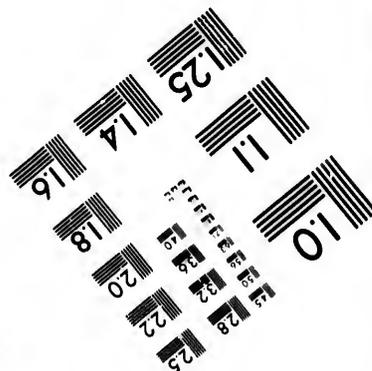
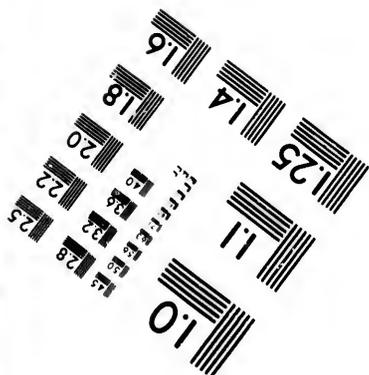
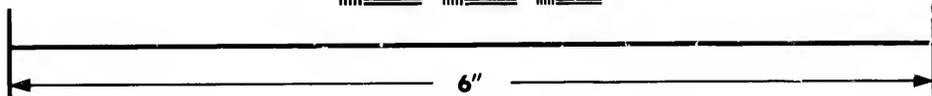
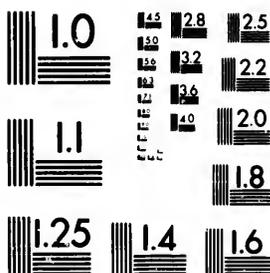


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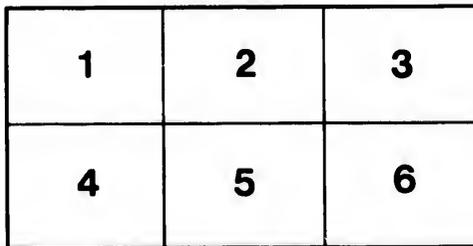
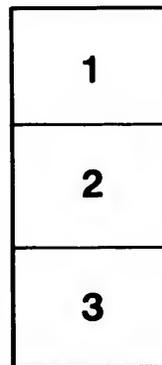
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A LIFE INTEREST

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF

"THE WOOING O'T," "AT BAY," "BY WOMAN'S WIT,"
"MONA'S CHOICE," ETC.

TORONTO:
THE NATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY.

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A LIFE INTEREST.

CHAPTER I.

RESURGAM.

REGENT'S PARK was looking coldly bright one clear March afternoon, bright with the first spring sunshine, which is more glaring than genial, while a keen north-east wind played spitefully through the trees, crisping the water within the enclosure into shuddering ripples, and searching out every cranny in the wraps of the children and nurses who were exercising within its exclusive bounds.

It made small impression, however, on a tall distinguished-looking elderly gentleman who was advancing at a good pace along the road which crosses the Broad Walk near Park Square. He was erect and vigorous, though white-haired and somewhat worn in face, with fine features and dark haughty eyes, still flashing keenly under thick grizzled brows. A long overcoat of fine cloth wrapped him from neck to heel, and from his glossy hat to his neat boots he looked the incarnation of pride and prosperity.

As he approached the gate which admits to the Broad Walk, a man who had been resting on a seat close by, his hands deep in his trowser pockets, rose lazily and strolled through it. Turning left in a purposeless manner, he paused as his eyes fell on the advancing figure. A greater contrast to himself could not be imagined; and it seemed to strike him, for a mocking smile curled his lips, while a gleam of recognition played over his countenance.

He, too, was above middle height and dark eyed, but his figure was bent and his eyes dull. A napless frock-coat, white at the seams and greasy at the collar, over which bulged a coloured handkerchief, was buttoned tightly across his chest. His baggy trowsers hung loosely over down-trodden boots, one of which was burst. The whole aspect of the man betokened seedy helplessness. More-over the style of his shabby garments was decidedly un-English, and he wore a large picturesque felt hat considerably out of shape.

He stepped slowly forward, and stopped exactly in front of the advancing aristocrat, who came to a sudden halt. A look of angry surprise changed to a look of disgusted recognition as he gazed at

the face before him. "Ha!" he exclaimed, "so you have come back to life. I was told you had paid one debt, which even you could not evade." There was indescribable scorn in his high-bred tones.

"I have renewed my bill at an indefinite date, and suppose there is something still for me to do or I should not be here."

"You will certainly have a prolonged lease of life if it depends on your completing *any* work! Now why have you stopped me! I washed my hands of you years ago."

"You can be at no loss for the answer—I am penniless and indisposed to go into the workhouse. I therefore take this opportunity of consulting you before coming to a decision."

"Money, eh? *that* of course! But if I begin that game, I see no end of it now that you have turned up in a worse condition than ever."

The other bowed. "Very good! It is to be the workhouse then. I will not detain you any longer;" and he stood aside.

"Look here, you unfortunate devil——" began his well-dressed interlocutor.

"Stop. I stand no bad language from you or any man," interrupted the seedy man, a sudden fire kindling in his eyes. "Moreover you are or ought to be a gentleman. Now go on."

"Do you think you could keep a promise?" asked the other with a look of surprise.

"Upon my soul I don't know. I have kept some promises very faithfully. It depends on the nature of the promise."

"On certain conditions I am disposed to help you. Where can I find you?"

"My movements are erratic. I had better call on *you*."

"No; I will not have you at my house. Give me a rendezvous somewhere out of the way."

The other unbuttoned his shabby coat, took out a letter, removed the envelope, and with a stumpy pencil wrote a couple of lines upon it, remarking, "It is hardly so refined as 'Mivart's' or as grand as 'Claridge's,' but it will do."

"Whercabouts is this 'Rising Sun,' Portobello Street?" asked the elder man, looking at the address with a doubtful expression.

"It is off Edgeware Road, right-hand side; pretty high up; any cab driver will take you there. I will wait for you to-morrow from three to five."

"I suppose this name," looking at the paper, "is known at the tavern?"

"Yes, well enough for our purpose."

"Well, I'll not fail; meantime take this." "This" was a plump yellow sovereign.

"Thanks," coolly pocketing the coin; "this will keep me going till we meet. One word more—your son?"

"He is remarkably well, and was married the day before yesterday," was the reply, accompanied by a grim smile.

"Ah!" returned the shabby wayfarer—a long-drawn "ah!" "Then till to-morrow." He raised his queer hat with a comic air of fashion, and turning, retraced his steps, walking slowly towards the Zoological Gardens.

He soon halted, faced round and looked after his distinguished acquaintance, who had disappeared.

"What a capital coat the old fellow has!" he murmured. "How deucedly unjust and uneven fortune is! She never thinks of striking a balance! indeed, no female ever does. There is that old fellow warmed within with the primest food and wine the world can give and thatched without with double-milled superfine cloth, while I am shivering in threadbare shoddy and unprovided with a mouthful of fuel to keep up the inner fire. However, luck hasn't quite deserted me. I don't think, low as I have fallen, I could have made up my mind to thrust myself on old 'Pomp and State' in his own particular marble 'halls'; but meeting him here under the free vault of heaven, it would have been flying in the face of Providence to lose my opportunity."

He took out the gold piece he had just received, and gazing at it with a smile, said half-aloud, "Our Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria, never did your simple face strike me with such a sense of loveliness as it does at this moment!" He resumed his progress northward. "What can that old buffer want with me?" he mused. "Old! not so very much older than myself, only that he never was young, must have been about fifty when he was short-coated, in spite of having travelled on a road of velvet all his life. He looks worn, yet my picture is like him still, or he is like it. A capital portrait, but indifferently paid. What can I possibly have to promise him? what condition can he wish to impose? Well, I am not too particular, I stand pretty well alone; I don't think I need mind anything he would propose. There used to be a decent tavern near the Park in Camden Town, but ten or eleven years bring many changes. I'll find some place to dine in. Dine! the idea is magnificent. I can't say I have dined since I revisited the shores of Albion; and there are more sovs. where this came from. Now to make the best of it."

He carefully buttoned up his coat again, and walked with increasing speed through Gloucester Gate. Passing the "York and Albany" as too grand to welcome a customer in his plight, he found a less pretentious hostelry in a street beyond, where his discriminating orders were carefully carried out, for this homeless wayfarer had still a possession left, of which neither fate nor his own recklessness had robbed him—an effective and attractive manner.

He was waited on with attention, lingering long over a substantial repast and some excellent ale. Having tipped the waitress handsomely, according to the standard of the place, he smoked a cigarette

while reading a weekly paper, and finally he sallied forth to make his way to the scene of his expected interview, to secure a room and make due preparations for so important an occasion. Following the road which skirts the Park he walked briskly towards St. John's Wood.

As he passed a row of severely respectable houses with porticoes and high steps, a well-dressed lady, followed by two children in fanciful finery, was descending from one of them, evidently intending to enter a bougham which waited below.

Something in the group attracted our wanderer's attention; he passed on as the lady was giving some directions to a neat maid-servant who held the carriage door open, while her pretty muslin apron and pink cap ribbons fluttered in the wind; and neither he nor his keen enquiring glance attracted her notice.

After taking a few steps he paused and turned abruptly, meeting the carriage which was driving off.

The lady had bent forward to arrange some wraps round the children who sat opposite, and her profile showed clearly against the glass of the closed window.

"By heaven!" muttered the observer, "it's herself; and in flourishing circumstances. Is this good or ill luck? Ill, I'm afraid; she could never bring luck to any one." He stood still in deep thought, and then walked back to the house he had just passed, ascended the steps with an air of decision and rang the visitors' bell.

The door was quickly opened by the smart maid-servant who had just attended her mistress to the carriage.

"Does Mr. Smith live here—Mr. Algernon Smith?" facing about with an air of assurance.

"No," returned the girl, gazing at him uneasily, "not here."

"Why, what's the number?"—glancing at the door—"Seven? Ay, seven it is! Are you quite sure there is no gentleman of the name of Smith boarding here? Perhaps the lady of the house might know."

"We keep no boarders," exclaimed the servant indignantly as she partially closed the door. "This is Mr. Ackland's house; and Mrs. Ackland has just gone out driving with the children."

"I am very sorry to trouble you"—politely—"but perhaps you could tell me if there is a Mr. Smith—Mr. Algernon Smith among the inhabitants of this terrace?"

"There's no such a name," she returned, shutting the door sharply in his face.

He smiled and went on his way. But before he had cleared the well-kept, highly respectable houses, he stopped again, and turning to look back he laughed aloud, a curious mocking laugh. The sound offended the ear of a stately policeman, who was solemnly marching on his beat. He cast an indignant and suspicious glance at the obnoxious stranger, and then followed him steadily till he was lost to sight in the St. John's Wood Road railway station.

Some hours later, as evening closed in, a visitor of a very different type alighted from a cab at the same door. A slight tall girl, wrapped in a dingy waterproof, a knitted shawl that had once been white tied loosely round her throat, and crowned by an unshapely black straw hat bent over her eyes, sprang out before cabby could descend, and running lightly up the steps, rang the bell. The door was speedily opened, and the same neat damsel who had repulsed the disreputable inquirer of the afternoon, gave a smiling welcome to the new-comer.

"Oh! Miss Marjory! missis didn't think you would be here till near eight. And you've missed Master George? He went away to meet you near an hour ago. Come in by the dining-room fire; you must be cold."

"Then George *did* go to meet me?" cried the girl glancing up with a rapid flashing glance. "I thought he would."

"Do come in, miss; I'll see to your luggage."

"I have but the one box, Susan—it is not heavy; make the man carry it up. I have just sixpence left over his fare, and I will give it to him."

"Very well, miss," taking the money. "Do go indoors, it is bitter cold. Master and missis are going out to dinner. Missis is dressed, she'll be downstairs directly." So saying, Susan ran away to subsidize the driver, while "Miss Marjory" walked slowly into the dining-room, and paused by a very dull fire, which was rapidly dying out. She removed her hat, laying it on the table. Hastily pushing back some stray locks of hair behind her ears, she looked round the familiar chamber.

Her distinctly marked brows met in a frown as she looked—a frown not indicative of anger so much as of a mental struggle. How well she remembered nearly every article of furniture in the childish days, which seemed to her so long ago; and that mark on the wall at the end of the room, within which hung a dim brown and olive green landscape, almost but not altogether hiding the darker space, *there* used to be her own fragile-looking mother's picture—a simpering shepherdess order of portrait it must be confessed, but lovely and adorable to Marjory's girlish fancy. Her heart beat quick and tears rose to her bright brown eyes, tears more of anger than of grief. "I wish I could have stayed at school," she murmured. "It wasn't quite the Garden of Eden, but I'm sure I was a better girl *there* than I can be here. I ought not to be such a fool. I will try to be wise and careful, then my poor father may like me better. I could love him well! How horrid it is to hate any one, it puts one so out of tune, but I can't help it, I——" The door opening put an end to her reflections and arrested the progress of her more prudent tendencies. A lady entered, a tall stately lady, her figure moulded on grand lines, rounded and full, but not stout; her complexion beautifully fair; her hair of the lightest brown, too pale to be

golden ; straight handsome features, the jaw a little heavy. The only fault an ill-conditioned critic could point out was that the quiet resolute eyes, eyebrows and lashes wanted colour. Her dress was of rich soft black silk and lace, and a small buckle of brilliants clasped a band of black velvet round her throat. Marjory stood very still, gazing at this handsome apparition. "You are a little before your time, my dear," said Mrs. Acland, advancing with outstretched hand and a pleasant smile ; "you cannot have taken the train I told you ; I am sorry you had no one to meet you." She bent forward to kiss her step-daughter as she spoke. Marjory did not refuse the salutation, but she turned her cheek to it.

"Well," continued Mrs. Acland, "I hope you have returned quite a reformed character, Marjory !—no more sulks, eh ? or angry scenes, but submission, cheerful submission to proper authority, and no more attempts to thrust yourself where you are not wanted ! I assure you, dear, both your father and I were *very* sorry to keep you so long away from home ; but now you are older and wiser, you will no doubt recognize the sincere regard for your real interests which actuates me. I am always willing to be your friend."

As Marjory listened to the soft measured accents in which Mrs. Acland habitually spoke, the good resolutions of a moment before melted away—as ice might before a fierce fire. She paused a moment, and then said shortly, "Thank you, I hope I am wiser."

"You will be hungry after your journey ? I have told Cutler to put your supper in the school-room. There is a fire there. Will you take off your cloak first ?"

"Yes ; but I am not hungry. I will wait and see my father."

"By all means ; but don't be too effusive—don't bedew his fresh shirt front with tears of joy."

Marjory flushed up, but resolutely refrained from words, and almost immediately the door opened to admit Mr. Acland, a good-looking, well-dressed, eminently respectable professional man. "Ha ! Marjory, glad to see you my dear," he exclaimed. Not too warm a reception for a daughter after more than a year's absence, but enough to stir Marjory's heart with an impulse to throw her arms round his neck and tell him her joy at seeing him again. The consciousness that her step-mother's eyes were upon her, however, chilled her into undemonstrativeness. She took his hand coldly and scarcely returned his kiss. "Very pleased to come home, Marge, eh ?"

"I was very happy at school," said Marjory in a low tone ; "but of course I am glad to be with you."

"And not with me ?" said Mrs. Acland, smiling playfully. Without waiting for an answer she went on, "There is the carriage, we must go ; it is quite twenty minutes drive to the Pearsons'." She wrapped herself up in a light-blue Indian shawl, embroidered in silvery white silk. "I told cook to give you tea in the school-

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room," she repeated, "you will be more comfortable there. Good-night, Marjory; you can see the children before they go to bed."

"You'll find them considerably grown," said Mr. Acland; "they will be glad to see you. I hope, my dear," a little pompously, "that you will be a help and an example to your little brother and sister;" and he stooped to kiss her.

Marjory threw her arms round his neck as Mrs. Acland left the room; "I am glad to be with *you*. Good-night."

"Take care, my dear, take care," settling his necktie; and he, too, left the room.

Marjory looked after him with moist eyes and a mocking curl on her lip. "An example, indeed—*me!*" she murmured.

"Would you like some warm water in your room, miss?" asked the servant, who had returned after attending her master and mistress to the carriage; "I'll take it up as I go to dress. I have my leave for the evening."

The tone was friendly but familiar, and struck Marjory's quick ear. "Thank you, yes. It is a treat to have hot water after school. I suppose I am to have my old room?"

"No, miss. Mrs. Acland wanted it for a day-nursery now Master Herbert and Miss Louie are getting on. You are to have the back attic beside ours. I'm afraid you'll find it very cold."

"I will go and take off my things at all events. Perhaps by that time George will have returned;" and Marjory ran hastily upstairs, past the drawing-room and Mrs. Acland's elegantly furnished bedroom, the comfortable nurseries, and up a last narrow, ladder-like flight, which led to the most elevated chambers.

She looked sharply round at the sloping roof, the uncurtained window, the little bedstead with its faded coloured coverlet, the darned piece of carpet beside it, the old washstand, from which the paint had been scrubbed, and worse than all, the small new, square, unsteady looking-glass, which imparted a green tinge and slight one-sidedness to the objects it reflected.

Tears filled her eyes; at which, though they were unseen, she blushed. "I am tired and hungry," she said to herself, "but I will not make a fool of myself. And at any rate this wretched little room is all my own and there is gas. "Oh! Susan, have you a match?"

"Yes," coming in a little breathless; "and I'll get you a scrap of candle. You know missis always turns off the gas at the main herself at half-past ten."

"She always did."

"Tea is ready, miss. Mrs. Cutler—that's the new cook—has put you up some cold meat;" and Susan departed.

Marjory, having made her toilet rapidly, went down to the nursery. On opening the door she saw a well-ordered, comfortable room, lit by the glow of a bright fire, nurse at her needlowork beside the large table and a neat nursemaid sitting on the floor showing a

picture-book to a little curly-headed rosy-checked boy, while a bright dark-eyed girl about a year older was making tea for a gorgeous doll who was seated in her owner's little armchair.

There was a pause, every one looked up, and then nurse slowly rose, exclaiming, "Law, Miss Marjory."

"Don't you remember me, Louie?" said Marjory. The child left her doll and came slowly forward, hanging her head shyly. "Why, Louie! don't you remember the games we used to have, and the boy dolly I dressed for you?"

By this time the child had drawn near; then came a laugh, and two chubby arms were clasped round Marjory's neck as she lifted her. "Don't you know me—who am I?"

"It's Marge," cried the little one, kissing her heartily. "Shall you stay now, Marge? Will you make a dress for my new beautiful doll!"

Marjory did not answer for an instant; she hugged the child to her heart with a sense of the warmest gratitude for her sweet welcoming kisses. Here was something to love her and to be loved.

"Good evening, nurse," she exclaimed, mastering her voice. "How Louie has grown! she is quite a great girl; and Herbert, too, why he hasn't anything of the baby about him now." She spoke for a few minutes to both children, for the boy soon clamoured for notice and asked if she hadn't brought him something, and then promising to see them early in the morning she went away to the depths of the basement eager to see her own brother, the only creature who really belonged to her.

When she opened the school-room door, a slight boy of fifteen or sixteen, with dark-brown hair, laughing eyes and long thin hands hanging far out of his sleeves, who was standing before the fire, sprang forward to meet her. "Why, Marjory, you gave me a start, I can tell you, when I couldn't find you at the station! You are such a queer little thing, I didn't know but you might have run away!" and he bestowed a hearty hug and kiss upon his sister. "You ain't a little thing any more, Marge; you have stretched out wonderfully!"

"I was afraid you might be gone to sea before I came back," she replied, slipping her arm through his, "you are such a lazy correspondent, you bad boy! I never know what is going on."

"Well! it is jolly having you home again anyhow!"

"Home!" repeated Marjory scornfully. "Do you call Mrs. Aeland's house home?"

"It's father's house, not hers," returned the boy. Marjory murmured something; and he continued, "For that matter Mrs. A. ain't half bad, anyway she hasn't been to be this time, and she has been quite friendly about my going to sea."

"And how is the Monster?"

"Well, a trifle bigger than ever, and queer, but not a bad fellow. I never thought he was. You are a bitter little pill, Marjory!"

"And you are too soft, George. Still I am glad to feel you near me after these long months."

"Yes, it seems years since we were home!"

"More than a year," said Marjory. "You remember I was asked to spend the summer holidays at Marshlands? Oh! George, it was such a delightful time! Imagine a big farm, cows to milk, dear rough ponies to ride, and a boat on the Broad! Oh! and such cream and strawberries! Then at Christmas the little ones were threatened with chickenpox, and Mrs. Acland *couldn't* think of my running into danger!" a significant emphasis on the last words.

"So it is two years since I saw you. Well, you are going to stay now, and we'll try and make some fun," cried her brother.

"Try," she repeated, letting his arm go after pressing it closely for a minute, and walking to the fire—"try if you like." She stood gazing at the red coals, while her brother gazed at her, dimly perceiving the change which the last year had wrought.

She was slender to thinness, yet not angular; her quick slight gestures had a peculiar grace, partly the result of perfect proportion; her dark, red-brown wavy hair was turned carelessly back from her forehead, round which it grew thickly in a graceful distinct line; her bright, rapidly glancing eyes of doubtful colour; a scornful rosy mouth which could smile at times sweetly, and a clear though somewhat pale brunette complexion, did not suffice to convince all her schoolfellows that Marjory Acland was a pretty girl; some thought her just not plain, while others pronounced her nearly beautiful. This evening the cold air and the warm fire combined had given her a brilliant colour, which lit up her eyes and lent fairness to her complexion.

"Come, Marge, if you are not hungry, I am," cried George, drawing his chair to the table, on which tea and remains of a cold sirloin were set out.

"Here is a nice cake for you," said a stout red-faced woman, entering unceremoniously. "I baked it a' purpose for missee's home-coming, and glad I am to see her. Leave a bit for Mr. Cranston." So saying she went swiftly away.

"Cookie is a capital old woman! I can tell you, Monster and I would often have short commons but for her," cried George.

"One would think *both* of you were Mrs. Ackland's stepsons."

"Yes, especially Dick," returned George.

"Perhaps poor old Monster isn't her son really! Perhaps he has been changed when a baby by a wicked nurse, or a malignant witch, or Mrs. Acland herself, as we read in story-books," cried Marjory, laughing.

"Oh! he is her son right enough," said George. "He looks like her sometimes."

"Unhappy Monster!" put in Marjory with a comic look of compassion.

"Look here, Marjory, I wish you wouldn't call him Monster. Though he is always so quite and we used to think dull, I believe you hurt him with your scornful mocking ways. Really, girls are ever so much harder and crueller than boys! Dick Cranston isn't half a bad fellow, and not half such a monster as he was."

"Indeed!" said Marjory, opening her eyes. "Has he grown down then?"

"No, but he isn't such a bundle of legs and arms as he used to be; and he has been no end of a help to me in arithmetic and Euclid; he is ready to sit with me and help me every evening after the day's work at the office."

"Ah! yes, I can imagine arithmetic and dry stuff of that kind just suiting the Mon——Dick, I mean."

As she spoke, the object of her remarks came in—a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with a strong quiet face, fair-haired and blue-eyed. Thick, soft, downy moustaches, a shade lighter and more golden than his hair, already covered his upper lip and, added to his size and gravity, gave him the air of being two or three and twenty instead of nineteen. He was dressed in a suit of rough dark tweed, which had evidently been long worn and was covered with dust, and held under his arm a large, thin, shabby-looking book. He stood still for an instant, meeting Marjory's eyes with a frank smile, and colouring through his fair skin like a girl.

"Good evening, Dick," said Marjory civilly, holding out her hand without rising.

"How do you do?" he returned, laying down his book and advancing to take her hand. "When did you arrive?"

"Not quite an hour ago. What has happened to you? Have you been rolling on the road, or have you been getting yourself up as the dusty miller?"

"Oh! I didn't know I was in such a state. I stopped to watch the men dressing stones for that new church by Falkland Crescent. There was a lot of lime and stuff blowing about. I will go and brush it off;" and he left the room quickly.

"You are right, George," said Marjory with a nod and an air of superiority. "He is bigger, yet less monstrous, but nearly as shy and awkward as ever."

"Just you wait," returned her brother; "Dick isn't a bad fellow."

Dick soon returned, and drawing up his chair fell to on the cold beef.

"I met with a man I haven't seen for years," he said, after a silence of some minutes, "that's what kept me later than usual. He was very good to me when I was a little chap. I was always fond of seeing builders at work, and he used to let me try my hand at chipping the stones and laying the bricks."

"Was he a workman then?" asked Marjory.

"Yes, a mason; he is a master mason now. I am going to see him on Sunday."

"I believe, Dick, you would rather carry a hod than hold a pen," cried George.

Dick smiled, but did not reply.

"Mr. Acland and my mother out!" he asked after a pause.

George nodded. "They have gone to a big dinner."

There was another pause, during which Marjory played an imaginary tune on the table with her slender but, it must be confessed, red schoolgirl-like hands, and looked round the room with quick scornful glances.

"You haven't had many additions to your luxurious furniture since I left," she said.

The furniture consisted of strong, heavy deal chairs and a stout table. The floor was uncovered save by a square of oilcloth, from which all traces of pattern had long disappeared; a dislocated pair of tongs and an attenuated poker were lying within a fender too small for the hearth; a couple of shelves ran along the wall opposite the fireplace, which were crowded with books, writing materials, carpenter's tools, and a variety of miscellaneous treasures such as boys collect; under the curtainless window stood a long painted box, something like a seaman's chest. That was all.

"A little more tea, if you please," said Dick Cranston, handing in his cup. "I daresay it seems rather miserable to you? I suppose you had a very smart drawing-room at your school?" His voice was deep and rich, but still youthful.

"Smart! oh dear no; still it was fit for a lady to sit in. *This* is really too dreadful. I hope my father will allow me some comfort now I have come back."

"I suppose you are going to stay at home?" said Dick, stirring his tea.

"I am afraid so."

"Would you rather go back to school?" asked Dick, looking steadily at her as if trying to make her out.

"Do you think this house can be very delightful to return to?" asked Marjory with a quick grimace.

"No, I don't," said Dick heartily.

"Still, school was not paradise," she continued. "At least I shall read what I like and spend my time as I like down here. But you boys," with ineffable superiority, "must keep your things in better order now I am to share your barn or dungeon."

"Oh! you will be in the drawing-room, I suppose," said George.

"Not if I can help it."

"Don't give yourself airs, Marge," cried her brother; "I can't bear you when you are so conceited."

"It is an untidy hole," remarked Dick, casting a penitent glance at the confusion of the shelves.

"And when are you to go to sea, George?" asked Marjory, after some further talk, as she pushed away her plate.

"In about a month."

"But how has it been managed? You must pass an examination. At least, I know Mary Devonport, one of my schoolfellows, has a brother in the navy, and——"

"Ah, but I am not going into the navy. I am going as apprentice on one of Rennie & Co.'s ships."

"What!" with an indescribable quiver of indignation in her voice, "on board a trading-ship—you? Ah! I understand now why Mrs. Acland was so good-naturedly ready to forward your wishes. It will just suit *her* to have you at a distance and degraded to the position of a common sailor. Our obligations to your mother, Dick, increase every day," cried Marjory, her gipsy face lighting up with intense anger.

Young Cranston flushed a deep red, and he moved uneasily in his chair.

"For shame, Marjory," exclaimed George. "I don't mind. All I want is to go to sea. I can tell you the mercantile marine is not to be sneezed at. Besides, I can get out of it into the naval reserve, and become a R.N. officer. You needn't blaze away like that;" and he glanced at Dick.

"You are as weak as water, George," she cried contemptuously.

"I don't wonder at your being bitter," said Dick in a low tone; and, rising from his seat, he went over by the fireplace. "George *ought* to be in the navy; but I think your father has a right to part of the blame. Try to be just as well as indignant, Marjory! God knows if it could help I would turn out to-morrow and labour for my living with my hands. I'll do it yet! Sometimes I am stung beyond endurance by the contemptible position I hold, especially when *you* send your words like darts into my soul! If it were not that I have a liking for your father, and took the place he offered me in his office as the best way of lightening the burden to him, I'd not stay here. Do you think I have any satisfaction in stupefying myself over the old-world bosh I have to copy by the yard? Why, it is softening my brain. Or that I enjoy the food my mother begrudges me? Now that *you* have come back I despise myself more than ever. I feel an intruder more than ever. You have always shown the contempt you feel for me; but I don't complain. It is natural—it is almost justifiable, yet——" He stopped short and turned his face away.

Marjory was thunderstruck. Never before had the despised "Monster" spoken so many consecutive words to her. A rush of contrition flooded her impulsive heart. She suddenly remembered the curious unfriendliness of Mrs. Acland towards her first-born—the silent resignation with which he had endured the hard loneliness of his lot, and she felt ashamed of herself.

The last year had developed her greatly. She was still hasty, quick to resent offence or to laugh at what seemed dull and awkward. But the woman's heart within her had woken up, and told her, that though distasteful and contemptible in her eyes, her father's step-son might have feelings that could be wounded—a soul that could suffer.

"Don't talk nonsense!" she exclaimed, starting up and coming over to him. "I don't despise you! Your being Mrs. Acland's son is certainly no recommendation; but I don't mean to be ill-natured. You shouldn't mind me. I can't help feeling wild at times. Still I do not think you heeded what I said, or—or I don't think—that is I *hope* I should not have been so disagreeable. I will be better in the future. At least, I'll try. Shake hands!"

Young Cranston turned to her with a searching look in his steady eyes, and took the hand she offered. "I am quite ready to be friends with you," he said, "but I don't expect you will be able to keep your tongue quiet, and you can't understand——" He stopped.

"I am not so stupid, though!" said Marjory with a saucy smile and a pretty bend of her head to one side.

"You are a good deal too sharp," cried George. "I do hope you will behave yourself properly in future, and as things are not generally too pleasant, let us try to be happy together."

"Very well; while we *are* together. But oh! George, I cannot bear to think of your going away as a common sailor! It is too, too cruel." She threw her arms around his neck and strove to suppress the angry tears that would well up.

"Come, come, Marjory, don't be foolish, I'll be all right. I'd far rather be a cabin-boy than be in the office."

Dreadfully ashamed of having betrayed emotion before the boys, Marjory struggled back to tolerable composure as Mrs. Cutler came in to remove the tea-things. Then, with the laudable intention of making herself amiable, Marjory asked Dick what book he had brought home under his arm.

He opened it, and drawing a chair between her and George, displayed his new treasure. It was an old volume on architecture, with illustrations exemplifying the process of building in various stages, with diagrams and measurements.

Over this work Dick grew animated and even eloquent. The boys were soon talking cheerfully, but Marjory was silent and preoccupied. Her colour faded and her lips were tremulous. "George was going to sea as an apprentice, going to unknown hardships and horrors"—this was the sentence which kept repeating itself in her heart, while fragmentary recollections of newspaper paragraphs describing the terrible cruelty of sea-captains came back to torment her.

It was a relief when cook looked in to say it was time to turn off the gas, and she could shut herself in her room to cry freely.

CHAPTER II.

TWINING THE STRANDS.

IN spite of having been later than usual the previous night Mrs. Acland was up betimes the morning after her step-daughter's return. She was a careful methodical woman, and before her husband had issued from his dressing-room she had descended to the dining-room in the neatest of morning gowns, and had pointed out one or two streaks of dust in the remoter corners of the sideboard to the housemaid who was bringing in the breakfast.

The sound of a door closing below attracted her attention. Stepping to the window she saw her eldest son come up from the basement entrance and walk towards the garden gate. Her face darkened and she tapped vehemently on the glass. Dick looked back, and, in obedience to an imperative gesture, returned to the house, entering by the front door, which his mother opened for him.

"Where are you going at this early hour?" she asked him when they had reached the dining-room; "you will be at the office before the doors are open. Tell me what scheme is in your head?" she spoke sternly.

As Dick met her eyes a faint smile curled his lip, but he replied with quiet respect, "My scheme was to see an old schoolfellow who is in a builder's office, and I sometimes call to look over the plans he is working at."

"That is like your usual obstinacy! You have a better opening given you by Mr. Acland than you have any right to expect—a chance of lightening the burden you have been to me, and instead of devoting yourself to the profession in which you might win fortune, you waste your time hankering after stones and mortar, some rubbish of an ideal!"

"I do not waste my time," returned the young man with a sort of weary indifference; "I never shirk the office work; but I have a right to my time before and after hours; *that* does not take anything from Mr. Acland."

"It does; it fritters away your mental force. Concentration is the best road to success. I hate to see any trace of what your unfortunate father used to call 'versatility' in you; and you are strangely like as well as unlike him. I trust you will not bring misery upon me as *he* did."

Dick made no reply; but a grim look of displeasure gathered over his brow, and brought out a decided resemblance to his surviv-

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ing parent. Mrs. Acland gazed at him, her light eyes darkening with a curious expression of dislike and distrust as he silently turned away.

"If you had half George's frankness I could understand and guide you ; as it is——" she interrupted herself with some impetuosity. "At any rate assume the bearing of a gentleman if you haven't the instincts of one, and don't slink out of the kitchen entrance like a servant, when your mother is mistress of the house."

"The servants are considerably more independent than I am," he said, in a deep tone that had a touch of feeling. "That is not your fault, I know. Things will be different some day." He left the room and the house, closing the door and gate behind him carefully and quietly.

Mrs. Acland stood still for a moment, a look of baffled anger on her face.

Her firstborn was no favourite. There was a kind of antagonism between them dating far back—when, as a big and somewhat lumbering child of three or four, he used to importune his mother for kisses, and was invariably and coldly repulsed ; for Mrs Acland was much harassed at that time, and was not the type of woman to whom the loving kisses of a little child would bring any solace.

Later, she visited the sins of the father upon the son, probably the only portion of the Decalogue she had ever followed.

As she stood thus in deep thought for some minutes, holding back the drapery of her skirt from the glowing fire with one white but by no means small hand, the other placed lightly on the mantel-piece—the steady repose of her attitude was indicative of strength—the expression of her face grew more restful and content. Last night's dinner had been a success. It was at the house of a wealthy solicitor, to which, as to the inner circle of her husband's profession, she had long wished for an invitation. For Mrs. Acland was not as yet very sure of her foothold in Philistia, nor was quite certain that the solemn and irreproachable society into which Mr. Acland had introduced her had set its seal of adoption upon her smooth wide low forehead. It was now more than seven years since he had drawn upon himself the cold looks and dubious head-shakings of his peers by his marriage with the interesting widow of a vagabond artist, who, having deserted his wife and child, lost his life in a steamboat accident on one of the great American rivers. Mr. Acland had met his fate at the bedside of an old lady, a wealthy client to whom the widow acted as companion and nurse. The client died before she had time to execute an intended codicil to her will in favour of her valued attendant, and Mr. Acland did his best to console the disappointed widow. The result was his marriage and the adoption of the new Mrs. Acland's son, a big-boned, awkward shy lad of twelve.

This step seemed the more idiotic on the part of Robert Acland, because just at the time he had sustained severe losses by the failure of two companies, in which he had invested part of his capital.

So far, however, he had no reason to regret his choice. He was a quiet hard-working man of the upper middle-class, good-looking and well-dressed, loving neatness, comfort, peace-at-any-price; and the relief of finding his house well-administered, accounts clearly kept, dinners admirably cooked and served at a smaller cost than paid for the muddle over which his first wife presided, was an infinite relief, and created in him unbounded faith in his present ruler's wisdom, strength and capability.

"Good morning," cried George Acland cheerfully, interrupting his step-mother's musings. "Anyhow, I am in good time to-day. Governor's not down yet?"

"You are a good boy into the bargain," she returned pleasantly. "Your father is ready; he only waited to see the children. They want so much to breakfast with us now. Louis is old enough, but I cannot separate them."

Here Mr. Acland came in, and with a somewhat precise "good morning" to his son, took his seat, and breakfast began.

"Where is Marjory?" he asked presently.

"Overslept herself a little, I daresay," replied his wife, holding out his cup of tea. "She was no doubt fatigued by her journey, and——" The entrance of Marjory cut short the excuses. She looked better and brighter than the night before, and paused for an instant as she closed the door, looking from her father to Mrs. Acland and back again. She had wakened refreshed, and therefore reasonable. She had recalled some good advice her friend the music teacher had given her, and determined to be wise and enduring, self-controlled and conciliating—all, in short, that Nature nearly forbid her to be; then she said her prayers fervently and descended to the combat.

Her first impulse was to hug her father, to kiss George, to express her delight at sitting down to breakfast with them again; but that would entail a polite embrace to Mrs. Acland, a sacrifice she could not make, notwithstanding her prayers and resolutions. So with a general "good morning" she took her place opposite George.

"Good morning, my dear," from papa.

"Have an egg, Marge?" from George.

"I hope you slept well and are rested, Marjory," from Mrs. Acland in a friendly tone.

"Oh yes, thank you. No; no egg, George.

"Oh! there are no more I see."

"I seldom take eggs myself, and there is plenty of bread and butter." said Mrs. Acland in a calm abstract tone,

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"Marjory is really looking very well, and much improved," continued Mrs. Acland.

"Yes, and grown a good bit. Marjory must be about five feet five or six, eh?"

"Oh, have no idea of measurements. I only hope she has grown in grace, and left all the obstinacy we used to quarrel about at school. If so, there is no reason why we should not be excellent friends, eh, Marjory? I have no doubt the training you have had has taught you patience and common sense, which you sorely needed." Mrs. Acland smiled quite kindly as she spoke.

"What training?" asked Marjory, looking up quickly. "Do you mean teaching? That is pretty severe training certainly."

"I told you the plan would answer," said Mrs. Acland, glancing expressively at her husband, who answered with a nod.

"Where is Dick?" he asked presently.

"He went off quite early; I don't know where. I am afraid he does not pay sufficient attention to his work; he always has some notchet in his head."

"I have really no fault to find with him; he is steady enough."

"I *hope* so," said his mother emphatically. There was a pause.

"It is quite fine and much warmer to-day," said Mrs. Acland.

"I think, Marjory, you had better take the little ones out for their walk, and let nurse get on with their spring frocks. Silence." Mrs. Acland looked steadily at her step-daughter, who coloured as she replied:—

"I would much rather help to make the frocks than go out in the clothes I am obliged to wear. It is nearly two years since I had anything new, and my skirts are like a ballet-dancer's. Don't ask me to go out till I have a dress and hat and boots fit to be seen."

"It would have been better and *wiser*, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland mildly, "if you had asked me with civility to examine your wardrobe and supply your wants. I wish to do justice to all, and to take care, while you and your brother have in moderation what you need, your father's resources are not exhausted, for you must not imagine he is a rich man. It is, as I have often told you, a strain to keep up the appearances which are due to his position and of importance to us all."

A dead silence followed. Marjory's bright face settled into an expression of sullen submission. Mr. Acland cleared his throat with a loud hem, while George looked and felt infinitely annoyed.

After a few moments of this significant "hush," Mr. Acland rose and saying, "I am a little behind time, I shall probably be half-an-hour or so late this evening," left the room, Mrs. Acland following him to pay the last wifely attentions before he started.

The sound of the front door closing was followed by Mrs. Acland's

reappearance. She walked to the fireplace and rang for the parlour-maid to remove the breakfast.

"Carry down all your things to the day-nursery, and I will look through them when I have seen cook and given orders for the day." There was a complete but indescribable change in her tone; and without waiting a reply she left the brother and sister together.

"You *are* a stupid, Marge," he exclaimed as he rose and confronted her. "Why *will* you rub her the wrong way? You make her hard and disagreeable. See, she is right enough with me, and not half bad. I don't think you are quite fair."

"Oh, you foolish, foolish boy! She behaves decently to you because you let her throw dust in your eyes and kiss and cuddle you, you big baby! Don't you see she is the sort of woman that would caress you on the very edge of the pit into which she was going to thrust you?"

"Pooh! that is regular story-book style. You were always too ready to romance. Girls are so carried away by their imaginations. You should try and be reasonable."

"I like to hear you preach, Georgie. Why, you are a mere boy, and you don't understand the instinct that makes me dread and dislike our step-mother. I don't understand it myself. I must show her my rags, at any rate. Perhaps they may move her compassion."

With a fine sneer on her saucy mouth, Marjory went away up to her room, to undergo the mortifying process of carrying down her belongs to the nursery, and parading her poverty under the critical eyes of nurse, who, though a good sort of woman, had the innate respect for fine clothes, be they acquired how they may, which distinguishes female character of a certain type, and induces a more than half-contemptuous pity for those wretches who are deficient in this important possession.

Mrs. Acland, being a woman of clear if not wide vision, kept her aims distinctly and steadily in sight. She began from the outset to put Marjory in what she considered her "right place."

To their step-mother these elder children were obnoxious because they existed and must be maintained at the expense, as she viewed it, of her own highly-prized treasures. George had found favour in her eyes, as she had soon succeeded in blinding him with small mercies, and thought it well to show the world that she could attach one of her step-children at least. Moreover, he could be provided for at small cost and away from his father and his home, while Marjory could scarcely be driven from the paternal roof without some especially good reason. Indeed, Mrs. Acland had found it was rather risky leaving her so long at school. At home, then, she must be, but she must be of use there. She must be so handled as to represent the thorn in her just and gentle step-mother's side—the

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hopeless irreconcilable, whom neither kindness nor wisdom could subdue. This condition of things might lead to her leaving home by her own desire, and in the meantime gave Mrs. Acland a good deal of power. So Marjory was promoted to be nursery-governess and extra needle-woman, considerably relieving nurse, and enabling the nurse-maid to bestow more time on cook; while her own chances of practising were few and far between, and finally ceased altogether, as Mrs. Acland resolved to keep the piano (the piano which belonged to Marjory's own mother) locked, as "such strumming was not good for so valuable an instrument."

Though coming round in some measure to her brother's estimate of Dick, Marjory was in too bad a temper to be either kind or courteous to him. She had, in her hasty judgment, set him down as a stupid, silent nonentity, not understanding the depths indicated by his uncomplaining endurance of her former taunts and occasional half-contemptuous notice. She had been better, certainly, he thought, since she returned from school, but she was still painfully variable.

"What has become of Dick?" asked Marjory one evening about fortnight after her return; "he always disappears after tea. Why does he go away?"

"Because he thinks his being here annoys you," cried George with some warmth, "so he goes and sits in our room; and you know what a miserable place it is."

"But that is nonsense," she returned; "I haven't been uncivil since I came back, and I don't want to be ill-natured to poor old Dick. I wish you would tell him to come down here."

"I have told him till I am tired," said her brother.

"Then I will go and ask him myself," exclaimed Marjory, throwing down some widths of brown merino she was diligently stitching together, and away she ran to the boys' room, which was an excrescence at the top of the kitchen stair. As to going into Dick's bedroom, she never hesitated; he was a sort of inferior brother, towards whom conscience told her she had been unjust. Moreover, she was possessed by a spirit of playful tyranny that made her impatient of losing a subject or a victim. Dick had no business to absent himself in that way when he saw, or ought to see, that she was willing, in school parlance, to "make up" with him.

"Come in," said Dick when she knocked at his door, but he did not rise or look round.

He had removed the looking-glass from the chest of drawers which served as a dressing-table, and had spread over it a sheet of paper, on which he was drawing diligently by the yellow light of a composite candle.

"What are you doing? why do you run away to this cold miserable room?" cried Marjory, coming to his side and leaning one elbow on the corner of the drawers as she looked up in his face.

Dick gazed at her in astonishment. "Marjory!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; did you think it was cookie? There is better light in the schoolroom, why do you stay here?"

"Because, oh! because I don't want to be in the way. You and George would rather be by yourselves naturally enough," he returned, as he resumed his drawing.

"I did not think you were spiteful," said Marjory, her smooth brown fair cheek flushing under the stings of conscience. "I know I have been nasty, but *you* need not be implacable."

"Implacable!" rejoined Dick, with a smile, as he looked down into the bright pleading eyes upraised to his, recognizing suddenly that Marjory was something better than pretty. "That is a big word! I am not implacable or spiteful—why should I be? It is quite natural that I should be in your way, that you should dislike me. I should in your place."

"But I don't dislike you, and George is quite fond of you," cried Marjory, bent on "making up," yet somewhat checked by his composure. "Do come and sit with us and show me what you are doing?"

Dick looked into her eyes for an instant. "I think you are in earnest," he said; "yes, I'll come." He gathered his pencils and papers together, Marjory aiding him, and without saying more he followed her to the schoolroom.

"Ah! that's right," cried George, looking up from a well-thumbed novel; "come along, old fellow, we three ought to hold together, we have a common cause. Here spread out your traps near the gas!"

"And make haste, it will soon be turned off," added Marjory.

"It is not more than half-past eight," returned Dick; "I have a good hour and a half;" and he again set to work.

Marjory picked up the material she had been sewing and stood for a moment or two gazing over Dick's shoulder at the lines which divided his paper into angles and squares and circles, with neat minute numerals here and there.

"What is it for, Dick?" she asked.

"Oh! nothing particular. I was helping a friend of mine the other day to copy a plan for a big house some fellow is going to build in the country, and I can't help fancying I could make a better disposition of the space, so I kept the dimensions in my head and I am making a plan of my own."

"I suppose you will give it to your friend and he will show it to his master and get the credit of it?" cried Marjory, still gazing with interest at Dick's work.

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He laughed, "There is small chance of an apprentice's plan being looked at. I don't suppose any one will see this."

"What a pity! it is so nicely and neatly done."

"Oh! my work is clumsy enough. If you could see some of the things at Malet and Driver's office—they are beautiful!"

"Why don't you try and do pictures?" asked Marjory.

"I don't seem to care for them. I like the projections and shadows, the angles and curves of a great building—they are real."

"But how hard it must be to get such work to do," urged Marjory, returning to her seat and continuing to run her seams with diligence. "Now with some paper and a few water colours you can sit in your room and make a pretty picture."

"And sell it perhaps," added George.

"A very big perhaps," returned Dick laughing. "There is a good deal wanting besides paper and colours. I like pictures well enough, and I think I could sketch a bit, but they are not in my line. I sometimes long to get away from the office even to turn stone mason."

"Stone mason!" exclaimed Marjory, looking up surprised, while she drew out her needle and a long thread. "You are not in earnest, Dick!"

"Yes, I am. I daresay you'd laugh if you knew how fond I am of stones. It takes a lot of hard work to make anything of them, but when you do they last. Look at Westminster Abbey and the Temple Church, why hundreds of years haven't spoil their beauty, either added to it."

"I don't imagine many stone masons think in this way," said Marjory.

"Very few, I daresay. I suppose mechanical labourers make up the greater number in every trade or profession, but when thoughts come into your head and you feel as if the things you handle have a life of their own, why then work is—must be a delight!"

He stopped abruptly and went on with his drawing, while Marjory looked infinitely surprised at such expressions from a creature she had always considered dull, heavy and, but for his silent indifference, contemptible.

"Oh! I assure you Dick is a dab at architecture," exclaimed George. "He ought to be our future Sir Christopher Wren, our—oh! I can't remember any other fellow. He can't pass a wall without looking to see how the stones or bricks are set, and if the thing is well-finished and solid."

"I daresay you'll laugh," returned Dick—he was in an unusually genial, communicative mood—"but a fine well-set solid wall with its edges and even courses gives me a sort of pleasure you couldn't understand."

"Why, that goes beyond 'finding sermons in stones,'" said Mar-

jory, the quick smile peculiar to her sparkling in her eyes and playing on her lips and cheeks like a sudden sunbeam.

"I went to see a friend of mine, a mason, on Sunday," resumed Dick after a pause, "and he showed me such a beautiful plan of a house in the country he thinks he will be employed in the building. I wish I were to have a hand in it."

"Is he a common workman?" asked Marjory.

"No; he has got beyond that. When I was a little chap and my mother away abroad, I used to live with an old woman—I believe she had been my father's nurse; I was let to run wild as much as I liked, and I was always hanging about some houses that were being built. Old Roper used to notice me at odd times, and give me a tool to play with now and again. One day his little girl fell into a biggish brook close by, and I went in after her; it was deeper than we thought, but I managed to keep her up till help came. Her father was desperately fond of her, and made a tremendous row about what I had done, as if I was no end of a hero. Then I was more with them than ever—every minute I could get away from school. I learned lots of things from old Roper, and right glad I was to see him again."

"I can imagine you must find it a dreadful bore having to go to the office," said Marjory.

"It is——" he stopped, and added, "There is no use trying to say what it is, for it has to be done."

"But why did you not make your mother put you into an architect's or a builder's office?" asked Marjory.

"Make my mother!" repeated Dick with a harsh laugh. "That is easier said than done. And you forget, too, that neither my mother nor myself have any money to pay the fees of apprenticeship. I had no choice."

"Well, if they wouldn't let me go to sea I should run away—be a cabin-boy," cried George with an air of heroic determination.

"Nonsense," said his sister scornfully.

"I am afraid neither builder nor architect would take a penniless runaway, so I had to bow to what is inevitable."

"Ah! that is detestable!" cried Marjory. "I have been fruitlessly fighting against the inevitable ever since I went to school, dying to have singing lessons from Signor Campanella instead of stray hints from good-natured little Miss Mills, the junior musical mistress, and begging for leave to attend Mademoiselle Duloque's French class all in vain. I had to hammer away as best I could with all the under-governesses, while the rich Liverpool and Birmingham girls had all the best lessons, which very few of them could appreciate. Oh! there is nothing so hateful as being poor. I wonder if my father cannot really afford to give me the education of a gentlewoman! I should like to be accomplished and beautifully dressed, and presented at Court with a train and feathers. I

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certain I could kick a train like the actress I saw when Mr. Cross took us to the pantomime."

She started up as she spoke, and hastily fastening the stuff she had sewn together with a few pins to her waist, proceeded to sail up and down the room, turning at each end with a dexterous sweep of her improvised train in a graceful stately fashion, very theatrical and effective.

Dick suspended his drawing to gaze at her, and George burst out laughing.

"I did not think you were such a conceited peacock," he exclaimed.

"Conceited! I do not think I am," resuming her walk and the kicking of her train; "I wish I could be; it must be so pleasant to be satisfied with oneself. Am I conceited, Dick?"

"I am not sure," looking gravely at her. "I believe with a little fine dress and company you would be. I fancy you think a good deal of yourself."

"I must if I am to live! Humility does not suit me; and you are a disagreeable boy to tell me plainly that I think too much of myself."

"I did not say that. I said you thought a good deal," returned Dick with a quiet smile, "you——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the friendly "cookie."

"Now, sit ye down," she exclaimed, "and have a bit of supper. See, I saved ye a mite of pastry and have made you a turnover each. There's a trifle of minced mutton inside 'em, as'll do you more good than sweets;" and she placed a small dish and three plates on the deal table, clattering down a few forks in a rough-and-ready fashion.

"Come now, eat 'em up while they are hot."

"We must wait till the performance is over," cried George, who was much amused by his sister's antics.

"Yes; can't I manage my train well, cookie dear?" said Marjory, recommencing her march.

"My!" exclaimed that functionary, gazing critically at the young lady, the backs of her hands resting on her hips, "it's just like play-acting."

"You see Cutler recognizes my genius," cried Marjory dramatically; "I will no longer submit to be undervalued by you miserable, half-fledged, half-civilized boys! I will escape the thralldom of grandeur where you cannot follow, where I shall not be contented to a faithful retainer for scraps of goodies filched from the abundance of the upstairs table, as though I were not entitled to my full share of all in this enslaved mansion. There are limits to my submission."

On this last sentence she brought out with great force, pointing a

scornful finger towards the ceiling. George laughed and applauded, and the sympathetic cookie exclaimed, "She do speak beautiful," when an awful sound hushed their mirth and fell like a ban upon the group. From the open door came the voice of Mrs. Acland, saying as she entered, "Pray, Marjory, is that the way to treat the material I have contrived to purchase for your use—sweeping the dusty floor with it? What ridiculous nonsense are you about? Pray remember you are no longer a baby. You had better go upstairs to nurse, she is ready to fit on your body. You ought to have finished your skirt by this time."

Marjory, her bright looks changed into frowning gravity, hastily unpinned her train and folded it up, while Mrs. Acland continued, "George, here is a letter from Messrs. Rennie & Duncan, telling your father that one of the boys they expected to sail in their next outward-bound ship is prevented by illness from joining, they will, therefore, send you instead. I congratulate you on getting off a fortnight sooner than you expected. You will sail this day week." She stood firm and quiet like an irresistible fate as she handed a letter to George.

"In a week? Oh! that is cruelly soon," cried Marjory, with the sound of tears in her voice.

"What are these?" asked Mrs. Acland, disdainfully examining the turnovers. "Cutler," she called after the vanishing cook, "take these to the larder. Supper is over; there is no need for a second edition of it. Go upstairs, Marjory," with sharp command. "I will follow you. Your dress must be finished to-morrow. Mr. Cross is coming to dinner and you must wear it."

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CHAPTER III.

A QUIET DINNER.

A DINNER-PARTY at Mr. Acland's was a rare and important event, costing the mistress of the house much anxious thought, not as to the dainty dishes fit to set before a king—these being of small difficulty to so accomplished a housekeeper—but as to the company.

Mrs. Acland was slowly though surely advancing towards the social position at which she aimed. The beauty of cleanliness and order which pervaded her dwelling, the good looks and careful dressing of her small children, the evident friendliness of her stepson, all scored in her favour; and if that ill-tempered, unmanageable girl, Marjory, had been wise enough to understand her own interests and willing to keep up a friendly appearance, the ring fence of fair-seeming would have been complete. But Marjory was irreconcilable.

Her prolonged banishment from her father's house to the cheerful atmosphere of a large, well-ordered, middle-class school probably saved her bright, impulsive disposition from being hardened and distorted by the suppression and irritation of her unhomelike home.

The guest in whose honour Marjory was to don her best frock was her father's junior partner, Mr. Cross—junior in rank but older in years—a stiff, silent, middle-class man. A more unimportant, unremarkable man could scarce be found, yet he had been sedulously courted by Mrs. Acland; nor without success.

The cautious bachelor had viewed his partner's marriage with strong though unexpressed disapprobation, and had long resisted all attempts to draw him into friendly intercourse out of office hours. Patience and perseverance, however, generally attain their end, and Mr. Cross was gradually mollified and enticed into a refrigerated degree of familiarity.

He preferred a *tete-à-tete* with his partner after dinner to any company banquet, as Mrs. Acland very well knew; but on the present occasion she had invited the clergyman whose church she attended and his wife, also a rich stock-broker who had managed Mr. Acland's little investments very satisfactorily.

Marjory and George received strict injunctions to be dressed and in the drawing-room after dinner. A similar order was issued to Dick, who preferred remaining late at the office to finish some work.

Marjory, however, obeyed readily; she had a pleasant recollection of occasional presents and small kindnesses from her father's

partner ; and she was intermittently anxious to win her only surviving parent's notice and approbation, though at times wildly angry with him for allowing a stranger, as she always considered her step-mother, to turn him against his own first-born.

It was with a certain sense of humiliation that she arrayed herself in her only presentable dress, not too well made by nurse, and took her place in the drawing-room. If she ventured to speak to Mr. Cross about George and her bitter disappointment at his being sent as an apprentice to sea, would it do any good? was the question which occupied her while she sat waiting for the ladies to come up from dinner.

It was the first time Marjory had seen the drawing room lit up since she returned. "How nice it all looks!" she said. "Mrs. Acland certainly has taste! she is awfully clever; no teaching, no book-learning could make one *her* match! I am not, at all events, and never will be," she sighed; "I care too much for things, I am too ready to go into a fury and cry!" George neither replied nor heard, he was deep in the morning paper's account of the Oxford and Cambridge crews.

Marjory relapsed into silence till the rustling of silk warned her the ladies were coming.

"What you say of home education is very true," said Mrs. Middleton, the clergyman's wife, as she came in with her hostess and settled herself in an easy chair—she was a pale quiet woman, not too well dressed in grey and pink—"but schools are different from what they used to be, and girls learn to know themselves better among companions and competitors than in the seclusion of home!"

"Still, a mother's care!" urged Mrs. Acland, looking round for George and Marjory.

"Even so. Yet I am not surprised that you should be reluctant to part with that sweet little girl," resumed Mrs. Middleton, "she and her brother make a charming picture; such well-mannered, prettily behaved children too! I find it very difficult to train my numerous flock. The boys going to a day school are at home in the evening, and make the others so rough."

"Let me introduce my eldest daughter to you," said Mrs. Acland with a charming smile. "Marjory, come here, my love."

With deepening colour and a slight frown Marjory drew near as awkwardly as was possible for her, and looking to the greatest disadvantage.

"Very happy to know you, my dear. You have only just returned from school?"

"Yes," said Marjory shortly.

"That is another pleasure of school life," pursued Mrs. Middleton, "the joy of returning home for good. I well remember my own emancipation. It is nice, is it not?"

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"Oh! very," in a dry tone.

"I suppose you brought back a good many prizes?"

"Not one," returned Marjory unflinchingly.

This was a poser. Mrs. Acland gave an expressive look to her guest, and remarked soothingly, "The race is not always to the swift; some private lessons will make up for lost time. I am not an advocate for the over education of women; their highest work demands more moral and religious than intellectual training."

"I entirely agree with you," cried Mrs. Middleton heartily, while she thought, as she afterwards told her husband, "What an ill-tempered disagreeable girl that daughter of Mr. Acland's must be—quite spoils herself! And she really ought to be pretty! Mrs. Acland has a great deal to put up with, I suspect; she seems so gentle and patient."

To which the revered gentleman replied, "A sensible well-principled woman, I believe; her table seems admirably served."

Mrs. Acland having successfully trotted out Marjory, called up George, who came smiling and ready to make himself agreeable to any and every one. He answered all observations and returned his step-mother's smiles sympathetically.

"Where is your brother, dear?" asked Mrs. Acland affectionately.

"Who, Dick? Oh, he was kept late at the office."

"Please go and see why they do not bring coffee," she asked, arranging his necktie with a motherly touch. "He is such a dear boy! just like his father," she continued, looking after him.

"I did not remark the resemblance."

"Well, at least I think so! My own eldest son is half jealous of him, yet they are the greatest friends—really brothers!" with a soft laugh.

"How very nice for you! quite an unusual case."

"Certainly uncommon."

When the gentlemen made their appearance, Mr. Cross, short, thin, dried-up, with snubby features and small light eyes, came first, followed by a tall, large fleshy man with a hooked nose, deep red and brown complexion, flashing dark eyes, abundant curly black hair and a big loose-lipped smiling mouth. Marjory took a violent dislike at first sight to him as he stood sipping his coffee, a large diamond on his little finger sparkling obviously, while she felt that he was scrutinizing her with more attention than she cared to receive. Mr. Middleton and his host came in together, and stood near the door continuing a discussion begun below.

"How much Marjory has grown," said Mr. Cross as Mrs. Acland herself put the sugar in his cup; "she is quite a young woman."

"Naturally; she is seventeen. Marjory, here is Mr. Cross."

Marjory rose and came towards him with a bright smile; she was inclined to welcome him as on her side.

"Well, and how are you?" he asked, embarrassed by the necessity of speaking to the young lady, who had almost outgrown his recognition. "You have come home for good, I suppose?"

"I have come back," returned Marjory, with slight, but significant emphasis; "and I suppose I shall not go to school again."

"No; you are quite a finished young lady."

"Finished!" cried Marjory, laughing. "I am afraid I am but too unfinished, and will be all the days of my life."

"That depends on yourself, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland, who took care to keep near while this little conversation went on. "Your dear father has given you every advantage. It is for you to pursue the studies you commenced at school."

Marjory was silent.

"Anyhow, you can play the piano, I suppose!" said Mr. Cross good-naturedly.

"I have been so late," observed Mr. Acland, joining them—"I been so late every day since Marjory returned, I haven't heard her yet. Sing us a song, my dear."

"Oh, my singing is not worth listening to. You know I have never had any lessons."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Acland quickly. "You are only now old enough to begin. Nothing ruins the voice so soon as straining it before it has reached maturity."

Marjory murmured that teaching was not straining, but no one heeded.

"Go and do your best," said her father; but Marjory, with flushed cheeks and a heart beating with mortification, steadily refused. It was the bitterest grief to her to be thus obliged to refuse her father's first request, but she dared not exhibit her deficiencies, and she was desperately inclined to cry.

"Don't press her," said Mrs. Acland, smiling in a maddening way; "you know what a shy little bird it is;" and she put her hand on Marjory's arm in a kindly, protecting manner.

Marjory, quite at the end of her self-control, shrunk from her touch with such unmistakable aversion that Mr. Acland started at her in displeased surprise.

"Won't the young lady give us a song?" asked the strange gentleman, approaching.

"You must excuse her," returned Mrs. Acland; "this is her first appearance on any stage."

"A very effective appearance, I am sure," with a florid bow "Will you not present me?"

"Mr. Blake—Marjory," said Mrs. Acland carelessly, and walked away.

"You know the birds that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing," Mr. Blake observed, in a familiar tone that offended Marjory.

"How do you know I can sing?" she asked aggressively.

"You have a musical face; and only a concord of sweet sounds could come from so pretty a mouth."

Marjory looked straight into his bold black eyes for half a second, and then turning her back on him, walked away to where Mr. Cross was speaking to George.

"And you sail next Tuesday?" he was saying as she came up.

"Oh! Mr. Cross," she exclaimed in a carefully lowered voice and with quivering lips, "must he go?"

"I do not see how it is to be prevented."

"But you do not think it is right that he should be sent from his home to be a common sailor?"

"Your father is the best judge," said Mr. Cross guardedly.

"Boys cannot hang on doing nothing at home. George absolutely refused to come into the office, and prefers the sea. Do not be uneasy. He will get on all right."

"It is very cruel," murmured Marjory.

"It would have been better, certainly, had he gone in for the Navy; but then he is to sail with a first-rate captain, I am told, and he will be well looked after."

Mr. Cross stopped abruptly, looking compassionately into the speaking face upraised to his.

"It is so near at hand—so soon after my return, I mean his going away," said Marjory somewhat incoherently.

Mr. Cross was silent.

He by no means approved Mr. Acland's action respecting his eldest son, but was too cautious to interfere in any way. Doubt, which had nearly died out, respecting the wisdom and kindness of Mrs. Acland started to life again, so he tried to turn the conversation.

"Do you remember coming to the pantomime with me?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed I do. It is one of the few pleasant things I have to remember."

"You must not be a pessimist, my dear."

"A what?" asked Marjory, puzzled and half offended, deeming it some term of reproach.

"I mean you must not look at the dark side of things."

"I have no other side to look at," cried Marjory impetuously.

"Come, come," Mr. Cross was beginning, when Mrs. Acland swept across the room with a pack of cards in her hand.

"Mr. Middleton likes a quiet rubber, will you make a fourth with Mrs. Middleton and Mr. Acland?"

Mr. Cross was most willing; and while her step-mother was settling the table and finding the counters, Marjory stole away without being perceived even by George, who was assisting Mrs. Acland.

"I suppose you do not want me any more?" he asked, "I would rather go to bed."

"Very well, go. Where is Marjory gone? without a word to me." She frowned as George, abstaining from words, nodded his good-night and went to seek his sister.

So soon as the whist party had become absorbed in their game, Mr. Blake, who had been standing on the hearthrug, gazed steadily at Mrs. Acland, till she turned her head and met his eyes. She almost immediately walked over to him. "Well?" she said, her fair face settling in a stony expression.

"I want to speak to you about on or two matters," he returned, in a low tone, as he drew forward a seat with an air of grave politeness.

"What matters?" she said impatiently, though in a careful undertone.

"Matters we cannot discuss here; tell me where I can meet you."

"You can have nothing to say that affects me, and I do not see what claim you have on my time and attention."

"Oh, you don't?" he returned with a civil smile but a somewhat threatening expression of eye. "I think on reflection you will be less unkind; besides, are you *sure* you have no personal interest in what I have to say?"

Mrs. Acland looked at him steadily, and seemed to think before she replied, "I am almost sure I have none."

"Almost, but not altogether," with a sneer. "Well, make up your mind and let me know where I can see you, as it would be wiser for me not to write *here*." Mrs. Acland again looked straight at him but did not answer.

"That's a pretty girl, that step-daughter of yours," he resumed after a short pause. "No regular beauty, but she has a pair of eyes and a 'go' about her that will lead some man a pretty dance one of these days."

"You think so?" coldly.

"I do. If I had time for such schemes I wouldn't mind having a bid for her myself; later on she will be uncommon taking. Though, you know, fair beauties are more to my taste." Mrs. Acland was silent.

"She does not love her amiable step-mother, eh?" continued Blake, with a grin. "I suspect you have all your work cut out with that young lady."

Mrs. Acland smiled, not a kindly smile. "She excites herself a good deal sometimes; but I do not think she can ever give me any real trouble. My power is too well assured with her father to be in any way touched by her resistance, and she will probably prefer *not* to live in our house."

"Oh, that's the plan, is it?" and Blake laughed.

"Now, Mr. Blake, would you not like to cut in in Mrs. Middleton's place?" said her husband; "she is not much of a player, and will be glad, I imagine, to escape."

Blake rose to accept the invitation, saying quickly to Mrs. Acland, "I shall hear from you then?"

"I think not," she said aloud and haughtily.

The whist players played, Mrs. Middleton babbled on, and Mrs. Acland covered up her growing weariness with an air of interested attention, while the leaden moments dropped slowly away; but the end came at last, leaving Mr. Acland the proud possessor of five shillings and threepence, the result of his winnings. Mr. Blake outstayed the rest, but to no effect. Mrs. Acland kept close to her husband, until her guest was obliged to bid his hosts good-night.

The dreadful day of parting came too quickly, George, light-hearted and hopeful, set forth as if to enjoy a holiday.

Mrs. Ackland expressed the warmest regret at parting with him, and high hopes of the success which must attend so gallant a spirit as his.

Marjory felt an indescribable movement of scornful indignation as she saw the gratified vanity which sparkled in George's eyes as he listened to her flattering words, and noticed the heartiness of the parting kiss he bestowed upon his step-mother. It was too bad that the only creature she loved should be but half-hearted in his sympathy with her dislike and distrust of Mrs. Acland. How could he be so easily taken in? She did not consider that it had never been worth Mrs. Ackland's while to take *her* in.

But when George was quite gone, then the full sense of her extreme loneliness overwhelmed her. She had no friend left in her home, if she could apply that term to her father's house. He was not unkind, only cold and not interested in her; nor had she ever the smallest chance of seeing him alone. Mrs. Ackland never left him to himself. Dick she had ceased to dislike, but she still considered him an inarticulate inferior; and, except the good-natured, rugged north-country cook, the servants were too much Mrs. Ackland's creatures to be friendly. Yet Marjory did not give herself up to sorrow; unhappiness was abhorrent to her. She struggled against it with wild resistance, as a victim might who feels the deadly coils of a venomous serpent tightening round him. She dared not let herself sit down in despair.

She kept as busy as she could, but the evening *would* draw in, and she was driven to take refuge in the schoolroom. Dick would soon come back now and tell her the last news of her brother. They were safe from interruption that evening, for Mr. and Mrs. Ackland were to entertain a carefully-selected party at dinner.

The familiar aspect of the sordid room was too much for Marjory. There lay George's lesson and exercise books on the shelf; his discoloured desk, a broken penknife, a ball of twine, and a shabby little

purse, the contents of an old jacket pocket turned out last evening by their step-mother's command when she took possession of that garment. How vividly did the untidy *debris* recall her kindly, careless, sweet-tempered brother! She had not been half tender or loving enough to him. She had been cross and selfish; she had been everything she ought not to have been. When he came back (*if* he came back) she would behave like an angel. The tears would come, resist how she might, even while she busied herself in putting the place in some order.

At last she heard the kitchen entrance door open, a step approached, then Dick walked in.

"Oh! Dick, you have come at last. Tell me all about him—everything!"

She passed her arm through his and drew him towards the window. It was the first time she had ever touched him voluntarily, and the young man felt curiously moved.

"First of all, here is a note for you. I was to be sure and give it into your own hands."

Marjory seized it in silence; it contained something heavy. She read it hastily, and in another minute exclaimed:—

"Oh! he is a dear! He says, 'Old Cross has turned out a trump. When he bid me good-bye at the office this morning, he tipped me five sovs. for pocket money, and the poor governor gave me three; so I send four to you, as I know you never have a shilling. I can't write more there is such a row going on, and everything upside down; but we'll be ship-shape to-morrow, and I have no doubt I will get on all right. So keep up your heart and keep down your temper! If you could humor Mrs. A. you would have an easier life. Dick is a real good fellow; be friends with him. God bless you! Your loving brother, George.' Look! he has sent four beautiful gold pieces!" cried Marjory when she had finished reading, and there was a suspicious quiver in her voice. "How good and generous! When shall I see him again? Do tell me how you left him, and everything!"

"I stayed with him till all visitors were ordered off the ship. It's a fine vessel; things are in confusion, of course. The captain does not join till to-morrow morning at Gravesend. I think George will be all right. The chief officer doesn't seem a bad sort of man, though rough."

"And George?" gazing earnestly into his eyes; "how did he part with you?"

"Well, he didn't say much; I fancy he couldn't. I believe he felt rather bad just at the last. You know it is hard to say good-bye for such a long time."

"How do you mean? He is going to Sydney and back, is he not?"

"He may come back direct, but he has signed for three years, and will probably be away the most of the time."

"Then I have been quite deceived!" cried Marjory, throwing up one hand with an angry gesture. "I thought I should see him within a year. How did he look?"

"Just a little down, but—"

He stopped, for Marjory, throwing herself into one of the heavy wooden chairs, put her elbows on the table, bowed her head upon her hands, and burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping.

Dick stood quite still, infinitely distressed and embarrassed. He felt keenly, warmly for her; he would have done anything to comfort her, and he did not know how. Nay more, he was half afraid to utter a word of sympathy lest he might offend. At last, watching the heaving of her shoulders as the quick sobs shook her slight frame, his spirit kindled, and drawing a seat beside her, he exclaimed, "Don't cry so much, Marjory, you will make yourself ill! Look here, I know it's hard lines for you to part with him, but for himself he will not be so badly off. He is pretty sure of good treatment, and he is a sort of fellow that's certain to make friends."

"Oh!" sobbed Marjory brokenly, "one reads of such horrible things—captains taking dislikes and flogging boys to death, and torturing them! And then the horrid people he will have to live with, who get drunk and chew tobacco! He will be miserable!"

"No, he will not. Captains of the class *he* sails with never do such things, and on board ship men don't get the chance of making brutes of themselves."

"Perhaps not, but it is all so dreadful. If I were sure George would not be unhappy when he sees what a sailor's life *really* is, I could bear it better. Do you think he will be wretched?"

"No, I do not. He has a real liking for the life. It won't be all ease and pleasure, but he will get enjoyment out of it, I am certain."

"If I could believe *that*, I should be less miserable. I am so lonely, so miserable, Dick!"

"I see you are. But I say, Marjory, though I am a silent, uncouth fellow, not bright and pleasant like George, couldn't you take me as a sort of brother in his place? Not that I would expect you to care for me as you do for him, but I might be of use, and"—smiling a sweet, frank smile—"at any rate you *might* forgive me for—*for* existing."

"Thank you, Dick. I am quite ready to be friends with you, and ask you to do things; but I hardly expect you could like me after the way I used to treat you."

"You were very unjust, I know; perhaps it is not your nature to be just, but if you will let me, I could be very fond of you. You are not so lonely as I am. You know I haven't a creature in the world belonging to me; even my mother wouldn't care if she never saw my face again."

"Ah, yes, we are both lonely and wretched, and I *will* take you

as a sort of brother, Dick, and try to be fond of you. Of course, you can never be what George is to me, but you were very good to him."

Turning to him she put her head against his shoulder, and indulged in a flood of quieter and more refreshing tears. Dick did not stir, yet he was conscious of a strange thrill as the little brown head with its plentiful wavy hair, all disordered by the impatient movement of its owner's hands, touched him, and he felt the pulse of her grief—a thrill of pleasure which startled and puzzled him. Why should he care for this girl who had wounded him a thousand times, and made him feel he was an intruder, the son of a detested mother? He thought with a kind of vivid confusion of her first departure for school. How glad he had been to escape her scornful eyes, and yet how he had missed her; how dull the down-stairs school-room had seemed without her, and now what would he not give to throw his arms round her and comfort her with a hearty kiss? But he would die rather than tell her so. He could not understand himself.

At last Marjory dried her tears and said in a tremulous voice, "There is no use in crying, but I could not help it, it is a sort of relief. When can an answer to this," touching the letter, "reach him?"

"Not till the ship arrives at Sydney, but you can post it for him as soon as you like."

"I will write him a long letter. I shall not feel so miserable to-morrow."

"I hope not," said Dick; "and here is tea—a cup will do you good." The housemaid appeared with the tea-tray as he spoke.

"I am sure I'm sorry you have been kept waiting, but I've not had a minute before," she said, "and cook is not to be spoke to, or I would have brought you some tarts."

"It is no matter, Sarah, though I daresay Mr. Dick is hungry."

"I'll see if I can't find something presently, miss."

Marjory proceeded to pour out tea in silence, and very few words passed between the pair for the rest of the evening. Dick had brought home some work from the office, and Marjory tried to read a stray volume of some novel George had left behind; but she often laid it down and let her thoughts wander away to visions of the future, both for herself and her brother. How would it be when he came back three years hence? Three years! what an illimitable space of time! Why, she would be getting mature—nearly old. Would she still be living on, just tolerated, in her father's house? Would George come back fearfully tanned, smelling of tobacco and talking in strange seamen's phraseology, metamorphosed from a gentleman into a sailor—a common sailor? It was an awful picture that her imagination conjured up. Marjory had dipped into sundry novels of "fashionable life," which had fired her fancy with pictures of "style," "elegance," and supposed refinement. She longed to

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see her brother blossom into a fine gentleman such as the Lord Frederics and Sir Reginalds who shone in the lengthy pages of her favourite stories; and how could such a superstructure be reared on so mean a basis as apprenticeship on board a merchant vessel? But this was a mere side reflection. The real tangible pain was the loss of his companionship, to which she had looked forward as the one homelike bit in her life, and she had enjoyed it for barely three weeks. Now she was virtually left alone with Dick. That was not so bad as she should have thought it a month ago, yet, glancing towards him, she contrasted him in her own mind with her brother, and he happening to look up at the same moment, their eyes met. Dick smiled. "You don't seem to get on with your book," he said.

"No, I cannot attend to it. I am very tired. I shall go to bed." She shut the book and gathering up some scattered properties belonging to George, she went towards the door. Pausing there she said, "Good night, Dick. I am glad you are left. I am going to adopt you, and if you have any socks that want mending, I will darn them for you."

"Oh! I have a splendid supply," he returned, laughing. "I hardly think you would like to undertake them. Cookie manages for me as she can, but I am ever so much obliged to *you*, Marjory. I would have gone barefoot before I should have thought of asking *you* to mend socks for me."

"Well, I shouldn't mind at all," said Marjory with ineffable condescension; "I am going to be your sister, you know."

"Good night," he returned, "don't cry yourself to sleep."

CHAPTER IV.

PUTTING ON THE SCREW.

THE first few days after George's departure were terribly blank to Marjory. She was left very much to herself, as Mrs. Acland did not seem to remember her existence, save when she wanted her help in needlework or with the children. So Marjory had plenty of time to mend Dick's socks and read what books she could find. These, with a certain degree of scolding bestowed on her adopted brother for untidiness, employed her days and evenings; but, as Dick's answers were much smoother than George's used to be, the oddly assorted couple settled down into companionship much sooner than might have been expected.

A few hasty lines had been sent ashore by the young sailor with the pilot—brave lines enough, yet pervaded by an unconscious tone of sadness which revived Marjory's grief and resentment. This epistle had been inclosed in one to Mr. Acland, and was delivered as the family sat at breakfast.

"George seems very well satisfied so far," said his father. "I dare say he will get on all the quicker for not being trammelled by the regulations of the Navy."

"No doubt of it," responded his wife.

"What does he say to you, Marjory?"

Marjory handed her letter to her father, remarking, "He writes sadly enough, I think."

"I really do not see what you have to fret about," said Mrs. Acland, looking scornfully at Marjory's tearful eyes. "Is it not a bit of your usual perversity, my dear?"

"I suppose it is," with defiant indifference.

"You have letters too, my love?" asked Mr. Acland, not averse to change the subject.

"Only one of those endless coal circulars," she returned, tearing it up as she spoke, "and one from Miss Clements, who is at Florence. She says she made the acquaintance there, last winter, of a Mr. and Mrs. Cateret, who are some connections of yours."

"Cateret?" repeated Mr. Acland. "No, not of mine. There was an uncle of Marjory's mother so called, but I have not heard of him for years."

"Marjory's mother!" thought her daughter bitterly; does he forget she was his wife, or is he afraid to mention it?"

"They seem to be people of some importance," resumed Mrs. Acland.

"They are. Cateret has an estate in the south of England; but he had most of his fortune through his mother. He always lives abroad."

"Miss Clements says they talk of returning to England. I think we ought to call on them when they are in town."

"Perhaps so."

"Come, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland sharply to that young person, who was evidently in a reverie, "what are you dreaming about? Pray rouse yourself. Put on your hat and take the children for their morning walk; nurse is very busy just now."

The afternoon of the same day had clouded over, and a breeze from the south-west had brought with it heavy showers.

The omnibuses were crowded with damp passengers and wet umbrellas, while the streets were rapidly converted into spaces of liquid mud, across which splashed pedestrians struggled under the noses of the steaming horses.

Sitting with a book on her knee in the school-room window, gazing at the fast-falling rain, and hearing the dreary splash-splash of the

big drops from the balcony of the dining-room above, Marjory fell into a sort of dream, from which she was startled by the sudden sharp closing of the front door, and was languidly interested by seeing Mrs. Acland sally forth, covered from head to foot by a dark shapeless rain-cloak, and further shrouded by a small black straw bonnet and a thick veil. Her skirts had been fastened up high enough to show her neat, well-made boots, which Marjory ruefully admired. She walked rapidly with a firm springy step through the garden, and turned towards the railway station at the end of the road.

"She certainly has nice feet," thought Marjory, putting out one of her own and contemplating it. It was encased in what cheap ready-made shopkeepers term "house slippers," constructed of thick hard leather, which creaked when she moved, and were square, coarse, and disfiguring to the last degree. Marjory's pretty short upper lip curled contemptuously as she looked. She slipped her foot out of its unworthy covering. That was more satisfactory. Her dark grey stocking showed its proportions, the small heel and high instep. "Mine would look as well if I had nice boots. I wish I could dress as I like. I wish I could look like a lady. Shall I never have any pleasure or pretty things? Shall I always be hidden away and be thankful to keep down here? The worst of it is, I shall grow bad and bitter and ill-mannered with this constant sense of wrong. I will try not to be rough or common. There are so many years before me, some happiness must be sprinkled amongst them; and then I am not ugly; no, I am sure I am not." She looked quickly round to see if a little glass which belonged to the pantry had by chance been left in the room. It had not. "I am a conceited goose;" and she smiled at herself. "I suppose Mrs. Acland is going to buy some wonderful bargain. Perhaps to Leadenhall Market. Nothing else would take her out in such weather. She is a strange woman: I believe if she made up her mind to be queen of England she would manage it somehow. I will not think of her any more;" and Marjory applied herself to her book, an old volume of Bourienne's "Life of Napoleon," through which she was struggling with a view to keep up her French.

Mrs. Acland kept on her way, however, though she was not bound for Leadenhall Market, nor for any tremendous sacrifice in the way of sales.

Arrived at Moorgate Street, she stepped quickly into a cab, and was set down at one of the fine new buildings near the Royal Exchange, where palatial chambers seem to guarantee the solvency of their occupants. She studied the names of the tenants on the black board usually hung within the door, as if unfamiliar with the place, and then ascended to the second floor, where she opened a door at the end of a passage, or the ground-glass panel of which was painted the words, "William Blake, office."

A couple of clerks were writing at high desks, one of whom rose and came forward. "Mr. Blake?" she asked, low and quickly.

"Engaged at present." Mrs. Acland handed him a note. The clerk hesitated a moment, and took it into another room.

He returned almost immediately, and bringing a chair said civilly, "Please sit down for a few minutes."

The minutes were but few; then Mr. Blake, bland, smiling fresh-coloured, with a flower in his button-hole, came forth exclaiming, "A thousand apologies for making you wait!" and ushered her into his private room.

It was luxuriously furnished. A soft fine Turkey carpet covered the floor; a massive artistic bronze clock adorned the chimney-piece; the solid comfortable chairs were covered with deep-red dull morocco; a huge knee-hole table of dark mahogany, with endless drawers, bureaux, bookcases, all the best and newest contrivances to facilitate the doing of business and the keeping of its records, had been lavishly provided; a bright fire glowed in a tiled grate of the latest pattern; and on a little table in one of the windows stood a silver tray with a couple of liqueur bottles, some glasses, and an engraved-glass jug full of water.

Blake drew an easy-chair near the table, and placed a glass screen between his visitor and the fire; for the weather, though damp, was not cold.

"I am sorry you have to come out on such a dreadful afternoon," he said with an air of solicitude. "Will you not take off your cloak; it may be damp?"

Mrs. Acland untied and removed her veil without speaking, showing a pale face, eyes bright with some emotion, apparently neither gentle nor pleasant, and a very firmly closed mouth, which gave a different expression to her countenance from what it usually wore.

"You gave very little consideration to what was good or bad for me when you posted a note, addressed in your *own* hand, at an hour when you must know it would reach me at the breakfast-table. Had Mr. Acland come down before me, in all probability he would have opened it, thinking that you could only write to me on a business matter." This was uttered in a suppressed voice, but with intense irritation.

"But," returned Blake, who had resumed his seat in front of his big table, leaning back in his chair and gazing at her with an admiring, half-smiling look, "I also knew the pluck and inventive power of my fair correspondent. Acland is not the man to find out such a woman as you are. Besides, as you chose to be obstinate and give me no chance of an interview, I was obliged, though most reluctantly, to apply pressure. It is absolutely necessary that I should see you—and alone," he added in a changed voice.

"Why?"

"Because I want your help, and you know I have a right to ask it."

"Why?" she repeated, keeping her stern angry eyes fixed on his.

"Because, my dear Judith, if you had not urged your husband to take his money out of my hands and invest it in guaranteed stock and government securities at a miserable percentage, I should not be in my present fix, and you would have a better income."

"And be on the brink of ruin, as I suspect you are."

"Exactly. You did me a bad turn then; I've been crippled ever since. I expected more faithfulness from you, considering the happy hours we have spent together, and our old relations. By Jove! I am inclined to believe those were the best days of my life." His bold black eyes had a gleam of regret as he spoke.

"Pray do you think you deserve that I should destroy my husband and children for the chance of making your fortune?" she asked bitterly.

"Your husband!" with a sneer. "Come now, Ju, you never were as fond of him as you were of me."

"He is my husband; our fortunes are identical; and I am no mean ally, as you would have found had you fulfilled your promise to marry me. I should have kept you straight. You would not have thrown away your chances, and wasted your money on rascally companions, as you have done, if you had had a decent comfortable home and a helpmate such as I could have been."

"Perhaps so—perhaps so," thoughtfully. "And you are deucedly handsome still, Ju!"

She replied by a gesture of disgust, and asked sharply:

"Tell me what you want, and let me go."

"Want? What can I want but money?"

"There seems no lack of money here!" glancing scornfully round.

"No matter. I shall want money badly in a week or two, I am afraid; and remember, besides the ill-turn you did me with Acland, for which you owe me something, I hold your acknowledgement for the money I lent you, to make an appearance when you went abroad with old Mother Redmayne, for which I never had a penny of interest."

"Why, that must be eight years ago! I never thought you meant to claim it."

"Nor should I, were I not driven."

"There is nothing in that to disturb me. I shall tell Mr. Acland that you advanced me the money as an old friend of Cranston's, and that I understood you had cancelled my acknowledgement. I shall not hesitate to apply to my husband."

"Ay! but that will not do. As you well know, my need of cash must be concealed to the last moment. My only chance of success (and if I succeed I will not trouble you) depends on my keeping up appearances—lulling suspicion."

"How have you got into trouble? I thought you were piling up gold."

"It's not a sort of affair you could understand. I thought I had a splendid opportunity of making a hit in these silver mine shares—I mean the new 'South American Mines Company'—and, as I was short of cash, silver I helped myself to a biggish sum I had access to, with the sincerest wish to benefit my clients *and* myself. These infernal shares went up steadily, till nearly double what I gave for them. Like a fool I waited, thinking the upward tendency would continue. The very next day the tide turned: still every one thought they would recover; but they have gone down and down. Now one of my clients, a shrewd Scotchman, will arrive from the Cape in about a fortnight, and unless there is some miracle in my favour, I must be out of this before he looks into matters, or an unjust judge might find me permanent lodgings."

All this was said with cynical indifference.

"Then you had better go," remarked Mrs. Acland, coldly. "I suppose you have not robbed these people without filling your own pockets?"

"There I have been culpably weak. I so believed in the temporary value of 'Silver Mines' operation, that I have put nearly every penny I could scrape together on it."

"You are a greater fool than I thought!" contemptuously. "A grain of common sense would show you that inconsiderate daring dishonesty never pays."

"There is no use in preaching now," replied Blake sullenly. "I must have cash enough to float me in the New World until I can turn round; and I count on you for a hundred."

"You might as well ask me for the National Debt."

After some further urging on his side and refusal on hers, Blake rose and, having helped himself to some liqueur, came and stood on the hearth-rug facing her.

"Look here, Ju," he said, still in the same tone, though a savage look came over his face, "you must and shall help me. You can do it if you choose; you are my safest card, and I have the means of revenge in my hands if you refuse."

Mrs. Acland could not grow whiter, but she did not quail. She only raised her eyes to his with so deadly an expression that Blake said,

"Ay! my life would not be worth an hour's purchase if those fine eyes could kill! But you know what I mean!"

