to see?" A sudden light came into his eyes. He looked at her eagerly, but did not speak.

"I have sent for her," said Molly. "I know you loved her, Jack: but you love me a little too, do you not?"—It was a piteous cry. But she was satisfied with his answer.

"I love her in a different way, Molly. I never injured her. It was all so different. . . Child, forgive me—and say good-bye. I love you—you, my wife."

But when they had exchanged the last sad kiss, and he was left with his nurses, it was noticed that he began to watch the door as he had never watched it for Molly's

coming. Every sound seemed to agitate him: the stupor was varied by fits of feverish restlessness, in which he murmured a name that was not that of his young wife. He had learned, perhaps, to love Molly; but he loved Valencia, as he had said, in a very different way.

She was with him at last. Her face came out of the mists and smiled bravely upon him. She was always courageous, and she had made up her mind that she would not distress him by lamentations. He was vaguely glad that she did not cry—as Molly did.

"Val," he said with a faint smile of welcome. "The end has come, you see."

"Not by your own seeking, Jack," she answered. She had knelt down beside the bed and was pillowing his head upon her arm. A sort of instinct told her what was best to be done for him.

"No, not by my own seeking. I was trying to do what you told me."

She suppressed a cry of agony. "As it has turned out in this way, and you were trying to do right, Jack," she said, "I think that we must conclude that—that it was God's will."

"For me to die?" said Jack, with a smile. "Well, I told you that it was the best way out of our difficulties. I want to say something to you, Val: hold my hand: don't let me go—don't let me die—until I have said it."

"No, Jack," she answered softly but firmly. "You shall not die until you have said all that you want to say!"

"You make me feel strong, Val. With you—with you—I should have been a better man. We are alone, are we not?"

"Yes, dear."

"Tell me that you love me, Val."

"I have always loved you—all my life. I shall love you till I die—and after death, to all eternity."

"And I—you, Val."

Then quite easily and naturally, he began to speak of Molly.

"I would have been a better husband, if I had lived, to that poor child. She loves me, and I could have loved her and the child too. You will be a friend to them, will you not, Val? I leave them to you."

"Yes, Jack. I will do all I can."

"She will marry again," said Hannington quietly. "Rutherford perhaps. I hope she will. You can tell her so, if ever the occasion comes, Val. And if she has—other children, and this little one should be neglected, or if the child was left motherless, then you—Val——"

"She should be my child, then," said Valencia softly.

"Yes that is what I wanted to hear you say. God bless you, Valencia. God forgive me!"

The light was fading from his eyes: his voice was growing very weak. She could barely hear his words when he murmured at last.—

"Kiss me, Val."

She bent to kiss him, and received his last breath upon her lips.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LUCK RETURNS.

THE way in which John Hannington came by his death remained for some time a mystery. Ralph Kingscott's flight was not at first connected with it, except by Alan Moncrieff in his own mind; and the questions that he put to Hannington, and that others also put, had not been answered by the dying man with sufficient clearness to ensure certainty.

Moncrieff became sure in his own mind that Kingscott was responsible for Hannington's death, but he sincerely hoped that it was by accident and that his brother-in-law had harbored no murderous design. The suspicions of other people were very easily allayed. It was not known that Ralph had met Hannington; no one had seen him leave Torresmuir, and he went away from home so often that his absence did not excite remark.

When Alan Moncrieff looked into his own affairs, much that had been puzzling to him was explained. The fraud and trickery of which he had been the dupe for years made him stand aghast. Ralph had gone on until discovery was imminent, and had then disappeared; he had taken with him large sums of money—enough indeed, to constitute a nice little fortune on which he could subsist very comfortably in a foreign land. Moncrieff, in the first shock of

the discovery, was inclined to prosecute, but the publicity of a prosecution would have been very painful to the whole family, and it was decided that the matter had better sink into oblivion.

About a month after Hannington's death, however, a letter arrived which threw considerable light upon several points. It was addressed to Alan Moncrieff, and the post-mark was that of an obscure town in Spain. It was from Ralph Ringscott himself.

"Dear Alan," it began, with an audacity which almost took away Moncrieff's breath: "I have just learned from the newspapers that poor Hannington is dead: I suppose he has told you how the affair took place, and I need not make any secret of the matter in writing to you, but for my own satisfaction I wish to tell you why I shot him as I did. The act was not premeditated, but it seemed to me unavoidable. He brought it on his own head, by his utter obstinacy and stupidity.

"To make you comprehend the matter from beginning to end would be too long a task; I cannot undertake it. But I will give you a few *renseignements*, from which you may construct the story if you like. Mrs. Moncrieff and your children will probably supply details.