"I do." She paused, and her well-gloved hand clenched itself tight as it lay on the table. "You mean, you would show those two letters of mine, which you kept back like a base traitor as you are, to my husband? Well! are you sure that the pleasure of seeing you in the dock might not outweigh the pain of failure and possible disgrace? Possible only!—remember the power I have over my hus-

band? Nor do faults *before* a marriage dissolve it! *Since*, I have been faultless."

"You are a plucky devil," said, Blake, eyeing her curiously, "and I would rather have you for a friend than an enemy. I vow to heaven I would not press you if I could help it, but I must have the money."

Mrs. Acland seemed lost in thought. "It is almost impossible, for me to obtain such a sum without raising Mr. Acland's suspicions," she said; "still, *if* you will hand me over those letters, having first let me read and examine them—no more sealed packets, given with the assurance that they contain all I had ever written, for me—I will endeavour to get you the money, or the greater part of it. How long can you give me?"

"Ten days at the outside. As to the letters, you shall have them when you hand over the cash. I never wished to harm you, Judith: I only kept those letters as a measure of precaution; for you are a dangerous customer. Now I am going to bid a long farewell to England, home and beauty. The letters are of more value to you than to me. When you bring me the money, you will look on me for the last time. My career will have closed on this side of the Atlantic."

"That, at least, is an assurance worth paying for."

"Well, Ju, there was a time when I little thought I should ever hear you say that."

"Yes! I look back with amazement when I remember how I loved and believed in you; when you seemed to me the embodiment of all that was elegant and well-bred—*you!*" She laughed bitterly, and Blake shifted his position somewhat uneasily. "Well, my experience was limited; I had not many opportunities of 'seeing life' in the little back sitting-room of my mother's lodging-house. *You* dragged me down low enough; still I suspect I was a better woman, really, in those days than I am now, with the halo of respectability and faultless living round my matronly head." She laughed again. "You see, however, I rose above the level at which you intended to keep me."

"Come, come, be just! I was always ready to give you a lift."

"Do you call your successful plot to marry me to a beggarly artist a lift?" she asked, her voice for once rising to an angry pitch. "Do you call persuading me that he was heir to a vast estate, with but one aged life between him and fortune—do you call *that* a lift?"

"I vow to God I believed it myself! How could I tell that a sickly youngster would recover and grow up to manhood?"

"Ah! what a life I had with Cranston! How he bored me! how soon he grew to mistrust me! Then *you* compromised me, and he deserted his big stupid lumbering boy and myself. Fate was merciful, however—"

"Ay! I thought it was a good riddance for you, when I got the

letter from that queer pal of his, Brand, announcing his death in the wreck of the Mississippi steamer?"

"He left a doubtful blessing behind. That boy is a great drag upon me."

"Does Acland object to him?"

"No! but *I* do. He is always in silent opposition to me. He is costly, and he is provokingly like his father."

"Why do you worry yourself so much about money? Acland is well off."

"His position is improving, but I feel bound to be careful. Mr. Acland has the life interest of his first wife's fortune, which reverts to Marjory and George, and I am determined to make the income it yields pay all expenses for some years to come. I am a tolerable manager!"

"That I am sure! Moreover, I would lay long odds that Miss Marjory does not benefit much by your expenditure."

"Marjory has been my enemy from the first. George was reasonable. I can get on with him; but it is war to the knife between Marjory and myself—an antagonism of nature! She has a most rebellious spirit, but I will break it."

"I'd back you for holding your own with any one."

"I am staying too long," exclaimed Mrs. Acland, starting up. "I wonder I can talk to you calmly, as I do, after your driving such a cruel bargain! However, the hope that it will be our last transaction buoys me up. Tell some one to call a cab for me; I ought to have left before."

Blake looked at her and hesitated. Finally he opened the door into the office, and spoke to someone without.

"Tell me how I can communicate with you safely?" he asked, coming back to the fireplace. "I protest I would rather *not* injure you, but where my own safety is concerned——"

"Pray do not apologize. I neither ask nor give quarter," she interrupted.

"Well, before we part give me my instructions."

She thought a moment. "Send me some circular—the announcement of a sale of women's finery; put Cranston's initials in the left corner of first page, and dot with your pen the letters and figures which will spell the address where I can find you. I can then open such a letter in the face of every one. You have given me a desperate task."

Here a clerk came in to say a cab was waiting below.

"Come this way," said Blake, walking to a second door which opened directly into the passage. "Of course I shall keep dark in London until the first heat of pursuit is over. No place like the big city for cover. I wish, Judith, you did not take my very natural measures for self-preservation in so unfriendly a spirit," he added.

"Let us not waste words," she returned sternly. "You have

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acted after your kind. My position will not allow me to resist your extortion; but it is the last blackmail you shall ever levy on me. Should you reappear on English ground and attempt to molest me, I will accept defeat, destruction, rather than hold any terms with you." She passed him without heeding his eager remonstrance, and went forth with a steady stately step.

"I almost wish I had stuck to her," murmured Blake, as he went back to his seat and his task of tearing up dangerous documents.

CHAPTER V.

A FAMILY AFFAIR.

MR. ACLAND was by no means either a hard-hearted or an ill-disposed man, nor was he offensively selfish. He had not vigour enough, mental or physical, to love or to hate strongly. His highest ambition was to be eminently respectable; his highest idea of happiness a quiet life, undisturbed by any necessity for difficult decisions, unruffled by small contradictions, unvexed by household disorder, and, without personal effort of any kind, to look upon the smooth surface of his home and surroundings with exulting pride.

All this his second wife's firm, able management enabled him to enjoy. Moreover, though fairly liberal, he was nervous about expenditure, especially since certain investments had proved failures. Here Mrs. Acland's clear head and financial ability finally riveted the chains which bound him to her. The monthly settling of accounts, on which she insisted, became a positive source of enjoyment, leaving behind it a delicious sense of security, of freedom from all need of personal supervision or responsibility. No wonder, then, that against spells so potent poor Marjory's intermittent and ill-directed efforts to attract her father's approving notice, to suggest her willingness to love and serve him, were worse than useless; they were an infinite bore.

Marjory's irrepressible vivacity, her alternate self-assertion and repentance, irritated him, and with a little judicious cultivation on the part of Mrs. Acland, established a deep impression in his mind that she was more than his crumpled rose-leaf; she was a cruel thorn, the one speck of rust on the brightness of his lot.

Marjory's long banishment at school, her somewhat trying position there as pupil-teacher for the last two years, was the outcome of her father's conviction that she was hopelessly intractable, and really too much for his dear wife's peace. For his own comfort and happiness his wife was so essential that Mr. Acland was ready, per-

haps unconsciously, to sacrifice both sons and daughters. He was, however, indolently fond of their two pretty children, who were always so well dressed and a credit to him, pleasant playthings of whom he never saw too much.

As to George, he was inoffensive; but Mrs. Acland was quite right in urging that, now they had four children to provide for, the cost of preparing for so poor a profession as the Navy was too much to expend on one.

Perhaps of all the young creatures his roof sheltered Dick Cranston was the one he liked best. The boy was so composed and silent, so steady in his attention to a business for which he had no special aptitude, that Mr. Acland began to look forward to his being of real use and saving him trouble in the future.

In appearance Mr. Acland was gentlemanlike and good-looking, always well dressed, and possessing an air of thoughtful wisdom, the result of a disinclination to talk much or commit himself on any subject, which greatly impressed clients.

His business, a steady remunerative though not very large one, he inherited from his father; but on losing the money above mentioned he took his head clerk, who had saved up a decent sum, into partnership; thus, though senior in years, Mr. Cross was junior in the firm.

Among her many admirable qualities Mrs. Acland possessed excellent health. It was an extraordinary event when a severe headache compelled her to remain in bed the morning after this interview, and poor Mr. Acland appeared disconsolate at the breakfast-table, feeling keenly his utter dependence on his better half.

"Mrs. Acland can only take a cup of tea with one lump of sugar and no milk," said he, as he sat down. "You had better take it up to your mama, Marjory."

"Sarah can go; I want to attend to you," she returned quickly. Mr. Acland looked vexed, though he made no remark; and having supplied her stepmother's wants, Marjory proceeded to pour out her father's tea, to hand him the toast, and do all the small services she had often jealously watched Mrs. Acland perform. Her eagerness, however, made her awkward. She managed to let drops of liquid fat fall on the snowy tablecloth when helping the bacon, and tumbled the sugar-tongs with a clang against the fender; finally, when her father handed back his cup with a look of disgust, exclaiming, "You need not have put the whole contents of the sugar-box in my tea," and she hastily emptied it into the slop-basin, more went outside than in.

"I wish, my dear, you could learn something of your mamma's handiness and composure; you have really made a horrid mess," observed Mr. Acland with sedate displeasure.

"If I were let to do something for you sometimes," cried Marjory, colouring crimson, "I should not be so nervous."

"Nervous! nonsense! what is there to be nervous about? You are not afraid of me?"

"Yes," she exclaimed with a sudden impulse such as often impelled her to rashness, "I am afraid of your not loving me as much as I should like—as I want you to love me!"

Dick, who sat opposite, gazed at her surprised.

"You have no right to accuse me of deficient natural affection, Marjory. I think I have done my duty by you conscientiously."

"Oh! I want a great deal more than duty. I want you to love me, and like to have me with you, as you do Mrs. Acland."

"This is a very improper way of talking; I cannot listen to it. When you are more reasonable and dutiful to the admirable mother whom I have seen fit to give you as a guide, philosopher, and the rest of it, then I shall be only too happy to let you pour out my tea, especially if you will not be so reckless—I must say reckless." Looking at the clock, "Dear me! it is almost nine. I must start and I have had next to no breakfast," in an aggrieved tone. He rose and left the room. Marjory sat still, a dull defeated feeling holding her back from offering to help her father with his coat.

Silence reigned for a few minutes, till they heard the front door shut; then, in an evil hour for himself, Dick, who, for a wonder, stayed behind his stepfather, said, "It's no use, Marjory; the more you try, the more you don't succeed!"

"I see that!" she cried, turning round on him, her eyes flashing through the tears his words arrested; "and you are a heartless creature to tell me so brutally."

"But I did not mean it in unkindness," he exclaimed earnestly, coming over and standing beside her. "Don't you see I am desperately sorry for you?"

"I do not want you to pity me; I hate being pitied."

"You must not be so unreasonable, Marge! You know I would do—well, *anything* to help you. I can't bear to see you beating yourself to death against your bars; and it is not all pity. I like your pluck; but I wish you would listen to me and take my advice."

"I am too impatient, I know, but I do not see that you are any wiser than I am. Oh! Dick, Dick, I am so miserable!"

"I do not know that I am any wiser, but I am cooler, and I am not you. Try not to be so miserable; it takes the heart out of a creature like you!"

"How am I to avoid it?" asked Marjory starting up from the table and throwing herself into one of the regulation armchairs which stood right and left of the fireplace.

"By not wasting your strength struggling for what you cannot get. It seems rather harsh to say it, but you have lost your father, and, what is more, you'll never find him again. My mother will take care of that. Just make up your mind to let him go, and you will take one weapon out of her hands."

"You are cruel! Boys have no heart!" murmured Marjory, looking at him with surprise.

"Well, *you* have too much for your own comfort. I know what it is too feel miserable, I can tell you. I remember, when I was a little chap, how I used to want to climb on my mother's knee and put my arms around her neck, and how she used to drive me away as if I were a noxious beast. I doubt if anything that ever happens to me in the years to come will wring my heart as that did."

"Horrid woman! I am not a bit surprised to hear it!" cried Marjory sympathetically. "How could you care for her?"

"I hardened, of course, in time: she can't move me much now. Indeed, I have been rather unlucky. I do not think any one ever cared a rap about me till George took to me at school. You know I was not exactly what is called 'attractive' when I came into this house."

"Don't!" said Marjory, with a gesture of entreaty.

A soft pleasant smile stole over Dick Cranston's handsome face as he continued, "Just follow my example, Marge; don't waste your affections on your father; if he does not care for you he doesn't deserve them. You need not be undutiful, of course. And take my advice, try and get out of the house you will never have a happy moment in it."

"That is true, Dick; but where can I go?"

"Girls often make their own living," said Dick thoughtfully; "you are rather young yet, but in another year——"

"Just consider how ignorant and untrained I am? My going to school was a mockery. I have read about a lot of things, but I *know* nothing thoroughly—no music, no drawing, though I could play if I had been taught! If I 'go out,' it must be as a housemaid or a shop-girl;" the tears brimmed over, hanging on the remarkably long lashes which veiled her bright eyes. "I am a lady, and I want always to be a lady," she added with a half-suppressed sob.

"You will always be what your own conduct makes you," said Dick gravely. This axiom was rather too exalted for Marge, who dried her tears in silence. "If you would like to learn a little Latin," he suggested, "I think I could teach you in the evenings."

"Latin? oh! I never could manage it; and it is too late," said Marjory despairingly.

"Well, I must be off, for I am too late already. Keep up your heart, Marge."

"I will," stoutly. "I will go and take one of the Waverly novels from the drawing-room, and read all day to get out of myself. I will not do a single thing for any one."

"Don't," said Dick. The parlour maid, thinking it high time the breakfast was cleared away, entered at that moment, and the conversation was at an end.

The look-out was dark enough, yet the confidential talk with Dick had relieved and cheered her. She was not alone in the house while Dick was there. Moreover, the picture his words had conjured up, when he described his childish efforts to win a caress from his mother, diverted her from the contemplation of her own wrongs and sorrows. She was so sorry she had ever deepened the shadows of his gloomy boyhood by her whimsical, unreasonable dislike and disdain. As to his advice about her father, she would certainly take it. Why should she care for a parent who was always ready to turn against her? But this doughy resolution was often broken in the ensuing months. It was hard to give up her own father, whom she longed to love, and it took many a rebuff, many an instance of cowardly compliance with his wife's steady repression of her obnoxious stepdaughter, before Marjory was steeled into the indifference she fancied she could attain by one effort of will.

The week following was marked by a domestic festival which Mrs. Acland always punctiliously observed.

The birthdays of her two younger children occurred within a day or two of each other, though there was over a year between them; so both were celebrated together.

On the present occasion the anniversary chosen falling upon a Saturday, it was decided that the feast should be held at luncheon-time, to enable Mr. Cross, who was the little girl's godfather, to be present without interfering with his usual habit of spending Saturday afternoon and Sunday out of town—the sole recreation he allowed himself.

As it was the business half-holiday, and for appearance sake, Dick was bidden to present himself, the household generally put on a gala appearance.

The proud mother had provided an excellent and tempting repast, a cake of superb dimensions, and a table on which was a goodly array of presents. The children, in white frock much trimmed with lace, with blue sashes, and elaborately curled hair, were duly admired and kissed. The boy, who had attained the advanced age of five—a fine little fellow, strikingly like Mrs. Acland—though drilled into a certain amount of company manners, was a violent, self-willed child, a good deal indulged in by his mother. He was very solemn, and kept his eyes steadily fixed on the cake. His sister, a gentle, tractable little creature, came in hugging a rag doll, which Marjory had dressed with care and ingenuity as a present for her little pupil, of whom she was rather fond, in spite of her relationship to the detested stepmother.

"What have you got there, Louise?" asked Mrs. Acland, as the young lady, having been assisted into the chair by the parlour-maid, objected to part with her precious dolly.

"It's my new dolly, that Marge gave me; such a dear dolly!"

"Very nice indeed!" said Mrs. Acland blandly. "Very good

of you, Marjory, I am sure. And Herbert?—is he not equally favoured?”

“I did not know how to make anything for a boy,” she returned.

Under cover of the bustle of helping the children and directing the under-nurse, who was assisting to wait, Mrs. Acland whispered to Mr. Cross, who with a deaf old lady, their next-door neighbour, were the only additions to the family party:—

“I am so glad to welcome any little sign of friendliness on Marjory’s part! She has been a terrible difficulty. She still detests my precious Herbert because he is so like *me*! But I trust time and patience may win her to better frame of mind.

Mr. Cross bowed assent, and glanced with a sense of bewilderment at Marjory’s bright young face, which was just then smiling at Louise’s efforts to adjust her napkin.

The luncheon ran through the usual course; the viands were done justice to; the health of the little hero and heroine of the day was proposed in very stumbling periods by Mr. Cross and repeated, by her particular request, to the deaf lady by Dick Cranston, who grew very red under the eyes of the company; the children were injudiciously crammed in spite of “mamma’s” remonstrances; and then they adjourned to the drawing-room. Here Herbert, no doubt irritated by indigestion, quick got into a quarrel with his sister. Marjory interfered to separate them, and an outbreak of screams and fury was imminent when Mrs. Acland swooped down on the aggressor, and with large indefinite promises lured him to the nursery.

During her absence the deaf lady cross-examined Marjory as to the picture and ornaments in the room; as to her own age, her school, her acquirements—whether she had or had not passed an Oxford or Cambridge examination, and many other topics. The gentlemen stood together in one of the windows, and Mr. Cross looked furtively at his watch.

“Oh! by the way,” he said suddenly, “Rivers, the accountant, came in just after you left, and told me there is a report that Blake, the stockbroker, has disappeared, having made away with a lot of money. It seems he has forged cheques, bills, and I do not know what. I trust you are safe out of his hands?”

“Is it possible?” said Mr. Acland in a somewhat awe-struck tone. “I thought he was perfectly sound. This must surely be a false rumour. However, thank God! it cannot touch me; I have had nothing to do with him for the last two years. It is a curious fact, Cross, that Mrs. Acland always had a great distrust for Blake, though we kept on terms of civility because he had been a companion and friend of the late Mr. Cranston; not, I imagine (between ourselves), that this intimacy was any great recommendation to Blake. I fear Mrs. Acland’s first experience of married life was anything but——”

He was interrupted by the approach of the smart parlour-maid, who presented a salver on which lay a card.

"'Vincent Brand,'" read Mr. Acland, taking it and looking interrogatively at the servant.

"Gentleman, sir, asked for Mrs. Acland."

"A gentleman?"

"Yes, sir—I think."

"Show him up, and take the card to your mistress. I fancy I have heard the name," continued Mr. Acland to his partner; "a former acquaintance of my wife."

As he spoke "Mr. Brand" was announced. Thereupon entered a tall, thin, haggard-looking man, with a short grizzled beard, thick moustaches, and a pair of smiling, sleepy, dark eyes. His hair was thin on the temples and greyer than his beard, and his figure looked younger than his face. He was rather peculiarly dressed in loose trousers, a brown velveteen coat with many pockets, and a soft brown felt hat, which he carried not ungracefully in his long, shapely, pallid, unglowed hand.

"I fear my visit is ill-timed," he said, bowing with an easy air; "but being in London for a few days, I thought perhaps Mrs. Acland might possibly like to see an old acquaintance and give me a few minutes' interview. I presume to have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Acland?"

His voice was pleasant and well-bred. Mr. Acland bowed; but before he could reply Mrs. Acland came in, holding the card which had been sent to her. Marjory, whose attention had been riveted on the stranger, looked earnestly at her stepmother, with instinctive curiosity to see how she would receive him, and was struck by the swift expression of terror and hatred which gleamed in her eyes, which she instantly closed, while she grasped the top of a high chair near her. The next moment she regained her composure by what Marjory felt rather than perceived was a supreme effort, and, smiling a rather ghastly smile, said, with a kind of gasp:—

"This is most unexpected, Mr. Brand."

"It is; perhaps too unexpected," he said in an altered tone.

"I ought to have remembered the painful associations——"

He broke off suddenly, and, looking straight into her eyes, resumed:—

"My excuse is that I shall only be a couple of days in town, and thought you might possibly care to hear some particulars——" he paused.

"No," said Mrs. Acland slowly, and gazing at him as if fascinated, "no; it is useless to open the cruel wounds that are now closing."

Brand bowed. Mrs. Acland moved forward and sank rather than sat down on the sofa, while the deaf lady, who had gone into the back drawing-room to examine a photograph of her hostess, asked loudly and generally:—

"Pray who is the gentleman? Some foreigner, I suppose?"

Mr. Cross considerably joined her, and started a question of current news to occupy her attention.

"Let me introduce you to Mr. Acland," said his wife, who had not yet quite recovered composure.

"Most happy to make his acquaintance. I have already introduced myself," returned Brand.

"Have you not been in England since——" Mrs. Acland paused.

"Since the deplorable accident which cost me the best of comrades and you a husband," he put in gravely. "No," drawing a chair beside her, "this is my first appearance on British soil since I was spared, and a better fellow than myself taken. Of course, I was anxious to see you and poor Cranston's boy. I need not say how pleased I am to see you happily settled"—a smile and slight bow to Mrs. Acland, who was looking puzzled and ill at ease—"and surrounded by a charming family, when I remember the past, which was far less agreeable."

"So little agreeable that I would rather not speak of it," said Mrs. Acland haughtily.

"Certainly not, if such is your wish. Is this little fair-haired angel your daughter?" he continued.

"She is." Brand stroked the child's curls with a kindly touch.

"And that tall youngster?" he resumed, looking earnestly at Dick.

"Is my eldest son."

"Ah!" cried Brand, starting up. "Shake hands, young sir, for your father's sake. We were old friends, and saw rough and smooth together. Why, you have grown like—not him so much as his father."

"Did you know my grandfather, too?" asked Dick, colouring and smiling under his searching eyes.

"Stay! that is your father's expression, I think," cried Brand, not answering Dick's question. "What are you doing—going in for art?"

"No; Mr. Acland has been so good as to take me into his office."

"Ah! that is better. The legal quill brings more certain supplies of filthy lucre than the artist's pencil, and, believe me, respectability pays. Put on respectability, my son! You see," he continued, laughing, to Mr. Acland, "I have been too long a rolling-stone, as you know, my dear Mrs. Acland; and I shall go on rolling till I topple over into the great abyss."

Mr. Acland stared at him, puzzled and annoyed.

"Without respectability life is little worth," he said precisely, "especially in England.

"That I well know. Am I not a naturalized Englishman? I have long since perceived that your very peccadilloes have a flavour

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of 'Church and State' about them, lending dignity even to scrapes. But I see, my dear sir, that you have taste as well as the *sine qua non* respectability. That is a very good picture—that landscape at the end of the room. It looks like L——'s style."

"It is an L——," returned Mr. Acland with some pride.

On this text Brand talked for a few minutes very pleasantly, with an air of well-bred deference towards the "man of the house."

All this time Mrs. Acland sat motionless, with an air of forced composure. Marjory watched the scene with keen interest, feeling attracted by Brand's playful manner, his pleasant voice and easy grace. There was something underlying the incident of his appearance which suggested a mystery to her.

Meanwhile Brand again addressed Dick, "Do you remember your father?"

"Very indistinctly. I think I recollect his taking me on his knee; but I must have been almost a baby. I did not see much of him, I fancy."

"Not much. You saw quite as much of me. Can you remember me at all?" looking full at him.

"I cannot say I do; yet there is something familiar in your voice. I seem to have heard it before."

"Ah! my voice dwells in your memory." He was silent for an instant; then, looking at Marjory, he asked, "And this young lady?"

"Is my stepdaughter," replied Mrs. Acland.

"Your stepdaughter? This completes the magic circle of your delightful surroundings. And what a lucky young fellow you are"—to Dick—"to have so charming a sister." He looked kindly at her, and added with a slight change of tone, "I have to congratulate you on being under the gentle judicious rule of so wise, so good, so disinterested a lady as your stepmother. Now," turning to Mr. Acland, "I have intruded long enough. I am well aware I cannot be a favoured guest, and I have satisfied myself on certain points; to-morrow evening or next day I start for Vienna, if I do not change my mind;" and drawing out a pocket-book, from which he took a card, he handed it to Mrs. Acland. "If you care to honour me with any commission, leather work, *bric-à-brac*, etc., I am at your disposal; there is my address."

Mrs. Acland took the card mechanically. Brand bowed, then crossed to where Dick stood, and saying "For your father's sake," shook hands with him cordially. Again bowing to the company, he left the room, followed by Mr. Acland.

"I do not think that gentleman a very desirable acquaintance," he said on his return from seeing him safe off the premises.

"By no means," echoed Mrs. Acland. "He was an associate I always dreaded for Mr. Cranston. Pray tell the servants never to

admit him." She spoke with an evident effort. "His visit has upset me; it has revived most painful memories. I must beg you to excuse me, Mrs. Merton. I will go to my room."

She rose and went to the door, but before reaching it wavered and stretched out her hand as if for support. Dick quickly put his arm round her; but with a gesture of repulsion she said harshly, "I do not want you," and steadying herself, she walked slowly from the room. A dead silence fell on all present; then the visitors quickly departed.

The young people, left together (for Mr. Acland went, as in duty bound, to attend to his wife), looked at each other for a few minutes in silence. Then Dick exclaimed, as if speaking out of his thoughts, "I cannot tell what I remember about that man, but there is something familiar to me in his voice and eyes."

"I like him!" cried Marjory decidedly. "He gives me the idea of a good villain."

"A good villain! what a ruin idea!" returned Dick. "Come, Marge, it is a beautiful day, and there is no one to worry us. Let us take a walk to Hampstead."

CHAPTER VI.

DICK MAKES UP HIS MIND.

THE unexpected visit of his father's former comrade made a strong impression on Dick Cranston's mind or imagination. It was like a light suddenly flashing through the misty veil which time had dropped over the past, bringing out the vanished pictures as colours grow upon the sight when the lamps are lit behind a transparency.

He brooded over the memories thus awakened, and felt almost angry with their disappointing imperfections. Something in Brand's voice and manner seemed to him mixed up with his early childhood—something important and painful, though he could not recall what it was. He had an odd restless desire to see and talk to the wanderer once more. Dick Cranston was given to long silent fits of thought; not reveries or rambling day-dreams, but distinct reflection, reasoning out subjects step by step; or, if he did look forward, framing his future on certain possibilities which gave something of solidity to his youthful imaginings.

Since Marjory had deigned to adopt him, he had grown much more communicative, and was a remarkably attentive listener when Marjory was in a good temper and talkative; but this was not every day, or rather every evening.

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Sometimes her presence was commanded in the dining or the drawing room, but not often. In the fine spring evenings, too, they had occasionally slipped out to take a walk. This, however, when made known to Mrs. Acland, was strictly forbidden, unless indeed her consent was first asked and granted. This very simple source of pleasure was therefore almost dried up, as neither son nor stepdaughter cared to ask for anything they could do without. In short, there could scarcely have been a more barren or monotonous existence than that to which these two young creatures were condemned; yet the divine vitality of youth defied the pressure of outward circumstances, and both in after-years could look back to hours spent together in the freedom of the bare sordid school-room as happy—even very happy.

"There! I think that looks better," said Marjory, in one of these peaceful intervals a few days after Brand's visit. She had been busy putting the room to rights, and had gathered quite a respectable supply of flowers from the refuse of a splendid basketful sent to Mrs. Acland by one of her husband's country clients.

Dick did not reply; he was studying a thick law-book, bound forbiddingly in calf. "Did you hear, Dick?" repeated Marjory resting her hand and duster on the table.

"Yes; what is it?" looking up wearily.

"Have I not made the place look nice?" She pointed to the bowl of flowers in the middle of the table.

"You have indeed," leaning back in his chair and pushing his book away.

"I wish I could live always in a pretty sweet room opening into a conservatory, with pleasure-grounds and a park beyond," said Marjory, shaking her duster out of the window and folding it up, then drawing a chair to the table opposite to her companion.

"And I wish I hadn't anything to do with law," cried Dick; "I cannot stand it. I would rather carry a hod."

"What is that!" asked Marjory.

"A kind of open box to hold bricks or mortar; labourers carry them up to the bricklayers when they are building a house."

"That must be horrid. If you hate law so much, why do you not tell my father, and try something else?"

"If I thought it would not cost him money or trouble, I'd tell him; but I have been a burden long enough already."

"It strikes me, Dick," said Marjory critically, leaning her elbows on the table and resting her chin between the palms of her hands—"it strikes me that you have not much spirit."

"I daresay I have not," returned Dick, laughing good-humouredly and showing his strong white teeth. "I always think it is better to obey honestly till you feel strong enough to judge and act for yourself. Obedience is nobler and wiser than self-will, and I know that if I ever come to command others I'll take care they obey implicitly."

"It's a babyish sort of thing, though, to be so ready to obey, at least for a young man, and you are quite big enough to be considered a young man."

"Oh, I am, am I? Thank you."

"How old are you, Dick?"

"I was nineteen in December, I believe."

"You are just two years and a month older than I am. Who would think it!"

"Why?—do I seem younger?"

"I am sure *I* feel much older. Then girls are always older than boys; in fact, we leave you behind!"

"Yes!" returned Dick, quietly, drawing the detested book to him. "Then they stop, and we go on."

"Do you mean to say we are stupid—that *you* have more brains?"

"I do not know. I have not seen much of girls. I feel somehow that they are different; they cannot do the things boys do, though they may be clever in their own way. Now, there is yourself; you dart at things wonderfully, and you are often right, but you couldn't plod."

"I should think not," contemptuously.

"Plodding is very useful, I can tell you; but quick-tempered people cannot plod."

"Am I quick-tempered, pray?"

"Well, rather! I can always tell, by the way you mend my socks, the mood you are in. Now last week you were cross, and you sewed up a hole just over the heel into a lump. It rubbed a sore place before I got to the office. When you are *not* cross, you do them so nicely and even, and——"

"You are an ungrateful, disagreeable boy," cried Marjory, reddening and sitting up stiffly, "when I treat you as if you were a whole instead of a half brother?—as if you were George himself."

"No, not quite," put in Dick. There was a pause, Marjory looking indignantly at her companion; presently her face softened.

"Did it hurt you very much, Dick?"

"Oh! I could endure it without crying out!" he said, with a smile.

"Dick! you are positively beginning to give yourself airs."

No answer. Dick was again trying to read.

"I have been thinking of what you said about my going out as a governess," resumed Marjory meditatively, and once more resting her chin on her hands. "Your mother would be happy then, when we were both—George and I—sent clear away, and she had my father to herself."

"I suspect she would; and then she would get rid of me. But, Marjory, I never advised you to go out as a governess. I said you would be better out of the house. I did not think how it was to be managed; any way, some fellow will marry you one of these days."

"That's not likely," said Marjory, still reflectively. "I have no money."

"Oh! plenty of girls marry without having money. Then some people would think you pretty."

"Indeed!" with pique. "That is as much as to say, you do not."

Dick looked at her critically for an instant, and replied very deliberately, "You are not a beauty, but you look pretty enough now and then; at least I have thought so, since you have been kind and nice."

"I don't suppose you know or care whether a girl is pretty or ugly," contemptuously.

"Perhaps not," returned Dick with a smile.

Marjory flashed a scornful glance at him in vain, for he had fixed his eyes on the page before him.

Marjory was silent for a minute or two, and then burst forth:

"Oh! don't let us be cross and disagreeable! It is a lovely evening; let us take a long walk. My father and Mrs. Acland have gone out to dinner, we will say nothing to them; but if Mrs. A. does hear, I am ready to stand a scolding."

"So am I," cried Dick, starting up, and shutting his book with a bang. "Law is too much for me: I think I must tell Mr. Acland it is no use, and he had better let me go and seek my fortune."

"I should, if I were you," returned Marjory as she left the room to get her hat.

Dick's desire for change, however, was to be brought about by an agency far different from what he would have anticipated, and, as is not unfrequently the case, what seemed a sore trial served to fulfil his most earnest wish.

Mr. Acland's mind had been troubled for the last fortnight or three weeks by the pallid looks and depressed air of his incomparable wife. Her appetite, too, was indifferent, and Mr. Acland had urged her more than once to consult an eminent physician, if only to relieve his mind.

This she gently refused to do. "I have no great faith in doctors," she said, "and I understand myself. The truth is, I have sustained a shock to my nervous system. The sudden appearance of that man, Brand, revived all the painful memories of my former life. He was one of the worst companions my unfortunate husband had, and was, I imagine, the confidant of his intention to desert me; at any rate, they were travelling together in America when the accident, through which Mr. Cranston lost his life, occurred. Ah! how terrible *my* life has been until I found rest and security with a true gentleman;" and she laid her hand caressingly on her husband's.

"Whose earnest effort will always be to promote your happiness, my love," returned Mr. Acland, touched and flattered. "I must

say I was pleased to see you look more like yourself last night at our friend's little dinner; and a very good dinner it was. We must ask Mr. and Mrs. Berry here, as soon as you feel equal to the fatigue of entertaining. Suppose you try a little change. A week or ten days at Brighton or Hastings might set you up. You could take nurse and the children, and——"

"And leave you alone, to be fidgeted into a nervous fever by Marjory's awkwardness!" interrupted Mrs. Acland, smiling tenderly upon him. "No, no! I will not stir without you. Besides, I do not think we are justified in incurring the cost of such an expedition, when we shall have to take the whole family to the seaside in August."

"Ah! I am not deterred by that consideration," said Mr. Acland cheerfully. "I have had a somewhat unexpected windfall. A man who was bankrupt a couple of years ago, and to whom I had done some service, has paid the debt he owed me this morning. I had never attempted to recover it, as it was not due to the firm. I shall therefore place it to my private account."

"That is very nice! I feel sure, dear, you do many kind acts of which no one hears," interrupted the lady. "However, the drawing-room begins to look terribly shabby, and I have set my heart on a really good Turkey carpet—if you think you can afford it."

A pleasant discussion ensued, and it was arranged that Mrs. Acland should call for her husband the following day at his office, and go with him to a well-known emporium to choose a suitable carpet, which, as Mrs. Acland observed, would wear well to the last.

Mr. Acland looked forward to this appointment with placid pleasure, equivalent probably to the sense of comfort and security which incites a petted pussy to purr. Mrs. Acland was always a credit to him, always sure to choose wisely, to keep the middle course between parsimony and extravagance. He even thought of treating her to luncheon at Pim's (the carpet warehouse was in the City), as she was to be at the office about one o'clock.

His gallant intentions were, however, frustrated by an urgent request to meet the opposing solicitor in a complicated case for the purpose of discussing the terms of a compromise. This necessitated the performance of some business he had intended transacting in the afternoon, at the time when he hoped to await his wife; and his arrangements for the day were completely upset.

Mrs. Acland was a little surprised, then, to find him awaiting her at Moorgate Street Station, where she alighted.

"I am glad you are a little before your time," he said, noticing her careful, simple, but handsome outdoor costume and distinguished look with satisfaction. "I am greatly annoyed at being obliged to break my engagement with you;" and he briefly explained, adding, "I shall not be detained for more than half an hour, and I will meet you at Dickson's."

"That will do very well," returned Mrs. Acland complaisantly. "I can wait for you there."

"Meantime, you can save me returning all the way to the office," continued Mr. Acland, as they ascended the long stair leading to the exit, "if you will bring me a paper, endorsed 'Abstract of Fleming's title.' It is lying on some documents tied together, in the middle division of my safe. Here are my keys. This long one opens the safe: if it is stiff, get Dick to help you; he is writing in my room to-day."

"Very well!" said Mrs. Acland, taking the keys.

"And you had better put the paper into an envelope. You will find some in the right-hand top drawer of my table. I was so put out by this summons, I quite forgot it—a thing I rarely do."

"I will be careful," she said. "Good-bye for the present."

"Take a cab down to Chichester Court," urged her husband.

"I would prefer walking; it is quicker and safer." She smiled and left him.

The office of Messrs. Acland and Cross was near the Metropolitan Station. Though Mrs. Acland rarely visited it, she knew her way; and, passing the clerk's or general room, tapped at a door that was inscribed "Private."

It was immediately opened by Dick Cranston, who evidently expected her. "Did you meet Mr. Acland?" he asked.

"I did." She seated herself, and drawing a small fan from her pocket waved it languidly, as if fatigued.

Dick resumed his writing. "Mr. Acland told me to bring him a paper from the safe. Which safe?—I see two," asked his mother.

"It must be the small one; I think he keeps his own papers in that." Mrs. Acland rose, and attempted to unlock it.

"I wish you would turn the key; it is very stiff."

Dick came to her assistance. "It needs more knack than strength."

"I should fancy you had more of the last than the first," she said, with a light touch of scorn, as she opened the heavy door and looked at the neatly arranged letters and papers almost filling the receptacle. Dick stood by her for half a second, and then went back in silence to his seat, which faced in an opposite direction.

"There is the paper! Certainly Mr. Acland is the most methodical of men," exclaimed his mother, closing and locking the safe. "I hope, Dick, you will profit by his example." She walked to the large knee-hole table, and selected an envelope as directed.

"I am not particularly untidy," said Dick; "I am far more orderly than George." His mother did not reply, but presently came and placed the packet before him. "Address that to Mr. Acland," she said; "I might possibly drop it."

Dick obeyed in silence, and looking up saw his mother leaning

back in a huge armchair which stood beside the fire-place. He rose and brought her the little parcel.

"Are you not well?" he asked, struck by her pallid, exhausted look.

"No; I am rarely quite well. I have these sudden terrible palpitations." She pressed her hand to her side, while she gazed at him with a peculiar resentful expression, her light blue eyes darkening and dilating with some strong feeling. "How could any woman's nerves or health stand the strain my life with your father put on them?—poverty, uncertainty, suspicion, desertion! And what comfort have you been to me?—always opposing me; never helping me in any way! You are," vindictively, "a reproduction of your father, with a strain of obstinacy even he had not."

"I am," said Dick, standing before her, his eyes on hers with a stern look of righteous wrath—"I am what your want of love has made me. Have you ever tried to give joy or comfort to the life I never asked you to bestow?"

Mother and son gazed at each other for a moment of terrible silence, all the antagonism of their natures flashing forth undisguised; but her eyes at last sank under his.

"I should be better and happier if I were not under the same roof with you," said Dick, steadily. "I have long wished to go out into the world and strive for myself. I do not fear the result; I can labour with my hands if need be. Your unconcealed dislike, which you never expressed so distinctly before, has decided me. I will speak to Mr. Acland to-night; I will no longer be a burden to you or to him."

"Do as you choose," she returned, coldly; "you are, no doubt, like your father, averse to steady application, and will become as useless a wanderer as he was."

Dick made no reply, and his mother left the room without a glance or a sign of relenting.

The young man threw himself into the chair she had just quitted, and burying his head in his hands remained quite still, except for a movement of his shoulders suggestive of sobs. It was a bitter moment. He had long known that his mother was indifferent to him; but that she absolutely hated him was a cruel revelation, and she did not hesitate to avow it with appalling animosity. Why, the most worthless fellows—boys that pilfered and lied, and robbed their benefactors, ay, and ill-treated their mothers—were loved by the very parents they injured! In gaol, on the gallows, many a criminal's mother stuck to him to the last! What had he done that he should be thus divested of friends, relatives, even of a mother's tenderness? He was terribly alone. But this temporary despair of a loving heart passed by. He could be, he thought, sufficient to himself, and it was unmanly to howl over what was inevitable. He could not be so very disagreeable and forbidding

after all, or Marjory would not have got over her strong prejudice against him.

Now that George was gone, the only creature he would regret under his mother's roof was Marjory. How impatient and stinging she could be! But when she *was* kind she seemed to draw the heart out of you and warm it against her own.

"Many a chap," thought Dick, pulling himself together with an effort—"many a chap has begun lower down a good bit than me, and got up pretty far; why shouldn't I?"

He rose and walked over to his desk.

"At any rate," he muttered, "I have done with my mother: she shall never move me or hurt me again."

And his pen was soon travelling steadily though not rapidly over the paper, proving that "Richard was himself again."

Meantime Mrs. Acland walked, not rapidly, to meet her husband. She had not come unharmed out of the angry scene with her son. Her face was set, and her eyes still dark with vindictive dislike. Air and motion, however, helped to recover herself; so Mr. Acland found her calm, smiling, and speaking with just the right degree of politeness to an attentive shopman.

"There is your paper, my love," she said, handing it to him, "I made Dick address it; just see that it is right."

"Yes, quite right," said Mr. Acland, looking at it. "You were not likely to make a mistake."

Then husband and wife threw themselves into the pleasant task of choosing among the harmonious colours and charming designs of the abundant stores exhibited. Taste and cost pulled in opposite directions, as usual. But Mr. Acland was in a liberal mood, and the right article was finally fixed upon in time to allow of his keeping his afternoon appointment punctually.

"I will put you into a cab before we part," he said; "you will want your luncheon by the time you get back."

"I shall not refuse a cab this time," replied Mrs. Acland, taking his arm and leaning heavily upon it. "The truth is, I have been a little upset. When I went into your room I found Dick idling and drawing ridiculous things, so I spoke to him rather sharply about the bad return he made to you after all your kindness. He replied most unbecomingly, in fact in a perfectly savage manner, so I left him."

"I am sorry to hear it. I must say, though Dick is slow, I never find him idle. I shall, however, certainly reprove him."

"No, no; pray do not! It will only make bad blood between us. Let us trust to time and kindness. I hope to bring him and Marjory, whose estrangement I deplore, to reason and right thinking by patience and justice."

"You are generally right. But here is a four-wheeler: you like a four-wheeler best?"

"Yes, thank you!"

She was about to step in, when Mr. Acland exclaimed:

"Oh! by-the-bye, give me my keys."

Mrs. Acland paused, thrust her hand into her pocket and withdrew, while a look of dismay came over her face.

"My dear, I am shocked and ashamed! I must have left them on your table when I went to find the envelope. Can you forgive me? I was so vexed and worried by Dick's rudeness, that I never thought of anything save getting away from him. I had better go back for them at once."

"No, no, by no means. No one will be let into my room while I am away, and probably no one will see them until I return."

"Well, pray *do* return as soon as you can! It is not well to leave them about even when Dick is there. Boys are curious; and then we must remember his poor father's propensities. Oh! I am so sorry, dear!"

"Never mind. Pray get in: it is beginning to rain."

Dick Cranston was unusually silent and preoccupied that evening; he did not even seem to hear Marjory when she spoke to him; nor did he demolish a pile of bread and butter, as was his wont at tea. As soon as he thought dinner was over he went away upstairs, and Marjory had time to forget his absence in an absorbing story which enlivened the pages of the "Family Herald," lent to her by the friendly cook.

Presently he came back, and stood looking wistfully, thoughtfully, out of the window, with his hands in his coat-pockets.

"Where have you been, Dick?" asked Marjory, roused to curiosity by his long-continued silence.

"I have been speaking to your father," he said, returning to his usual seat, and leaning his elbow on the table, rumpling his hair as he rested his head on one hand. "I have been telling him I will not go on at the office any longer; I want to maintain myself in my own way, without troubling him or my—mother."

"And what did he say?" asked Marjory eagerly.

"Oh! nothing very distinct; something about waiting, and not knowing my own mind—just what my mother has put into his head; but that is all nonsense. I never could leave at a more suitable time. I have finished a lot of copying, and there's a new fellow just apprenticed, who will fill my place; so my loss will be a gain."

"Then you really mean to go?—when?"

"I most certainly mean it. If it were not for respect to Mr. Acland, I should go to night."

"But, Dick, have you any money?"

"Yes, a few shillings."

"What will become of you if you do not find something to do?"

"I shall find something to do; I am not afraid!" A long pause,

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during which Marjory struggled hard against an inclination to cry.

"I shall be awfully lonely when you are gone; I shall not have a friend in the house, except cook."

"Yes, I am afraid you will be very lonely," returned Dick, looking at her kindly. "But I can't help going, Marge. I feel I would rather walk away into my grave, than stay in the house with my mother. She spoke to me this morning as if my existence was an unpardonable offence. If I see her every day I shall end by hating her; and, cruel as she is, I don't want to feel like that."

"I am sure I am not a bit surprised if you do!" cried Marjory, with heartiest sympathy. "Why, she makes us *all* miserable. How I wish I could go away too!"

"You cannot, though," said Dick thoughtfully; "you are such a slight young thing! How could *you* fight with the world?"

"I do a good bit of fighting here, only I am always beaten," replied Marjory, ruefully.

"Still, you are in your proper place under your father's roof—the place you have a right to. Now I have no rightful place, till I make one for myself."

"How shall you make it Dick—by carrying a thing like what you described on your shoulder?"

"Yes, if need be."

"Oh! how I wish George were here!" cried Marjory. "It is too bad to lose you both!" The big tears welled over and hung upon her eyelashes.

"Don't lose heart, Marge! By-and-by, when George and I get on, perhaps we might set up together, and you could come and keep house for us."

"It would be heavenly!" said Marjory, clasping her hands with delight at so glorious a prospect. "I would go to market and manage everything. I love being in the kitchen! But," her face changing, "if poor George is to be always at sea, he will not want a house or a housekeeper."

"Well, anyhow, let us hope for the best," said Dick, rising. "I am going to look over my belongings; I will take very little with me. But I have some books that were my father's; I'll sell them to-morrow, and get a few more shillings to keep me going till I find employment. I wonder if my father really *was* so bad a fellow as my mother makes out!"

"I am sure it was *her* fault if he was," said Marjory stoutly.

"I don't know. She makes *your* father a capital wife."

He opened the door slowly, as if expecting Marjory to speak; but Marjory was thinking of the delicious possibility of keeping house for the boys; so Dick disappeared for the evening.

CHAPTER VII.

THIEVES BREAK THROUGH AND STEAL.

MR. ACLAND had been a good deal disturbed by his stepson's resolution to quit a certainty for an uncertainty. He rather liked the boy, and had grown accustomed to see him. Moreover he feared it would not have a good appearance in the eyes of the world this separation in the family.

The lad, however, was extremely resolute in a quiet way, and altogether Mr. Acland scented trouble near at hand. His ever-ready comforter, however, laughed at his taking the matter to heart. "You are too kind and unselfish," she said; "it is not worth fretting about. Insist on his taking a fortnight to consider what he is about, if he is still of the same mind, let him go! Trust me, he will come back. If he does, we ought to ship him off to the Colonies. He is just the sort of dogged plodding boy that would succeed there."

The next day, however, wrought a complete change in the views and action of the speakers."

Mr. Acland was late. It was very warm weather for the beginning of May, and Mrs. Acland had ordered a suitable dinner—delicately fried salmon steaks, cold lamb, with fresh salad and mayonnaise sauce made by her own fair hands.

Her husband, however, arrived, looking pale and jaded; nor did he seem disposed to enjoy the good things set before him.

"Is Dick in the house?" was almost his first question.

"No; I thought he was kept at the office."

"He left the office a little after three, having told me he had copied the letters Mr. Lane gave him to do, and as he did not intend to remain, he had better not begin anything else."

"How insolent!" exclaimed Mrs. Acland.

"No, he did not speak insolently."

"Something has happened to disturb you?" said Mrs. Acland, looking sharply at her husband.

"Yes! I will tell you after dinner."

The meal was finished in ominous silence. As soon as they were alone Mrs. Acland uttered an interrogative, "Well?"

"My safe has been opened and robbed," returned Mr. Acland, speaking with unwonted animation.

"Robbed!" echoed his wife, growing pale. "How—when?"

"I will tell you all about it. The day before yesterday, as I told you, a man who had long been in my debt paid me eighty-five pounds odd, in notes and gold. He stayed a while talking, and when he

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left, as it was too late for the bank, I put the money into an envelope, wrote the amount on it, and locked it away in my safe." (Mrs. Acland nodded an affirmative.) "Yesterday morning, you remember, I was a good deal hurried and put about; but though I was detained rather long in consultation I returned to get the keys which you had forgotten." (Mrs. Acland's eyes grew larger with a look of alarm.) "It was again too late for the bank, so I did not open the safe. On asking if any one had inquired for me, I was told that no one had called—that only Mr. Cranston had been in my room, where he was writing till Mr. Cross had sent for him shortly before my return. To day, as I told you, Dick left early, and immediately after I went to get the money and send it to the bank. It was clean gone."

Mrs. Acland uttered a low moan and fell back in her chair. "Robert!" she said in a voice full of emotion, "my unhappy boy! You will not be too severe on him?"

"Your suspicions point in that direction?" said Mr. Acland nervously, and hastily pouring out a glass of sherry he pushed it across the table to his wife. "I cannot myself believe he would be so dishonest—so short-sighted."

"What have you done?"

"I was afraid to do anything. The chief thing to guard against is scandal. I sent for Cross and told him of my loss. He seemed to think it absurd to suspect Dick, of whom he has a high opinion. We asked cautiously if any one had seen a pencil-case lying on my table or anywhere about yesterday, and both the clerks declared that from one o'clock, when Dick had come out and taken a sandwich, returning almost immediately, he had never left the room, until a minute or two before I entered it. Now you were not there till after one."

"Ten minutes past," said Mrs. Acland; "I remember looking at the clock over the mantelpiece."

"I returned at four forty-five," continued Mr. Acland, "found the keys where you thought you had left them, and since they have not been out of my possession."

"It is terribly suggestive," said his wife.

"You see," he resumed, "I really cannot make a move in the matter which is not fraught with danger to the boy himself—to the—the respectability of the office—to our own credit. Looked at apart from our personal belief and regard, the case against Dick is strong—very strong!"

Mrs. Acland covered her face with her handkerchief and shook her head. "You will be merciful?" she murmured.

"When you opened the safe to get the paper I required, did you notice if an envelope, endorsed in my writing, 'eighty-five pounds, thirteen,' lay on top of the papers in the middle division?"

"I did," faltered Mrs. Acland. "I recognized your writing; and

Dick, who assisted me to turn the key, must have seen it too, for he stood by me for a minute or two."

"His sudden desire to leave me, the indescribable determination to quit the office at once—all looks suspicious. Still I cannot believe—in short, I am at my wits' end. And the money is irretrievably lost. Under the circumstances I cannot make any move about it."

"Robert!" sobbed Mrs. Acland, "you are too—too good; I feel as if my heart were broken!"

"Come, come, you must neither think nor speak like that."

"Let us see the boy and hear what he has to say for himself," cried Mrs. Acland. She rang hastily.

The servant who answered her summons reported that "Mr. Cranston had just come in and was having his tea."

"Tell him to come here as soon as he has done," she said, and both husband and wife kept silence—a painful silence, broken only by an occasional ejaculation expressive of horror and despair on Mrs. Acland's part.

Then the door opened and Dick Cranston walked in quietly, and stood looking at them both with perfect composure. "You sent for me?" he said, after waiting to be addressed.

Mr. Acland looked at his wife, who shook her head, then he uttered a loud "hem" and said, "I wished to ask you a few questions, Dick. You were in my private room almost all yesterday?"

"I was, sir."

"Who came in while you were there?"

"Only my mother and Mr. Cross."

"What time did you leave?"

"About half-past four."

"Did you see my keys lying on my table?"

"No, sir."

"Are you aware that a considerable sum has been taken from my safe?"

"No! Has there really? Then I do not think it could have been done yesterday, for I was in the room the whole time."

"Then who could have taken it?" asked Mr. Acland. "For the money—over eighty-five pounds—is gone."

"Some one must have a master key!" cried Dick; "how else could the safe have been opened?"

"Dick," said Mr. Acland solemnly, "suspicion points to *you*. For some hours you were alone, and the key of the safe was within your reach!"

"To me! It is impossible, sir, you can suspect *me*!"

"It is inexplicable," exclaimed Mr. Acland, his expression growing undecided. "The idea of a master key is altogether improbable. I have had that safe for years, and no attempt was ever made upon it, though we had one dishonest man in the office."

Here Mrs. Acland suddenly started up, and clasping her hands,

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stretched them out to Dick tragically. "My poor misguided son," she exclaimed with a sob, "have courage; I have interceded for you; you know the generosity and tenderness of your good father—he is indeed a father to you—be candid, and tell the whole truth. We shall not be severe on a first offence."

"I would forgive, if you would do your best to atone, and save me from accusing some innocent individual falsely."

"Why, mother! you don't believe I have done this; I am certain *you do not!*" cried Dick, turning on her with a stern piercing look. "Why have you thought it necessary to intercede for me? I need no intercession." Then facing Mr. Acland he said still steadily, though with much emotion, "What have I ever done that you suspect me of such short-sighted infamy, such base gratitude? I have no need for money, I have no debts, I have never gambled, though I have watched others play. I demand that you make the strictest inquiry, in justice to me! My only capital is my character, and if you find out the truth I am sure to be cleared."

"But don't you see, Dick, you unfortunate boy," gasped Mrs. Acland, speaking with difficulty, "that if Mr. Acland makes open inquiry into the matter, it will be destruction to you? No one would believe you innocent, the evidence is too—too—" she faltered, and fell back in the chair from which she had just risen, apparently fainting.

"This, too, is your work!" exclaimed Mr. Acland indignantly as he rang the bell for assistance; "it is plain what *her* conviction is."

Dick did not attempt to approach his mother, and Marjory, who soon after Dick was summoned had followed with a chivalrous intention of standing by him if necessary (for she had a vague prophetic feeling that mischief was brewing), stood, disregarded by the others in their agitation, terrified, indignant, bewildered, looking on helplessly, while Sarah loosened her mistress's lace neckchief and held smelling salts to her nose.

But Mrs. Acland quickly recovered, and peremptorily dismissed the servant. "I am utter unhinged," she said brokenly, "I seem to have lost my head with all this horror. Come and speak to me early to-morrow, Dick; you may hear reason from me. And you, my dear husband, for my sake spare my son, have compassion on his youth and inexperience!" she rose and tottered towards the door.

"I feel as if I were going mad," exclaimed Dick, stopping short and gazing at her; "you, my mother—you, Mr. Acland, who have been my best friend and who know me thoroughly, to believe me capable of such baseness! Good God! I begin to doubt myself!"

"Be wise," murmured Mrs. Acland; "do not persist in useless obstinacy."

"Obstinacy!" repeated Dick, "I have not quite lost my senses, and I shall always maintain my innocence." He began to pace to and fro. Mr. Acland, with a condemnatory shake of the head, supported his wife out of the room. Marjory felt almost afraid of Dick, he looked so dark and stern; yet she could not make a movement to go away. "Marjory," he said, as if suddenly aware of her, "do you believe I am a dastardly thief?"

"No," she cried, the spell of silence and immobility breaking at the sound, "not if every one in the world swore to it. I should sooner believe *she* did it herself! Don't be afraid, Dick, the truth will come out one day; but it is utterly unaccountable, there is some witchcraft in it."

"Thank you, Marjory; while I have one to believe in me I won't give up, but here I will *not* stay."

"What will become of you, Dick?" cried Marjory appalled. "Can you do nothing to prove your innocence?"

"Nothing," he said. "Everything is against me."

He turned and retired to his own room, where Marjory dared not follow him, to face this terrible trouble as best he could alone.

Marjory waited miserably enough, hoping for his reappearance till Sarah came to turn off the gas.

As to Dick, he felt as if the ground, which had hitherto seemed solid, giving way under his feet. Even his steady sense and natural self-reliance failed him in solitude and darkness.

Was he going to be the sport of what weak fellows and romance writers call "fate?" Well, not without a stout tussle was the determination which finally grew up from the weary round of conjecture, anticipation and confused plans, through which he wandered in the sleepless watches of that dreary night.

Early next morning the housemaid tapped at the door:—"Please, sir, your ma' would like to speak to you in her own room."

It was with the utmost reluctance Dick obeyed. He looked for no sympathy, no kindly comprehension from his mother.

She was wrapped in her dressing-gown, sitting by her writing-table, on which stood a cup of tea.

"I have not closed my eyes, Dick," she exclaimed as he entered the door; "of all my troubles *this* is the worst that has fallen upon me."

"I am not surprised at your thinking so." He was very composed and cold.

"I am driven by irresistible facts to believe as I do, most reluctantly; but, Dick, neither Mr. Acland nor I wish to be harsh. I have succeeded in persuading him to give you another chance; he will bear the loss—a very serious one, and preserve the strictest silence on the subject, to save your character. Fortunately the money was his own and no one knew it had been placed in the safe; no one need be the wiser. If you are sensible, and aware

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what is due to Mr. Acland and myself, you will stay where you are and endeavour to live down this most painful and too probable suspicion."

"I will never sleep another night under your roof nor cost Mr. Acland another shilling," returned Dick very quietly. "Mother, I do not believe that in your heart you think me guilty," he added emphatically, while he looked keenly into her face.

"I would rather not; but how can I *disbelieve*? who else could have taken the money? who else was alone in Mr. Acland's room except myself? Perhaps," with a scornful laugh, "you wish to shift the blame on me?"

"I would not do so even if I could," said Dick coldly.

"Insolent boy," cried Mrs. Acland with sudden fire, "your tone is an insult. I believe you think me capable of any crime."

"I did not mean to be insulting."

"Then what do you intend to do? You can find no employment without a recommendation. Do not be a fool; stay where you are. If you are unjustly suspected, the truth will come out some day; be guided by me."

"I cannot stay," he returned firmly; "neither you nor Mr. Acland ought to suspect me. I may be a dull rough fellow, but I have always been honest; I have deserved better from you. Now I shall bid you good-bye: if we are to meet again you must seek me."

"Stay—I desire you to stay," cried Mrs. Acland, greatly agitated.

"Good-bye, mother, you will be happier without me." With a choking sensation in his throat Dick left the room and shortly afterwards the house.

When Marjory came downstairs there was no sign of her comrade and ally; she did not like to ask for him, though her heart swelled painfully at the thought that she should not see him again, and yet, she told herself, he could not have gone without saying good-bye.

She went into his room—nothing had been touched; she wandered into their subterranean study—his pencils and bits of drawings lay scattered about.

"What's become o' Mr. Dick?" asked the cook. "He was off early without a mouthful between his teeth. Has he fallen out with his ma? Well, many a lady might be proud of such a son, a tall, fine-looking fellow, and that quiet and well behaved."

"I know nothing about him, cook; I am afraid something has gone wrong."

Breakfast passed in almost total silence. Mrs. Acland did not appear, but a message from her summoned her husband to a private interview before he set out for his office.

Marjory watched the breakfast being removed with a sort of dumb

anger at things going on as usual, so natural to a mind deeply irritated and distressed. Then Louise's lessons and music had to be attended to, and she was extra troublesome.

It was a weary morning, the moments were as drops of lead.

Mrs. Acland only left her room to go out in a cab, which had been waiting a few minutes. Then nurse did her best to persuade Marjory that it would do her good to take the children for their morning walk. This she utterly declined; and feeling unspeakably desolate she settled herself in the schoolroom, and tried to work, chiefly sitting with her elbows on the table and her head on her hands.

Suddenly the door opened and Dick came in.

"Oh! I am so glad," she cried, "I thought you had gone quite away; where have you been?"

Dick sat down opposite her, a smile, somewhat sad but very soft, parting his lips. "I should not have gone without bidding you good-bye. I have been to see Mr. Cross in his own house, to tell him the whole story.

"And what does he say?" cried Marjory breathless.

"That as a case of circumstantial evidence nothing can be stronger against me; but strong as it is, he does not believe I took the money. You can't think what a relief this is; I feel as if I had more faith in myself."

"I am so glad," said Marjory warmly. "And did you tell him you would go away?"

"Yes; he advised me not, but I held to my intention. Then he offered me a tip, but I could not take it."

"But you ought have taken it," cried Marjory; "I am sure you have no money of your own!"

"Enough to begin with," said Dick. "However, he insisted on my eating a good breakfast; and I feel much bolder in consequence," he added with a laugh. "Now I have come back for a last word with you; it will be many a day before I see you again."

"But won't you write to me?" cried Marjory, her lips quivering.

"It would be no use," he returned; "our roads will lie wide apart, for I am going to begin at the very bottom of the ladder, and I may not be a desirable acquaintance."

"Dick!"

"I don't think you would cut me, but the idea of keeping up any intercourse with this house is utterly repugnant. I want to break away and disappear, so I will not write to you, though I shall think of you often. You have been very kind and good since you came back from school; I thank you with all my heart."

"Oh! Dick, I used to be a wretch! Won't you sit down and have a little talk, they are all out?"

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room and taken a few clothes—I think I have earned them. Now I must say good-bye."

"Then if we are to part friends, Dick," speaking with an effort, "you must take this from George and me." "This" was a folded paper containing three sovereigns, which Marjory had hoarded up.

"What! rob you of your capital," cried Dick, looking down at her with moist eyes and a half smile. "No, Marjory, I have not come down to that yet!"

"But, Dick, you must, you must," slipping her hand through his arm and endeavouring to force the gold upon him, "or shall I think you do not like me, that you are still offended with me! I shall be miserable enough when you, *too*, have gone, and my only bit of comfort will be knowing that you were not quite penniless, that I was able to help you a little. Don't refuse me, Dick."

Again he refused; but she pleaded so earnestly, her bright eyes all suffused with tears, that he yielded at last. "Well, Marjory, I will repay you if I live, and at least I shall always feel I have one friend in you." He looked round the bare dull room, and took up some pencils and a drawing or two which lay on the shelf and put them in his pocket. "I have known some miserable hours in this room," he said, "and some pleasant ones since *you* came home, but I little thought I should be driven to leave it as I am! Give my love to George, he has always been a good fellow to me; and now, Marjory, God bless you! Won't you give me a parting kiss?"

"Oh yes, dear Dick," she cried, the tears now welling over and rolling down her cheeks. She lifted up her face to him as she would have done to George. Dick, moved to a degree that surprised himself, hugged her heartily.

"It is hard to part—harder than I thought," he said, half ashamed of his own emotion. "I could be so fond of you, Marjory, if I stayed! but it is all no use, we may never meet again; only, believe me, I shall always try to be an honest man, however humble my way of life. From this time forth I will trust to myself alone."

"Good-bye," sobbed Marjory, now quite broken down, "do let me hear from you some time or other; and remember I shall never—never—never believe a word against you."

Dick pressed her hand hard and went out through the side entrance, turning at the gate to wave a last farewell. His countenance was grave but not despondent, and his step as he walked rapidly down the road was firm and elastic.

"He will succeed, I am sure he will," thought Marjory, as she hurried away to her own room to sob herself back to composure. Surely a more tragic break in the routine of a sombre life could not have come to deepen monotony into gloom!

So Dick Cranston went away out of Marjory's life altogether for the present, leaving no trace.

For awhile Mr. Acland was uncomfortable, and occasionally conjectured what might, could, would or should have become of his stepson. But Mrs. Acland was immovably calm. "As soon as he needs anything he will return, depend upon it," was her invariable answer. "He has found some means of living, and even if he suffers privation he deserves to suffer for his shameless conduct to *you*, who have been a real father to him."

"Then you believe he *did* take that money?"

"I try hard *not* to believe it; but it is evident that Dick and myself were the only persons who had access to the safe."

"Circumstantial evidence sometimes misleads! And it would have been more natural for him to have gone off with his plunder instead of returning here."

"On the contrary his disappearance would have left no doubt as to who was the thief. His best chance was to face the danger and throw suspicion on some one else—even on *me* if he could."

"On you! Oh! that would be too preposterous!"

"Well! I rather think it would!" with a placid smile; and then the conversation drifted in another direction.

Gradually forgetfulness fell on all save Marjory. She thought often of the outcast, pictured him in difficulty and sore need, even carrying the hod he had described to her, or perhaps falling in with some benevolent millionaire such as appear at the right moment in sensational stories, and returning prosperous, powerful and ready to confound his mother by his superiority and success.

The glowing June and showery July days passed without a break—passed chiefly in the solitude of the school-room. Even Marjory's bouyant nature was losing its elasticity under the pressure of an ever-present enmity, and she began to give up the struggle to win something of kindness and recognition from her father. Indeed, she marvelled at the dexterity with which Mrs. Acland always made her appear in the worst light, while her subtilty defied Marjory's untrained efforts to counteract her malignant influence.

Writing long letters to George, who was still in southern latitudes, where his ship was employed in various voyages between the Colonies, California and South America, was her only solace; and in her loneliness she began to attach herself to her little half-sister, Louise, who was her pupil, and, though troublesome, was interesting and affectionate.

The autumnal sea-side visit was a welcome break. Marjory had a keen and exquisite pleasure in the beauty, the colouring, the changefulness of the sea, and she used to wander with and without Louise for miles along the beach, for which freedom of action Mrs. Acland occasionally scolded.

After Christmas, however, a fresh trial awaited her. Herbert,

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his mother's special favourite, was to begin lessons, and Marjory particularly disliked the child. She well knew that the effort to make him attend would most certainly embitter her relations with Mrs. Acland and estrange her still more from her father; she was therefore resolved not to undertake the odious task for nothing.

Having screwed her courage to the sticking point, for she was not nearly so brave as when she first returned from school, she startled both Mrs. Acland and her father at breakfast one morning after they were again settled in Falkland Terrace by saying abruptly, "If I am to teach, why can I not be a governess in some strange family? Let me have some lessons, or attend classes this winter, and in the spring I can go away and earn my own bread as the others did." A very injudicious beginning, but Marjory had learned that speak as she might Mrs. Acland would always twist her words against her.

"Why, Marjory!" exclaimed Mr. Acland, looking up from his paper, "what has put that into your head?"

"I hope a sincere desire to lighten your burdens," said his wife smiling. "I thought it would be a mutually helpful arrangement if Marjory saved you the cost of school for our little ones, and yet kept them under the shelter of her father's roof."

"I think I should do better among strangers," returned Marjory bluntly. "Louise is all very well, but I shall never be able to manage Herbert; besides——" She paused.

"Besides, you would no doubt prefer seeking adventures far from the restraints of your father's decorous house," interrupted Mrs. Acland.

Marjory flashed a look full of wrath upon her, but wisely held her tongue.

"Well, a-really, I never thought a daughter of mine would entertain such an idea," said Mr. Acland pompously; "do not let me hear anything more of such a scheme."

"I do not know that I should insist on its complete renunciation," remarked Mrs. Acland thoughtfully. "Some girls cannot be happy at home, and many young ladies, better off than Marjory will ever be, like the independence of earning their bread. But at present Marjory is decidedly too young."

"And too ignorant for anything above a nursery governess," put in the subject of discussion. "If you will only let me attend the music and history classes at the New Institute in the High Street I will do all I can for Herbert. and, of course, for Louise too."

This bold attempt succeeded. For some object of her own Mrs. Acland saw fit to second her stepdaughter's proposition, and Marjory had one opportunity in her life of feeling something like friendliness towards her stepmother when she was permitted to attend the classes as she proposed.

The winter then passed far more quickly and pleasantly than Mar-

jory had dared to hope, in spite of the penance entailed by striving to teach Herbert.

Yet Mrs. Acland did not slacken the reins of discipline. Marjory, who was extremely sociable and ready to make acquaintances, once brought in a class-fellow who was walking back from the institute with her, to explain some change which had been made in the order of their lessons, and while they were looking through their books in the dining-room, Mrs. Acland came in. She was freezingly dignified, and the young visitor speedily departed. Whereupon she sternly forbade Marjory ever taking so great a liberty again; she was not to bring promiscuous companions into that sacred room or into the house; all sorts of evil might come of it.

"Oh! very well!" said Marjory bravely, though her heart swelled with rage and mortification. "I thought it was my father's house and that I might ask a friend to——"

"Yes, it is your father's house," interrupted Mrs. Acland with contemptuous calmness. "but he has put *me* at the head of it, so I shall do my duty and what is best for those in it, regardless of your insolence. You will find it is wiser to be my friend than my enemy."

"How can I be your friend when you never will understand me or believe that I try to do right," cried Marjory passionately.

"Go, leave the room; do not attempt to answer me," returned Mrs. Acland; and Marjory gladly obeyed.

This interdict cut her off from making any girl intimacies. If she could not ask any one to her father's house, neither would she accept any invitation, while she was too loyal to her father to complain of his wife to strangers. So she grew silent and reserved and was naturally left to herself.

CHAPTER VIII.

ENTER UNCLE CARTERET.

TIME in its ceaseless, pitiless unbroken stream swept through the frost and snow, the storms and suffering of winter, and once more spring sunshine and early showers smiled and wept on the fast flowing current.

It was a year since Dick had gone out into the unknown, and nothing whatever had been heard of him.

The recurring season filled Marjory with thoughts of both her banished brothers. George, she had some hopes of seeing soon, as Mr. Acland had heard from the owners that the ship was to come home in autumn.

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This was cheering news, and Marjory supported herself on it, as a shipwrecked mariner clings to the plank on which he floats amid the bitter briny waves.

The year just past had ripened and matured her fiery impetuous nature, but it had also in some degree tarnished the bright hopefulness which was her spear and shield; she still cherished the plan of going away to teach or work among strangers, and escape the humiliation of being treated like a hireling in her father's house, but she had not again broached the subject to Mr. or Mrs. Acland; it required a good deal of resolution to attack it.

One evening after dinner Marjory went up to the study, as the back-parlour was termed, which opened on a balcony with steps leading to the garden. Here Mr. Acland liked to smoke a post-prandial cigar, while his wife, who was remarkably industrious, worked some elaborate ornamental stitchery. Marjory's errand was to submit a list of books she had been ordered to make to her step-mother.

Mrs. Acland glanced over it. "That seems all right," she said "but there are some in the spare room which I had forgotten. I just scribbled them down. There, you had better sit down and add them to the list."

Marjory obeyed, and while she wrote her father took his cigar from his lips, remarking lazily, "I met Fowler to-day, Fowler of James, Briggs and Fowler, and he mentioned that Mr. Carteret had actually arrived in London. Fowler is his solicitor, you know."

"Oh! indeed. You mean Marjory's uncle or grand-uncle, whom we heard of last year?"

"Yes; It seems the tenant of his place in Daleshire is leaving, and he has come over to stay there for a few months and let it again."

"Indeed! I suppose this Mr. Carteret is a man of property?"

"His estate is not very considerable, but he inherited money from his mother, and his wife had a large fortune."

"Where is he staying?"

"At the Grosvenor Hotel."

"Don't you think, dear, you ought to call upon this relative?"

"He is only a connection," returned Mr. Acland. "And I do not feel disposed to spend any time on him. He never took much notice of his niece nor of me. When we were married he sent us a queer-looking mouldy lamp; I believe it was something Grecian or Pompeian."

"Is that the old green thing with a broken foot in the lumber room?"

"I daresay; I have not seen it for years."

Mrs. Acland mused for some moments in silence.

"I think, dear, if you do not care to call, I ought, if it were only for Marjory's sake, she ought to know her mother's relatives."

"I do not think that old Carteret would ever be of use to any one."

"Still," urged Mrs. Acland, "I should like to call if you have no objection."

"Do just as you like, my dear; I do not think they will be long in town."

Mrs. Acland made no remark, but this possibility of establishing a link with real genuine members of the "upper ten" fascinated her.

If she could manage to please this rich old aristocrat she might introduce the thin end of the wedge into society far and away beyond the north-west coterie by which her ambition had hitherto been bounded.

She was up betimes next morning, and foraged out the "wonderful lamp" with her own hands, wrapped it in paper and took it before luncheon time to a "handy man" in the neighbourhood who did much repairing far her.

"Marjory," she said when the mid-day meal was nearly over, "go and put on your best dress and hat, or rather bring the hat to me and I will put in a few primroses, it is a little too simple. I am going to see Mr. and Mrs. Carteret and will take you with me; try and be amiable and agreeable. These relations might be of great use to you."

Marjory muttered something.

"What do you say—you have no nice gloves? You shall get a pair as we go along. It is a miserable wet afternoon and we shall be sure to find them."

If Marjory had not been going to pay this visit in company with her stepmother she would have been full of lively curiosity and highly pleased; as it was she felt sure Mrs. Acland would contrive to make her look awkward or foolish, or both. However, it was a little change, so she brought her hat and looked on with rather reluctant admiration at the deftly arranged decoration by which Mrs. Acland soon improved its appearance.

"I shall have a cab. It is false economy to spoil one's clothes," was Mrs. Acland's decision. And she even risked an additional sixpence in the fare by stopping at Marshall and Snelgrove's to get Marjory the gloves she needed.

Arrived at the Grosvenor she was rewarded by finding that both Mr. and Mrs. Carteret were at home.

Marjory was absolutely dazzled by the grandeur of the stair-case, the wide hall, the numerous waiters, the deference of the elegantly-mannered porter. She was struck by Mrs. Acland's composed matter-of-course air; it seemed as if she had been used to this sort of thing all her life.

The room to which they were conducted was large and handsomely furnished, a fire burned pleasantly in the grate, and beside it in an easy chair sat a small elderly gentleman, with a short, arched, obsti-

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nate nose and shrivelled yet rosy cheeks, like a certain kind of apple, a remarkably abundant head of light-coloured hair, contrasted with scanty greyish whiskers, and suggested the aid of art. He had evidently been examining or sorting letters, for a small table in front of him was covered with papers of various kinds, and when Mrs. Acland's card was presented he looked up and took it with a peevish expression. "Acland—hey?" he exclaimed, examining it through his double eyeglass. "Who—what——" but his speech was arrested by the entrance of Mrs. Acland in her handsome visiting dress of black silk, lace and jet and an exceedingly becoming bonnet. She was followed by Marjory in her very best though unspring-like costume of dark grey and hat of coarse straw, which her stepmother had "smartened up" for the occasion.

The little old gentleman rose, pushed away his table and made a low bow. He was very carefully dressed in rather a picturesque style, his coat was black velvet, and his shirt collars were turned down over a pale blue tie, secured at the throat by a gold ring.

"Mrs. Acland," he said with a slightly bewildered air, "I fear that during my absence from England I have not kept up my knowledge of family history, a——" he hesitated and paused.

"I have taken the liberty of calling," said Mrs. Acland in her gentlest voice, with her most softly composed manner, "although I am not so fortunate as to be related in any way to you, Mr. Carteret; but hearing you were in town I thought it right to present your grand-niece, my husband's eldest daughter, Marjory Acland, to you."

"Ah! I am sure you are very good—very good indeed!" looking hard at our little heroine. "But do you mean to say that exceedingly grown-up young lady is my *grand-niece*?"

"I am told that my husband, Mr. Robert Acland's first wife was your niece, Marjory Barton."

"Oh yes, I remember now. It certainly seems a long time ago. I was young myself then—young, I mean, to have a marriageable niece; but her mother, my sister, was older—considerably older, and married far too young! Won't you sit down a——" he spoke uneasily and as if not too well pleased.

Mrs. Acland immediately took a chair, and Marjory, meeting his eyes and greatly amused with his quaint figure, smiled one of the swift sweet smiles which at times lit up her face with passing beauty. The old gentleman was struck.

"I think your daughter is more a Carteret than a Barton," he said with a smile, which showed a superb row of teeth. "I caught an expression there that reminded me of my mother, who was a celebrated beauty."

"I confess that I am rather struck by the likeness between Marjory and yourself," returned Mrs. Acland seriously.

"Indeed! indeed! that is rather curious! for I am considered to have a striking resemblance to my mother. Would you mind stand-

ing by me here?" he ambled with little short quick steps to a long looking-glass between the windows. "I am rather a well-known judge of faces, likenesses—in fact of all the subtler indications of hereditary; I want to compare our faces." He looked with great gravity at the reflections of himself and his youthful grand-niece.

Marjory had rarely looked so sweet. The idea of finding a relative who would acknowledge and perhaps protect her in this funny, pretty, and decidedly well-bred old gentleman, softened her with a sensation of grateful pleasure. She felt ready to take him into her heart.

"Well, a-really, a—I do perceive a certain resemblance——"

"I hope I *am* like you!" said Marjory, turning to him with so genuine an expression of kindly appreciation that Mr. Carteret had rarely been more pleasantly flattered,

"Thank you, my dear, I must say the same to you. Now sit down, sit down. I am a very busy man, my dear madam," to Mrs. Acland, "but I will gladly spare you a few minutes until Mrs. Carteret appears. Now tell me everything, put me *au fait* of family matters" (he was very fond of peppering his talk with scraps of foreign tongues, which shall be translated), "not that I am very deeply interested in such things; my sympathies take a wider, a more cosmopolitan range; still, as you have taken the trouble to call——" He paused and waved his white lorgnetted hands as if to say, "Go on."

"I can give you very little information," returned Mrs. Acland. "These matters do not interest me greatly, and the late Mrs. Acland's sisters have held aloof since Mr. Acland's marriage with me."

"Very foolish! very unreasonable indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Carteret. "They could not expect that a man of his age, scarcely come to the prime of life—he is some years younger than I am—would live alone, unaccompanied and unsoled. Pooh! how few understand human nature!"

"Quite true," said Mrs. Acland much impressed, as if this view had never been presented to her before.

"And Acland is still doing well? He's something in the law? And he had, you know, a very fair fortune with Marjory Barton."

"I know very little of Mr. Acland's affairs previous to his marriage with me. He has had some severe losses" (Mr. Carteret's face assumed a sudden expression of alarm and disgust; Mrs. Acland hastened to finish her sentence). "I have therefore found full occupation for my limited powers in endeavouring to secure for my husband and family the largest amount of comfort at the smallest possible cost. However, for the last three years I am happy to say he has been recovering himself."

"Glad to hear it, very glad indeed."

"A press of business has prevented Mr. Acland from doing himself the pleasure of calling upon you."

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"Pray don't mention it! My compliments to Mr. Acland; he is by no means to trouble himself: in fact, I have so little in common with an English man of business that an interview would not be productive of much enjoyment to either."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Acland with an amiable smile, as if she were taking her interlocutor into her confidence. "My dear good husband has certainly not much perception of the ideal or beautiful. Why, I found an exquisite antique brown lamp, Pompeian or Grecian, hidden away in a cupboard, a thing which rejoiced even my uneducated eyes, which I have reinstated in its place of honour. I understand it was a gift from yourself."

"A bronze Pompeian lamp," repeated Mr. Carteret, almost lifting himself off his seat so eagerly did he grasp the arms of his chair. "My dear madame, I should like to see it! I should very much like to see it! Would you mind sending it here for inspection?"

"It would give Mr. Acland and myself infinite pleasure if you and Mrs. Carteret would waive ceremony and inspect it in our very modest abode, any day and hour you choose to fix for dinner," began Mrs. Acland insinuatingly.

"Dinner! my dear madame!" almost screamed Mr. Carteret. "Nothing on earth would induce me to dine out in London. The atmosphere, the cooking would be my death!"

Mrs. Acland's colour rose, and Marjory opened her eyes while she suppressed an inclination to laugh.

The awkward silence was broken by the entrance of a tall, slight, elegant-looking woman, very colourless, with near-sighted light eyes and a thick gold-coloured fringe of hair. Her costume was almost girlish in its delicate colouring, and the lace with which it was abundantly decorated was of the most costly kind.

"Ah, here is Mrs. Carteret. My dear, this is Mrs. Ackland and Miss Acland; you remember, or perhaps you do not, that my young relative, Marjory Barton, married a Mr. Acland. This is her daughter, and this is the present Mrs. Acland. It is really rather complicated, but I have a knack of starting things."

Mrs. Carteret made a slight gracious bend of acknowledgement, saying in a very sweet refined tone, "I remember quite well;" and drawing a chair near Marjory, picked up a tiny silvery little Yorkshire terrier, which waddled after her, and began to stroke it as she spoke.

"Now about this lamp," resumed Mr. Carteret, addressing Mrs. Acland with real interest, and they were soon in deep conversation, while Mrs. Carteret with a soft smile asked Marjory, "Have you been long in town? I suppose it is your first season?"

"We always live in town," said Marjory, immensely struck by the elegance of her uncle's wife. Could so grand a lady belong to her in any way?

"Ah! indeed. All the year round?"

"Except when we go to the seaside."

"Yes; Is it not rather unpleasant in November?"

"No, I do not think so."

"Do you like dogs?"

"Yes, very much. What a little darling that is!"

"It is a lovely creature, and so intelligent. Oh! you may stroke her; she rarely bites."

"What is its name?"

"Fairy! Have *you* any dogs?"

"Marjory shook her head. "I should like to have one, but Mrs. Acland would not let one into the house."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Carteret—a very expressive "ah!" and there was a pause, during which Marjory listened to what Mr. Carteret was saying to his attentive listener:

"A very serious misfortune, I assure you. After ten years of sunshine, of intellectual intercourse, an atmosphere impregnated with art, beauty, classical associations, to be torn from all that makes life worth living because a wretched soap-boiler chooses to relinquish his tenancy of a place far too good for him, which he held at a nominal rent—merely nominal, I assure you!"

"Nevertheless it will be pleasant to see your own old place again!"

"Old! There is nothing really old in England! Just look at the Colonnas, the Orsini, the—*the* Contarini! We are mere mushrooms compared to them!"

"Very true," said Mrs. Acland, as if beaten out of the field.

"I shall only remain for the summer, or as long as it remains unlet, and I intend to occupy my time in arranging and classifying a collection of coins and curios I have brought with me. I am now endeavouring to find an intelligent young man as amanuensis, but their demands are exorbitant, preposterous, and they are so self-sufficient. There is nothing so derogatory to nobility of character and—and high attainments as conceit."

"One would imagine the advantages of such an appointment might be a temptation, apart from money payment."

"Exactly so. Excuse me for the interruption, but I must put a question to Mrs. Carteret. Pray what answer did Mr. Fowler get from that young man, our last applicant?"

"He cannot, he says, take less than fifty pounds for so temporary an appointment, as it may hinder his finding something more permanent," returned Mrs. Carteret, as if she were repeating a lesson she had learned off by heart.

"Ridiculous! I shall give nothing of the kind. All I want is a decently mannered man, who writes a clear hand, spells correctly, and does what he is bid—fifty pounds, indeed!"

"It seems an enormous sum," said Mrs. Acland.

"I don't think it is after all," remarked Mrs. Carteret with an air of reflection; "one can buy very little with fifty pounds."

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"My dear, you know nothing about it," cried her husband.

"We must say good morning," said Mrs. Acland rising; "I fear we have already trespassed too long. Shall you make any stay in London?"

"About ten days more," returned Mrs. Carteret.

"Might I hope that if you have time you will call and see the lamp of which we were speaking, our residence is not very much out of the way?"

"I fear I can make no promise, my dear Mrs. Acland. My engagements are so numerous. I shall therefore depend on you to let me see it here! Suppose you come and have a cup of tea on Thursday. No, Thursday I am to receive the president of the Anthropological Society. Let us say Saturday at four-thirty."

"Certainly, I shall be most happy."

"And I shall have the pleasure of returning your kind visit," said Mrs. Carteret courteously as she shook hands with Mrs. Acland. "We hope to see *you* also on Saturday," she added to Marjory, "and you can improve your acquaintance with my pretty Fairy, who seems quite friendly."

Marjory went reluctantly away in the wake of her stepmother. What would she not have given to have remained behind!

"This has been rather a startling visitation," said Mr. Carteret, settling himself again to his letters. "If I am to be inundated by my cousins and nieces and kindred to the third and fourth generation, I shall return to Italy and leave the Priory to take care of itself."

"The girl is pretty, certainly attractive!" observed Mrs. Carteret, resuming her seat when she had rung for tea.

"She is," Mr. Carteret agreed heartily, "and remarkably like me—curiously like."

"I cannot say *I* observed the likeness," said Mrs. Carteret, rolling Fairy's ear round one of her fingers.

"No, I daresay you do not! You contrive to see about as little as is possible for a person not absolutely deprived of eye-sight."

Mrs. Carteret replied by a politely suppressed yawn and an openly expressed wish for her tea.

"The step-mother seems a sensible, well-bred, observant woman," continued Mr. Carteret shuffling among his papers, having fixed his double eye-glass firmly on his nose.

"Her manners are remarkably careful," said his wife.

"I flatter myself I am as good a judge of manner as any man in Europe, and I say she is a *remarkably* well-bred woman."

"Oh! very likely—only *I* do not care for her. The girl looks like a gentlewoman, though she is wretchedly ill-dressed. Why, a milliner's apprentice would not wear such a badly made, second-rate gown, and her hat did not match in the least. Poor child!" this with a sigh of the sincerest pity. "Did you notice?"

"Her hat? No, I tried not to see it. I always avoid seeing hats and bonnets. How women can endure the agonizing ugliness of modern fashions is more than I can understand!"

Here the tea was brought in and Mrs. Carteret, depositing Fairy in her basket, proceeded to pour it out.

"I don't suppose you would like to see me driving in the Park with only a Greek fillet round my head," she said in her gentle equable voice. "Will you have your cup of tea over there?" Mr. Carteret nodded. Then his wife, walking across the room, opened a door and called, "Virginie."

"Here, madame," replied a high pitched strong voice, and a smart Frenchwoman answered the summons. "Virginie," continued her mistress, "I found some pasmenterie to-day which will exactly match my eau-de-Nil dress;" and mistress and maid plunged into a disquisition on dress to the exclusion of all other considerations.

CHAPTER IX.

GRASPING THE NETTLE.

THIS visit was a greater event to Marjory than even going to school had been. Her mother's people, then, were unmistakably of the "gentry" class. She was keen to perceive the nice distinction between her step-mother's studied manner and guarded speech and the simple, natural high breeding of Mrs. Carteret.

That lady had greatly fascinated her. Her grand-uncle was a funny little man—could the all-accomplished dilettante and antiquarian have read her thoughts! but no doubt very kind and learned. At any rate, handsome and clever as Mrs. Acland was, these relatives of hers—of the despised Cinderella's were of higher social standing.

The young are generally aristocrats. The idea of nobility is confounded with its outward symbols; and not until life's schooling has brought forth ripeness of thought, is the insufficiency of mere externals recognized.

Seated at a long task of neediwork, which was unusually distasteful, as it was for Mrs. Acland, Marjory's brain worked faster than her fingers.

She, the niece of such charming people, to be acting a maid's part to Mrs. Acland, her enemy, her oppressor. "I should not mind how much I did or what I did for my own father, or Mrs. Acland sither, if she were kind and just. How smooth she was to Mr.

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Carteret-- Uncle Carteret. I wonder if he would let me call him 'uncle?' He seemed a great man in his way, but it was kind of him to be pleased because I was like him; I don't think I am a bit. That is no matter. I wish he would take a fancy to me, only it is not likely, I am so ignorant, and I *must* seem common to them." She coloured with vexation at the idea of her own deficiencies.

"How could I have any manners or style, living always in this horrid schoolroom, glad to speak to the servants for company and no companions but rough boys! Ah! the poor dear boys, I wish I could see them again. Yet I would rather sit here and mend Mrs. Acland's old gown than walk with the children and nurse. Nurse never treats me as if I were a young lady! I cannot bear it. Then I am afraid I shall grow bitter and spiteful, when I think there is not a soul who cares for me—not even my own father! Of course the boys are fond of me, but I suppose I shall never see much more of them. What can have become of Dick?" her thoughts ran after him for a while, and then worked round to her uncle again. "I am sure I could help him to write his catalogue; he said he only wanted a man who could write a clear hand, spell correctly and do what he was bid; I can do all that! Shall I ask him straight out if he will take me when I go on Saturday? Shall I have the courage to speak before Mrs. Acland? I am ashamed of myself, but I *am* afraid of her; her eyes make me faltering and awkward. Still, if I could get the words out anyhow, it might give me a chance before he goes away, for I suppose I shall never see him again; and I *will* get away from this hateful house, if I run away to be a maid-of-all-work!"

Here she suddenly threw the dress she had been repairing from her with some force into a corner, where it lay in a heap.

"I will not do another stitch! Mrs. Acland is out. I will have an hour's practice if she kills me for it."

And away she ran to the drawing-room, to forget her woes and nurse her baseless hopes while she had the opportunity.

Mrs. Acland also had meditated very profoundly on the results of the visit, from which she hoped to have built up a useful intimacy.

The past had left her no friends, only a slight acquaintance with one or two insignificant elderly women whom she had met while living with the old lady at whose house she had found her husband, and with these persons she so conducted herself as to earn their highest esteem. Now she was bent on gathering a circle—a circle of the highest respectability—round her. She was too acute and logical, however, not to see that Mr. and Mrs. Carteret were too much birds of passage to be any great use, and it might be as well that Marjory should not gather a dangerous amount of knowledge from too frequent intercourse with these new found relations. Moreover she would be more rebellious and unmanageable than ever if they puffed her up with pride and then retired to inaccessi-

ble regions on the Continent where they could not be turned to any account.

"That old man is a self-absorbed idiot. Were he within reach, I could do a great deal with him; his vanity puts him at one's mercy," she thought with the direct common sense which distinguished her. "But the wife is different. She hasn't much brains either, but she has instincts and a will, and she is one of those cold, proud 'grand ladies' who have not the faintest notion what life really is. Nothing one could ever do would melt here, if you were not born in the purple, unless indeed, you were distinctly an inferior, a servant or a hanger-on, then she might be kind and friendly enough. I hate this sort of woman!"

Her report to Mr. Acland of the interview therefore was tempered by many sound remarks and a graceful acknowledgment of his better judgment in thinking the visit would probably be time thrown away.

She resolved, however, to keep her appointment for the following Saturday, though she groaned in spirit over the trouble that unlucky lamp cost her. Never had her handy man been so slow in executing an order. Three times had she to call for it, and when at last it was completed, it proved to be the clumsiest piece of work he had ever put out of his hands.

"I am afraid our interview with Mr. Carteret had not a wholesome influence on Marjory," she said to her husband in their confidential after-dinner talk. "It has certainly suggested ideas of independence which may be troublesome. Yesterday, as she dislikes going out with the poor children and would, I knew, only mope over a novel, I asked her to reline the hem of my dress. When I returned about five, I went downstairs to speak to cook, and there I saw my dress thrown in a heap into the corner of that dusty school-room, not half done, while she was upstairs strumming waltzes on the piano! If it had been a steady practice I should not have found fault, but it was a sheer waste of time."

"Very annoying indeed! Do you think then that Marjory noticed Mr. Carteret's remark about her mother's fortune?" asked Mr. Acland a little uneasily.

"That I cannot possibly tell; if she did, she will be making some fresh demands, you may be sure."

"I should not like to seem in any way unjust to Marge," said her father, "nor give her room to complain that she had not received the education, the advantages to which she is entitled, you must remember."

"She gets all she is entitled to," interrupted Mrs. Acland with quiet decision. "You have the life interest of her mother's property, and you have the right to use it for the benefit of the family generally. Marjory has been to an excellent school, and has had besides lessons throughout the winter; what more can you do? If

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she proves one of the restless dissatisfied creatures who will never content herself at home, why, we must just let her go away and find her level. Trust me, she will soon be glad enough to come home."

"There is a great deal in what you say; still I do not like the idea of her quitting my roof."

"Well, she is not gone yet; let us see what time will bring forth."

The upshot of these mingled motives was first made known to Marjory on the fateful Saturday at luncheon time, when Mrs. Acland, as they rose from table, observed, "You need not have put on your best frock, Marjory, I am not going to take you with me to Mrs. Carteret's to-day."

"But I was asked!" urged Marjory, her heart beating very fast. "Why will you not take me with you?"

"I shall only stay a few minutes, and I have other places to go to where I do not want you. In short, I have decided *not* to take you."

"Very well," said Marjory with such sudden complete acquiescence that her stepmother was surprised and suspicious.

The unexpected disappointment had fired Marjory into quick resolution and unusual self-mastery. While her lips uttered the unconditional surrender expressed in her "Very well," she said to her heart, "I will see my uncle alone."

She went straight to her room and changed her best for the worst frock she possessed, and when she had from her lofty garret-window seen her stepmother sally forth, a rather ungainly parcel in her hand, she descended in a battered hat, and went forth for a long solitary ramble across Primrose Hill, and through a maze of new streets in progress of erection: not a lovely nor an inspiring excursion, but at least she had freedom and fresh air. She could think out her daring scheme and strengthen herself in her resolution to stake all on a throw.

Mrs. Acland was in good time for dinner, and told her husband laughingly that she was quite sure the famous lamp was a sham, for Mr. Carteret had examined it eagerly at first, and then blandly restored it to her, saying that he now remembered it quite well, and begged to reiterate the gift, which he hoped she would consider as much hers as her husband's.

The next day was Sunday, and though Marjory had gone to bed with a bad headache, she appeared early, and was quite ready to follow her father and stepmother in the usual procession churchwards, which the latter loved to lead.

In the afternoon Mrs. Acland was roused from a slight doze by hearing the front door shut.

"Who has gone out, Jane?" she asked the servant who came to let down the blinds, as the sun came round at that hour.

"It's Miss Marjory, 'm."

"Miss Marjory!" in some surprise. "Did she say where she was going?"

"No, 'm. To church, I think; she had her prayer-book in her hand."

"It is rather odd," ejaculated Mrs. Acland, rising and going to the window; but Marjory had vanished.

About the same time Mr. and Mrs. Carteret had finished luncheon, and were conversing with a couple of guests who had joined them at that meal—one was an Italian, as great an enthusiast in art as Mr. Carteret himself; the other was a tall well developed lady nearer thirty than twenty, with a high colour, bright black eyes and a profusion of dark hair not too fine in texture.

The Italian spoke eagerly in his own tongue to Mr. Carteret, while they examined some coins which the former had brought for inspection; nor did Mrs. Carteret and the young lady seem at any loss for subjects of conversation.

"I am sure Mr. Carteret will like Langford Priory, at least, in summer. The country is so pretty, not grand in the least, but thoroughly English. I am quite fond of the place, and my mother stood last winter there very well—wonderfully well. She was much the better for the treatment at Aix-les-Bains, and will be delighted to have you as a neighbour."

"You are very good! I am afraid neither Mr. Carteret nor myself can ever settle down to English country life. It is——"

"Miss Acland," said a waiter in stentorian tones, and giddy with horror at finding herself face to face, not only with her uncle and aunt, but also with two utter strangers, poor Marjory advanced into the room. Mr. Carteret did not take the slightest notice of her; Mrs. Carteret rose and said graciously:—

"Good morning! We were sorry not to see you yesterday. I am glad your headache is better; pray sit down. Miss Waring, this young lady is a niece of Mr. Carteret."

There was an awful pause. Marjory wished herself away—hundreds of miles away.

"Oh, indeed!" said Miss Waring with a frank pleasant smile. "I don't know how it is, but I never imagined Mr. Carteret had any relations except Ralph Ellis."

"We have been out of England almost ever since this young lady was born," said Mrs. Carteret smiling.

"There is no place like London for meeting every one you have ever known," observed Miss Waring, addressing Marjory pleasantly.

"I suppose so," she returned, trying to seem composed.

"And I suppose, like every one else, you find it a delightful place! Well, dear Mrs. Carteret, I must run away as I expect some people to tea. When do you go down to the Priory?"

"On Tuesday, if the place can be got ready."

"On Tuesday," thought poor Marjory. "It is neck or nothing!"

A few more words of leave-taking, a parting bow to Mr. Carteret, whom she would not disturb, and Miss Waring disappeared.

Then Fairy was produced and petted; next, to Marjory's mingled joy and terror, the Italian rose, pocketed his coins, made one or two energetic speeches, bowed with chivalrous politeness over Mrs. Carteret's hand, and took his departure. An awful moment ensued.

"Oh! you have made us out again, my little niece," said Mr. Carteret, as if rather surprised to see her, which Marjory took to mean that she was rather audacious.

"I hope you are not angry with me for coming?" she exclaimed.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Carteret.

"Suppose you say at once what you want, Miss Marjory," added Mr. Carteret sharply. Marjory's tongue for a moment seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth; the tremendous nature of her bold attempt stood out before her in appalling proportions.

"I will," she returned, growing red and then pale, "though I feel almost afraid to speak now that I am here lest you should think I am taking too great a liberty. When I came with my step-mother," she went on quickly as if afraid to stop, "I heard you say you wanted some one who could write clearly, spell correctly and do what he was bid. I can! Will you employ me?"

She had regained courage now that she had broken the ice, and looked to her uncle for his reply with such honest trusting eyes, such a pretty tremulous smile that the old dilettante fixed his glasses on his nose to contemplate her with a sort of pleased curiosity.

"This is a most extraordinary proposition," he said after a pause.

"Is it not?" addressing his wife.

"My dear Miss Acland," she exclaimed, "you would get dreadfully bored. I am sure you would give up in ten days!"

"Indeed, indeed I should not," very earnestly.

"I am afraid, my young lady, you would be more a trouble than a help. I fancy your education has been limited, at any rate in the direction of art."

"It is limited in every direction," sadly, "but do, do try me! I am not *very* stupid, and I would do my best. You know after a week or two, if I did not please you, you could send me away." The tears rose to her eyes.

"Do you want to leave your home?" asked Mr. Carteret, still examining her through his glasses.

"Yes, very much!"

"Stepmother, eh?"

"Well, yes. It is not like having one's own mother," returned

Marjory, resolved not to betray the secrets of the prison house, for her father's sake, at least not yet.

Mr. Carteret chuckled. "I suppose the usual game goes on between you that charming women play with each other," he said, "kisses and caresses before faces, cruel words, quiet stabs behind backs."

"I never kiss Mrs. Acland. I could not be so dishonest!" cried Marjory indignantly.

"Have you any idea of the duties you are willing to undertake?"

"Not a very clear one," she faltered. "To copy out things, and— and make lists, I suppose, and do some accounts. I am pretty well on in arithmetic——" She stopped abruptly.

"You would find it very tiresome doing anything for Mr. Carteret," said his wife gently. "He is dreadfully cross and irritable when he is busy about his collections."

"I should not mind," with an entreating glance at her uncle. "He does not look as if he would be really unkind."

"And pray what do you expect me to pay for your valuable services?"

"Pay me, your own niece? Oh, nothing. I only want to be of use and away from home."

"Ah!" said Mr. Carteret, who removed his glasses from his nose and sat playing with them thoughtfully.

"There would be some inconvenience attending such an arrangement with a relation," he said at length to his wife. "She would of course have to be at the table with us, and she must be fit to be seen, and if we have visitors——"

"You might give me my dinner early," cried Marjory eagerly.

"I see no difficulty in that," said Mrs. Carteret carelessly; "we shall not be over-crowded. Pray, can you read aloud, my dear Miss Acland?"

"I read aloud to the children sometimes, and I might try."

"My eyes are rather weak since I had a bad cold last winter, and I find newspapers trying," said Mrs. Carteret.

"Have you your father's consent to the application?" asked Mr. Carteret.

"No, I did not ask him; if I had waited for anything my courage would have all gone. I hope you are not vexed with me," urged Marjory, her heart beating painfully, for the coldness with which her proposition was received threw her back on herself.

In spite of the common sense of which she had a fair share, her imagination had persisted in depicting an effusive acceptance of her offer by her uncle and his wife and a triumphant return home to inform Mrs. Acland that she was to escape her clutches.

"Angry! no. I think you are rather an exceptional young lady; but I am disposed to consider your suggestion. You must make your father write his consent, and you must clearly understand that

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I only agree to try what you can do from a motive of benevolence, also that even if satisfied with you your engagement will terminate when we leave Langford Priory."

"Of course, whatever you choose."

"There are writing materials, please write a sentence or two." This was indeed putting her to the proof; Marjory trembled, but obeyed. "What shall I write?" she asked, drawing off her glove; "I cannot think of anything."

"Can you not remember a line or two of some poem?"

"Oh yes, thank you;" and she wrote rapidly for a minute. Then handing the paper to her uncle, waited his sentence.

"Hum!" said the old gentleman with a cynical smile, and he read aloud:—

"Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not,
Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow.

"Very fine! Stepmother again! Your hand is not bad. Now you must leave me to think over the question. I shall send you a note, and you may rest assured I am not displeased with you—not at all displeased," this with infinite condescension.

"Are you not making much ado about nothing?" said Mrs. Carteret in her sweet languid way. "Can you not ask your niece on a visit, and let her help you if she can, and read to me? Then instead of a salary, which of course she would not hear of, give her some pretty frocks. I would rather have a young girl at the Priory than any of those awkward ill-mannered men, who are neither one thing or the other. You need make no provisos, Miss Acland will get tired of the place and of us before long."

"I wish, my dear, you would allow me to arrange my own affairs. I may happen to know what I want better than you do," cried Mr. Carteret.

"I am not sure," she returned calmly.

"I fear I have stayed too long," said Marjory; "I hope you will excuse me."

"Oh! no. We are very happy to see you. Have you a—a cab waiting?"

"I shall get an omnibus at the Circus."

"My dear, do you mean to say you are going home alone in an omnibus?" exclaimed Mrs. Carteret with horror and surprise. "You are not serious?"

"I am indeed. I came that way; there is no danger or difficulty in an omnibus. I should never get out at all if I waited for some one to take care of me."

"You must not return unattended," said Mrs. Carteret with unusual energy, "it would look too strange." She rang the bell as she spoke and sent for her maid: "Virginie, you must take Miss Acland home in a cab; after you can go where you like, I shall not want you again till night."

"I am so sorry to give you this trouble," murmured Marjory.

Uncle Carteret had meantime been arranging his writing materials, and settling himself he now looked up to say, "You had better ascertain the cab fare."

"Virginia will see to that," replied Mrs. Carteret; and in a few minutes Marjory found herself driving north-west, *tete-a-tete* with the shrewd-looking Frenchwoman.

That she was speedily summoned to the presence of her father and Mrs. Acland, on her return, may be imagined. Nor is it given to the power of ordinary language to describe the amazement and consternation of her hearers when she gave a short but clear account of her visit to Mr. and Mrs. Carteret and its results.

"If this girl dares to take such a step, she will develop into a very dangerous enemy," thought her stepmother, while she said with cold displeasure, "I do not know what your father will think of such a proceeding. To me it seems at once indelicate and deceitful."

"I am amazed and a—a—distressed," said Mr. Acland. "I cannot think what idea Mr. Carteret can form of the way in which you have been brought up and—treated, when you offered yourself for so menial an employment. I am greatly displeased."

"I am sorry for that," said Marjory quietly. "But Mr. Carteret did not seem at all astonished. If he says he will take me out of town with him, you will not refuse your consent?"

"I cannot answer without reflection. It is not my wish that you should leave my house."

"Still it is better I should," cried Marjory.

"You had better leave the room and not stand there arguing with your father till he is almost out of his senses! Leave us, Marjory, I would advise you!"

So Marjory retreated in a fever of excitement. She was in too great a state of effervescence to be cast down by her father's and stepmother's joint rebuke; not, indeed, that she expected a very rose-coloured existence with her grand-uncle; he was by no means so nice as she thought he was at their first interview; but to make a move, to loosen her chains was all she asked for. What would George say when he heard she was absolutely going to stay with a member of their own family? It would be a great piece of news!

But Monday passed and Tuesday, and no communication came from Uncle Carteret, at least Marjory heard of none, and she grew wild with anxiety as the hours rolled by. They, Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, were to have left town that day. Had they forgotten her? Was she to lose the result of her desperate daring?

On Wednesday, as they had nearly finished the early dinner, of which Marjory could hardly taste a morsel, a carriage stopped at the gate and a lady alighted who Marjory immediately recognized as Mrs. Carteret.

"I hope there is not a very strong odour of dinner," said Mrs.

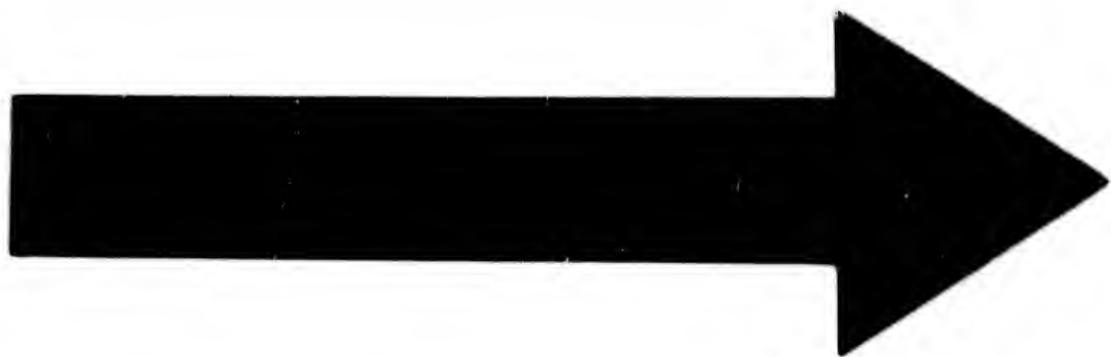
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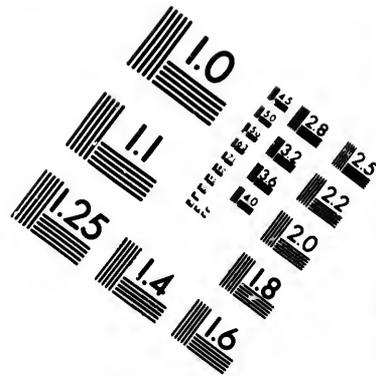
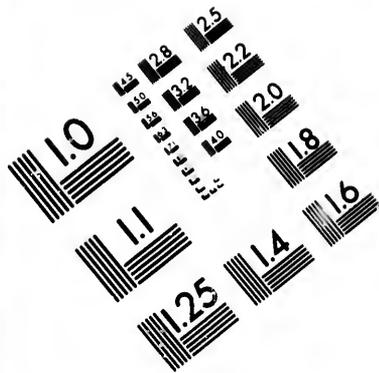
Acland rising, "it gives such vulgarity to a house!" She went away upstairs, poor Marjory not daring to follow. But she was soon summoned, and informed that her uncle and aunt were so very kind to invite her to stay with them for a month or two, and Mrs. Acland would use her influence to obtain Mr. Acland's consent. She added that the chief difficulty was the state of Marjory's wardrobe, which she did not feel herself justified in placing on a footing suitable to the society she would meet with Mrs. Carteret.

"Oh! we see hardly a creature," returned that lady, "and we shall be mere hermits in the country. Mr. Carteret hopes his niece will be of some use to him, and you must allow *me* to arrange for her costumes. Dress is a subject in which I take a great interest—indeed, I think it is of the last importance. We find now it is impossible the house can be got ready for us before the end of next week, so we can get Miss Acland's things for her in that time."

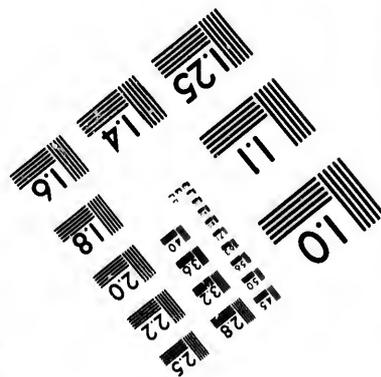
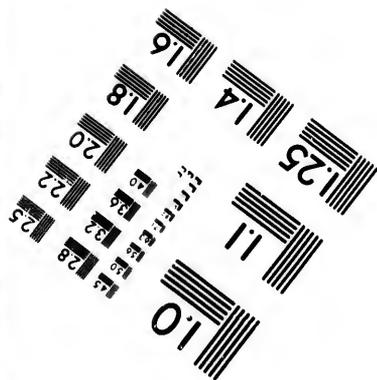
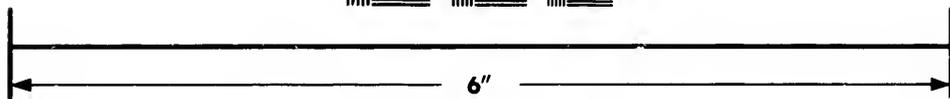
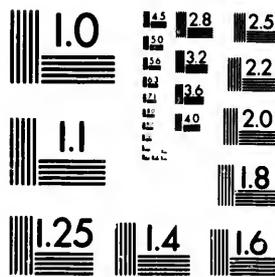
It would take more space than could be well spared to trace all the various rills of motive which went to swell the current of decision in favour of Marjory's installation as her uncle's amanuensis. Stinginess, flattered vanity, the notion of securing a bond-slave to his caprices, on Mr. Carteret's side. The pleasure and occupation of dressing a pretty doll after her own fancies, and spending some of the abundant pin money secured to her by her marriage settlement, for Mrs. Carteret was wealthy. Why she had ever bestowed her wealth and herself on so unattractive an individual as her husband was a lasting puzzle to all who knew them. The desire to get Marjory out of the house creditably, in a way that she could mention with good effect, was a very potent motive with Mrs. Acland. She began to hope that Marjory had neither noticed nor understood the mention of her mother's fortune. And it was not likely the subject would be again alluded to; at any rate it was worth while to secure her absence.

So the affair was settled, and after some days' ecstatic shopping and "trying on," which made Marjory fancy she had indeed discovered a fairy godmother, amid some lugubrious anticipations of her being returned at the end of a month as useless and unmanageable from Mrs. Acland, some tears from Louise, and an unusually kind kiss from her father, as he said, "You will let us know how you get on, Marge," which made her heart swell, Marjory Acland set forth to seek her fortune, feeling as if she had burned her ships and that return was impossible.





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CHAPTER X.

MARJORY IN OFFICE.

LANGFORD PRIORY was not a grand place ; it was a comfortable, unpretending residence, having been originally little better than a large farmhouse, to which successive occupants had added as their requirements grew. The name really belonged to some beautiful ruins which were separated from the dwelling by the grounds and a flower-garden. The situation was pleasant, sheltered behind by a wooded height ; the ground sloped gently in front to an excellent trout stream, and rose again in soft swelling downs to a low range of hills which stretched to the west ; while on the other side was a wide district of woodland belonging to a neighbouring nobleman.

The estate of Langford was not large. Mr. Carteret's fortune was principally derived from other sources, and he was not likely to diminish it.

Mrs. Carteret was well born as well as wealthy, and generally considered by society a very nice woman. Those who knew her more intimately were often puzzled to make up their minds whether she were a shrewd observer or a fool, a mere automaton or a woman of taste and character. She hated trouble and delighted in dress—these were her two most salient points. She spent a great deal of money on herself ; but now and then she would surprise every one by an act of unexpected generosity.

That she was by no means weak in some directions none knew so well as her husband ; she never quarrelled with him or interfered with him, but she went steadily her own way, and even occasionally influenced his actions. Each had a thorough contempt for the pursuits of the other ; but they did not display this too openly, and on the whole were not an unhappy couple. Perhaps the only living thing Mrs. Carteret loved was her little dog ; and the only opinion she ever preferred to her own was her maid's.

The morning they left London had been lowering and damply, breathlessly hot, and after they reached the little country town of Market Gilston, their nearest station, a heavy thunderstorm came on as they drove to the Priory, deluging horses and driver. Uncle Carteret was dreadfully cross because some drops of rain made their way through the top of the closed landau ; he prophesied a severe attack of rheumatism, and on arriving went into a feeble little rage because no fire had been lit in his room. In short everything went wrong. His spirit was sorely tried by the evidences of wear and

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tear in the furniture, carpets, etc., which he declared to be wholesale destruction, but which in truth were not worse than might have been expected, considering the house had passed through the hands of two successive tenants since the owner had seen it. Nevertheless, Mr. Carteret grumbled and lamented all dinner-time; he wished he could get rid of the confounded place altogether, etc., etc.

These disagreeables, however, made little impression on Marjory, she was enchanted with everything. The gardens, the fresh delicious green of grass and foliage, the ruins, the picturesque irregular house—all seemed delightful to a girl who had only known the streets of London and the flats of Norfolk, where she had occasionally spent a few weeks with a schoolfellow. To her the place seemed spacious and splendid and the household numerous.

The thunderstorm cleared the air, and the clouds breaking away, a glorious setting sun turned the slowly receding masses of vapour in the west into gorgeous aerial mountains and islets of crimson, violet, orange and palest lilac.

Mrs. Carteret, while her husband fussed and fumed, had taken Marjory upstairs and shown her the room prepared for her. Then she took a seat in her own apartment, to watch with keen interest the unpacking of her boxes and the arrangement of their contents in drawers and wardrobes.

Marjory, by her advice, betook herself to a similar employment, and had made her little room look quite home-like by the time dinner was announced. After, Mr. Carteret declared he was too tired to do anything; and Mrs. Carteret, neither fussed nor fatigued nor disturbed in any way, took up her tatting and settled Fairy on the sofa beside her.

"I always used to sit on this sofa when we lived here ten years ago," she said to Marjory; "but I had not learned tatting. I used to net then; and I had just had Fairy given to me—he was a little puppy."

"It is a delightful place," returned Marjory, looking round and longing to escape out of doors. "Are you not pleased to come back?"

"I cannot say I am. It is dreadfully dull, and I have been accustomed to people coming in and talking, so that I shall like it less than I did; still, it is rather nice in summer."

"May I go out and walk round the garden, if you do not mind being left alone?" asked Marjory with some hesitation.

"Oh, yes! You may go, if you like. I dare say it is dull for you. You had better put on overshoes, the grass will be quite wet."

Like a bird escaped from a cage, Marjory flew upstairs to find her hat, and was soon wandering, with a delicious sense of enjoyment, through the garden, across the closely-shaven grass of the pleasure-grounds, and into the precincts of the ruined priory.

The entrance had fallen, only the bases of some of the clustered columns remained ; while a quantity of carved stones, corbels and crockets, pieces of broken tracery and lengths of dogtooth decoration were piled at either side, partially covered with flowering creepers, cared for without being trained. A gravelled path led to where the altar once stood. Behind, the tracery of the east window was in wonderful preservation, as were also a few of the windows and part of the wall at either side of the chancel ; a few lime-trees and a short sturdy oak beautified the interior, which was carpeted with soft mossy grass.

"How lovely!" said Marjory, seating herself on a rustic bench placed where the altar once stood, so as to command a fine view of the sunset. "It is just the sort of place one might read about in a novel! How sweet the wall-flowers are! Oh, how charmed Dick would be here! I should like to know all about it. If Uncle Carteret wants antiquities, I wish he would hunt up the history of this delightful old priory and let me write it out for him. What a view! It is a sort of place that makes one feel good, or at least as if you wished to be good, and that is something. Those old monks *must* have been nice! they were certainly good to the poor. How delightful life might be here, and *is*, I suppose! It is cruel to think how miserable it is in great crowded cities. Oh! I could be happy anywhere, almost anywhere, if only I had my own mother and if my father loved me! Still, I suppose it is better to have no mother than one who dislikes you, as Mrs. Acland dislikes Dick. Poor Dick! I wonder what has become of him? Shall I ever see him again? I suppose, if I were in a proper frame of mind, I should be inclined to forgive Mrs Acland—particularly here, for the place was holy—is holy! But I hate her all the same, and I never can forgive her; what is more, I shall not try! I don't think it is all because she made my home miserable and turned out both my brothers. I believe if I had met her in her best clothes at a party I should dislike and distrust her the moment I looked in her face! Still I don't want to harm her, at least not *very* much." Then the sweetness, silence and beauty round her began to penetrate Marjory's soul, and softer pleasanter thoughts stole into her heart, including a warm sense of gratitude to Uncle and Aunt Carteret for bringing her to so charming a scene.

"I'll do the very best I can for them both," she resolved. "I wish he was not quite such a funny little man. I am afraid of laughing at him sometimes. Mrs. Carteret is very nice. I wish I could learn something of her elegant quiet manner. I know I must seem uncouth to her. I always feel in such a hurry."

The view all round was picturesque and varied—the open downs to the west, the gentle dip of the ground to the stream in front, the rich woods of Lord Beaulieu's domain rising to shelter the valley on the east. Though so near the house, the remains of the chancel

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wall completely hid the seat Marjory occupied from observation ; indeed it was only from the entrance it could be seen.

But time was slipping away ; the sun had sunk behind the downs, and Marjory remembered she ought to return. On the hall door-steps she met Brown, her uncle's valet.

"Mr. Carteret has been asking for you 'm," he said solemnly.

"I am so sorry," cried Marjory, hurrying to the drawing-room with a sudden sense of guilt.

"Where have you been ?" asked Mr. Carteret peevishly. "I had no idea you were wandering about, at the risk of taking cold and incapacitating yourself for the duties you have undertaken. I must warn you that a cough is quite intolerable to me ! It puts me into a fever. I cannot sit in a room with a person who coughs."

"I hope I shall not have one then," said Marjory with a sunny smile. "It is quite warm this evening ; no one could take cold. And, oh ! I am so grateful to you for letting me come with you to this lovely place "

Even Mr. Carteret's testiness was not proof against the joyous freshness of her pleasant youth.

"Glad you are pleased. Now, as it is a little too early to go to bed, I want to know if you play cards or any games so as to help me over an hour."

"I am afraid I only know 'Beggar my neighbour' and 'Nap.' "

"Have you any idea of chess ?"

"Only just an idea ; the boys used to teach me, but they said I was very stupid."

"There are chessmen somewhere ; ring for Brown. Brown, get me the chessboard and men. If you attend to my instructions I will make a chess-player of you ; for I have been accustomed to hold my own with the Chevalier Palliguardini and Herr Vandorvoordt, the champion players of Italy and Holland."

Here Brown returned, and Mr. Carteret proceeded to set up the pieces. Then began a weary lesson for poor Marjory. The niceties of moving the king's pawn, of check and checkmate, etc., etc., were elaborately expounded till the poor child was dazed, bewildered, and overdone with fatigue, more of excitement than of travel. At last Mr. Carteret, who was greatly pleased with his own lucid explanation, exclaimed, "Why, Marjory, I do believe you are falling asleep !"

"Very naturally," said Mrs. Carteret, who had been playing patience by herself. "It is ten o'clock, and quite time to go to bed."

"Ten o'clock ! I had no idea it was so late. Do you think you will remember what I have been telling you, Marjory ?"

"Yes, Uncle Carteret—the beginning ; but I am very tired."

"Then ring for my chocolate, and you can go to bed."

The first few days at Langford Priory were broken and unsettled.

Mr. Carteret was too busy discussing various details connected with the estate to give Marjory any employment, so she drifted into Mrs. Carteret's hands. She read aloud portions of the newspapers, dawdled with her round the garden and sometimes as far as the dairy, gathered flowers to fill the vases and china bowls in the drawing-room, and wrote a few notes at her aunt's dictation. Still she had abundant time to inspect the contents of a small and comfortable library, in which she promised herself to spend many a happy hour. She mounted the library steps with almost childish glee, to examine the topmost shelves, and sat there absorbed in some quaint tome with curious streaky engravings, where the muscles of men and horses were shown in the strongest relief by the tremendous exertions they appeared to be making.

These days of happy idleness, however, were few and brief. The cases which contained what Mr. Carteret proudly called "his collection," arrived from London within the first week of their stay, and he was in a fever to open and arrange them.

"I must arrange a plan of classification at once simple and distinct, or we shall never get through the work that is before us."

"The boxes are not large," said Marjory, whose arm he had taken, to assist his steps from the dining-room.

"Ah! but if you think of the varied size of the specimens, most of them delicate and minute, you may form an idea of the number to be catalogued. On Monday—no, Tuesday—I shall open the case No. 1, and begin our task. At present I am feeling very unequal to mental or physical exertion; that tendency to heart complaint, which is the result of a highly strung nervous intellect acting on an extremely delicate organization, obliges me to be very careful—unceasingly careful."

"Mrs. and Miss Waring are in the drawing-room, sir," interrupted Brown, who deigned to act as butler in the improvised establishment.

"Oh, indeed! Ah! then we must go and see them. Miss Waring is a very intelligent young lady, our neighbour here, and also an acquaintance of ours in the lovely classic land of literature and art." He turned, and still resting his hand on Marjory's arm, led her to the drawing room. Here they found a bundle of black silk and lace, crowned by a grey bonnet, on the sofa beside Mrs. Carteret, and on a low chair in front of her sat the black-haired, bright-complexioned lady to whom Marjory had been introduced on the eventful Sabbath on which she had appealed to Mr. Carteret. Miss Waring greeted her with kindly cordiality and presented her to her mother. Then Mr. Carteret claimed her attention, and Marjory, much fascinated by her frank manner and pleasant smile, was content to listen, thereby gathering some knowledge of the neighbouring society.

The rector was now so old, he was obliged to have two curates.

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His daughters were all married, and his eldest son's widow kept house for him. Then the chief doctor at Market Gilston was dead, but his son had inherited his practice and was making a fortune. Mr. Sheldon, the banker, was paralyzed, and things were not so satisfactory as they used to be in that family—so far Miss Waring, with some commentaries from her auditors.

"The chief event, however, has been Lord Beaulieu's return," said Miss Waring.

"Oh! he has come back, has he? Why, it must be five or six years since the minor died and he succeeded. Where has he been all this time?"

"Oh, everywhere—sketching and yachting. He is more a Bohemian than a peer. However, he is now busy restoring and beautifying the castle, and giving employment to numbers.

"Ha! I suppose he is getting rid of the minority savings as fast as he can."

"At any rate in a better fashion than the old lord disposed of his money. Except for building, he does not seem to have any extravagant tastes."

"I hope he is doing his work in good taste! I must go over and see what he is about."

"Just now he is away, I think." A little more gossip and the visitors took leave.

A few days later and Mr. Carteret found himself at leisure to open his cases and set to work on his famous collection. This was the beginning of troubles.

The experts to whom the packing had been confided had either put wrong numbers on the boxes or disposed of the contents in a different order from that dictated by the owner. Two mornings were consumed in indignation and despair over the discovery of fresh iniquities as each package was opened, and then Mr. Carteret, armed with several lists—among which he constantly lost his way—endeavoured to ascertain if his treasures were all intact.

The confusion was great, and the irritation indescribable. "I don't see how I shall ever regulate such a chaos," cried the enraged virtuoso, throwing himself back in his seat.

"Suppose I take one of these new exercise books," said Marjory compassionately, "and wrote down everything as we find it, you can give me a description?"

"That would not be the slightest use," cried Uncle Carteret, testily; "you see my object is to classify as I go, and now an awful idea suggests itself—I believe my gold Alexander was in this case; pray turn out that small coffer of olive wood again and shake the cotton wool. That gold Alexander was the crown of my collection; and how can I face Vere Ellis, who is coming here next week, if I have lost this gift? Why, there are scarcely any gold Alexanders in existence, and he laid me under an immense obliga-

tion by presenting me so great a treasure. It was not with the other coins."

"It is a coin, then?" asked Marjory, still sympathetic, though beginning to be dreadfully weary and bored.

"It is a coin," repeated her uncle, exasperated beyond endurance. "Great heavens! and you are supposed to have been educated. This is the way in which English women are left in outer darkness respecting the art, the genius, the—the development of antique civilization, which can alone be surmised from these precious remnants of the past! Have you thoroughly examined the contents of case No. 1?"

"Yes, uncle; I am sure I have taken out everything."

"Then pray put them back again; I do not want the contents of one to be mixed with the other; when you have finished we will open No. 2."

So on, through a lovely summer's day. Mrs. Carteret sent to know if Mr. Carteret or Miss Acland would come with her to visit Mrs. Waring, but a hasty message from the former that they were much too busy cut short Marjory's hopes in that direction. "When uncle has found them all and we get to the catalogue it will not be so bad," she said to herself. She was in truth sorely disappointed. She had looked forward to the unpacking of the antiquities and curiosities of which she had heard so much with the keenest interest, hoping to acquire a fund of information from so learned a multi as her uncle, also to feast her eyes on beautiful forms. When, therefore, a quantity of dusty, broken bits of stone, rusty iron, small begrimed imperfect statuettes, corroded bronzes, bits of coarse mosaic, a few small panels decorated with paintings of dishevelled saints, some models of pillars and arches and a casket filled with copper and silver coins, she could hardly restrain her lips from the fatal exclamation. "Is this all?"

At dinner Mr. Carteret enlarged upon his loss, without attracting much attention from his wife, who was cutting up some chicken for her dog. She only observed, "You ought to have employed Smith to pack for you. He is a far better man than Ludovici."

"Nonsense, my dear. Ludovici has a feeling for art, an appreciation for the treasures of antiquity. It was quite gratifying to see the delight he took in my little collection."

"He would say anything."

"Pray when did you hear from Ellis? When does he talk of coming?" asked Mr. Carteret, not caring to pursue the subject.

"I had a letter from him just before we left town. He was to arrive on the 27th, and hoped to be with us a few days after. He has been promoted, and is now first *attache*."

"I thought he was rather young for such promotion."

"Young!" repeated Mrs. Carteret. "He must be two or three and thirty."

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"Impossible! Why, his grandfather and I were at Berlin—No—no," interrupting himself, "it must have been his father—it was his father. At any rate I shall be ashamed to see him now that his most kind and valuable gift has disappeared. Why, this is the 27th."

"What have you lost?"

"Why, I have been talking about it all dinner-time. My Alexander—my gold Alexander!"

"But it is not lost," said Mrs. Carteret calmly. "Do you not remember you gave it to me to keep? It is in my jewel-case."

"My dear, do you mean to make me out an idiot! I could not forget such a circumstance."

"I assure you it is in my jewel-case."

"Impossible!" gasped Mr. Carteret.

"Brown, pray tell Virginie to bring me my jewel-case."

In a few minutes Virginie appeared, bearing a very large leather case.

Mrs. Carteret unlocked and opened it, sought in a few of the receptacles it contained, and produced a pill-box, in which, on a bed of cotton wool, lay the missing treasure.

Mr. Carteret took and gazed at it with mixed feelings—joy at its recovery, annoyance at being proved guilty of so great a lapse of memory.

"I am sure," he said peevishly, "this horrid place is beginning to dull my faculties already. I could not have believed I should forget this."

"You were so worried about those cases to-day, it is no wonder you forgot," murmured Marjory, compassionating his mortification.

"Exactly so—exactly so. I really lost my head for the time being."

Virtue sometimes has its reward. The fatigue and excitement of the day disposed Mr. Carteret to sleep after dinner. As this was an old fogey habit which he very carefully concealed, he usually retired to his study or morning-room, on the plea of having some important letters to write, and requested not to be disturbed until Brown brought him his chocolate.

When he had executed his manoeuvres, Marjory took advantage of his absence and asked her aunt if she might take a walk in the grounds.

It was very delightful to escape into the fresh perfumed air, away from the sound of Uncle Carteret's peevish voice, to enjoy the odour of a newly-mown field down by the river, to rest a while in the ruins and gaze over towards the downs, where the sun was beginning to set. How George would enjoy fishing in the stream, and Dick, too,

though he was less keen about such sports. Oh! it would really be too delightful to have the boys there safe away from Mrs. Acland. She wondered when any one would write to her. She had already sent two letters home; perhaps one from George was lying there for her. She was sure Mrs. Acland would never forward it.

Then the question suggested itself, "I wonder what sort of a person this Mr. Vere Ellis is? He is rather old; I suppose he is another learned solemn man like Uncle Carteret. I wish he was younger, it would be pleasanter. I hope he plays chess! I get so dreadfully sleepy. Oh! if he were nice and would come and walk with me sometimes, it would be charming. After all, thirty-two or three is not so very old!" and she ran over in her own mind the heroes of many novels who must have been about that age, gradually forming an ideal in her imagination of a very superior highly educated gentleman, who would talk over her head, yet condescend to take some notice of her and some interest in her improvement. Perhaps he had a wife. Somehow this suggestion took a little from the interest of the picture. Miss Marjory was by nature a coquette, though she was not aware of it.

A week of rain keeping Mr. Carteret in the house, Marjory began to perceive that to reside with and to be employed by her uncle was not exactly the bed of roses it appeared to her at first. The catalogue and the bad weather united were too much for his equanimity. Marjory's mistakes, which were not so very numerous considering her inexperience and the endless alterations of plans on the part of her dictator, were bitterly rebuked and harped upon till only pride enabled her to restrain her tears and kept her from flying to her own room first and out of the house after.

But she resolved to bear almost anything rather than return defeated to the taunts and triumphs of her father's wife, who would be but too glad to point out the hopelessness of a girl who could not get on with her own mother's relations.

She thought that Mrs. Carteret sympathized with her, though that lady did not express her feelings, not being disposed to exhaust herself in words.

"Have you been crying?" she asked quietly one evening when, worn out by a series of small rages while wrestling with his catalogue, Mr. Carteret had retired to "write letters of importance."

Marjory was startled and vexed by the query, but answered honestly, "Yes, Aunt Carteret," blushing and smiling.

"If you cry because Mr. Carteret is cross, you are very foolish. The more he sees you are afraid of him the worse he is."

"I don't think I am afraid of him, I should be ashamed of being afraid of any one; but I did hope to please him, and I do not."

"You please him as much as any one ever did. He always quarrels with his *employees*; only as you are a girl and a relative, he thinks he may say and do what he likes. The next time he is very

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tiresome you may tell him—prettily and politely, of course—that you are sorry you cannot please him and that you would rather go home. It is very unpleasant to see people with red eyes.”

“But I would rather *not* go home!” cried Marjory, alarmed at such a suggestion. “I want to stay here; I am so much happier than I ever was before, at least since I was a little child, except when Uncle Carteret is cross.”

“Then you are very easily pleased,” returned Mrs. Carteret not unkindly. “As to Mr. Carteret, you are silly to mind him; he would be very sorry to lose you. He is never fond of any one, but he is sometimes pleased with you, and then you cost him nothing.”

“Oh, no, Aunt Carteret! he gave me beautiful dresses and quantities of things.”

“He did not give them *all*.”

“Then *you* did, dear aunt! How kind and good of you, when I was a stranger and no relation to you! I wish you would love me a little, and let me love you!” Marjory seized and kissed Mrs. Carteret’s hand, leaving it moist from some irrepressible tears that would drop.

“You are dreadfully impulsive, Marjory,” said Mrs. Carteret with a smile—a rare smile. “You must learn self-restraint or you will be at the mercy of every one who chooses to play upon you or wound you.”

“I am not so easily wounded, I assure you; only people I really care for can hurt me. I am as hard as—as a stone to Mrs. Acland.”

“Ah? your stepmother?” said Mrs. Carteret; and thereupon the floodgates opened and Marjory poured out her tale of woe.

Mrs. Carteret rather enjoyed listening to gossip, without exerting herself to put questions. “I did not like Mrs. Acland much,” she said at length. “She is handsome, and even *distinguee* looking, but I do not think she is a gentlewoman. Who was she?”

“She was a Mrs. Cranston, the widow of an artist.”

“But who was she originally, before she married?”

“Oh! I have no idea; but I thought she was very ladylike; I know she was always finding fault with me for my vulgarity.”

“No, you are not vulgar,” said Mrs. Carteret, after disentangling her thread, which had gone into some complication. You are unconventional, but you are a lady. You might improve yourself if you liked. You speak too suddenly; then you dart at things instead of moving gently. No well-trained person is ever in a hurry.”

“I will try and be quiet. Oh! I wish I could be like you, aunt! you always seem to do and say the right thing. But if you only knew the tremendous hurry I feel in sometimes—often to reach what I want and to say what I want, you would understand how hard it is for me to be slow.”

“I do not suppose I *could* understand it,” returned Mrs. Carteret with an unusually indulgent smile. It was not in human nature to

be indifferent to the warm sincere admiration of so bright a creature. "But I should like to see you improve; and take my advice, exercise your self-control by resisting your inclination to be wounded or frightened by Mr. Carteret. Whether you do well or ill he will complain all the same; and then you must suffer for all *his* mistakes. Most men are very weak; your father yields to his wife, for instance. I must say it is most unjust to dress you so badly; and then to send your brother to sea in a common ship—it is positively cruel!

This was a speech of extraordinary length for Mrs. Carteret. Marjory thanked her for her counsel and promised she would do her best to follow it.

CHAPTER XL

A NEW ARRIVAL.

SOME days after this conversation came an invitation to dinner from Mrs. Waring to Mr. and Mrs. Carteret and Miss Acland.

Marjory felt quite elated at being asked to dinner, and ardently hoped Uncle Carteret would consent to go.

After luncheon, during which meal he directed his wife to accept Mrs. Waring's invitation, instead of taking a book or newspaper to a seat on the verandah as was his usual custom, he observed, "I think, Marjory, a couple more hours' work will complete the first part of our task. Then I shall rest for a day or two before I attack the other cases."

Back to the library, therefore, was Marjory marched, and set to work by her inexorable uncle. The prospect of a break in the routine of her existence was cheering, but the idea of going out to dinner was positively exhilarating, if for nothing else but for the joy of wearing the pretty half-dress evening costume her aunt had given her.

She had just glanced at the clock, and noted that only an hour and five minutes had elapsed since she had resumed her pen, when she heard the sound of approaching wheels. It might be Miss Waring's pony carriage; if so she regretted being chained to her task. None of her aunt's other visitors interested her much.

Presently the door opposite opened, and Mrs. Carteret, looking a little more animated than usual, walked in, followed by a gentleman.

He was not tall, or did not seem tall because of his breadth of shoulders. His hair was short, wavy and dark, if not quite black. His eyes, too, were very dark and deeply set under thick eye-brows, and his clean-shaven jaw was strong but not heavy. He was not good-looking, his features were irregular, his mouth somewhat large,

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yet his whole style and bearing had an indescribable stamp of distinction such as Marjory had never seen before ; he was well dressed and moved with tranquil assured self-possession.

"Here is Mr. Ellis," said Mrs. Carteret ; "he came over from Aldenham this morning, not direct from London."

"Ah, Ralph ! though I greatly object to surprises of this kind, I am really glad to see you," said Mr. Carteret, rising and pulling off his spectacles. "When did you reach England ?"

"About three weeks ago. I have been greatly occupied with business and I suppose what I ought to call pleasure ever since. Glad to see you looking so well," he added.

"Well, my dear boy, I wish I were ; I wish I *felt* well. This frail tenement constantly reminds me that an indifferent physique, not the flight of years, weighs me down."

"I do not think Mr. Carteret is any worse than he was when we met in Paris," observed Mrs. Carteret ; "but I must go and order luncheon for you."

Mr. Ellis with a leisurely step moved to the door, opened it, and bowed in a courtly fashion as Mrs. Carteret passed out.

Returning to Mr. Carteret they exchanged a few questions and answers respecting people of whom Marjory knew nothing ; then Mr. Carteret, turning suddenly to her, said, "We cannot do any more work to-day ; I will not keep you."

Marjory rose immediately, put her papers and books together, and left the room, passing by Ellis. He did not open the door for her, however, or appear to know she was present, yet she felt that he had seen and observed her.

It was with a new and unpleasant sense of mortification that she sat down in the window of her bedroom to think.

Her uncle had always treated her with scant ceremony, although not unkind except when irritable, and though Mrs. Carteret's politeness was unailing, she did not make much of her husband's young relative, yet Marjory was quite content, but now that a complete stranger came on the scene, a man too who was probably of her blood, that she should be treated as a mere *employee*, sent out of the room without a word of introduction, was too bad !

The new-comer, too, marked his sense of her social inferiority by not opening the door, as he had done for Mrs. Carteret. It was a trifle, she even laughed at her own weakness for thinking so much of such a trifle, yet she knew with the most complete conviction that had he thought she was a young lady he would have opened the door and bowed for her too.

After all, she told herself, it was contemptible folly to let herself grow morbid about such miserable minutiae, and she did rally. Finding a book, and curling herself up on a bench in an out-of-the-way corner of the grounds, she was soon absorbed in the story.

The little incident, however, left a small trail of soreness, and

put her on her mettle to meet any slight with good-humoured indifference. "It is better to be here than at home," was her final reflection when dressing for dinner. "And I am sure Uncle Carteret never intends to be rude. I suppose, as I am really a nobody, he cannot help showing that he knows it sometimes; but I shall show that quiet insolent Mr. Ellis that I consider myself his equal, if I can! Three score years and ten, the Bible says, is the general length of life. Take eighteen from seventy and fifty-two remain; well, it will be hard if I do not find some pleasure, some joy, some true love in all those years, especially if I deserve it."

Dressing for dinner was a very simple affair at the Priory. Mullin, instead of cotton or woollen, a few knots of ribbon and lace, a rose and spray of fern, were the only changes required. Mr. and Mrs. Carteret had lived so long abroad they had got out of the way of making a regular evening toilet, as is the fashion in an English country house; besides, everything was at present provisional.

Marjory, however, arranged her hair most carefully, and without adding anything unusual to her ordinary attire, made the most of herself, to use an expressive phrase.

Ellis did not appear till the gong sounded for dinner, when he came just in time to lead Mrs. Carteret to table.

Mr. Carteret passed his arm through Marjory's, saying, "I am going to leave you some work to do alone to-morrow; do you think you can manage it?"

"I will try, uncle, if you will explain."

"Then you must be very attentive." Here they reached their places, and Mrs. Carteret, just before she sat down, said, "I had forgotten to explain, this young lady, Miss Acland, is Mr. Carteret's niece, or rather his grand-niece."

"Really such lengthy appellations are unmanageable in conversation," observed Mr. Carteret. Ellis bowed with an air of deference, and shot an observing glance at Marjory, who was infinitely annoyed to feel herself colour quickly when she had intended to be collected and dignified.

There was, however, no further demand on her self-possession, as no one addressed a word to her during the repast.

She was sufficiently amused, nevertheless, listening to the conversation. Uncle Carteret was voluble on many subjects, which were new to his niece, about some excavations at Rome and the discoveries made thereby; about some Etruscan vases and trinkets dug up in a village near Florence; and finally about Wagner *versus* the Italian school. She was struck by the cool superiority of the new guest, the way he threw in a word or two here and there to keep his host going and spare himself trouble. Marjory suspected that he knew a good deal more of most things than her uncle, and though he concealed it, that he felt considerably bored.

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To Mrs. Carteret he was pleasantly attentive, and from the sentences they occasionally exchanged Marjory gathered that Mr. Ralph Vere Ellis had been for some years attached to the British embassy at Vienna, that he had applied for an exchange, and hoped to be appointed *attaché* at Paris.

When dinner was over the gentlemen accompanied Mrs. Carteret and Marjory, after the Continental fashion, to the drawing-room.

Then Mr. Carteret seemed to remember Marjory. He was standing in the large bay window at the end of the room, and had just proposed that they should smoke their cigarettes in the garden, when he interrupted himself to say, "Oh, come here, Marjory!" Then taking hold of her arm he led her to Ellis. "Just look at this young lady, Ralph," he exclaimed, "and tell me if you see any likeness to any one!" Ellis did not turn instantly, and the instant thus gained gave Marjory time to collect herself. When therefore the accomplished diplomatist directed his deliberate gaze upon the bright eyes, the fresh delicate face offered to his inspection, she met his glance with steady composure, keeping her eyes on his unflinchingly, till he felt he was being scanned as coolly and critically as if he were an inanimate figure. He was purposely slow in answering in order to try the remarkable *sang-froid* of this country girl.

"I am really at a loss," he said at last; "I fear I am not quick to recognize likenesses. There is a charming contadina with brown eyes in the Lichtenstein gallery by an unknown painter, that has some slight resemblance to Miss—Miss——"

"Miss Acland," put in Mr. Carteret as he paused. "Pooh, nonsense, I mean what likeness do you see to some living person?"

Ellis glanced at Mrs. Carteret, and then a light seemed to dawn upon him. "Ah! yes, of course, I am really very dense. The resemblance is to yourself."

"Exactly. I think it rather striking, and your evidence is a strong confirmation of my opinion. I wish my niece carried the resemblance a little further, and had something of my tastes and method. She has been working under my direction at a catalogue of my collection, and we do not get on too fast."

"But that is a tremendous task for a young lady," returned Ellis carelessly.

"Come, let us have our cigarettes," said Mr. Carteret, releasing Marjory's arm; and both gentlemen left the room.

"I am glad Mr. Ellis has come. Mr. Carteret is always better tempered when he is here; and then there are several matters to be arranged which cannot be done without him; you know Langford Priory will be his after Mr. Carteret," began Mrs. Carteret as soon as Marjory brought her work and sat down beside her. "He is well bred and well informed. I am afraid he will not stay long, it is too dull for him."

"I suppose so," said Marjory.

"They say he was rather reckless and extravagant as a very young man, but he has been very steady of late years. I know Lady Mary Netterville told me Lord H——, the ambassador at Vienna, has a high opinion of him; I daresay he will be an ambassador some day himself."

"Do you really think so?" said Marjory.

"Yes; they all have to begin by being *attachés*."

After this exertion Mrs. Carteret lapsed into silence, and Marjory's busy brain occupied itself in depicting Mr. Ellis largely decorated with stars and orders, in silk stockings and the shorts of court attire, as the members of the Congress of Vienna were represented in an engraving at home, puzzling his diplomatic brethren with an inscrutable smile; she thought, "I am quite sure it is the sort of thing he is fit for. Fancy his coming out with me for a scramble in the woods! I might as well ask Uncle Carteret himself. Yet he has a nice voice, so soft as if he could not take the trouble of speaking fast or loud. I wonder what Mrs. Acland would say to him or he to her?" Then her thoughts naturally went off into another channel; she felt keenly that her father must have almost forgotten her existence, as he had never answered any of her letters.

The addition of a new member to the family party made but small change. Mr. Ellis bestowed a general "Good morning" on the party when he appeared in the breakfast room, and only spoke to Mrs. Carteret, allowing his host to talk uninterruptedly while he paid strict attention to what was set before him.

Soon after breakfast for the first few days Mr. Carteret drove away with his guest to the county town, and Marjory set to her work, finding she got on much more quickly alone. After luncheon she persuaded Mrs. Carteret to take a walk, and then she read the "Court Journal;" so dinner-time came round, and chess and bed-time.

Mr. Ellis asked at breakfast, the third day after his arrival, if Miss Waring was at Dene Court.

"She is residing there; but she has been away for a few days. We dine there to-morrow, and you had better come; she will be delighted to see you," said Mr. Carteret.

"It is rather a dangerous experiment to go uninvited to a dinner; one may make the dreaded thirteenth!"

"Oh! we can obviate that difficulty," cried Mr. Carteret pleasantly. "Mrs. Carteret, myself and Marjory were invited; we will not take Marjory; so there remains the original number, and any hostess will be glad to exchange a girl for a man."

Marjory looked up with a sudden flash of indignant surprise.

"My dear sir, you are brutally frank," said Ellis laughing.

"Why should Miss Acland be cheated out of the exciting festivity?"

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would not know what to say, and there would be no one to talk to her. If it were a dance she might like to go."

"I can write to Miss Waring," put in Mrs. Carteret, "and tell her Mr. Ellis is here; then we can all go!"

"No; nonsense. There is no room in the carriage for four; I object to being crowded. Marjory must stay at home."

"And I do not wish to go now," said Marjory stoutly.

"No, of course not; you can do a little more of the catalogue while we are away," said Mr. Carteret.

"Oh no," cried Marjory, too indignant to submit to this. "As I am not to go to the dinner you must give me a holiday."

"That is only fair," said Ellis.

"I don't like to encourage idleness," observed Mr. Carteret.

"Do you really think I am idle?" asked Marjory, looking very straight at her uncle.

"Well—no—that is, you work very well under pressure."

Marjory made no reply; the colour mounted to her brow and a decidedly contemptuous smile curved her lips, but she resolutely kept her eyes on her plate for a minute or two. When she raised them she encountered those of Ellis fixed on her with a curious half-smiling expression, as though studying a new specimen of human nature—an expression which had so irritating an effect upon her that Marjory was conscious of a very unladylike but strong desire to throw something at him, so strong that it warned her to draw the reins of her self-control tighter. "It will never do to show temper with such cool trained people," she thought; and she forced herself to give Ellis a quick glance and smile, as if they understood each other, and he was laughing with, not at her.

Still it was a day of trial and mortification. She kept up gallantly till they were all gone out to dinner; then she indulged in a fit of crying, begun in wrath and ending in sadness. Was ever any creature more alone than herself—motherless, fatherless—for was she not robbed of her father?—friendless—for who could trust to such refrigerated beings as Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, or look for sympathy from them? Her kind schoolfellow, with whom she had spent some happy days, was married and gone, and George was at sea. Then Dick—poor dear Dick!—basely suspected and driven away. Perhaps he had gone to the Colonies or America; perhaps he is dead—dead of hardships and a broken heart!

This was the climax of her sorrowful reflections. Eager to escape from them and from herself, she seized her hat and neckerchief and set out to visit the poultry yard, having made friends with a comely matron who presided over it.

The day after Mrs. Waring's dinner Mr. Carteret found himself very unwell after his unwonted exertions; something in the dinner or the wine had upset him, and he remained in his room all the

morning. Marjory, however, kept at her accustomed task in the library until she had finished all she could do without further instructions; then she mounted the steps and took down an old translation of Froissart which had fascinated her, but which she did not like to take out of the library. Armed with one of the volumes, she sat on the top of the steps and was soon deep in the curious pictures of past times given by the old chronicler. As the door was open and the carpet soft she did not hear any one enter, nor till her attention was attracted by the rustle of paper did she look up, when to her surprise she saw Ellis writing at her uncle's table. He smiled as he folded his note, seeing she was aware of his presence, and said:

"I ought to ask pardon for having stolen in in this way, but I had begun to write before I perceived you and then I saw you were so absorbed I thought it better not to disturb you." He rose as he spoke and, coming across the room, leant against the high steps, looking up at her with the curious half-smiling expression she disliked so much. "May I ask what you are reading?"

"Froissart," she replied, wishing that he would go away and let her escape.

"Not an ordinary book for so young a lady to choose."

"It is more interesting than most novels."

"I certainly think so. But have you forgiven me for taking your place yesterday?"

"It was not your fault," with calm impartiality.

"It was not, indeed; and I assure you you lost very little. The whole affair was insufferably dull; people living here cannot possibly have anything to say. You were desperately indignant at being left behind, were you not?" smiling softly.

"I was," said Marjory steadily. "I had a right to be indignant; it was unjust to leave me behind."

"But that is no reason why you should be angry with me."

"I am not angry with you—not the least." She shut her book, but did not like to stand up and put it away while Ellis stood at the foot of the steps.

"It must be a fearful bore to be obliged to sit here all day writing the list of that rubbish."

"It is a little tiresome. And you are not wise to call '*The Collection*,' rubbish; suppose I were to tell Uncle Carteret?"

"I am not afraid; I do not think you are treacherous."

"Do not be too sure."

"Yes, I am sure; I think I understand you; you have a tell-tale face."

"There is not much to tell," she returned, laughing good-humouredly. "Now please let me come down; I have idled here long enough."

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first, Miss Waring was *very* sorry you did not come to dinner and scolded Mr. Carteret soundly—in fact, I felt as if I were an unwelcome intruder; secondly, Miss Waring intends giving a garden party, which is to end with a dance, and you are to be especially invited.”

“Really!” cried Marjory, her eyes sparkling and all ideas of enmity to the speaker and prudence as to her own words scattered to the winds. “That will be delightful! Miss Waring is a dear! What else did she say?”

“A good deal, but I cannot remember her words.”

“I do hope Uncle Carteret will not prevent me from going.”

“I suppose,” said Ellis, moving a little more in front of the steps, “if Mr. Carteret is your uncle I am a relative—a cousin more or less removed.”

“Perhaps so,” returned Marjory, in no way elated. “But these sort of things are not easy to understand.”

“Then you will not have me for a kinsman?”

“Well, it is not much matter. You will be going away; so shall I; and we shall probably never meet again.”

“What a heartless speech!” (laughing). “I fear I have unconsciously done something to prejudice you against me.”

“I never know whether you are in earnest or not. Though it is not really of any consequence—at all events, you have brought me some pleasant news. Now stand away—I must come down!” this very decidedly.

Ellis drew back.

“Are you not very immovable?” he said. “You ought to be gracious to me in this dreary land; say you will accept me as a kinsman and try to like me!”

“Try to like you?” echoed Marjory. “Would trying be any good? I always jump into liking or disliking without exactly knowing why.”

“Then I trust in my case you are for once hesitating on the brink before you plunge into the fatal abyss of dislike?”

Marjory laughed merrily, then hesitated. She did not want to go up the steps to put away her book, nor would she venture to take it with her; so turning to Ellis she gave it to him, saying, “Will you be so kind as to put that in its place for me? Uncle does not like his books taken out of the library.” With a smile and little quick bend of the head she left him looking after her with the book in his hand.

“She is uncommonly pretty and brimful of saucy spirit,” he thought. “It is droll to find myself condescended to by a little school-girl, after being a spoiled child in Vienna drawing-rooms. It would be rather amusing to instruct her ignorance; she has pluck and brains, I suspect, and might turn out a leading woman; as it is, she will marry some curate or fatted calf of a farmer and

be lost to social life. If I had time I should certainly cultivate her and tame her pretty daring. It is a long time since I saw anything so fresh and so amusing."

This encounter enlivened Marjory; but she was still more cheered by a visit from Mrs. and Miss Waring, when both expressed their regret that she had not come to dinner. Then the latter proposed to walk through the grounds and to the ruins, where she had not been for a long time. Marjory gladly ran to get her hat, and the two elder ladies were left to keep each other company.

They had hardly reached the ruins when Ellis joined them, and Marjory listened with interest to the talk which ensued, her eyes fixed admiringly on Miss Waring's face, quite regardless of the tact with which Ellis tried to draw her into the conversation. The topics they discussed were new to her. At length Ellis said something about going to town on Monday, and Miss Waring exclaimed, "I hope you intend to return for my party, Mr. Ellis."

"You may count on me, I am only going for a week or ten days. I want to see my chief and buy a horse. Mr. Carteret's stud is extremely limited, and if I stay over the 12th I shall want a couple of dogs."

"I did not think you would stay so long in England."

"I find it necessary. At present, you see, I am unattached, and while free I wish to guide Mr. Carteret in the way he should go. He wants a good deal of guidance, does he not?" looking at Marjory.

"Oh no," she said demurely, "he can guide every one. I am sure he takes a great deal of trouble with me!"

"Which I am sure you are delighted to give," he returned.

"Then I may expect to see you," said Miss Waring. "I intend to send out my invitations next week."

"I shall be sure to come, among other reasons, to do my duty by dancing with my cousin, Miss Acland."

"I did not know you were related."

"We are, I assure you; though Miss Acland will neither acknowledge me nor assist me in tracing the tangled threads of our kinship."

"I am surprised," said Miss Waring smiling. "I think you would be rather nice as a cousin."

Ellis raised his hat.

"I know very little about relations," cried Marjory colouring. "I never met any but Uncle Carteret—of course, except my brothers, and they are part of myself."

"How many have you?" asked Miss Waring.

"Two—George and Dick. Dick is only my half-brother." She quite forgot the existence of little Herbert.

"My mother will think I have forgotten her," said Miss Waring, rising; and they walked slowly to the house.

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The few days which intervened before Ellis went to town were certainly pleasanter to Marjory, thanks to him. He looked over "The Catalogue" and praised it. He assured Uncle Carteret it was admirably planned, and advised that no further alterations should be made. He frequently spoke in a frank friendly way to Marjory, and put Mrs. Carteret in high good humour by complimenting her on the taste with which she dressed her *protegee*.

This sort of recognition on the part of so important a person as Vere Ellis gave Marjory more trust in herself; she began to have a sense of self-reliance which was new and comforting.

The evening before Ellis was to go up to town she had slipped away, as she often did, to look at the sunset and breathe the sweet evening air. She was slowly following the path to the river, when she perceived the perfume of a cigar, and a few steps further came face to face with Ellis.

"I thought I should find you here," he said, turning with her. "Tell me what fairing shall I bring you from great Vanity Fair?"

"Oh! nothing, thank you; I really do not want anything."

"Then you stand alone among women! Have you no commission to give me? I have two or three from Miss Waring. Must I choose for you, Marjory?"

She turned and looked full at him with surprise and displeasure.

"What! may I not call you by your pretty quaint old English name?" He laughed quite good-humouredly and threw away his cigar.

"No, I would rather you did not," said Marjory quietly. "I do not call you by your Christian name, and it is not right that you should be more familiar than I am."

"Very well, my proud kidswomen; but I should be charmed if you would call me Ralph—my name would sound very sweet spoken by you."

"That is nonsense," said Marjory gravely. "I could not call you by your name—not if I knew you all my life; it would seem quite unnatural."

"Now it seems quite natural to me to call you Marjory; perhaps because I think of you as Marjory," stealing a look at her.

"Well, I do not like it," she returned unmoved.

"Very well, Miss Acland, I shall not offend." They walked on for a few paces, then Marjory said suddenly and softly, "I dare say you think me a stupid ill-tempered girl, for I believe I ought to thank you for inducing Uncle Carteret to let me finish that tiresome catalogue without further alterations. I am indeed obliged to you." She looked at him with sweet shy eyes, very unlike her usual quick distrustful glances.

"Believe me, I am very glad to be of any use to you; and I fancy that catalogue was enough to turn your hair grey, Miss Acland."

"It was indeed." A pause; then with an effort Marjory spoke: "You might help me a little more if you liked."

"How?"

"When the catalogue is quite done, I am afraid my uncle may not want me—send me away."

"Great heavens! Do you wish to stay *here*?"

"Yes, very much."

"May I ask where you live when at home? In a ladies' boarding school or a nunnery?"

"I live in my father's house."

"Is it very indiscreet to ask if you are kept locked up and fed on bread and water?"

Marjory laughed frankly and shook her head, then she cast down her eyes a little sadly and said, "I have no mother and my father is married again." Ellis looked at her very intently while her eyes were averted; he felt a sudden interest in the details of her life.

"Then I am rather sorry for your father's wife," he returned, stooping to disentangle her dress from a broken branchlet which had caught in it, and speaking in pleasant playful tone; "I think you might be rather a formidable step-daughter."

"Why? How curious! I don't think I am naturally disagreeable; but if—if I am struck on one cheek, I do *not* feel inclined to turn the other!"

"Of that I am quite certain. So you do not care to live at home? Pray tell me how I can help you to avoid it."

"Suggest something else for me to do."

"With pleasure. I would willingly keep you here if I could. What shall it be? You must assist me; though why you should imagine Mr. Carteret is ready to return you to the paternal jail I cannot understand."

"Well, you see, he never grew fond of me!"

"No? Very strange! Then I do not think Mr. Carteret's heart is of the clinging order. He is not given to entertaining devoted attachments."

Marjory laughed. "No, not exactly; and I am sure he will not let me stay unless I am of some use. Mrs. Carteret is quite different; she really like me—at least I think she does—or I should not care so much for her."

"Ah! Do you always return love for love?"

"Yes, I am sure I do."

"A very charming disposition," said Ellis meditatively.

"Suppose," resumed Marjory, "I were to make a fresh list of the books?"

"What! have you the resolution to face another catalogue?"

"It would not be half so bad as the first one. And I love books; but as for those dusty broken curiosities——"

"Let us not be blasphemous," said Ellis. "Your suggestion is

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excellent. I shall act upon it ; and at any rate, if you want to stay here, here you shall stay."

"Thank you very much."

"Thank *you*," returned Ellis gravely ; "I consider your asking even this trifle a token of amity."

"I think it is," said Marjory. "I think I am too hasty, and I fancied when you came first——" she stopped abruptly.

"Pray finish your sentence ; I am all anxiety to know what special injustice you have done me."

"I thought you cold and contemptuous ; I never thought you could be good-natured, and *this* is being good-natured."

"Cold !" repeated Ellis, laughing a low peculiar laugh. "Well, conscience does not endorse your accusation ; let me hope I may improve on acquaintance. What, are you going back to the house ? Let us stroll a little further along the river. The evening is delicious."

"I should like it very much," she returned, "but I cannot stay. Mrs. Carteret likes the newspapers read to her about this time and will expect me ; and my uncle will look for his game of chess."

"Which he shall have when I am ready," said Ellis smiling. "You will go then ?" he held out his hand ; "shall we swear eternal friendship first ?"

"Eternal friendship ! that is quite too tremendous," cried Marjory ; "possible friendship if you like—there's my hand on't," she touched his quickly and was gone.

Ellis lit a fresh cigar and sauntered on, thinking idly. "Pretty wood-nymph ! is it ignorance or strength that keeps her so steady and indifferent. There's something about her like the flavour of wild strawberries, their delicate fragrance, their slight piquant acidity. She is worth waking up. There's plenty of fire and ardour beneath her outer icing. Old Carteret bristles with difficulties of another order, but I shall not leave till I have bent him to my will. What infernally good care he takes of himself ; he intends to live these thirty years ! How irrational it is to allow useless individuals to stand in the way of more capable men. I suppose the progress of common sense will some day develop the practice of Euthanasia."

Mr. Carteret fumed and fussed while waiting for his chess, but Ellis was too absorbed in his own thoughts and schemes to remember his host.

Ellis was an ambitious man, strong-willed and capable of working patiently for an end. He was also capable of self-mastery if self-interest demanded it ; and though gifted—or troubled—with strong passions, he rarely let the reins of government slip from his grasp. He liked his pleasures, as he liked his food and wine, to be of the very best and most perfect description. Nothing common or unclean

suited his palate. In society, he was perhaps more esteemed than universally popular, and although the few women he sought returned his preference with devotion, he was not generally considered a "lady's man."

He was by no means indifferent to women, only they were from his life things quite apart; he deliberately considered women as created by beneficent nature for the convenience and gratification of the superior animal: this is the unconscious and unavowed belief of many fairly good fellows, but with Ellis it was acknowledged and acted on with full unhesitating conviction. Still, something of character was necessary to complete a woman's charm for him. He did not like dolls, so in general very young girls were not to his taste. But character, intellect, beauty, tenderness were only of value so far as they enhanced his enjoyment; of a woman's right to her own individuality he had no idea. In short he took Milton's view of the subject—"He for God only, she for God in him."

At present he was interested and much amused with Marjory. Her untutored grace, her speaking eyes, her varying expression charmed him; her resistance to his advances, her indifference to his quiet but constant efforts to please and soothe her, nettled him. He had more serious matter for thought, however, and his schemes for the future pushed lighter and pleasanter topics from his mind.

While Ellis was away, Marjory was surprised to find how much she missed him. Indeed his absence was felt by others besides Marjory. Mr. Carteret was querulous and irritating to an intolerable degree—wanting the restraining influence of his kinsman's presence and Mrs. Carteret was more silent than usual.

In short, every one was pleased when Ralph Ellis notified his intention of returning, and sent as his precursors a horse, a groom and two dogs.

Mr. Carteret looked not too well pleased at these addition to his establishment, but to Marjory's amusement he uttered no audible objection.

She made acquaintance with the dogs on the morning after their arrival, and took a great fancy to one—a young brown and white setter, of playful habits and caressing manners; but the groom would not permit her to feed or pet him, explaining respectfully that "that he was a young dawg, and not half educated yet."

Finally Ellis himself made his appearance, arriving so late that Marjory had retired before he reached the the Priory.

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CHAPTER XII.

FOUND !

THE eagerly anticipated party at Dene Court was at hand, and Marjory's measure of content was amply filled by an invitation from Miss Waring to stay with her for a day both before and after that event, which invitation Mr. and Mrs. Carteret permitted her to accept, as neither cared to risk fatigue or late hours.

The friendly Virginie busied herself in beautifying a very simple muslin frock, making it fit for so grand an occasion ; and Marjory's very vivid imagination depicted impossible glories and romantic situations at the coming festivity.

This preoccupation did not prevent her from feeling very pleased when the day after his return Ellis presented her with a beautifully bound copy of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King."

"As you would give no clue to your tastes, I was obliged to follow my own poor judgment," he said ; "and seeing you are a lover of books——" he held out the volume.

"Oh, thank you very much. How good of you to think of me, I could like nothing better—indeed I never had anything so beautiful before. Is it not beautiful, Aunt Carteret?" cried Marjory with blushing cheeks and sparkling eyes (the presentation took place before their hostess).

"Very nice indeed ; very kind of Mr. Ellis," returned Aunt Carteret.

"Do you know Tennyson?" asked Ellis.

"Very little. One of the girls at school had his early poems for a prize and let me have them to read, but she grew afraid I should spoil the binding from constantly holding it open, so she took it away. But it was not to be compared to this, and there are pictures too!" She sat down to examine them on the spot.

Mrs. Carteret smiled indulgently.

"It has evidently been a most fortunate choice," she said.

Ellis sat down on the ottoman partly behind Marjory, and looked at the illustrations over her shoulder, while Mrs. Carteret, who was going to pay some formal visits, left the room.

"You must put my name in it," said Marjory, as Ellis returned from seeing Mrs. Carteret off and resumed his place half behind her.

"I am glad I have succeeded in pleasing you for once," returned Ellis, leaning over her shoulder to see a pretty sylphlike figure of Enid.

"There, that has a look of yourself ; a considerably stronger likeness than you have of Uncle Carteret."

"What, that beautiful airy creature like me," cried Marjory. "How the boys would laugh if they heard you. You need not say such wonderful things to 'make up.' I am quite ready to be friends without that."

"But it is like you! I say it is," repeated Ellis. "Let me see!" He seized the book as if to get a better view, and with it Marjory's hand: "Yes! the figure especially."

Marjory laughed merrily: "I am glad you think so." She turned her head as she spoke, and found her cheek almost touching his; she shrunk back. "I beg your pardon, I nearly knocked you," she said. Somehow the close proximity, the warmth of his breath on her neck, the faint fragrance of tobacco which hung about him affected her strangely, her heart beat, and an odd feeling of fear, against which she indignantly revolted, shot through her. Starting up she exclaimed, "There is no ink here; come into the library." Now in the library was Uncle Carteret, to whom an explanation must be offered. He remarked viciously that a fool and his money were soon parted, and that Marjory would probably never read the book, "or if she does will have a very hazy notion of the contents."

"I am not quite so stupid as you think, uncle," began Marjory indignantly; then a quick flash of thought suggested the folly of being angry with so perverse an old egotist—of displaying impatience before Ellis, who had followed her, and she added in a different tone, "Even if I were, I suppose talking with you and writing with you for the last six weeks ought to have brightened me up!"

"Well, it ought," growled Uncle Carteret.

Ellis seated himself at the writing-table, and as Marjory placed the book before him he looked up into her eyes and whispered, "Bravo."

"Thank you again very much," said Marjory, taking her book when he had written her name, adding "From R. V. E.," and carried it off to her own room.

A colder-hearted girl than Marjory might have been conciliated by such kindly efforts to please, and she *did* take Ellis into favour; but across this friendly mood fitted a vague helpless fear, a misty distrust, which a moment's thought dispersed, only to gather up its vapours again as soon as the dispelling force was withdrawn.

Only one day now intervened between Marjory and her delightful visit. It was mid-July; some heavy showers had relieved the air, and also created fears for the success of Miss Waring's outdoor *fete*, which depended on the weather.

Marjory, returning from the dairy, whither she had gone with a message from Mrs. Carteret, made a little *detour* through the shrubberies, to enjoy some quiet castle building and the fresh dampness of grass and foliage.

As she approached a gate which led into the woods beyond, the howls of a dog as if in pain and fear startled her. She paused and

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then ran quickly through the gate in the direction of the sound. Turning round a large tree into the wet grass, she beheld her favourite setter crouching on the ground, held firmly by Ellis with one hand, while with the other he beat the animal severely with his dog-whip. His expression was coldly composed, not the slightest tinge of anger to excuse the severity of the punishment.

"Why do you beat that poor dog?" she exclaimed.

"Because," returned Ellis deliberately, after administering a few final lashes and then letting the dog go—"because he must be taught obedience; he must learn to keep at heel when told."

"I am sure you are naturally cruel! It was not necessary to hurt him so much. Could you not teach him by kindness?"

"Not half so effectually as by cruelty! I am not cruel, but if it is necessary to be cruel, why, it's folly to mince matters."

"You looked as if you liked it," cried Marjory contemptuously and flaming with indignation. Ellis laughed.

"You don't understand, my dear Miss Acland. A dog must be licked into shape, any one will tell you the same thing. You will find Tatters quite ready to make friends with me in a minute or two. Which way are you going?" and he turned with her towards the house.

Marjory could not speak; she feared showing too much indignation.

"Confess now you would like to thrash me within an inch of my life?" said Ellis smiling.

"Yes! I should very, very much," returned Marjory quickly, with such unmistakable sincerity that Ellis could not restrain a laugh. He offered her the whip, saying, "I will take whatever punishment you choose to inflict, *provided* you give me my revenge after!" Their eyes met as he said this, and again a wild sense of fear, for which she despised herself the next instant, thrilled through her. Was she growing a senseless coward?

"You do not accept my offer?" he continued as she did not speak. "Come, I don't like you to think me a monster! I assure you I am not—I am no worse than other men if not much better. As to the dog, he is none the worse. Here, Tatters, Tatters!" The dog came timidly and fawned upon him: "You see."

"Yes," returned Marjory, who felt disgracefully inclined to cry from a curious mixture of feeling, "I see and I feel ashamed of so poor-spirited a creature! he ought to have bitten you! Perhaps you would not have beaten him so hard had you not known he would have been ready to fawn on you."

"You are a very dangerous young lady! It would be no trifle to offend you. It is not easy to mollify you, as I know."

"I really do believe you are naturally cruel. I felt it the moment I looked at you, and I would rather walk alone—I would indeed."

"Why, Marjory? I mean Miss Acland."

"Oh! I daresay I am foolish and prejudiced, perhaps rude, but I am *not* angry—not now; you have made me feel quite miserable. I do not think either George or Dick would have beaten a dog as you did, not just in the same way."

"I am very unfortunate!" cried Ellis, half in earnest. "Now I suppose you will not 'make up,' as you call it, for ages, and I am going away to Beaulieu to-morrow; we shall not meet again till Miss Waring's party. Will you not shake hands?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Ellis! What can you care about it? I cannot shake hands with you! Good-bye; do not kill your poor dog before we meet again." She opened the gate as she spoke and ran swiftly down the shrubbery towards the house.

Ellis stood looking after her half amused, half vexed. "What a provoking, sensitive, obstinate girl! But she is less indifferent than she was. Yes, dislike is a better beginning than indifference. She was almost in tears. I wonder why?"

Marjory was very quiet and undemonstrative for the whole of the evening and kept close to her aunt, but when not reading aloud to that lady perused the copy of Tennyson Ellis had given her. Ellis himself talked a good deal about foreign politics to Mr. Carteret, who had driven over to Market Gilston that day and had consequently to write "letters of importance" in the privacy of his own study. So Ellis went out to smoke, and Marjory saw no more of him, except for a few minutes at breakfast next morning, until they met at Dene Court.

Lord Beaulieu, whose guest Ellis was to be for the next few days, had, as was said before, succeeded his nephew, a sickly lad, who died a few years before when only eighteen, and so permitted the revenues of the estate to accumulate largely.

The present lord had led an easy artistic life as an impecunious younger brother, chiefly in Italy and the south of France. He was rather bored than elated when the death of his predecessor raised him to rank and riches. Nevertheless he proceeded to enjoy himself as much in his old way as his altered circumstances permitted.

The old castle at Beaulieu had been kept up after a fashion, that is, it had not been permitted to fall into decay; but what repairs were needful had been done with a niggardly hand and with utter disregard of the fitness of things. Lord Beaulieu therefore decided on complete restoration in harmony with original design. This was begun and carried out so thoroughly that at the time of which we write there were not more than four or five rooms left habitable in the edifice. Here Lord Beaulieu dwelt contentedly, conferring with the architect, the clerk of the works, and an artist whom he had known abroad and whom he had brought with him after a short visit to Paris, from which place he had just returned. To this

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gentleman was confided the interior decorations ; but the architect and director in chief was Lord Beaulieu himself. Here among stones, bricks, dust, mortar and workmen Lord Beaulieu was happy.

Ellis had been known to him in Italy ; and he was very glad to renew his acquaintance with the accomplished *attache* whose opinion in artistic matters he considered sound. The time passed agreeably, examining the works, discussing the plans, and fishing. The two men had plenty to talk about ; and there was just that difference in their tastes and knowledge which gave zest to conversation.

The days, then, before the Dene Court party passed swiftly. But, alas ! the day itself broke in storm and rain ; nor did the weather improve as the hours rolled by.

In view of the uncertainty of the weather the invitations requested that, if the weather proved unpropitious for a garden party, the guests were requested to assemble later for a dance and supper. Lord Beaulieu, though not much disposed for such festivities, was too kindly a neighbour not to show himself at Mrs. Waring's house. He, too, had known her and her daughter abroad when he was a Bohemian artist not too well off, and he had always been an ally of Miss Waring.

The dance was in full swing when Ellis and his host arrived. Dances in Gilston and its vicinity were few and far between, and the local *belles* and *beaux* eagerly seized the opportunity offered.

Dene Court was a fine house of the Queen Anne period, with a large inner hall, which was used as an impromptu ball-room, a gallery at the back affording a convenient place for the musicians. It was well lighted, plentifully decorated with flowers and, with the moving crowd of many-coloured dancers, made an effective picture.

Miss Waring received her guests in the drawing-room, where Mrs. Waring, who took little or no part in the entertainment, was comfortably established on a sofa, where her special friends came to peep with her.

"I suppose I need not offer to introduce you to partners?" said Miss Waring after some little conversation with the last arrivals.

"No, thank you ; I am no dancer," said Lord Beaulieu.

"Well I am. It is part of an *attache's* duty," added Ellis ; "but as every one seems afoot I shall look on for the present."

"It is quite a country assemblage," said Miss Waring ; "none of our London-going neighbours have returned yet."

Other guests claiming her attention, Ellis and Lord Beaulieu strolled back to the hall, where the former soon perceived Marjory, who was going through the lancers under the guidance of a very boyish-looking young man with a fair open face. She was looking her best. Pleasure and excitement had given her a rich colour, which heightened the brilliancy of her eyes ; her abundant chestnut brown hair formed a sufficient coiffure ; her simple frock of creamy

muslin was gracefully draped; the open corsage, with its modest cascade of lace, had for its only ornament a spray of crimson roses, their dark green leaves lying against her soft white skin.

It was some time before she recognized Ellis, for she was evidently on the best possible terms with her partner. They laughed and talked and made endless mistakes in the figures of the dance; but Ellis watched, with a degree of pleasure that surprised himself, the natural grace of her movements. "I think I may venture to waltz with her," he thought; "she ought to make an admirable dancer."

The lancers over, the performers slowly filed past to the refreshment and other rooms, and presently Marjory and her partner came up.

"I think you intended to cut me!" said Ellis, smiling as he held out his hand; "but I will not submit to such treatment."

"No, indeed I did not!" giving hers; "I saw you just now, and was looking round for you."

There was such an unusual expression of soft happiness in her eyes, of kindness in her tone, that Ellis asked himself with a curious sense of irritation, "Is this cub some boyish lover who has unexpectedly turned up?"

"I need not ask if you are enjoying this gay and festive scene?"

"It is perfectly delightful!" cried Marjory, with emphasis on "perfectly." "Do you know, I have danced everything!"

"I quite believe it," with a grave bow. "Pray can you spare me a waltz?"

"I am not sure," taking her programme from her waistband and consulting it seriously.

"The next is a polka, and you have promised it to me!" cried her partner, looking over the card.

"Yes, I know; and then there is a waltz. I am engaged to some one, I cannot make out the name."

"Persons who do not write legibly do not count; put my name in his place."

"Oh no, I could not do that!"

"I know who it was, Miss Acland," cried the cub. "It was that old grey buffer Miss Waring introduced to you. He is a stranger. I know all the men about here; he's not one of them."

"Then the dance after," urged Ellis, taking the programme.

"I am afraid I do not waltz well enough for you," said Marjory, smiling upon him.

"Allow me to find that out for myself," said Ellis, putting his initials against one of the few unappropriated dances.

"If you don't come along, Miss Acland, you'll have no time for an ice before the polka begins."

"That would never do," exclaimed Marjory, yielding to the onward movement of her partner, but turning her head as she went to throw a bright arch glance at Ellis.

"That is a deucedly pretty girl," exclaimed Lord Beaulieu, who stood behind him. "Who is she? a stranger? I do not know her face."

"She is related to old Carteret, his niece or grand-niece, and is staying at the Priory."

"She would make an admirable model. What an expressive face! I should like to sketch her."

"She is a mere school-girl," said Ellis carelessly, and he went away to talk with Miss Waring.

At last his turn came, and Ellis smiled to himself when he remembered the last dance at which he had figured, the urbane highly trained fascinating women of the world whose cavalier he had been. Nevertheless he was conscious of a certain keen sense of pleasure in the prospect of a waltz with simple untutored Marjory Acland, mere school-girl though she was.

"This is a quadrille," said he as he offered her his arm; "you cannot want to dance it. You ought to rest, and then give me the waltz which follows."