"I must trouble you first with my reasons for staying so long at Torresmuir after Marie's death. The place was not interesting to me; your society was not that which I preferred—you were always too straight-laced for me—and the work that you expected me to do was detestable. Add to this that I hate your climate, and you may well wonder why I stayed a month with you. My dear Alan, you forget—you had always a knack of forgetting—that I was poor. You paid me what you considered a handsome salary, no doubt; it was enough for my wants if I had meant to live at Torresmuir forever. But I had dreams of my own. I wanted a competency. I wanted a villa in some warm southern place, where I could be all day in the sun, and get the accursed Scotch chill out of my blood. I very early resolved that I would make my fortune out of you, and would leave you as soon as I had done so. It took me a longer time than I anticipated, and involved me in various awkward complications, on which I had not reckoned; but my efforts have at last been crowned by complete success. If you will not meddle with me, I

promise you to lead henceforth a most reputable life. For obvious reasons, I do not give my address; I do not live here under my own name, and my personal appearance is considerably changed. I am safe enough in Spain—but then, I do not wish to reside in Spain continually. I should therefore very much like your assurance that you will not endeavor to have me arrested when I leave this country. You can manage to throw the police completely off the scent if you will. And really—is it worth while to put me in prison for the sake of a few pounds which I dare say you would have given me if I had chosen to ask for them? Judging from your character, my dear Alan, and your pride in your family, I cannot bring myself to think that you would stoop so far! Send me a line to the address that I enclose, and I shall know what to do.

“And now to business. I resolved, as I said, to make a fortune out of you. To this end I sacrificed all that stood in the way. Your coldness towards your children gave me a great many chances. You were so easily suspicious of them that it was no hard task to throw blame on them a thousand times when they were perfectly innocent. I began with wishing to make a competency; before long, I wanted your whole fortune. I resolved to make you cast off both your children, and leave your property to me by will. When that will was made, I thought that you would probably soon give me possession of the estate. Because your affections are pretty strong, although you hide them with a coating of ice, and when your heart and spirit were broken, as I meant them to be, by your son’s dissipations and your daughter’s disgrace, you would not bear your unhappiness very long. You would either have gone out of your mind, under the circumstances, Alan Moncrieff, or you would have committed suicide. Knowing you as I do, I feel sure of that.

“My plans were succeeding admirably, when you—quite unconsciously—put an obstacle in the way. You engaged Stella Raeburn as a governess for Molly; and, what was more, you fell in love with her almost from the beginning. I did my best to put a spoke into her wheel, speaking familiarly. I showed up her ignorance on several occasions with considerable skill, I fancy; I insinuated doubts of her capacity and of her good will; but with very little effect. It was I, for instance, who managed that she and

Bertie should be left together upon the island. I hoped that the boy would make love to her—but he was too inexperienced; and you, by that time, were resolved to think no ill of her. You married her, and I knew that my power at Torresmuir would soon come to an end.

“I did my best again, however, and partly succeeded. I fostered Molly’s love for Hannington, and devised their elopement. I took the jewels and papers from your bureau, and dropped Molly’s ring into one of the drawers—as Bertie can testify. That action would effectually bar her return, I thought, to Torresmuir. But your wife once more defeated me. She threw discredit on my character: she led Bertie to confess his escapades, and Molly—indirectly—to ask your pardon; and although I told you the story of her previous engagement to Hannington and took care that you should see her letters to him, I knew that she would conquer in the end. The period of coldness between you lasted longer than I expected; but when I saw that you were reconciled, that Bertie had got under young Rutherford’s influence, that Molly was back at Torresmuir, and that Hannington was expected—why then; I felt that the game was lost. If Hannington were to come and to find out that he and his wife had been suspected of robbery, I knew that he would fly into a rage and tell you a good deal more about me than you had ever dreamt of. He knew of two or three little transactions which I had hitherto carefully kept from your ears: and if these were to be revealed, it seemed to me that I would rather be out of the way. Bertie’s scrapes, too, were partially known to Hannington, and I did not quite like the idea of your hearing that I had been responsible for most of them—as he would doubtless have informed you. In the matter of the cheque, it is perhaps only fair to say—as I wish to do the handsome thing by you all in leaving the country—that Bertie was little to blame. He had had considerable pressure put upon him, and he was so frightened of yourself, that he thought anything preferable to telling you the truth.

“The game being up, then, I prepared for departure. What I did not reckon on was coming face to face with Hannington in the lane that leads to Tomgarrow. He was in a tremendous rage over the story of the robbery, which Lady Valencia Gilderoy had told him, and accused

me of plotting to throw disgrace on Molly. Then he insisted on my coming back with him to Dunkeld, to meet you and to clear Molly's name. I saw immediately that this would not suit my book at all. I had studied time tables to some purpose. If I missed a certain boat, I might not be able to get away to Spain for two or three days, and I was not certain how you would take Hannington's revelations. I knew that I had, strictly speaking, brought myself within reach of the law. I did not want to wait on Scottish soil, and be confronted with the tale of my own misdemeanors—besides running the risk of prosecution for embezzlement if you were in a particularly savage mood. It was absolutely necessary then for me to get away.

"Hannington was difficult to deal with. He insisted: I refused. He attacked me in his usual brutal way—knocked me down, and tried to extract from me a promise that I would go with him to Dunkeld to meet you. I had a loaded revolver in my pocket. The temptation was too great. I got my hand free, and I fired. I meant to wing him only—but at a short distance one does more harm sometimes with fire-arms than one intends. I can, however, assure you that I meant only to disable, not to kill, him. I ascertained that he was alive before I went on my way, and I knew that he was sure to be found and taken to your house before long. I amused myself with picturing the *ménage* that would be formed at Torresmuir—with Jack Hannington as a reformed character being lectured by Madame. It was quite a shock to me to hear that the poor fellow was dead.