"Very well; I am a little tired."

"There is a boudoir or some such place hereabouts, where we can be quiet," he said; "this place is insufferably hot." He led her to a small drawing-room opening upon a balcony.

The night had cleared, the clouds rolled away, and a fine moon was shining over the woods and fields visible from the windows.

"It is better here, is it not?" asked Ellis.

"Yes, for a little while. It is so cool and dim," said Marjory, sinking on a sofa and feeling she needed the refreshment of a brief rest.

"So you have been having such a good time, as the Americans say, that you extend plenary absolution even to so great a malefactor as myself?"

"Yes; at present I cannot feel vexed with any one."

"Something especially pleasant has happened to produce so much sunshine; I read it in your eyes—your smile?"

"You are right; something very delightful has happened, though I am a little uneasy. I had a letter from my brother this morning. He is safe in London and wants to come and see me!"

"Oh, indeed! Which of your brothers?"

"George."

"How long has he been away?"

"A year and three months. He is not to be long in England, and I do want to see him so much."

"Well, can he not come down to the Priory?"

"I daresay he has money enough for his railway fare, but—but I am afraid Uncle Carteret would not like him to come."

"Why should he object?"

"I do not know. He would not be pleased, perhaps, if I asked

leave for him to come, yet he will never think of inviting him if it is not put into his head."

"I see," gravely. "It is a difficult question, and requires diplomatic handling. I fancy you require my help?"

Marjory hesitated, drew off her glove nervously, and then with a little embarrassed laugh said, "Yes, I know you could help me, but I am half ashamed to—to ask you, because I have been—been rather rude to you, and what is worse, I don't feel particularly sorry for it."

"That is a great aggravation undoubtedly," returned Ellis gravely. "And you have been dreadfully rude you know."

"No, not dreadfully."

"Will you answer me one question candidly?—I promise not to be offended by an explanation; Why do you dislike me?"

"I don't know," dropped from Marjory's lips before she could stop the words. "That is, blushing vividly, "I do not dislike you, I am sure I do not, exactly——"

"There, that is quite enough! I am very thankful you do *not* know why you dislike me. There is some hope that a prejudice so unfounded may melt away in time."

"You see," said Marjory, looking straight at him and recovering her self-possession, "I do not quite understand you, I don't feel sure. And, oh! do not let us talk of disagreeable things on this delightful evening; I think you have been quite kind, and I was beginning to think I should like you, only—that dog."

"But, Marjory, that is utter folly."

"Very well, perhaps so."

"Then you will not ask my help?"

"No; but if you choose to give it I shall be grateful."

"Very good. And we are to be friends?"

"Yes, if you care to be friends with me."

"Well, it is a curious fact, but I *do* care. Come, they are playing a capital waltz, it was a great favourite in Vienna. Where did you learn to dance?" and he led her towards the hall.

"Some of my school-fellows taught me. They had a French lady to teach them, but I was never allowed to have extra lessons, that is why I am so ignorant and——"

"Look on this picture!" interrupted Ellis, pausing before a long glass and pointing to her reflection in it. "Do you think profound knowledge or high accomplishments are very essential to so charming a personage?"

Marjory withdrew her arm from his, annoyed at what she considered a piece of impertinence. "I want something *in* my head for my own sake," she said. "And you are ever so much nicer when you are not sarcastic."

"Sarcastic! I protest you do me the greatest injustice. I am wholly and sincerely in earnest! Did none of your other partners

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convey to you their conviction that you are the *belle* of the evening? not even the pretty boy who carried you off for the polka?"

"The pretty boy!" laughing, partly mollified yet still distrustful. "He is a naval officer; he is delightful! I like him so much. No, he did not talk nonsense."

"It must be trying to exchange him for an idiot like me."

Marjory laughed again very merrily. "He is staying here," she said; "he is the rector's youngest son, and he says he will come and see me, but I told him he must not."

"What audacity!" exclaimed Ellis. "We shall lose that waltz if you delay longer."

When this was over a country dance was proposed.

"A country dance!" exclaimed Ellis. "You would not think of such a violent performance; it requires muscles of iron, staying power of the highest order. No, you had better come back to that pleasant nook we discovered, and let us discuss our plans about your brother."

"Very well," said Marjory with some reluctance; and they returned to the dimly-lighted room which Ellis found so much to his taste. It was no longer empty, however, as many couples were sitting and standing about.

"What have you done with your other brother—what is his name?" asked Ellis as they paused beside a window through which the moonlit grounds were visible.

"Dick? Ah, I do not know what has become of Dick," sadly. "He quarrelled with his mother and went away more than a year ago; we have never heard of him since."

"Then I am afraid he is the scamp of the family."

"Indeed, indeed, he is not! He is so quiet and steady, and everything that is good."

"What a dangerous character! Still waters run deep."

"Oh! of course you laugh at me; but if you knew Dick!"

"I should endorse your opinion? Perhaps. Meantime you had better sit down and rest, while our *convives* are prancing." He pointed to a lounge which stood invitingly near. The sound of a brisk air summoned the loiterers who had been hanging about, and Ellis had begun a sentence when to his great disgust the young naval officer came quickly into the room, looking eagerly round as if in search of some one. "Ah! there you are, Miss Acland," he exclaimed; "I have been looking everywhere for you; they are just going to have a jolly country dance—I think you promised it to me."

"I do not think I could, for I did not know we were to have a country dance."

"Well, I am sure my name is down for No. 13. May I see your card? Aye, there it is, only they have changed it to a country-dance. Come along, our *vis-à-vis* are waiting."

"Miss Acland is very tired and intended to rest, I believe," said Ellis blandly.

"I feel rested already, and the music sounds delightful," cried the faithless Marjory, rising and accepting the arm offered her, with a pretty deprecating look to Ellis, and went off cheerfully with the interloper.

"Deserted, by Jove!" thought the former, with an impatient frown, which was almost immediately succeeded by a smile. "I thought I was beginning to make some way; and I believe she is just as well pleased with that insignificant sailor boy as with my noble and experienced self. She is the first woman I ever met who seems to have an innate distrust of me."

It was all over at last. But when Marjory shut the door of her own room, she did not begin to undress. She lit the candles which were attached to a large cheval glass and looked at herself very deliberately; then a well pleased smile parted her lips and a tangled succession of thoughts stirred her brain. First came a comfortable conviction that she did not look so badly; next, that she had danced everything, and four times with that nice young sailor; finally, that Mr. Ellis had danced with her, and only with her! moreover that he was really, truly, genuinely vexed when her favourite partner had carried her off. That was a triumph! If so cool and indifferent an individual, a man of the world, the great world, a future ambassador, took the trouble of talking to her insignificant self, he must think her rather nice, for she could not credit him with abstract good nature. The remembrance so exhilarated her that she performed a *pas seul* before the mirror and laughed aloud merrily, while she blushed at her own folly. "It would be such fun if he were to take a fancy to me (of course it would only be a passing fancy) and to show him that although he is a great man (comparatively) and I am a mere nobody I do not and will not care a straw about him! I must be very nice, though, when I go back, if he gets an invitation for George. Oh! how delightful it will be to see George. Dear George! I wonder if he will be able to find out anything about Dick." She stood a moment or two, her face softened and sobered, then she undressed quickly, blew out the candles and went to bed.

Next day, however, inexorable fate overtook Marjory in the shape of Aunt Carteret, who had been despatched to recall her. Mr. Carteret had decided on making a new alphabetical list of his books, and he was determined to begin the very next day. So Marjory could no longer be excused.

Ellis also returned in time for dinner, and before going to table contrived to give Marjory a hint that it would be well to broach the question of George's visit at once. This she did with some trepida-

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tion. Her announcement that her brother had come home from sea did not rouse much attention from Mr. Carteret. But Ellis took up the running.

"Your brother has come home, do you say, Miss Acland?" he said audibly. "I suppose you want to run up to town to see him?"

"I want to see him very much indeed," faltered Marjory.

"How—what?" cried Mr. Carteret. "Go to town. Certainly not. Why, we begin the catalogue of books to-morrow, and it would be very bad behaviour on your part, Marjory, if you were to absent yourself now that I have taught you to be a little useful."

"I do not want to go away, uncle, but I do want to see my brother."

"Then he had better come down here," suggested Ellis.

This proposition seemed to startle Uncle Carteret; but as Ellis appeared to think it a matter of course and Mrs. Carteret made no objection, he gave a peevish assent.

"George need not be in the way at all, uncle," said Marjory, eagerly. "He can ramble about the place in the morning and walk with me when I have done writing, and only for a couple of days, you know." The ladies were leaving the dining-room as she spoke, and Ellis shook his head at her. Later, when he found an opportunity, he lectured Marjory on her imprudence. "Such a speech is always unwise. It gives a man like old Carteret an exaggerated idea of his own benevolence. Take such things as natural and of course, as if it was or ought to be a pleasure to him to invite any relative of yours."

"But it is not," cried Marjory.

"No matter; you can credit him with proper sentiments. Now have I not returned good for evil? Have I not kept my word in spite of your base desertion of me last night?"

"You know you did not want to dance the country dance."

"Did you?"

"Yes; I never was at a party before."

"You ought to have preferred sitting out with me."

"Why should I?" asked Marjory, opening her innocent-looking eyes.

"Oh, because—because *I* wished it."

"That is no reason in my opinion. There, Uncle Carteret is putting out the chess-men."

"Ah," Ellis advanced to his host, "I fear I must trouble Miss Acland to take my place, sir," he said. "I have some important letters to write, and must send my man over to Market Gilston with them. Have you anything for the night mail?" Marjory gave him a reproachful glance. "Lord Beaulieu desired me to say he wished you would drive over and look at the alterations and restorations he is making. He would like the opinion of such a judge as he knows you to be."

"Ah, indeed, I am sure his lordship is very welcome to any advice I can give him. I daresay there is much to amend in the plans. I am told he employs none but Englishmen. If to-morrow is fine we will drive over to Beaulieu."

"To-morrow" was fine. They started, therefore, immediately after luncheon; and Marjory found the scenery, the air, the perfume of the new-mown grass—everything, in short, delightful. In her heart she conjectured what the answer to the invitation would be. It was more than probable that Mrs. Acland might be propitious, as she seemed anxious to stand well with the Carterets. Once or twice when roused from her thoughts, Marjory had caught Ellis's eyes, as if he had been contemplating her, and she had given him a friendly grateful glance and smile, remembering the good service he had done her.

Mr. Carteret discoursed on Gothic *versus* Classic style, and proved to his own satisfaction that the former was distinctly barbarous.

Arrived at the park gates, the gentlemen alighted, and then Ellis, as if moved by some sudden thought, asked Mrs. Carteret, who was going on to pay a visit, "Do you want Miss Acland very much? If not, she may like to see Beaulieu."

"Oh yes, she can go if she likes."

"Thank you. I should greatly like to go."

"Hey—what?" said Uncle Carteret. "You can carry my sketch-book and case of pencils then."

Ellis led them across the park, under the stately oaks and graceful beech trees, which grew singly or in clumps, through which they caught glimpses of the deer browsing in groups.

"Give me your arm, Marjory," said Mr. Carteret. "I had no idea it was so far, Ralph, and it is extremely hot."

"We will get round to the east end directly and find shade," returned Ellis.

"Ah, there is the castle!" cried Marjory. "How fine it looks, rising above the trees."

"It will be very fine when finished. They are busy about the chapel now; it had quite fallen into decay."

In a few minutes they ascended a smooth green bank, and following the edge of what had been the moat, now a sunken shrubbery, turned an angle and found themselves in a busy scene.

Workmen were sawing stones, chipping stones, laying courses of stones with ringing trowels. Heaps of mortar lay about, some being mixed, others ready. Men were climbing ladders, putting up scaffolding.

"I do not see Beaulieu about," said Ellis. "I will look for him; he would not like to miss you."

As he turned to go, he was struck by Marjory's startled expression and heightened colour.

"What is the matter?" he asked,

"Look," she exclaimed excitedly, "do you see that man who is standing by a heap of mortar there?"

"Yes, a tall good-looking fellow."

"It is—it is Dick!" cried Marjory, dropping pencils and sketch-book recklessly and darting forward to clasp his mortar-splashed, dust-begrimed hands. "Oh, Dick, have you forgotten me? I am so glad! I thought I should never see you again."

CHAPTER XIII.

MARJORY TAKES COUNSEL.

THE young man turned sharply with an astonished glance, which quickly changed into a look of delighted recognition.

"Why, Marjory, where have you sprung from? How did you come here?"

"I am staying near this—but oh, Dick, are you really a workman? Do you carry a hod?"

"I have got beyond that; I am getting on, and I am right glad to see you have escaped as well as myself."

"Only for a little while, Dick," shaking her head. "Oh, can you not come away and tell me everything? I have missed you so dreadfully, and wondered so often what you were doing."

A smile lit up Dick's face, as he said, "Have you?"

During the rapid interchange of these sentences, Mr. Carteret stood in speechless astonishment, which changed rapidly to indignation as he perceived his precious sketch-book and pencil-case on the ground, where Marjory had dropped them on recognizing Dick, the former lying open and some loose leaves scattered about.

"This is a very extraordinary and romantic *rencontre*," he said to Ellis, who stood beside him looking on with quiet critical curiosity.

"Really, Marjory is too utter unconventional. See how all these fellows are staring!" Then advancing, he exclaimed, "I wish, Marjory, you could be a little less demonstrative and impetuous; I have no doubt the points of my pencils are broken, and all my loose sketches are tumbling in the dust."

"Well, I could not help it!" cried Marjory, who was for the moment exalted far beyond the fear of consequences. "You see I was so surprised to see Dick, I forgot about everything else."

"That is very evident. Pray may I ask who 'Dick' is?" asked Mr. Carteret in a slightly contemptuous tone which stung Marjory.

"He is my brother, my half-brother. I have not seen him or heard of him for ages, and I was so glad."

"Naturally," put in Ellis ; "Miss Acland is, I am sure, a staunch friend."

Dick turned to him, undisturbed by being thus suddenly brought into notice. "You are right," he said emphatically. "I will not keep you, Marge, I have too long a story to tell ; I will write to you, and come and see you, if I may ? Where shall I address ?"

"Oh ! I wish you could come *now* !" cried Marjory, looking up to him with moist eyes.

"Well, I can't, you see."

"Then write soon," said Marjory earnestly ; I am staying with my uncle, Mr. Carteret, at the Priory—Langford Priory."

"I know it. Good-bye, Marjory, it's jolly to see you again ;" and Marjory was obliged to return to her uncle.

Ellis meantime had picked up the sketch-book and continued to carry it, Marjory being too much agitated to notice that or anything else.

"Pray how comes it that this young man is in such a—very extraordinary position ? I am afraid he is a ne'er-do-weel," asked Mr. Carteret.

"He is nothing of the kind !" cried Marjory indignantly. "He is as good and steady as he can be. He quarrelled with his mother, and he hated being in my father's office, so he went away to seek his fortune."

"He appears to have been eminently successful in his search," remarked Ellis quietly.

"He will be successful, *that* I am quite sure," returned Marjory, with calm assurance. "But it must be rather dreadful, working as he does with common men, though Dick would be vexed if he heard me call *any* one common."

"Hum, a young radical, I suppose, in addition to his other qualities," growled Uncle Carteret.

But Marjory did not heed him, she had turned and looked back. "I think he is taller than ever !" she exclaimed, as if speaking out her thoughts ; then Ellis knew their eyes had met, for she brightened all over with a vivid smile and waved her hand. "I am sorry I dropped your book, uncle, but I do not think there is any harm done," she said, as if with an effort.

"That is not your fault," returned Mr. Carteret testily.

Marjory did not seem to hear him. She was too excited and exhilarated by this sudden encounter to heed what was going on about her. Dick did not look ill, or worn, or unhappy ; on the contrary, he was bright, embrowned and cheerful, more cheerful than she had ever seen him before ; nay, there was something assured and dignified in his bearing, that seemed to ennoble his workman's garb. "He looks like a gentleman, in spite of his clothes," was her most definite impression ; "now, if George comes down and they set each other, if we are together even for a day, how delightful it will

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be! I ought to have a letter from George to-morrow morning. I will not say a word about meeting Dick when I write home." While she so communed with herself, mixing past, present, and future in her chequered musing, a gentleman joined Mr. Carteret and Ellis, a short, broad, keen-eyed man, roughly dressed in a tweed suit and a soft felt hat. Marjory was aroused by her uncle's voice saying sharply:—

"Marjory, Marjory! Lord Beaulieu is speaking to you."

"Oh, yes, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed, colouring and smiling a sweet deprecating smile, "I did not hear."

"I was asking if this is your first visit to Beaulieu," said Lord Beaulieu good-naturedly.

"Yes! I have often wished to come, but had no one to come with. It is very beautiful, and when finished——"

"My occupation will be o'er," put in Lord Beaulieu smiling. His voice was refined and pleasing and made his hearers forget the plainness of his exterior. "In a week or so I shall be able to show you the chapel; at present it is a mass of confusion, you could form no idea of it." Then turning to Mr. Carteret he continued: "It has been tedious work, and I have been obliged to take several of the men away to finish some apartments for my sister, Mrs. Maynard, who thinks her native air may do her good."

"I trust she is regaining strength and spirits," said Ellis, with an air of interest.

"I have not seen her for some time; but I believe she is rousing up a little. It was an awful blow to be left a widow a few little more than a year of marriage. The baby, of course, is a great consolation. My sister married young Maynard, of Leighton Abbot, who broke his neck out hunting, last March," continued Lord Beaulieu, explaining to Mr. Carteret. "It was a melancholy business—they were very happy and everything promised well. The son and heir was about six weeks old when his father was killed."

"Very unfortunate indeed," said Mr. Carteret, in a polite tone. "This infant, then, is heir to a large property? I remember the curious circumstances of old Maynard's will, under which the present man took the estate."

"The worst of it is, poor young Maynard's father cannot bear his little grandson out of his sight, and the mother will not leave him; so she is buried alive in that big desolate place in Yorkshire. Her father-in-law does not like her to go anywhere except here. He has an idea I shall never marry, and that my small nephew may be the heir of Beaulieu as well as of Leighton Abbott. Now, Mr. Carteret, you must come round to the principal front, and give me your opinion on one or two slight changes I have made in the general design."

"My poor judgment is quite at your service," said Mr. Carteret complacently; and they walked on, Lord Beaulieu pointing out

whatever he considered worthy of notice, and his companion happy in being able to detect various faults.

Marjory and Ellis followed in silence.

"May I intrude upon your thoughts?" asked the latter, after studying her face with impunity, perceiving that she was scarcely conscious of what was going on around her.

Marjory looked at him with a slight start, as if waking from a dream. She had not taken in the sense of his words.

"May I speak to you?" resumed Ellis, laughing. "Your spirit was so evidently absent, I hesitated to bring you back from your, I presume, happy memories."

"No—not at all happy!" said Marjory, with a quick sigh.

"Ah! well, I daresay it was a little trying to find your brother in workman's garb."

"It was not that altogether, but he has been badly treated. I have been very unkind to him myself; and now——" she stopped abruptly.

"You are repentant, and wish to atone for the wrong you have done. I am glad to hear it, for I may hope you will feel remorse later on for your consistent and undeserved bad treatment of myself."

"I never behaved badly to you; and I am sure it would be no great matter if I had. You will go away soon and I shall never see you again."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Ellis, in a low tone; but Marjory did not heed him.

"Dick was always good and patient; and he had not a friend in the world but George—except my father perhaps," she went on, "while you——"

"Are not good, and have heaps of friends," put in Ellis as she stopped.

"I daresay you are very good. Indeed!" turning to him with a sudden burst of gratitude, "you have been good to me. If you had not backed me up about George, Uncle Carteret would not have invited him here. And if I have the great pleasure of seeing both my brothers together, it will be chiefly owing to you."

Her eyes softened as she looked kindly at him.

"If tenderness touched her, the dark of her eye
At once took a deeper, a heavenlier dye,"

quoted Ellis, smiling, while his own gaze grew more intense. "When you understand your own powers better, you will know that your strength does not lie in the fiery indignation you sometimes display, but in the melting mood which is—shall I say—irresistible?"

Marjory did not answer. She felt hurt, without exactly knowing why. His mocking tone jarred upon her present excited mood, on

her tender regretful recollection. She looked down, while her cheek flushed and her lips quivered.

"You are displeased," said Ellis, watching her. "I have said nothing to deserve your displeasure. Seriously, I want to be good friends with you, and my assistance is not to be despised. You will want to see this brother sometimes, and I will help you, in this or any other case."

"Thank you," murmured Marjory; but she did not quite like his mixing himself in her affairs. She wanted no one to come between her and Dick, or to show off his fine gentleman airs to the brother who had for the present laid aside his social position.

Ellis looked at her as if about to speak again, but checked himself. They had now joined Lord Beaulieu and Mr. Carteret, who were standing before the chief entrance, deep in an argument respecting the transition from Norman to Early English style, most of which was Greek to Marjory, but in which Ellis occasionally entered, with evident knowledge of what he was talking about. At last, Mr. Carteret thought of looking at his watch, and declared it was time to start on their homeward track.

"I hope you will come again soon," Lord Beaulieu, "when the interior will be sufficiently advanced to allow of your forming some idea of what it will be. I was fortunate to fall in with a very clever and exceedingly Bohemian artist in the Pyrenees last year—I had met him in America before—and he has designed some excellent decorations for the principal rooms. I hope Mrs. Carteret and Miss Aeland will drive over also, my sister will be very glad to see both ladies indeed; she had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Carteret in Italy."

"Mrs. Carteret would be charmed," her husband was sure, "and Lord Beaulieu would be so good as to excuse plain speaking, but in matter of taste——"

"Mrs. Carteret's is unimpeachable," put in Lord Beaulieu, who accompanied his visitors across the park before taking leave of them.

Marjory was too excited to fall asleep as she generally did as soon as her head was on the pillow, the night after this *rencontre*. She lay long awake, thinking over the past, and seeing bright impossible visions of the future.

But to-morrow morning brought disappointment. There was no letter from George when Mr. Carteret opened the post bag at breakfast and distributed its contents. Ellis raised his eyebrows with a questioning sympathetic expression, as he watched Marjory's expectant look change to one of discomfiture.

"So he is not coming to-day?" said Ellis, strolling into the library a few minutes after Marjory had settled to her usual work.

She shook her head. "I suppose Mrs. Acland is contriving to delay him."

"Why should she take that trouble?"

"I do not know; probably to annoy me."

"You dislike her very much; one can see that, though you say little. Don't you think she would be a very stupid woman to waste her energies on so small an object?"

"It seems so. Yet she always tried to keep George away from me. He is rather good friends with her, which is annoying;" she stopped abruptly, feeling it would not do to allow herself too much licence on this exciting topic, especially to one whom she vaguely distrusted.

"And you have no tidings of the other either?" pursued Ellis, setting himself at a small writing-table in one of the windows, and setting forth pens, ink, and paper.

"What? From Dick? No, I did not expect to hear from him so soon;" a pause.

"Do you mind my writing my letters here?" was his next question. "If I disturb you I can write elsewhere."

"I do not mind at all, if you do not speak."

"Thank you, in spite of your unsociable proviso."

"I will not speak to you, so we need not disturb each other."

Ellis bent his head in silent acquiescence, and for some time profound quiet reigned. Ellis had rapidly penned two or three letters, and Marjory had copied a couple of slips which contained the names of those volumes classified under E and F into the catalogue she was making.

At length Ellis, who had glanced at her occasionally, noting how absorbed she was in her work, laid down his pen, and asked, "May I speak?"

"Yes," returned Marjory shortly, without looking up.

"I am a good deal puzzled about this half-brother, of yours. You are the daughter of your father's first wife. Where does this young man come in? for he is a good deal older than you."

"Mrs. Acland was a widow, and Dick is *her* son."

"Oh! I see. Then in fact he is not your half-brother, he is no relation at all."

"Is he not? I imagine he must be a sort of brother—at any rate I consider him one now, though I disliked him so much at first and treated him as an intruder."

"How long is it since your father married?"

"Rather more than seven years."

"I suppose Mrs. Acland is handsome? This young fellow is good-looking."

"I thought him ugly when I saw him first. He was all legs and arms, and was so dull and heavy, I was dreadfully unkind to him."

"What is his name?"

"Cranston."

"Cranston," repeated Ellis, "I seem to know the name. What induced him *really* to leave a comfortable home for so unsuitable an occupation?" looking keenly at her.

But for his searching eyes, Marjory might have told the whole story in her eagerness for sympathy, and her indignation at the wrong done to Dick; but she checked herself, and only said, "His mother was always quarrelling with him and hated him, and he detested being in my father's office. He wanted to be an architect; so when things became unbearable he went away, and nobody seemed to care, so I never knew where he was till I saw him yesterday."

"There are a great many steps between a mason and an architect," said Ellis; "I suppose he has no money?"

"I do not think he has a penny. I think his father was an artist and rather a bad man," returned Marjory, and she resumed her work, while Ellis thought to himself, "Old Acland has probably fallen victim to an adventuress. His sweet little daughter has a bad look out. It would be a meritorious act to take her out of the stepmother's clutches and put her in some pretty pleasant nest, well sheltered from observation as well as from winter and cold weather, but she is a very wild bird."

Here Mr. Carteret came in to inspect Marjory's progress, and to find various minute faults, so the conversation ended.

Ellis finished his letters very soon, and went noiselessly away.

The next day, however, brought Marjory two letters—one from George announcing his advent on the following Saturday, only to stay till Monday, and concluding hastily, "I can tell you all about everything when we meet."

The second was from Dick.

"I am longing for a talk with you," he said, "but I am afraid it will be difficult to manage, for I do not like to call at the Priory. I have reconnoitred the country, and find that midway between the village and the Priory, on the path through woods and over the hill, some trees have been felled and are lying about. If you can walk so far on Sunday afternoon, I could meet you. I have much to tell, and some good news. Let me know if you can manage this. Address me at the Post Office, Langford—I lodge close by. Do not put 'Esquire' on your letter!—Yours affectionately, Dick Cranston."

"I will go and look at the place to-day if I can," was Marjory's mental resolve as she read these letters, with a beaming face, which fully informed Ellis, who sat opposite her at breakfast, who were the writers and what the contents.

"George says he can come on Saturday and stay till Monday afternoon, since you are so very kind as to invite him," she ex-

claimed, addressing Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, "and you have made me very happy, I cannot thank you enough."

Mrs. Carteret smiled good-naturedly, and her husband remarked that he supposed the catalogue would stand still for two days at least.

"And afterwards," said Marjory, "I will work harder than ever to make up for lost time."

"There will not be much time lost," observed Ellis from behind his newspaper. "Saturday is always a half holiday, and of course you do not expect Miss Acland to break the Sabbath, sir."

"To think that I shall see George the day after to-morrow!" murmured Marjory, as if to herself. "I can hardly believe it!"

For the rest of the meal she was evidently preoccupied and answered at random, while her heightened colour and sparkling eyes showed the joyous excitement of her heart.

The time which intervened before the arrival of George was not however without uneasy considerations.

The young sailor was to start at cockcrow by a cheap train arriving at Market Gilston about noon, and Marjory was puzzled as to how he was to accomplish the five or six miles which lay between the station and the Priory.

She knew—or guessed—that he would scarcely have spare cash enough to pay for a private conveyance, and there was no public one to be had. He might walk, of course, but that would seem very miserable to the servants and every one. Then she had only a few shillings herself. Neither Uncle nor Aunt Carteret seemed to think it necessary to send a carriage for him, at least they said nothing about it, and she could not screw up courage to ask. She dreaded irritating Uncle Carteret, and so risking a cold reception for her brother, whose brief visit she wished to make as bright and agreeable as possible.

After cogitating on this difficult question, Marjory reluctantly decided on availing herself of the offer Ellis had made to help her in any way he could, and applying to him for assistance.

It was something of an effort to speak to him, but for George's sake she would venture.

She found the opportunity that evening, when Mrs. Carteret and Virginie were absorbed in a box from Paris.

The perfume of delicate tobacco guided her to the ruins, where she found Ellis seated on a broken column.

"Excuse me for interrupting you," began Marjory shyly.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Ellis, as if he had expected her.

"I have come to ask your help," resumed Marjory, gathering some wild roses and plucking them to pieces as she spoke.

"It is yours."

"You know George is coming to-morrow?"

"Yes! I rejoiced in your pleasure yesterday, to-day a change

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has come o'er the spirit of your dream. You are worrying about something."

"I am; but how can you tell?"

"I should be a very stupid fellow, very unfit for a diplomat, if I could not read *your* face."

"I do not like the idea of your—of any one knowing my thoughts."

"I daresay not; but how can I be useful to you?"

"You see Gilston is more than five miles away, and—and—Uncle Carteret has not offered to send for George."

"I see; and you want to go and meet him?"

"Yes, I should like to do so very much."

"Leave it to me," said Ellis; "when is he due?"

"At 12.20."

"That might suit me very well. I think of going to town for a few days."

"Oh, don't go!" cried Marjory impulsively; "I should be so sorry if you were away while George is here."

"Indeed!" looking down into her eyes, "I feel flattered."

"It is a selfish wish on my part," she returned with a half smile, and meeting his glance frankly, "but Mr. Carteret would be kinder to George, if you were here to keep him in order!"

Ellis laughed. "I wish I had the influence with which you credit me."

"Still he is never so cross when you are here," said Marjory.

"He is rather a cantankerous subject" returned Ellis. "You will be very glad to get away."

"Indeed I shall not. I prefer being here to being at home, and Aunt Carteret is very kind."

"She is a remarkably well-bred woman," returned Ellis gravely.

"Well, Miss Acland, you may consider this matter settled, and be ready to start at half-past eleven to-morrow."

"Thank you very much, I am really grateful." She half offered him her hand and then drew it back with sweet girlish shyness.

"Why baulk your own gracious impulse?" exclaimed Ellis quickly, as he caught and kept it for a moment. "Let this be a token of plenary absolution from the penalties I may unconsciously have incurred. Will you accept me as your friend and colleague in future!"

"Thank you very much," repeated Marjory, uneasy, she knew not why. "You are really very good, but I—I don't think we are exactly suited to be friends. Now I must go, Mrs. Carteret may want me."

"Don't!" emphatically. "Not yet. Who was with her when you came out?"

"Virginie."

"Then she is not ready for you yet by a long way. Tell me more about this brother of yours, and the young mason. He really looked too good for such work."

Marjory hesitated. She wished to go, she wished to stay. It was delightful to talk about the two boys she loved so well, and Ellis contrived to put so much sympathy into his voice, though he said little, that Marjory was insensibly drawn into talking more of home and its circumstances than she quite approved on reflection.

"Perhaps if I were to ask Beaulieu to speak to the clerk of the works he might give young Cranston a lift," said Ellis thoughtfully.

"That would be a great help," cried Marjory. "I will tell Dick; he will know how you can help him."

"When are you going to see him?" sharply.

"On Sunday. I shall take George with me to meet him on the path to the village. I can hardly believe that we three shall be all together again. I am so much obliged to you, Mr. Ellis:" she turned as she spoke and walked quickly towards the house, pausing at the entrance of the ruins to wave her hand and give him a backward glance.

The day so eagerly anticipated by Marjory rose fair and smiling. It was the end of July and the weather was indescribably charming. Breakfast-time came and no word was spoken as yet about sending for George. Marjory could not eat; she shot one or two appealing glances at Ellis, who made no sign. At last, when the meal was nearly over, he said, addressing Mrs. Carteret, "As I am going to drive over to Gilston, Miss Acland might like to come and meet her brother, perhaps."

"But Marjory might get on with the catalogue this morning while waiting for—" began Mr. Carteret.

"I should not advise you to trust her in her present excited mood," interrupted Ellis smiling. "Depend upon it, she would have to tear up to-morrow what she wrote to-day."

"Very likely, very likely indeed!" cried Mr. Carteret peevishly.

"I can work till—till Mr. Ellis is ready to start," put in Marjory.

"And I will be very careful—I do want very much to go and meet George."

"Oh! I know what your carefulness is, young lady," returned Mr. Carteret.

Marjory was tremulous with joy and anticipation when she was informed that Mr. Ellis was ready and waiting for her.

She ran downstairs, her gloves not yet buttoned, looking more than pretty in a fresh morning frock and a shady hat turned up at one side, a tea-rose with its dark green leaves fastened under the brim. Ellis was already seated in the dog-cart and stretched out his hand to assist her ascent.

As soon as they were clear away, Marjory exclaimed, "It was such a relief this morning when you spoke of driving over to Gilston and taking me; I grew dreadfully nervous till you did speak."

"I think you might have trusted me," looking into her eyes with an expression that created an indefinite sense of embarrassment, which she told herself was too stupid.

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"Yes, I think I ought," she returned softly, and fell into silence. The great pleasure of meeting her brother, now it was so near, grew shadowy with the fear of seeing him sorely changed by the roughness of his life since they last met, with the anticipation of parting again so soon. Then the keen sense of wrong done to him by sending him from home in so inferior a position woke up again, and deepened her gravity.

"Do you not think you have tormented yourself enough?" Ellis asked at length.

"How do you mean!" exclaimed Marjory with startled eyes.

He laughed. "You are very much afraid of my reading your thoughts! I can see, however, that your meditations have not been pleasant."

"Well, no! I am afraid George will be a good deal changed, after living among sailors and people like that, and," with a sigh, "he was so nice."

"Do not trouble about it. A few minutes will answer the conjecture. Besides, it takes a great deal to change nature."

There was a pause.

"Do you think we are really related, as you said we were?" asked Marjory abruptly.

"Yes, certainly. I am old Carteret's third cousin, or some such thing, and you are his grand-niece. Of course we are cousins.

"And so is George?"

"No doubt."

A little further talk about Marjory's disappointment at his not being in the Navy brought them to the town.

"Suppose I leave you at the station," said Ellis, "and go about my business, which is only a visit to the saddler's, then you can have a few minutes with your brother before I return to pick you up."

"Oh, thank you! thank you! you think of everything. Then you are not going to London?"

"No," smiling, "not till next week."

Here Ellis turned sharp into the yard of the station and drew up. Beckoning a porter to hold the horse, he sprang down and assisted Marjory to alight, accompanying her into the ticket office to inquire, with the quiet ineffable air of authority which always impressed people, if the 12.20 train from London was generally punctual.

"No, sir, that she baint," was the emphatic reply.

"Then is it worth while waiting now?" he asked Marjory.

"Oh, yes, I should like him to find me here."

It seemed hours to Marjory while she paced the platform or sought shelter from the sun in a dingy unswept waiting-room. At length, quite ten minutes behind time, the ardently-expected train came in.

Marjory eagerly scanned the passengers as they alighted, and after a moment's uncertainty recognized a young man—taller and thinner

than the George she remembered—dressed in a light-coloured check suit, with a rough blue coat over his arm and a small bag in his hand. The next moment her arms were round his neck.

“Oh, George! I thought you would never come.”

“Why, Marjory, I didn’t know you! You have grown quite an elegant young lady.”

Then a few hurried questions and answers, and Marjory led him into the station yard. Ellis had not yet returned.

“We must wait a few minutes for the dog-cart. You have no more luggage?”

“Luggage! no. I had hard work to get a decent coat to come in, I can tell you. My father is stingier than ever.”

“No, no! *He* is not to blame. But how thin you are, and how brown, and *how* you smell of tobacco!”

“I am sorry, Marge; but you see I was shut up with three fellows who were blowing clouds all the way down, so I was obliged to smoke too.”

“You look ever so much older. Have you been miserable, dear?” pressing his arm fondly.

“Oh no, by no means, and I have got through the worst of it now. But if I had known exactly what I was going into, I don’t think I should have been so ready to give up the Royal Navy.”

“Ah! George, I am sure you have suffered fearfully.”

“Nonsense, Marge, nothing of the sort; at any rate I am going to be very jolly here for the next few days. What sort of an old buffer is the uncle? I say, is this the trap?” as Ellis drove up.

“Yes, come along; we must not be late for luncheon.”

“Well, you have him safe and sound,” said Ellis good-humouredly. “Glad to see you; jump up behind.” He stretched out his hand to Marjory, who was pleased at his unwonted cordiality, and they set off at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER XIV.

THEY THREE MEET AGAIN.

THAT afternoon and evening were ever graven on the tablets of Marjory’s memory as curiously interwoven with pleasure and annoyance.

To stroll about the beautiful ruins and the picturesque grounds with George was delightful; to sit at table with him and Uncle Carteret was a sore trial.

George, in the first place, brought no dress-clothes—for the best reason in the world, he had none to bring. Then he did not know

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the uses of many of the more luxurious implements of the table. As to the French dishes, knowledge was of small importance, as he ate indiscriminately of them all. He was in no way vulgar, Marjory told herself, but he was unconventional, and extremely shy, which, of course, encouraged Uncle Carteret to snub him.

Here Ellis did yeoman's service. He turned Uncle Carteret's stings aside with diplomatic dexterity, and covered George's occasional slips with the ægis of tact. Then he assumed an air of deep interest respecting colonial trade and the condition of the merchant service, on which topics the young sailor spoke intelligently enough.

But his hands! Poor Marjory could not keep her eyes away from them. They were rough and scarred and brown, and one or two nails were crushed and injured. He was still good-looking, even gentleman-like looking; but between him and Ellis what an immense gulf was fixed! The contrast irritated Marjory even while feeling warmly grateful to Ellis for his loyal help.

It was a relief to rise from table and escape both Uncle and Aunt Carteret's observing eyes; for even the latter, though polite and kind, evidently looked on their young guest as a kind of curiosity quite apart from her life. Marjory's heart went out to her brother all the more glowingly for these impalpable slights. He was—like herself—the victim of a destiny brought on them by her father's wife. If she could make it up to him in any way, she would have gone and lived with him in a hovel in a wilderness, where no one should mock at or undervalue him! her dear, kind light-hearted brother.

Her feeling for him was tenderer and more compassionate than for Dick, warmly as she felt for him. He was so strong and resolute, he would conquer fortune if any man could. But George was different. Ellis noticed from time to time that her eyes filled, her colour changed, and then, with a brave effort, she would conquer herself and address her uncle, to distract his attention, or engage Mrs. Carteret on some subject that turned her thoughts from George's shortcomings.

It was an unfamiliar and a somewhat wearisome world to the ambitious *attache*; but, so far, Marjory was an interesting study. She helped him through the dull time which he had devoted to the difficult and delicate task of persuading his old kinsman to make certain dispositions of his property which would be to the advantage of his heir presumptive. He brought to his task some admirable qualities—patience, tenacity of purpose, an equable temper, a keen regard for his own interest. So he stayed, amiably to talk with Mr. Carteret and further his special object, while George and Marjory—having asked and obtained leave to go and look at the sunset—set forth for a walk together.

With what delight they scampered off to the ruins anxious to get well out of sight; and then they paused and found a seat where

they could rest and pour out unchecked the experiences of what seemed to them the ages which had passed since last they met. George was more anxious to hear Marjory's history than to enlarge upon his own. He was ready enough to describe any pleasant adventures, any bright bits in his generally monotonous existence; but he did not care to talk about the trials and troubles of his first days on board a merchantman—though no doubt the life was luxurious, compared to that of his predecessors of twenty or thirty years before.

Then Marjory had the history of Dick's troubles to recount. The particulars had never reached George. Marjory could not bear to put on paper the accusation she felt to be so unmerited. George, therefore, had but an indistinct idea of the occurrence, which Marjory now described, even to the minutest details, and with a graphic power which astonished George, who was deeply indignant at the cruel treatment of his chum.

"I never could make out why he did not write to me," said George, when Marjory had finished her dramatic narration, "and now I begin to believe that Mrs. Acland is a bad lot."

"You begin to see through her at last," cried Marjory. "I used to think, sometimes, I was too bitter against her—that I was fanciful and unjust; but she gets worse and worse, or I get to know her better. I believe she hates Dick more than she does you or me. No! not worse than she hates *me*. I feel she cannot bear the sight of me. I suppose that is the reason I dislike her, really."

"Yes, no doubt. And you know, Marge, you can be horrid disagreeable."

"Say horridly, George. I daresay I can; but I fancy I am better-tempered now. I feel oftener sad than cross, and I am more sorry for people. I certainly feel that I should like to shake Uncle Carteret sometimes; *he* can be disagreeable! Still, I am grateful to him, and I could be quite happy with Aunt Carteret. I am not sure that she cares a straw about me, but she is always just, and so even in temper, I envy her. She is generous too. She gives me quantities of pretty things, and made Uncle Carteret buy all the nice clothes I have, instead of paying me for my services. I was never fit to be seen before."

"Well, you are quite fit to be seen now," said George, looking admiringly at his sister. "You have turned out quite a pretty girl, Marge; and you have a deuced nice figure."

"Have I? Do you really think so?" cried Marjory delighted. "I used to be so afraid I should grow up ugly! If I am just pleasant-looking, I shall be content. Beauty is entrancing! I could look at a beautiful man or woman for ever! See, George, my hands are not so red as they used to be," and she spread them out.

George nodded, and busied himself filling his pipe.

"Perhaps, George dear, you think me nice because you have not seen me for a long time."

"May be so," said George philosophically, and began to puff.

"What nasty tobacco!" was Marjory's next remark. "Mr. Ellis has cigarettes that smell deliciously."

"I daresay he has; and he pays a delicious price for them. I am glad to get what I can; besides, I am used to it. The stronger the better, when you have the watch on a cold stormy night."

"I can imagine it," said Marjory tenderly, slipping her arm through his and hugging it.

"I suppose this Ellis is a regular high and mighty chap?" asked George, condescendingly permitting his sister's caress.

"I believe so. He is, or has been, *attache* at Vienna; and Aunt Carteret says he will be an ambassador one day."

"No! Well, he has good manners, anyhow. He was helping me out of holes all dinner-time; and that old buffer Carteret was always thrusting me into them. Ellis is a good-natured fellow!"

"I am not so sure," said Marjory slowly, with a profound air. "I believe he could be cruel if he liked. I hated him when he came first. He oppressed me in an odd sort of way. Now I don't know whether I like him or not, though he has really been very good to me; but I think I am a little afraid of him. He gives me the idea of masked power."

"Oh, that's nonsense! He might have fallen in love with you, only he is rather old."

"In love with *me!*" and Marjory laughed, a light-hearted, natural, girlish laugh. "That is too funny an idea. What do you know about love, you silly boy?"

"A good deal," said George with much gravity, taking his pipe from his mouth. "I was awfully in love with a girl on the voyage out; she was such a lovely little creature, and I think—I think she noticed me, for she used to ask me to do things for her, and smile."

"Do you mean to say you never spoke to her?" asked Marjory.

"Well, she spoke to me once or twice; but you must remember it would be the height of presumption for an apprentice on board ship to talk to a lady passenger."

"I suppose so," said Marjory with a sigh, and she did not speak again for some minutes.

Then George began to talk confidentially of his hopes and plans. He was determined to stick to the calling he had adopted, though the life was very different from what he had expected. "It would not be a bad thing to command a steamer, and I am getting on pretty well; you see one must train in a sailing ship, but all the high-class merchant vessels are steamers now," etc., etc.

The soft darkness of a summer's night began to close round them before Marjory remembered it was time to return to the

house. "Uncle Carteret will make a fuss, George; we had better go in."

It is to be feared that Marjory did not give that undivided attention to the rector's sermon next day which it no doubt deserved.

She was watching the sky through an open window near the Priory pew, and hoping the fleecy grey clouds were not gathering for rain. If so, she would not be able to meet Dick as appointed, that is, if it rained heavily.

The gentlemen of the family were conspicuous by their absence. Old Mr. Carteret was an avowed freethinker, and disposed to flaunt his freedom of thought somewhat obtrusively, and Ellis saw no object to be gained by boring himself on Sunday mornings.

Mrs. Carteret therefore kept up the character of the establishment, and with her, of course, came Marjory and George.

Luncheon seemed preternaturally long that day. Uncle Carteret would talk and dawdle, while Marjory was dying to meet Dick and hear his history since they parted.

At last they rose from table, and Marjory murmured something to Mrs. Carteret, something about a walk and meeting her half-brother.

"You had better take umbrellas," said Mrs. Carteret, "the sky looks threatening."

"Yes," cried Mr. Carteret, who overheard, "do not be imprudent and take cold. Colds are the beginning of all kinds of disorders, and I am exceedingly afraid of infection in my frail health."

"I will take care, uncle," said Marjory, as she made her escape.

It was a soft grey day, the atmosphere a little oppressive, but trees, grass, flowers, shrubs, all gave out their fullest fragrance. The two young people walked somewhat silently along, ascended the hill behind the Priory and pursued the path which led by the wood to the village of Langford. Marjory's heart was very full at the idea of hearing Dick's story and of telling him her own. What hardships he must have undergone, but at least he looked well and cheerful. He would not fail to meet them? Even while the veiled doubt floated through her mind, a tall figure came round a bend of the path. George, with a shout that woke the echoes, sprang forward and clasped Dick's hand as the latter paused, his blue eyes beaming with pleasure, and a joyous smile showing his fine white teeth under his thick golden moustache. Marjory observed that he had not lost the look and bearing of a gentleman, that his morning suit of brown tweed was well cut and became him, that, in short, he had deteriorated less than George.

"Oh, Marjory, I thought you would not fail, but I little thought who would be with you. Why, where did you drop from, old chap?"

While he spoke he held Marjory's hand, and stooping, kissed her

cheek. Her first impulse was to throw her arms round him, but something in his movement checked her.

"Well, Dick, you look first-rate! You seem to have been getting on."

"Come back with me to where the trees lie," returned Dick; "we can sit down and have a regular good talk, we have no end to tell each other. I was here ever so much too soon, but I knew what a long affair Sunday dinner is, so I waited patiently. Why, Marjory, you have grown a grand young lady. I never was so amazed as when you flew over to me at Beaulieu."

"And I never was so delighted, except to see George."

"Come, Marge, you sit between us," said Dick, when they reached the resting-place he had chosen, and Marge quickly complied. First, young Cranston questioned them eagerly respecting home and their own adventures before he would speak of himself, listening with profoundest interest to all they had to tell.

"And has no suspicion ever arisen as to who was the real thief, as to who took the money I was charged with stealing," asked Dick at last with a frown.

"Not that I ever heard," returned Marjory; "in fact, it was never mentioned. Have you any idea?"

"Perhaps I have, but I don't want to talk about it," he said, a distressed look clouding his face. "It was a cruel business altogether. I shan't soon forget how I felt when I left you that day. How long ago is it, Marjory?"

"Nearly fifteen months."

"Well, it seems more than fifteen years. You were a trump to me, Marge," and he suddenly put his arm round her and hugged her against his side. "She gave me the money you sent her, George, nearly every penny she had. You don't know what a help it was to me, Marge," continued Dick, removing his arm; "I do not know how I should have got on without it, and I have saved as best I could to return it to you. I never intended to write to you or try to see you till I could return it. Here it is, Marge." He drew out a shabby purse and extracted some coins folded in paper, which he put in her hand, closing it forcibly on the little packet.

"No, no, Dick! I don't want it."

"Nor do I. Give me something to keep instead, just for a keepsake. No, Marge, there is no use in refusing; I will not take them back."

"Now get on like a good chap and tell us all about everything," cried George impatiently.

"Here goes then. You remember just before you sailed for Australia, George, I fell in with a man I had known when I was a little fellow away in the country—a man called Roper, a mason. He told me where he lived, and I walked over one Sunday to see him. He made a good deal of me, because I once waded into a

stream and pulled out a baby girl he was very fond of. When my mother," he paused an instant, "when my mother tried to shove that theft upon me, and I felt I could never live under the same roof with her again, I went straight away to Roper. Of course I only told him that I had quarrelled with my people and couldn't stand the office; it would have been ruin to me if the true story had got out. Well, Roper was very kind. He got me a room close by them, I won't say much about it, it was by no means a dainty chamber; however the rent was low. Then there was a difficulty about getting me work. You see masons, bricklayers, handicraftsmen of that kind, are hampered with rules about apprentices and unions and lots of things, so Roper could only give me labourer's work at first. I did not care so long as I could earn my bread. Soon, however, Roper—who was a master mason—was employed by a firm of builders on a large factory they were putting up at Lambeth, and then I got my chance. Roper was an uneducated man, and I was able to help him with measurements and accounts; then there were some crooked bits of masonry, and I made him a copy of the plans for his own private use. The clerk of the works noticed this, and often had me into his office to help him, and I learned a good deal in that way. Unfortunately poor old Roper, though a good, well-meaning fellow, got a drinking fit every now and then. He spent a lot of money at these times, and his wife used to be in a dreadful state of mind. I helped him over some of these turns, and I think he grew ashamed of my seeing him. We were 'out' for a short time last winter, which made things a little hard, but we were better off than a good many others."

"Was it not trying, having no one of your own class to speak to?" asked Marjory, whose eager eyes seemed to drink in Dick's words.

"It was curious; but perhaps the worst thing of all was the want of books. It is no wonder that intelligent artisans devour newspapers and swallow all they assert. Some of them are shrewd enough, but for want of training and association their shrewdness runs wild. If I had not been among these men, I should never have known how much is learned from living with reasonable educated people. Book knowledge is only one means of information. I got on pretty well with the men. They were suspicious of me, because I was a little different from themselves, but I kept very quiet, and after a fight or two with one of the worst, and proving I could hold my own, I did better, and I must say they are all ready to help one another when in trouble, with real generosity. When I could not get work I used to draw and copy plans, and design decorations and keep as busy as I could. In the spring, Roper had a lot of repairing and putting in new shop fronts to do and some odd work in gentlemen's houses, and he always wanted me, paying me fairly. At last, in the end of May, he was sent for by Carson and Humph-

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ries the builders, and engaged to do certain parts of the restorations down here at Beaulieu. It was quite delightful to get away to the sweet fresh country. Most of our men have their quarters at Gilston—which is nearer—but I have found a clean little place in the village down there."

"How long have you been here?" asked George.

"Nearly two months." Dick then went on to say that the same clerk of the works who had noticed him previously was employed at Beaulieu, and again took him to assist in his office, while he found opportunities for making himself useful to the architect as well. "Now," he recommenced after a short pause, "for the bit of good news I promised you. About a fortnight ago, I heard the architect and clerk of the works in the office talking of a new man Lord Beaulieu had brought over from France to decorate the reception rooms in the modern part of the Castle. Mr. Jervis, the architect, said he believed he was an American, and a clever artist, and the clerk had just begun to say he was a foreigner, when they both stopped short, for a gentleman in a velvet jacket, and very well got up altogether, walked in. You may guess how surprised I was when I saw he was the Mr. Brand who called, as I daresay you may remember, on the children's birthday, just before I came away last year."

"Is it possible! How extraordinary!" cried Marjory.

"He glanced at me, but took no further notice till he finished talking with the architect; then he came over and looked at what I was drawing. 'That's not bad,' he said; 'are you Mr. Revel's assistant?'"

"'Sometimes, not regularly,' I answered. He was silent for a minute, then he said, 'You might assist me too, when Revel can spare you; come and see me this evening, I am staying at the White Horse at Gilston.'"

"And you went?" asked George.

"I did, though I did not half like it; I was afraid he might put my mother on the scent. I found I had nothing to fear however. I can't tell you how kind and pleasant he was. He had recognized me at once, but did not say so till he heard my story. He questioned me pretty close, and seemed puzzled. Then we talked, and somehow I was greatly taken with him. He knows a lot about art, and he seems to have been a fast friend of my father's. He did not say much about Mrs. Acland, but I don't fancy he likes her. At last he said that for my father's sake he would help me. Then he gave me some designs he had sketched, and told me how to elaborate them. I was to work them, and take them to him when I considered them fit for inspection. The upshot was that he left the inn at Gilston, and has taken lodgings in the village near mine, and now he has spoken to Lord Beaulieu, and I am to be his assistant regularly. He calls it his apprenticeship, only I have bargained for two

evenings a week to help Roper. This was settled the very day you saw me among the workmen. You see you brought me luck, Marge."

"I hope I did. What sort of a man is this Mr. Brand?"

"First, before everything else, he is a gentleman! It is wonderful to hear him talk sometimes; then again, he is terribly depressed. I rather fancy he used to take opium, and he is trying to do without it. Anyway he is a wonderful draughtsman. He does not seem to like being left alone, and has me in nearly every evening to draw, and to talk with him. I believe he met Lord Beaulieu long ago in America, and then again last spring at some place he has near the Pyrenees; but Brand is a thorough Englishman, I am certain. Yesterday morning, I began to work on the decorations of the dining-room, with Brand. It will be splendid! In short, I feel I have my foot on the ladder, and it will go hard if I don't creep up a tolerable height. Ah! if I had only been trained early, I should have no fear, as it is I shall get on slower."

"Well, you have been in luck," cried George; "Then you are a clever chap, and that counts for a good deal."

"I can only work in a particular line; I should have been nowhere as a lawyer."

"It is quite like a novel," said Marjory, gazing dreamily away over the fields and swelling upland that lay spread before them. "Suppose this Mr. Brand turns out to be a nobleman, or a millionaire in disguise, and gives you a fortune?"

Dick laughed (how pleasant his laugh was). "I do not think Brand has ever been troubled with much money," he said, "but he may help me to make a tolerably good position. I am sure he has a history, a painful history."

"I should like to see him again. I remember his face," exclaimed Marjory. "He looks ill and thin, does he not? and he has a sweet voice?"

Dick nodded. After some discussion and conjectures respecting the story to which they had listened, Dick asked Marjory if she were likely to remain with her grand-uncle.

She shook her head. "I fear not! I gather from what they say, that Mr. Ellis is persuading Mr. Carteret to sell the Priory; and at any rate, my uncle will not stay later than October. Neither he nor my aunt have ever said a word about taking me abroad with them. I don't think they care enough for any one to put themselves out of the way, so I am almost sure I shall have to go home. How I hate the idea! You will write to me, will you not, Dick? You will let me know where you are and what you are doing; I can always get your letters without Mrs. Acland seeing them."

"Of course I will write to you, Marge, but you need not hide my letters; you have a right to have them, and now I have regular work I do not fear my mother meddling with me."

Then they rose and walked to the beginning of the village, where

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Dick turned and went back with George and Marjory. Time flew fast and the dinner-hour drew near; still they were far from having exhausted all they had to say.

"I am so glad, Dick, that you have been able to get some nice clothes," said Marjory, as they paused near the Priory to say a final adieu.

"Don't you recognize these garments?" asked Dick, holding out his arm for her inspection. "They were new just before I left Falkland Terrace. I was almost ashamed of taking them with me, but I had worked pretty well at the office for a year, and I was to have had some pay at Easter, which I did not get, so I carried them off. It was not your father's fault, Marge; he is naturally kind and generous."

"Not to me!" cried George. "He never gives me a rap."

"I will walk towards the village next Sunday. Will you come and meet me?" asked Marjory.

"Yes, without fail, rain or shine."

"Oh, if it is wet, it would be no use. I dare not go out."

At last they said good-bye, and parted.

The evening was something direful in its leaden dulness. George found a book, and Marjory was upheld by the memory of Dick's delightful story contrived a *tete-a-tete* ramble through the grounds, in the course of which Marjory insisted on sharing her newly-recovered store with him.

Next day, her brief pleasure was over. After a broken morning, the young sailor, with wet eyes, which he tried hard to conceal, bid farewell to his weeping sister, who accompanied him on foot half way to Gilston, and returned in a state of the deepest depression, much increased by the absence of Ellis, who had started early for London, which looked to Marjory very much as if he had really postponed his visit to please her

CHAPTER XV.

A BREATHING SPACE.

THE cottage in which Brand had taken up his abode stood at the entrance of the village and was of a better class than the rest. It belonged to the bailiff of the Langford estate, who was well pleased to let a couple of rooms to a liberal tenant, while his neat, active wife exerted her simple culinary skill to the utmost to tempt the variable and indifferent appetite of the strange gentleman who spoke "so civil like."

The sun had set but it was still light, on the Sabbath succeeding the one when Marjory had enjoyed the interview with her two brothers.

Brand had been sitting in the garden reading and smoking, and had now retired from the dews of evening to his parlour.

He had had a sleepless night and a weary day from neuralgic pains, and was beginning to feel his own company rather tiresome, when an approaching step caught his ear. He laid down his book, and listened with an expectant expression. In another minute a tap on the door elicited "Come in," from the listener, and Dick Cranston entered with a roll of paper under his arm.

"Ah! there you are. I thought you did not mean to come. I have had an awful time of it."

"I am very sorry," with a sympathetic inquiring look. "You see I was working all the morning at that plan you suggested for the addition near the west tower—I have brought it with me—and then I went to meet Marjory Acland, my sister, you know."

"Your sister, eh?" languidly. "Let me see what you have made of the plan. Pull back the curtains and put the table in the window."

For some time they discussed the drawing earnestly, Brand pointing out errors, while evidently pleased with the work.

"You've the making of an architect in you," said he, after looking silently at the plan for a moment or two, "but, of course, you have a great deal to learn. How old do you say you are?"

"I was twenty my last birthday."

"You were twenty-one!" said Brand sharply. "I remember drinking your health the day you were born."

"Did you know my father so long ago?" asked Dick.

"I knew him before that, my boy. I knew him in all his troubles, a good many of which were his own fault, but I need not talk of them to his son; and he had a heart withal."

"He must have had some good points, or you would not have stuck to him as you did," said Dick sadly. "It seems rather hard that death should have taken my father, and some intolerable quality or other in myself, I suppose, disgusted my mother; at any rate, I am pretty well alone."

"Never mind, you are all the freer to work your way up. I don't think you have much to lament. Just fight for your own hand in the battle of life. I never could understand the art of getting on. My own movements, after reaching a certain point, have been retrograde. It is curious how some fellows—fellows that seem to know life well too, and can work fail for want of that indescribable something which enables them to grasp fortune when the jade shows symptoms of fickleness! There's a flaw somewhere in them—sometimes it's generosity, or a weak reluctance to press before another, or an instant's self-distrust—a want of the hard self-reliance that insists on having a try anyhow, hit or miss, and don't care a hang if people sneer about presumption. I wonder what will become of you, Dick? I am half afraid you are not hard enough to succeed."

Dick smiled. "I am not wildly ambitious," he said, "but somehow I do not fear the future. I think I can work and wait. I may never rise high, but I think I can win independence, and there is great pleasure in a simple life."

"May you always think so!" ejaculated Brand. "I believe you are made of stronger stuff than your father. He had plunged deep into difficulties and succumbed to a lot of temptations by the time he was twenty-one. Well, I shall do all I can to help you, but I don't think there is a great deal of time before me. I feel awfully weak to-day. Tell me, how does your mother get on with her step-children?"

"With George well enough, but with Marjory—no! she was always irreconcilable. There seems to be an antagonism between them. Marjory was awfully bitter against me, too, when I first went to live with them? she could not speak a civil word to me. I suppose it was natural for her to object to an intruder, but it made things hard to bear."

"She must be a cantankerous young lady."

Dick shook his head. "She is, or was, quick-tempered, but there is not a truer-hearted girl in England," he said warmly. "Then she speaks so honestly! Whatever she says is what she really believes at the time. Hard as she was to me, I was sorry when she went to school, though George and I were better friends when she went away."

"She has a nice head," said Brand musingly, "and a speaking face—as well as I remember."

"It was shameful," resumed Dick, "the length of time she was left at school and the way she was kept there, as far as I can make

out as a pupil teacher. I always felt angry with Mr. Acland for that, depriving her and George of everything.

"Ah!" said Brand. "Well, she came round to you?"

"Yes; she behaved like a trump to me when I left my step-father's house. I think she likes me nearly as well as George. If I could ever make a home for her I *should* be glad, for she will never stay in her father's house. I am sometimes half afraid of the future for her—she is hasty and impetuous, and might do something rash."

"Won't old Carteret keep her?"

"She does not think so."

"Bring me the tobacco-jar, my pipe is empty. Take my advice, Dick, don't go to meet her for a couple of Sundays. It has a queer look, a young lady like Miss Acland rambling through the country with a workman—for that is all you seem at present—and people are ready to talk ill-naturedly, especially country people."

Dick coloured quickly. "But if they know we are brother and sister?" he exclaimed.

"Ah! but they don't know; and indeed you are no relations whatever."

"No? Not even half-brother and sister?"

"No, stupid boy, of course not! Her father's younger children are her half-brother and sister."

Dick was silent and thoughtful for a minute. "Then you really think I ought not to take a walk with her every Sunday?"

"I certainly think you had better not."

"It was something to look forward to all the week," said Dick regretfully.

"Very likely."

"And she will be disappointed, too."

"No doubt."

"I must write her a line to say I shall not be able to meet her."

"Do so," returned Brand, "and as I have not been spending any money lately I shall hire a trap and we will drive over to D—, it is not more than seventeen miles, and see the cathedral, it is a poem in stone."

"Thank you," said Dick soberly. "I wish Marjory could come with us."

"I am sure I should have no objection," returned Brand, "but fate forbids such things to be."

There was silence while he filled his pipe.

"Stay and have some supper with me," resumed Brand; "I don't care to be alone, and I don't suppose you have anything better to do."

"I never have anything half so pleasant to do," said Dick warmly.

"Not even walking with your—sister?"

"It is a different kind of pleasure, though a great pleasure; but it is like getting into another world to talk with you."

"God help you, boy!" smiling, yet heaving a deep sigh, "you had better keep out of my world. Here is supper, and thank heaven I feel inclined for it."

The landlady, with an occasional word of inquiry, or a remark on the weather and the crops, set forth the table with cold chicken, home-made bread, and a tongue of her own curing. Brand produced a bottle of claret from the cupboard, and invited his young friend to fall to.

Presently the lamp was lit and Dick's host brightened up as his custom was at night. How well he talked! He had read and seen much; he had whimsical theories on many subjects, not rigid convictions, but light airy fancies, which could be floated hither and thither as the Japanese performers waft paper butterflies by the motion of their fans. Then art was a prolific topic, on which Dick was never wearied of hearing him enlarge, and through all there sounded an undertone of kindest interest in Dick himself, in all that he remembered, all he hoped or feared or longed to attempt, which drew the young man to him irresistibly. "You do not drink wine," he said at last; "would you like some beer, or have you adopted the 'Blue Ribbon?'"

"No, I have taken no pledge, but as water costs nothing, I stick to it, and find I want no more."

"I daresay you are right; yet there is a certain, I was going to say intellectual, loss in not being able to appreciate a glass of good wine, but that is rather too strong. I always liked it myself, though I never drank hard. Nor did your father, and he was driven sometimes to seek oblivion at any price. His greatest temptation was opium."

"At all events he was cut off from temptation tolerably early," said Dick with feeling. "I often fancy I should have been fond of him, if he had come back. My mother never encouraged me to lavish my affection on her. Now, when I hear your voice it brings a sort of hazy recollection with it—a dim remembrance of climbing on a man's knee and rubbing my cheek against a soft beard."

"Do you remember that?" murmured Brand in a low tone, setting down the glass he was lifting to his lips. "Ah, yes, I was contently with your father in those days."

Both were silent for a while, then Brand, rousing himself with an effort, said, "Those rooms will be ready for occupation the end of the week. I hope the fair widow will approve."

"She is Lord Beaulieu's sister?" asked Dick.

"Yes, young Maynard was a great catch, and the Honourable Miss Saville had no money. Her elder sister is married to the rector of a country parish. I believe Mrs. Maynard is a beauty."

"You seem to know a great deal about people as well as things," said Dick, looking at him admiringly.

"Ah, well, your father used to tell me a great deal about the upper ten in old days, and since I returned from America I have had occasion to make some inquiries about the Beaulieu family."

"But you are not American?"

"Oh, I scarcely know what I am; cosmopolite before everything. Look here, Dick, I have one or two plans in my head; for you, I mean. There is Jervis the architect. I want to get you into his office for a while, only I am afraid he will ask a premium, and I don't care for your going through a regular apprenticeship. He has a great name, and you could pick up a good deal from him; still if he lets you in for nothing, I do not see how you are to live without pay. I will speak to Lord Beaulieu."

"Pray do not ask him for any money help," cried Dick, red-dening.

Brand laughed. "Don't be afraid, I will keep up your dignity; but from time immemorial it has been the proud privilege of great nobles to assist struggling genius. We must not deprive our worthy employer of his rights, especially as he is a capital fellow. His artistic Bohemian life in early days has done him a world of good."

"He is wonderfully frank and nice to his employes."

"Yes, it is a comfort to work for a man who knows what work is. By the way, there was a scraggy Scotchman at the Castle for a few days last week; did you see him?"

"I believe so. He was admiring the library and the big drawing-room when I passed through."

"He was greatly taken with the decorations. It seems he has been restoring an old family seat he bought back—he made a heap of money in China, I hear—and he has asked me to undertake the decorations. I hesitated, for the place is close to Edinburgh, and I hate the climate. However, the work will be in doors, and I don't know exactly what may turn up for the winter. This man's house will not be ready for me till October. Then in the spring I am in hopes Lord Beaulieu will renovate that old chateau of his in Dauphiny; it would be a delightful job, and if it can be managed I'll take you with me, Dick."

The young man's eyes sparkled. "You will! Why that is something beyond my highest hopes."

Brand took his pipe from his lips, and said with some emotion, "I'd do a good deal for your father's son; besides, I am under obligations to yourself, but you can't understand this. Now I am horridly tired, and I want to get a thorough rest and be fresh for a hard day's work to-morrow, so good-night. You can stay on here if you like, there are books and light. With a nod and a kindly smile he left the room.

Dick, who rose as he said good-night, drew a chair to the open window and fell into thought. His luck had certainly turned.

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What a wonderful piece of good fortune it was to have fallen in with a man like Brand ; this at least was a legacy from his poor wandering, unthrifty, much-abused father. What a strong friendship must have existed between them ; such faithfulness could hardly exist between two worthless men. But Brand, whatever his past life, and Dick instinctively felt it had been most irregular, was not worthless. At any rate such unearned kindness as he had heaped upon him should secure his warmest gratitude, his unstinted service.

If he was thus willing to associate him (Dick) in his work, the long and toilsome way which lay before him would be wondrously smoothed and levelled—and what joy in the kind of work destined to fill his days ! The young man's heart glowed with hope and delightful anticipation, only he wished Brand had not warned him against those Sunday rambles with Marjory. It was surprising how much more he enjoyed talking with Marjory than he used. No doubt she had grown gentler, more womanly and wiser than she used to be—that might be expected ; but her bright observant remarks, her gleams of pathos, of kindly consideration, these were beyond what her early impetuous sauciness promised. How amusing she could be too ; a pleasanter companion no brother could have. Brand might say what he liked, they would always be like brother and sister. It was hard to give up seeing her save at rare intervals, still there was truth in what Brand said. The apparent difference between his position and that of Marjory was so great as to make their being alone together an impropriety, especially as he must not explain their relationship. Well, not relationship, the connection between them—and Dick's cheek burned as he thought of the coarse misconstruction his fellow-workmen would put upon their acquaintance, should any of them meet him sauntering along with Marge. Dick's reflections here became confused and disturbing, so he turned his thoughts to George, and speculated how soon his chum would write to him, as he said he would whenever anything was settled about his going to sea.

Finally Dick extinguished the lamp and went wandering in the moonlight along the path towards the Priory, in a pleasant dreamy state of mind, full of vague bright hopes, of soft kindly fancies, seeing a delicious vista of possible success—distant certainly, but not beyond his reach.

The arrival of the Honourable Mrs. Maynard with her baby, her nurse, her maid, and a German courier, created a little stir in Lord Beaulieu's provisional household ; but to the troop of workmen without it made no difference.

Lord Beaulieu was glad to direct his sister's attention to the improvements he was making.

Perhaps, in her present depressed condition, when few things possessed any interest whatever for her, the restoration of the family

seat was more calculated than anything else to divert her thoughts from their ordinary sorrowful mood.

She seemed to enjoy, in a languid fashion, walking slowly round the terrace and through the courtyard, leaning on her brother's arm and listening to his explanations. Nurse and the baby were generally of the party, as the poor young mother could scarcely bear the child out of her sight.

He was a fine, fair, chubby infant of nearly four months old—full to the lips with abounding life, ready to jump out of his nurse's arms at every fresh object presented to his wandering eyes—a perfect miracle of precocious intelligence to his admiring mother.

Though Mrs. Maynard shrank from society, it amused her faintly to talk with the architect, or discuss the harmony of colour with Brand, whom she noticed a good deal.

"That Mr. Brand is really quite a gentleman," she said to her brother, "and what taste he has! He was speaking to baby yesterday, and baby quite took to him. It is amazing to see such a mere infant showing distinct likings and dislikings. Yesterday I found him (I mean Mr. Brand) making a sketch in water colours of the western tower and a bit of landscape beyond—really exquisitely done! so I asked him if he could take likenesses, and added that I should be glad if he would paint baby. He was so frank and honest about it. He said it was too soon, that a month or two hence the darling would have more expression, and then he said he would like to paint him as the infant Hercules."

Lord Beaulieu smiled. "He is a clever fellow, but rather erratic. I met him some five or six years ago in South America, when he helped me in a slight difficulty, and for a week or two I saw a good deal of him; he seemed in a very unsettled state then, and what we used to term, in my own Bohemian days, 'down on his luck.' Then I met him last winter at Fleury St. Jean, the little town near my quarters in Dauphiny. He had been sketching there all the autumn, and was delayed by illness, bad cold, and low fever, so I looked after him a bit, and found him a pleasant well-informed fellow; though he was evidently much better off than when we met him in America, he was glad to find work, so I engaged him to do the decorations here, and I think I made a hit. Ah! Brand!" coming on him as they began to descend some steps leading to the shrubbery in the moat. "We have been talking of you. Mrs. Maynard tells me you have been making some sketches, very good sketches."

"Very slight things, Lord Beaulieu. As this is the men's dinner-hour I came down here to get some of the noontide effects on the side of the moat, and that mass of masonry that used to support the drawbridge. You see there is an oblique light upon it that brings out the ruggedness of the stones and their peculiar tints wonderfully."

"You are right. What a beautifier light is—set to work, or you will lose the effect."

Brand had already seated himself on a fragment of stone projecting from the bank, and settled his sketch-book on his knee.

Mrs. Maynard and her brother watched him for a few minutes, when Dick came down the path behind them, and raising his hat asked leave to pass, as he had a message for Mr. Brand. It was from the clerk of the works respecting some new staging which was to be put up in one of the rooms for the purpose of painting the ceilings. Brand gave a few directions, and giving an eager glance at the sketch in progress, Dick, with another bow and lifting of his hat, sped back again.

"Who is that young man?" asked Mrs. Maynard. "I have noticed him several times. He is very good-looking, and even aristocratic-looking. It is very strange, but his face always seems familiar to me. Where could I have seen him? Who is he?"

"He is a very superior young fellow," returned Lord Beaulieu.

"Brand, who seems to have adopted him, knew his people."

"Who is he, Mr. Brand? Not an ordinary workman, I am sure."

"No!" said Brand quickly, as he bent over his drawing. "His father was an artist, and an old comrade of mine; he died, or rather was drowned, early, and this boy had such a passion for architecture that he ran away from home to be a mere labourer among masons, so as to get the rudiments of the art he craves for."

"How very curious. Do you think he will succeed?"

"Yes, with a little judicious help."

"What is his name?" asked Mrs. Maynard.

"Cranston," returned Brand shortly.

"Cranston," she repeated. "How very odd. Cranston is one of the Maynard names."

"Oh! my old comrade was a South of England man, had no connection with the north; in fact, poor fellow, I doubt if he could claim any relations at all."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Maynard, and dropped the subject, fancying that Dick's father might have been illegitimate.

"Come," said Lord Beaulieu. "I want to get luncheon over soon, and take you for a drive to the Priory. We have not returned Mrs. Carteret's visit."

CHAPTER XVI.

A GREAT SURPRISE.

ELLIS prolonged his visit to town for a week after George's departure, and Marjory found that time hung very heavily on her hands.

Although she had never quite overcome her feeling of uneasiness when in his presence, the kind of distrust to which his cold insolence had originally given rise—he had amused and interested her—she was conscious that an under-current of mutual understanding had established itself between them, indeed, she was at times almost startled by the intuition he displayed as regarded her own unspoken wishes and the small difficulties into which her impetuosity sometimes led her. When she thought of it, she was half angry at the influence he was gaining over her. She did not like him, not really; yet when he came suddenly behind her as she sat reading or working and she felt his breath upon her cheek, when he spoke softly, she could not prevent herself from flushing, or her heart from beating with a curious emotion that was half dread.

During his absence, she forgot all this in a great measure; besides, her imagination was much occupied by Dick, his plans and hopes. She had quite made up her mind that he was going to be a great architect, a second Wren. How she wished she were a boy! boys had so many more chances than girls, as she was; though she felt she was not ignorant, she dared not hope for anything save the humblest kind of employment, as nursery governess, perhaps, which after all is only a bigger name for children's maid.

In this dull interim, however, Uncle Carteret did not let her idle. He hurried her to finish the catalogue, and besides gave her letters in his own crabbed writing to his solicitor to copy, letters from which, without giving them much attention, Marjory gathered that the old gentleman was taking advice as to the sale of his property and the settlement of a sum of money on his heir-presumptive. A good deal was mentioned about breaking the entail, and, indeed, the correspondence bristled with law terms which were Greek to Uncle Carteret's young secretary.

The accomplished old critic was remarkably irritable and hard to please, and Marjory longed for Ellis, who always appeared to have a repressive effect on his fractious kinsman. Indeed, she laughed at her own conceit and folly when she found herself looking earnestly in the glass the evening Ellis was to return in time for dinner, arranging flowers in her dress and otherwise taking special care in

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making her toilet. "I am a goose! yet I don't choose to look quite a dowdy when the 'ambassador' returns from the grand people he has been with," she said to herself apologetically. "I should take just as much trouble for George and Dick, and they would admire my pretty dress immensely; I am sure they are worth dozens of Mr. Ellis; but what a clever masterful man he is with all his smoothness!"

Ellis did not return alone. There arrived with him a friend of Mrs. Carteret—a much travelled unmarried lady of a certain age of good family and indifferent means. She had known Mr. and Mrs. Carteret for some years, and had written to offer them a visit on her way from the Isle of Wight to the north. Mrs. Carteret was charmed to receive her, for she was a complete encyclopedia of information respecting the inner life of the "upper ten" at home and abroad.

It need scarcely be said that Ellis did not travel with her further than the short distance between the railway station and the Priory.

He only made his appearance as dinner was announced, and had no time for more than the briefest greeting to Marjory. He spoke to her occasionally across the table, and but for him she would have partaken of that meal in total silence; their eyes met more than once, when Marjory smiled frankly, and Ellis felt that he was welcome.

In the drawing-room after dinner, Mrs. Carteret and her friend soon fell into an eager whispered conversation, above the indistinctness of which, exclamations of, "Incomprehensible, my dear!" "Extraordinary conduct in a woman of her rank and breeding!" "A perfect brute, I really can use no other word!" occasionally rose clear and audible.

Mr. Carteret and Ellis did not join them till late, and the latter at once walked over to where Marjory was sitting in a corner engaged on an elaborate piece of stitchery which Mrs. Carteret had given her. "And tell me how things have gone all these long days I have been away?" he asked, drawing a chair between her and the rest of the company. His deep-set eyes glowed as he spoke, and seemed to fasten upon hers as if he would dive into the recesses of her soul.

Marjory was most indignant with herself, for her heart throbbed uncomfortably, and she felt that her cheek flushed and grew pale, why, she could not tell.

"Things have been just as usual; Uncle Carteret has been rather cross, and I have been making some mistakes."

Ellis did not reply, his eyes wandered slowly from the fresh speaking face uplifted to answer him to the slight figure and busy little hands.

"One day we had a visit from Lord Beaulieu and his sister." Marjory went on, feeling his silence oppressive; "she is beautiful,

but so sad. I was quite ashamed of myself ; I could not help gazing at her. I should like to see her again."

"How is Dick ?" asked Ellis abruptly.

"Quite well, and getting on so well. I had a nice walk with him on Sunday, and I shall meet him next Sunday if it is fine."

"And George ?"

"I have only had one little letter since he left ;" there was a pause.

"I want to hear all about everything, but I must not stay now : Mr. Carteret is bent on whist. That gushing young person, Miss Danvers, is a past mistress of whist—see how she is smoothing the crust of Carteret's queer temper till he smiles—to-morrow she will charm both host and hostess, so you will be able to escape for a ramble with *me* and tell me your news."

"Very well." said Marjory, not knowing what else to say.

"I have something to tell you," added Ellis as he rose and went over to Mr. Carteret, who had beckoned him.

Marjory whispered a request to her aunt that she might go to bed, which was graciously granted, and she escaped for a quiet hour's reading and thought in her own room.

When Mr. and Mrs. Carteret started with their guest to drive as far as Beaulieu and show her something of the neighbourhood, Ellis was nowhere to be seen. Marjory, however, was too much taken up with a couple of letters she had received that morning to feel in any way nettled by his apparent neglect ; she was anxious to speak with him, however, as her heart was full and there was no one else to whom she could open it.

As soon as the carriage had driven away she took herself and her letters to her favourite seat among the scattered stones of the ruined priory, and read them carefully over again. While thus employed and as she half expected, Ellis joined her. She made room for him beside her and finished the perusal without speaking.

When she had folded up the letters and put them in their envelopes, Ellis said, "I am going to take a great liberty ; I am going to scold you." Marjory looked at him with slight surprise. "You have been spoiling your eyes with tears ; your eyes are meant for better usage, they are intended for smiles."

"They would be worthless eyes indeed if they could not shed tears," she returned warmly ; "but I am not going to cry any more now, and I do not think it quite nice or kind of you to notice my eyes."

"Perhaps it was not," gravely. "Forgive me, and tell me what has troubled you."

"I think I must, I have no one else to tell, and I am rather unhappy."

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"Thank you. I shall be most interested."

"I had a letter from George this morning. He is to sail in a new ship of Rennie & Duncan's, next Thursday. They are going to Madras. He seems quite pleased; he says they are to have a son of one of the owners on board, who is to take the voyage for his health, so they will not stay away very long, and oh! Mr. Ellis, he says he saw you in London, that you are a jolly good fellow and would tell me all about it."

"There is nothing in all this to call for tears?"

"Perhaps not; but it is a little hard to have had such a short time with him, and then not to see him again before he goes!"

"This is not all the trouble, is it?"

"No; I had a note from Dick, and he says he cannot meet me on Sunday next, because he is going somewhere; and he fears he will be engaged on the Sunday after, too. This is very unkind of him! No one knows what may happen in a fortnight. I may leave this, and never see him again! He cannot care."

"Boys of his age are very thoughtless," said Ellis gently, watching her as he spoke.

"Boys!" repeated Marjory as if speaking to herself. "He never was a boy, and he never was thoughtless."

"Then he prefers not to come; possibly he may have found some young lady who is not a sister to take his Sunday walks with."

Marjory started, and then laughed softly. "Of course it is possible, but somehow I never thought of Dick or George having a sweetheart."

"That does not detract from the possibility."

"Still he might care a little for *me*, when I am so fond of him! Of course I am fond of both my brothers—I have no one else to love."

"You consider it absolutely necessary to love some one?"

"Yes, of course. It would be too dreadful not to love *some* one! Fancy having no one to think of, no one to look forward to meeting, no one to trouble about, to have only oneself! Why, it would be too desolate! Even *you* must have some one."

"Even you," repeated Ellis with a slow smile. "Am I the most heartless person of your acquaintance?"

"I did not mean that," said Marjory gravely. "I do not know you well enough to judge, but you seem to me able to stand alone."

"Perhaps I am! Perhaps I am selfish, yet for all you know I may be capable of a vast amount of love; I sometimes suspect I am."

"I hope so, for your own sake," murmured Marjory, putting her letters back in her pocket. "Tell me, how did you happen to see George?"

"I asked him to dine with me, and to see 'Patience' afterwards."

"That was very kind of you," cried Marjory, turning her eyes

full of tender gratitude to his ; " he has so little pleasure, poor boy ! I wish I had been with you."

"So do I," earnestly. "Well, I think George enjoyed himself, and he made himself very agreeable. Do you know, I was half inclined to call on Mrs. Acland."

"I wish you had ; I should like to know what you would think of her."

There was a pause ; Marjory gazed upon the grass at her feet, and Ellis gazed very intently at Marjory. She had seldom looked more attractive ; a quiet wistful expression stilled her face, her ripe red lips were slightly apart, her dark brown eyelashes swept her cheek, and her gloveless hands were clasped upon her knee. What admirable colouring, Ellis thought, as he scanned her hair, her softly rounded chin, the pretty oval of her delicate face.

"I had something to say to you," he half whispered at last. Marjory started, her thoughts were evidently far away.

"Yes, what is it ?"

"Nothing you will like, I fear. Your uncle has made up his mind to sell Langford, and I have found a purchaser. They—Mr. and Mrs. Carteret—will probably leave the end of this month."

"Ah ! and I must go home ! I am very sorry." She stopped abruptly, her mouth quivered, but she had self-control enough to keep back her tears.

"I suppose you must."

"I shall feel it much worse than it used to be."

"I fear so," said Ellis sympathetically.

"But I shall not stay at home," exclaimed Marjory with sudden fire.

"Where can you go ?" asked Ellis.

"Oh ! I cannot tell ; I might teach little children, or read and write for some old lady. You see I am but half educated, and——"

"You are well read and more than usually intelligent," interrupted Ellis with an air of conviction.

"Do you really think so ?" asked Marjory doubtfully. "Even so, talking about things and teaching them are very different." Ellis did not reply, and after a pause she resumed, "I wonder how I should set about finding an engagement ?"

"Advertising is the usual mode of making one's wants known," said Ellis absently.

"I should really prefer being a lady'smaid or a housemaid to remaining at home," murmured Marjory as though to herself.

Ellis suddenly threw away his cigarette, and drawing a little nearer to her kept his eyes on hers as he said very quietly, "Let me offer an alternative—suppose you marry me ?"

"Marry you !" repeated Marjory, quite incredulous and unmoved. "I thought you were going to give me some serious advice, that you were rather sorry for me, and you are only laughing at my troubles !"

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"Laughing!" echoed Ellis, "I never was more intensely in earnest in my life. Nor can I understand your blindness. You must—you ought to have seen that more than a month ago I gave up resisting my love for you, and determined to win happiness if I could, cost what it might!"

"But I cannot believe it," cried Marjory, too much astonished to be confused. "How did you ever come to think of marrying me?"

"Because—well, because I could not help it," returned Ellis, smiling and amused at the curious dialogue, though his heart beat fast and it tasked his habitual self-control severely to keep back the ardent words which sprang to his lips. But he was playing a deep game, and he resolved not to lose it from any heedless impetuosity.

"But you ought to marry some great lady. Aunt Carteret says you will be an ambassador one day, and I am not fit to be an ambassador!"

"I love you, Marjory!" said Ellis in a low voice. His tone struck to her heart. If he loved her, that explained every thing.

"It is most extraordinary," murmured Marjory, her colour changing and an expression of tender solemnity stealing over her face as the fact that she was loved and sought in marriage penetrated her understanding.

"This humility is not usual in you!" said Ellis, who had expected a saucy refusal at first, but could not therefore afford to lose time.

"It is not humility; I know that I am not unworthy of being loved, but I do not want anybody greater than myself, and then Mr. Carteret would never forgive you! You know he wants you to marry Miss Waring."

"He also wishes me to marry Miss Maynard. Unfortunately I cannot oblige him."

"I have an idea that it would be bad for you to quarrel with Uncle Carteret."

"It would be rather ruinous for me just at present, even were he to know I asked you to marry me," said Ellis.

"Then do not think of me; besides, you see it would not be worth your while to vex him, for you know I do not—that is, I am not in love with you."

"I know it but too well, my sweet Marjory! That is the reason I dared to speak so abruptly—so prematurely. You never seemed to see—I never could make you understand that I was trying to win you. I had so few opportunities, and you distrusted me so strangely! Now, do hear me. I am most infernally hampered, but I want you to give me a chance—a chance of gaining your heart."

"I know it is unkind to say so, but I don't think I could ever love

you, though you are very nice," said Marjory, hesitating, and dreadfully distressed at having to give pain.

Ellis smiled, while his dark eyes glowed. "You must and shall, Marjory! You have cast some spell upon me. If you love no one else, you *must* learn to love me."

"It would be wiser not to ask me to try! I do not want to love any one in *that* way."

"What! do you intend to reject everything but *brotherly* love?"

"Yes, I find trouble and pain enough in my love for George and Dick. Suppose I were to love *you*," turning to look at him, then, finding his eyes embarrassing, averting her own, "and not be able to see you or perhaps write to you, it would make me more unhappy."

"But if you consented to be my wife," exclaimed Ellis with more fire than he had hitherto shown, "do you think I could endure existence apart from you? No, I should want you beside me every hour—every instant of my life!"

These words and the tone in which they were spoken made a profound impression on Marjory. Had Ellis only shown the sort of light but flattering preference for her he had shown at Mrs. Waring's party, she might have returned it with some innocent girlish coquetry, but the offer of a man's heart and life was a terribly serious affair, and transformed her for the moment into a thoughtful considerate woman.

"But you said it would be ruin to you if Uncle Carteret even knew you had asked me to marry you, how then—?"

"It would certainly be ruin," interrupted Ellis. "But I do not intend him to know anything about it for a year or two."

Marjory looked straight at him with a puzzled expression which changed to grave displeasure as her colour rose.

"You mean to marry secretly?" she asked.

"I do. You must hear me, Marjory," said Ellis, catching her hand, which he held firmly in both his own, "I want you to understand how I am situated and what I propose; I want to inform you fully. I am dependent on old Carteret, and just at present I have almost, not altogether, succeeded in a most difficult and delicate negotiation respecting the sale of this property, to which I am heir, and the settlement of the proceeds on myself. I am not penniless, but to push my fortunes I need a larger command of money than I have; a wealthy marriage would give me all I want, but I can only repeat, I love *you*; the idea of any other woman is intolerable to me" (if he added "at present," it was mentally). "I cannot let you drift away out of my reach, I cannot leave you to be tyrannized over by a cruel woman, your bright youth, the period of love and pleasure, crushed and blotted out with premature misery! With me you would be tranquil, beloved, and sure of sympathy. Can your imagination not present a picture of what life might be with a

lover for your companion, even though we were obliged to live in obscurity for a year or two, until I had gained a position which would render me independent, and I could proudly proclaim our union to the world?"

Marjory shook her head and tried to draw away her hand. "Obscurity would matter very little, but hiding is always shameful," she said. "Even if I loved you, I could not think of such a marriage."

"If you loved me, Marjory, you would do that and more for the man you loved! You have enormous capacity for love, or I have lost my power of reading character."

"I am sure it is impossible to say what I am capable of. Pray let me go, Mr. Ellis. Now that you know I do not care for you enough to marry you, I am sure you will not wish it any longer, and in a little while you will be glad. You must forgive me if I have pained you; I never dreamt you cared for me—I am not at all the sort of a girl you ought to marry."

"I am the best judge of that," slowly releasing her hand. "Do not imagine I accept this refusal; I felt sure you would reject me, but, Marjory, I can wait! I am no headstrong impressionable boy, who can be checked by a first denial; I am master of myself, and I am determined you shall be my wife! I am determined to rescue you from the barren existence, the poverty-stricken monotony to which you seem doomed, and show you what life and love are! There, you sweet little witch, I will not torment you more just now. You will think of me, I know, because your kind heart grieves for the pain you have given; let your thoughts picture the difference of a home with the man who loves you and a home under your step-mother's rule."

He caught her hand again and kissed it twice before she could break away and run to the house.

He looked after her swiftly retreating figure and very deliberately lit another cigarette. "Not so bad on the whole," he said to himself. "There is more depth in her than I thought, and even more charm. Now, her heart and imagination will be my allies. Did I ever think I should risk so much for any woman? The affair bristles with difficulties, but if she yields, I can overcome them. The conviction that it would ruin me if Carteret knew of my avowal will keep her silent; I am safe so far, I think she is loyal and she half fears me."

Marjory, her heart beating fast, took refuge in the safe solitude of her own room. It was some minutes before she could marshal the confusion of her quick crowding thoughts into anything like order.

Profound astonishment and uneasy dread were her predominant feelings. The astonishment, however, was tinged with a faint pleasant sense of gratified vanity. How did it happen that he had come to love her when she was so indifferent to him? It was quite

unnatural ! Why, if everything was fair and smooth and Uncle Carteret himself ready to pronounce the nuptial benediction, she would not like to marry Mr. Ellis, she could never fancy feeling at home with or feeling quite sure he meant what he said. How awfully cross Uncle Carteret would be if he knew ! She must be very careful to seem quiet and composed at dinner, lest he should suspect anything. "For Mr. Ellis' sake I must be very prudent. He deserves that at least from me," she murmured to herself ; then all alone as she was, she blushed at the idea of meeting Ellis face to face knowing that he loved her, and recalled not without a feeling of helplessness the absolute certainty of his tone when he spoke of his determination to marry her in spite of herself. Could he really be kind and good ? His wish to marry her was certainly disinterested, and no doubt life with him would be easier and pleasanter than at home. Still something in her heart forbid the banns, apart from the idea of a secret marriage, which was utterly repulsive and indeed impossible. How could Mr. Ellis think of such a thing or suppose she would consent to a step so closely bordering on disgrace ? Would any one else ever love her and ask her to be his wife ? If some kind good man she could even like tolerably offered her a home, she would accept it, and do her very best to make him happy and comfortable. "Men like comfort so much. If Mrs. Acland made my father uncomfortable she would not have half so much power over him. Oh ! if he only had not married again, I might be his housekeeper and do everything for him. I could love him well if he would let me ! I will write to him now this moment ; perhaps he will answer me this time."

When the letter was finished it was time to dress for dinner ; then came the awful ordeal of going into the drawing-room and meeting her lover's eyes.

Ellis was extremely prudent however. He kept his eyes in order and spoke to her at dinner in the most friendly unembarrassed way imaginable. Afterwards he played whist with much amiability, but before separating for the night managed to whisper, "You will be glad to hear that I am going over to Beaulieu to-morrow to dine and sleep."

"Then pray look well at Mrs. Maynard, and see how beautiful and charming she is."

"I know her, and I am proof."

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CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. ACTLAND'S VIEWS.

"MARJORY," said Mr. Carteret, "show me the catalogue; is it finished?"

"Not quite; I have only one slip to copy, a few Z's."

"What an extraordinary confused mode of expression! you mean, I suppose, you have only a few works to enter the names of which begin with Z?"

"Yes, uncle; I tried to say it shortly."

"Hum! Brevity is the soul of wit! But I do not think you have much wit, Marjory."

"Oh! I do not suppose I have; still, I hope you have not found me too stupid?" looking up with an appealing glance, for she felt depressed and helpless. She had not recovered the shock which Ellis had given her. His avowal had banished her original, perhaps somewhat childish self for ever, and startled her into sudden thoughtful tender womanhood, amazed and half frightened to find she was the object of so serious a passion.

"Well you were rather trying at first, but I have succeeded in teaching you a little, and it will have been a useful experience for you working under my directions; indeed I felt it was right to give you a chance, and I hope you will be the better for it when you go home."

"When I go home, uncle?"

"Yes; I do not think I shall remain here beyond the end of the month; we must go to London to prepare for a long residence abroad, and then your occupation will be o'er, Marjory."

"I am sorry—oh, so very sorry! Could I be of no more use to you when you leave the Priory? Shall you not have letters to write and things to copy? and Aunt Carteret, who is so kind, she likes me to read to her."

"Ah well, you see, when I have settled on permanent winter quarters, I am about to undertake a work of some importance treating of the Renaissance period and the fundamental principles of classic art. To assist me in this, I need the services of a man and a scholar; I don't suppose you think yourself equal to such an undertaking, in spite of your high estimate of yourself."

"Indeed I do not," cried Marjory, much wounded and deeply regretting that she had stooped to ask a favour. "I well know that I am quite unequal for such a task, and I shall never say another word about it."

"I am glad you are so sensible," returned Mr. Carteret drily. "Now give me the catalogue. I shall mark the volumes I wish to keep; when I have done so, you must make a list of them and they can be packed ready for removal. The rest, with the furniture and effects, are to be sold by auction in September or October."

"And all your curiosities, uncle?"

"Oh! ah, I think of presenting them to the museum at D—, the county town, you know, to be called the 'Carteret Collection,' and so perpetuate my reputation for antiquarian acumen. Let me have that list also, Marjory; I have a great deal to do, and not much time to do it in. Have you heard from home lately?"

"Not very lately."

"I really must take this opportunity of expressing my serious disapprobation of your father's choice of a profession—no, not a profession, a calling for his only son, a gentleman, too, on one side of the house at least."

"On both sides," said Marjory gently but distinctly.

"Yes, yes, of course. I believe he is positively a common sailor!"

"He is what is called an apprentice."

"Just so! Now no gentleman is ever apprenticed to anything, and considering that your brother is entitled to his share of your mother's fortune, I insist that it is not correct either in conduct or principle to take advantage of his right to the life interest for the benefit of his second family. It is most reprehensible; while he is ready to palm his daughter off on any relative who will relieve him of her!"

"You do my father injustice," cried Marjory, flushing crimson, while her heart beat almost audibly. "He hesitated to let me come; it was Mrs. Acland who persuaded him, it was Mrs. Acland who wished to get rid of me!"

"Why does he yield to an underbred woman of that kind, when he had the advantage of having a well-born gentlewoman for his first wife? Of course, Marjory, you understand I am not finding fault with *you*. It is quite natural you should wish to come to us; I even credit you, whether justly or not, it is impossible to say, but I *do* credit you with some wish for self-improvement. Now, when you return home, Marjory, I think it is your duty to remonstrate with your father; you are indeed at liberty to tell him the substance of my remarks."

"It would be much more to the purpose if you told him yourself face to face," cried Marjory, boiling over. "How could any girl tell her father such things? He would be kind enough to us, and fond enough of us, if Mrs. Acland did not put him against us. It is her fault about George, and about me too! If I had not been miserable at home, do you think I should have 'palmed myself off' on you? for it was my own doing altogether. I did hope I could have been of use and that you might have liked me; as it is, I have a

"Come to go to, though it is not exactly paradise, so I can leave you to-morrow ; I have money enough for my journey !"

"Why, Marjory, I am astonished at such a display of temper ; I had no idea you were such a spit-fire ! You need not be in such a hurry to run away, it would be extremely ungrateful to do so, after I have had the trouble of training you and you have become of *some* use. In short, I wish you to remain until we leave the Priory ; and if you are offended at any expressions I may have used in my natural indignation at the way you are treated, I am sorry. As to speaking to your father, I always have made it a rule through life never to interfere with what does not concern myself especially, and an excellent rule I have found it."

"I daresay," murmured Marjory.

"Now, as you understand that I wish you to remain, I trust," loftily, "I shall hear no more nonsense about going away."

"Then please, Uncle Carteret, remember I stay because you ask me."

"Oh ! of course, of course ; I really can waste no more time on these puerilities. Give me the catalogue of my antiques ; there are a few I cannot part with : I will just mark them off."

Marjory felt the better for this brush with her uncle, it gave her confidence in herself and made him a little more civil ; for Mr. Carteret belonged to that not inconsiderable class whose maxim is, "Kick him, he's down," and who are themselves immensely improved by a thrashing.

It was a great relief to her that Ellis prolonged his visit to Beau-lieu till the afternoon of the third day. It was a trial to her to meet his eyes, to have to speak to him after his amazing avowal. In his absence the reality of the whole thing faded ; she began to think it was a sort of dream, a delusion on his part, that a few days spent among people of the world to which he was accustomed would dispel. Still she felt curious to see him again. She fancied she should be able to perceive from his first words, from the tone of his voice, whether he had come to his right mind or not. Sometimes she regretted that she could not like Ellis better. Suppose he were a man she could be happy and at home with, and suppose he were free to marry her openly, what a splendid means of escape from her trying position with her stepmother ? "But no," was her usual conclusion to such trains of thought ; "I know I am headstrong and prejudiced, I dare not marry a man I do not love ? Now I am half afraid of Mr. Ellis, he always disturbs me, and that sort of thing would be uncomfortable *every* day."

The presence of Miss Danvers set Marjory free from the necessity of accompanying Mrs. Carteret in her daily drives, and left her a good deal to herself. The loneliness pressed somewhat heavily on her spirit ; the outlook was not cheering, and the chance of being able to tell her troubles to Dick seemed very remote. Next Sunday

he was positively engaged, and the Sunday after he was not disposed to meet her, but he had some good reason; she could not doubt Dick.

Having the house to herself, she ventured to open an old piano, which had been tuned previous to Mrs. Carteret's single dinner-party, and to play the accompaniment to one or two of the songs she had learned during the previous winter. From this occupation she was startled by Ellis, who came behind her and said:

"This is a revelation. I had no idea you could sing."

Marjory started up in dire confusion. "How you frightened me!" she exclaimed, and stood facing him with alarmed eyes, her hand pressed to her heart.

"I see I have, and I beg your pardon. I kept quiet because I wanted to hear your voice. It is sweet and sympathetic. Pray sing another ballad—I should like to hear a little more."

"It would be quite impossible," said Marjory, shutting the piano. "With the best will in the world I could not."

A look of displeasure clouded his face for a second. "I am very unfortunate in exciting your distrust," he said. "I assure you, judicious training would do wonders with your voice. It is not strong, but it has some excellent qualities. I am a great lover of music."

"All the more reason why I should not try your patience."

"I did not ask you to sing supposing your singing would charm me, but because it would give me infinite pleasure to find in you possibilities of perfection in future. Your future, you see, occupies me a good deal."

"You are very good to me," said Marjory softly, with graceful hesitation, leaning against the piano, her fingers playing nervously on the dark wood; "better than I deserve."

"If you think so," returned Ellis, "why do you fear me?"

"I do not fear you," exclaimed Marjory, suddenly conquering her embarrassment. "I do not fear any one, at least I hope not; why should I?"

"That is a 'why' very difficult to answer. If reason always ruled, we should have fewer inexplicable sensations, rarer instinctive insight, profound calm and extreme dulness! You are too sensitive to be always reasonable. Come, Marjory, you have not welcomed me back! How have things gone on since I left?"

"Just as usual; Uncle Carteret has been rather disagreeable;" she gave him her hand as she spoke. He held it with a gentle and increasing pressure, looking gravely at her.

"May I tell you why you fear me?" he asked, and went on without waiting for a reply; "it is because you know I love you—you know it better than I could describe it, and as yet you do not love me—as yet, sweet Marjory! The love may come then——" he stopped abruptly and drew her to him. She tried to extricate her

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hand ; Ellis immediately released her. "Forgive me," he went on in an altered voice, "I did not intend to bore you ; I am not always reasonable either, you see. I suppose we may have tea though the mistress of the house is absent. It is a dull grey afternoon and will rain presently." He went across to the bell and rang. "You will be so kind as to 'pour out,' and I will tell you all about my stay at Beaulieu. Tea in the library," this to the servant who answered the bell, "and light the fire, it is damp."

Marjory felt it would be folly, affectation, to make any difficulty, and both were soon seated at the tea-table snugly ensconced beside the fire. Here Ellis completely laid aside the lover's tone, and talked charmingly on many subjects till Marjory grew interested and at ease. First he scored most successfully, observing as he handed his companion some buttered toast, "I saw your brother Dick yesterday."

"Indeed!" she cried, roused at once to eager attention ; "did you speak to him?"

"No ; you must remember he does not know who I am, but I heard of him. That artist *protege* of Beaulieu, Brand, seems greatly interested in you—let us say brother, and thinks highly of his abilities. There is some talk of getting the architect, Jarvis, a well-know man, to take him up."

"Indeed ! I suppose that would be a great help to Dick?"

"Very great indeed. That Brand is a curious fellow. He has a history or I am much mistaken ; at any rate he knows what he is about as regards matters of art ; he will make the interior of Beaulieu a gem as to decoration."

"I suppose Dick will write to me about this chance?"

"Very probably. I am not sure he knows anything of Brand's move yet."

"Oh!" cried Marjory, clasping her hands, "how proud, how delighted I should be if Dick turned out a great architect ; they all thought him so dull and unenterprising."

"Except you, I suppose?"

"Indeed," returned Marjory with remorse, "I was as bad as any one else ; I disliked and despised him for a long time, till I came back from school and saw how badly his mother treated him."

"Ha ! a very sound reason for changing your estimate of his intellectual faculties," said Ellis.

Marjory laughed fankly, "That sounds very silly, but, you see, when I began to like him, I began to think him clever."

Ellis looked at her with an expression of amusement. "I fancy the young man has ability in some directions. If he is wise, however, he ought to turn contractor. Architects many earn fame, contractors pile up fortunes ;" then he turned the conversation to building in general, and described some of the various styles he had seen in his travels, passing from these to other topics, and drawing

Marjory into discussions which made her almost forget he was her lover, so successfully did he divert her thoughts, and time flew pleasantly.

Uncle and Aunt Carteret with their guest returned and were well pleased to find tea ready.

This spell of undisputed sway, when Mrs. Acland was free from the presence of her step-children and her firstborn, was a halcyon time. Every member of the little household felt the benign influence.

Never had Mr. Acland's little dinners been more perfect or the weekly bills more delightfully small. His accomplished wife, as she sat at needlework or walked with her children in the Park, a model of well-dressed, careful refined motherhood, often reflected with sincere self-admiration on her own excellence. Any other woman, she thought, having made so false a start, and having been deceived into so beggarly a first marriage, would have gone down and down to the streets and the gin palace, whereas her own resolution kept her true to herself, and she had managed to reach land at last. Was it *terra firma*? Well, yes, at present, and the longer she rode at anchor the more firm would grow her hold on the heart, the spirit, the whole being of her husband. He could not live without her, she must make herself more and more essential to him; she rather enjoyed doing so. After all, set her free from her own son, who was only a legacy of trouble from a man she despised, and her husband's children, who were useless burdens (indeed Marjory was worse, she was an ever-present enemy, who, in case of difficulties arising, might be dangerous)—set her free from these, and she would be a *bona fide* good woman, quite suited to associate with the salt of the earth, indeed, a good deal of beyond them in intelligence, ready to fulfil her duties, to make the lives of those who depended on her smooth and well-ordered, provided they bent to her authority, and ready also to sacrifice her own ease in order to carry out the system she considered best for others—and for herself.

The stars in their courses certainly fought on her side as heavenly bodies ought. It was an immense gain the visit of Marjory to her maternal great-uncle. Perhaps the old man might take a fancy to her and keep her altogether. This, however, was a possibility not unmixedly agreeable. Mrs. Acland's dislike of her step-daughter could hardly be satisfied with mere removal under advantageous circumstances; she would be better pleased to see her incur her father's serious displeasure, to know she was placed in some trying and humiliating situation, from which she could not escape without her stepmother's aid. Young and inexperienced as she was, there was about Marjory an instinctive doubt, and uncon-

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scious distrust of Mrs. Acland's fair-seeming that roused that lady's deadly animosity.

Early in August Mr. Acland, according to the usual habits of professional gentility, took his family to the sea-side, and having seen them installed, returned to bivouac in his own house, and dodge the perils of house-cleaning during his exits and entrances, refreshing himself with a weekly visit to his wife from Friday to Monday.

The presence of one or two neighbourly families of severe respectability and considerable social importance made this a pleasant and profitable holiday to Mrs. Acland, who was extremely anxious to form a "circle" of her own which would be a species of buttress and an advantage to her children.

Mr. Acland greatly enjoyed his visits to Eastbourne. It was pleasant to turn his back on business, on querulous clients and hot dusty courts, for two whole days and nights; pleasanter still to find his handsome, becomingly dressed wife, with their pretty well-cared-for children, awaiting him at the station. Then the walk to their lodging along the parade, with the fresh salt scent of the sea, the sense of being welcomed and made much of, the placid satisfaction of seeing his wife smilingly saluted by Mesdames Brown, Jones and Robinson, the better-halves of eminent legal or mercantile men, all assisted to soothe and gratify him.

Then came a neat and appetising dinner, a stroll on the beach with the children, their disappearance with nurse when bedtime approached, and finally a quiet confidential hour with his admired spouse.

"By the way," said Mr. Acland, breaking the silence which had succeeded an interchange of gossip touching what had happened since he had been last there, "I had a letter from Marjory—I brought it with me. She says," drawing out his note-book and turning over its contents,—“she says the Carterets are going to sell the Priory and are going abroad. She supposes, therefore she must return to us.”

"Let me see it," asked Mrs. Acland, holding out her hand. "Ah! addressed to the office, I see. No doubt she counts on your keeping the contents to yourself."

"I do not think so, nor is there anything in it which needs concealment."

"Very likely; but you must know how systematically she distrusts and opposes me. I regret to say it, but I cannot help seeing how painfully jealous she is of your affection for me, how gladly she would sow dissension between us. I would not for worlds speak or act unjustly to *your* daughter, but the instinct of self-preservation forces me to warn you, do not let her come between us, my dear husband."

"There is small danger of that," returned Mr. Acland, smiling

with a proud consciousness of power and superiority on his wife. "No one can interfere with you, my love, in my estimation; but I think you credit Marjory with more depth than she possesses. She is headstrong, troublesome, foolish, but I should say incapable of scheming."

"So I used to think," said Mrs. Acland slowly, and proceeded to read Marjory's letter.

"Very affectionate indeed," was her observation when she finished it—"the most affectionate letter you have ever had from her, I think. I am sure I am the last person to find fault with any amount of affection bestowed on you, my dear, but I cannot help feeling that it is strange, certainly inconsistent, that so warm a regard for you does not make her more amiable to your wife."

"Poor Marjory has rather an unfortunate temper, but I think at heart she is——"

"Not grateful! I fear she cannot be considered grateful; you see here she says, 'The country is very pretty,' *et cetera*, and goes on about it; then she writes, 'I should have enjoyed myself very much only Uncle Carteret is very cross and exacting, I never know whether I please him or not, still I should like well enough to go abroad with them, but I fear there is no chance of this. How happy I could be with you, dear father, if I thought you loved me and would let me do things for you. Believe me, I only wish to please you, and I hope when I come back, which will be, I fancy, soon, you will sometimes talk to me and let me walk with you.'"

"Now, dear," continued Mrs. Acland, folding up the letter, "do you not see the drift of all this?"

"Well, I—I suppose she sees she has been troublesome and wishes to make amends."

Mrs. Acland looked down and smiled. "It is a most painful and ungrateful task, my dear husband, to find fault with your daughter, to unmask the slight crookedness of her nature, which renders her so hard to manage, but I feel I should be false to you if I hid my real impressions, as I read this letter I see its bearing so plainly that I am amazed you do not perceive it too. First, ingratitude to Mr. Carteret, who has loaded her with benefits; then bitter disappointment because she has evidently been unable to control her rebellious unmanageable nature, and so failed to ingratiate herself with the old couple; and finally an effort to make all straight with *you*, as she is obliged to return to your house. Few girls of eighteen would show such a profound regard for self-interest as she does."

"Ha! you think so? You certainly are a close observer of human nature; still I do not suppose——"

"You are farseeing yourself," interrupted his wife, "and it is to me curious that you do not remark that, anxious as she evidently is to put herself right with you, she never mentions *me*, and she sends the letter to your office, hoping it might escape my eye."

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"She knew no such thing. Can you wonder, Robert, that I dread her return? She will estrange you from me, I know she will;" and with a heavy sigh Mrs. Acland leant her fair head against her husband's shoulder for a moment; the dusk of evening had gathered over them and there were no passers-by.

"Of that you need not have the slightest fear," cried Mr. Acland with unusual energy; "I will not suffer any child of mine to make your life uncomfortable. If Marjory cannot accommodate herself to the constitution of my household, why—why she had better leave it."

There was a pause. Mrs. Acland had found her opportunity for inserting the thin end of the wedge.

"It would pain me infinitely to see your daughter obliged to leave your house," she said slowly, "but I greatly fear she will never be happy herself nor allow us to be happy while she is in it. You must see that she is an irreconcilable. George was always friendly; indeed, I am almost ashamed to say I prefer him to my own unfortunate boy. Had Marjory been responsive, all would have been well, but she is my implacable enemy; I am sure she would be glad to leave our house."

Mr. Acland listened without committing himself to any opinion.

He was not sufficiently modern to have taken in the nineteenth century notion of girls going forth alone to do battle in life's warfare. He heartily wished that his wife and his daughter would live peaceably together. If they would not, he knew well *which* must suffer defeat and exile; but for the present he would postpone the evil day of decision, and he closed the discussion by remarking that they must wait and see how Marjory went on. If indeed she expressed a wish to leave home, why, he would think about it.

"Meantime, my dear, will you answer her letter for me?"

"No, no," returned Mrs. Acland, rising from the bench where they had been sitting; "Marjory would certainly imagine that I had prevented your replying. You must do so yourself to-morrow morning before we drive up to Beachy Head. You ought to write a letter which will show her that you are alive to her little peculiarities, and that if she expects a father's affection she must show a daughter's obedience. Come, dear, it is growing chilly."

The answer which Marjory received to the outpouring in which her perturbed spirit had found vent on the memorable day when Ellis had asked her to be his wife, may be imagined.

It had been chiefly dictated by Mrs. Acland, and each word was well calculated to sting and wound.

She was reminded of her many shortcomings, rebuked for not having secured the regard of her excellent relatives, who might

have become valuable friends, affording some relief to a father already overburdened by the claims of a large family; reproached for her neglect of her admirable stepmother, whose unceasing efforts to befriend and conciliate her deserved a better return; also for the small trickery of addressing her letter to the office; and finally assured that her best way to win the love her father was only waiting to bestow, was to conduct herself amiably and dutifully to the excellent woman who was the comfort of his life.

The passion of grief, anger and despair which this epistle roused in the fiery loving heart of the recipient may be imagined.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DICK MAKES A MORNING CALL.

MARJORY, however, was not without some compensation to balance the pain her father's letter occasioned her.

Next day brought a note from Dick, in which he begged her to meet him on the following Sunday. He had given up all idea of the engagement he mentioned, as he had news to tell her which she would like to hear, and also he expected to leave Langford.

Marjory lost no time in sending a hasty reply, promising to keep the tryst, and for the rest of the week was in a state of unrest, hoping that nothing would occur to prevent her meeting her friend and brother, and looking forward to the relief of reading her father's letter to him and of opening her heart on this and other topics.

It had been hard for her to keep silence even with Mrs. Carteret, who was by no means inclined to receive confidences of a disturbing nature; and Ellis would certainly have heard all about it, had not his declaration sealed her lips. To complain of home troubles would only be to furnish him with arguments for her taking refuge from them with him, and she was vaguely conscious that his eyes, his touch, the sound of his voice soft and low at her ear when he came suddenly behind her to whisper some remark, produced a strange and almost unpleasant effect, her heart beat fast, and a curious fascination seemed to paralyze her will, she could hardly help staying to listen while he chose to speak.

On his part, Ellis carefully abstained from overt love-making; any third person might have listened to his conversation and believed he was only a grave, kind friend. But for all that, Marjory felt that he watched her, and constantly cared for her, staying off

little unpleasantnesses and smoothing her way with amazing thoughtfulness and ingenuity.

Marjory grew more at ease ; she would like him so much if he always kept up this tone ; perhaps he might change his mind about wanting to marry her. It was such an extraordinary fancy for a man like him—a man so much older than herself too.

There was, however, no reason why she should not speak of Dick to him, and so she ventured to broach the subject as they sat virtually *tete-a-tete* in the drawing-room after dinner, while Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, the rector and Miss Danvers were enjoying a quiet rubber. Marjory had been thinking deeply over her needlework, picturing all that Dick might possibly have to tell her ; Ellis was reading 'The Fortnightly,' and looking up suddenly caught her eyes. "Well?" he said, drawing his chair a little nearer.

"Yes," she said smiling, "I wanted to speak to you, I must speak ; I have had a note from Dick ; he wants to see me on Sunday, and he is going away ; I suppose with the architect you told me about. Oh ! I do hope nothing will happen to prevent me."

"No, we must manage too well for that," returned Ellis, laying down his magazine.

"Miss Danvers is going on Saturday," said Marjory dolefully.

"No matter ; if there is any difficulty you had better tell Mrs. Carteret of your appointment."

"So I intend. I have no idea of making a secret about meeting dear old Dick ; only he does not care to come here. Suppose the weather is bad?"

"Then he must write."

"Then he is going away soon and I may not see him for years. Of course brothers must go away, one does not expect to see much of them after they grow up, but I should like to bid him good-bye."

"Certainly ; we must hope the best, and if the weather changes, why, I will see what is to be done." There was a pause, then Ellis resumed, "I found the first volume of Buckle's 'History of Civilization' on the library table just before dinner ; who was reading it—Mr. Carteret?"

"No, I was ; and when I heard the bell I jumped up in a hurry and quite forgot to put it in its place ; I had better go and do so at once. If Uncle Carteret finds it, he will be vexed."

"No, do not trouble yourself ; I put it in its place, and I put a mark where the book was open. Tell me, does it interest you?"

"Yes, greatly. Why ? do you think I cannot understand it?"

"No ! If you care to read it, you understand it, I presume ; but it is rather a tough book for so young a reader."

"I like tough books sometimes," said Marjory looking down ; "they seem to brace one up like walking across a breezy common, and they comfort me in an odd sort of way more than novels, much more."

much more than religious books, which, indeed, I never could read."

"Ah!" said Ellis, a long-drawn reflective "ah." "And do politics come within the range of your sympathies?"

"I suppose you are amused at the idea of my wading out of my depth," said Marjory good-humouredly. She had never answered Ellis sharply since she knew he loved her or fancied he loved her. "I do not know about politics, I do not understand them in the least; they are always going on, you see. When politics have grown cold and turned to history, people can write about them and explain them, but while they are boiling and bubbling, it must take a strong intellect to comprehend the mixture. To men who can see through the puzzle, politics must be intensely interesting!"

"You are a shrewd philosopher for eighteen, Marjory. You allow me to call you Marjory, do you not?"

"Yes, if you like," with a sigh and a blush.

Ellis looked at her for an instant, then, as if for the sake of speaking, he said lazily, "And so if you were a man, you would go in for a political career? As a woman, what is your ambition?"

"I have none," with another sigh.

"I can hardly believe that. A bright keen intelligence like yours is rarely without ambition. What is your scheme of life? All thinking creatures have schemes of life more or less distinct; yours naturally has the deepest interest for me;" and he looked at her.

"I do not think I have any. I do not care for fine dress or jewels or a grand house, though I like pretty things; but I do want to be happy, and not quite useless. I should like to travel, to—in short, I scarcely know what I want, except to be different from what I am." A deeper sigh and a downcast look emphasized the sentence.

"For different circumstances, perhaps, but I cannot echo your wish to be different from what you are."

Marjory made no reply, and Ellis, turning the conversation, talked lightly and pleasantly till the whist party broke up; and Marjory's last waking thoughts were, "How nice he can be! how much he knows about everything; I wonder he cares about me! and I wonder I do not care about him! If he had not this unpleasant notion of a secret marriage, I think I would marry him; though it would be rather awful to be really married to Mr. Ellis, and I am sure he would get tired of me."

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Sunday dawned cold and dark and dreary, with low-lying clouds and a steady down-pour of rain; poor Marjory was fain to confess that it was impossible to keep a woodland tryst in such weather. She was very disconsolate and distressed, and even drew down a gentle reprimand upon her head from Aunt Carteret for making

mistakes and leaving out words when reading the psalms and lessons, as going to church was not to be thought of.

After luncheon the party had assembled in the drawing-room, where a bright wood fire was crackling, and Miss Danvers (who had yielded to her friends' entreaties not to leave them till Tuesday) was detailing with much exactness the circumstances attending the purchase of a remarkable engraved emerald by her dear friend that delightful old Duca di San Marina, when she suddenly paused, and putting her lorgnette to her eyes, exclaimed, "Why, Mrs. Carteret, here is some enterprising visitor braving the elements to pay his respects to you."

"He must be a lunatic!" exclaimed Mr. Carteret.

"Perhaps it is Mr. Berry," suggested Mrs. Carteret.

"He certainly would not come over on foot from Gilston," said Ellis, rising to look out of the window. Marjory offered no suggestion, but flushed up and waited breathlessly for the result. Presently the door opened and Mr. Crauston was announced.

Marjory darted to meet him with outstretched hands, eager to save him so far as she could from the ordeal of advancing alone in face of so many strangers.

"I am so delighted you have come! I never expected you," she cried. "Dear Mrs. Carteret, this is my brother, Dick Cranston."

Dick, however, did not seem to need either encouragement or support, he coloured slightly through his embrowned skin, but bowed with great composure and said, "I should not have taken the liberty of calling but that I leave this neighbourhood to-morrow, and shall have no other chance of seeing Marjory again."

"I am very happy to see you," murmured Mrs. Carteret, rather bewildered.

"My uncle, Mr. Carteret," resumed Marjory with a slight gesture towards that potentate, her heart beating with pleasure and embarrassment. How was she to get Dick away from among these people? and they could not possibly talk before them. Here Ellis came forward, and offering his hand, observed, "We have met before, Mr. Cranston."

"Yes, I saw you at Beaulieu," returned Dick with his pleasant frank smile.

Marjory felt she could have hugged Ellis for this friendly move; it emboldened her to say, "May I take Dick into the library, Aunt Carteret? I want to hear all his news."

"By all means," returned Mrs. Carteret; and Marjory with a quick "Come then," led the way to the scene of her labours.

"You really are a dear good boy to beard all these lions to see me. It must have been an effort," she exclaimed, seating herself at the writing-table and pointing to a large easy chair, which Dick drew forward.

"No, I did not much mind; I should not have intruded without

a good reason ; but I had a good one. I could not have gone away without seeing you, Marge, though I was scarcely sure you would like me to come."

"Like you to come ! Why, Dick, I was ready to cry my eyes out when I saw the horrid rain, and I knew I could not go and meet you."

Dick smiled well pleased. "You are fonder of me than you used to be, Marge."

"And you are very ill-natured to remind me how unkind and nasty I used to be ; you know I love you nearly as well as I love poor George, so do not be disagreeable. Now go on and tell me everything, every single thing." She leant her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands, fixing her earnest eyes on his face.

"I sometimes think you are a couple of quite different girls in one, Marge ; you are sometimes so much older and more womanly, and then again you are just the same sharp, saucy puss you were in the schoolroom at home."

"Ah ! yes, I feel years older and graver, more troubled about the future, and—and changed in every way ;" Marjory's varying face grew grave and dreamy, while a sudden sigh heaved her bosom. "But never mind me, tell me all about yourself."

After a brief pause, during which Dick sat very still with downcast eyes, he began his story of the fortnight which had passed since they had met. The chief event was a proposal from the architect to take him as clerk of the works to a building which was being erected from Mr. Jervis's designs near Hult. The original clerk of the works had resigned, as he wanted to join a brother in Australia, and Mr. Jervis at once spoke to Brand on the subject. "This is a step more in the direction of being a contractor than an architect," continued Dick, "and I should much prefer the latter, but you see I must live, and apprentices earn no wages, or next to none. I have very fair pay as clerk of the works, and may get opportunities of improving my architectural knowledge ; anyway, I will be among stones and mortar, for which I have always had a passion as you know, and I see my way to independence, that is the great point."

"Yes, indeed, Dick. It seems like yesterday, that wild March evening when I came back from school and you walked in all covered with dust. You had just met your friend the mason."

"Ay, I think you brought me luck, Marge ; and then when I saw you again I met Brand. That was the best of all, not that I think much of luck. The grand thing is to believe in oneself and to work with a will."

"I wish I could work for myself," said Marjory ruefully ; "you are sure to get on, you will be a great rich man one day, while George and I —"

"Well, we will stick together anyhow. Now tell me your news."

"I have nothing good to tell. Uncle Carteret is about to sell this place or has sold it; they are going abroad, and I am to be sent back to Falkland Terrace. How pleasant that will be you may judge from this letter;" and she drew the obnoxious epistle from her pocket.

Dick read it in silence. "It is harsh enough," he said, returning it; "but it is not your father's composition."

"I know that, though it does not mend matters. Dick, if I go away to be a housemaid. I will not stay at home. I cannot live in the house with your mother."

"I believe it; but what can you do, Marge? girls cannot battle with the world like men. Can you not persuade Mr. and Mrs. Carteret to keep you?"

"I have asked Mr. Carteret and he refused; I cannot humble myself a second time."

"There must be lots of rich childless old people, Marge, who would be glad to have you to read to them or write for them; you have a nice voice and you understand what you are reading about," said Dick earnestly, quite absorbed in the consideration of Marjory's future. "I wish I knew you were well employed and happy. Do you know, I often lie awake at night thinking of you and feeling sorry and ashamed that *my* mother should have struck in and spoiled your life. Look here, Marge, this is my address for the next three months, you must promise to write to me everything; and more, if you are in any trouble send for me. I'll come and help you cost what it may. You must promise, Marge." He held out his hand and she put hers into it.

"I do promise, that is, if you are not too far away. But I do not think I shall get into any trouble, at least not so bad as to want more than a little advice. You will write to me often, will you not?"

"I will. You know, as George, your real brother, is so far away I must take his place."

"My real brother! Are you not my brother too?"

"Of course we shall always be like brother and sister, in our own minds, but I believe really we are no relations."

"Ah!" cried Marjory, "that is what Mr. Ellis says."

"Mr. Ellis! who is he? the fellow who shook hands with me in the drawing-room?" Marjory nodded. "Do you tell all your affairs to *him*?"

"No, not all. But it is a comfort to talk to some one sometimes. He is really very kind to me; and, Dick, he is rather a big man in his way, he knows so much, too, it is astonishing."

"Yes, he looks as if he were some one," returned Dick slowly, and then silence fell upon them. Marjory felt uneasy, Dick looked so grave, almost stern, and she was conscious of having coloured and hesitated when she spoke of Ellis. She would have liked to

tell Dick everything, but that was quite impossible : she wanted to break the oppressive silence but no words would come, so she sat feeling and looking terribly conscious.

At last Dick said abruptly, "I do not like his face ; I mean his expression."

"Nor did I," returned Marjory, relieved to be able to speak, "that is at first ; now that I know him better, he seems——" she stopped.

"Quite handsome, I suppose," put in Dick with some sarcasm.

"No," returned Marjory steadily. "But he is the only creature here that has been really friendly and sympathetic, and I am obliged to him."

"That is natural enough," said Dick in an altered tone. "Well, Marge, you see, that is, you will not think me a suspicious brute or a bore if I say it would be better not to have too much of his kindness or sympathy ? You are a nice little thing."

"I am much obliged to you, but I am not so very little," this with dignity.

"Yes, yes ! I daresay, Marge, I am making a fool of myself, but you see there's very little company or anything going on, and he might find it very pleasant to sympathize with you to a large amount ; and you—you might miss his sympathy afterwards, and I can't bear to think of your being grieved, Marge, that is why I ventured——" he hesitated and broke down.

Marjory, with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes, made quick reply, "I understand what you want to say quite well ; you mean to say that I am an insignificant frivolous girl, who will allow a man of higher position than myself to make an hour's amusement out of my vanity and leave me lamenting. But you are mistaken. Mr. Ellis is my kinsman, he says so himself ; he is a man I never *could* take a fancy to, and to do him justice he has not the faintest idea of finding a passing amusement in flirting with *me* ; he is as grave as—as a judge when he talks to me, and he treats me with more respect than *you* do." Here Marjory's fiery glances were dimmed with tears ; "I did not think you could talk such nonsense, Dick, such unkind nonsense."

"You must not be angry with me," cried Dick, by no means convinced, but eager to make friends ; "I am only a clumsy fellow, and I am too anxious about you to stop and think whether I should offend you or not. Don't cry, Marjory, this is the last talk we shall have together for many a day ; don't quarrel with me, like a good girl ; you are the only creature in the world I have to care about."

"Oh ! I daresay you did not mean half you said," drying her eyes, "but you have wounded me, and all for nothing. I shall be leaving this soon, and then I shall never see Mr. Ellis again ; nor do I care much, though I *am* grateful to him and always will be ; but of course

I don't care for him as I do for you. There! do not let us say any more on the subject; you can be very nice when you like, so do not be tiresome."

Dick looked at her wistfully for a minute, his heart too full of one subject to take up another easily.

"When do you start?" asked Marjory, generously helping him.

"The day after to-morrow."

"How can Mr. Brand spare you?"

"Well, the decorations we were working at together are all planned out and nearly finished; at any rate he would not let me lose a chance; but I cannot tell you how much I dislike leaving him, he has been so wonderfully kind to me; then I feel somehow that he will miss me greatly, and his health is very bad; I fancy he has taken a great deal out of himself."

"He looks ill, or looked ill the evening I saw him. He must have been handsome once," said Marjory reflectively.

"He is still at times, and he is a wonderfully pleasant companion, it is a treat to hear him talk when he is in the mood," said Dick. "Then he has such wonderful manners. If you saw him talking to Lord Beaulieu's sister, he is like a prince talking to a queen; and she never passes him anywhere, she always stops to speak with him, and the baby laughs and holds out its arms to him. I should like to know his history. He has been in good society, as it is called, some time or other."

"Yet Mrs. Acland spoke as if he had been a bad man," observed Marjory.

"He is not one now, at any rate; it does me good in many ways to be with him."

"Mrs. Maynard is beautiful and charming," murmured Marjory.

"She is a lovely woman! It is a pleasure to look at her," cried Dick enthusiastically. "What a gift beauty is! and her voice is so sweet! she often speaks to me. One day she said she was sure I was not in my natural place among workmen."

"And what did you say?" asked Marjory, deeply interested.

"Oh, I think I said, I hoped to do my work as well as if it *were* natural to me."

"That was as much as to say it was *not* natural to you."

"Then their talk wandered to George and the chances of his return within the year. At last it was time to part.

"There is one thing I must impress on you, Marge, never mention that you have seen or heard anything of Brand. He particularly wishes our friendship to be kept dark."

"And of yourself?"

"What you like. I wrote to old Cross last week and told him what I am about. I gave him to understand he was at liberty to give the letter to Mr. Acland, so you can say what you like. Now I must leave you, and I hate having to say good-bye. You'll write to

me, Marge? Tell me everything, and you shall hear of my doings if you care."

"If I care! of course I do. I wish you were not going, dear Dick, I am awfully lonely;" her voice broke, and she clasped his arm, lifting her face to his as if seeking a brotherly caress.

"God bless you, Marge, good-bye!" said Dick with much feeling in his deep rich tones, and, stooping, he kissed her gently on the brow. The next moment she was alone.

"You have been spoiling your eyes again," Ellis contrived to say under cover of an argument between Mr. Carteret, his wife and Miss Danvers that evening after dinner. "Had young Canston anything tragic to communicate?"

"No; but I shall not see him for ever so long, and I shall have no one at home!"

"And you need not stay at home if you do not like it. Marjory, I restrain myself for teasing you with the reiteration of my hopes and wishes, but do not forget I am waiting your decision all the same, and I love you with all my heart and soul!"

About a fortnight after this interview, Mr. Carteret gave the order to move; and Marjory was obliged to announce her return home for the following week. The house from this time became the haunt of various myrmidons of the house agent, who made inventories, packed up books and various articles selected for keeping, and infested the rooms.

Ellis, who had been more than once in town in the interim, was to leave for Paris, where he had succeeded in obtaining the appointment of *attaché*. Marjory observed that Mr. Carteret, who seemed in excellent spirits, was remarkably polite and friendly with his kinsman. She gathered, too, that the operation of cutting off the entail in order to sell the property had been accomplished, and the proceeds settled on the heir.

This was the business which had brought Ellis to Langford Priory and kept him there so long. It was a delicate affair to manage, and cost him both time and trouble. He was proud of his success, but another interest had come to mingle itself in his life, or rather a passion had seized him with unaccountable force.

Had it ever been foretold to Ellis that he would lose his head about an unformed, inexperienced school-girl, he would have laughed the prophet to scorn. He wondered at himself, for he never before had felt inclined to sacrifice any of his projects or ambitions to a woman; even now, though ready to run certain risks, he was more disposed to grasp all he wanted by a bold yet subtle scheme than to renounce an iota of his future plans. He was, as he boasted, master of himself, but not to the point of renunciation; rather he held his own will in check the better to concentrate his forces and carry out the design he had deliberately plotted.

Circumstances were peculiarly favourable, and could he but overcome Marjory's provoking distrust, a distrust which added an extraordinary attraction to the fresh intelligent sweetness of this young recluse, he saw his way to some years of delicious companionship, which would leave him free enough, yet not cost her anything beyond temporary seclusion. What a pity it was that women should clamour for equal rights and make themselves intolerable burdens. A wife *sub rosa*, with all the charm of illegitimate secrecy about her, would be quite fascinating; while some unceremonious form more or less binding ought to be quite enough to satisfy her scruples and secure her self-respect.

The day before Ellis was to leave the Priory, Marjory walked over to Dene Court to bid farewell to the friendly heiress and her mouse-like little mother. It was a pleasant visit and cheered the young secretary not a little.

Returning, she was not altogether surprised to overtake Ellis loitering at a bend in the road where a path struck off through an angle of the Beaulieu woods and shortened the distance to the Priory.

"I have been on thorns for the last quarter of an hour lest I should miss you," he said. "This is my last chance of seeing you alone for the present, and you need not walk so fast!"

"Ah! Mr. Ellis," began Marjory eagerly, and then stopped short.

"Why do you check your impulse to speak to me out of the fullness of your heart? I think I deserve your confidence."

"You know why," returned Marjory, determined to be brave and candid. "You have been so good as to care for me, and—and I am always afraid of misleading you. It is not worth your while to risk anything for me, and I will not risk anything for you. You are going to Paris, where you will be busy and see nice people; in a little while you will wonder you ever troubled about me."

"You think so?" and Ellis laughed a somewhat harsh laugh. "I almost wish I could! No, Marjory, I am not going to let you slip from me; I have not quite matured my plans, but I shall see you in London before long, as I shall have leave of absence for some weeks, and then I shall seek you in your father's house."

"I hope you will not, Mr. Ellis; Mrs. Acland would be sure to make mischief of your visit."

"Do you not think me capable of out-manceuvring Mrs. Acland? If I come, shall you be glad to see me?"

"Oh! I shall indeed! A friendly face will be something delightful in *that* house," cried Marjory with an irrepressible burst of feeling.

"If you dread your stepmother so much, why are you reluctant to exchange her tyranny for my protection?"

"Well, you see," hesitating a little, "I am not *married* to her, Mr. Ellis."

He laughed: "I understand, you cautious little witch. Perhaps after a week or two of home life you may take a different view. Believe me, I could make existence very pleasant for you. Tell me, is your chief objection the concealment that must shroud the first year or two of our marriage?"

"It is," said Marjory frankly. "But I must be truthful, and, indeed, I do not love you, Mr. Ellis, though I like you and am grateful to you."

Ellis did not reply for a few minutes and then began to speak of the many pleasures a life with him would offer, even during the time that must elapse before he could make their union public. Soon--too soon, he thought--they came to the edge of the Priory grounds. Marjory paused.

"It must be good-bye then," said Ellis; "to-morrow we shall be *en evidence*." He took her hand in both his, looking earnestly into her eyes. "You do not care, eh? You heartless girl," smiling and kissing the hand he held, "you do not dream how hard it is to be satisfied with *this* when I long for a parting kiss from that sweet mouth! You need not start and struggle to get away; *nothing* would tempt me to offend you. Some day, when you are my wife, you will wonder you ever refused me."

"No, Mr. Ellis, I never shall," cried Marjory, blushing and trembling as she slipped away her hand and fled rapidly to the house.

"She is not quite so indifferent as she thinks," murmured Ellis, following slowly; "time and determination will win at last."

CHAPTER XIX.

"BREAKING UP."

BACK again in Falkland Terrace! How strange, yet painfully familiar it seemed.

The three or four months which had elapsed since she left it were as so many ages to Marjory; and measured by the change they had wrought in her--the sobering, ripening effect they had produced--were, in truth, equal to years. She was surprised to find how much she missed Ellis during the short time which intervened between his departure and her own. She felt keenly that his intervention had often saved her from the irritating worry of Uncle Carteret. That distinguished dilettante was, however, so pleased to exchange his country place for hard cash, that at the last he grew somewhat gracious, and even bestowed upon Marjory some ancient books, "Telemachus," bound in calf, a stray volume or two of "Rollin's

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Ancient History," a copy of "Childe Harold," minus a few pages, nibbled by mice, and "Young's Night Thoughts." He also assured his grand-niece that he was glad he had been of use to her—that no doubt her residence with him would prove a mental stimulus which might help her to resist the *bourgeois* influence of her ordinary surroundings.

Mrs. Carteret was very kind. She said she should miss Marjory's pleasant reading aloud, and that she had been an agreeable and well-bred inmate; finally she bestowed on her a *portemonnaie* with some bright new sovereigns in its recesses. Poor Marjory was almost ashamed of herself for the solid comfort she felt in the possession of those bright gold pieces, but she knew she was going back to penury and prison, and money is always a powerful friend.

Uncle and Aunt Carteret had decided to drive to the county town, where the mayor and the authorities who managed the museum had invited the former to partake of luncheon and inspect the room set apart for the reception of his splendid gift. Thence they were to start for London, and Marjory, accompanied by Mrs. Carteret's maid, was to join the train when it stopped at Market Gilston, with all the impedimenta of the travellers.

As on the occasion of their arrival, a heavy, unexpected shower descended as they drove to the station, and as she had thoughtlessly packed up her rain cloak, her thin dress and light jacket were soon wet through. No one noticed her condition, as the sympathetic Virginie went into a second-class carriage, so by the time Marjory, having parted with her relatives at Paddington, had rumbled in a slow four-wheeler all the weary way to Falkland Terrace, she was flushed and shivering, and could hardly keep her teeth from chattering, with a strange feeling of cold, which yet did not prevent her feeling feverish.

Mr. and Mrs. Acland were just going to dinner when she arrived, and putting off her hat in the study, she joined them at once.

"We were beginning to wonder what had become of you, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland graciously, after greetings and inquiries had been exchanged. "But I told your father, that travelling with such staid people as Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, he might be sure you would be well looked after."

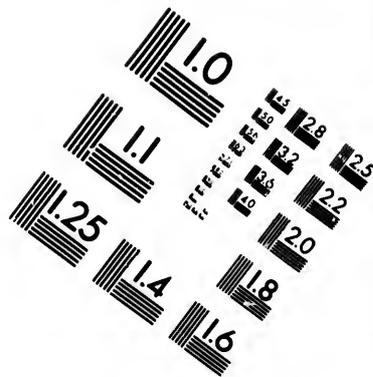
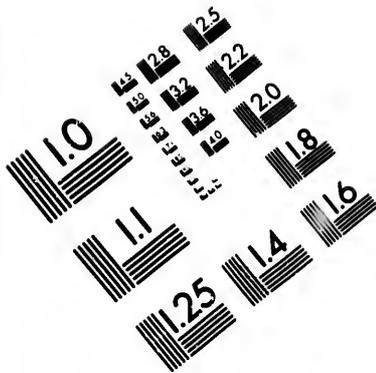
Marjory smiled to her father, and answered pleasantly, while she said to herself, "Perhaps Mrs. Acland is going to be kinder; if so, I will try and stay a little with my father and get him to notice and to know me, before I go away to seek my fortune."

"I think," remarked Mr. Acland, "I think Marjory has grown since she was away, and she has quite a colour!"

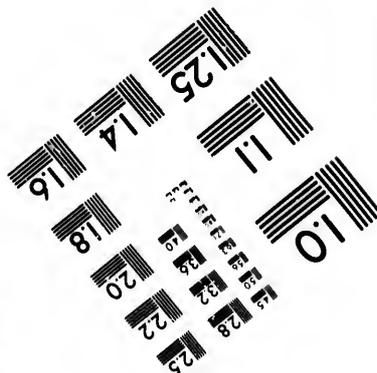
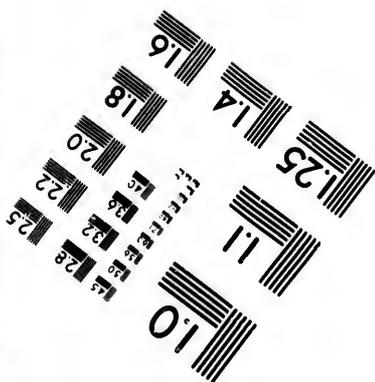
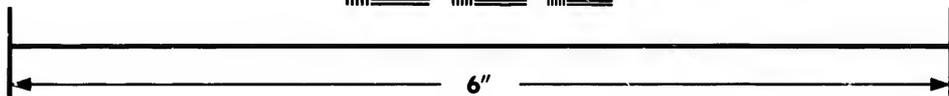
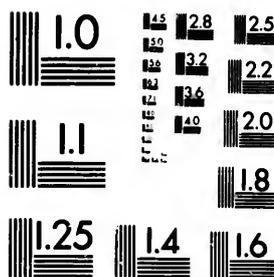
"She is looking very well indeed!" said his wife.

"I should think I have a colour," cried Marjory laughing, and putting her hands to her cheeks. "I got a wetting to-day, and fear I have taken cold, for I am burning and shivering at once."





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"That is a pity, directly you come home too! You had better go to bed early, and have some gruel," said Mrs. Acland. "It would be very unfortunate if you were laid up, supposing Mr. Carteret were to consent to take you abroad. I intend to call on Mrs. Carteret, and see what can be done in the matter."

"You may save yourself the trouble I am sure, *I* tried in vain."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Acland facetiously. "How was it that so charming a girl as you are, failed to fascinate the old gentleman?"

"Fascinating! Me?" exclaimed Marjory, perceiving the undertone of sarcasm, but determined not to show she did. "It would take far greater powers of fascination than I possess to fascinate Uncle Carteret; besides, he never held out any hope that he would keep me longer than while he wanted me in the country. He scarcely seemed pleased with what I did, and I really did my best."

"Come now, Marjory, tell the truth; did you never lose your temper and give saucy answers?" asked Mrs. Acland, with a smile which stung her stepdaughter. She retained her composure, however, though she was trembling with the fever that was gaining upon her.

"I think I only answered him sharply once, and that was when he said something disagreeable about my father not caring for me and my mother being of higher birth; then I stood up for my own people, you may be sure; of course I know nothing of the family history." Having dealt this blow, Marjory paused abruptly.

Mrs. Acland looked at her, positively startled. Some remarkable change had taken place in this provoking girl. Formally she was merely a passionate, insubordinate child whose efforts at resistance only tightened her chains, now she had suddenly reappeared, "clothed" with a tone of well-bred self-possession, and "in her right mind" as to her use of possible facts; this was a dangerous antagonist, to be relegated as soon as possible to a distance.

Mr. Acland was, however, a good deal agitated.

"This is a most unwarrantable assertion on the part of Mr. Carteret," he said, "and I shall call him to account for it; I am not aware that I have failed in any duty to my children. I should be inhuman if I preferred the younger to the elder, or the elder to the younger. Impartiality is my aim, and I think, Marjory, you must be aware that I have given you every advantage in my power, with justice to others—with justice to others."

"I am sure you always intend to be kind," returned Marjory in a low tone.

Mrs. Acland marked the reservation, but kept silence.

"I shall seek an interview with Mr. Carteret, and demand an explanation of his words," reiterated Mr. Acland pompously.

"You will make him very, very angry, but it can't be helped. Do you know I feel so ill and giddy, I shall just go to bed." She rose, glad to escape to the silence and darkness of her own room.

Never had the sordid discomfort of that room seemed so miserable. At the Priory her chamber was not luxurious. The furniture was old-fashioned, the hangings faded, but all was clean, neat and pleasant to the eye, while the outlook over the flower garden was delightful. Here, the sloping roof only allowed her to stand upright in the centre; an iron bedstead of the commonest description, covered with that abomination, a coloured counterpane, a painted washstand, the paint worn off in patches, a much darned square of carpet, and a glass which required a large amount of paper stuffed between the frame and the supports to prevent its presenting the wooden back to those who would fain look at their own image. The window was innocent of curtains; indeed there was no means of fastening them to a window in the roof.

It was not so much the actual discomfort as the extreme ugliness which helped to depress Marjory till she could not restrain her tears. Was she going to be ill in that horrible room? If so, she must get well the best way she could; she would have little attention, and that grudgingly given.

She made no attempt to unpack; indeed, one unsteady chest of drawers and a row of hooks on the wall was all the accommodation offered for bestowing her increased possessions, so Marjory got into bed as fast as she could, thankful to put out the light and lay her head on the pillow.

But sleep was far from her eyes. Presently she heard some one ascending the garret-stair. Her door was opened and the voice of "Cookie" exclaimed:

"Eh! in bed already! I've brought you a basin of gruel, Miss Marjory. Have you any matches?"

"I got into bed without thinking of them."

"Ah, well, there'll be some in the girl's room. I'll get them!" Sounds of groping were heard, and cook returned with a light.

How glad Marjory was to see her broad strong face; she could have hugged her. "Oh, thank you, Cookie, dear! It is so good of you to come up all this way."

"I wanted to see you, miss; it seems long since you was away. There, sup it up. It's nice and hot and sweet; I put in some shreds of lemon peel to give it a flavour."

"I am sure it is very good; sit down by me, Cookie. I don't think I can hold the basin steady."

"Eh! but you are all of a tremble; stay, I'll put a shawl round you, your hands is burning. How did you take cold?"

Marjory told her.

"Ah! there is nothing worse than sitting in wet clothes. I remember my eldest sister's daughter, a bit of a girl just your age, sat in wet things, took a bad cold, and just went out like the snuff of a candle. Can't ye sup the gruel? I know I made it as smooth as silk."

"Is it as nice as nice can be, but I cannot swallow it. It seems quite impossible! Stay a little with me, and I shall get to sleep; a good night's rest will make me quite right."

"Lie down then and I'll tuck you up; you'll not be fit to leave your bed to-morrow. Well, I suppose you have had fine times in the country. It's dreary work coming back here to a garret like this."

"Yes, it was very pleasant at Langford Priory—quiet enough—but there were books and flowers and beautiful walks."

"And no grand parties?" asked cook, dissatisfied. "I thought you would have big dinners every other day. Two soups, two fishes, entrées, roasts, iced pudding, and all that. I thought maybe you'd bring me back a notion or two; for between you and me my hand is getting 'out' here."

"We had no parties of that kind. I was at one dance; it was delightful. I should like to go to one every night; at least I did think so. At this moment I don't feel to care for anything. I am all over aches and pains, and so—so cold."

"You want a hot bottle to your feet; I'll get one for you. It's a pity you can't take the gruel; and have you any word of Mr. Cranston?"

"Yes, I have seen him. He is well, and doing well; he is an architect, or going to be an architect; that is a man who builds beautiful houses, and churches, and things. He was doing work for a great nobleman."

"I knew he'd do well!" cried cook triumphantly. "He isn't made of the stuff that fails; he'll be a great man yet. The house has just been an 'owling wilderness since you and the young gentlemen left. I'm thinking of leaving myself."

"Oh, Cookie!" murmured Marjory, who felt the good-natured woman's talk a little overpowering.

"Yes, I don't feel as how I can stay. It's not a bad place, nor is your step-ma a bad mistress. She's orderly and economical, but she's not stingy by no manner o' means, and she knows how to treat a good servant; but somehow I never did take to her, and I say she hacted shameful to her own boy! A fine handsome fellow any mother might be proud of! She ain't fond of *you*, Miss Marjory, any one can see that with half an eye, and she don't make things pleasant for you; at any rate I could forgive her better, for you ain't her own, but Mr. Dick—such a real gentleman—Well, I'll not stop here keeping you awake. I'll just get you a hot bottle and a box of matches." She took up the rejected gruel and departed, soon returning, somewhat breathless, with the promised hot bottle, which she put to her patient's feet, re-tucking her up with great care. "There now, the candle and matches are on the chair beside you, and I'll come and look after you myself to-morrow."

Marjory scarce heard what she said; she fell heavily asleep for a

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short time and then woke suddenly, palpitating with a vague terror. of she knew not what.

It was a horrible night ; she only fell asleep to dream, and wake to vivid consciousness of pain and distress. In her dreams she was generally flying wildly from Ellis, who pursued her with the expression of cold unflinching cruelty she remembered in his face when she had seen him beat his dog, and he was always on the point of overtaking her, with the object of hurling her down a deep precipice, along the top of which she was running.

But morning came at last, and then the housemaid, who was sent to inquire what kept Miss Acland, brought so bad an account of her that Mrs. Acland herself ascended to the upper chamber, where Marjory tossed and turned, seeking in vain for a position where she might be at ease.

"You are very seriously unwell!" said Mrs. Acland in a tone of just displeasure. "It was unspeakably imprudent of you to leave yourself without a wrap in uncertain weather."

"It was not uncertain. It had been fine all the morning, some heavy clouds came up just as we were leaving and then drenched us before we got to the station."

"There is all the danger of its turning to something infectious, and then we shall have the expense of sending the children out of the house, to say nothing of a doctor's bill, for you *must* see the doctor," pursued Mrs. Acland.

"You cannot bring the doctor *here*," murmured Marjory, raising herself for an instant, to glance round the room.

"No, of course not! It would never do to drag Dr. Wells up this height, you must come down to the spare room."

"There was an expressive silence, then Marjory said with an effort, "I don't feel as if I could stand or walk."

"Then you must be wrapped up and carried," returned Mrs. Acland, with decision. "And I shall see about it at once. I know the bed is aired, for I make Elizabeth sleep there occasionally."

Marjory did not reply, she was wishing her step-mother had delegated the task of keeping the bed aired to her, instead of Elizabeth, a little slavey, whose labours were divided between the kitchen and the nursery.

She was quite willing, however, that she should be found by the family doctor installed in the sacred spare room. She did not wish that any slur should be cast on her father, and where she seen lying ill in that miserable garret, it would be to every one's discredit. "He cannot, of course, go into the details of household management. I don't suppose he knows what room I have. When I am well and feel up to it, I will try and find an opportunity of speaking to my father when he is alone, and then I shall be able really to judge whether he would be sorry if I left his house or not! If he does care a little bit about me, it would be a great comfort. I

wonder if Mr. Ellis is really as fond of me as he thinks he is? I am sure I would marry him, and get away from all this if he did not want to keep the marriage a secret; that would be too horrid; and I do not see how it could be managed. Will he call, as he said he would? How surprised Mrs. Acland will be; I must say something about him, in case he does come." So mused Marjory as she lay, feeling very ill and helpless. She fancied it would be better and less puzzling if Ellis did *not* come; yet she was aware she would be disappointed if he did not; giving up, and being given up, are two very different things.

But she felt drowsy and confused, nor could she follow any line of thought long or clearly. It seemed ages since Mrs. Acland proposed carrying her down-stairs, when nurse and the parlour-maid suddenly stood beside her bed, with blankets and a shawl.

"Oh, I am sure I can walk, if one of you will hold my arm; give me my slippers. Sarah, please go down-stairs before me, then I shall not see how steep they are."

Though she once nearly fell, from giddiness rather than weakness, Marjory reached the haven of the spare room safely, and felt thankful to be in a bed so much more comfortable than her own.

By the time the doctor appeared on the scene, everything was in apple-pie order, and Marjory surrounded by all the niceties a sick room should have.

After an interview with his patient, the doctor descended to the dining-room to write his prescription and have a confidential talk with Mrs. Acland.

"Nothing in the least infectious, my dear madam, nothing, I assure you. But a severe chill, such as she has had, may lead to rheumatic fever, to, in short, many maladies; her nerves, too, seem irritable. Timely remedies, however, and your good care will, I trust, prevent serious mischief; you are not aware that the young lady has any mental anxiety?"

"None whatever, so far as I know, but she is somewhat reserved, I may say sullen; you doctors are behind the scenes in so many families, that I do not mind admitting to *you*, that the position of a step-mother is not a bed of roses, even where young people are well disposed. I have not Miss Acland's confidence."

"Ah, very likely, very likely? But a woman of your character will win it, finally. There, my dear madam, the mixture every two hours, the febrifuge morning and night, and plenty of lemonade, not too sweet, a few spoonfuls of beef-tea, in the form of jelly, occasionally; she will need little nourishment to-day, and I will look in in the evening, when I hope to find the pulse considerably lower."

Much impressed by Mrs. Acland's words and manner, the doctor went on his rounds, and when, some time after, a little talk arose about Marjory having left her father's house, Dr. Wells always de-

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clared that no girl could have had more tender and motherly care bestowed upon her than Mr. Acland's eldest daughter.

Youth, and a sound constitution, aided the doctor's skill, and Marjory soon threw off her feverish symptoms. She was still very weak, and could not shake off the sense of depression which weighed her down.

Mrs. Acland's visits were not cheering, although she abstained from absolutely unpleasant or stinging speeches. She was sincerely anxious for Marjory's complete recovery, that she might commence the operations necessary for putting her out of the house.

For what long hours she used to lie alone, dreaming rather than thinking clearly; never before had she realized how utterly isolated she was. Her school friends had been kind, but their letters had dropped off; the music teacher was married, and gone to live in a big seaport town; Aunt Carteret had called to inquire for her, and written a nicely-expressed farewell note, previous to leaving town, so they, Marjory felt, had passed out of her life. There were left George, Dick and—Ellis. Of the dear boys she would probably never see much, and Ellis must be all or nothing, if indeed he ever crossed her path again. What she wanted was a kind woman friend, older and wiser than herself, all the men in the world could not supply the place of a tender, large-hearted woman, to whom she could tell everything, as she never could to a man. Why had her own dear mother been taken from her? Oh! to lay her head on a mother's shoulder and feel safe and at rest! how bitterly she wept over her own destitution, in the silence and solitude of her sick room.

"Dr. Wells thinks you may go down-stairs to-morrow, in the afternoon, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland as she came in for her anti-prandial visit. "Once you are regularly up and dressed, you will soon get on. I think Louise will be glad to begin her lessons again, she has had a long holiday."

"I suppose she was not let to come and see me.

"I thought it safer not, the atmosphere of a sick room is not very good for a child; you shall see her to-morrow. There has been a visitor for you to-day, a Mr. Vere Ellis."

"Oh, indeed!" returned Marjory, in as indifferent a tone as she could manage, but painfully conscious that she had flushed to her brow.

"Yes, I was rather puzzled when he was shown up, as you had never mentioned him."

"I was too ill to think of it. He is a sort of relation, you know."

"I know nothing about it; he did not say so," fixing her eyes searchingly on Marjory. "He said he had only just come from Paris, where he had seen Mr. and Mrs. Carteret, and he thought you would like to hear of them."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"I suppose this Mr. Vere Ellis was a visitor at the Priory."

"He was a good deal to-and-fro."

"It is rather remarkable, a man of his apparent rank and position, taking the trouble to call upon *you*."

"I do not see that," cried Marjory; "he is a relation, at least I believe he is, and we were very good friends while he stayed in the house, I do not see, either, that he is anything so superior to myself."

"Ah, you have not, evidently, fallen in your own estimation." Silence. Marjory, though dying to hear what Ellis had said, would not permit herself to ask a question respecting him.

"I shall tell your father of this visit, Marjory."

"By all means; I suppose Mr. Ellis left a card for him."

"I do not think he did!"

"Mr. Ellis is very remiss then." This in a tone of superiority which amazed Mrs. Acland.

"I fear Mr. and Mrs. Carteret spoilt you, Marjory! If they took a fancy to you, I wonder they sent you back on your father's hands."

"Because, I suppose, they thought a father is always ready to welcome a daughter home again," said Marjory, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice, when she knew she was on the verge of a flood of tears.

Mrs. Acland did not answer immediately. Marjory was certainly less easily routed than of yore; she was cooler and more collected.

"It is not always a matter of feeling; people with a large family to provide for are influenced by graver considerations. It would have cost Mr. Carteret very little money, and done you a great deal of good, had he taken you abroad with him for a couple of years. Pray did he make you no present for nearly four months' service."

"Why you know he and Mrs. Carteret gave me quantities of things before I was fit to be seen at the Priory."

Mrs. Acland frowned. "I mean at parting, you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes! he gave me some old books, 'Telemachus' and 'Young's Night Thoughts.'"

"A valuable gift!" contemptuously.

Marjory was tempted to let the question rest there; but she was too honest.

"Mrs. Carteret gave me five pounds," she added abruptly.

"Oh, indeed! Then you can buy yourself a handsome winter dress, without drawing on your father's purse."

"I intend doing so."

"Well," said Mrs. Acland rising, "it is almost dinner-time, I must leave you; I think you may come down to luncheon to-morrow; you can return to bed early, but it is time you made a beginning. That Mr. Vere Ellis"—Mrs. Acland liked to give her

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acquaintances their full names and titles—"said something about calling again, but he has to go out of town, so he probably will not have time."

"Very likely! If it puts him out at all he will not come."

It was the second day after Marjory's reappearance at the family board; being a fine Saturday afternoon, Mr. Acland had taken his wife and children for a drive to Hampstead.

Marjory therefore established herself on the sofa in the little study opening on the garden, and began a letter to Dick, whose silence made her uneasy, till it occurred to her that he waited to hear that she was positively settled at home.

Writing was rather a fatigue, but she got on slowly, pausing every now and then to lie back on the sofa and rest.

She felt chilly too, though she had put on the warmest dress she possessed, a soft grey woollen stuff that fell into easy folds, and had further fortified herself by a wisp of creamy lace, given to her by Mrs. Carteret, round her throat. She was very pale and her eyes looked large and brilliant, though rather sad; she rang, and asked the servant to set light to the fire which was laid ready for the evening: after watching it a few minutes the girl retired, only to return with a card, saying:—

"Will you see the gentleman, miss?"

"Yes," said Marjory, feeling her heart beat hard and then stop, as Ellis walked in. The remembrance of his last words came back vividly to her, and brought the colour in a rush to her pale cheeks.

"And you have been ill—really ill," said Ellis, taking her hand in both his own and gazing at her gravely, intently.

Marjory could hardly keep from tears, she was strangely agitated. "I have really been ill," with a faint smile, "and I feel ridiculously weak."

"Sit down again; you tremble," resumed Ellis, lifting her little writing-table away and drawing a chair beside her. "Now, the stars in their courses have fought for me! I hear every one is out, and you will be able to tell me your history since we parted. I too, have a good deal to say. It is heavenly to see you again!" he broke off abruptly.

"And it is very good of you to say so," returned Marjory, her lip quivering, for she was touched by the welcome warmth of his words and voice, after the indifferent coldness which had chilled her heart when she most needed sympathy. Why should she reject the love so freely offered, when no one else seemed to care about her?

"Now you are here, I am glad!" she went on after a pause.

"Thank you!" good-humouredly. "That means, you did not want me to come."

"I did—and I did not—you see I want to speak as truly as I can."

"You always do I firmly believe, but I am not going to disturb you to-day with my own hopes and wishes. I see you are not equal

to much worry and, so far, I fear I do worry you. Tell me about yourself. How came you to be ill, you, the very embodiment of health?" And Marjory told him.

"What selfish idiots old Carteret and his wife are," ejaculated Ellis, "not to see you were drenched! And since you were laid up, how has the step-mother behaved?"

"Oh, I have been so miserable!" The words burst from her before she could check them. Ellis looked down steadily for an instant or two while she went on. "I do not mean to say that I had not every thing I wanted, but no one cared for me, except poor Cookie, and she could not come up to me often. When Mrs. Acland used to come and sit by me I got quite nervous; I fancied that if she could kill me with her eyes and not be found out, I should never rise again, in this life at least; of course—" interrupting herself with a poor attempt to laugh—"that was only when I was feverish—a mere sickly fancy."

"I am not so sure," said Ellis in a low distinct tone.

"And my father, do you know, he never once came to see me."

"I can hardly believe it."

"Oh, I do not know what story *she* told him! I do think he would have come, if he had been let alone. If I ever seem him without her, I shall ask him. I cannot bear to think she has put me out of his heart, but I fear—I fear she has." Her voice was choked, and she had a hard struggle to maintain her composure.

Ellis silently took her hand again, holding it with a soft pressure, but releasing it at her first movement of withdrawal.

"But I never *do* have a chance of seeing him! However, I am getting quite well, and in another week I shall speak to my father about getting something to do away from home."

"Ah?" murmured Ellis interrogatively.

"And what do you think of Mrs. Acland?" asked Marjory, after a brief pause.

"She is a handsome, shrewd, clever woman, and I rather fancy she has a history. Where did your father pick her up?"

Marjory told him all she knew.

"Well, my sweet Marjory, it would have been wiser if you had not declared war upon so potent a power as Mrs. Acland until you had measured your strength with hers."

"At eleven or twelve one has not much forethought; besides I could not help it. I was jealous of my father from the first."

There was a silence of a few minutes, then Ellis began very gently:—

"I said I would not worry you about myself, but I *cannot* keep my word. Grant that you do not love me now, do you not think a home with me would be preferable to the home you have?"

"I have none," murmured Marjory.

"True, and you are shamefully defrauded of your due. I must

say your father has sacrificed you utterly. Why do you hesitate to be my wife?"

"For one reason, because I do not see how it is you can love a girl who does not love you, and I ought not to let you sacrifice so much for me."

"And your other reasons?"

"You know," said Marjory shyly.

"Suppose I could go to your father to-morrow, ask his consent, and arrange for the wedding at St. George's?—joy-bells and favours—would you say yes?"

"I think," returned Marjory deliberately, "I should—I should learn to love you, because you are good to me, and I never dreamed of caring for any one before. I never saw any one I could care for—only," she paused, "I am half afraid of you; and when I think of that dog, it makes me doubt."

"What dog?"

"The dog you beat."

Ellis burst out laughing.

"That is too absurd! Do you think I would beat you?"

"N—no, but you might be cruel!"

"You are unjust and illogical, Marjory! You say you do not wish me to make any sacrifice for you, yet you are ready to accept my ruin, which open marriage with you would be. My darling, don't you see that if I am your husband my career is yours. In my profession or calling, money is of the last importance; a poor married *attache* might as well retire from the combat at once. I look for help in more ways than one from old Carteret. I will not cut myself off from that. In a couple of years I hope to have an appointment which may make me more independent, when we can throw off the mask—need I say how gladly?"

"But if only for so short a time, would it not be wiser to wait?"

"What? and endure the separation, the knowledge that you were undergoing all the wretchedness your step-mother will heap upon you, all the minor miseries of a governess or companion's life. No, Marjory, not for any amount of bliss at the end. Listen to me. Having just received my appointment, I have a couple of months' leave; make up your mind, and return with me; trust to my management. No one shall know your whereabouts really, till it is too late to interfere, and I will undertake to bring your father to reason. Remember, you have virtually accepted me! just picture the life we can lead together." And he went on to describe existence in Paris, in glowing terms, till Marjory felt her brain bewildered. "You are so young," he concluded, "a year or two of seclusion will only give you a chance of acquiring the knowledge and accomplishments which would fit you better to fill, and to enjoy, your position hereafter; and you are quite indifferent to the happiness you can bestow?"

"But a secret marriage! Could one ever throw off the slur?" asked Marjory.

"There would be no slur to throw off."

"Is it not growing late? They will be back soon."

"Ah, you want to get rid of me?"

"No, but it would be awkward."

"Very well! When shall I see you again? Here is my address, you will write if you want anything. In a few days I am going to Scotland, to shoot. I must see you again first. I must not forget to tell you Mrs. Carteret says she misses you much; old Carteret thinks he has heart disease, so he has, but not of the right sort. They are thinking of settling in Rome as a permanent winter residence. Now, Marjory, I must leave you; think of all I have urged; give yourself to me, and turn your back on coldness, and suppression, and worries, for I love you, my sweet one, more than it has ever entered into your heart *as yet*, to imagine, and I will not live without you."

He pressed a long tender kiss on her hand, and was gone.

Marjory sat down and buried her face in the sofa cushion and tried to reflect; for the first time she began to think of the possibility of marrying Ellis, but not in secret—no—unless her father was ready to throw her off; then she would, indeed be of no importance to any one, save the lover who importuned her so persuasively.

CHAPTER XX.

"NOTHING VENTURE, NOTHING HAVE."

ONCE up and dressed, Marjory recovered rapidly, and Mrs. Acland soon discovered she was quite equal to the task of teaching the children. This was more irksome than ever; Louise, though still affectionate, and delighted to see her step-sister, had been much spoiled during her absence, and Herbert was intolerable. However, from this species of slavery she was determined to free herself.

Ellis had called again, but Mrs. Acland was at home, and Marjory's was amused to see that he bestowed most of his attention on her. He managed, however, at parting to press a note into Marjory's hand, begging her to walk towards Hanover Gate alone, between two and four on any one of the three following days as he had something special to tell her. Marjory doubted, hesitated, and wrote to say she could not; that it would be useless, and would only give both pain.

The following afternoon, which was damp and drizzling, a seedy-looking man rang and inquired if Mrs. Acland was at home. She had gone out, however, and would not be home till late.

The seedy man departed, and some ten minutes after, Ellis presented himself and was admitted,

Marjory was half-flattered, half-scared, by this bold perseverance. Ellis did not stay long. "I go North to-morrow," he said, "but I could not leave without seeing you; I want to know what you are doing or going to do."

"I am acting unpaid governess to my little brother and sister at present, but I intend proposing to advertise for an engagement and to relieve my father of one burden. If I see that he is sorry, it will not alter my intention, but it will comfort me."

"And suppose he jumps at the scheme?"

"Well, then I do not care what becomes of me."

"If, then, there is no one else to give you any love, you may accept mine."

"I am half inclined to say I will; but certainly *not*, if I see I am still dear to my father, and I think—I hope—I am."

"Then I will wait your decision," said Ellis, after a minute's thought. "I shall be in town again in a few weeks, and then you must decide. Marjory, you have it in your power to mar my life, or make it; perhaps you exercise the same power over your own. Do not thoughtlessly cast me from you."

Marjory did not speak; her bosom heaved, the tears stood in her eyes. "I do not know how to decide," she exclaimed, pressing her hands together. "I have nothing to guide me save my own instincts, and they are against you, yet—yet, I do not like to think I shall never see you again."

"Then bind me to you for ever," whispered Ellis. "But I will not press you, I will ask your final answer when I return; once I have your consent all will be easy, trust to me. I must leave you, for I have much to do; I never thought it would cost me such a pang to part, even for a few days, from any human being; think of me longing, waiting, hoping for you. Good-bye, Marjory." He pressed her hand to his heart, and left her, more anxious, more uncertain than ever, almost wishing she could love as he did, for then doubt would be gone.

For a few days Marjory watched eagerly for an opportunity of speaking to her father when he was alone, but in vain; Mrs. Acland never gave her a chance. Marjory watched his manner his voice, with a keenest observation, striving to find out if he cared for and noticed her. He was tranquil and undemonstrative, showing cordiality only to his younger children. He answered Marjory civilly, if she spoke to him, but rarely addressed her of his own accord.

This time of waiting and watching was cheered by a letter from

George, written from the Cape in the highest spirits. The young invalid son of the great shipowner had singled him out and quite made a companion of him. He undertook to show him some sport when they got to Madras, as they were to make a short stay there, and he (Charles Rennie) was so much better that he felt up to shooting a tiger. Even this satisfactory communication did not rouse Marjory from her increasing gloom and uneasiness; she felt she was at a turning-point in her life; should she go to the right hand or the left?

Ellis's carefully restrained passion, his considerate tenderness, had begun to impress her; would any one else ever love her so much?

At length, finding it useless to attempt a private interview with her father, unless, indeed, with Mrs. Acland's knowledge and assistance, she strung herself to the humiliating effort of asking it.

"I have been thinking about my future," she said abruptly to her step-mother one wet afternoon as he sat at needle-work with that lady. "I should like to do something to maintain myself; I am not fit for much, but I might teach children, or be a companion, or something."

"It is a very proper idea, Marjory; would you like me to speak to your father about it?"

"I should like to speak to him myself, and alone, if you will give me the opportunity," returned Marjory bluntly.

"Oh, certainly, if you wish," with a bland smile, "though I cannot see the object of a private interview; your father will tell me all that passes between you."

"No doubt; still I should like to see my father alone."

"Very well, do not worry him this evening, after the fatigue of business; say your say to-morrow morning."

"There is so little time then."

"Nevertheless, it will be better when your father is fresh."

Marjory could say no more. She felt that she was really in her step-mother's hands, but she had done her best.

Next morning, as soon as breakfast was over Mrs. Acland rose ostentatiously, saying, "Marjory wishes to have a few words in private with you," and left the room.

"Well, make them as few as possible," and Mr. Acland looked unmistakably nervous as he spoke.

This pressure drove poor Marjory's ideas and intentions into the blankest confusion; the little speech she had composed with a view to testing her father's feelings vanished.

"I—I—wish to do something for myself; I don't like living any longer at your expense, so will you consent to my putting an advertisement in the *Times*?"

"An advertisement for what?"

"For a situation as governess, or companion, or--or housemaid, or anything," cried Marjory, firing up.

"Yes, you may ; if you are discontented with your home you had better leave it, and learn its value when you have roughed it elsewhere. But you need not delay *me* to talk on this subject ; you have a more efficient adviser in your mother."

"Mother !" repeated Marjory, bursting into passionate tears. "I have no mother ; I have lost both father and mother."

"I greatly fear, Marjory, your ungoverned temper will destroy your success and happiness in life. You might have the kindest and wisest of mothers, and an attached father, but your headstrong nature rejects both. I cannot allow you to mar the comfort of my home, the--the repose of my excellent wife. It is better you *should* leave us, at any rate, till you can live at peace with her. Consult Mrs. Acland as to the details of your plan, and be guided by her."

"Very well," returned Marjory, with sudden composure, though her voice was still unsteady and her eyes wet. "I have your consent and will act as best I can. I don't think you can be as indifferent to me as you seem ; I do not deserve it."

"Really, Marjory, really--" began Mr. Acland, in a more natural tone, but Marjory left the room without seeming to hear him.

She was outwardly very quiet for the rest of the day ; she settled herself to write her advertisement in the deserted schoolroom, but even the memories evoked by that melancholy abode did not call forth any further fits of weeping, she felt that she was really beginning life, and her spirit rose to the occasion. Already she felt half emancipated. At luncheon she told Mrs. Acland that she was going out, to leave her advertisement at a stationer's in the neighbourhood, as her father approved her project. "I shall go to Shoobred's afterwards," she added ; "their autumn sale is going on, and I want a dress, and many things."

Mrs. Acland was struck by her tone. "Pray, do you expect us to pay for whatever *you* choose to order ?"

"Certainly not ; I have my own money, and do not intend to ask my father for anything."

"I am glad to hear it ! You must not expect, however, that an engagement will fall into your mouth the moment you ask for one."

"I do not, Mrs. Acland."

The next week was feverishly busy and anxious. On Marjory's return home from her expedition to the news agent, she found the housemaid in the act of transporting her belongings from "the spare room" to the garret. It was an additional stab, but she determined to take no notice, and in this eyrie she passed hours, diligently working to have her wardrobe in order for a sudden summons, and thinking as diligently, revolving the perpetual questions ; Shall I ? Shall I not ? Would Ellis reappear before she actually left her home, and, if he did, what possible plan could

he devise by which their marriage could be kept secret from her own people? Dare she trust him? Was it worth while dragging on an unloved, unlovely life, when warmth and colour and tenderness were to be had for the taking?

At last her modest little advertisement appeared; she thought she had devised it cunningly, but it looked wofully insignificant amid the crowd of "Want Situations," which filled the mighty columns of *The Times*.

Mrs. Acland's eagle eye quickly detected it, and she read it aloud at breakfast with a slightly scornful accent, which thrilled Marjory with painful indignation. "Not very striking, Marjory. I am afraid you will get no replies; you would have done better to let me apply to the Governesses' Institution; I know the superintendent a little."

"I prefer to try myself first."

"Very foolish indeed," said Mrs. Acland with melancholy emphasis; but did not pursue the subject.

In the afternoon, Marjory, with a sinking heart went to see if there were any answer for "M. A." Alas! there were none; nor the next day; the six and sixpence she had expended in the hope of finding independence was lost!

The third morning she had hardly hope enough to pay another visit to the agent. But lo! a neat-looking letter, with a handsome seal, awaited her.

Only a sense of propriety restrained her from flying back at full speed, as she would not open it till safe in the shelter of the old schoolroom. There, with breathless impatience, yet carefully avoiding any injury to the imposing seal, she extracted the letter. It was framed in the usual style of such a reply, and informed M. A. that the writer wished for a cheerful young person, who could read aloud pleasantly and give some instruction to a boy of nine years old, who was a cripple and in delicate health; that as the engagement was an easy one the writer could not offer more than thirty pounds a year, with travelling expenses, should the family go abroad, as was their intention. A speedy reply, with references, was requested; this communication was signed Jean Morrison, and bore the address, Craighall, by Strathlogan, L—shire.

"Thirty pounds a year, seven pounds ten a quarter!" thought Marjory. "I ought to be able to save money out of that; I may grow quite fond of the poor boy!" and Marjory swiftly ran up a splendid castle. Then the thought, "What will Mr. Ellis say if I am gone before he comes back? Will he follow me? It would be dreadful if he did; it would seem strange! I think I must write and tell him. What will Mrs. Acland say? I wish she would come in. I will not answer, till I have shown this letter to my father."

After trying to settle to needle-work in vain, Marjory took out

a letter she had received from Dick, and wrote a long reply, touching on all topics save one, the most important. Dick, on his side, had written very fully; he seemed to enjoy pouring out all his hopes and plans. He was anxious, he said, about Brand, who was evidently unwell. He (Brand) was afraid he should be obliged to give up the work he had undertaken in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh, and get away south, which would be a great loss to him, as he was well paid and interested in what he was doing.

"I wonder what George and Dick would say, if they knew Mr. Ellis wanted to marry me. They would hardly believe it. But, oh? how vexed they would be if I married clandestinely, I should never bear to look at them unless—unless—" here she broke off the thread of her thoughts, and applied herself to her letter.

.....

"Marjory has absolutely had an answer to her advertisement," said Mrs. Acland, coming into her husband's dressing-room that evening. "She will show it to you after dinner; now be advised by me, dear, do not make a fuss about her, she is disposed to try her strength with me. It seems a very good chance, this offer she has had, let her go; we can always recall her, and she is so determined in her opposition to me since her return, that I think, in justice to your wife, without any ill-feeling towards your daughter, you are bound to show a certain amount of displeasure; she thinks you will not like to let her go, but there is really no hardship in it; girls much better off than Marjory like to earn their own pocket-money, and relieve their parents."

"Still," said Mr. Acland, "I do *not* like letting her go, though she is insubordinate and troublesome. However, what you say is just, and I will not make a fuss about her. But I depend on *you*, my love, to make careful inquiry respecting the people who have answered Marjory; the child must not run any unnecessary risk."

"Trust to me," returned Mrs. Acland confidently. "I am as anxious about her as you can possibly be, only she must not see it."

Thus fore-armed, Mr. Acland read the letter presented to him unmoved, while Marjory watched him with eager eyes.

"Strathlogan—'um! the post town, I suppose. This is not a bad offer, Marjory; you cannot expect a high salary, as you are neither highly educated nor accomplished."

"I am quite aware of that," cried Marjory.

"If, therefore," resumed Mr. Acland, clearing his throat, "you wish to leave your home, you might as well try this place."

"Do *you* wish me to stay in my home, father?" asked Marjory, and there was a touch of pathos in her voice.

"I wish to leave you perfectly free," he returned calmly; "do what seems best in your eyes; it is better you should feel your own

day. Mrs. Acland will, I am sure, give you all the assistance in her power, and I will pay for your journey."