"I have now told you the whole story in outline, and you can fill in the details as you please. I have not succeeded in my main object, but I have not done very badly for myself after all. The only thing that I want now is your assurance that I am safe from prosecution for embezzlement, fraud, robbery, or whatever you like to call it, and that you will not make the contents of this letter public, so as to bring suspicion upon me with regard to Hannington's death. In return for this assurance, which, for Marie's sake, I think that you will give, I will set your mind at rest on a point which once disturbed you more than you would allow—the fate of that stone which went by the name of 'The Luck of the House.'

"It was I who took it away (as, by the bye, Molly, with unusual acumen, always suspected), and for two reasons. First I wanted to have the stone tested, as I had a notion that it might prove more valuable than we thought. But in this I was wrong: the stone was intrinsically worthless. Secondly, I knew that its disappearance would perplex and, perhaps, distress you, for the family superstition had never been eradicated from your mind. In this I was right.

"I am quite willing now, however, that you should have the stone, if you can find it. In a fit of unreasonable vexation at its worthlessness, I flung it out of a window in the Tower, into the midst of a thickly growing bed of bracken. It may be there yet, for aught I know. If you can find it, you are welcome to it, and to all the luck that it may bring.

"I have now told you the whole truth, and I think that you can afford to let me pass from your notice and from your memory. You are not likely to hear of me again.

"R. K."

Moncrieff read this letter with a feeling of rage and shame of which he found it difficult to rid himself. All Stella's persuasions were needed before he could resolve to send Kingscott the assurance that he would take no steps to make the matter public; but he did so at last, under the conviction that for Molly's sake it had better remain unknown. The robberies he could forgive: but it was hard to pardon the man's vile plotting against the characters of Stella and of Molly; or his cold blooded murder of John Hannington. These he could never pardon, but he refrained from vengeance, and was content to leave his enemy to the inevitable disappointment and remorse which Time alone could bring.

A search was made for the stone, but proved unavailing. It must have become embedded in the earth and overgrown with vegetation, and probably, Moncrieff said, rather regretfully, would never be found at all. He declared that he had no superstitious feeling about it in the very least, but Stella fancied that she could read a little regret in his honest eyes.

Molly mourned her husband bitterly, but she was young still, and her heart had, after all, not been broken. There came a day when Captain Rutherford, after two years of

patient waiting, found her alone in the garden at Torresmuir, and asked her if she could trust him to make her life happy, and if she could ever consent to be his wife. And Molly did not say no.

In the days that were to come, when a troop of children made gladness in Rutherford's house, and Molly was proud of their beauty and their noisiness and their mirth; even then John Hannington's foreboding was not justified. His child was never neglected, never set aside for any of the new comers. Her mother and her stepfather had indeed a special tenderness for her; she was their darling, and in due time their helper and their comfort. But they never grudged her to their old and true friend, Lady Valencia. In her house, little Valencia Hannington spent many weeks every year; she was Lady Val's greatest interest in life. Many people said that Lady Valencia's great wealth would some day be left to her namesake, and that Val Hannington might yet be one of the richest women in England, but that day does not seem likely to dawn just yet. For Lady Val is as strong and brisk and active as she ever was, and the only trace that her great sorrow has left upon her is a wistful sadness in her beautiful eyes, and an ever increasing tenderness for the lonely, the sorrowful, the weak—and perhaps, we may add, the wicked—of the earth.

With one more scene from the life at Torresmuir, our story will fitly end.

It is a bright summer morning, and Stella and her husband stand on the terrace, discussing their plans for their day, reading their letters and opening their newspapers, after the pleasant fashion that obtains at Torresmuir on sunny mornings, when the post comes in. Presently Stella turns her head, and laughs for very happiness. A sturdy little fellow, with great brown eyes, comes stumbling and panting up the slope of the hill towards the terrace, with something tightly clasped in his dimpled hand. Master Alan makes his way straight to his mother, throws himself upon her with exuberant affection, and then displays what his hand contains. It is an oddly shaped stone—something like a lump of dull glass—and at sight of it, Mr. Moncrieff utters an exclamation of pleasure and surprise.

"Where did you find that, my boy?" he asks.

Alan the younger explains in broken English that he found it in the grass, and that he thought it "pitty," and wanted to bring it to "Muzzer."

"It is a good omen," said Alan Moncrieff, with a smile. "Stella, this is the stone that was lost. The boy has found it at last."

Stella, with her child in her arms, turns to him, smiling also.

"So he has brought back the luck of the house?" she exclaims.

But Alan suddenly looks grave. "No, no," he answers, in a softer tone, as he puts his hand upon her shoulder, and looks into her eyes. "That came long ago, when you, my Star, brought us your sweet presence, and the love that has brightened all our lives. Then you brought back to us, Stella, 'The Luck of the House.'"

THE END.