"Then I will write my reply to-night," said Marjory, bearing up bravely under her father's indifference. "The sooner the matter is settled, the better."

"That was well done," remarked Mrs. Acland as Marjory left the room; "if she only stays a few months and then returns to us, it will be a wholesome discipline."

Mr. Acland did not reply.

The correspondence with Mrs. Morrison continued satisfactorily; she professed herself contented with the reference offered by Marjory to the clergyman whose church she attended; finally, she wished Miss Acland could make arrangements to come to Craighall on the twenty-second of October; the nearest station was Strathlogan, where a carriage should await her.

Marjory felt that her fate was fixed. The twenty-second was only a week off. Ought she to let Ellis know? He had almost a right to be warned of her movements; she could not make up her mind to write to him; it would look like asking him to interfere. She held her hand, therefore, contenting herself with sending a few lines to Dick, telling him of her approaching departure.

Mrs. Acland had accused her one day, before her father, of carrying on a correspondence with "that boy Dick," and Marjory had at once acknowledged it, had given a short account of their meeting, and of Dick's promising prospects, suppressing only Brand.

Mr. Acland said he was pleased to hear he was getting on, and for his own part believed he would succeed. Mrs. Acland added in a doubtful tone she was sure she hoped so, and no more was said on the subject. Mr. Acland had no objection evidently to his daughter holding communication with his stepson.

Now all things were settled. Mrs. Morrison mentioned in her final letter that they would be going to Edinburgh in a few days, previous to proceeding abroad. This rejoiced Marjory. "Abroad" sounded vaguely delightful; in short, had it not been for the complications with Ellis, she would have felt brave and comparatively cheerful about this her first plunge into the wild waters of the world; but the idea of his possible pursuit disturbed and unhinged her. It was over a fortnight since she had seen him; would he fulfil his threat, his promise to seek her again?

The third morning before Marjory was to set forth on her first venture, was bright and crisp. She had gone out to do some last remnants of shopping for herself, and a few commissions for Mrs. Acland, who was busy preparing for her husband's departure by a night train to Wales, where he had been summoned by an old client, whose health would not permit of his coming up to town.

It was rather an unusual event for Mr. Acland to leave home,

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and Marjory felt anxious and curious to see how he would part with her. Surely at the last he would show some tenderness for his eldest daughter? "I suppose," she thought, "when I was a little thing, he was as fond of me as he is now of Louise and Herbert. If a father can change so much, *who* can one depend on?"

Mrs. Acland had completed her preparations, and sat down in the dining-room to read the morning paper until the early dinner was ready. She was in a placid mood; things were prospering with her. Once Mr. Acland was accustomed to the idea of Marjory earning her own bread, there was little need of her ever crossing their threshold again, or at least only on very rare occasions. "Then the girl may marry, she looks pretty, or rather attractive at times; that might be troublesome, however, and cause a disagreeable examination into affairs. I wonder what brings that man Ellis here? It must be some fancy for Marjory, but he is too cool and experienced a man of the world to think of *marrying* her. Well, I suppose she must learn to take care of herself, as others have learnt. She has a hundred advantages I never knew; had I been brought up as she has been, how differently I should have acted, and yet the chit doubts me. She has been ten times more scornful since she returned from the Priory. I must warn her father not to let her cuddle and cry over him when he goes to-night."

Here, the front door bell run sharply.

"Is the drawing-room fire alight? That may be a visitor," said Mrs. Acland to the servant who was laying the cloth.

"Yes, 'm," she replied, glancing through the window. "It's a gentleman, 'm," and she hastened to admit him, soon returning to announce, "Mr. Ellis."

"Oh! very well, let the children have their dinner without me. I do not think Miss Acland will be in yet awhile."

Having looked quickly but carefully in the glass, to see that her dainty morning cap was perfectly straight, her lace *cravate* duly arranged, she went up to receive her visitor with a very thoughtful expression.

"You will, I hope, excuse me for presenting myself at so early an hour," said Ellis, "but I was anxious to see you and Miss Acland, as I was commissioned to call."

"I am very glad to see you; pray sit down. Marjory is out. Has she told you she is going away from home?"

"Miss Acland has never honoured me with a letter," returned Ellis as he took a seat facing Mrs. Acland, "and it is of more importance that I should speak to *you* than to her."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Acland waited for him to go on, thinking that although not good-looking he had a fine strong face and most distinguished manners, superior to those of any man *she* had ever met before, except perhaps her first husband's, whose memory was always distasteful to her.

"Though I did not hear it from Miss Acland," resumed Ellis, "I know from another source that she is going to some friends of mine—or I should say acquaintances, and I promised to call and tell you something about them."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Acland again, fixing her eyes on his face with a keen watchful expression.

"Well," resumed Ellis, "Mrs. Morrison is exceedingly respectable. She keeps her eldest son's house, she has also a daughter and a little boy, very much younger than his sister. I do not say they are of the highest class of gentry, but they are of the higher class of farmers, and I think Miss Acland might be very comfortable with them. I had their shooting some years ago, and again this autumn."

"It is rather remarkable you knowing them," said Mrs. Acland slowly.

"Yes, it *is* remarkable," he returned.

"Of course Mr. Acland and myself are most anxious that Marjory's surroundings should be all that is refined and respectable."

"I suppose so, as you allow her to leave your house."

"I understand your tone, Mr. Ellis. In justice to myself I must say that Marjory leaves us by her own distinct desire. She could stay at home if she chose, but I must admit that I should be more than mortal if I opposed her desire to go. She has destroyed the peace of our home, and tried to set my husband against me."

"These are grave charges," said Ellis with a smile; "I am not surprised at your being glad to get rid of such an inmate."

There was a short pause—then Mrs. Acland bent her eyes on the ground, and said carelessly, "Probably you find her interesting."

"I confess I do. She is not a common character, and without disparagement to either of you, I can imagine you would be happier apart."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Acland, raising her eyes suddenly to her visitor's with a peculiar smile, "you think it would be an act of pure philanthropy to assist in separating us?"

"Perhaps," returned Ellis, looking steadily at her.

"If I were assured of Marjory's welfare," resumed Mrs. Acland in a bland tone, "for, believe me, I am her sincere well-wisher, I confess I should not regret *anything* that would remove her to a distance, but of course I should like to know she was happy."

"Of course, my dear Mrs. Acland; and suppose this engagement led to the accomplishment of both these objects? You would not permit too minute inquiries to interfere with your very natural desire? Suppose this engagement led to a prolonged residence abroad, and the consequent relief of her father from the cost and trouble of her maintenance, he would not, I presume, make any opposition? He would leave correspondence to *you*?"

"I should take care of that," said Mrs. Acland with a peculiar gleam in her eyes.

"I ask, because some of the party intend sojourning on the Continent, and taking Miss Acland with them."

"So Mrs. Morrison mentioned. I think such an arrangement might be very satisfactory, especially if *you*, a relative, know that these are thoroughly respectable people—that her protectors or protector, would be kind and considerate."

"Of that I am quite sure. Then Miss Acland goes to Mrs. Morrison with full permission to make what arrangement she likes as to her remaining with the family during their proposed residence abroad?"

"Yes, I think you may consider her perfectly free."

Mrs. Acland's eyes met those of Ellis, and they looked at each other in expressive silence.

Then Mrs. Acland turned hers away and said with a slight smile, "I suppose it is not improbable you may see Marjory occasionally when abroad?"

"Far from improbable," returned Ellis emphatically.

"That is a great relief to my mind."

"When does Miss Acland start for the North?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"And travels alone, I presume?"

"She does; she must learn to take care of herself, as she voluntarily abandons her—her home."

"I have no doubt she will find some one able and willing to take care of her," replied Ellis, rising. "I fancy we perfectly understand each other's sincere desire to promote your step-daughter's happiness. I shall not say good-bye, however; if you permit, and Miss Acland is disposed to accept the proposition, I will call to-morrow, and take her to see the studio of a friend of mine whose pictures are worth looking at. Is one o'clock too early?"

"Not at all," exclaimed Mrs. Acland readily. "You are very good to trouble about Marjory; it will cheer her up to go out with you, for I expect she will be rather doleful after parting with her father, he is going away to-night."

"Going out of town? Ah, I hope he will have fine weather. Good morning, Mrs. Acland."

Marjory was considerably surprised, and more agitated than she cared to admit even to herself, when Mrs. Acland informed her of Ellis's invitation to visit his friend's studio. He had not given her up yet; it was, on the whole, comforting to know there was *one* person who thought of her; she at once determined to accompany him and hear what he had to say.

"Mr. Ellis seems to take an interest in you, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland. "He knows something of these Morrisons, and says *they* are very good sort of people."

"That is fortunate," said Marjory; "I will go and finish my packing, so as to be free to-morrow, but you will be sure to call me down before my father goes."

"Yes, of course."

Mr Acland came back early, in order to take a hasty dinner before starting. He found everything in readiness, and his wife awaiting him in a state of the most amiable solicitude about his comfort, and regret for the fatigue a night journey would entail.

They had some pleasant confidential talk as she ministered to his wants at dinner, and she assured him she had made the most careful inquiries respecting the character of the lady to whom Marjory was going, and that everything was satisfactory; but somehow she omitted to mention the visit she had had from Ellis.

At last Marjory's intently-listening ears caught the sound of the nursery bell, and she ran down-stairs rapidly, distancing Louise and Herbert, who were also descending.

Mr. Acland was standing in the hall in his over-coat, his wife held his hat and woollen scarf, Sarah had just taken up his portmanteau and was carrying it through the door; Marjory's heart was very full.

"I shall not see you again, my dear father," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and bursting into tears, "not for a long, long time! Are you sorry to let me go? Will you answer if I write to you? Do you care a little—a very little for me?"

If Mr. Acland was touched by this impetuous appeal he, no doubt, thought it wiser to conceal his feelings.

"You ought not to put such a question," he said testily. "The best proof of your affection will be to control your temper and learn common sense; of course I have a proper regard for all my children; I am too busy a man to be a correspondent, but I shall always answer you in any matter of importance; be wise and cultivate kindly relations with—with your excellent step-mother, and—I am somewhat pressed for time!" He pushed her gently away, saying, "Good-bye, Marjory, cultivate self-control;" then he held out his arms to the younger ones, "Come, my little darlings," he cried. "Come, kiss father, he will not see your bright faces to-morrow."

Marjory stood for an instant as if petrified, then catching a sight of a somewhat peculiar smile on Mrs. Acland's face, she turned and fled away to her room, with a sore and bleeding heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DIE IS CAST.

WHEN Ellis reached Falkland Terrace next morning he was received by Mrs. Acland alone. He cast a quick questioning glance round the room, which did not escape her notice.

"Marjory will be here directly," she said with a soothing smile. "She has gone to put on her hat. I assure you I feel quite obliged to you for taking her out this morning; she is in the doleful dumps because her father was not in sufficient agonies of grief at parting with her last night; you would not imagine Marjory a sentimentalist."

"I do not pretend to fathom the depths of Miss Acland's character," returned Ellis abruptly and conscious of an inclination to snub the speaker, to whom he felt a decided dislike, "but at her age the emotions are generally strong, and no doubt she felt it might be a long time before she would see her father again."

"How long, is probably better known to *you* than to me," said Mrs. Acland with a bold peculiar look.

"What a she-devil," thought Ellis. "She would send that poor child to any fate provided she got rid of her," and while he thought Marjory came in.

She had put on her new dress and hat to do honour to the future ambassador, and the prevailing colour, deep red toned down with black, suited her well; she looked pale, paler than Ellis ever saw her before, her eyes seemed larger than usual and had a distressed expression, but her manner was composed and still: she showed none of the flitting blushes and shy impetuosity which had at first attracted him.

"You are very kind to come for me," she said in a low but distinct voice as soon as they had greeted each other. "I should like to see your friend's pictures. I am quite ready."

"Let us go then. I wish you good morning, Mrs. Acland, and good-bye, as I leave town almost immediately and shall not have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"I dare say not," said Mrs. Acland with a cordial smile. "I suppose, Marjory, I may expect you when I see you! Mr. Ellis will take good care of you."

Marjory made no reply, and followed by Ellis, went silently down-stairs.

As soon as they went out of doors he hailed a hansom, and they rolled rapidly away towards his friend's studio in Kensington.

"You are unhappy!" said Ellis.

"I generally am, but do not speak of it now, or I shall not be fit to be seen when we arrive."

"After you have looked at Vigors' pictures I have a good deal to say to you, till then we will talk of something else," and he went on to describe, lightly and amusingly, how he became acquainted with the painter they were going to see, hoping to divert his companion's thoughts till they reached their destination.

Even the unusual circumstance of paying a visit under the escort of Ellis did not disturb Marjory on this memorable occasion. Her mind appeared to be pre-occupied, to the exclusion of the present; still the studio, with its draperies, its bits of art pottery, and armour, curious weapons, and a few pieces of Venetian glass, surprised and delighted her, though it was simple enough, compared to the costly sanctums of most successful and established artists.

"I have brought a young cousin of mine to see you and your works," said Ellis; "she is very fond of pretty things, and I want to cultivate her taste for art."

"I am much flattered that you should think my poor studio worth a visit," said the artist with a low bow, as he laid aside his palette. "I haven't much to show you at present, having not yet had any of my pictures back from the provincial exhibitions; indeed I hope not to see them again."

He was a short, broad man with wild red hair and huge moustaches.

"What a lovely place!" cried Marjory, carried out of herself as she looked round. "It is like getting into another world to come here."

Then Vigors began to display his pictures, and entered into a discussion of the subject on which he was then working, and the best mode of treating it; then they talked of events and people all strange to Marjory, while she went softly to and fro, gazing her fill, and now and then asking a few questions.

The artist was evidently interested by her intelligent ignorance, if such an expression be permitted, and admired her too, Ellis perceived.

"Does Miss Acland live in London?" he said at length. "For if she is within reach, I should be tempted to ask a great—an enormous favour."

"From me?" returned Marjory.

"Yes, I would implore a few sittings; Miss Acland," turning to Ellis, "has exactly the face, the expression, the *tout ensemble*, I want for a picture I am thinking of, a scene from the Vicar of Wakefield, 'Olivia and the Squire in the Vicarage Garden.'"

There was an instant's silence. Ellis knit his brows. Marjory flushed up to the roots of her hair, and then grew paler than before.

"I leave London to-morrow," she said, and then became quite silent.

Soon Ellis declared that they had kept Mr. Vigors long enough from his work, and in taking leave observed, "If you will allow me, I will show Miss Acland that wonderful head of a monk you picked up at Sienna. It is in the dining-room, I think; do not trouble to come, I know my way, and we need disturb you no longer."

To this the artist agreed so readily that a more experienced person than Marjory might have suspected mutual understanding.

"This way," said Ellis, leading her up a narrow dark stair to a comfortable, mellow-looking room, smelling strongly of tobacco. The light of the declining sun struck strong and golden on a striking picture of an emaciated head in a monk's cowl.

"Stand here, you will see better," said Ellis, closing the door. "Now you have seen it I want all your attention myself; no one will interrupt us here. I have thought and schemed for this interview; it must be final and decisive." He drew forward a large easy chair in which Marjory obediently sat down, her eyes fixed on him with an expression, half fear, half expectancy; she made no reply.

"I said you seemed unhappy," he continued, taking his place on a low ottoman beside her. "Will you not tell me if anything fresh has occurred to distress you?"

"Nothing very unusual," returned Marjory slowly. "only I have been foolish enough to take it to heart, or rather it seems to have stilled my heart and made it stronger. You know I have found an engagement in Scotland?"

"So Mrs. Acland told me."

"I start to-morrow morning all alone, and when my father was going away last night I thought I *must* hug him, and get him to say he loved me, and was sorry to let me go. I forget Mrs. Acland—forget there was any one looking on—and threw my arms round his neck sobbing like—like a fool; but it was no use. He turned from me to caress Louise and Herbert. I do not grudge his love to them, poor things, but—but he might have a *little* for *me!*" Ellis silently took her hand, which she left in his grasp.

"Take *my* love instead," he murmured.

"But one's father—one's own father! It is too terrible to lose his love because a stranger has come between you. However, I have given him up, I must learn to be self-sufficing."

"Now, hear me, Marjory," began Ellis, still holding her hand. "Your father has deliberately thrown you over; there is now no duty, no home ties to separate us; can you hesitate in choosing between a life of mental and emotional starvation as an ill-paid governess, and a life of warmth, and appreciation, of sympathy, if for a while of obscurity, with *me*? Be brave at this turning point of both our lives, be my wife."

Marjory did not answer immediately, there was a far-away look in her eyes, then turning to him she said quickly, distinctly—

“I will!”

Ellis kissed her hand.

“Well said!” he exclaimed in a tone of exultation. “My love, my own, you give me new life.” Marjory was surprised and touched to see how his usually hard face softened and lit up. “How much you might have spared yourself had you come to this decision sooner.” Yet though gazing at her with passionate delight, Ellis did not resist the movement by which she drew away her hand. “Let me explain my plans to you, though I can scarce think clearly, in the flood of happiness which has burst upon me.”

“Listen to me first,” said Marjory, still pale and with a quiver in her voice that bespoke how much she felt. “I cannot break away suddenly from the engagement I have just made. I must go to Scotland after awhile.”

“Yes,” interrupted Ellis, an amused smile glittering in his deep-set dark eyes, “you certainly must go to Scotland, you must fulfil your engagement. Just hear me and credit me with some ingenuity. You told me you were going to advertise in the *Times*. I went away to my shooting-quarters and steadily searched the columns headed ‘Want Situations,’ till I found a little announcement that such and such an appointment was required by ‘M. A.,’ replies to be addressed to a street I knew was near your house. This I answered, to find out if I were right or not.”

“You?” ejaculated Marjory.

“I saw,” continued Ellis, “in your intention to leave home my—may I say *our*—best chance? Your reply enabled me to prepare for my grand *coup*; in short, the letters were *mine*, and you engaged yourself to me. Having arranged matters so far, I hurried to town to make a last desperate effort to throw myself on your mercy—mercy for yourself as well as for me. If you accepted me at last, the way was clear, you would come with me to Strathlogan, where on our arrival we should be united by the simple unceremonious ceremony, if I may so express myself, which performed in Scotland is perfectly binding. Then, as announced in Mrs. Morrison’s letter, we could go to Edinburgh for a few days; from Edinburgh you could write to your step-mother that you were going to Paris, and arrived there you could give an address where letters would find you. It does not seem to me that you would be troubled with many. Gradually your father would grow accustomed to hear very little of you, and so time would pass until the day I so ardently long for, when we should return together and stand before the world as man and wife.”

“What an extraordinary plan. Did you take *all* this trouble for me?”

“Does it seem strange to you? It is simple enough to me.”

"Then really I am not engaged, and there is no Mrs. Morrison."

"You are engaged to *me*! But there is a Mrs. Morrison; she is my very excellent landlady. She is unaware that I have used her name, but she is quite prepared to receive a young lady who is to be married to me under her roof, and is full of sympathy."

"It is too dreadful," said Marjory, as if to herself. "What would George and Dick say?"

"That it is better for you to accept the warm devotion of a man who loves you than endure a desolate life with your step-mother. Remember, too, there is no escape from it, at least no immediate escape, save with me! I am your pupil, your lover, your protector—as to these brothers of yours, they may be the best fellows on earth, but they will have their own loves, their own ties, and you will be secondary; to *me* you will be ever first."

"I am indeed alone," said Marjory, trembling visibly. "There seems no hope for me, but with you."

"Why does the idea of marriage with me terrify you, Marjory? You fill me with despair when you shrink and tremble. Remember, my every hope is bound up in you."

"It is the concealment I dread. The immense falsehood of the whole thing. I am deceiving every one, I seem leaving light and honesty behind me to hide under the shadow of shame."

"You are not deceiving any one. I may be—I daresay I am. But all will be forgiven if it needs forgiveness, when we can avow ourselves. My love, my fortunes are yours. It is as much for your sake as my own that I wish to conceal our marriage. I could not endure to think of all you would undergo if I left you in the claws of that harpy!"

He continued to plead, to reason, to enlarge on the miseries and wrongs she had endured. But more than all his subtle arguments, the bitterness of remaining at home after all was settled for her escape on the morrow, the conviction that she was virtually separated from George and Dick influenced Marjory, and when Ellis ceased to speak she sighed deeply, and said, "You do not convince my reason; yet I will go with you, I cannot stay in my father's house! I do not deserve that you should care so much for me, and take so much trouble for my sake. But if I marry you I *will* love you! Oh, it is cruel to be indifferent to one who gives you his heart. How it cut me to the soul when my father turned from me, and you seem to love me more than I do him." She smiled with inexpressible frank sweetness.

"Yes, my own, my love," cried Ellis, an intoxicating sense of triumph and delight, stealing over him. "I know you will be tender and true! Do not say, *if* I marry you! The hour you join me settles that '*if*,' and makes marriage a positive necessity."

"Is it not growing late?" asked Marjory, who began to feel the need of solitude and reflection, a nervous dread of being questioned, if she delayed too long.

"I am afraid it is," said Ellis, looking at his watch. "I have some affairs to attend to before evening, so I fear I must take you back."

They exchanged a few sentences respecting their meeting at the station next morning, Marjory entreating him not to show himself until he ascertained if Mrs. Acland had thought fit to accompany her. Ellis smiled at the idea of *her* putting any obstacle in the way, but was wisely silent as to his conjectures.

"Was it not strange," she said, as they stood exchanging last words, "your friend, Mr. Vigors, thinking of me as a model for Olivia? It seemed a bad omen."

"He is an idiot," sharply. "Do you think I could ever be a villain like the squire?"

"Ah, no! I must think you everything that is good *now*." There was a slight melancholy cadence in her voice that touched him deeply.

"Dearest, try to anticipate nothing but good; your lot shall be a fair one, if it is in the power of mortal man to make it so. Say good-bye to me here."

He caught both her hands and drew her towards him trying to raise her arms to his neck. Marjory shrunk back with a startled look which warned Ellis. He instantly released her.

"There!" he exclaimed, "you are free, not even were I your husband would I insist on a kiss you were not willing to give; you will love me yet, when I have had a chance of winning you. Come, let me see you safely to your prison house, this will be our last parting, I trust."

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Ellis returned exultant to his hotel. He had never taken so much trouble about anything in his life; his passions, affections, taste had never before been so strongly stimulated. The harder crust of his nature had been effectually pierced, and above all the difficulties of his pursuit, the original fearless dislike, toning down to indifference of its object, only increased his determination to succeed. Ellis was both resolute and patient, and generally gained the ends at which he aimed. His love for Marjory was sincere enough, nor altogether unworthy her acceptance, but it would not stand an hour before the claims of ambition. At present he fully intended to be her faithful husband, but he liked to think that the period during which the marriage was to be concealed was at his option, that he was master of Marjory's fate, that she might exist (happily he hoped) for years, to give a secret charm to his life. Even if the father came to know of the connection, he could be easily persuaded to keep quiet for the sake of his daughter's interest, but he hoped matters might be kept dark from him. Perhaps Ellis may by some almost unconscious cerebration have felt the foreshadow of distant

possibilities, when increased or complete concealment instead of open avowal of his marriage might be necessary. Well, all that was very dim and remote, while the present was full of success, good intentions and heavenly anticipations.

On her side, Marjory entered her father's house, probably for the last time, in a state of much agitation, though she managed to suppress its outward evidence.

"Where is Mrs. Acland?" was her first question, with a view to avoiding that lady's presence.

"She has not come in yet and there is a letter for you, miss." Marjory seized it with mixed feeling. It was from Dick. When, before, was a letter from him anything but simply welcome?

"I have only time for a few words; Brand wrote to me last week that he is too ill to go on with his work, so I started as soon as I could to do it for him. Mr. Jervis agreed to my going when I explained matters. Be sure and write to me here and tell me all about yourself and how you get on. I shall be here some weeks,

"Your affectionate brother,

"DICK CRANSTON."

This letter bore the address: 17, Dublin Street, Edinburgh.

The hand which held the letter dropped to her side as she came to the end. "Tell him all about herself; should she ever be able to do so again? If she were true to the man who was to be her husband she must break off from all communication with her dear and only friends, or throw them off the scent by a series of falsehoods and deceit, the mere thought of which made her pale cheeks burn. Then, though George, kind, light-hearted George, might be kept out of the way by his profession, she feared that Dick, who was a free agent and might lead a wandering life, would find her out; and if he also found that she had *lied* to him, how he would despise her.

Yet *how* could she escape? she could *not* draw back. How could she tell Mrs. Acland that she would not go to Scotland the next morning? Above all, how could she disappoint Ellis, who seemed so alarmingly fond of her? *Why*, she could not understand. No, she must go through with her desperate undertaking *now*, and perhaps all would turn out for the best. It would be so delightful to see Paris, and with such a companion, for certainly Mr. Ellis could be delightful, and so clever, rather too clever she feared, as she thought of his unscrupulous and daring scheme.

After all, no one else ever cared so much about her. Her chums, George and Dick, though kind and true, would, as he said, find their own loves and give her but slight consideration; she thrust the letter into the depths of her pocket, and went to take off her hat and assume as composed and indifferent an air as she could. How

strange that last evening seemed! Mrs. Acland was wonderfully quiet and civil; she asked if the pictures were well worth seeing, and remarked that Mr. Ellis was a distinguished-looking man. Then Marjory begged to be allowed to put Louise to bed; she was amazed to feel parting with the bright, troublesome little creature so keenly; should she never, never see her again?

When she returned to the dining-room Mrs. Acland was over her accounts; Marjory sat down without speaking and kept quite still.

How cruel it was to have no one near to speak a friendly, sympathetic word to her, on the eve of this tremendous change in her existence; she felt it almost impossible to restrain the hysterical tears which were ready to burst forth; she tried to steady herself to say good-night and get away to the solitude of her garret. Mrs. Acland suddenly startled her into self-possession by asking, in a hard, matter-of-fact tone, "Have you any money, Marjory?"

"Very little." Marjory was determined not to say how much she had saved from her necessary purchases.

"Well, your father told me to give you a couple of pounds for your travelling expenses; of course, after starting you fairly he expects you to maintain yourself."

"I hope to be able to do so," said Marjory calmly.

"There are two sovereigns and a half; you will want cab fares."

Mrs. Acland rose, and coming over to the table placed the money beside her. "I have no doubt you will get on very well; send a card to announce your safe arrival, and then you can wait and see what the place is like before you write again. What train do you go by in the morning?"

"The 10 a.m. from King's Cross."

"Then you must start at 9.30, and as the mornings are sharp now, I do not think I shall see you off; you can take care of yourself."

"Certainly, there is no need whatever for you to come."

"I fancy not," said Mrs. Acland in a peculiar tone, but Marjory was too much taken up with her own painful anxieties to heed, so with a hasty good-night she went away to try and rest, if not to sleep.

No amount of bathing in Lethean waters could ever wash away the painful impression that early morning drive to King's Cross left on Marjory's memory; the fever of nervous anticipation, the cold fits of terror at the idea of crossing the Rubicon, for once started in the train with Ellis, there could be no retreat; she dared not dream of drawing back, she was completely committed. If at the last moment some way of escape had offered itself, Marjory felt she would have seized it. Knowing there was none, she struggled to hope the best, to be just and truthful to the man who would be her husband to-morrow. He seemed so fond of her that he deserved her gratitude. If only she had not to steal in such a thievish way

into the bonds of the holy wedlock, she did not think she would mind marrying Mr. Ellis (he was still "Mr. Ellis" in her thoughts), but when she was with him he always exercised a curious disturbing influence over her, half fear, half attraction. Now she must put away all doubt and fear, and try to look on him as one with herself.

Marjory had a strong and generous instinct of justice to others and felt that she ought not to vex Ellis by looking or seeming miserable.

At last the wretched drive was over, and Marjory, with desperate courage, alighted and paid the driver.

"Your train goes in a quarter of an hour," said a porter, taking her box, and reading the address.

Marjory was following him to the ticket-office, when Ellis suddenly appeared at her elbow. "Thank heaven you are alone!" he said, drawing her arm through his arm, "you are awfully cold. There is a good fire in the ladies' room, and I will come for you when I have secured a carriage. That's your luggage, is it not?"

In an instant all trouble, all necessity for thought, was lifted from her.

Ellis established her by the fire, and with a few tender words left her feeling somewhat comforted. She had not spoken, she had only returned slightly the pressure of his hand.

After an age of waiting (*i. e.*, about ten minutes), Ellis reappeared, and led Marjory quickly to a first-class carriage, of which he seemed to have taken possession. It was supplied with foot-warmers; plaids, rugs, wraps, books, newspapers, and a travelling bag lay scattered on the seats. Having placed his companion in the seat furthest from the door and covered her carefully with a large plaid, Ellis descended again, and Marjory heard him talking to a polite deferential guard, and then to a well-dressed respectable looking man to whom he seemed, from the words which caught Marjory's ear, to be giving various directions. She was struck by the cold command of his tones; they made her shiver with a sudden unaccountable dread of future possibilities. The next moment Ellis sprang into the carriage, the whistle sounded, and they were away on their journey—a life journey!

"At last, my darling!" cried Ellis, his voice so changed by the ring of joy and tenderness softening it, that Marjory could hardly believe it was the same she had heard a minute before, "at last I have you safely extricated from the claws of your step-mother. It is an awful trial for you this long journey: you are looking white and worry already; give me your hand, no, your left hand." He proceeded to unfasten and draw off her glove, and put on the third finger a brilliant diamond and ruby ring. "Even for a few hours you must wear this as the 'locum tenens' of the plain gold one to which this will be the guard."

"It is splendid!" said Marjory, with genuine admiration, "I never had anything half so beautiful before." Then Ellis, touched

by the tremulous agitation which she tried to control and conceal, began to talk, in quiet but joyous accents, of his plans, of all that he longed to show her, of the mode of life which they would lead, of their future intercourse with George, leading her thoughts from the oppressive present to a bright future. Marjory lent herself willingly to his efforts ; she longed to throw off the load which oppressed her ; she was ashamed of her own fears and ingratitude, ashamed to show the terrible shame she felt at thus leaving her father's house with a comparative stranger, to live with him in secret, even though his wife.

So she forced herself to look out of the window and remark upon the scenery, to ask a few questions about foreign countries, to tell a few droll instances of her father's subjection to his wife. But the experienced man of the world who sat beside her saw through, and thoroughly appreciated her effort to control her own fears and emotions. He kept himself well in hand, determined not to disturb or alarm her by any attempted caresses, much as he longed to hold her in his arms and kiss the sweet mouth which quivered now and then, even as it smiled.

"I suppose you know something of Scotch marriages?" asked Ellis, as they left Peterborough. He had wanted to come round to this subject for some time, as he did not know exactly what sort of ceremony Marjory expected.

"Not much. They used to be performed by a blacksmith, did they not?"

"Not invariably," said Ellis laughing, "nor shall I bring one to forge your fetters, my darling. That was in the Gretna Green days. A Scotch marriage is as legal and binding if celebrated in a house as in a church or a registry office ; the chief thing is to have two witnesses, which I have been careful to provide."

"And suppose they both die in a few years ; shall we be able to run away from each other?" asked Marjory, trying to cheer up and speak lightly.

"I shall certainly not try, and I don't fancy *you* would seek to burst your bonds, even if I prove a bore. I have the fullest faith in you, more than you can say to me. Eh, Marjory?"

"I think I prove my faith in you by being here," she returned, with a quick sigh.

"I am afraid it proves still more, that you had a most unhappy, unbearable home. How could any man be indifferent to such a daughter as you are?" and Ellis went on with many a tender and lover-like speech, which helped to soothe and cheer Marjory, at any rate while he spoke.

As evening closed in, however, her spirits sank, and endless doubts and terrors arose in the dimness of a dull autumnal gloaming.

After passing Newcastle, she began to feel excessively weary from the mental strain and bodily fatigue of the last few days.

Ellis observed that she was growing very still and silent. He had insisted on her taking some wine at York, but she could not eat a morsel. He was touched and impressed by the courage and spirit she showed in so trying a position. He knew her heart was sinking within her, but having promised to be his, she was trying to give as little trouble as possible.

"She will develop into a very plucky capable woman, but by that time I shall have established complete control over her; besides she is too unselfish to injure me in any way. Yes, I think I have secured a charming and malleable companion."

"You seem very tired, dearest. Will you not rest your head against my shoulder, and let me support you with my arm?"

"Oh, I am quite comfortable in this corner, I would rather stay here."

"Little prude! In a few hours we shall be man and wife."

"It is not that—it is—that I should rather stay here."

"Very well, you do exactly as you like; let me put this plaid round you, it is growing cold."

A long spell of silence, spent by Ellis in agreeable thoughts, in self-gratulations on his successful scheming, on the safety and secrecy he had insured in planning the routine of his life for the next year or two. Marjory seemed to sleep; she had removed her hat and thrown a soft, white woollen scarf over her head; her auburn brown curls in some confusion escaped from under it; she was very pale, but her lips were red, and the long dark brown lashes which lay on her cheek looked black against its whiteness. How young and fair she looked in the faint glimmer of the lamp; she was infinitely charming, bright, variable, self-asserting without obstinacy, and best of all, obscure. No one would trouble much about her, and he could have his own way pretty well in the development of their future.

"Where are we?" cried Marjory, waking up with a sudden start and look of terror. "I have slept hours." She unconsciously grasped her companion's hand.

"Not so long as you imagine; we shall soon be at our journey's end, thank God."

"Mr. Ellis," with feverish solemnity, "before it is too late, do, do think if you are sacrificing your future to a mere whim, sacrificing me too, if your feeling for me is not very deep indeed."

"I never indulge in whims, I have none to indulge," returned Ellis, very gravely, pressing her hands in both his. "It is too late to draw back, Marjory, for your own sake you *must* marry me now."

"There is no must in it."

"Inexperienced as you are, Marjory, a moment's thought will show that you have put yourself in my hands; it would be destruction to leave me now. My darling! you have had a dream. Do not anticipate evil; this day three or four months hence, you will laugh and wonder you ever hesitated."

CHAPTER XXII.

A COUNTERMARCH.

It was quite dark when they reached the end of their journey. A thick mist further obscured the little station and all around it—a mist which fell like the finest rain, soaking through wraps and stealing under umbrellas. A waggonette, drawn by a big rough-looking horse, and driven by a lad to whom the same description applied, awaited the travellers.

“The resources of my temporary establishment do not supply a covered trap, I am sorry to say,” observed Ellis, as he assisted Marjory into the conveyance, and proceeded to cover her up with cloaks and rugs.

“It does not matter,” she returned, and did not speak again till they arrived at their destination.

It seemed a long way, this silent drive through the soft darkness. Wearied, and chilled Marjory made no resistance when Ellis managed to put his arm round her and draw her close to him.

At length the driver stopped, got down and opened a gate; then she felt that they were going over a very rough road. Presently a sharp turn brought them opposite an open door, through which Marjory saw a hall partially lighted by a lamp, under which stood a tall, square-shouldered, grey-haired woman, shading her eyes from the light, the better to peer into the darkness, while the door was held open by a smiling, neat, almost lady-like-looking, red-haired lassie, about Marjory's own age. How her heart revived at the sight of the women. With them there was some chance of safety—of help—if need be.

“We are rather late,” said Ellis, “and I fear Miss Acland is terribly tired. Mrs. Morrison, pray take her to her room, and see that the fire is good; then let us have dinner.”

“I am sure the young lady is real welcome; she does look very white and wearied. Come this way, mem. Jessie you see that the luggage is taken up as sune as the cart comes. This is my second daughter, mem, and she will be glad to help you any way she can, as we all will, for I am sure Mr. Ellis is just a real gentleman, and I wish you and him great happiness.”

Speaking volubly, Mrs. Morrison led her young guest up a short, broad oaken stair to a dim lobby, and, throwiug open a door, ushered her into a large bedroom, comfortably but plainly furnished, and brightened by the glow of a blazing fire. “There,

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now," lighting the candles on the dressing-table. "let me help you off with your cloak. Wouldn't you like a glass of wine? though, for taking off the child, there's nothing like a drop of whisky; but, maybe, you're no used to that."

"Thank you very much. I do not want anything," returned Marjory, overwhelmed at being treated as a bride-elect. What—what—would these people think of her?—coming there alone—such a long, long way with a lover—to be married, without a friend or relative to stand by her? "I am so cold and tired," she said in a broken voice, and then, in spite of herself, she burst into tears.

"Oh, my dear! this will never do. I am sure you ought to be a happy lady, for there never was a gentleman so careful to make everything ready for his sweetheart, and so feared that anything should happen to disappoint him. He'll just break his heart if he sees you crying like that. Come away and bathe your face and sit down, get a warm, and make your hair smooth; maybe you'll feel better after," placing an armchair in front of the fire. "There, sit ye down; Mr. Ellis is a grand gentleman, and does not like to be contradicted. He was maist always dinin' and shootin' with the earl and his great folk, but now they are all away in the Highlands, so not a soul about here need ken a word of what you are about, for not one of us will speak till Mr. Ellis lets us."

This speech was infinitely distressing to Marjory; every word was a separate sting. It assisted her, however, to recover herself. She must not talk to this good-natured gossip. "I am very stupid. It is fatigue, I suppose. I will bathe my face, and make myself fit to be seen."

"And that you are! a pleasure to see! The cart will be here directly, and then you'll have your things. Now, I'll just leave you. You ring the bell when you are ready, and Jessie will come and show you the way."

Thankful to be left alone, Marjory did her best to wash away the traces of her tears. It would be too unkind to Ellis to appear before him as if overwhelmed with grief on the eve of their union. But as the awful moment drew near, it was appalling to feel her reluctance, her dread increase. Why did she ever leave her father's house? Why did she allow herself to be over-persuaded into what she disapproved? If she could but be transported back to the desolate schoolroom and her stepmother's severities, it would be heaven compared to her present state of mind. Then she could honestly ask for sympathy in her troubles and grievances. Now, whatever sorrow might befall her, it would all be brought on by her own action.

She was drawn from this painful turmoil of thought by a tap at the door, which opened to admit Jessie, followed by the rough-looking lad carrying her box.

"If you are ready I'll show you the way to the parlour," said

Jessie, who looked radiant, as she evidently thought was suited to the happy occasion. "The dinner is ready."

"In a moment," returned Marjory, putting a few final touches to the toilette; then she followed her guide with outward composure but profound mental disturbance. Even while telling herself that nothing could deliver her from the imperative necessity of wedding Ellis, the prophetic power of strong emotion impressed her with an unreasoning conviction that the struggle must end by successful resistance to the destiny she dreaded.

Down stairs again, through a long cold passage, Jessie led her to a room panelled in oak, with deep red curtains, comfortable leather chairs, a faded turkey carpet and a glowing fire.

A lamp on the dinner table and wax candles on the chimney-piece only partially illumined it.

Ellis, who was standing by the fire, came forward to meet her eagerly, full of solicitude and inquiries.

Dinner was brought in immediately, and the attendance of a tidy servant girl, aided at intervals by Jessie herself, relieved Marjory from the first awkwardness of a *tete-a-tete*.

Ellis, always self-possessed and equal to the occasion, covered his companion's silence by giving her some account of the place, of how he came to know it and to hire the shooting; how, also, he had been laid up with a sprained ankle two years before, and what an excellent nurse Mrs. Morrison had been.

Marjory forced herself to make monosyllabic replies. She felt that Ellis' keen eyes were looking her through and through, that he divined her profound uneasiness, and that he would probably take some decisive step to put an end to it.

As soon as the cloth was removed and they were left to themselves, Ellis made Marjory write a post-card announcing her safe arrival, and promising a letter in a few days when the family had removed to Edinburgh. He then asked her to draw nearer the fire. She stood up and approached it.

"Dearest," he said, "putting his arm round her and drawing her gently to him, "it distresses me to see your suppressed agitation. You are infinitely plucky. I cannot say how I admire the courage with which you bear up, when another girl—most of girls—would give way to hysterics. Let us cut short this uncomfortable transition state; once you are irrevocably my wife you will be calmer and more at rest. As I told you, a marriage in Scotland requires only the declaration of the parties that they take each other as husband and wife before two witnesses. Let me call up Mrs. Morrison and her son; they are quite prepared. I have explained to them the object of our journey here. I have the wedding ring," he took it from his pocket, "and in a few minutes we shall be bound to each other for life."

"What! now, here, this evening?" exclaimed Marjory, growing

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"Why? Marriage was the object of our journey here, and the sooner it is accomplished the better for you especially."

There was an indescribable tone of mastery in his voice which thrilled Marjory with terror, but she struggled to be composed and firm.

"Such haste is unbecoming," she said; "it would seem strange to the people of the house, though, indeed, it must *all* seem strange. Besides, there is no clergyman; and to be married without a clergyman is *too* heathenish. Do not ask me to consent to anything so repugnant."

She had drawn away from him as she spoke. A frown knit his brow for an instant, but he quickly banished it and said in a care-softened tone:

"My dear love, is it not foolish to stick at a trifle now, when you have gone so far? I explained the nature of a Scotch marriage to you, and the advantages it possessed for persons in our position; you seemed to understand, and made no objection to it."

"I never understood there was to be no clergyman. I knew we were not to be married in church; I understood that there were to be two witnesses, but I thought a clergyman would certainly be here to give us a blessing."

"But, Marjory, there is no minister within five or six miles. It is impossible to fetch him this evening."

"Of course it is; but there is really no need for hurry. Besides

"My dearest child," he interrupted, "you do not understand; be guided by me. I am acting for the best; I cannot listen to your scruples, they are weak and unworthy of you. I am now your protector, and my will ought to have weight with you. I am ready to take all responsibility. I must *insist* on having my own way in this."

He stretched out his hand to the bell-rope. There was such resolution and authority in his voice and look that Marjory quailed. It was only for a second, gathering up her forces by a supreme effort, she laid her trembling fingers on his arm.

"Stop!" she cried, "I am *quite* determined not to be married except by a clergyman."

Ellis let his hand drop and his face grew hard; they stood looking at each other in silence. "If we are already so opposed in idea," resumed Marjory in an unsteady voice, which grew firmer as she proceeded, "it would be wiser *not* to unite ourselves irrevocably. I have been weak in allowing you to over-rule my deep repugnance to a secret marriage,—now that I have gone so far my dread of it, of all the difficulties it may lead to, increases every moment. I do

beseech you, Mr. Ellis, do not persist—let us stop—before it is too late.”

Ellis had gazed at her intently while she spoke. “It is too late,” he returned with a harsh laugh. “Do you not see the absurdity of your own proposition? Suppose I were willing to give you up, after risking so much to win you, losing sight of principles that have hitherto guided me, after scheming, lying for your sake, how are you to extricate yourself? How account for your return?—would you venture on an avowal of your experimental trip with me? You must know enough of life to be aware that such an incident would not be to your credit—in the eyes of the strait-laced.”

Marjory coloured to the roots of her hair—her throat and ears were dyed with the vivid blush his words evoked—while she quivered as if a blow had been dealt her. “Better risk *anything* than life-long regret,” she said with the courage of indignation. “I could write to my stepmother and say that the place and the people were not what I like, and return home.”

Ellis looked at her with a moment's hesitation, then walked the length of the room and back; stopping opposite her he said in a softer tone, “No, Marjory you could *not* face such an ordeal as that; moreover I cannot part with you. I do not suppose you have the faintest notion how cruel you are; I am half inclined to wish I had never seen you. Why don't you love me? Why do I love you? I cannot answer either question. Sweet Marjory, be kind to me and to yourself—if you leave me now—if you return as Marjory Acland to your father's house, I tell you, you do not know the consequences of your own act. I cannot explain.”

“I am deeply, deeply grieved—I am ashamed of myself,” cried Marjory, struggling with the sobs that would rise in her throat. “If you are really so fond of me I will wait for you as long as you like—until you think it prudent to marry; I will never look at any one else, never, I promise. Wouldn't that do?”—beseechingly, yet a little more calmly.

“No! you strange, incomprehensible, charming girl,” cried Ellis. “It will *not* do! Let you leave me now?—on the very brink of the happiness I have longed for, and dared so much to win? What do you think I am made of? You force me to be almost brutal. Put all these follies out of your mind; accept the destiny you agreed to yesterday—and be my wife; for by heaven or hell, whichever is the most appropriate oath,” he added with a sneer at his own unusual energy of speech, “I will *not* let you go.”

Marjory shrunk as if he had struck her. She did not speak—she stood quite still—one hand pressed on her heart, her reproachful, entreating eyes fixed upon his face. Her brain was in a whirl, but through all the dire confusion of thought and feeling a voice—not her own—seemed repeating in her inmost heart, “I will not stay; I will not stay.”

Again Ellis took a turn to and fro, then, pausing beside Marjory, who stood by the fire, he exclaimed: "I hope this is the last unpleasantry before we start on our honeymoon. I daresay you think me anything but chivalrous. Believe me, I am not a bad fellow. I will love and cherish you as much as the most psalm-singing professor of proprieties could, possibly more; but there are a few points on which I will not bear opposition. I am willing to yield to your whim about having a clergyman to marry us; it involves a foolish delay, but I wish to please you as far as I can. To-morrow morning I shall send early to catch the nearest minister."

Marjory bent her head in silence; she resolved with instinctive prudence not to commit herself by further speech; she wanted to go away to think in solitude.

She put her hand to her head and murmured that she was "awfully weary."

"I daresay you are, poor child," said Ellis compassionately. "I will explain matters to Mrs. Morrison and get information respecting the minister. Meantime you had better go and rest. I daresay you will be glad to be alone. I will send Jessie to you. Good-night, my love. Do not think unkindly of me. Remember that you have virtually given yourself to me by your acceptance of my scheme." He drew her to him and softly kissed her eyes, instantly releasing her when she strove to free herself. He walked to the door, paused, looked at her, and went out. "I think I have made her understand," he mused as he went in search of Mrs. Morrison, "that resistance is useless. It would indeed be a *fiasco* were she to escape me *now*. But though she is plucky enough, she dare not leave me; besides, she does not like to wound me. I do not think she will give me much trouble in future."

Marjory threw herself into a large chair and covered her face with her hands. She was terribly in the power of this resolute and unscrupulous man. How unscrupulous the bold ingenious plot by which he managed to withdraw her from her father's house proved. Would to God she were back there! Ellis might be kind, but, oh! he could be cruel; she was sure he could. "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Mr. Ellis said you wanted me." Jesse interrupted her with these words.

"Oh; yes, thank you; I want to go to bed, I have a headache."

"Well, it is full half-nine, and how people can sit up late I cannot think; they can't have much to do in the day. I've just been hunting my little brother away to his bed; he'd read his book far into the night if he were let."

"I am sorry to trouble you, but I don't think I could find my way."

"Eh! I am proud to help you. And so we are not to have the wedding to-night?"

"Oh! no, it is far too late. You have a little brother, then." Marjory went on quickly to change the subject as she followed her guide down the dim passage which was but faintly lighted by the candle she held.

"Yes; the eldest and the youngest are lads, but wee Jammie is a cripple, poor fellow! and sadly spoiled."

"My pupil that was to have been," said Marjory to herself, thinking of the hopefulness with which she had answered the letters that lured her into her present trying position. How was it that yesterday the prospect of marrying Ellis did not seem by any means overwhelming or dreadful, whereas *now* it was appalling—a very nightmare of terrible anticipations? Finding no solution to this riddle she looked fearfully round her large gloomy chamber, and the immense necessity for self-control being removed, burst into a passion of tears and sobs.

Jessie shut the door in hot haste. "Preserve us!" she exclaimed. "He must not hear you take on that way; and the poor gentleman that delighted to get you safe away! Take a drop of water—you're just fairly done. No one will come here to disturb you. Well, if you can't stop I'll call my mother," and while Marjory continued to sob almost hysterically, though she tried hard to stop herself, Jessie ran to call her mother, who came as soon as she got rid of Ellis.

"And what's it all about, my lamb?" she asked, coming into the room, a phial of sal volatile in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other.

"It is over fatigue and—and stupid nervousness," faltered Marjory, who was beginning to recover herself.

"Ay, ay! they do say this volatile stuff is composing, but I would try a sup of whisky and a little cold water—it's just fine for the nerves."

"Thank you very much; cold water will do—and then if I could get to sleep."

"Ay! that you will, tired as you are. I suppose you just had a few words about the minister. You'll excuse me if I am saying more than I ought; but it's bad to begin with contradictions. He's awful put out—I can see that—and ever since he began to talk of the young lady he was to bring he has been quite another creature. He is a proud, masterful man. You'll excuse me talking so free; but you are just a bit lassie, and I feel for you; but you ought na' to have stood out about a minister—it looked like doubting him, and there was Willie and me in our best clothes, just waiting to be called to be your witnesses—for Mr. Ellis had warned us to be ready—you'd have been tied up safe enough without a minister."

"Well, you see, I did not think so," murmured Marjory, not quite pleased with this freedom of speech.

"Anyhow," resumed Mrs. Morrison, placing her phial on the

table and her whisky bottle on the floor. "The boy is to be away first thing in the morning to fetch Mr. Blair, who is the minister of Haggisburn—the nearest manse. He'll be here by ten o'clock," this with an air of encouragement.

"By ten o'clock," repeated Marjory faintly.

"Well, well, you are better now, my launnie, so I'll leave you to get your rest; would you like a night-light?"

"Yes, I should, and ho! Mrs. Morrison, if I am not asking too much, would your daughter mind sleeping with me to-night? The room is so large, and I feel so awfully strange and lonely."

"Ay! that she shall. I'll send her up in a few minutes. Tomorrow is churning day and she'll have her hands full. Shall I unstrap your box?"

At last she left the room. It was an infinite comfort to Marjory to know she would not be alone in the silent watches of the night. She had rather taken a fancy to Jessie's bright honest face. Dare she trust her and try to gain her assistance towards the escape she meditated? No; it would be too rash. If the minister was to arrive at ten, what chance had she?

When at last her young companion and herself were safely locked in for the night, Marjory was calmer and able to think more clearly.

Jessie was still excited and talkative; such an event as a private marriage did not happen every day in their quiet house.

Neither of the girls were disposed to sleep.

"You're waking?" whispered Jessie, as Marjory lay watching the dancing shadows made by the fire-light.

"Yes."

"Well, for fear you should be put out and disappointed tomorrow, I may tell you it's my belief that Jack will no find the minister. I know Jean (that's the housekeeper at the manse) told our Maggie the minister was away to Glasgow for the christ'nin of his sister's bairn; but I wouldn't lose heart for that,—there's Mr. MacGuckin of Caldercleugh, he's like to be at home."

"And how far is he away?"

"Nigh ten miles up a hilly road."

"Indeed!"

"Oh! don't you fear; our brown mare would go there and back under the four hours even with a rest."

"What is that?" asked Marjory with a start, as a shrill, distant scream broke the silence.

"It's only the railway whistle, the wind must have gone round to the north-east; the line comes much nearer than the station, it bends round by the burn at the head of the wood."

"Does the railway go to Edinburgh?"

"Yes, it is only an hour-and-a-half by the quick train. Have you ever been in Edinburgh?"

"No."

"Eh—it's a grand town ; but Mr. Ellis will be taking you there likely to-morrow."

"I suppose the train we came by to-day goes on to Edinburgh?"

"Yes ; when we go we always take the seven-fifty, it gives a long day."

"That is dreadfully early."

"Ah ! well, you see, there is not another till twelve forty-five, and that is a slow train, so we'd need to sleep in the town. You'll like to see Edinburgh?"

"Very much indeed. I have heard it is a beautiful city."

"You may say so. There's the Castle, and Scott's monument, and Holyrood, etc., etc." Jessie ran on awhile, but not receiving a reply, she stopped, thinking her companion was asleep "Poor lassie," she thought. "She *did* take on. I wonder what she found to cry about, when she's going to marry a grand gentleman like Mr. Ellis, and he so fond of her? I wonder if she is a great heiress? anyway she has has no jewellery," and Jessie gradually passed from conjecture into profound slumber.

Her companion, though keeping very still, was intensely awake. She was considering eagerly, painfully, her chance to escape.

If the clergyman first named by Jessie was at home and obeyed the summons, Marjory felt that she *could* not for very shame refuse to go through the ceremony of marriage. She could not so cruelly disappoint and insult Ellis as to reject him in the face of the man he had brought to unite them. No. It would be braver and more honest to stand to her deeper convictions in the face of all difficulties, but she knew she had not courage to do this. Then where should she drift? to be the suppressed wife of a man she did not love, whom she would disappoint, and disappointed, Ellis could and would be cruel! she felt it,—she knew it by the prophetic instinct of a sensitive nature. If she could only get away unseen when Ellis was occupied elsewhere,—it would be cowardly, even base, but she would do it. It would be better for both of them in the end. As to arriving at any decision, that was impossible; she had not even the will to decide. So she worked wearily round and round the same circle of thoughts, diversified by miserable conjectures as to what was to become of her *after*—by mental counting up of the money she had in her purse, just enough to take her home, and by repeating over to herself Dick's address in Edinburgh. Oh, oh! if she could take shelter with him! Should she ever accomplish it?

When undressing, Marjory had found the letter she received yesterday. Was it yesterday or two years ago? and reading it over a gleam of hope came to her with the idea of Dick being within reach; painful as it would be to make such a confession, she *could*

tell him anything. At last, when night was nearly over, she fell asleep from exhaustion, and slept profoundly, dreamlessly.

It was broad daylight when she woke, and Jessie stood by her bed with a cup of tea, which Marjory found very refreshing. Having replied to the girl's kindly inquiries as to how she felt, Marjory could not force herself to say more; the subject on which she would fain have had information was too tremendously important. Her eyes no doubt spoke for her, as Jessie said with a smile, "Indeed I have no news for you yet; Jock did not get away till near nine; my brother said it was no use disturbing the minister before his breakfast. He'll be back soon, though, for it's near ten now. Will you get up to your breakfast, or shall I bring it here?"

"I have a shocking headache, Jessie," returned Marjory, resolved, if possible, to avoid seeing Ellis till the last moment; "I think I shall keep quite here."

"Ay! do," said Jessie sympathetically; and taking the empty cup she left the room.

While Marjory, whose complaint of headache was fully justified, was trying to arrange her thoughts and praying earnestly for help and guidance, Mrs. Morrison came in with a note in her hand.

"I am sorry," she exclaimed, sitting down by the bedside; "but Mr. Baird is away to Glasgow, so you must just wait for the minister of Caldercleugh—and he cannot be here before the afternoon. Mr. Ellis is wearying to know how you are; there's a note from him."

Marjory opened and read as follows, while Mrs. Morrison very deliberately studied her face:

"It is most unfortunate, dearest, that the minister nearest at hand is absent. I am just starting in search of another at some distance, thinking that if I do not appear in person he might decline to undertake a long drive for so small a motive. Possibly reflection and daylight may have presented a different view of matters from what you entertained last night? If so, tell me; and we can carry out my original plan. I trust you are calmer, and refreshed by a night's rest. Will you not see me before I start? and *must* I start at all? Ever your devoted—R. V. E."

In reply Marjory hastily wrote:

"I cannot come round to *your* views. I *do* wish you would agree to mine. Forgive all the trouble I cause you. I cannot see you just now."

"You will give that to Mr. Ellis?"

"Yes; and he is looking awful bad. I don't think he has closed

an eye all night. And now he is just going off to Caldercleugh to fetch Mr. MacGuckin; he is ready to do anything to please you. Indeed, and you may be a proud lady."

"Oh! yes; I daresay I ought to be," cried Marjory, dying to get rid of her hostess, her invention strung to sudden life and activity by this scarce expected turn of affairs.

"And what would you like for your breakfast?"

"Anything—nothin'. I have had a cup of tea; that is enough."

"Indeed, an' it's not; you must any way have a new-laid egg and some cream scones."

"I assure you I do not want anything. Please take that note to Mr. Ellis."

Directly she was alone Marjory rose and began to dress. She had eagerly leaped to the conclusion she dared not attempt to reach the night before. It would be one o'clock before Ellis could possibly return; by that time she must have eluded Mrs. Morrison and her daughter; have reached Strathlogan, and be on the road to Edinburgh—to deliverance. It was base, perhaps cruel to Ellis; but she could not help it—it was a question of life or death to her.

"Eh! but you are locking another woman," cried Mrs. Morrison, who had tapped for admission, and now entered bearing a tray on which reposed the good things she had prescribed.

"Well, that poor gentleman is away," she continued, evidently considering Ellis an ill-treated, long-suffering lover. "But he'll be right glad to find a bright, bonnie bride awaiting him. I'll have a nice bit of lunch ready as soon as he and the minister come back. Mr. MacGuckin's a learned man I'm told, and a soond classical scholar, but he likes a good dinner for a' that; then you can be married and a', in time for the evening train to Edinburgh; at least I believe that's where you're going."

"Yes; to Edinburgh," repeated Marjory.

"There, now, try and eat a bit, and when you ring Jessie will come and help to sort ye."

Left alone, Marjory tried to steady her nerves; she finished dressing, and made up a small parcel of necessaries which she could easily carry under her rain cloak; she re-arranged and carefully locked her box; she counted her money. Then she rang, and awaited the appearance of Jessie, who escorted her to the room where she had dined the day before.

It had evidently been Ellis' sitting-room. Books, pamphlets, newspapers and writing materials gave an inhabited aspect. A large square projecting window looked out over a wide stretch of undulating country to the right, a plantation of some extent sheltered the house on the north-east.

It was a clear, dry, grey day, and Marjory felt that decision had given her strength and courage. How to evade the people of the house puzzled her. How to find her way was another difficulty.

"What a fine view," she observed, walking over to the window. "It was so dark and wet last night I could not see anything."

"Oh, it's fine and open, and away over the hill there's a grand moor just full of birds."

"Which way has Mr. Ellis gone?"

"Over the upland before you and across a corner of the moor. I am glad it's still, for it's a bitter cold drive on a windy day."

"Is that the road we came by last night?"

"Oh no! As soon as you pass the wood and out of the gate you turn to the left and follow the road along the hollow; that's the road you came last night, and maybe you'll go back by to-day if you take the train to Edinburgh. If I hadn't to attend to the butter I would take you out for a turn to see the place, but mother is in a hurry, she wants it finished off before dinner."

"Oh, do not mind me. I'll shall find a book. Indeed, my head still aches. As soon as my room is ready I will go and lie down and get a little sleep."

"That's right. I'll make Maggie do it at once. Then I'll come and call you, for you'll likely be waiting to put on another gown."

"Thank you. And where is the dairy? I should like to see the dairy later."

"It's right at the other end of the house, by the kitchen and the farmyard" (she pointed to the left). "You'll not be frightened if the house is still, for no one will come to disturb you."

"No. I shall be glad to be quiet."

"There's mother calling me. You ring if you want anything." She hurried away.

Marjory stood in deep thought, marshalling the facts she had ascertained; first, the 12.45 Edinburgh train stopped at Strathlogan; next, she had learned the way. Lastly, the family would all be engaged for some hours at the other side of the house—chance favoured her. She stole noiselessly into the hall to consult the clock. She would give herself an hour and a half to accomplish the two miles and a "bit." Once outside the gate, no one would recognize her. But oh! that long, lonely walk. She would not think more of its terrors. Now was the moment for action, if she missed it she would be lost.

She carefully folded up the sparkling ring, which she had worn scarce twenty-four hours, in paper and inclosed it with a few words in an envelope addressed to Ellis:

"I am behaving badly to you, I know," she wrote, "and I most humbly ask your forgiveness. I cannot marry you. Hereafter you will be thankful I did not. I will write in a day or two and tell you where I am. Trust me not to betray you to any one. Again I beg you to forgive me. I can hardly forgive myself.—MARJORY."

This she left on the chimney-piece when she had dressed and thrown her rain cloak over the parcel she carried. Then she locked the door of her room and placed the key under the letter

"If they come and find the door locked, they will think I am asleep and not look for me; though no one has a right to stop me."

All was profoundly still. The front door was open, as it usually is in country houses. She ventured forth. Not a creature was to be seen. She stole past the corner of the house, and keeping in the shelter of the wood, followed a road which ran beside it till she reached the gate, when she turned to the left and walked as swiftly as her quick-throbbing heart would allow towards the station and liberty. Of the gloomy, forbidding aspect of the distant future, she did not allow herself to think.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STORM STAYED.

Of the three young creatures over whom Mrs. Acland had exercised so evil an influence, the one least injured by it was her own son. This was not owing to any good-will on his mother's side.

Her cruel insinuation that he had been guilty of theft had gone no further than their family circle, save to old Mr. Cross, in whom Dick had confided. He had escaped from his mother's oppressive presence, from a profession he disliked to congenial work, and, after the first year of hard struggle, to sympathetic companionship.

From the time he encountered Brand fortune had smiled upon him. He was singularly attracted to his father's old comrade, and felt bound to him by more than gratitude, by the keenest sympathy, by a subtle harmony of nature which underlay considerable difference of opinion.

But though they had been in close communication for several months, and Brand talked frankly on most topics, Dick was completely ignorant of his previous life. As to his past career, Brand never uttered a syllable, and seeing that he did not wish to speak on the subject, Dick avoided it with equal care. They suited each other admirably, and the elder man revealed, in conversation with his young companion, some literary and much worldly knowledge, which he kept to himself in his intercourse with ordinary acquaintances.

When Dick readily obeyed his summons, he was shocked to find Brand looking extremely ill, suffering from severe neuralgic pains and terribly depressed in spirits, the results of a bad cold.

"I feel better already," said Brand next day, after a long talk about the work on which he was engaged and the particular portion of it in which Dick could assist him. "I have grown suddenly anxious to live. Two years ago, if any one told me that I would try to stay upon the stage instead of accepting the very first opportunity of making my exit, I should have laughed at the idea. But so it is."

"Then I have no doubt you'll pull yourself together," said Dick. "I think 'will' has something to do with recovery. It's a good sign your taking a relish for life again."

"It isn't a relish," said Brand thoughtfully; "it is an interest. I fancy I can be of some use to *you* in the next two years."

"You have been of the greatest use already," returned Dick, a good deal touched by the quiet earnestness of his manner. "Where should I have been if I had not fallen in with you?"

"I think I have been a help to you. But you would have got on without me; you have some of the qualities which insure success. I particularly want to do this job of Lord Beaulieu's in France; it will be a great thing for you. I shall leave as much as I can to you, and it will make you known to a good set of people. Then the climate will suit me. I love the south of France and Italy. That's the reason I want to finish my present undertaking. This is a cruel climate, and it's not so pleasant working for Sir Peter Tulloch as for Lord Beaulieu, who was himself an artist; so you must push the men on."

The scene of their labours was a few miles out of Edinburgh, and Dick went there early each day by train, returning when evening closed in. The first morning Brand accompanied him and explained all the details he wished to carry out. After, he was very irregular, sometimes keeping indoors all day, though certainly better and more cheerful.

The first four or five days were especially pleasant to Dick Cranstoun. His work interested him; he had a pride in carrying out Brand's plans, while the return to a cosy, cheerful evening, a thoughtful book and a pipe, or a rambling confidential talk with Brand about art politics, made the hours fly fast.

Sometimes conversation turned on the Acland family. Brand was always interested in them. He was concerned to hear that Marjory was going to leave her home.

"She's not the stuff to make a governess of," he said. "It is true I only spoke to her once. I saw her again at Beaulieu, when she did not see me. But from what you tell me, as well as the little I saw that evening, I should say she's not the stuff to make a governess of; she is not mechanical enough. Why, every thought speaks out in her face. She is the making of a charming woman, or I am much mistaken. I wish she were happily married. It is possible she may throw herself away on some worthless fellow; girls who

have unhappy homes often do, and she is an attractive creature." Brand sighed.

"Poor Marge! I *should* be sorry if anything went wrong with Marge; she can be so miserable and so joyous. Then she is as true as steel."

"A rare quality in man or woman. But there has not been much to try her as yet."

"Small things show the disposition," rejoined Dick.

The day after this conversation Dick returned rather earlier than usual, feeling somewhat tired and looking forward to his evening with quiet pleasure. He let himself in with a latch-key, and turned into their sitting-room, expecting to find Brand beside the fire. To his amazement a lady occupied his armchair. Dick, with a feeling of bewilderment, mechanically closed the door. At the sound the lady started up and flew to him with outstretched arms, which she threw round his neck.

It was Marjory—Marjory herself, deadly pale, her eyes looking large and strained, her lips quivering. "Oh, Dick! I thought you would never come. You *will* help me; you will not think me a wretch?"

"Marjory! Why, what has happened? Of course I'll do all I can for you. What has gone wrong?" He removed her arms gently from his neck, but held her hands tightly in his own.

"I have done wrong, Dick. I went away yesterday *with* Mr. Ellis from my father's house; to-day I have run away *from* him to—to you," and she laughed hysterically.

"Good God, Marjory!" exclaimed Dick, his own colour changing. "What have you done?"

"I have done wrong—very wrong—I tell you," she repeated feverishly. "It is a long story; you must listen patiently before you condemn me."

"You ran away with Ellis?" asked Dick, his face darkening, and gradually taking in the assertion which appalled him. "Then was your story about going to be a governess false?"

"No, no, Dick; I never told you a lie. I never told any one a lie. But I have *acted* one. Do not be angry with me. I have no friend in the world but you, Dick. Just hear what I have to tell."

"Sit down, Marge; why, you can scarcely stand. Yes, tell me everything."

He put her in the armchair again, and drew a chair beside her, his eyes eagerly fixed on her face as he devoured her words. She spoke low and quickly, but gave a clear account of her acquaintance with Ellis, of her amazement at his proposal; then of her return home, her illness, her unhappiness, the reappearance of Ellis, and the subsequent events. When she came to the miserable uncertainty, the terror and repugnance which grew upon her during the journey, and reached its highest pitch when she found herself away

from every one she had ever known, in the lonely house at Strathlogan, she grasped Dick's hand in both hers, and bowed her head upon it; her voice was broken, but she shed no tears, the tension of waiting for his verdict was too great.

"So I got away and came here," she ended without looking up.

"Ellis is a scoundrel!" cried Dick; adding with a grim smile, "How awfully sold he must have been when he came back and found his bird flown."

"I am sorry for that too. Oh! I have behaved badly all round. You may not believe it, but Mr. Ellis was very fond of me; if he had asked my father, and married me openly, I might have grown fond of him: that was why I went away with him. No one else cared a straw for me, and he did; he did indeed."

"I believe it"—shortly—"but not in the right way. He should not have taken advantage of your unhappiness to induce you to do what we would have been ready to shoot another man for even mentioning to a sister of his own. I should enjoy horsewhipping the fellow."

"Don't abuse him. I have decided him, and why should I punish him for my own weakness? Can you forgive me, Dick?"

"I have nothing to forgive, Marge. It was awfully foolish of you to listen such a proposal, but I can understand the temptation. Thank God, you had resolution enough to come away. It makes me shiver to think what you have escaped. You must stay and rest here."

"And you will not let Mr. Ellis come here? You will not let him take me away?"

"Let him?" and Dick pressed her hands with such force that she could have cried out. "You are safe with me. I mean us, for I must speak to Brand; he is very wise."

"No, you must not," said Marjory firmly, as she withdrew her hands, looking straight into Dick's eyes as she spoke. "I will never betray Mr. Ellis to any one, except to you, because I *must*. If the story of his wishing to marry me came to Uncle Carteret's ears, it would ruin him. Indeed it would do him no good in any direction, and I will not harm him if I can help it."

"Marjory," indignantly, "I believe you love the brute."

"Love him? I almost wish I did. I should have trusted him then, and had a little bit of happiness, for a while at any rate, whatever came after. How can you say so, after all I have told you?"

"Girls are such strange creatures, they say, I know nothing of them."

"Well, that does not matter, only I will *not* have any one told about him; promise me, Dick, dear Dick."

"But I can't all at once, we must think what is best to do. Anyway, Marge, I *am* glad to see you, though you look so white

and worn, poor little Marge! Have they given you anything to eat or drink?"

"I want nothing, only to settle with you about going back, for"—with a shivering sigh and closing her eyes—"I have made up my mind to go back."

"What! to Falkland Terrace?"

"Yes. It will be awful, but I will do it."

"And face my mother? Why, she will never allow such a 'raw' to heal."

"I deserve some punishment for so—so wild, so dreadful an act as running away with a comparative stranger. Oh, Dick! I am so overwhelmed with shame when I think of it. I will bear everything the best way I can. I intend writing to Mrs. Acland that the place is unsuitable, intolerable, and return the day after I write. You see, they know at home that I was to come into Edinburgh with Mrs. Morrison, so far that is provided for; for the rest I shall say I was uncomfortable, and explain nothing. Oh! I can hold my tongue if I choose. Then I will teach Louise, and try and make up for my haste and imprudence. I shall be more patient because I know I do not deserve —"

"You are a thousand times too good for them—for any of us," interrupted Dick, infinitely touched by her humility. "What chance had your inexperience against the scheming of a villain like Ellis?"

"You must not abuse him. I ought to have had sense enough to judge, and"—growing crimson—"my womanly instincts ought to have kept me from listening to what I knew was wrong. I do not want to shirk my own responsibility. But do you not see, Dick, that the least said about such an affair the better? Promise me you will not tell Mr. Brand."

"Perhaps it would be better not. If you have the courage to face going back,—why, it is the best thing you can do."

"Oh! I shall do it"—in a tone of despairing resolution—"all I ask is a sacred promise never to tell any one what I have confided to you. When George returns I may tell *him*. I cannot have a secret from him. Do you know the idea of deceiving you both held me back more than anything. Oh! it is such a relief to be with you, to tell you everything," and she laid her head against his shoulder."

Dick kept very still. "Thank God! you have escaped," he murmured. "I was always afraid of that fellow."

"Afraid of whom? Mr. Ellis?—why?"

"I don't know. He was always about with you."

"How do you know that?"

"Whenever you talked to me or wrote to me, you always mentioned being here or there with Ellis."

"Did I? Well, I used to dislike him."

"You don't dislike him *now*?"

"No; I could not dislike any one that seemed so fond of me; it would be ungrateful, Dick."

"He does not deserve much gratitude from you."

"No one else seemed to care much about me."

"Do George, and I count for nothing?"

"No, no; but how little I shall ever see of you." She stopped abruptly, and there was a moment's silence.

"I must explain your appearance in some way to Brand," exclaimed Dick in a troubled voice.

"I have seen him—and explained myself," she returned. "When I came here, the old lady who opened the door did not seem inclined to let me in, even when I said I was your sister; then I asked for Mr. Brand, and she brought me in here. Mr. Brand was so astonished. He was very nice and kind. I tried to seem calm; I told him about finding the engagement I had undertaken unsuitable, and coming to you for help and advice; he said you would be in about six, and that both of you would be glad to help me in any way. Then he offered me tea; I could not take it, so he went to settle with the landlady about a room for me, I think, and I sat counting the moments till you came."

"It has been an awful business for you altogether," said Dick, after a moment's pause, "and I wish—I do wish, Marge—you had not to go back home."

"Oh! so do I. It seems more than I am able to face, but I must. It is my only way to escape—unless, indeed, Mr. Brand or any one could find me something to do here?"

"That, I fear, is out of the question. How long can you stay, Marge?"

"Till Monday or Tuesday. It would be too soon to seem to give up before. This is Thursday."

"Well, you must rest and gather courage—and then try for another engagement. I should feel happier if I knew you were out of the house—your father's house."

"I don't feel as if I should ever have heart or courage again," said Marjory.

"Perhaps old Carteret —" Dick was beginning, when Brand opened the door and walked in, saying, "I hope I have left you long enough to discuss your affairs. Now, I think it is high time Miss Acland had something to eat—she looks tired out. I have settled with Mrs. MacKibbin about a room for her as long as she chooses to honour us forlorn bachelors by staying here." He smiled in a kindly paternal fashion as he spoke.

"Thank you," cried Dick; "I have heard all my sister had to tell me, and think she was quite right in leaving the people she went to."

"What a shame to drag her all this way north—for nothing,"

said Brand lightly. "Would you like to see your room before tea?"

Marjory gladly accepted the suggestion, and, accompanied by the landlady, left her hosts with a whispered reminder of his promise to Dick.

"She has had a start?" said Brand interrogatively.

"Yes; she came in for rather an unpleasant affair, but she has insisted on my promising to keep the thing secret."

"Oh! very well. Least said soonest mended is often the case; the sooner she is safe at home the better."

"I wish she hadn't to go there," cried Dick, who was leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, and his head on his hand in a despondent attitude. "It is too bad that a slight, tender little creature like that, who is all fire and feeling, should be driven into a corner and obliged to escape from her father's house as if from prison."

"Ay!" returned Brand, lighting a cigarette, "life is desperately hard on some women. Your sister won't mind my smoking?"

"No; she used not to object to a pipe, unless she was *very cross* with us."

"The worst is," continued Brand, "that it's the best women who generally, indeed almost always, go to the wall. I've seen the the hard, selfish ones, the cool hands, whose adamant natures are sheathed in the velvety soft-seeming of exterior timidity and shrinking, clinging, flattering helplessness, ride over the roughest waves to success and prosperity. This poor young thing is the right sort. When she came in here to-day I could see she had had a great shock of some sort. Oh! I don't want to know what it was. I could be no help to her; but she pulled herself together as pluckily, as if she had a man's spirit in that slender frame of hers. What a fine pair of eyes she has! Gad! if I had a daughter like that I would never let her out of my sight, and I'd work my soul out to make her comfortable. I am a tolerably keen observer now, after having been taken in often enough, and I'd be thankful for a daughter like her," pointing to the door with the cigarette which he took from his mouth.

Dick's eyes lit up with pleasure as he listened to this eulogium, and the sweet grave smile which was peculiar to him parted his lips, showing his white teeth under the soft golden-brown moustache which had grown so thickly since he had parted with Marjory on the miserable day when he went forth to the battle of life. "Yes, Marge is wonderfully plucky; I wish we could keep her with us—she looks awfully cut up."

The entrance of a raw-looking Highland servant girl with wild black hair, who proceeded with a good deal of clatter to lay the table, interrupted their conversation, and Dick left the room.

When Marjory joined them, she was looking more cheerful and

composed, a grateful sense of the rest and security soothed her; she was satisfied that she had done wisely—if not for Ellis, certainly for herself—ay! for him, too. It was such a blessed relief, too, to have no barrier of concealment between herself and Dick; then she was with kind, frank friends, and free from all the horrible, painful embarrassment of expressive looks and love-making.

“Come, my dear Miss Acland,” said Brand, placing a chair for her, “you must, if not too tired, pour out tea. It is no end of a treat to see a young lady pour out tea. A teapot without a woman to preside over it is only a melancholy reminder of past joys and privileges. Dick will lose his manners if he goes on always *tete-a-tete* with a miserable worn-out old misanthrope like myself.”

“I’m sure you are no misanthrope, Mr. Brand,” said Marjory, looking kindly into his dark, sleepy, smiling eyes, “or I should not feel so much at home with you. I fancy your misanthropy is all for yourself. Do you take sugar?”

She assumed the duties of administering tea with a pretty air of unaffected readiness, surprised at her own composure after the trials and emotions of the last twenty-four hours.

Brand did most of the talking. He insisted with kindly authority on his young guest eating some of the grouse which furnished their evening meal; he talked of the beauty and historic interest of Edinburgh, and promised to show her some of the principal lions on the following day. Marjory, though she listened well pleased, said very little, and soon after the table was cleared bid them good-night. “I feel as if I could sleep day and night,” she said; “I never was so tired before.”

“You must not get up till all hours to-morrow,” returned Dick, who had come out with her into the hall to light her candle.

“I suppose you go away early?”

“Yes; at half-past eight.”

“Then, Dick, I shall not see you before you go; and I *must* write to Mr. Ellis. I must, indeed,” this in a very low tone.

“Why? I do not see the necessity.”

“But I promised; and it would leave him in such cruel perplexity if he did not know what became of me. Oh! I must write, Dick. I will show you what I have written.”

“If you must, you must,” said Dick gloomily.

“You are not to be cross to me, for I cannot bear it,” slipping her arm through his and pressing against him.

Dick, looking down gravely and kindly into her eyes, murmured: “I never am cross to you, Marjory. Good-night. I trust you will rest well, little Marge.”

“All the same—he *was* a little cross,” thought Marjory, as she went upstairs to her room; “or perhaps it is that boys can’t bear to be cuddled.”

A delicious sense of security enabled Marjory to enjoy to the full

a night of profound sleep, which she sorely needed. Her wakening, therefore, after a moment of puzzled confusion, naturally brought her renewed courage and clearer thought.

She had made a terrible mistake. She had very nearly let herself be persuaded into doing what she knew to be wrong; but she need not allow this painful memory to overshadow her always. She would try to be wise and good and prudent, and so in some measure atone for her rash error. Above all, she was anxious to write to Ellis and acquaint him with her plans. She would like to finish with him clearly and distinctly.

As soon as she had dressed and breakfasted, finding that both Brand and Dick had gone out, she settled herself to write her letter. Many were the attempts she made, the notes she tore up, and she was but ill-pleased with what she finally wrote:

"I am staying here with my brother Dick," so ran her brief epistle; "On Monday I shall write to my stepmother, and say that I cannot remain with Mrs. Morrison, as I am unhappy and uncomfortable. On Tuesday I shall follow my letter before Mrs. A—— can answer it. No one, therefore, need ever know that you were with me, except Dick. I was obliged to tell him, but he has promised to keep the secret, and you *may* trust him. Now I want you to forgive me. I know I do not deserve that you should, but I shall be miserable if you do not. Had I only had the strength of mind to say 'No,' and stick to it, neither you nor I should have been in this uncomfortable position; so, believe me, I am very, very sorry. Write me a little word, and then we had better never hear of or see each other again. I am grieved to say good-bye thus, but you will forgive me and forget me, will you not?—M.A."

Poor Marjory shed some tears over this disjointed epistle, and put up an earnest prayer that she might never see his face again.

Faithful to her promise, she put the letter unclosed in her pocket, ready for Dick's inspection, and then she spent some time gazing out of the window, vaguely watching the scanty traffic and wondering at the steepness of the street.

She was calmer and braver than the day before, but not yet able to give her attention to a book. Presently, with a thrill of delight, she recognized Dick Cranston at the opposite side of the street. He seemed taller and broader and more important-looking than when he shared the light and shade of life in Falkland Terrace. Could she have ever dreamed that the despised "monster" would turn out so handsome a man? for there was nothing of the boy about him now.

"Brand let me off early," said Dick a few minutes later, coming quickly into the room. "He thought you would be lonely. We'll ask Mrs. McKibbon for some luncheon, and then talk a walk into the old town. It is well worth seeing."

"How good of him; how good you both are, to a sinner like

me!" cried Marjory, with one of her old bright smiles. "I do not deserve it, but then Mr. Brand does not know."

"No; and never shall through me. I believe you are right, Marge; this affair ought to be kept a secret."

"Will you look at my letter?" she asked timidly.

"I scarcely like to do so, yet perhaps I ought."

Marjory handed it to him, and he read it through slowly.

"He is getting off far too easy," he said, returning it to her. "I hope he will trouble you no more. To-morrow Brand will come back early to keep you company, and so you shall not be much alone."

Next morning, when her kind hosts left her, Marjory tried to read some of the books and magazines, a good supply of which lay about, but found that the restless uneasiness of yesterday had returned to gnaw her heart. How unwise, how precipitate she had been! and what terrible retribution awaited her in her return to her step-mother's rule. Oh, if Mrs. Acland only *knew*, what bitter use she would make of her knowledge."

No, she could not read, so she set to work to put the room in order and arrange the books. She was even meditating asking for a duster, when the Highland lassid suddenly flung the door open and said, "Here's a gentleman for you, mem." For an instant Marjory felt blind and dizzy; then she saw all too clearly that she was face to face with Ellis.

How white and stern he looked, as he stood silently gazing at her. Marjory unconsciously clasped her hands and waited for his words. She could not have spoken to save her life.

"I am not surprised that you find my presence somewhat painful and oppressive," Ellis said at last with a bitter laugh. "Few lovers have ever been so neatly tricked. I congratulate you on your power of keeping your own counsel, of making your clever plans. Of course, I had no notion you had cover so near at hand."

"I have no right to quarrel with anything you choose to say," returned Marjory sadly and humbly; "but, remember, I begged you, even at the last moment, to give up the marriage—to think well before you committed yourself irrevocably. Was it not better to run away, rather than let you marry a woman who did not, could not love you?"

"Why could you not love me, Marjory?" said Ellis advancing a few steps.

"I may answer by asking, Why did you love me? We cannot help ourselves. I am most unhappy when I think of having given you pain; but you will soon see that we are better apart. You will soon forget me."

"Never!" cried Ellis in a harsh tone, "never, Marjory. You have stamped the impression of yourself and your desertion too cruelly deep upon my soul. I wonder you did not fear rousing the enmity of the man you cheated so basely."

"Not so basely, Mr. Ellis," pleaded Marjory. "I never pretended I was in love with you."

"You promised to be my wife. Can you deny it?" Marjory dropped her head in silence. "However," resumed Ellis, "I did not come here to waste time in useless reproaches. From first to last, Marjory, you are the one weakness of my life. You have cost me what you can never repay. Now I want you to tell me clearly and truly what your intentions are."

"I have told you already. I cannot venture to return before Tuesday or Wednesday next; but I shall go home."

"Where I do not imagine you will have a very good time," replied Ellis. "What would Mrs. Acland say if she had an inkling of the truth? For what matter, what would *any one* say?"

"She need never know," cried Marjory, stung to self-assertion by his jeering tone, "unless *you* tell her; and from what you have said I imagine you would be as little disposed to betray the secret as myself."

"I am not inclined to betray either you or myself," said Ellis. "But whatever happens, and wherever you go, Marjory, the existence of *that* secret is a tie between us you can never break. In travelling with me, in remaining under the same roof with me, you have put yourself in my power. I may never use the power; but I will not promise to refrain. How will your future lover or husband like to know that you escaped from your home, under false pretences, with a man whom you did *not* marry?"

"No, thank God!" exclaimed Marjory, full roused. "Better face any fate than be tied to a man who can threaten as you do."

Ellis did not reply immediately; he walked to the door and returned.

"My natural indignation hurried me into too forcible expressions," he said. "You must, however, acknowledge you deserve little consideration at my hands. Yet I never forget that I am a man of honour, that is your best safeguard. Still, I should like to pay the debt I owe you. I feel a curious mingling of passion with a longing for revenge, a tolerably devilish mixture, I admit."

"I am more and more convinced that I did well in leaving you," returned Marjory, who had completely recovered composure. "I regret, I always shall regret, that I was weak enough to be persuaded against my better judgment; and I shall never cease to repent having caused you pain. Even now, if I can atone to you in *any* way, except marrying you secretly, I will."

"You will?" repeated Ellis, and stood a moment or two in profound thought. "I accept your offer. You said you were willing to be engaged to me, to wait until circumstances permitted me to marry openly. This is the atonement I will accept. It will be a long waiting, I warn you; there will be considerable periods of separation; but in spite of your strange conduct, Marjory, I can

trust you. I think you will keep your word. Will you promise to be my wife when I can claim you?"

"Is this your revenge?" asked Marjory, looking steadily at him, the vivid colour his appearance had called up fading away.

"Nay; it is the constancy of my affection. Don't you see I can not bear the idea of losing you; and would rather cling to a distant hope than give up all hope."

"Having treated you very badly, I suppose my conscience makes a coward of me, and I feel less ready to give you my promise than I was the other day."

"This is the only atonement I will accept, and I think I have a right to ask it."

"No doubt you have," cried Marjory, rallying her forces. "But, Mr. Ellis, be generous; forgive me, blot out all this unhappy affair. I am no fit wife for a diplomat, a future ambassador. You, too, as time goes by, will find an indefinite engagement a mill-stone round your neck. Now you are angry, and with justice. You will be happier if you throw this anger off and let us part friends."

She made a step towards him with a frank, winning smile and outstretched hand. Ellis grasped it hard.

"You do not know me, Marjory. You shall not trick me out of my rights. You accepted me for your husband. You committed yourself by trusting yourself to me. Had the minister I first sent for, been at hand, you could not have escaped. You took a base advantage of my effort to meet *your* wishes to frustrate mine. Now I only ask the performance of your own proposition, to wait till I can marry you openly. Surely such unwavering constancy deserves some acknowledgment."

"Let go my hand, Mr. Ellis; you hurt me," said Marjory faintly. "If I thought you really loved me, that you had not some idea of revenge in what you ask——"

"Love you," he cried, walking restlessly to and fro, "I never loved you more passionately; never felt more eager to call you mine. Sweetest Marjory, you are a rare woman, or promise to be one with your tenderness and resolution. You have wrung my heart; will you not heal it?"

"If, indeed, I can atone to you," she said falteringly, "why, I ought to give you my promise—a promise, perhaps, you will never claim."

"Do not lay *that* flattering unction to your soul. I will hold you fast. Come, repay me for all you have inflicted—bitterness you are incapable of measuring, profoundest mortification, cruel desertion. Atone as you offered by saying, 'Ralph, I promise to be your wife when you claim me.'"

"And you will quite forgive me if I do?" cried Marjory, overwhelmed with shame and penitence.

"Yes, quite," with a peculiar smile. In a low and broken voice she repeated the words.

There was a moment's silence. Then Ellis, who had thrown himself into a chair, exclaimed:—

"It was a dreadful breach of trust to tell that brother of yours, as you call him, you were going to marry me."

"I could not help it. I wanted his advice. I wanted some one to speak to; and he is both kind and safe, quite safe."

"I daresay he will hold his tongue for *your* sake," significantly. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he scolded me and abused you."

"Ah! very likely. Of course, so admirable a young man would not be guilty of such folly."

"Who? Dick? Oh, never."

"Well, perhaps he has not been tempted. He is a mere boy."

"He seems a man in sense and judgment to *me*."

"Ellis looked at her with a cynical smile. "I suppose you will complete your confidence by telling him of your solemn promise to me?"

"Of course I shall." Another pause.

"Let me put this ring on your finger once more," said Ellis rising and coming over to her.

"No, please do not. I could not account for it, and I will not lie if I can help it."

"Keep it then," holding it out to her.

"No, pray keep it for me. I would rather not have it."

"You will write to me, dearest?" There was something gone from his voice since they had journeyed north together; she could not define what.

"And how—where can I write to you?"

"Oh, I do not know. I must think and tell you. You must not write often. I will be guided by you in all small matters, sweetest Marjory. I shall be in London to-morrow. You will write to my club."

"Yes." She said it faintly.

"Then I must leave you, my shy bright-eyed bird. I wish I had the power to carry you with me. Good-bye; come, give me a kiss. I deserve one, and I *will* have it." He caught her in his arms, to her infinite terror, when the sound of the door handle turning made him release her quickly, before Dick Cranston was fairly in the room.

The two men stood for an instant eyeing each other in no friendly spirit. Marjory sank into Brand's favourite armchair.

"Mr. Ellis," said Dick coldly, "I cannot say I am glad to see you."

"Very likely not," returned Ellis readily; "yet I should have imagined that a young fellow like yourself would have sympathized

with, and even smiled at the imprudence of a senior. Are you so thoroughly a *brother* in spirit to Miss Acland that you cannot perceive how impossible it was for a man who loved her to resist securing at once his own happiness and her deliverance from a miserable home?"

"If you had really loved her you would not have persuaded her to take such a step," said Dick gravely.

"Counsels of perfection which are beyond me," returned Ellis with an irrepressible sneer. "You cannot deny that she has amply punished me for any indiscretion I have committed. However, she has forgiven me and I have forgiven her. I hope hereafter to win her esteem, and do not despair of even yours," and he smiled cynically. "So once more good-bye." He kissed her hand in a courtly, respectful fashion, and with a defiant bow to Dick, he left the room.

Marjory sat down suddenly by the table, on which she rested her elbows, burying her face in her hands.

"What a cool, insolent rascal!" cried Dick, looking angrily after him. "I was afraid he might force himself upon you. Never mind, Marge; he is gone now, and I hope you are clear of him."

Marjory was crying quietly, though bitterly, as if her heart would break.

"Don't give in now, Marge, after showing such pluck."

"Oh! I can't help it, Dick. I shall *never* be clear of Mr. Ellis. I have—he has made me, promise to marry him by-and-by, when he can marry openly."

"What!" cried Dick in so stern and angry a tone that Marjory ceased crying and lifted her head to look at him; "you have been so miserably weak as to let that sneering devil bamboozle you? I am amazed! I am disappointed. It is unworthy of you." He strode across to the fireplace, and, leaning against the mantelpiece, turned his back upon her.

"If you had heard all he said, Dick, you would understand that I could hardly refuse. You know how I tricked him; and before I promised that if he would not insist on marrying me then, I would wait for him as long as he liked. Now he says the only way to atone for my base treachery is to promise to marry him, and I felt so guilty before him that I would have promised anything."

"I would almost rather follow you to your grave than see you the wife of that man," said Dick with strong emotion. "There was more hatred than love in his eyes as he looked at you. You shall not marry him, Marge!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

DIPLOMACY.

MRS. ACLAND was sitting serene in the dining-room beside a bright fire, having interviewed cook, examined the larder and looked keenly at the condition of passages and scullery. She was justly proud of the prudence and success with which she had manœuvred her objectionable stepdaughter out of the house.

"And she shall not come back in a hurry," thought Mrs. Acland; "why should *she* be kept under a glass case, when her superior in looks and ability had to rough it with doubtful characters, and struggle up into respectability, in spite of such obstacles as few women have had to encounter—a commonplace school girl pretending to hold her own with *me*, and trying to rival me with her father." She read over the "Money Market" article, in the morning paper; and finding little else of interest, resumed the current of her thoughts. "I wonder what that man Ellis was plotting? Did Marjory understand him? Those honest-looking girls are very deep sometimes. He is in love with her or I am much mistaken. A man of his stamp would not take the trouble to come all the way here unless for personal gratification. I suppose as he is a sort of relation his intentions are honourable; are any man's intentions honourable towards any woman who is not able to take care of herself? At all events, I need know nothing and suspect nothing. If she is entangled with him, why, we shall probably never see her again. I should be quite justified in refusing to receive her into the house with my own daughter should she get into a scrape—which is highly probable; then good-bye to Miss Marjory."

Here her reflections were interrupted by the parlour-maid, who presented a letter.

"The promised letter from Edinburgh," said Mrs. Acland to herself, recognizing the writing and examining the post-mark; "this is quicker than I expected." She opened it and read:—

"DEAR MRS. ACLAND,

"I am sorry to tell you that I have been much disappointed in the place and people at Strathelgie. They are quite respectable, but rough and common. I have, therefore, given up the engagement, and have arranged to start for home to-morrow morning, arriving about seven in the evening. You may be quite sure that I shall lose no time in looking out for some other employment.

"I am yours very truly,

"MARJORY ACLAND."

Mrs. Acland's face fell as she threw the letter from her, her fair brows knit themselves and her handsome mouth grew hard. "Back again so soon! there is some mystery in this. If Ellis knew these people how is it that they are too uncouth for Marjory? Has she quarrelled with him? was the whole affair a plant? I wish I had told Mr. Acland of Ellis calling here and saying he knew these Morrisons, then there might be an opportunity of implicating Marjory; as it is, I had better say nothing. It was stupid of me suppressing that visit. How hard it is to know which is best, speaking out or keeping quiet; who could have dreamed that she would have come back within a week? She has quarrelled with Ellis and got the better of him or she would not be so ready to return. I wonder if he travelled north with her? I wish I had gone to see her off. Had I seen him I could make a row; as it is, I had better keep quiet, and start her off as soon as I can. I believe she will stick to us like a burr." Mrs. Acland thrust the letter impatiently into her pocket and went upstairs to tell nurse and to order the garret to be prepared for the "*un-welcome* guest."

Mr. Acland was much disturbed by the news of Marjory's most unexpected return.

"Something very unusual must have occurred to induce her to leave at once. I trust there has been no infringement of—a —the properties? What do you think, my dear?"

"Oh! as to that I don't think you need distress yourself. I fancy it is only Marjory's whims and conceit that have made her throw up the engagement. Probably with her usual want of self-control she showed airs and temper, and these quiet country folk will be glad to get rid of her. Marjory's temper will always destroy her chances of success. However, *I* am willing to do my best for her."

"You are always kind and considerate. I am sure I wish Marjory would live peaceably at home. I cannot think where she got her temper. Her poor mother was placid to a degree, and I am not at all passionate."

"By no means; your temper, though determined, is calm."

"Exactly so," returned Mr. Acland much gratified. "No one knows me as well as you do, my love. Well, if Marjory is still determined to leave what might be a happy home, we will not stop her."

"Perhaps it would be wiser not," said Mrs. Acland, as if giving up her opinion to his.

As may be imagined, Marjory's reception was of the coldest. Her train was late, and dinner when she arrived was over.

"I must say your journey north has not improved your appearance," was Mr. Acland's remark after her first icy, "How do you do?" In truth Marjory looked ghastly pale and weary, with dark shadows under her eyes.

ACLAND."

"Well, Marjory, you find there are worse places than home," said her father. "Why did you leave so suddenly?—was there any serious objection to your employers?"

"Very serious to my mind—they were simply rough farmers. I could not have lived with them; but I am too tired to talk about anything to-night. I will take a cup of tea and go to bed. I am very very sorry to come back to trouble you. However, I hope to find something else soon."

"Had you not better take a glass of wine, Marjory? you seem over-fatigued," asked her father, touched by her aspect.

"Thank you; I will, as *you* ask me," she returned with a slight tremble in her voice. She felt sorely in need of something to sustain her; and having swallowed it, bid Mrs. Acland and her father good-night.

What a home-coming! with all that pressed upon her mind and memory. What a contrast to the tender care, the thoughtful consideration lavished upon her by Brand and Dick.

If she could only have stayed with them, to be their housekeeper, to mend their clothes and look after them generally, life would have been too lovely; but delighted as both seemed to have her for a guest, neither seemed to think it possible she could remain. How grieved Brand appeared to part with her, and Dick seemed almost as sorry; though he did not quite forgive her for letting Ellis extract the promise she had given. How earnestly he entreated her to write and tell him everything; his last words were whispered:—"Marge, get clear of Ellis—unless you love him, which I trust in God you do not."

"Love him! No!" but she felt remorseful towards him, and a little afraid of him, but for the present she would put him out of her mind. There was enough to worry about just now, and Ellis was fading into a distant danger. He would not trouble her for a long time; and she sank to sleep with the memory of Dick's kind earnest eyes and slightly-knit brow as he huskily bid her farewell, for her last waking thought.

The sudden apparition of Marjory, her strange story, the extraordinary mixture of courage and weakness she had shown; her hard fate in having to return to her father's house, made a deep impression on Dick Cranston. He was imaginative in a strong, slow fashion—small matters did not move his creative powers to conjure up mind pictures, but once touched or stirred to indignation, the impression took deep hold and haunted him.

Though simple and unpretending in nature, he had a high ideal of life and conduct, none the less stringent, because he was quite unconscious of cherishing a loftier standard than the ordinary young man of every-day life. He was in some ways old for his

years—steady and earnest, yet full of enthusiasm, of which he spoke little. He was almost startled at the fiery turmoil into which Marjory's tears, her extraordinary escape, and above all her semi-recapture, had thrown him. He should have enjoyed hurling Ellis down stairs, and reflected with grim satisfaction that he *could* have done so; Ellis was a villain, of that he felt convinced, and he half feared Marjory liked the scoundrel.

The evening after her departure Dick came in late. He had been intensely diligent in his work, and looked tired and out of spirits when he sat down with Brand to their evening meal, of which they partook almost in silence.

When the table was cleared, Brand settled himself in his chair for a quiet smoke, while Dick got pencil and paper and began drawing lines and curves.

"What are you about?" asked Brand, after watching him for a few minutes.

"Trying to put some ideas that came to me to-day into shape."

"You have worked enough. Can't you let your brain rest?"

"Perhaps I had better," said Dick, turning his chair round; "it does not feel too clear."

"I feel in the down-below too," returned Brand. "I tell you what, we both miss that sister of yours. Ah! if I had a daughter like her, I should not be here now. But after all, would *anything* have kept me from making a fool of myself?"

"Poor Marge! I wonder how she is getting on. I wish we could have kept her with us."

"Ay! but we couldn't, you see, neither of us being any relation to her."

"No?" said Dick doubtfully, and there was a pause. "She has had a hard life of it," he resumed presently. "She was dead against me at first, and my mother, too; I can't describe her scorn."

"Ha! I suppose she is not first favourite with Mrs. Acland?"

"My mother was positively cruel to her. Well, Marjory, who always gave herself airs of superiority over George and me, was worse when she came from school. She was furious because I was in her father's office and her brother sent apprentice to sea; and I do not wonder at it. How she used to flare up!" He laughed softly. "She seemed just transparent with her big eyes and speaking face, as if one could see the dancing flames in her heart. One day I broke out and told her how she hurt me. She seemed struck, as if a new light had come to her, and she softened; she begged my pardon, so sweetly, so frankly! and from that time we were friends, such friends when George went away, and we had the schoolroom to ourselves. *That* was the happiest time I ever had. How we used to talk, and how she used to mend my things and scold me! It all came to a sudden end, though. If you care to

hear, I will tell you all about it ; it is a great secret," and he gave Brand for the first time the history of the theft from Mr. Acland's safe, of the way in which his mother threw suspicion upon him, by her entreaties that he would confess. Brand was so deeply interested that he let his pipe go out and forgot to relight it.

"But she did not really believe you guilty?"

"I do not think she could. I am sure Mr. Acland did not, nor did Mr. Cross, his partner, to whom I went and told the whole story. I don't think any one else ever heard of the affair, as it was Mr. Acland's money that was taken. I resolved to go away and work independently for my own living, however humbly. Then it was that Marjory stood to me like a trump. She had a little money her brother had sent her, and she insisted on giving nearly all of it to me. How she cried when we parted ; her grief cut into my soul. Then came the great surprise of our meeting at Beaulieu. She was delighted to see me just as I stood—a workman in working clothes, though she was with a couple of swells ; but she was always a trump. Then you know the rest."

"I suspect the governess engagement was a bad business ; she is well out of it."

"A very bad business," said Dick with a sigh. "I wish I could tell you all about it, but I am bound by my promise."

"Of course, of course."

They were silent for a few minutes. Then Brand suddenly asked :—

"When did this *fracas* about the money take place?"

"More than a year and a half ago, shortly after you called at Falkland Terrace, and my mother was so cut up at seeing you."

"Ay, and shortly after that infernal scoundrel Blake, the stock-broker, levanted ; that was queer. Mr. Acland had dealings with him?"

"Not for some time. I think my mother distrusted him, and she rules Mr. Acland in everything."

"Well, she might distrust him," said Brand sternly, with a quick, angry flash from his usually smiling eyes. "He was, and no doubt is, an unmitigated rascal."

"Then you knew him?"

"Yes, few knew him so well. He was the worst enemy your father ever had ; ay, or your mother either."

"Is that possible? Why, he used to dine at Falkland Terrace. He dined there a couple of weeks before he disappeared."

"You surprise me. Yet, why should anything surprise me? Do not let us speak of the villain any more ; he has gone under, I suppose, and I hope he will never turn up again, unless to be hung."

Brand rose and relieved his wrath by a few turns to and fro. Dick looked at him in some surprise. He was usually so lazily

quiet, so rarely moved in any way that the present burst was unprecedented. But it did not last. Returning to his seat, Brand relit his pipe and muttered, more to himself than his companion, "There is no use in looking back, and hopeless to try and repair mistakes. Keep steady, my boy. Put your heart in your work, and be deaf and blind to whatever would lead you from it."

"I think I am tolerably fond of it," and have found as yet little to distract me."

"Yes, you are steady enough. If I had stuck to my art as you stick to yours I should have been— Bah! There is no use in talking."

"You are twice as clever as I am, and you work hard enough now."

"Yes, when it is too late. There, let us say no more."

"You are very good to listen to my bit of a story with so much interest."

"Interest!" repeated Brand, stretching out his hand impulsively and grasping Dick's hand, "I tell you I look on you as a son, though I fear I am not exactly the sort of father men wish to adopt."

"I will be very thankful if you choose to adopt me," returned Dick, with the soft smile that sometimes gave beauty to his grave face.

"Then I do take you for my son from this hour," said Brand with a certain solemnity, and shaded his eyes with his hand for a few moments. "I have had a letter from Lord Beaulieu," were his next words, in a different tone; "he is getting impatient that we should get away to Fleury. How soon do you think we can finish our present piece of work?"

"In three or four weeks."

"Scarcely. Say five, that will take us into December. But we will push on as fast as we can. I long to be off. Fleury is a nice place, a splendid climate, and it will take six or seven months' work to carry out all Lord Beaulieu's plans. Living is cheap and the pay good. Let us save up and take a run over to Florence when we are free. I gather strength under the skies of the sunny south; bring over that portfolio, I have some sketches and plans; I will give you an idea of what we—Lord Beaulieu and myself—thought of doing," and the pair of friends plunged into a professional discussion.

Mrs Acland had only reserved her cross-examining powers until she had Marjory to herself, as her curiosity was excited to an irritating degree. Yet she did not like to put the leading questions her conjecture suggested before her husband, who though not too observant, might possibly suspect their drift.

Now the morning after Marjory's arrival, Mr. Acland had ap-

pointed to meet his wife in town on some domestic business, and Marjory had escaped for a long walk with the children. Mrs. Acland was therefore obliged to defer putting her stepdaughter on the rack till next day. She invited Marjory in a friendly manner to come and help her with some needlework for the children, adding, "I know you did all your own before you started on that unfortunate expedition of yours."

"Very well," returned Marjory, who was too humble in her own estimation to resist anything just now.

Mrs. Acland commenced operations by detailing some domestic grievances, in order to get up a confidential tone; Sarah, the parlour-maid was beginning to give herself airs, she had made quite a fuss because her mistress had insisted on having the drawing-room cleaned that morning instead of on Friday, which was the usual day; if this sort of nonsense was repeated Sarah's doom was fixed. Marjory listened with a careless degree of surprise, as Mrs. Acland had never hitherto had, or confessed to having, household difficulties. She replied that it was stupid of Sarah, who seemed a sensible, clever servant.

Mrs. Acland had just uttered the words, "There is no accounting for——" when the delinquent in question flung open the door, announcing in a vicious tone, "Mr. Ellis," and ushered the refined diplomat into the little study, where the table was strewn with small garments under repair, with "torn off" pieces, with paper patterns, and crowned by the big grubby nursery work-basket.

Mrs. Acland grew white with anger as—to speak dramatically—she felt the sting of Sarah's revenge. As to Marjory she shivered as the awful thought suggested itself, "Has he come to declare himself, and marry me openly?" She could not command her voice as she stood up, put her hand into his and received his greeting in silence. "This is an unexpected pleasure," said Mrs. Acland, recovering herself gallantly and offering him a chair. "I thought you were in Paris by this time," while she looked keenly at Marjory.

Ellis was cool and imperturbable as ever; he did not attempt to exchange a glance with his trembling *fiancée*, but drawing the seat offered him beside her, said: "I was detained by family business, and got a few days' additional leave. I must apologize for intruding at so early an hour, but I heard last night of Miss Acland's return, and have come to ask particulars. I am awfully distressed that things did not turn out satisfactorily. Pray tell me your objections. If you have any serious complaints I must see that apologies and reparation are made."

His tone was so easy and natural that Mrs. Acland was profoundly puzzled, while Marjory was amazed at his audacity.

"Perhaps I had not much to complain of," she said, gathering her forces. "Perhaps I expected too much; but the family seemed

so rough and—and untrained. I did not like the idea of going abroad with them. I—in short, I felt I must come away home.”

“In short, you found haggis and porridge, material and social, with nothing more digestible. Well, I warned you they were not gentry—the Morrisons I mean—but they are honest respectable people. I ought to have remembered that a young lady requires more niceties than sportsmen accustomed to rough it.”

“The fact is,” put in Mrs. Acland, “Marjory was in too great a hurry to run away from a comfortable home to try her luck among strangers. I hope you have learnt a lesson, my dear.”

“I have indeed.”

“I cannot say how deeply I regret having been instrumental in sending Miss Acland on so fruitless an errand. I beg you and Mr. Acland will forgive me. I dare not hope to make my peace with your daughter?”

“It was my own fault for being so precipitate,” murmured Marjory.

“Can I in any way atone?” said Ellis earnestly, turning to her. Mrs. Acland took the opportunity of his eyes being fixed on Marjory to sweep away some of the pile which encumbered the table, and Ellis took advantage of her action to slip a small thick note he had held in his left hand into Marjory’s while he continued speaking, “for although I must travel to Paris to-night, I can write to Mrs. Morrison. I am sure some compensation——”

“I could not possibly claim any,” said Marjory quickly; “I broke the engagement I undertook; I put every one to inconvenience, and I cannot complain.” She had hastily concealed the note in her pocket before Mrs. Acland had resumed her seat.

“I assure you I do not know when I was so profoundly mortified,” resumed Ellis in a tone expressive of just the right degree of concern. “I wish I could do the state, that is, Miss Acland some service which would obliterate my *maladresse*. If you think of leaving home,” turning to her again, “why do you not join the Carterets? I am sure you were of infinite use to them.”

“But Uncle Carteret would not have me,” cried Marjory; a faint irrepressible smile at Ellis’s audacity parting her lips.

“Well, I shall see my worthy kinsmen in Paris (they do not move on to Rome till the second week in November). Have you any objection to my negotiating your residence with them for a year or two?”—he looked earnestly, tenderly into her eyes—“You know old Carteret is inclined to hear words of wisdom from my lips.”

“No, no,” said Marjory, “I would rather not be forced upon him.”

“I have already outstaid my time,” said Ellis rising, “and I have a great deal to accomplish before I start. “Will you,” addressing Mrs. Acland, “will you allow me to leave my address in Paris

with you? and if, under your good counsel, Miss Acland changes her mind, perhaps you will let me know; but pray let it be soon, for I do not hope to do much with Mr. Carteret, except by word of mouth." He bowed over Mrs. Acland's outstretched hand, and contrived to hold Marjory's a moment, while he sent a look of entreaty into her eyes, his back carefully turned to the lady of the house—and was gone.

A short silence ensued. Marjory, feeling that Mrs. Acland's keen glance was upon her, forced herself to resume her needlework calmly; she could not attempt to leave the room in order to read her letter lest she might arouse suspicion.

"Mr. Ellis seems to take a great interest in you," said Mrs. Acland at last. She did not venture to push her queries very far—conscience made a coward of her. She knew that she had tacitly handed her young stepdaughter over to this man, and it would not do to show how much she surmised. Moreover, she was really puzzled; she began to doubt that he had accompanied Marjory to Scotland; if he had, she would not have left him, and if they had quarrelled he would not have called and asked for particulars respecting her return in that easy natural way. She would certainly write to that Mrs. Morrison; she thought she could remember the address.

These ideas flashed through her brain while Marjory was saying:

"Yes, he is very good."

"I suppose you were great friends at that place in the country, the Priory."

"Not particularly; he was a help certainly when Mr. Carteret was particularly fidgety, and so far useful."

"Oh! I daresay he amused himself with you in that stupid hole."

"Perhaps so," said Marjory indifferently, anxious to end the conversation anyhow; probably it was the most baffling answer she could have given her stepmother, who calculated on her showing pique or embarrassment or emotion of some kind.

"Mr. Ellis does not give one the idea of a philanthropist."

"No, certainly not; yet some people seemed to like him. Lord Beaulieu was always asking him to the Castle, and coming over to the Priory."

"Who?" asked Mrs. Acland, caught by the sounding title.

"Lord Beaulieu," repeated Marjory, noticing the effect of her words. "He was one of our neighbours; he was making great improvements and restorations at the Castle. It was there I saw Dick at work, dressed just like a workman," she added, gathering up spirit to carry the war into the enemy's country, and enjoying the raid.

"If he was, it is his own fault," said Mrs. Acland surprised and angered; "he had every chance of doing well here."

"He could hardly stay when he was accused of being a thief, could he?" said Marjory in a quiet confidential tone.

"No one accused him," cried Mrs. Acland, gazing at the speaker.

Here a summons to inspect the putting up of fresh muslin curtains obliged Mrs. Acland to quit the field.

Marjory breathed freer when she was alone, but she made no attempt to look at her letter till she was finally released from her stepmother's presence at dinner time, when she was at her own request excused appearing.

It was not without emotion that she glanced first hastily and then more deliberately through the closely-written pages; they were pre-empted by a tone of subdued warmth, and spoke of the tie which existed between them. He implored her for frequent tidings of herself, and begged her to take counsel with him how she could best escape the gloom and discomfort of her home.

Marjory read it twice with care, then tore it in small pieces, and striking a match consumed the fragments.

"Why do I distrust him so much?" mused Marjory. "It would be a solution of many difficulties if I could love him and believe in him. But he is too clover, too like an irresistible fate; only I will resist as long as I can,"—even while she resolved so bravely, she smiled with a certain sense of enjoyment as she thought of Mrs. Acland's mystification. Ellis was more than a match for her astute stepmother.

CHAPTER XXV.

"NEWS OF GEORGE."

WHEN Marjory had replied to Ellis—entreating him on no account to write to her, as his letters would infallibly fall into Mrs. Acland's hands and do them both serious mischief—there seemed no more to be done.

Everything went on as before the important episode of her visit to Langdale Priory; so like was each day to those of the past that Marjory thought at times it was some vivid dream which had broken for a moment the monotonous sleep of her existence, and vanished when the dull dawn of reality summoned her to wait and to endure.

Mrs. Acland troubled her very little; she was in fact plotting in her own mind some more permanent plan for getting her stepdaughter out of the house. When obliged to hold any intercourse with her, Mrs. Acland showed a cold, hard aversion, which was even more depressing than active hostility, especially to a vivid nature like Marjory's. For the present she (Marjory) was beaten to the ground, unequal to exertion, and above all, unhinged because she was ashamed of herself.

She could not rouse up to make any attempt at obtaining employment; she feared to advertise, and she shrunk from asking for the introduction to the Governesses' Institution which Mrs. Acland said she could procure. A couple of letters from Dick were the only gleams of comfort in this dreary interval. He spoke of being in London early in December on his way to the South of France, and surprised her by saying he would call at Falkland Terrace, adding, "I should not like to leave without bidding you good-bye."

"Time went heavily enough. Marjory—who had quite given up all attempt to ingratiate herself with her father—kept away from him and Mrs. Acland, as much as she could, asserting that she preferred early dinner and tea with the children to the more ceremonious evening meal in the dining-room.

It was little more than a fortnight after Ellis had called when Marjory was summoned to her father's presence. She obeyed with some reluctance, as she had just settled herself to read "Guy Mannering" for the third or fourth time, new books not being easily obtainable under Mrs. Acland's rule, and hoping to forget herself for awhile.

Mr. and Mrs. Acland were sitting cosily by the fire: her father in his easy-chair, an evening paper across his knee; her stepmother busy with a piece of fancy stitchery, her little worktable beside her. Neither spoke as Marjory came in.

"You sent for me," she said, pausing near Mr. Acland.

"Yes; I rarely see you, Marjory. I suppose you find your own company best of all. However, I have a letter which concerns you, which will, or ought to, give you much satisfaction. He took it from the mantelpiece, where it lay in readiness, and opened it deliberately. "You had better sit down," said Mrs. Acland. "We shall have some matters to discuss."

Marjory obeyed.

"This letter is from Mrs. Carteret," resumed Mr. Acland, "and contains a very kind invitation." He put on his glasses and proceeded to read aloud:—

"DEAR SIR,—If agreeable to you, I should be pleased to receive your daughter, Marjory, for a few months, or longer, to act as my companion and amanensis; also to do any writing he may require, for Mr. Carteret. Marjory knows the routine of our lives, which is extremely quiet, but she seemed happy while with us, and she reads very nicely. Pray give her my love. As soon as I know when she will start, I will send a cheque for her travelling expenses.

"I should like her to come early next week. She will not need any preparation, for coming to Paris she will not, of course, think of buying anything in London. Our movements are uncertain, but we shall be in Paris for about three weeks.

"With compliments to Mrs. Acland,

"I am, yours faithfully,

"DOROTHEA CARTERET."

Silence ensued when Mr. Acland ceased reading. Marjory had acquired the habit of thinking before speaking in Mrs. Acland's presence. Moreover she saw the work of Ellis in this invitation, and hesitated to accept it.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Acland sharply, "you ought to consider yourself singularly fortunate, Marjory, to have such a chance offered you. This is Thursday; I suppose you can start on Monday?"

"Do you wish me to go?" asked Marjory, flushing up and looking at her father.

"Can you hesitate yourself?" he returned in a tone of surprise.

"Yes; a little." She felt that by accepting she would be putting herself in the hands of Ellis. "You see," she went on with evident embarrassment, "when I asked Mr. Carteret to let me stay he refused, and now——"

"I must say, Marjory," interrupted Mrs. Acland, "your perversity passes belief. You hate being at home—you will not even dine at table—you seek employment for yourself, and throw it up the moment you get it—now you have an offer any girl would jump at, and you hesitate; there must be something under all this we do not understand."

"It is unaccountable," said Mr. Acland. "I cannot give way to your whims. I insist, Marjory, on your accepting this kind invitation—accepting it gratefully!—it is in every way advantageous."

Marjory did not answer for an instant, while she thought rapidly that her refusal would be indeed unaccountable, suspicious, useless. Then if the Carterets went away to Rome, she should escape Ellis, that is if she ever *could* escape him—and it would be very nice to be with Mrs. Carteret.

"I accept," she exclaimed suddenly, just as Mrs. Acland opened her lips to make some further stinging remark, "but I cannot go till Wednesday," and turning to Mrs. Acland, "I shall do my best to stay away."

"An exceedingly gracious, well-bred speech," observed her stepmother.

"I did not mean to be rude," said Marjory, and then she stopped, appearing to be lost in thought.

"You are an extraordinary girl!" exclaimed Mr. Acland. "I beg you will write a proper letter to Mrs. Carteret."

"I will, I will write at once," rising.

"You had better let us see your letter," said Mrs. Acland.

"Do you want to see it, father?"

"No—yes—that is, I do not care."

"If you are returned to our hand, *now*, Marjory," cried Mrs. Acland, "we will know whose fault it is."

So in less than a quarter of an hour Marjory's fate was fixed, and in spite of her dread of Ellis, her spirits began to rise.

At any rate, she would be out of sight and hearing of Mrs. Acland.

As to Ellis it would surely be a long time before he would be prepared to fulfil the condition on which she had promised to marry him, and probably he would be tired of his fancy by that time. It would be silly, she thought, with the buoyancy of youth, to spoil the present by worrying about an uncertain future or fretting over an irrevocable past. She had done very, very wrong; she was heartily sorry and ashamed of herself. But in the future she would try earnestly to be wise and good, conscientious and diligent, and things would come right in the end.

Marjory's preparations were soon made. They consisted in packing up everything that she possessed, in the earnest hope that she might never return to stay under her father's roof again.

Mrs. Carteret was as good as her word. The reply to Mr. Acland's letter contained a handsome cheque, which, after paying her travelling expenses, left Marjory a tolerable supply of pocket-money. "What a delightful thing money is," she wrote to Dick when describing the sudden change in her fortunes, "I wish I could make some, but that seems impossible for women, unless indeed they have 'genius.' I hope I may be in Paris when you pass through, if there is any chance of seeing you, though for other reasons I should be glad to go on soon to Rome."

To this she received a reply the day before she started. "I am glad you are going to escape from home even for awhile, but much as I should like to see you I would be glad to know you were going on to Rome at once. Whatever happens, try to get free from Ellis; I cannot well express the dread I have of the fellow. You'll be miserable if you let yourself be persuaded to marry him."

"I am sure I hope I never shall," murmured Marjory as she watched the missive burning. "But I do not see how I am to break my promise if he chooses to hold me to it."

It was a cold, dull November day, with occasional showers of sleet, when Marjory reached Paris after her long, dreary, lonely journey *via* Dieppe. It was strange and depressing to be for the first time plunged into the babel of a strange tongue, for French rapidly spoken by natives is indeed an unknown tongue to most English schoolgirls, even when supposed to be proficient in that elegant language.

It was reviving to see Virginie's familiar face when she arrived at the Gare St. Lazare. She could not refrain from embracing the friendly lady'smaid, thereby completely winning her. "Ah! mademoiselle is pleased to come to Paris, I believe. I was content to receive the orders of madame to meet you. Monsieur and madame await you with impatience. Come, we must await the baggage in the Douane. Mademoiselle must be nearly dead with fatigue," etc., etc.

"Oh, no, Virginie; I am quite alive now, and so glad to come."

The drive to Mr. Carteret's apartments, in one of the streets leading from the Champs Elysées to the Rue St. Honoré, was infinitely interesting. Everything was new and unlike anything Marjory had ever seen before. In spite of the untoward weather, which Virginie loudly lamented, she was full of admiration. "If—if only there had been a fine sun, then indeed mademoiselle would be struck with wonder and delight."

Arrived at her destination, Marjory was amused by the extreme politeness of Virginie and that most un-English official the *concierge* to each other, the perpetually recurring "monsieur" and "mademoiselle" which prefaced their sentences. It was all very delightful she thought.

The Carterets were comfortably settled on the second *etage*, and the door was opened by Deacon, Mr. Carteret's grave and incomparable valet—Ellis generally called him Arch-Deacon—opened the door and vouchsafed Marjory a serious smile. Mrs. Carteret was ensconced beside the fire in a large low chair, with her tatting and Fairy, as if some potent enchanter had picked her and her belongings up in the Priory and set her down just as she was in the Rue de C—.

"Well, Marjory, I'm glad you were able to come," she said kindly and placidly. "You are not looking very well; rather tired, I suppose? A sea voyage is most disagreeable."

"I am so glad to come, dear Mrs. Carteret," cried Marjory effusively. "It was very good of you to send for me."

"I am pleased to see you. Now you must have some breakfast. Virginie will show you your room. Mr. Carteret is out; he has gone to the Bibliothèque Nationale, though he has a cold: most imprudent. As soon as the carriage comes back I am going to a bazaar. It is a great bore, but I must go. You will be rested by the time I come back, and be able to read probably."

So Marjory was inducted into her new life. It was surprising how soon she began to feel at home, how quickly she settled herself into her tiny bedroom.

Uncle Carteret was fairly gracious and made one or two tart jokes respecting Marjory's expectations of being useful in compiling the great work on which he was now engaged. "You belong to madame now," he said.

"I shall only be too glad to do anything I can for you too, uncle," she returned readily.

The routine of life in Paris differed widely from that of the Priory. Mr. Carteret had much to divert him, and was less oppressive in consequence. He often desired Marjory to copy letters and papers, but the fact that his wife had invited and generally undertaken his niece at her own charge softened his feelings towards that young person considerably.

Mrs. Carteret found much interesting occupation in providing

suitable costumes for her *protegee*. Money was never an obstacle to her. If she were not consistently generous it was simply because she never troubled herself to think. When a necessity was brought before her she responded, but she never sought an occasion for liberality. In the case of Marjory her taste was gratified by the success of her efforts to make her young companion what she called "presentable."

It was the third evening after Marjory's arrival; she had not as yet seen Ellis, and had heard very little of him. Curiously enough, she felt slightly offended by his non-appearance, though half-frightened at the idea of encountering him. Disentangling herself was one thing; being "let go" was another.

Uncle Carteret had insisted on his niece being his partner in a game of whist, wherein M. Staroffski, a highly accomplished linguist and universal genius of doubtful nationality, who came two or three times a week to assist Mr. Carteret in his great work, made the fourth. Poor Marjory was suffering acutely from the fearful responsibility laid upon her by her cruel uncle, and the frequent question, "May I ask what you did *that* for?" when dire fate compelled her to play first, a question she never *could* answer, completed her confusion. The sudden announcement of "Lord Bealieu and Mr. Ellis" put the final touch to her troubles. She felt that she flushed and grew pale as Ellis spoke to her with easy cordiality.

"I was nearly at the end of my patience," cried Mr. Carteret, when greetings were exchanged. "My niece here has been making confusion worse confounded; it will be an act of benevolence to all concerned, Lord Bealieu, if you will take her place.

"Oh, pray do!" exclaimed Marjory, with such imploring earnestness that they all laughed, and Lord Bealieu at once complied.

Marjory stood for an instant or two beside her aunt, not knowing exactly what to do or where to go, fearing she might seem either to seek or avoid Ellis.

"You must not distract the players," said he at length. "Won't you sit down here," placing a chair near the fire, "and tell me when you came." Marjory felt obliged to obey; she caught up Fairy and began stroking his beautiful silky ears to hide the uneasiness which oppressed her.

"So Marjory, I have you within reach again," resumed Ellis, placing himself between her and the whist party.

"I suppose," she returned, with a pretty embarrassed air and downcast eyes, "I have *you* to thank for Aunt Carteret's invitation."

"Do you thank me for it?"

"Yes," thoughtfully. "It is much nicer to be here than at home, and I shall be delighted to see Italy."

"I don't fancy you will see Italy as soon as you expect."

"Why?" looking up quickly.

"Because I do not intend you to go so far away. Ah! that does not please you. How inconvenient it must be to have such an expressive face. I shall never forget your look of horror and amazement when I walked into Mrs. Acland's room that day. If she had not been so overwhelmed by my intrusion she would have suspected something under the cards——"

"It was too audacious!" exclaimed Marjory, lowering her voice. Then, at the thought of his extraordinary coolness, a bright, amused smile sparkled in her eyes and parted her lips.

"You are looking pale, as though you had been distressed, but sweeter than ever. I will win you yet, Marjory," whispered Ellis. "I wonder I do not hate you, you wilful little witch. I will hold you to your promise."

"Do not speak in so disagreeable a tone, Mr. Ellis. When *you* are ready to claim my promise, you will find me loyal; in the meantime we can be good friends. If you knew how unhappy I have been you would not worry."

"I worry you, do I? Well, I shall try and make you like Paris, though you do not deserve that I should do so."

"I know that," penitently.

"You must help me to see you alone sometimes."

"Oh no, let us have no more secrets or manoeuvring; I cannot bear it."

"Then I must manage alone."

"You are a great deal too clever, Mr. Ellis. I feel as if you could always do as you like."

"You have taught me that I cannot."

"Do let us just be friends for the present, and do not trouble about—about——" She paused.

"Do not tease you with love-making?" said Ellis, translating her thoughts with a hard laugh. "I believe you are half afraid of me."

"Why should I be?" said Marjory indignantly. "I should be ashamed to fear any one."

Ellis did not reply; he rose, and after a short search found a book of photograph views of Paris, and began to talk pleasantly and well of the various places she ought to see.

Then Lord Beaulieu called him to cut in, and spent a few moments in conversing with Marjory. He remembered her connection with his young Palladio, as he called Dick, and said he was then on his way to his place in Dauphiné, where he expected Brand and Dick soon, and after setting them to work he would return to stay with his sister and her father-in-law in Yorkshire. It gave Marjory the keenest pleasure to hear the kindly, good-humoured peer speak in flattering terms of Dick, her friend and brother. What confidence she felt in him; how vividly his advice, "Try and get clear of Ellis," came back to her. She felt almost nervous from the impression that Ellis was tightening his grasp upon her,

upon all of them. The expected journey to Rome began to fade from her expectations, and the reality of being a puppet in the hands of an unscrupulous man impressed itself upon her imagination.

A few weeks slipped quietly and rapidly away. Mrs. Carteret had a strong objection to sight-seeing, but she permitted the accomplished Virginie to escort her niece to some of the principal places of interest in the famous capital. Virginie enjoyed the task of acting as cicerone, and insisted on her companion speaking French. The oddly-assorted pair got on remarkably well and Marjory often looked back to their expeditions with amusement and pleasure.

During this time she saw very little of Ellis. He called upon Mr. Carteret regularly, but did not appear to make any attempt at private conversation with Marjory. Indeed he seemed to mask his batteries with peculiar care, so much so that Marjory began to question the sincerity of his assertion that he dare not betray his intention towards herself to Mr. Carteret. "He has such influence with my uncle," she thought, "that he might persuade him to consent, but there is no knowing what he really wants and wishes."

Meantime Mr. Carteret was so fascinated by M. Staroffski, who could not leave Paris, that his desire to push on to Rome grew fainter every day.

"I suppose Marjory has not been to any of the theatres yet?" said Ellis one Sunday when he had come in to breakfast. He called her Marjory now even to Mr. and Mrs. Carteret.

"Not yet," replied her aunt; "I have not thought about it. I must ask the de Lacey Browns or Miss Valentine to take her when they are going. I could not bear the heat and discomfort myself."

"Oh, no! of course not," cried Marjory, blushing at the idea of giving trouble.

"If you will allow me, I shall be happy to take her to see a very pretty fairy extravaganza that is going on at the Porte St. Martin. It will amuse her more than the Comédie Francaise in the present condition of her French. Eh! Miss Marjory?"

"How very good of you," she exclaimed with sparkling, grateful eyes.

"Pray, when did you turn philanthropist or philanderer?" asked Mr. Carteret looking up from the *Figaro*, which he was absorbing with his morning's allowance of Burgundy.

"My natural amiability and consideration for others has always been the same," returned Ellis with great composure.

"Can Madame Petroskoff spare you?" continued Mr. Carteret with an unpleasant laugh.

"Certainly! she has a great respect for family duty. Then Wednesday next is an off-night. It is a Russian saint's day or eve, and she is obliged to go to a night service," said Ellis carelessly.

"You really should not talk in such an unguarded manner," observed Mrs. Carteret with disapprobation. "If you can take Marjory to the theatre without inconvenience, Ralph, I see no objection. You really are third cousins, once removed, and you are very obliging to think of it. Marjory will be charmed."

"I shall be very glad to go indeed, if it does not interfere with Mr. Ellis—or—bore him," said Marjory with a demure, mischievous smile.

"I will endure the boredom for the sake of the relations—I mean the relationship between us," returned Ellis laughing good-humouredly, but with emphasis which Marjory understood. "It is to be Wednesday then? I must call early for you. These long fairy pieces begin at some hideous hour; besides if it is a fine dry night you might like to walk part of the way up the Boulevards. I fancy you have never seen them lit up. You had better have an early dinner; so shall I."

"Thank you! I should like walking up the Boulevards immensely."

"Mr. Staroffski is in the study, sir," announced Deacon.

Mr. Carteret arose quickly and shuffled out of the room.

"And about her dress? what shall Marjory wear, Ralph?" asked Mrs. Carteret.

"Oh! a toilette de promenade, of course. Then on Wednesday I will be here at six-thirty, unless you hear from me to the contrary. I shall not be able to see you before, Mrs. Carteret, as I shall be a good deal engaged for the next two or three days."

Going to the theatre was a joy rarely but deeply enjoyed by Marjory, and she looked forward with keenest pleasure to the treat promised her. That Ellis was to be her companion did not exactly enhance it, yet it was not absolutely a drawback. He could be a very agreeable companion, especially when he refrained, as he had lately, from making love to her. Moreover the sense of being flattered by his admiration a little counteracted her distrust of him. If only he had not the terrible power which her flight with him had put into his hands she might have liked him better.

Still Marjory had undoubtedly a degree of satisfaction in putting on her pretty winter bonnet, adorned with sable tails and a brown cloth dolman which suited her slight figure, tying a pale pink handkerchief coquettishly round her throat, and fitting on a new pair of tan gloves. Virginia protested that "everything went well," as she handed her her little velvet and fur muff, and Marjory found herself ready in excellent time.

Ellis did not keep her waiting. He too seemed in a festive mood. After exchanging a few words with Mrs. Carteret he turned to Marjory, and with an expressive look which told her she had not dressed herself in vain, proposed they should set out.

It was a fine, crisp, frosty evening—crisp, but not too cold for enjoyment—a bright moon was silvering the fountains in the Champs Elysées and casting shadows of leafless trees on the dry clean footway.

"How beautiful everything looks," cried Marjory, "and how much nicer it is to walk than to drive."

"And what a relief it is to have a word with you out of earshot of those respectable mummies, Uncle and Aunt Carteret! Take my arm, Marjory; we shall soon be in a more crowded thoroughfare. I almost wish you had put on a thicker veil."

"Why? are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

"I will not rise to that bait, you *unso*, histicated little coquette! But I have a scheme in my head and do not want people to recognize you."

"A scheme? What scheme?"

"I will not tell you, and you *must* not say no, Marjory," pressing her arm to his side. "I do not want to waste this precious evening in a crowd of strangers where we cannot speak a word in safety! I want you to dine with me at a *café* I often go to. We will have a private room—a long *tete-a-tete*! I have a thousand things to say to you—suggestions to make—hints to give you. Fancy the long fast I have had from anything like a confidential intercourse. I looked in at that rubbish they are acting at the Porte St. Martin last night, and can tell you enough to supply a description for Mrs. Carteret's benefit. Come, dearest; we are almost man and wife, you know! It will be a taste of heaven after all the long constraint which *you* have never tried to lighten."

His words struck terror to Marjory's heart, and shivered her anticipations of a happy evening. He was as determined as ever.

"No, Mr. Ellis, I cannot, it would be wrong in every way. I never will lend myself to any deception again, if I can possibly help it. Aunt Carteret, too, deserves better treatment from me, and I would not like it at all."

"But I have a right to be heard. I insist on your giving me the opportunity," said Ellis imperatively. "Come Marjory, I will take no refusal, I have much to say to you."

"Then say it as we walk along," returned Marjory, whose heart was beating fast. "I do not know what it can be; there is nothing to plan or to talk about now; there is nothing to do but to wait—until——"

She stopped in some confusion.

"Until we can marry openly," added Ellis impatiently. "Yes, there is much more; besides I want to clear myself from the absurd insinuations of old Carteret about that Russian woman."

"I assure you I do not want to hear anything about her."

"But I wish to explain. In short, I am resolved you shall spend this evening with *me*; I can so rarely see you or have a word with

you, I must put some pressure to gain my point." He caught and held tightly the hand that lay on his arm, looking eagerly round for a *fiacre*.

"But I am quite as resolved *not* to go with you," cried Marjory, now thoroughly frightened.

Something hard in the expression of her companion's face, something in his eyes, made her feel strongly inclined to run away.

"Ah, there is a *fiacre*," cried Ellis, drawing her towards it. "Come, Marjory, you would not make a scene."

"Yes, I would," she cried firmly, "and if you do not let me go, I will." She looked defiantly into his fierce dark eyes. "This is more like revenge than affection, Mr. Ellis; nothing shall tempt me to go with you *this* time."

Ellis suddenly let go her hand, and stood an instant still and silent.

"Marjory, there is something under this resistance I do not understand; love for another must steel you against me. But I warn you, that I hold your future in my hand; it depends on yourself whether I make or mar it, you cannot defy me."

"I do not want to defy you, but I will *not* let myself fear you," retorted Marjory bravely. "How can I love you when you disturb and distress me?"

"And why do you risk turning me from a lover to an enemy?" asked Ellis, recovering himself. "I see you would willingly free yourself from me altogether; but you never can."

"I will be true to my promise—if you do not give me cause to break it. I shall go back to Aunt Carteret at once."

"No—no—that would never do, we must go and see this infernal play," said Ellis, with something like his usual voice. "That is if you will so far trust yourself with such a villain."

"Of course I will; now you understand me."

"Understand you? that I never shall, your obstinacy is incomprehensible;" he signed to a passing vehicle and directed the driver to the Port St. Martin.

But the pleasure of the evening was over. Not all the gorgeous beauty of scenery or costumes could make Marjory oblivious of the short, but sharp and decisive conflict which she had just won, what she felt would be a costly victory, while Ellis made no attempt to conceal his annoyance. He was profoundly silent, and when he left her at the door of her uncle's apartment, he pressed her hand almost painfully, saying in a low voice, "I shall not soon forget my obligations to you for cheating me out of my dinner and a good deal more."

Nor did Marjory recover her spirits for many days, during which she rarely saw Ellis, as he was particularly "ta'en up wi' affairs o' the state."

December was half over, and Marjory was beginning to feel

anxious for tidings of her brother. He was an indifferent correspondent at all times, and as his ship was making a regular trading voyage, partly for business, but chiefly to benefit the favourite son of the shipowner, Marjory never knew where a letter would find him; he was, therefore, deprived of the reminders he needed. Dick kept her acquainted with his movements, or rather his intended movements, as the work on which he was engaged took longer than he or Brand expected, and Marjory began to look for his promised visit.

One dull afternoon, more like a day in London than in Paris, Marjory had gone into the Rue St. Honoré to do some commissions for Mrs. Carteret. On her return she found the carriage at the door; she hastened upstairs, for she was to accompany her aunt to a solemn afternoon tea at Mrs. de Lacey Brown's, and feared she might have kept her waiting.

The sound of a familiar voice struck her ear as she entered the room, and behold—on the heartrug in earnest speech with Mrs. Carteret—stood Dick Cranston.

"And here she is," said the former, as if she (Marjory) had been the subject of conversation.

"Oh! Dick! I thought you would never come," Marjory exclaimed, as he sprang forward and grasped her hand.

"I only arrived this morning," he said, noting that her lips quivered, and that if her eyes sparkled with pleasure they were dewy with starting tears, she had so much to tell him that she did not, could not, write; he would counsel her, and give her courage; she had longed so ardently to tell him everything that now he was come she was strangely moved.

"You are looking well, Marge! better than when I saw you last."

"No wonder, I am so much happier."

"Well, I will leave you to talk with your brother, Marjory," said Mrs. Carteret, who was in her outdoor dress. "You will have a good deal to say to each other, I dare say. No one will disturb you, for Mr. Carteret will not be in till late. Good morning, Mr. Cranston," and with a parting kiss to Fairy she left the room.

Dick looked after her, then at Marjory, and evidently hesitated as to what he should say.

"Do sit down!" she exclaimed. "My heart is so full. I have so much to say to you that I do not know where to begin; and you, Dick," scanning his face anxiously, "you have something unpleasant to tell me. Is it about your mother?"

"No, Marge!" and he sat down by her on the sofa; "it is about George. He has met with an accident."

"Have you to tell me that he is—dead," she whispered, while she grew pale with fear.

"No, no, Marge; I trust he has many years before him. His

arm has been broken, and so badly they have been obliged to amputate it."

"But he will live? My poor dear George! I have been wondering he did not write. Tell me all; there is something more?"

"Yes, he has proved himself a fine, plucky fellow. It seems that one of the crew was an uncanny sailor, who used to talk to himself and cut capers, and young Rennie, the invalid lad, used to laugh at him, and gave him dire offence. One day as they lay becalmed on the voyage from Madras to Ragoon, having some Government stores on board; this unlucky beggar suddenly went raving mad and rushed on Rennie with an iron bar. The only one near was George, who threw himself between them and received the blow intended for Rennie, on his arm. Then a struggle took place, in which George received other injuries before the man could be taken off him."

Marjory clasped her hands, uttering a low exclamation of horror.

"Unfortunately in the fight the broken bone got through the skin, so they were obliged to amputate the arm as soon as they reached Ragoon, and George, poor fellow, had a bad touch of fever. However, he was decidedly better when the captain wrote, and he and young Rennie are to start for home as soon as George is fit to be moved."

"And how have you heard this; does my father know?"

"Yes; Mr. Rennie, one of the partners in Rennie, Duncan and Co., Rennie's father, came to the office and gave Mr. Acland the captain's letter. Mr. Cross had it when I called on him yesterday, so I saw it too. Mr. Cross said that Mr. Rennie could hardly speak when he tried to express his gratitude to George for saving his boy."

"Ah, Dick! I am afraid George is worse than you say," cried Marjory, her lips quivering, but too shocked and alarmed for tears.

"No, Marge, I tell you exactly what I was told, and I believe you will see him soon, for Mr. Rennie has telegraphed directions that both the lads are to be sent home by steamer as soon as possible."

"And I shall be away when he comes! I will not stay here. George may want care and nursing; he may want *me!*"

"Do nothing in a hurry, Marge. You will not easily find such a comfortable home as this."

When Marjory had recovered something like composure they discussed this question, and she finally yielded to Dick's advice to stay where she was till George was actually in England.

"I suppose my father or Mrs. Acland will take the trouble of informing me of this terrible business."

"Of course. You see they only knew the day before yesterday."

"I am so glad you were able to come. Everything would have

seemed infinitely worse if I had read it in a letter ; and you really do think George will recover ? ”

“ I do really. ” There was a pause.

“ Is my father very much distressed ? ” asked Marjory.

“ No doubt he is, but Mr. Cross said nothing about it. I think my mother will take care of George when he comes back ; you see she rather liked him, and it would *lock* well. ”

“ Yes, she may for a time. But if she comes to think him a burden—and she soon will, for I suppose George cannot go to sea again—then he will know what *I* have suffered. ”

“ That’s likely enough. I wish I had not been obliged to bring you such bad news. Now tell me about yourself. How is it you have not gone on to Rome ? though I am glad you have not, or I should not have had this glimpse of you. ”

“ We have not gone on to Rome, ” said Marjory, raising her eyebrows with a pretty, impatient expression, “ chiefly, I believe, because Mr. Ellis chooses we should remain. ”

“ Oh, and how—how do you and he get on ? ” and Dick looked searchingly, almost sternly, into her eyes.

“ Very badly ; that is, we have had another quarrel—and oh, Dick, you may despise me if you like, but I must confess I am awfully afraid of him. ”

“ Why ? ” asked Dick frowning.

“ Why, because I have a kind of feeling that he dislikes me, even when he—he talks all sorts of nonsense. I am sure he would like to revenge himself in some way. How I wish I had never seen him, or rather how I wish I had been true to my own sense of right and never gone away with him. If you knew how awfully ashamed I am when I think of it ! and I know you are ashamed of me, too. ” She coloured crimson, cheeks and ears, even the delicate morsel of throat seen above the lace which edged her collar, as she covered her face in her hands and tried to keep down the quick sobs which rose in her throat.

“ No, Marge, dear, I am not, ” said Dick tenderly, “ I do not blame *you*. My mother—aye, and your own father are at the bottom of that mischief. But I cannot deny it has been an awful misfortune. I wish— ” his mouth grew hard and set as he spoke, “ I wish we could have the old duelling days back for a spell. I would pick a quarrel with Ellis and shoot him as unhesitatingly as I would a mad dog, before he should interfere with you, Marge ! ”

“ Why, Dick, you look as if you meant it, ” she cried, gazing at him surprised.

“ I do ! ” Then smiling and trying to speak in a different tone : “ It would be justifiable homicide. I am not a bad shot, I assure you ! ” But Marjory was silent, struck by the extraordinary change which had come over the once despised, detested monster. She felt in some vague yet convincing way that Ellis could never manage

or blind Dick with his sophistry and sinuosities ; she half unconsciously put out her hand and laid it on his, where Dick let it rest without trying to hold it. "Promise me," he resumed, "that you will never consent to anything he proposes, or grant anything he asks, without consulting me. I know little or nothing of his world, but I do know what is good for you, Marge. What I fear most of all is your growing to love him ! It will be all over with your happiness if you do."

"There is no chance of that—less than there ever was. No, Dick ! do not look at the clock ; you need not go yet."

"In a few minutes I fear I must. I am to meet Brand and go with him to do some commissions for Lord Beaulieu, who expects us to-morrow."

"To-morrow," cried Marjory, her eyes filling, "then I shall not see you again."

"Not for some time," he returned, pressing her hand, "and then I hope you will be free of that fellow."

"Well, I hope so ; he will surely be tired of me by that time ! and tell me how things are going with you and Mr. Brand."

"Very well. He is cheering up since we left Edinburgh. We are to have rooms in a wing of the old Chateau at Fleury St. Jean and very decent pay. I expect to enjoy the work ; in short, it is the best bit of luck that ever fell in a fellow's way. Now I must be going. And when do you think George may be home ?" Some minutes passed in discussing probabilities respecting the brother they both loved so heartily.

"But I must not stay," cried Dick at length. "God bless you, Marge ;" he raised and kissed her hand.

"Oh, don't do that, Dick ! it is like Mr. Ellis."

"Does he only kiss your *hand* ?" asked Dick sharply, his eyes questioning hers.

"Only my hand," returned Marjory steadily, though a vivid blush rose in her cheek and faded as she exclaimed while the tears brimmed over, "I wish—I wish I could always live with you and George !"

"And I wish I could spend every hour of my life with you !" said Dick passionately, adding in an altered tone, "that is till you found some one you could love better than either of us !"

"I do not think I ever shall. I have been so wretched since Mr. Ellis asked me to marry him, that I feel as if I should never care for any companion but my brother."

"Ah ! Marge, you will leave us yet. Dear sister, good-bye." He drew her to him gently and kissed her cheek, then hastily left the room. Marjory threw herself into a chair and wept without restraint. Her tears, however, were not bitter ; though the grief and anxiety of the hour stole the consoling reflection, "I did not think Dick cared so much for me ! What a good kind fellow he is !"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FRESH START.

A NEW year, the third in this veracious history, had opened on two troubled spirits with whom, out of the many thousands which ache and palpitate, our story is concerned.

Away in the quiet decorous routine of Uncle Carteret's household Marjory watched and waited for news from her brother, or of his arrival—waited with a sore and anxious heart.

At home in Falkland Terrace Mrs. Acland pondered moodily on the ill-fortune which sent back George a sickly cripple, to be an unavoidable burden on her hands.

To turn a young man so circumstanced out of his father's house was not to be thought of. He could not be sent back to sea, and he was fit for little ashore. Still, he was more bearable than Marjory, less likely to do mischief, or to interfere with his father.

To Mr. Acland she talked soothingly, with many expressions of sympathy and regret for the poor dear boy's sufferings.

Mr. Acland himself was a good deal disturbed and distressed. He was grieved for his son, and touched by the account of his sufferings, but he was also much concerned that he should be thrown on his hands. Mr. Rennie—whose son George had saved—wrote in the warmest terms of his gratitude, and expressed his intention of calling on Mr. Acland when he came up to meet the two young men. Mrs. Rennie had added a glowing ungrammatical postscript.

Mr. Rennie was the head of the firm, and resided in the neighbourhood of that busy, well-known seaport, Dockborough. Here he had started in life, and risen to be head of the business he had enlarged and extended. The London house was but a branch establishment, which he visited occasionally, while he personally directed the chief office.

A telegram from the expectant father announced the arrival of George and his friend at Southampton rather sooner than Mrs. Acland expected, and the next day Mr. Rennie himself escorted the invalid to his home.

When Mrs. Acland beheld her stepson, pale, bent, his empty sleeve fastened up under the short remnant of the arm he had lost, and leaning the other on that of a tall, big bony man, with profuse sandy hair and beard, she instinctively assumed the motherly tenderness calculated to impress the wealthy shipowner.

"My poor, dear boy!" she almost whispered as she embraced

him. "We have been looking and longing for you. We must nurse you up now, we have you safe at home. You are not looking so ill as I expected," and, turning a little aside, she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. "How good of you, Mr. Rennie—I presume it is Mr. Rennie—to bring our dear boy back yourself." With her sweetest smile, "If Mr. Acland were here he would thank you better than I can."

"I doot that," returned Rennie abruptly, in a voice from which a sojourn of forty years in the land of the Saxon had not banished the strong Scotch intonation. "Anyway, I'd do more for the lad that saved my son. He looks a bit shake in but they tell me he is just twice the man he was when he went on board at Galle. We'll have him down at Craigneish—that's my place beside Dockborough. The sea breezes will set him up."

They had gone into the dining-room while he spoke, and George dropped into a chair. "I'm awfully tired," he said rather querulously. "Where's Marge?"

"She is away in Paris, dear, with your Uncle Carteret, and enjoying herself."

"Oh! I am sorry. I did hope to find Marge here. Did you tell her I was coming?" asked George, as if going to burst into tears.

"Of course I told her, but I fancy she had a lot of engagements. Now, dear, you must have a glass of wine—you look faint—and you will allow me to offer you a glass also, Mr. Rennie?"

"Aw! yes—I'll just drink my friend George's health and complete recovery, which I have no doubt will be speedy with your good care," returned Rennie, who had the tendency of his countrymen to credit a handsome woman with many virtues.

"Allow me to serve you myself; we live in a very homely, modest way," said Mrs. Acland, hastening, with grateful alacrity, to produce glasses, biscuits and a decanter of sherry from the side-board.

And it's the right way, too," said Rennie approvingly; "a handsome woman never looks so handsome to my eyes as when she's bustling about her house and making her guests happy. Now, my lad, I'll bid you farewell for the present. Forbes and I are going down to Dockborough to-night. His mother is just wearying to set eyes on him, and no wonder; she was very near never seeing him again. Good evening, Mrs. Acland. I'll be back again in a week, and give you a call. I suppose I'll find Mr. Acland any time at his office?"

"Certainly, or he would keep any appointment you might wish to make."

"Naw—naw. I'll not break up his time—time's money you know; very pleased to have made your acquaintance," and Mr. Rennie strode off to his cab.

"Well, dear George, let me help you off with your coat and

muffler," said Mrs. Acland kindly, while she mentally marked the retreating visitor as a man to be carefully cultivated.

"Thank you. I am rather helpless still, but not half as bad as I was," and George rose with a brave effort to be composed—to resist the sense of depression resulting from fatigue and disappointment. "The worst of it is," he continued, sinking again into his chair; "I am so confoundedly weak; I can hardly keep from blubbering like a baby every now and then. I wish Marge had been here—she has so much 'go' in her. She would have cheered me up. When is she coming?"

"I cannot say, George. It would not be well to take her away from people who may be of use to her, and from the luxuries and amusements she might not care to leave. I am afraid you must be satisfied with *me*, Georgie," standing by him and stroking his rough and somewhat neglected hair.

"Oh! you are very nice and kind; but—but I do think Marjory would like to come to me—if she knew I wanted her."

"Well, time will show, only you know with so many to provide for it is a serious matter to withdraw her from—"

"Oh! don't fancy I intend to be a burden," interrupted George, flushing hotly; "as soon as I am a bit stronger, I fancy Rennie will take me into his office. Forbes said as much; and, you see, it's the left arm that's gone. I can write still."

"My dear boy! do you imagine such sordid ideas enter into your father's head or mine?"

"I'm sure I can't tell. I know they come often enough to me."

"Well, pray get rid of them. Here is your father."

Mr. Acland was really affected on meeting his son. He actually hastened into the room without stooping to take off his overcoat. George had never opposed or irritated him. Moreover, he had found favour in the eyes of his all-powerful wife. Finally, with all his professional precision, he had true English sympathy with personal prowess, and was proud of the pluck and resolution shown by his boy.

George was cheered and gratified by the emotion his father displayed. His faith in Mrs. Acland had been a good deal frayed by Marjory's observations and his later experiences, but about his father he had no doubt.

Dinner, therefore, passed harmoniously. Mr. Acland produced a bottle of champagne to drink his son's health, and directed Mrs. Acland to have him overhauled by some high-class doctor, in order to ascertain the course of treatment most likely to restore his strength and general health—a suggestion which, for no particular reason, was never carried out.

Mrs. Acland soon perceived the usual result of suffering in her stepson. He was slightly peevish and impatient, a remarkable change in so sweet a temper, and when the children, who were at

first afraid of him, began to take liberties, they were a source of annoyance and irritation. Of this Mrs. Acland took a note, and entered it to his debit. Nevertheless, the first week at home saw the disabled young sailor stronger and calmer.

The day after his arrival, finding that Mrs. Acland could not spare time to write, he made his first effort to use a pen since the loss of his arm. It was a trying affair. He was always going to place his left elbow on the table, having a curious sensation that elbow and hand were still there. Then it was so hard to keep his paper steady. He was obliged to find a weight to lay on it. This showed him the difficulties which might interfere with his success as a clerk. In spite of all, however, he managed a short letter to his sister, which he strove to make cheerful, but into which a tone of depression would creep, and then he waited impatiently for a reply; but a week passed, and Marjory made no sign.

Mr. Rennie, however, was true to his promise, and made his appearance after luncheon, about the date he had fixed. He looked red and radiant. His light grey eyes had a pleasant twinkle, his large strong mouth a kindly look of benevolent satisfaction, very different from its expression when closing a bargain or dictating the terms of a contract.

He was very cordially received, and ushered into the study, where George was lying on the sofa, a cheerful fire brightening the half light of a chill January afternoon, and sufficient evidence of needlework on the table to suggest industry, not disorder.

"Well, my laddie," he exclaimed, as soon as they had exchanged salutations and resumed their seats—(Mrs. Acland on the sofa beside her stepson)—"I've had a 'crack' with your father this morning, and he has quite come round to my views. I've been proposing that as you must give up the sea, you enter my office as a clerk. I'll give you a decent salary to begin with, as I consider I am bound to, and you shall creep up if you are so minded. There's a careful old body, Mrs. Acland," turning to her, "that has charge of our offices, and lives in the rooms above. Your boy shall have free quarters there for a year or two, till I can honestly raise his salary, so he shall be properly looked after. Mrs. Stokes—that's our caretaker—will market and manage for him better than any mere landlady, to say nothing of Mrs. Rennie herself, who is just longing to cosset him and see that he wants nothing."

"Oh! thank you," cried George, his wan cheek colouring with pleasure. "The only thing I fear is being a helpless log—a burden on my father—" his voice broke, and he stopped abruptly.

"You are infinitely good," murmured Mrs. Acland, taking George's hand and stroking it.

"Hoot toot!" cried Mr. Rennie, "there's nothing to make a hubble about. What I want is to set the laddie on his feet. He'll make the going himself as he gathers strength. His captain gives

him a first-rate character, and when I saw my boy's mother thanking God for giving him back to her, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks, I promised myself that the lad who saved him should never want a friend." The kindly canny Scot finished abruptly and blew his nose like a trumpet.

"I am sure," began Mrs. Acland blandly, "my husband and myself feel warmly your great kindness and generosity. After all, George only did his duty, and——"

"And if he had not thrown himself between a powerful maniac and his victim, I should be mourning my son, while yours would still be following the career he had chosen," interrupted Mr. Rennie. His last words, however, escaped Mrs. Acland; her attention was attracted by the sound of feet in the hall and the bump as of a heavy box being set down.

The next instant the door open impetuously and Marjory appeared—Marjory, very pale, with disordered hair escaping from under her hat, and eyes that looked unusually large. She paused an instant, looked eagerly round, and then darting to George, threw her arms round him. "My dear, dear brother," she cried. "Thank God! You are safe, and—and better; better than I hoped you would be."

Mr. Rennie observed that the colour came with a rush to her cheek, and then left her paler than before.

"Oh! Marge, this is jolly," exclaimed George, returning to her embrace, where his voice faltered and his lips twitched. "Where—how have you come?"

"Yes, Marjory; how in the world have you managed to get away?" asked Mrs. Acland in a voice from which she strove in vain to banish all acrimony.

"Have you not had my letter? I wrote three days ago, as soon as I had explained everything to Mrs. Carteret, and she agreed to let me come and see George before we went on to Italy. Oh! George, I knew no rest after I had your little note—dear, dear George." Her voice broke, but she struggled bravely for composure, and even managed to smile upon him in a way that Mr. Rennie thought infinitely pathetic. She was evidently overcome by the terrible change in his appearance, yet resolute to conceal her impression. "They are all and all to each other," thought the shrewd shipowner, "and she is just the age of my own girlie."

"This is your own sister, I suppose?" he asked.

"She is."

"Ah! missie, I suppose you're thinking it is hard your brother should be so mauled and mangled for the sake of a stranger."

"No, no," cried Marjory, smiling through the tears that *would* come. "I would not have had him do differently. Thank God, he was able to save your son for you and for his mother, his *own* mother." Her voice quivered, as she spoke, with an emphasis she

could not help ; " but it is—it is a little distressing at first, and I have had a tiresome journey."

" You are a brave lassie," said Mr. Rennie admiringly, " and your brother shall not be the worse, as far as his career goes, for his pluck and generosity. I have settled with your father to-day," and he proceeded to recapitulate his plans for George's benefit. While he spoke Mrs. Acland slipped noiselessly from the room to give the directions Marjory's unexpected return necessitated.

" This is good news," she exclaimed, clasping her hands. " What I dreaded more than anything else was his having to hang on in idleness at home. He will soon be able to begin. Do you suffer any pain now, Georgy ?" nestling close to him, and gently, fearfully touching the stump of his arm.

" Oh no ; at least very little. Isn't it lucky the fellow didn't break my leg ? But I say, Marge, can you stay all the time I am here ? It is so miserable without you."

" Yes, I can ; I wish—oh, *how* I wish I could always live with you and take care of you ! You will want me for some time to come, George."

" Well, can't you come and stay with your brother for a bit ?" suggested Mr. Rennie, who was greatly touched and interested by both brother and sister. " If you don't mind roughing it in the bachelor's den he is going to have at our diggings, it might be better for both of you ; not that I suppose *you* would stay long there, my lassie, it's too high up, and too much out of the world."

" Ah, no ; it would be heavenly," said Marjory, her voice unsteady and full of feeling ; " George and I have no one in the world but each other, and to be of some use, after wondering all my life why I was sent here to be merely an encumbrance, would be like getting into a better world."

" If that's your way of thinking !" said Mr. Rennie, rubbing his hands, " you are the right sort. Let us talk to your father and mother about it. I don't see why it could not be managed."

" You do not know all the difficulties," returned Marjory, colouring vividly, and undoing her cloak with trembling fingers. " I dare not trouble my father, and I could not be a burden to poor George."

" Oh, that's it, is it ?" said Mr. Rennie meditatively. While he paused Mrs. Acland returned.

" I am afraid, Marjory," she said, " your room will not be very comfortable. Had you given me notice——"

" But I wrote—I did indeed," interrupted Marjory, " but I did not post the letter myself, so I fear it was forgotten ; French servants are so careless. As to my room, never mind about that. How are the children ?"

Before Mrs. Acland could reply Mr. Rennie broke in :

" It seems, Mrs. Acland, that this young lady thinks her brother

would be better of her company for a year or so, and I am much of the same opinion myself. What do you say?"

Mrs. Acland took a rapid mental glance at the proposition. So long as Marjory was out of the house it mattered little where she was, and the seeming would be quite as fair whether she were with her uncle or her brother, but residence with the latter implied demands on the paternal purse.

"I am sure it is a very kind thought," she said, smiling sweetly; "but I could not answer off-hand. Mr. Acland, of course, is the person to consult, and apart from all other considerations it might not be well to withdraw Marjory from an aged and wealthy relative who is much attached to her."

"Attached to me!" echoed Marjory in such a tone of amazement that Mr. Rennie smiled.

"And they are going so far away—to Italy," she added with doleful emphasis.

"Well, well, missie, if you are ready to give up a fortune and a journey to Italy for your brother's sake your wishes deserve to be considered. I shall be a few days longer in town, so I'll have a talk with Mr. Acland and see what is to be done. Meantime you'll be glad to see the back of me as I am but a stranger."

"No, no! certainly not," cried Marjory, "you seem a real friend."

"This is a very impetuous child," said Mrs. Acland smiling and laying her hand caressingly on Marjory's shoulder, "you must excuse her want of manner."

"Want of manner," repeated Mr. Rennie rising, "I hope she may never learn anything different. Now good-day to you. There's my card, but of course you'll always find me in Fenchurch Street. As soon as you are able, one of our shipping clerks shall give you some hints in bookkeeping (of which, it seems, you know something) and also respecting our particular business. Good morning, Mrs. Acland. Your boy is looking better already. Let him have his sister to look after him, and I have a shrewd notion you will save her keep in doctors' bills." He shook hands heartily with each, adding a friendly slap on George's shoulder, and left them.

"Isn't he a trump?" cried George. "I feel ever so much stronger since he came. Who could fancy he is the man all the fellows about the office talk of as if he were a 'fee fa fum' ogre who'd eat you up about the smallest matter. Forbes is just like him, only more of an Englishman."

"Well, Marjory," said Mrs. Acland, who had followed Mr. Rennie into the hall, "I wonder what your father will say to you for rushing off in this ridiculously inconsiderate way!—casting from you the chances which your position with the Carterets offered, without a thought for the heavy burdens your poor father has to bear. Pray how did you get the money to travel, I should like to know? I trust you did not borrow and expect us to repay it."

"Indeed I did not," indignantly. "I simply gave George's poor little letter to Mrs. Carteret, who has been so very, *very* good to me of late. She cried too—I never thought she could shed a tear—then she said I could go home if I wished it, and gave me the money. I don't think she ever knew before how people can love each other. If I did not believe there was a chance of living with George I would rather live with her than any one else."

"I warn you there is little or no chance of your setting up with George. It would be too unprincipled to ask your father to support you when you can have a luxurious home for the taking, and you cannot expect George to share half a loaf with you."

"Yes, but I would, though," he exclaimed. "Marge and I could do on very little. It would be better to live on one meal a day and be together than have half the continent of Europe between us."

"You are the most idiotic young people I ever met," said Mrs. Acland contemptuously, as she rang for the gas to be lit. "You had better go and take your things off, Marjory. From being like a ghost you have made your face as red as fire with your tears and nonsense. I hate sentimentality."

The days following the reunion of brother and sister, though Mrs. Acland did her best to render them irksome, were jewelled with many a pleasant moment. Fire in the schoolroom was strictly forbidden, thus George and his sister were compelled to be pretty constantly in the society of their stepmother. But there were few days when she did not go out, and the two young creatures made profound calculations as to how much they could live on, wildly under-estimating the cost of keeping body and soul together.

Then when the weather was fine and the air still, they made excursions to look at the shops—Marjory full of care for her precious invalid and guarding him from rude contact with wonderful adroitness. Sometimes they indulged in a cup of tea or a shilling drive in a hansom, which reckless outlay was defrayed by Marjory, as poor George's purse was quite empty. Then there were one or two interesting letters from Dick, and even Mrs. Carteret wrote a few kindly lines. These were comforting circumstances, yet they hardly atoned to Marjory for the cold disapprobation which her father steadily evinced towards her, and which made her feel more than ever an *un-favoured* guest.

At length came a glorious afternoon when George returned from an interview with Mr. Rennie, who had gone and come in the interim, and announced that he was to begin at a hundred a year, which after two years—if he proved worth it—should be increased according to his usefulness. "Why, Marge, we can live like fighting cocks on two pounds a week," was his concluding sentence.

"Yes, of course," cried Marjory with sparkling eyes. "It is splendid! for from what you tell me you are not to pay any rent. Mr. Rennie must mean us to live together." Neither of the young financiers reflected there were fifty-two weeks in a year. Nor did they reckon on Mrs. Acland's covert resistance to their scheme. Still they held steadily to it; and Mr. Acland, who was much influenced by the opinion of a stronger and more prosperous man than himself, was ashamed to refuse his consent to what seemed so natural and suitable an arrangement. Marjory represented that she could do with an allowance for her dress, that it would cost George very little more to keep her than to keep himself, that there was much in the way of mending and making which he would have to pay for if she were not there to do it for him, and much more.

At last perseverance was rewarded and Marjory wrung a reluctant consent from father and stepmother. Then came the only painful bit of the whole business—writing to Mrs. Carteret, who replied very kindly though her expressions were curt and dry. She desired that Marjory should write to her from time to time as she would always feel an interest in her.

Mrs. Acland was excessively annoyed at the turn things had taken. She felt herself virtually defeated, and added another count to the heavy list of Marjory's evil deeds, which she promised to pay in full.

It was arranged that George should pay a short visit to his friend, Forbes Rennie, take his place in the office, and have things in readiness for his sister when she came to join him.

All through this period of close friendly intercourse Marjory constantly debated within herself, "Shall I or shall I not tell George I went away with Mr. Ellis?" and the answer was always "No."

She saw that, although gradually gaining strength, her brother had still much of the nervous irritability to which weakness is liable, and she feared the effect of such a confession; besides, it would be a breach of faith toward Ellis. No: she might as well save herself the shame of such a disclosure.

It was a day or two before George was to leave town. He was busy at his writing in the dining-room, trying to get accustomed to the awkwardness of being one-handed; Marjory was pretending to read but furtively watching his progress. Mrs. Acland, as was usual in the afternoon, had gone out.

Marjory's thoughts had been oscillating between castle-building as regarded her life with George, and conjectures as to what Ellis could, would or might do when he found she had quitted Mrs. Carteret, when she was almost startled into a scream by the servant suddenly opening the door, and before she could well utter the words, "A gentleman for you, miss," Ellis walked in.

"You did not expect to see me, eh?" he said with a pleasant

smile. "I was obliged to come over on a matter of business. I promised Mrs. Carteret to see you and report on your brother." Marjory murmured something about being glad, which her looks belied, and let him hold her hand for a minute while he scanned her face.

"I am glad to find you so far recovered," he said kindly, passing on to George and shaking hands with him. "I hear you have been doing 'doughty deeds,' and trust you will ultimately be none the worse."

"An arm is a sad loss," said Marjory. "But I am thankful he was able to save his friend's life." She was very proud of her brother's prowess.

"Of course; it is a physical loss he will never recover; but I am told he has made a friend of a powerful and wealthy man, who will no doubt help him on.

"He is very kind and makes too much of what I have done. It amuses me to hear them all talking of my pluck and resolution," continued George with a boyish laugh. "I can tell you I was in a desperate funk. I would have given anything to run away, but when I saw the madman creeping over to attack Forbes, who did not see him, something that seemed not myself forced me to run between them. Then I thought it was all over with me."

"It would be well if fear oftener aped courage as successfully," said Ellis. "Now I am going to treat you unceremoniously. My mission to your sister is a secret; so I must ask you to leave us—"

"Oh! very well; I don't mind," returned George, rising with alacrity; "only remember Marge has promised to stay with me."

"I am not likely to forget." Gravely—"No, Marjory," as soon as they were alone. "My debt to you is increasing daily and the accumulation of unpaid interest will be enormous. You will be bankrupt, my sweet bride-elect. How do you intend to clear yourself?"

"I suppose I must become insolvent," returned Marjory, determined to keep a brave front to the foe, though shivering at his cold, mocking tone. She had George to fight for now as well as herself, and he should be neither disturbed nor deserted if she could help it.

"I do not think you are likely to be insolvent—at least your inventive resources seem tolerably large. Still it was imprudent and unwise of you to quit Paris without consulting or informing me. I might make matters difficult for you."

"Pray understand that I do not hold myself accountable to you, Mr. Ellis," she cried, half frightened at the violent beating of her own heart, yet resolving to bring him to reason if she could. "After all, I do not see how you could make things difficult to me without betraying more than you would like Uncle Carteret to know. What do you want me to do? Is it not right and natural that I should stay with my own brother?"

"And is it not natural that I should wish to keep my promised wife within my reach—where I can see her and endeavour to win her obdurate heart?"

"I cannot help thinking—or rather, feeling—that you don't love me a bit, said Marjory, nerving herself to a supreme effort and raising her clear, honest eyes to his. "I do not believe you would trouble about me if it were not to revenge yourself. There is something gone from your voice, and the very touch of your hand, which used to make me think you loved me. For that I thank you," she went on, with a sweet humility that almost moved her hearer, "and now, though I behaved so badly, why don't you try to put away evil, unkind thoughts and forgive me heartily? You would be ever so much happier if you did. I know I should be better and happier if I could forgive Mrs. Acland; I am, when I can forget her. A strain of hatred through one's heart makes havoc of all harmony. Do forgive me!" With a sudden impulse she stretched out her hand to him.

Ellis made no movement to take it. He leant his elbow on the table near which he sat and covered his face with his hand.

"I will forgive you," he said after a moment's pause, "but only on my own terms. Our ideas respecting life and moral harmony do not agree. You have affronted, mortified, baffled me as no other man or woman ever has, and you shall pay me in full or——" He came across to where she sat and took her hand. Marjory started up, struck by the change in his expression. "Put your arms round my neck, lay your cheek against mine, and say, 'Dear Ralph, I will let myself love you; I will be your wife when you claim me.' If you do, I will forgive you. I will be weak enough—or forgiving enough—to lose my head about you again, for you are still the strongest passion of my life."

"But I cannot—I cannot," cried Marjory, turning very white and trying to draw away her hand. "I do not love you and I dare not marry you. I retract my promise. I never, never can be your wife."

"Then be careful how you indulge your emotions," said Ellis, still grasping her hand firmly. "If you will not have *me* for a lover you shall have no other. What man would care for a wife who left her father's house with another man, and left him next day *unwed*?"

"When I marry," cried Marjory, roused to indignation which carried her beyond fear, "it will be time enough to fulfil your chivalrous threat! I will never see or speak to you again if I can help it."

"Ay! if you can," returned Ellis in a low, harsh tone. Then, in spite of her struggles, he caught her in his arms and kissed her brow, her cheek, her lips. "There," he said, "is the first and last lover's kiss you will ever have from me. In future, remember I am

a creditor, who will have his pound of flesh. I accept your renunciation."

The next moment Marjory was alone—shocked, stunned, unspeakably indignant, yet defiant. She was in too great a state of effervescence to feel fear or shed tears, but often, in after times, when alone and depressed, the recollection of his words, his cruel look at parting, came back to her and she shrunk from the picture presented by memory.

"I say, Marge, is he gone? What a pleasant voice he has, and what was it all about?" asked George, coming in almost directly.

"You don't suppose I will tell you the secrets confided to me," returned Marjory, endeavouring to speak gaily, and thankful she had so unobservant an interrogator.

"I fancied that rich aunt of yours might have sent you a handsome present as you are going to set up housekeeping."

"Oh! George, how can you be so greedy? Think how generous she has been already."

"Well, I know; but I suppose twenty or thirty pounds are not of much matter to her."

"Oh, such a sum matters to any one. I have left my best scissors in my room; I must fetch them," and she escaped him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"DANGEROUS GROUND."

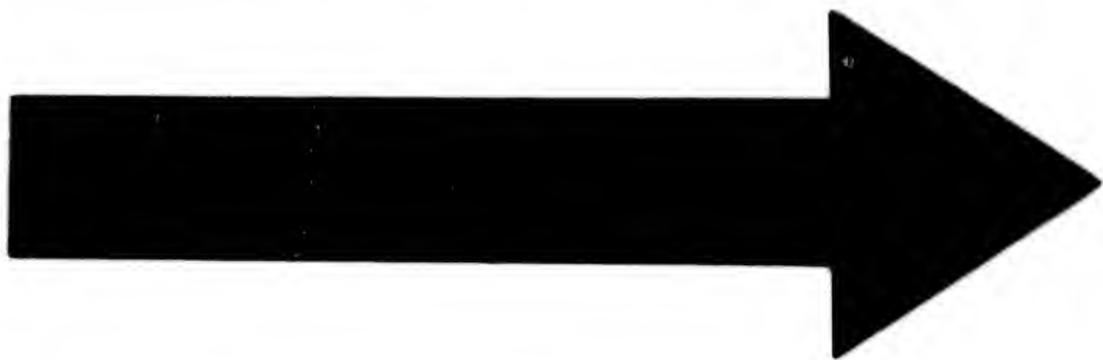
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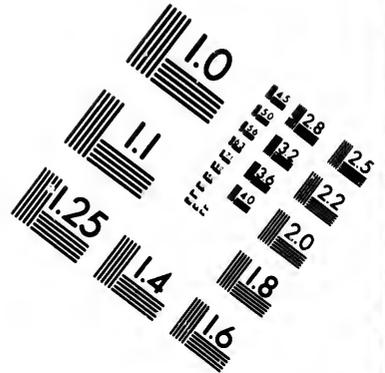
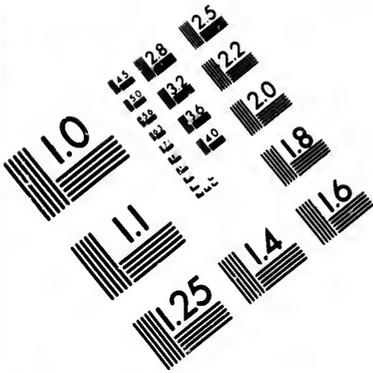
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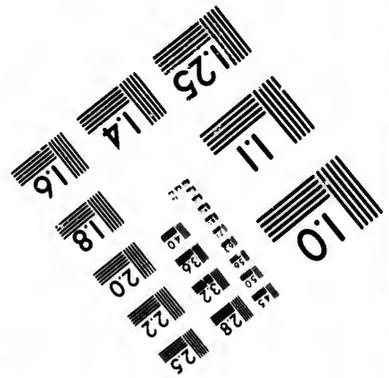
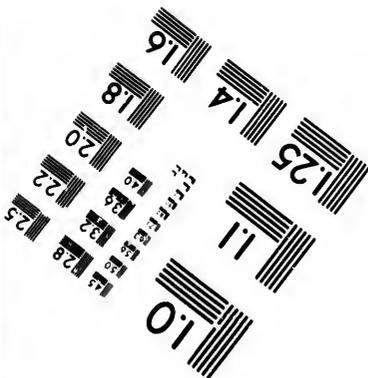
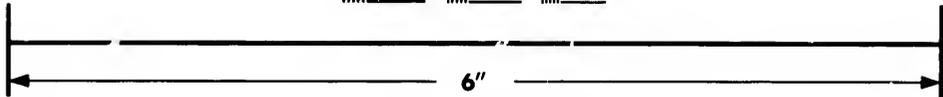
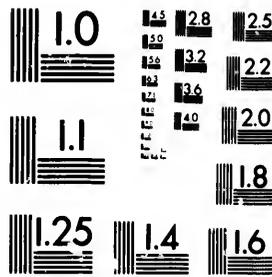
"It must be nearly a month since I last wrote you, but do not fancy I have been either idle or negligent. On the contrary, I have been so busy I have not known which way to turn. Then I wanted to get a little used to my new life in order to describe it.

"To begin at the beginning. George had just got into these rooms when I joined him. Mrs. Rennie, at whose house, as you know, he had been staying, quite loaded him with kindness; besides the ordinary necessary furniture she put many pretty things in our new home, beautiful hot-house flowers and a basket of fruit and vegetables. They (Mr. and Mrs. Rennie) live about four miles out of the town, in a pretty country house, called Craigneish, after some place in Scotland. Mrs. Rennie is rather a fat, fair woman, who must have been very pretty. She is most good-natured—it seems a delight to her to do kind things; but she speaks oddly





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and puts her 'h's' in wrong places. Then she wears gorgeous gowns that would make Aunt Carteret's hair stand on end ; but it is a shame to write all this of any one who has been so good. In short, she is a sort of rose without a thorn, and I always feel inclined to hug her, so does George.

"The rooms Mr. Rennie has given us are in the fourth storey of a great new house he built some years ago for his offices. They are rather low, but very pleasant ; the furniture is simple, but fresh and pretty, and Mrs. Rennie put in a sofa for George to rest on when he is tired, which, I am sorry to say, he often is. By-and-by, when we get over the cost of settling here, I shall hire a piano. The houses opposite are small and low, and we can see over them to the river. I am never tired of looking at it. It is such a grand, broad highway for all the nations of the earth. And the crowds of shipping that go to and fro would astonish you. I did not think there was so much in the world. It makes one feel as if in touch with the ends of the earth to see the great steamers coming in and going out to America, India, China and Australia.

"Besides our nice rooms, I have the use of a dear little kitchen which I share with Mrs. Stokes : she is the caretaker, a Scotch woman, who had been nurse in Mr. Rennie's family, and married some *employe* of the firm, who died and left her unprovided for so Mr. Rennie put her here : she speaks so funnily I do not always understand her. I *think* she could be disagreeable, but fortunately she was very fond of Forbes Rennie, and so is very friendly with George and me for his sake. A woman comes in every day to help in cleaning, and I pay her for doing our rooms too. I am learning fast to be a keen housekeeper. At any rate, I see how much thought it takes to get full value for a shilling. I go to market, and am beginning to be able to do a little cooking with Mrs. Stokes' help.

"As George is in the house he is able to take his dinner with me at one o'clock, and it is delight getting everything ready and nice for him.

"Then, after tea, he lies down, and I read to him, or he reads to himself while I work, and there is nothing to disturb us ; no one to dread, but sweetest freedom and a heavenly sense of safety, only for one horrid memory, but I will not name it. *You* know, and I often forget that. I never was so happy before. I am sure I am useful to George ! He is far from strong and at times is a little fidgety. He was very nervous about his work as clerk at first, but I can see that as he gathers strength he is calmer and more self-reliant ; still he is not so bright as he used to be. It would never do for him to be alone.

"There, you see how my old dream of 'keeping house for the boys' has been realized—but not quite. We want you so much, Dick. Fancy how nice it would be to have both my brothers to

cater for. But you are better off as you are, and seem to be in society into the bargain.

"What grand neighbours yours must be. How do you feel when you hand a countess in to dinner? Pray write and tell me all about yourself. When shall we see you again? I hope Mr. Brand keeps well; give him my very kind regards. I like him so much.

"Good-bye, dear Dick,

"Always your affectionate

"MARJORY.

"P.S.—Perhaps you had better write to George next time; he likes to get a letter. I forgot to mention that Mr. Ronnie has a daughter, a very pretty girl, like her mother; she wears *such* charming frocks! she is inclined to be great friends with me. There is an elder son, too, in the army. Mr. Rennie came up the day before yesterday to see how we were getting on. Is it not kind of him? I am so thankful to be here.

"M. D."

This epistle was eagerly read and re-read by its recipient, who had begun to feel depressed by Marjory's silence. Indeed, his thoughts dwelt much upon her in his unemployed moments.

Her grief at poor George's untoward accident; her dread of Ellis; her readiness to give up all the advantages of residing with Mrs. Carteret in order to be her brother's companion and helper in comparative poverty and complete seclusion, were so many rivets to fasten his imagination—his heart—to the ever present picture of the bright if somewhat wayward girl who had been his tormentor.

To know that she was happy with George seemed to remove the only obstacle to his own hearty enjoyment of his life.

The winter had been a busy time—for Brand was unusually well and energetic—in the genial southern climate. Château Fleury stood in a bend on the hills, sheltered from the cold south-east winds which occasionally swept down from the neighbouring Alps. It was a quaint old house, neither large nor exteriorly picturesque. But an archway led into the courtyard (three sides enclosed by the dwelling and the fourth by some dilapidated stables), which in summer was a delight to the artistic eye of the owner. The walls were of a warm grey tone, as if they had absorbed the glow of southern sunshine, and draped at two of the angles with ivy. There was a parterre crowded with rose trees and ordinary sweet garden flowers, in the midst of which was a fountain, and at the top of a small mound in the centre was a hoary sundial. The windows which looked upon this pleasance were of all shapes and sizes, save on one side, where a small chapel was lighted by a row of mullioned windows.

The chief alteration to be effected was to pull down the stables and replace them by arches to support additional rooms, and thus

to permit a beautiful view of the country and the mountains beyond to be visible from the courtyard. This, with necessary repairs and interior decorations, was the work in hand. Lord Beaulieu himself designed the arches and superincumbent edifice, and found young Cranston sufficiently intelligent and instructed to carry out the details. Brand spoke French fluently if not grammatically; and Dick, unhampered by knowledge of or regard for rules, rapidly picked up the language from the men he employed. In this he was assisted by a neighbour.

A couple of miles from the château, in a somewhat superior farmhouse, lived a certain Baron de L'Epinaud, an old manufacturer of Grenoble, who, having lost some money by the fluctuations of commerce, retired from business in a fright, and amused himself by what he termed amateur farming, but which was really market gardening. In spite of his assertions that he was a ruined man the inhabitants of the district asserted that he was still rich, and by the severest economy added yearly to his store. M. de L'Epinaud had not brought his title nor assumed it at his own pleasure. He came of an old Provençal family, which had been reduced by its own extravagance and political changes to beggary.

When, therefore, its last scion worked his way up again, he revived the ancient honours of his race by the simple process of printing "Baron de Bellecour" on his cards and signing himself without his Christian name.

His retirement was soothed by the companionship of a widowed daughter, Madame la Comtesse d'Albeville—a fascinating young woman of eight or nine-and-twenty, who, on the strength of a pair of big, black eyes and a quantity of blue-black hair, posed as a beauty. She was touchingly devoted to her aged father, on whom her neighbours said she was entirely dependent, M. Le Comte having departed this life some three years before, "leaving not a wrack" behind.

These were the only neighbours above the rank of peasants of which Château Fleury could boast; and when it was found that "Milord" spoke French "well, but remarkably well," he was the object of much civility from the baron and his daughter.

Meeting him about with Brand, apparently on familiar terms, the hospitality of Bellecour was also offered to Lord Beaulieu's *employe*, who, in his turn, mentioned that young Cranston was his adopted son: so it came about during the long dark winter's evenings our two friends were occasionally the guests of M. Le Baron. The devoted daughter, with winning grace, ventured to correct Dick's French, and further suggested that he should study the splendid literature of the country under her guidance. Dick very gratefully accepted, so on Sundays and Thursdays he walked over to Bellecour and spent a pleasant and profitable hour or two with Madame d'Albeville, who, as the days lengthened, occasionally

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met him half way, just for a little exercise, and they walked back.

The day he received Marjory's letter was a very busy one with Dick. He found that some of his directions had not been carried out, which necessitated undoing what had been done, and he felt obliged to watch the setting of every stone. Finally, when the workmen departed, he sent a polite note excusing himself to the countess.

He wanted to sit down quietly and answered Marjory's letter. He felt that he could cover pages. How she would enjoy Fleury and the beautiful scenery around, the picturesque aspect of the country and the people.

"You are not going over to Bellecour this evening?" said Brand, as they set by the fire after dinner. He had lit his cigarette, and laid the book he was going to read beside him, but in the meantime was scribbling figures in his memorandum book.

"No; I want to answer Marjory's letter," and Dick set forth his blotting book.

"Hum!—I hope you sent an excuse to madame?"

"Of course."

"She will not be pleased."

"Oh! she won't mind."

"She is wonderfully kind."

"Yes," returned Dick shortly, as he dipped his pen in the ink.

"How do you get on with your studies, my boy?"

"Pretty well. I make a mess of it sometimes, but I am getting on. Madame d'Albeville reads beautifully, and is altogether very nice, you know; but she wastes time a good deal crying about her husband, who must have been, from what she says, rather a brute."

"I am afraid *you* are rather unsympathetic," said Brand drily.

"No, I am not; but it's uncommonly awkward when a woman whom you scarcely know begins to talk of her desolation and you see her great eyes shining through the tears that drop down after a bit on the book."

"I suppose it is," said Brand in a peculiar tone. "I suppose you are not handy at offering comfort?"

"Me? No; I never know what to say, even if she understood English, and certainly not in French. Why, she seemed so broken-hearted last Sunday that I felt obliged to say or do something; so I just thought I would press her hand."

"Had that very strong measure the desired effect?"

"I don't know. She was not angry, anyhow. She smiled and said something about the consolations of tender and sympathetic friendship, and begged me to confide the history of my life to her. I quite understood that much, and I managed to say I had none to tell, but hoped for a busy, full life in the future."

Brand laughed quietly to himself: "And after this touching

passage you fail to attend for your next lesson ; she will think you ungallant."

Dick laughed. "I don't want her to think me rude ; but you see I want to answer Marjory's letter—which, of course, I prefer doing."

"The letter you had to-day ? That's quick work."

"They will not think it too quick." Brand did not reply. He went on scribbling figures, and Dick was soon deep in his letter. By-and-by Brand leaned back in his chair and seemed cogitating some question. Then his eyes turned on his companion, whom he watched for some minutes, a soft, sad, and kindly expression stealing into his eyes.

"Why, you are inflicting a volume on Miss Marjory."

"It is to George ; but it is all the same."

"Oh ! indeed. Well, look here. I have been making a little calculation. Do you know, we have been living here at a remarkably cheap rate. Old Joséphine is a capital cook, and, like most good cooks, is a good manager. We have about six weeks or two months longer in this nice old place. These French workmen are very slow, or, rather, very intermittent. Now, when all is finished, I propose we take a trip into Italy and have a peep at Florence and Genoa. You have made some savings, I suppose, and you could not spend them better. What's deficient I'll make up, for I am not quite dependent on what I earn."

"You are too good to me," cried Dick, enchanted with the idea. "I often wonder why it is you have taken to me so much, a man so inferior to you in knowledge and—ability."

"Not in ability, I suspect," returned Brand in a low, unsteady voice. "Perhaps some day I will tell you all I know. Meantime you like my project ?"

"Like it ! Why it is beyond my highest hopes."

"We must make the most of our time and study the great buildings. I wish we could manage Venice, but I am afraid. I knew Italy years ago and I think I can contrive to do our little tour cheaply. But we have plenty of time to lay our plans. Now I will let you finish your letter. It won't break your heart to leave your charming instructress."

"To leave Madame d'Albeville ? No ! certainly not. Why should I ?"

So it came about that it was some time before Dick and his faithful friends in Dockborough met again.

Lives unmarked by events roll swiftly. The first five or six months of Marjory's existence at Dockborough were peacefully monotonous yet never dull. It required a good deal of thoughtful management to keep within the limits of her scanty means, but she accomplished it.

Mrs. Rennie was always helpful, and used to come panting and smiling, after her ascent of the long stair, to bring the produce of her dairy and henhouse to her young *proteges*, to inspect her neatly-kept sitting-room and praise her good management. Then there were teadrinkings, when Mary Rennie came in for shopping purposes, and partook of that refreshment with Marjory, who had never since she was at school known the pleasure of having a young girl friend. How fast their tongues went on these occasions! how their merry laughter rang through the rooms and even out into the passage, reaching the ears of Mrs. Stokes, who smiled in a sort of pitiful sympathy; and yet there were times when Marjory grew grave and sad when, after Mary Rennie left, she washed up the tea things and put them in their place.

If dear, honest, kindly Mrs. Rennie *knew*, would she allow her young carefully-guarded daughter to associate with a girl to whom such a story as hers was attached? For as time went on Marjory saw how almost impossible it would be to explain the peculiar circumstances which urged her to go with Ellis, how difficult to clear herself of suspicion. Over and over again she resolved that nothing should tempt her to marry; never could she confess her rash weakness to any man, nor would she deceive any one she loved. Having failed to confide the tale of her terrible mistake to George when they first met she never could bring herself to approach the subject.

There were, however, plenty of happy days when she quite forgot the existence of her enemy, as she considered Ellis, and enjoyed the companionship of her young friend heartily. So thoughtless and inconsequent a creature as Mary Rennie she had never met; a sound, warm heart preserved her from utter folly. She had been indulged in every fancy, yet not utterly spoiled because of the divine gift of sympathy. The number and variety of her dresses, her hats, her trinkets were a source of amazement and admiration to Marjory, while the wonderful manner in which Marjory turned, twisted and preserved her garments was equally a source of astonishment to the rich man's daughter; she would have liked to have bought pretty things for her friend, but though she rarely thought, her instinctive feeling was true and there was an independence about Marjory that forbade the offering of such gifts.

"What delightful brown bread and butter you have?" cried Miss Rennie one warm day towards the end of summer, as the two girls sat at tea in Marjory's room. "It never is so nice at home."

"That is because you are never so tired and hungry there. Everything seems excellent to me at Craigneish."

"I am dreadfully tired, certainly. They were so slow serving me at Macdougall's. It is a horrid shop, but my father insists on our going there because he is Scotch."

"If I had known you were going to shop I should have asked leave to come with you, for I have had a present from Aunt Carret and am actually going to buy a new dress."

"Oh, that is nice. I will come in to-morrow and help you to choose it. Where does your aunt live?"

"Chiefly in Italy. She was in Switzerland when she wrote."

"What a pretty name Carteret is. Are they swell people?"

"I hardly know. Mr. Carteret (*he is my great-uncle*) had an old place—such a pretty old place—called Langford Priory, but he sold it."

"What a shame! If I had an old place nothing would induce me to sell it. I should like to have come of an old, old family, with family relics, old armour and swords, and things hanging on my ancestral walls, and hiding places, and——"

"A family ghost or two," added Marjory as Miss Rennie paused in her enumeration.

"Yes, *and* a ghost if necessary; now everything about *us* is so commonplace and new."

"You have one possession that is most *un*-common, it is such a man for a father as yours."

"Oh, yes; he is an old dear. I wouldn't change him for all the armour and ghosts in England; and mother, *too*, is a dear, only she worries about my untidiness and idleness, though I believe she is right." There was a short pause. "I believe I am going on a visit to my aunt," resumed Miss Rennie, "and I do not fancy it much."

"To Scotland?"

"Yes; she does not live in the Highlands or any nice place. They have a farm somewhere near Edinburgh."

"I daresay you will enjoy yourself."

"I wanted to go abroad. I have only been in Paris, but Alick (*her eldest brother*) is coming with me. I believe my cousin has very good shooting, so he wants to come too."

"When do you expect him?"

"Next week. He will stay awhile with us. I am sure I don't know how he will like staying with my aunt, for she and my cousins are regular farmers, make the butter and go to market; while Alick is rather a fine gentleman, quite different from any of the men you see here. Your brother speaks more like him than any one else. Your brother is so nice. Why does he never come up when I am here?"

"He would like to come, I am sure, but he is always busy then."

"He is looking better, poor fellow. I wonder you can bear to see Forbes when you think he cost your brother his arm."

"My dear Miss Rennie, I am only glad that George was able to save him."

"Do call me Mary—do, *do*. I want to call you Marjory. Where is your other brother?"

"Dick? Oh, he has not written at all regularly of late, but when last I heard he was still at Fleury, in the south of France."

"He is an architect, isn't he?"

"He is trying to be one. He has had a delightful trip to Florence and Pisa; now he has gone back to do some more work at the château."

"Won't he come and see you?"

"I hope so; but I do not know when. He must go where he gets anything to do."

"I should like to go to the south of France," said Miss Rennie meditatively.

"It must be lovely—the scenery there I mean. I must show you two sketches of the place where Dick is at work."

She rose and brought over two water-colour drawings, carefully wrapped in silver paper. One was a charming sketch of the courtyard at Château Fleury, the other a fine view of woods and mountain.

"How beautiful—how exquisitely done! Did your brother paint them?"

"Ah, no; these are the work of a real artist who is decorating the interior of the castle. He is the greatest, the best friend Dick has. He kindly drew them for me. They are great treasures."

"I am sure they are."

"The carriage is ready, and the maister's waiting for you," said the caretaker, putting in her head.

"In a minute, nurse! I wish I could sketch. I learned drawing for years, and I wish you could see the things I produce. How proud mother would be if I could bring her back some pictures from Scotland! I believe the country round Aunt Morrison's place is rather pretty."

"Where does she live?" asked Marjory, her ear caught by the name.

"Near a place called Strathlogie. Do come and dine on Sunday when George is free. I will look in to-morrow. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REUNION.

MARJORY was indeed pale! Her heart for a second seemed to stand still, and then beat wildly—as the horror and danger of her position displayed themselves before her. What more likely than that Mrs. Morrison should return with her niece, then what a disclosure awaited Mrs. Rennie—and for herself, what shame! A cold shiver shot through her at the idea! She would never stay to be discovered!—better a thousand times tell all to Mrs. Rennie and go!

This was a consequence of her folly she never anticipated. Ought she to warn Ellis?—ought she to permit such a blow to fall unexpectedly on George?—was she to be a trouble and a disgrace to the brother she loved so well?—would the whole story get round to Mrs. Acland? If it did, how she would revel in the power it bestowed to trample and to torture! Why it would be almost better to marry Ellis and escape it all! But, no!—a deep and true instinct whispered *that* would be a life-long misery.

She sat long where Mrs. Rennie had left her—her elbows on the table, her face buried in her hands. Gradually, the terrible painful confusion of her mind cleared a little; with the pluck natural to her, she strove to think not only what was the best, but, above all, what was the right thing to do. Courage and calmness came to her as she thought. For every one's sake she must keep her secret as long as possible. She could ascertain from Mary Rennie if her aunt was coming to return her visit, and before they met she would tell her story to Mrs. Rennie; she would meet the danger half-way, it was all she could do. Then, if Mrs. Morrison would not leave her home, her daughter might, and she would be equally ready to tell the scandalous story. The only creature with whom she could take counsel was Dick, and with him, only face to face. If she wrote on the repulsive subject, Dick would reply, and there was always the danger of the letter falling into George's hands, who would unhesitatingly read it. Besides, she scarcely knew where to address him, as he spoke of leaving Fleury St. Jean about the present time.

Indeed, his letters had been few and scanty of late, there was a change of tone in them too, an indescribable constraint since he and Brand had parted after their expedition to Florence. Marjory had noticed it before; now, as she re-read his last two epistles (which

she took out in hope of extracting some consolation from their contents), it appeared more marked than at first. Was Dick forgetting her, or growing indifferent to her joys and sorrows?

Until this thought occurred to her, she did not know how much she depended on his sympathy and counsel. The tears which her alarm, her anticipation of shame had frozen at their fount, melted and flowed freely at the idea of separation or estrangement from Dick. How her heart ached for the sight of him, to hear the sound of his voice. He would surely counsel her for the best, and feel for her as no one else would. He alone knew the real truth of her secret trouble.

She roused herself, bathed her eyes, put away the tea things, and then wrote a few lines to Dick, begging him to let her know what chance there was of her seeing him soon—because she had much to tell him, which she must write if he did not come. This letter she sent to Château Fleury—she did not know Brand's address or she would have written to him for information respecting Dick's movements, she only knew that they parted in consequence of Brand having business in London, while Dick returned to Fleury by Lord Beaulieu's wish.

When she had posted this letter she felt calmer and braver, and though George thought her rather quite and perhaps tired, as it was very warm, he saw nothing unusual in her manner.

The next day was wet, so the project of shopping fell through, and the girls did not meet until the following Sunday, when George and his sister dined, as they often did on the Sabbath, at Craigneish.

After the midday meal Majofry found herself alone with her friend in a shady nook, each armed with a favourite volume. It was too hot to read attentively, and they talked lazily for a while.

"Have you any young cousins in Scotland?" asked Marjory, after a pause.

"The eldest daughter is about my age, but she is going abroad with her little brother who is very delicate; she will feel strange there, as she is a regular country girl!"

"Then I daresay you will bring your aunt back with you?"

"My aunt! Nothing on earth would induce her to leave home, we have tried and tried in vain to coax her here, for we like her, though she is funny!"

Marjory silently returned thanks for this postponement of the evil day, but she felt it must come; secrets always come out. Then she taxed her memory as to whether Mrs. Morrison had heard her name; she rather thought not. When her luggage was forwarded to her in Edinburgh it was addressed to "Mr. R. Cranston;" she hoped, she believed, her name had not been mentioned—she had purposely abstained from putting it on her box at starting. The name of Acland would then bring no associations to Mrs Morrison's

mind when she heard the story of her nephew's rescue. Above all, Marjory would have time to win Mrs. Rennie's esteem and regard before the shameful truth came out—if any esteem and regard would stand such a disclosure.

Still the hopefulness of youth suggested everything as possible in the distant future, and Marjory felt more like herself than she had been since she had learned the relationship between Mr. Rennie and Mrs. Morrison.

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Forbes Rennie was a frequent visitor, as was natural, to his friends George and Marjory. To the former he was warmly attached, and the latter he treated as a sister; but it was a brotherliness with a dash of salt—just the drawing recognition of a woman's charm—for Marjory gave herself great airs of seniority. But she was heartily fond of the boy; something of the gentle sadness which comes from ill-health still hung about him, though the sea voyage remedy had been marvellously efficacious, and he seemed in a fair way to complete restoration. He too was in his father's office. Mr. Rennie considered his eldest son entirely unsuited to business, and wisely gave him his choice of a profession. He was older by several years than his sister, two children who came between them having died in infancy.

Mr. Rennie was very lenient to his youngest boy, letting him off before the ordinary time of closing, and granting him a holiday whenever "Mother asked for it."

"Are you busy writing again?" he exclaimed, coming into Marjory's sitting-room one fine glowing afternoon at the beginning of August. "Why you must be secretary to something! Is it the society for providing straw bonnets for the Hottentots, they were bothering the governor for a subscription to some such thing the other day?"

"No I wish *I had* a secretaryship," said Marjory, raising and putting her papers together hastily. "Is George with you?"

"No! He is quill driving as hard as he can go, but I have brought my brother to see you. He arrived yesterday. He has stopped outside to speak to old Mammy Stokes—she was his nurse you know. I thought you wouldn't mind if I brought him, Miss Acland?"

"I shall be very happy to see him," returned Marjory, regretting that her hair was probably ruffled, and that she had on her very simplest morning dress of blue checked print; but pretty golden brown hair is not the worse for being in slight disorder, and a neatly fitting print frock with a white apron sometimes sets off a figure as well as silks or satins,

Marjory was, however, shy and nervous about meeting strangers, Mary Rennie's startling communication of a few weeks before had

given her a shock from which she had not recovered. She wished this stranger had not come.

"And how long does your brother stay?" she asked.

"Oh for some time; he has asked a brother officer, a chum of his, down here, so he cannot go north until he is gone." Here Forbes went hastily out and shouted, "Jack, I say Jack, don't be all day," returning almost immediately, followed by a tall, red-haired, good-humoured looking young man, very like Mr. Rennie, remarkably well set up and soldierly in air.

"This is George's sister," said Forbes, by way of an introduction, waving his hand towards Marjory.

Captain Rennie bowed and smiled, saying pleasantly, "I am afraid my brother is an indifferent master of the ceremonies, Miss Acland."

"In this elevated position we are above all ceremonies, and generally dispense with them," returned Marjory. "At any rate your sister does, when she kindly comes to tea with me."

"I have just had the pleasure of shaking hands with your brother," resumed Rennie. "I am sure we are all deeply in his debt for saving this youngster at his own expense. My mother was always rapped up in Forbes."

"I think she is in you all."

"I believe so. And how do you stand Dockborough, Miss Acland? It is rather a beastly hole."

"Oh! I think it a most interesting place. I am quite happy here. I am never tired looking at the river." She pointed to the open window.

"Yes," rising to look; "there is really a fine view here. I do not think I ever was in these rooms before. Don't you find them awfully high up, especially when people come to call?"

"No one ever does except Miss Rennie, and sometimes your mother; that is always a gala day when she comes."

"By Jove, you must be buried alive! You must be deucedly fond of your brother to leave London and roost here for his sake."

"That depends on the sort of life I had in London. You see my brother—my brothers and myself, have nothing but each other."

"Oh, come Miss Acland, I can't believe that; I suspect you might have a good deal more for the taking." He laughed a light-hearted boyish laugh, in which without knowing why, Marjory joined. Then they talked in a friendly way for a few minutes, the young officer describing the nuisance of being quartered in Ireland, as he had been—the nuisance it was to be ordered to quell disturbances; to stand to be pelted with stones and mud by the patriotic population, while a nervous magistrate hesitated to read the Riot Act. Then he reminded Forbes, who had scarcely spoken, that the "mater" would be expecting them, and bowed himself out.

"I say, Forbes," he exclaimed when they were in the street, "I had no idea that young Acland's sister would be such stunning good style. She is deucedly pretty into the bargain. What sweet bright eyes she has. I suppose you often find it convenient to pay her a visit? Eh, Master Forbes?"

"Well, you see, I like to show some attention to George's sister, and——"

"I daresay you do, a good deal of attention," interrupted his brother; "so should I if I were staying here, and if—but never mind! How comes it that her people let her hide herself away here, and wait on her brother as if she were the daughter of a petty shopkeeper? Who are these Aclands?"

"The father is a lawyer. I fancy they are gentry, but they have a stepmother, and somehow, though Marjory, I mean Miss Acland, never mentions her, I do not think she cares to be at home. Then they are awfully fond of each other—I mean George and Marjory."

"Marjory? I suppose it is Marjory when you are *tete-a-tete*, and Miss Acland before faces, hey! you young scamp."

"Jack, how can you talk such rubbish," cried Forbes, colouring with vexation. "I dare not call her Marjory, only hearing George and Mary always say it, it slips out."

"You *dare* not," repeated Captain Rennie, laughing with keen enjoyment of the boy's confusion. "That's an awful severe sign, my poor chap."

"Look here, Jack, don't go on like that before my mother and Mary, it might——"

"Trust me," interrupted the other again, "I'll not spoil sport, besides," more seriously, "it might make things disagreeable for that nice little girl—not so little either. I can tell you, Forbes, my boy, I would try and cut you out if I had not my own affairs to attend to, so make your mind easy."

Jack Rennie was a good specimen of the average young officer, not very intellectual or refined, but honest, brave, good-natured, with a tolerably high estimate of himself, and had no doubt whatever that he would be acceptable to any woman under the sun, which was not to be wondered at considering he had a most kindly feeling towards them all. To his sister he was the finest gentleman in the world, and he *was* in her world. To his mother he was her darling boy, that was enough.

Mary Rennie was naturally much taken up with her newly arrived brother, so time went slowly for Marjory. It was nearly three weeks since she had written to Dick Cranston, and he had not yet broken silence. She felt unusually depressed. If he were indifferent to her sorrows and anxieties life would indeed be a desolate wilderness.

Mary was therefore unusually welcome one afternoon when she suddenly made her appearance.

"I suppose you thought I was never coming again," she cried, embracing Marjory effusively; "but I have had a hundred-and-one things to do—and we have been busy preparing for Jack's friend, Mr. Mowbray Delamere."

"I don't fancy you have done much," said Marjory laughing. "Will you have some tea?"

"No, thank you, it is late, and I had some before I came out. You think I am too idle to be of any use, Marjory; but I am very active sometimes."

"I dare say; at all events you are of use to me—it cheers me to see you, for I have felt rather melancholy of late."

"Oh! you dear. I am so sorry. Go put on your hat and come back with me to dinner. Leave word for your brother to come and fetch you; the walk will do him good and you shall drive back——"

"Thank you a thousand times, but——"

"I will take no excuse—I know they will be delighted to see you. Jack says you are the right sort, and he is accustomed to very nice people. Do come. You need not change your frock—I like that soft grey and the pink 'pussy-cat' tie round your neck; you had that dress from a first-rate milliner, I am sure."

"Yes, I believe so—Aunt Carteret gave it to me. It was my best dress last summer."

"That is amazing—how is it you manage to keep your clothes?"

"Because I know how difficult it is to replace them!"

"Do get your hat and come."

"Don't you expect Captain Rennie's friend to-day?"

"No; is it not provoking?—Jack had a telegram this morning. He cannot get leave until the 21st. He is so nice and amusing, but rather grand. We saw him when we were up in town last year—the regiment was at Shorncliff then, and was going to give a ball. I would have given anything, my eyes!—to go to it, but father had some horrid business in Manchester, and mother would not go without him—I cried half the evening. Mr. Delamere told me afterwards he wished he had been near to wipe away my tears! What do you think of that? Isn't Mowbray Delamere a beautiful name? I am afraid he will find us humdrum and homely——"

"Did you hear a knock? I thought some one knocked," interrupted Marjory.

"No—I——"

The knock was repeated this time unmistakably. "Come in," cried Marjory.

The door opened slowly, and Dick Cranston answered the invitation. Marjory started up and stood still for half a second, then with joyous eyes and trembling in surprise and excitement, she flew to meet him, and throwing up her arms as nearly to his neck as she could reach, cried, "Oh! Dick—I thought you would never come."

"I came as soon as I could after getting your letter," he replied, gently returning her embrace; "I only had it a week ago."

"This is my brother, Dick Cranston!—Miss Rennie, Dick, of whom I have often spoken in my letters." Dick bowed—Marjory was struck with the superiority of his bow.

"I am sure I am very glad you have come," said Miss Rennie, with a pretty blush and smile and upward glance. "For Marjory has been in the dolefuls and fretting about you I am sure. Now, Marjory, I cannot expect you to come to dinner, so I shall just run away; but I'll come soon again. Good afternoon, Mr. Cranston; you must pay Craigneish a visit." Marjory followed her to the top of the stair. "My dear! *what* a handsome man!" cried Mary. "Why did you not tell me how handsome he is, Mowbray Delamere is not to be compared to him. He is like a sea-king, or a knight of the round table—or, there—I must not keep you—good bye, I am so glad he has come."

"At last, Marge!" said Dick, when she returned to him, as he took her hand and looked wistfully, inquiringly into her face, "I have come to hear what the trouble is!"

"Oh! thank Heaven it is not pressing *now*. I am dying to hear what good fortune has brought you back, Dick. My troubles will keep till to-morrow; tell me all about yourself."

"I will, Marge! How heavenly it is to be here with you, and what a nice pretty room! But you are not looking as bright as I hoped to find you."

"I feel all right now," said Marjory, but her lips quivered and her eyes grew moist. Dick sat down on the sofa, put his arm round her, pressing her to him for a moment, then with a slight sigh he let her go and began his story. "Your letter must have reached Fleury just before I left, and as Lord Beaulieu was away, no one thought of forwarding it. It is not a week since it reached me. I hurried to London, because Brand thought I had a chance of some work from Jervis—you remember, the architect at Beaulieu? When I saw him he gave me a rough sketch of some almshouses to enlarge and finish. You may imagine how glad I was to find they were to be built by a benevolent millionaire at the other side of the river, there—" he pointed to the window. "It will not be a long job, but I can see you and George nearly every day, for I am to be clerk of the works and architect in one. Of course, the building will be simple enough, still, all this experience helps me on."

"And you will be near us for some months?" cried Marjory, her voice full of thanksgiving. "It seems too good news to be true. How will Mr. Brand do without you?"

"He does not seem inclined to do without me," returned Dick smiling. "He talks of coming down here and finding some place that will do for a studio. He is so much better, he says he'll try painting again. The sunshine and life altogether in the south seems

to have stirred his artistic soul. He made a number of capital studies, and he is going to paint some pictures from them. I hope he'll be able to find what he wants, for I feel quite lonely without him. It will do him good, too, to have a talk with you, Marge; he is awfully down at times. I have known him sit for hours and not open his lips, looking all the time as if he saw ghosts rising out of the past. Then again he cheers up, and is the brightest companion in the world. I never thought I should like any one so well."

"I liked him so much too that dreadful time I stayed with you. Oh, Dick! how I wish I could blot it out!"

"Try not to think of it, it is all gone by," he replied, looking kindly at her.

"I wish it were, but it is not!"

"Then the trouble you wanted to tell me is about that unfortunate business? Now, I have told my story, let me have yours, Marge."

"Not now. George will be here directly. You will find him a good deal changed, though he is much better, thank God! and I have a great deal to say; besides, I might cry. I won't if I can help it, but I am a greater fool than I used to be; more easily frightened."

"That will not do, Marge; both George and I always admired your pluck in the old days."

"Oh, Dick! that was before I had anything to hide."

"It is an infernal shame that secrecy should have been forced on you!" he burst out. "You, the frankest, truest girl in the world."

"Well, it was my own fault! Had I been true to my convictions, I should have nothing to fear now. I am afraid you will despise me, but I have never had the courage, the heart, to tell George!"

"Despise you!" he repeated in a peculiar tone, and then paused. "I rather think it is as well you did not; the fewer who share your—I mean, *our* secret, Marjory, the better; and George would only fret. Moreover, he might let it out some day, unintentionally."

"I am so thankful you do not think I ought to tell him, it is quite a relief to my mind. Did you see my father when you were in London?"

"No! I don't feel it is exactly honest to go and see him. If we meet, I should speak to him the same as ever; but he *ought* to have stood by me when my mother accused me so cruelly, so basely! I did see old Cross, though. He has always been a trump to me. He thinks and observes a good deal for such a dry methodical chap. He is greatly interested in you and George. Does your father ever write to you?"

"Scarcely ever. Sometimes to George; but I am no favourite. Oh, here is George!"

The start, the pause of delighted surprise and recognition, then

the hearty prolonged hand-shaking, the exclamations and questions which ensued can be readily pictured. The simple homely tea and supper, set forth by Marjory's own hands, assisted intermittedly by her brothers; the eager talk, the full free out-pouring of experiences since last they had met; behold! it was all very good.

I do not know why the record of eating is considered somewhat beneath the dignity of a story; eating plays a very important part in life, and the pleasure of a meal in company with those you love is a delight by no means to be despised.

Our trio enjoyed theirs immensely, and when it was over, set forth together to reconnoitre some of the better streets near the river, where Dick hoped to find rooms for partner and self, as George termed him and Brand.

The joy of this re-union revived Marjory's drooping spirits and waning courage. Dick's presence brought strength and safety with it. Nevertheless, several days passed before Marjory found an opportunity of confiding her doubts and fears to him.

He was only able to join his brother and sister at tea time, when George was always present. Then, the first Saturday half-holiday after his arrival was devoted to Brand, and to settle his belongings in the quarters they had chosen, within easy reach of one of the steam ferries, which landed Dick each morning within a short walk of his work.

The next day, Brand was brought to call upon "Miss Acland," who received him with a warm welcome that delighted the kindly Bohemian.

He was looking sunburnt and well. Marjory observed that his step was firmer and more elastic; his head more erect.

He thoroughly enjoyed himself with his three young friends, and insisted on their crossing with him to the opposite side of the river, where he hired a carriage with reckless generosity, and they enjoyed a drive into the country, finishing with tea at a rustic inn.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"A CONFESSION."

DICK CRANSTON had not been many days established at Dockborough, when Miss Rennie found it convenient to make another late visit to her friend Marjory.

The hour for afternoon tea was past, and Dick had just come in, intending to spend the evening with his chums.

"Well, Marjory dear!" kissing her affectionately, "you see I have kept away a long time, as I knew you would be too much taken up with your brother to want me."

"Brother or no brother, I am always delighted to see you."

"Ah! I know better! Now *you* are here, she does not want me. Does she, Mr. Cranston?" with a pretty interrogative bend of the head and coquettish glance.

"I don't suppose for a moment that I could supply *your* place," replied Dick, with an easy manner and ready responsive tone that astonished Marjory. "I am sure your society must have done much towards making my sister so fond of Dockborough."

"I don't think *you* will like it," replied Miss Rennie, "after the life you have been accustomed to abroad."

"I wonder what sort of a life you imagine I lead," said Dick laughing.

"Oh! a very gay one, I daresay, very different from this humdrum place. Then French ladies are so lively and charming, and different from us."

"Very different indeed! their brilliant dark eyes and glossy black hair are very striking; but somehow I began to weary for," glancing at her, "the golden auburn locks and soft blue eyes of my countrywomen."

"Ah! that is all very fine, but I suspect you have left your heart behind you, Mr. Cranston!"

"No, I assure you, I always keep it by me ready for present use!"

"Dear me! what an inconstant man your brother must be, Marjory."

"I am sure he is constant in friendship," she returned, more earnestly than the occasion needed.

"In friendship! perhaps so; but I must not forget. Mother sent me to ask if you would come and help us on Saturday. We are to have all the school children from St. Margaret's schools to

tea and games. We always give them a feast, poor things ; and I hope George and Mr. Cranston will come later."

"I shall go, of course, and with pleasure. When shall I come?" said Marjory.

"Oh, you must come to luncheon."

"You must remember, Saturday is a busy morning with me—*this* piggie has to go to market."

"Oh, never mind, Jack will be in town with the pony carriage and will call for you. It will be an awfully tiresome day. You will come, will you not, Mr. Cranston?"

"You are very good to ask me, Miss Rennie, but I fear I cannot have the pleasure of joining you, I have an engagement on that day."

"Then you must really give it up," she exclaimed, and thereupon plunged into a very prompt flirtation *a propos* of his refusal and her own insistence, in which Dick took part with spirit. Marjory was quite amazed how long they continued to talk nonsense ; at last, the young lady with many tender expressions and a hug to Marjory, saw fit to depart. Dick followed her down stairs. They must have continued their conversation at the door, for it was some minutes before Marjory heard the carriage drive away.

"Your little friend is an arrant flirt," said Dick laughing, as he threw himself on the sofa when he returned, "and rather pretty, with her red hair and fair skin."

"You took my breath away, both of you," returned Marjory. "I had no idea Mary would chatter in that way to a stranger."

"There is no harm in her," said Dick carelessly. "It's just the skittishness of a filly."

"It is all very well for you to talk of her red hair when she was gone ; you called it golden auburn to her face."

"Oh, I was talking of my countrywomen generally," and though his mouth was grave, his blue eyes smiled.

"Nonsense, Dick, you coolly looked to see what colour her hair was before you spoke."

The culprit made no reply, he seemed lost in thought. Marjory moved to and fro, folding up her work and arranging the room.

"I wish," resumed Dick, "she had not asked us to this school feast. It cheats *me* out of another half holiday. There seems a fate against our having that confidential talk you want. I am most anxious to know what troubles you. Suppose you come away with me on Sunday after dinner to that park they talk of up the river."

"Yes, to Salisbury Park," put in Marjory.

"There is a tram, I think, that goes by the gate," he continued.

"George is going off somewhere with young Rennie, and shall we ask Brand to come in, in the evening?"

"Oh yes, do ! I shall enjoy a stroll in the park with you, for I am longing to tell you everything."

With a sigh, Marjory sat down beside him, and leant her head against his shoulder with sisterly familiarity, but Dick soon drew gently away, rose and went to look out of the window. Marjory looked a little surprised, but accounted for his unsympathetic movement by reflecting that boys were averse to be petted, only George was ready enough to let her cuddle him—then he had been ill and weak. George coming in just then, and declaring himself ravenously hungry, she thought no more of Dick's peculiarities, and he refused to stay, on the plea that he had promised Brand to return to dinner.

Sunday was all that could be wished in the way of weather, bright, pleasantly warm, with something of invigorating crispness in the air. Though much fatigued by her exertions the previous day in aid of her friend, Marjory prepared with some care and great pleasure for her expedition with Dick. She was a little anxious to ask if anything had happened to worry him, for she fancied she had observed a subtle change in him. He had always been grave, but now he was often absent and abrupt; there was a slight sternness in his expression as if in conflict with something, and he was certainly colder, less gently sympathetic to herself. Nevertheless he was her best and dearest friend, and she would try to look well-dressed to walk out with him.

George had started early with his friend, who was to drive him in the dogcart to a pretty village some miles distance, where after service (Mrs. Rennie liked her boys to go to church) they were to lunch with the vicar and take a long ramble through the fields and woods.

Marjory was quite ready to start when Dick came for her, and while she drew on her gloves he looked at her from head to foot, with an expression which induced Marjory to say with a saucy smile, "Do I look nice, Dick? Fit to be seen with?"

"You know you do," he returned grimly, adding with one of his kindly smiles which gave such sweetness to his grave face, "You know I am always proud to be seen with my smart little sister; not so little either—stand here before me—your head is nearly up to my chin."

"Not nearly! I am afraid I have none of the dignity of height. Come, it is almost three o'clock."

Salisbury Park was a favourite resort of the Dockborough "upper ten." For the humbler classes it lacked teagardens and small taverns, being a couple of miles from the nearest quarters inhabited by them. It was a comparative solitude, therefore, when Marjory and Dick descended from the crowded tram-car and walked leisurely through the gates into the pleasant shade of the trees and on over the soft fragrant grass, to a seat commanding a view down the slope below them to the wide river, its opposite banks clothed with woods and dotted with pretty white villas. A boat here and there spread its canvas wings to catch what breeze there was.

"This is a relief," said Dick. "I must own, though I have no pretensions to aristocratic exclusiveness, I hate to be crammed up with a heap of Sunday passengers. That fat old publican sat upon you, didn't he?"

"Yes, rather."

"This is a nicer place than I expected," he resumed. "I wish I could spirit you away to Fleury, Marge, it is a delicious spot."

"You were sorry to leave it?"

"I was very glad to leave it; beautiful as it is, I could not live there. It would be merely vegetating, but *you* would enjoy a summer there. I wish, Marge, you had a little more beauty and colour in your life! Do you know, I used to feel indignant with myself in the long summer evenings for having all that loveliness about me, when you were broiling in a seaport town. You don't know how I used to long for you when I rambled about alone."

"Did you?" said Majory. "Yes, I should have enjoyed those rambles oh, so much! But, Dick, dear, I have been very happy and very comfortable, in fact, happier than I ever was before, until about three weeks ago." And she proceeded to give him an account of the connection between Mrs. Morrison and the Rennies, and the shock the discovery had given her. "In truth I shall never feel safe ag-*in*," she ended with a sigh.

"It is very curious," said Dick, who had listened with profound interest, "and exceedingly embarrassing. Your best plan, no doubt, would be to tell your story to Mrs. Rennie before any one else had a chance of doing so, but certainly not until absolutely necessary. It was an awful piece of ill luck your falling in with Ellis."

"But is it not extraordinary his taking a fancy to me?" observed Marjory, meditatively; "a clever man of the world who had seen so much."

Dick looked at her with a slight smile. "Perhaps it was," he said slowly. "There is no accounting for such things, however; anyhow it was a misfortune for you. The cruellest part of all is that the fear of such a story (which sounds much worse than it really is) becoming known will destroy the sense of security—the self-reliance without which life is scarce worth having. Try, Majory, to put this fear out of your thoughts; all the thinking on earth will not help you. No one who *knows* you will ever believe that you were not more sinned against than sinning. Unless this Morrison woman finds you here, you are safe enough."

"But nothing can lift the consciousness of what I have done from my own heart!" said Marjory, sadly.

"Marge," cried Dick, with intense feeling, and grasping her hand tightly, "I would forfeit years of my life if I could blot out that miserable episode from yours. Keep up your courage, my

darling. It is too bad that your life should be blighted by the misconduct of others. Always remember that I will do all I can to help you, because you are as dear to me as if you were my own—sister, and because I must atone as far as I can for the trouble my mother has brought upon you."

"Oh, Dick, I fear nothing when you are with me," she exclaimed with quivering lips and unsteady accents. She had never seen him so moved before, and she thought no music had ever sounded so sweet as the rich, deep tones of his voice. She was conscious of a double impulse—one to throw her arms around his neck, another imperatively forbidding such an action, which reduced her to laying her other hand almost timidly over his.

"I wish I could be with you always, then," he said dreamily, while his grasp gradually relaxed; and after a pause he resumed, "These Morrisons may never come here after all, at least during your stay."

"But, Dick, where else can I go? It is quite impossible I can live at home. I hope always to be with George."

"I should almost prefer your being with Mrs. Carteret. You would be better off."

"Away from George and yourself. That would not make me happy! Then I should have to see Mr. Ellis, and I dread him. Oh, I do dread him!"

"Tell me, Marge," said Dick, with sudden animation, "how is it that you did not take a fancy to that fellow? He has, I suppose, what are called charming manners, and is certainly distinguished looking."

"I sometimes wonder I did not!" said Marjory, with frank simplicity. "He talked delightfully, and really seemed very fond of me; but I was indignant with him at first, and never quite got over it. Still, Dick, if he had been ready to ask my father's consent and marry openly I should have married him, and perhaps grown fond of him by this time."

"Very likely," said Dick, contemptuously. "Women seem able to get fond of anything."

"Do not be unreasonable," returned Marjory. "If Mr. Ellis had been my husband and taken me before the world, I should have been grateful to him, and gratitude counts for a great deal."

"Gratitude," growled Dick. "You do not owe him much gratitude now." He rose; and Marjory asking, "Why are you cross?" (to which question she got no answer) followed his example. They walked on slowly for some time in silence, then Dick said in a slightly embarrassed tone, "There is one matter I want to speak to you about, Marge, though you may be offended."

"What is it Dick?" asked Marjory, changing colour, and so visibly disturbed that his eyes grew soft and compassionate.

"Your nerves are not what they were," he said; "or perhaps," with a change of expression, "conscience makes a coward of you?"

"No, it does not."

"Well," he resumed with an effort, "I wish you would not let that Captain Rennie hang about you as he did yesterday. You are a bit of a coquette. I suppose you cannot help it; for I suspect you do not care a rap for him, but it would make all sorts of unpleasantness, and I do not think he is worth that."

"Captain Rennie hang about me!" repeated Marjory in the blankest amazement. "Why, Dick, you are crazy to think of such nonsense. He was obliged to help me at tea and in the games. He could not help it. He is good natured, as the whole family are, but he is only just not bored with me."

"I am sure you think so, Marge, or you would not say it; but I could have pitched him into that fish-pond near the swings with pleasure! He would not let any one have a chance of speaking to you."

"And I am sure *you* did not care to speak to me. You were far too much taken up with *his* sister to think of your own," returned Marjory tartly.

"I was not taken up with any one; I was bored to death," said Dick gloomily.

Marjory had coloured up, and her eyes sparkled as of yore; but suddenly a change passed over her, tears dimmed her quick glances, and, slipping her arm through her companion's, she said gently, "Don't quarrel with me, Dick, and spoil the first happy hour I have had for three long weeks. As to Captain Rennie, I shall not see him again probably before he goes away. If you only saw him a little oftener you would acknowledge that he is just civil to me for his sister's sake, no more."

"Quarrel with you, Marge! God knows, I don't want that! Perhaps I was wrong. I think my temper is not as good as it used to be."

"Nonsense, Dick! But I fancy you are not as happy as you were! There is something—I do not know what—of sadness about you. If you have any trouble, dear, will you not tell me?"

"I have none I care—I mean I have none to tell you, Marge," and he pressed her hand close to his side. "On the contrary, I am getting on far better than I could have hoped. If I could see you clear of Ellis I should have nothing left to wish for." But he sighed as he said it. "Come, I think we had better turn our faces homewards. Brand will be waiting for us."

They quickened their pace, and soon fell into pleasant discourse. Marjory was surprised to perceive how old Dick seemed to have become since they had last met, or rather how mature. He appeared to have thought and observed much, and his descriptions of

what he had seen were vivid and graphic. Then, his earnestness was infinitely delightful to Marjory's warm, sincere nature. How different from the cynicism which tinged everything Mr. Ellis said—even his love-making.

When they reached home it was already dusk, and Marjory quickly lit the lamp, expecting every moment that Brand would make his appearance. She removed her hat and hastily arranged her hair. Returning to the sitting-room, she found Dick still alone, standing by the open window gazing at the river, across which the light of a fine harvest moon made a broad streak of rippled silver, apparently in deep thought. "Mr. Brand is late," said Marjory, placing a bowl of flowers on the tea table, which was already laid.

"Yes, but he will be here presently; he likes to come."

"And I like to have him." Dick drew a chair to the table, and picking up a folded newspaper which had fallen on the floor, said, "Brand sent you this, but I forgot to give it to you before we went out. There is a review of some new books he thought you would like to see."

"Thank you. I will read it while I am waiting for George. Dick," she resumed, sitting down on the sofa facing him, the lamp light falling on her pretty bright brown hair, her speaking eyes and face, where air and motion had brought a soft rich colour. "Dick, I do not think I ever told you what Mr. Ellis threatend the last time I saw him."

"No; you told me you saw him, that was all."

"He warned me never to love any man, for he would tell whoever I was going to marry that I had gone away with him." She blushed crimson, thinking of the exact words Ellis had used.

"He is an unmanly scoundrel," exclaimed Dick, angrily; "and no man worthy of you would heed him."

"I shall never put any man to the test, Dick? so you may be sure I will never 'flirt' with any one. I renounce such ideas. It would be too humiliating to make a confession, and I never could deceive any man.

"Ah! Marge, stay till you fall in love. You do not know how hard, how bitter it is to give up any one that you love passionately. It would break your tender little heart, Marge."

"But, Dick," in much surprise, "how do *you* know, *you* never were in love?" ending in an acute tone of inquiry.

Dick did not answer immediately. The colour came slowly to his sunburnt cheek, and a dreamy look to his grave blue eyes.

"Yes! Marge," he replied in a low voice. "I have been in love—I *am* in love, as I trust you never will be."

"Really and truly, Dick? Does it make you unhappy? Does *she* not love you? Oh! Dick, if she knew what a dear, kind, true-hearted fellow you are, she would love you."

"Well, Marge, I cannot tell you more than this, that she is so twined around my heart that, although I would give—oh! I don't know what—to feel differently towards her; though I have striven against myself with all my force, I grow more passionately fond of her every day."

He leant his arm on the table and shaded his face with his hand. Marjory was silent and even awestruck at this outburst. An odd sense of pain oppressed her.

"Why will you not confide in me as I do in you?" she asked tremulously.

"It is quite different," murmured Dick.

"I wish I could help you. I wish I could make everything happy and smooth for you," said Marjory, tenderly coming over and laying her hand on his shoulder. He made no reply. "Just tell me one thing. Is she very pretty?"

"To me. Yes."

"And is she fair or dark?"

"Oh! dark. Big black eyes and shining black hair."

"Then she is a Frenchwoman!" exclaimed Marjory, in a somewhat disappointed tone.

"I will not answer another question," said Dick resolutely. "I never intended to say so much. I slipped into it somehow. Never remind me of it again. There is nothing but pain in thinking of a woman one cannot marry."

"I will not, then," said Marjory humbly, while she thought: Can he have fallen in love with a married woman? It would be too dreadful! "But if I may not speak any more, I want you to remember that I feel for you as you do for me, dear brother." And she kissed him lightly on the brow.

Dick pressed her hand hard, but did not reply for a moment. "Thank you, Marge," he said at last. "We will never speak of this again."

Marjory, who was greatly disturbed by this confession, now busied herself about the table, and presently said: "Do you think Mr. Brand will come?"

"I begin to think not," returned Dick, looking up from the paper he was affecting to read. "I hope he has not had one of his sudden attacks. He suffers terribly from neuralgia at times."

"Then I will make tea. If he comes at all he will be here by the time it is ready." As she spoke the sound of steps and whistling approached, and George came in, looking as if he had had a happy day.

"Isn't Mr. Brand come yet?" he asked. "Oh, let us have tea. We had rather a dusty drive back, and I am dying for a cup. We have had a delightful day. The vicar is a jolly old fellow, and told us some capital stories. What have you two been doing with yourselves?"

An interchange of adventures followed, and Dick seemed to grow more himself while chatting with his chum.

Marjory was glad to listen. Indeed George, when in spirits, as she was rejoiced to see was the case, did not ask anything more than a good listener. Not being able to fix her attention on what was being said, she took up the paper to find the notice of which Brand spoke. Her eye, however, was caught by the column said to be so attractive to women—Births, deaths, marriages. Suddenly she uttered an exclamation, "Oh! Dick, I am so sorry. That dear, pretty baby is dead. What a blow to the poor mother;" and she read: "'On the 20th inst. at Eastbourne, of diphtheria, Edward Reginald Cranston Maynard, only son of the late Reginald Maynard, and grandson of Edward Cranston Maynard, of Leighton Abbot, aged eighteen months.'"

"It will kill the old man!" cried Dick. "I *am* sorry for this. Lord Beaulieu will feel it too! He was hoping his sister would go and stay with him at Fleury, and bring the boy later on. Such a fine, healthy little chap. Brand will be quite cut up."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

THE day following this memorable Sunday, Mrs. Acland had a busy afternoon, shopping and preparing for the annual exodus of the family of the sea side. She returned somewhat fatigued and ordered a cup of tea and some thin bread and butter to be brought to her in the dining-room. While sipping this refreshment, she reflected with some satisfaction the course matters had taken since the same period last year. Three times had that unmanageable Marjory come back on her hands and three times she had got rid of her—certainly the stars in their courses fought on her (Mrs. Acland's) side. It was right and natural that Marjory should reside with her brother and take care of him—it accounted for her absence in the most satisfactory manner. True, Mr. Acland had to send the tiresome girl a small sum quarterly, but after all, they were cheaply rid of both stepson and daughter. Then neither had asked for any addition to their scanty allowance. Mrs. Acland made tolerably sure that, for the future, she held her husband and his belongings in the hollow of her hand. She was succeeding in society, too; several heads of distinguished families in the neighbourhood had called upon her, and she meditated giving some select dinners

on her return to town. "Yes," she thought, "I have not done badly, considering all the——"

"If you please, 'm," said the housemaid, entering with a salver on which lay a letter, "will you see the gentleman?"

Mrs. Acland took the letter, opened, glanced at it and grew somewhat white, then catching a surprised look in her servant's eyes, she said haughtily :—

"Another of these endless petitions, why did you let the man in?"

"He called before, 'm, and made particular inquiries when you would be in. I thought he was a gentleman."

"Well, as you *have* let him in, I must see him," returned her mistress, crushing up the letter in her hand, and as the girl left the room she carefully dropped it into a glowing cavity in the fire. The next moment Brand stood before her.

"I thought," she said harshly, "you promised never to seek me again."

"I did——" he paused, even by the half light of a rapidly closing day she saw that he was deadly pale, "and I intended to keep my word. Circumstances have changed, and I am compelled to take counsel with you. For your *own* sake see me as soon as possible. I leave time and place to you. I dare not write lest I betray you. Believe me, I do not wish to injure you."

They both remained standing; both spoke low and hurriedly.

"I am going out of town the day after to-morrow and I do not see how I can manage it." She had dropped her harsh resentful tone, as if struck by the urgency of his.

"You can manage anything if you choose; promise to do it and I will wait your time, but the sooner the better for yourself."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Euston Hotel."

"Change to Charing Cross and I will try to manage an interview, but on no account write to me or call again."

"I will do as you desire, but our consultation cannot be got over in a few minutes."

"Very well, now go. I will ring for the servant to let you out; stay till she comes." She rang, and as the door opened said, calmly and loftily, "It is quite impossible to subscribe to everything, and Mr. Acland does much in the parish; it is therefore useless to apply to him. I wish you good-day. The door, Jane," and Brand was ushered out.

As Jane observed to cook on her return to the kitchen teatable, "Missus makes short work of such gentry."

When she was alone Mrs. Acland leant her arm on the mantel-piece and pressed her hand against her brow. "What can it be?" she murmured. "What can it be? Not money? He was, and probably is, a weak fool, but he would never press me for money as

that—that villain Blake did ; nor would he injure me, I really believe he would not. But there is something wrong, some danger to us both ! Why am I tormented when I am leading so irreproachable a life ? I make husband and children happy and comfortable. I have turned many a dangerous corner, why should *this* be worse than anything in the past ? Yet I feel it is, my heart turns cold." She went to the cellarette, took out brandy and a wine glass, then she paused, looking at them with a curious expression, half fierce, half frightened. "No !" she said aloud, "No ! If I begin *that* it is all over with me !" and she replaced them.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half hour. "I must not idle here," she thought, and rang for the parlour maid. "I forgot to tell you that Mr. Cross may dine here, so put another place at table," and she went away to her own room.

An hour later she sat in the snug study, well and carefully dressed, with a calm face and air of repose, her pretty children at either side looking at a book of pictures which she held open on her knee. It was a pretty homelike group to greet Mr. Cross's eyes when he entered soon after. But those small quiet optics of his had been considerably opened of late, and Mrs. Acland's "groupings" had less effect than formerly. His dry immovable manner gave no clue to his condition of mind, but from the day when Dick, burning with indignation, pierced by the sting of finding in his mother his bitterest foe, told his wrongs and sorrows to the cautious bachelor, Mrs. Acland for ever forfeited her place in the estimation of her husband's partner.

He was greeted as warmly as ever, the children were presented, the best chair drawn forward for him, the choicest morsels heaped on his plate.

Conversation was scanty and intermittent till the servants left the room and Mr. Cross had been helped to number one of the two glasses of port he always enjoyed, but never exceeded after dinner. Mrs. Acland had mentioned, as a sop to Cerberus, that she received very satisfactory accounts from George and Marjory ; the former was greatly improved in health, which he certainly would not have been had he not had his sister's care, and that both were the constant and favoured guests of those excellent people the Rennies.

"That's well," returned Mr. Cross ; "perhaps it's better for Marjory to be there than here."

"I think," said Mr. Acland seriously, "it is Marjory's duty to be with her brother."

"I suppose you never hear anything of Dick ?"

"Never," replied Mrs. Acland sadly. "That poor boy has been a terrible trial to me. Because in my distraction and distress—when appearances were so much against him—knowing the tendencies he *might* have inherited, I implored him *if* he were guilty to confess, he assumed that I accused him, and spoke most improperly to Mr.

Acland, most ungratefully, then he left the house——” she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

“A very unfortunate business,” returned Mr. Cross. “He generally looks in on me when he happens to be in London; he knows I never suspected him. He has been rather lucky—his education has told. Jervis, the well-known architect, noticed him when he was helping the clerk of the works at Lord Beaulieu’s, and so he has got on. He was over in France doing some alterations for Lord Beaulieu, and paid me a visit a little time ago when he was on his way to another job in the north.”

“I am sure I am very glad to hear it,” said Mrs. Acland. “I wish he had a little more sense of duty to me—of gratitude to the generous man who adopted him——” she again put her handkerchief to her eyes.

Mr. Cross coughed, he had a short, dry cough occasionally, and sipped his wine, then he changed the conversation.

“I have been trying to persuade your husband to bestow next Saturday afternoon and Sunday on me, instead of going to you at Folkestone. There’s a pretty little property to be sold near ——, which I have some thoughts of buying; I should like Acland’s opinion of it.”

“I am sure he would be most happy to be of any use to you, Mr. Cross, and for my own part, though I rather grudge a Sunday out of the few we shall have by the sea, I will be generous and give him up to you, especially as you are going to take him into the country,” said Mrs. Acland blandly, with a gracious deliberate smile.

“Thank you. Then, Acland, we might leave the office early, and catch the one o’clock train at Waterloo. It is only an hour to Thirlmere and you are completely in the country, with as pretty a trout stream running through it as you could wish to see.”

“Very well, I am at your disposal. And perhaps there is not much doing just now, I could spend the week after next with Mrs. Acland at the sea-side.”

“I see no reason why you should not,” was the compliant reply.

“Thank you, Mr. Cross, you are evidently ready to make payment in full,” and with a dignified bend of the head she retired to the comfortable study, to think hard how she should best take advantage of this fresh instance that fortune had not deserted her. Mr. Acland’s absence would give her the opportunity she needed; now to plan a patent necessity for coming up to town on Saturday.

To Marjory the day marked by these events at Falkland Terrace was also troubled. She had had a sleepless night. Dick’s confession of the evening before had produced an extraordinary and painful effect upon her. She could scarcely understand it herself.

She knew it was but natural, as Ellis had pointed out, that both her brothers should, like other young men, fall in love, marry, and cease to consider her of the same importance to them as she now was, but did not anticipate the change would be so bitter. To think that Dick—who was so particularly sympathetic, who seemed to understand her a great deal better than George—Dick, who appeared to like her the better because he had forgiven her so much, should be devoted heart and soul to another woman, was more than she could bear. In future if he showed her kindness and consideration it would be from pity and a sense of duty, not for the real preference for her company, the pleasure in her presence he used to have. How cruel the loss, no words could ever express! All his tenderness, all the indescribable gentleness of his strength, the quiet watchful affection which made itself more felt than seen, would be drawn away to that brilliant French woman (she must be French), with big black eyes; of course, being totally different from himself, would be an additional attraction. But why did she make him unhappy? Marjory could never forgive her for *that*, never! Perhaps it was not her fault. Dick seemed unhappy; yes, he *was* quite unhappy; perhaps cruel parents intervened? It was not likely, thought Marjory, as the tears she could not restrain flowed freely under the safe shadow of the silent night, it was not likely any girl would be scornful to a man like Dick, and his image rose before her, so handsome, so unconscious of his own good looks, so distinct with the quiet dignity of strength—strength even more of character than physical power—how could she refuse him? And with this question flashed another, which seemed to rend her soul as with a torturing rack of shame and agony. Had Dick asked *her*, would any power on earth have kept her from saying yes? Then the terrible truth broke on her, as in a blaze of light, that she loved this man, whom she considered her brother, who treated her as a sister, with all the warmth a husband could desire.

It was a fearful shock. How she shrank from herself, how she prayed that Dick might never discover the disgraceful truth, how sternly she resolved to stamp out her guilty affection and destroy it! Was she not unfortunate? Oh! it would have been better to have married Ellis and escaped the pain, the horror of this discovery. Yet, no! she was too loyal to be false to her own hidden love; no man should ever call her wife, as her beloved, the lord of her heart, was forbidden to her.

Morning found her pale and exhausted, but she started up resolved to lose no time in beginning to fight the good fight which lay before her, with the conviction that no change could ever come to her present condition of heart and mind which the young man entertain. She determined to give her future life to her brothers—yes, she would compel herself to look on Dick only as a brother, and time, reflection, work would restore her to her senses. Thank

heaven, it would be quite evening before Dick could come, and perhaps he would not even then.

"Why, Marge, have you seen a ghost?" asked George at their early breakfast, "you look like one."

"I have lain awake thinking."

"Thinking? What about?"

"Oh! I have plenty of things to think of. How I can save two-and-sixpence in this week's housekeeping; of when my father will write next; and oh! of that poor Mrs. Maynard and the dear little baby."

"Well, I wish you would not, you trouble too much about other people. Look here, Marge, here is a note from Miss Rennie, I forgot to give it to you last night. They are going to see the D'Oyley Carte Company to-morrow night and have a place for you. I shall ask Dick to come with me to the gallery."

"How good Mrs. Rennie is," said Marjory languidly, when she had read the note.

"Don't you care to go?" asked George, opening his eyes.

"Yes, of course I do. Mary is coming in to-day, and I am to go shopping with her."

"She lives in the shops, I think; but what a pretty girl she is. If I wasn't a poor maimed, penniless chap, I'd go in for Mary Rennie."

"Oh! George, you are worth a dozen of her. Why must every one fall in love? I am sure it must be more a worry than a pleasure. Make up your mind to be an old bachelor, and you and I will take care of each other all our days."

"What has gone wrong with you, Marge," cried George laughing, "you are the last girl to preach so dreary a doctrine. You will be leaving *me* some day, and then I will have to shift for myself; anyhow, you look after me now, so I wish you would see to the coat I wore yesterday, it caught on something as I got down from the dogcart, and the lining is torn. It is my best go-to-meeting garment and must last an indefinite time. Please mend it before next 'Sawbath,' as our worthy principal calls it."

"Very well, George. I wonder what became of Mr. Brand, last night?"

"If Dick does not come in by eight o'clock, I will go down to their place and ask."

"Yes, do," returned Marge, who was brushing his hat. "There now, go dear, it is nearly half-past eight."

Having got rid of her brother, Marjory proceeded to busy herself severely, so much so, that by noon there was nothing left to do, and she was reduced to overhaul George's shirts, which were in excellent order.

It was quite a relief when Mary Rennie came, and they went away together to get that new dress which Marjory had never yet

had time to buy. Then they had a great deal to say about the expected pleasure of seeing "Patience;" altogether, Marjory got through the day successfully, and in the evening there was her dress for the theatre to be got ready.

George went after eight to see what had happened to Brand and Dick, and returned just as his sister was thinking of going to bed.

"It was no wonder he could not come to us last night. When Dick went back last night, he found a line to say that Brand found he was obliged to go up to London for a few days, and not to expect him till he saw him. It was a very sudden move. But though they are such chums, Dick knows nothing of his life or friends; I fancy it has put Dick out, though. He seemed in the blues, so I stopped on and we had a talk over old times, when you used to call him the monster; he walked back with me to the door, but I could not persuade him to come in. He said he had a headache."

"Had he?" and Marjory mused a moment. "He was fretting, no doubt, about that black-eyed girl, and it would give him no comfort to come in and say good-night to the sister who loved him so well."

"I shall go to bed, George. I do not want to look like a ghost at the theatre to-morrow."

"No, no, that would never do."

Notwithstanding her distress of mind and contempt for herself, Marjory took due pains to look well on the occasion of accompanying Mrs. Rennie and party to the Theatre Royal, Dockborough.

One of the two pretty half-dress evening frocks chosen for her by Aunt Carteret was put in order, its lace cascades pulled out, its knots of ribbon pressed and refreshed, and a pair of Paris gloves carefully rubbed with bread till quite as good as new. The state of feverish resistance to her own thoughts in which the day had passed had given colour to her cheek and sparkling restlessness to her eyes; and when she came forth from her chamber, George, who was having a pipe in company with Dick, exclaimed, "By Jove! Marge, you are a swell; something better than the brown stuff you pricked your fingers over in Falkland Terrace, eh, Dick?" Neither had seen her in evening dress before.

"These personal remarks are very embarrassing," she said laughing. "Good-evening, Dick; any more news of Mr. Brand?"

"No, he will probably write to-day. It must have been a sudden thought; he said nothing about it at breakfast on Sunday. George is quite right, Marge, you are no end of a swell," and Dick's eyes dwelt on her with a grave, thoughtful expression, as if he were pained, not pleased.

"Are you both going?" asked Marjory, fetching the lamp shade and putting it on. "How can you bear such a glare?"

"Yes, we will start as soon as you are gone."

Here a tap at the door elicited "Come in," from George, and Captain Rennie, in evening dress, his crush hat under his arm, a brilliant blossom in his button-hole, walked in, holding in his hand a lovely little bouquet of carnations, heliotrope and delicate fern.

"Good evening," he said generally. "My mother is waiting for you, Miss Acland; rather early, isn't it? but you know she is ferociously punctual. Permit me." With a bow he presented the flowers to Marjory, who accepted them with a gracious:—

"Thank you very much; they are quite beautiful," and proceeded to fasten them in the opening of her corsage, where they looked charming, at least so her admiring brothers thought.

Then with a nod and smiling good-bye she went swiftly away, followed by Rennie, after he had exchanged a word or two with George.

Mrs. Rennie was quite pleased with Marjory's appearance, and told her so with her usual good-nature.

"Ain't she smart, Mary?" she said as soon as they were comfortably seated, and she had thrown off a gorgeously-embroidered Indian wrap, settled her bracelets, and felt that her brooch was in its right place. "Where did you get that pretty dress? Not in Dockborough, I'll be bound."

"No, Mrs. Rennie, Aunt Carteret gave it to me last year."

"Law, dear, how well you have kept it! You are just the wife for a poor man. You look well in a trifle."

"That is fortunate! I am not likely to find a rich husband," said Marjory laughing.

"Oh, there is no knowing. Now we mustn't talk, the curtain is going up. My goodness! what short waists all those young ladies have."

For awhile Marjory forgot her sorrows and her self-contempt in the charming music and quaint drolleries of "Patience." Indeed she threw herself so completely into the amusement of the hour, that she grew excited and talkative between the acts, and Captain Rennie, who sat beside her, leant forward to laugh at her remarks and compliment her on her wit.

When all was over, however, she felt marvellously exhausted and glad to be at home. George returned a little later, highly pleased with his evening's entertainment. Dick had gone straight back to his own diggings, he said, after seeing his chum clear of the crowd.

"Though I don't want to be taken care of as he seems to think I do. I am very nearly as strong as ever I was," continued George. "I told him so, but he did not seem to hear me. I do not know what's come to Dick, he seems in a sort of dream, and he is a bit sulky into the bargain. He scarcely laughed at that funny fellow, the poet. To be sure he saw the play in London. What is the matter with him?"

"I am sure I do not know, George; I suppose every one has their own private worries."

"But he used to tell you everything. I am sure he ought to be satisfied, he is getting on very well."

"I am so tired, George, I must go to bed. Good-night."

The following day Forbes Rennie had got permission to leave the office early in order to inspect a fine new steamer which was being built and was nearly completed in a famous yard at the other side of the river; a son of the builder was to accompany him, and of course he carried off George with him.

"Marjory, therefore, took her tea alone, and left to herself felt very miserable. She had just risen to seek distraction in some numbers of *Temple Bar* lent her by Miss Rennie, when Dick Cranstons walked in.

What a painful reversal of the former state of things it was, to feel the necessity of masking her feelings, of preserving her ordinary tone, instead of the frankly expressed pleasure at his coming, the cordial out-spoken confidence in a dear brother.

"I am glad you have come in, Dick," she said cheerfully, "George is out."

"Yes, he told me he was going. No—no, thank you," seeing her about to pour out a cup of tea, "I have had some," and he sat down by the window, looking out in an absent way, a certain constraint in his manner increasing Marjory's discomfort.

"Have you heard from Mr. Brand?" she asked, as she put away the tea things.

"I had a letter this morning. He seems to have one of his bad turns of neuralgia, and he wants me to run up on Saturday and spend Sunday, at least till late in the afternoon. He offers to frank me, with his usual generosity; of course I should go in any case, as he wishes it."

"Yes, of course; I am sorry he suffers so much; has he had advice?"

"I do not know. He is too ready to take chloroform. He used to take opium; that helped to shatter his nerves, I fancy. Then I am inclined to believe that any shock or trouble brings on an attack; perhaps the business he went away about was unpleasant."

"Very likely, there seems no end of trouble," said Marjory, placing the lamp and her workbasket on the table, gladly threading her needle for an occupation, and much concerned by the gloominess of Dick's countenance.

"You did not seem to think there was much trouble in the world last night," said Dick, coming over to sit opposite to her, and smiling rather grimly.

"No, I was very much amused. How clever and pretty it all was. Did you enjoy it, Dick?"

"No, I did not."

"Does it tire you to see anything the second time?"

"I will tell you what I did *not* enjoy, Marjory—watching you smiling and talking and fascinating that booby young Rennie; why you hardly stopped to attend to the play."

"Dick!" in a tone of surprise. "What possesses you to say—to think such nonsense?"

"No matter what possesses me, it may be an evil spirit, but it enables me to see pretty clearly."

"No, Dick, it distorts your vision," she returned gravely and steadily, her resolution returning with a sense of indignation.

"You are a coquette by nature, Marge; I suppose you cannot help it. Why the very way you took those flowers from the fellow was enough to lead a man on."

"But the flowers were not from him; they were from Mary, she gathered them and tied them up. I was amused with the play, so was Captain Rennie, and we laughed together."

"You know," resumed Dick in a low tone full of feeling, "that I believe every word you say, as I do scarcely anything else, and I hope you are unconscious of your own maddening ways, but if you do not take care you will get into some other scrape besides making those that love you miserable."

"You must have lost your senses, Dick, or you would not be so unkind, so ungenerous, as to remind me—" her lip quivered and she broke off; mastering herself, she exclaimed in an unsteady voice, "There, I will *not* quarrel with you; I suppose your own unhappiness makes you unjust, but you need not be cruel to the sister who is so fond of you," she ended, with an assumption of her old natural tone, of which she was justly proud.

"I believe I am a brute," he returned, shading his face with his hand, "and I *may* be wrong. But if you knew all I have to fight against—" he stopped.

"You know I always feel with you and for you, but, indeed, you have no right to accuse me of being a frivolous coquette. Heaven knows I have had enough to make me steady. Still, if you imagine because I made one great mistake I am never to speak to any man, or have a little pleasant chaff, you are very much mistaken."

"Yes, you like to feel your own power; I am not so far wrong."

"I do nothing of the kind. I *have* no power, and though I love you, you shall not tyrannize over me; you are not such a good example yourself! You say you are deeply attached to some one somewhere and yet you can flirt with Mary Rennie as if you liked no one better."

"Liked no one better? Why, Marge, I scarcely know what she is like."

"Then it was not for want of opportunities of seeing her; you hardly left her all Saturday afternoon. You see how we are liable to be misunderstood, only I did not attack you for being flighty and inconstant! Now I have no one to be inconstant to."

"But I *am* constant. If I were less constant I should be less unhappy," said Dick, looking down at a paper knife he had taken up and was turning over and over.

"Why are you so unkind and harsh, Dick?" her eyes were fast filling; "you never used to misunderstand me and I want to have a little happiness while you are here."

"I cannot make you happy, Marge; you want some one gay and grander than I am."

"You do not deserve that I should answer such a stupid speech; you know I would rather have you with me than any one else except George. You *ought* to beg my pardon."

There was a short silence. Marjory bent her flushed cheeks and cast down the eyes from which she kept the tears by a strong effort. Presently Dick rose and brought his chair over beside her. "I do beg your pardon," he said softly, with a sad echo in his voice that touched her heart; "I believe I have been out of my mind; forgive me, Marge," he took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"I have told you not to do that, Dick," she said, drawing it away, while she was almost frightened at the beating of her own heart. "It reminds me of Mr. Ellis."

"Then give me a sisterly kiss, Marge, to show you are all right," and he bent his head till it was close to hers.

"Oh! nonsense," cried Marjory laughing pleasantly. "We are not babies to kiss and make up every time we quarrel; let us shake hands like good comrades;" she held hers out and was surprised to find his unsteady.

"I beg your pardon, Marge, for asking. I will never offend again."

"I am not offended, Dick, I only want you to be just and to be my dear true friend as you always have been hitherto."

"And will be always, Marge, always," he replied, rising to go and gaze from the window.

"As to poor Captain Rennie, he and his sister are going to Scotland next week, and Mrs. Rennie goes with them, for the gentleman they expected is not coming, so I shall have no one to exercise my mischievous tendencies on. You must never accuse me of coquetry again, Dick. Come and sit down and tell me some more about your life in France. Why will you not speak to me of the one you love best? It would be a relief to you."

"I cannot, Marge, I dare not, and I am a sorry companion to-night, so I will leave you."

"Can I not be of any comfort to you?" she asked tenderly.

"Yes, if you will promise not to trifle or get into any entanglement till—till you are quite clear of Ellis."

"You may trust me! I will take care."

"Good-night, then;" he waved his hand and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MRS. ACLAND MAKES UP HER MIND.

BRAND had established himself at Charing Cross, as directed by Mrs. Acland, and waited patiently for her promised communication.

It was a trying time for him. He could not employ his pen, nor could any amusement divert him from the excitement of his own thoughts. He never went far from the hotel lest he might miss a note or a telegram, and sat alone for hours, anticipating the crisis he knew was coming, or recalling the past, its fatal mistakes, its errors, its shortcomings. There were hours when the mental and physical pain was almost more than he could bear. But a new and powerful motive lent him force; he was working for one dearer to him than himself.

At last the anxiously expected note arrived. It contained but four words, written in roughly printed characters, "To-morrow evening after dusk." The date was the day before, and the line was unsigned.

When Brand had forced himself to swallow some dinner he paused in the entrance hall and said to the porter, "Should a lady inquire presently for Mr. Brand say I am in my room, No. 119, and ask her to walk up."

"Yes, sir."

"You will remember my name, 'Brand, 119,'" he repeated, and slowly ascended to the second floor. Here he had secured a comfortable bedroom. As soon as he reached it he put a match to the fire, which was laid already, and lit the gas. Then he threw himself into an armchair, and sat very still, in deep thought. "If this cursed pain would keep off," he muttered, "I should be fitter for the work before me. I have a keen devil to deal with, and I dare not touch chloroform till the interview is over." He shivered and glanced at the door near him, which led into the adjoining room. "The window must be open in there, I feel such a draught." He moved his chair to the other side of the fireplace, drawing the curtains and placing a small table by it before sitting down with his back to the window. "It is quite dark, and past six. I wish she would come," he said half aloud, and took up a phial which stood on the table, as well as a round leather case such as are fitted to bottles for chloroform, and writing materials. "No,"—looking at the bottle—"I must not." He put it down and almost immediately

there was a low tap at the door. "Come in." Brand's voice sounded hoarsely, and an unwonted look of stern repugnance replaced his usual expression of kindly indifference as he stood up to receive his visitor, a tall lady in black with a thick black veil, who closed the door most carefully, then took a few steps into the room, and very deliberately removed her veil. They both stood looking at each other silently for a moment or two, then Mrs. Acland, who, though pale, looked as composed and still as if her face was of marble, said in a low clear tone :

"I hope you have a sufficient reason for putting me to the trouble and danger of meeting you. It so chanced that my—that Mr. Acland went to the country to-day. I came to town on the plea of completing some arrangements omitted in the hurry of our departure. He is therefore aware I am in town and that I am to return to Folkestone from this station. Now, what do you want with me?"

"I have ample reason to give for troubling you to come here," returned Brand. "But it will take some time to explain; you had better sit down."

With a keen comprehensive glance at the table and all that stood upon it, Mrs. Acland took the seat pointed out, and loosened her fur-trimmed mantle at the throat, then sat quite silent, waiting for Brand to speak.

"In the first place," he began, "I saw the death of old Cranston Maynard's baby grandson in a paper I took up last Sunday."

"Well?"

"Have you so forgotten your former hopes and disappointments as not to see that, the child being removed, I am heir to his lands and wealth?"

"Ah!" she ejaculated. The colour rose to her cheeks in a vivid flush, she compressed her lips, but still kept silence.

"And after me they will be my son's and your son's—your son whom you have striven to crush—whom you have slandered."

"You admit then that he is your son."

"I told you before that I did, and I begged your forgiveness for the wrong I had done you. Then I removed myself out of your way, thinking that the best atonement I could make, for had I made myself known I should only have dragged you and Dick from competence and respectability to comparative beggary and Bohemianism. I little thought you would have returned my self-effacement by shifting the blame and the shame of your theft to the shoulders of my boy. For you took that money, and I imagine I know the reason you wanted it."

"Your imagination was always fertile," returned Mrs. Acland, who had again turned very white, but met Brand's angry glance with deadly resolute eyes. "Pray, how has—our son" (a cynical stress on our son) "conveyed this information to you?"

"Because he has gradually told me his whole history during our daily companionship for more than a year."

"Where?" she asked incredulously, but there was a nervous catch in her throat and a more perceptible effort in her composure.

"At the various works in which we were associated. You know. I suppose, that your son became a mason." She bent her head. "Now, listen to me; I will be as short as possible. When, after the hideous discovery that Blake had introduced me to his cast-off mistress, and that you both succeeded in entrapping me, I believed, in my shame and despair—and not unnaturally—that your relations with that scoundrel had never been broken off, that the boy was his; had I not felt, from sundry suspicious circumstances, convinced of this, I should never have deserted you. I loved you, Judith, when we were married, and after, till your contempt for me, when you found there was no chance of my inheriting my uncle's property, opened my eyes to the evil of your nature. I know I was careless and extravagant and trying; but, had you loved me, had you even shown a sense of duty, you might have saved me."

"I did not think I should have had to listen to sentimental reminiscences," she said with a sneer.

"When I found who and what I had married," he continued, not heeding the interruption, "I grew utterly reckless; and my American friend Brand easily persuaded me to go with him to New Orleans. There I soon expended all I had, and sank in to depths of penury. Previous to that, I was going with my companion in search of some employment up the Mississippi when the wreck took place in which he was drowned. It was by accident that I was reported drowned and he among the saved. But I seized the chance of getting rid of a name I had disgraced. After buffeting for seven or eight years I fancied I'd like to come back, were it only to die in old England. When I reached London I had but a few shillings, and the day after, I had strolled in Regent's Park, and was debating whether the best way to spend my last sous would not be to buy enough opium to soothe me out of my worries once and for all." A curious light came into his listener's eyes, as he paused with something of his natural careless smile. "It was then," he resumed, "that I met Cranston Maynard, suddenly, face to face, and told him the condition I was in. He threw me a sovereign. I met him by appointment after, and then, at his request, I undertook never again to reappear as Philip Cranston in consideration of an annuity of two hundred a year for life. I did not trouble myself about Dick's rights, as I did not believe him to be my son."

"Pray, what induced you to change your opinion?"

"It is curious. You remember the visit I paid you? Well, I declare to Heaven I did not intend to betray you or injure you by going—I would not, were it but for the sake of these unfortunate little children—unfortunate in having you for a mother."

"You are increasing your claims on my consideration every moment," she said bitterly.

"Be silent," he returned sternly; "You shall know in a few minutes how far you are dependent on mine. I thought that at the hour I called Acland would be safe in the city, and I was greatly taken aback to find himself intruding on a happy domestic festival. It was then that I saw Dick for the first time since he was a little chap of seven or eight; and I was not struck with any likeness to myself, but to the Cranstons generally. They are physically a fine race—I am somewhat different, smaller and darker—with your complexion, he is strikingly like my father. His voice, his expression, all spoke in favour of the belief that he is my own—my own son. Moreover, the likeness to ancestors is more convincing than even to the immediate parent. Believing this, and your explanation of certain circumstances in our last interview, I am going to forfeit Maynard's annuity and claim my rights. I fancy the loss of his grandson will have broken him down, and I want to get him to acknowledge me before his death complicates the affair."

"Perhaps he has a better life than yours," said Mrs. Acland uneasily, glancing at the bottles on the table. "Suppose he refuses to acknowledge you, how will you prove your identity? Shall you call me to witness on your side?"

"I know you would do your best to damn my cause," he returned calmly, "but Cranston Maynard is a gentleman and a man of honour. He will never deny what he knows to be true, even though he dislikes me—why, I cannot think, unless—" with a sudden flash of suspicion—"unless *you* made some mischief with him. Then he will see that Dick—my boy—is worthy to bear the old name and rule in his stead. I shall go down to Leighton Abbot on Monday or Tuesday, but I thought I would warn you first, that you might take measures accordingly."

"Take measures!" she repeated, rising to her feet with a wild fierce look in her light gray eyes. "What measures can I take? If you carry out this scheme you destroy me, and you expect me to identify you! Ah, if old Maynard would but take counsel with me, I should soon settle the question of your identity."

"You see, Maynard is governed by different principles from yours." Mrs. Acland did not seem to hear him; she stood, her hands clasped and dropped before her, an expression of despair and fury distorting her face.

"Proving your story means destruction to me. Mr. Acland would repudiate me! my children will be taken from me, I shall be trampled in the dust of humiliation. Dick will revenge himself; I should fall below the hope of ever rising. I will never live to bear such a fate; you do not know me, Philip—I will die!"

"I do not want to be unnecessarily cruel," returned Brand, touched by her self-abandonment. "If you do not oppose me I

will shield you as far as I can. I deserted you—you honestly believed me dead when you married Acland. I do not know much about law, but I am pretty sure you could get a divorce from me, and he would marry you ; in six months all would be forgotten—of the past I would never speak ; I want to shield Dick's mother."

"But you forget," she said in a fierce whisper, "that Mr. Acland will know that I recognised you three years ago. Had I not feared your slanders, your tale of my infidelity, I should have faced the recognition then ; Mr. Acland is the most sensitive of men, the scandal and exposure would kill him. Philip !" changing her tone ; "you are suffering, your strength is broken ; you have a sufficiency. Dick is on the high road to a respectable position such as he is fitted for. Why take up this cruel story of our misfortunes ? Let yourself rest for the present, and I swear to you that when this Mr. Maynard dies I will assert Dick's claim, if you are not here to do it yourself." She stretched out her clasped hands to him in passionate entreaty.

"Understand me," said Brand sternly ; "that it is waste of breath urging such a request. I will not be vindictive, but you are of no more value to me than the lightest thistle down, compared to the son we have so deeply injured. I am determined to secure him the chance of being heir to Leighton Abbot before I die ; and your happiness or unhappiness, your reputation, your life, will not weigh with me for one moment as compared to this. But your case is not so desperate. I shall never tell Dick that I am convinced you took that money from your husband's safe, to assist Blake, the villain, to escape."

"I deny it," she cried in much agitation.

Brand smiled. "Be that as it may, tell the villain not to cross me."

"He is far away, if he be still alive."

"He is in London," returned Brand severely. "I saw him yesterday, disguised, skulking along the Embankment."

Mrs. Acland gasped as if for breath and sank into a chair.

"Now you know my intentions," resumed Brand, with a slight softening in his tone. "I must beg you to leave me ; I am suffering horribly and must get some relief ; as soon as I see Maynard and arrange with him I must meet you again and plan how best to break the matter to Mr. Acland. Let me know how I can see you in the course of the week ; address to me here."

"I will," she said, regaining composure by a wonderful effort of self control. "I deserve little at your hands, but, Philip, do not be unnecessarily cruel."

"I will not—by heaven, I will not. Ah !" A moan was wrung from him by a thrill of extreme pain. He seized the phial and looked round for a measure glass which generally stood beside it. "Where can that glass be ?" he cried.

"Let me drop it for you, Philip," she said softly; "my hand is very steady."

He smiled in the midst of his anguish. "You are infinitely good; I prefer measuring such stuff myself." He rang the bell as he spoke.

"Then I will leave you," she said in a sad voice, while a wave of colour passed over her face, "and I will write without fail. Do not attempt to address me till you hear." She went noiselessly away, a hell fire of impotent rage burning in her heart. A few steps from the door she met the chambermaid hurrying to answer Brand's bell.

"The poor gentleman cannot find his measure glass," she said blandly.

"Oh, dear; I left it in my place at the end of the passage; I'll fetch it in a minute."

"Pray first, tell me which way to turn to the staircase; I am afraid of losing my train."

"Straight on, first passage on the left," and she hastened in the opposite direction. Mrs. Acland paused; she was at the door of the room next Brand's, she had noticed it as she came up; the door was then open and the chambermaids were coming out with dust-pans and brooms, it was probably unoccupied. Some half-conscious cerebration prompted her to turn the handle, the door was locked, but the key was in it; the next instant she had unlocked it, withdrawn the key, entered—and relocked it; all this with infinite noiseless rapidity. Once safe within the chamber she sank upon the nearest chair and looked round.

The window had been forgotten and was open, admitting the cold air, the roar of the street, and some of the glare from the gas lamps below.

After a moment of strange numbness, which she resolutely resisted, the sound of voices in the next room roused her attention; she listened, eagerly attentive.

"So sorry, sir, I forgot to bring back your glass," said the voice of the chambermaid.

"Never mind; just pour in a teaspoonful out of the small bottle, the other is chloroform—now some water; thank you. Lower the gas—I will try and get some sleep."

"Hope you'll be better soon, sir." The sound of the closing door was followed by complete stillness.

Collecting her thoughts, Mrs. Acland perceived that the distinctness with which she heard the above sentences was accounted for by a thin line of light which showed that the door between the rooms was slightly ajar. She sat rigidly quiet, while her thoughts began to clear themselves from the mists of furious disappointment, the agony of anticipated discovery and disgrace. Occasional deep sighs, almost moans, reached her ear—then came profound silence

which might have shaken nerves of less strength than those of the resolute but defeated woman who sat there in the semi-darkness as if turned to stone.

Was she, after all, to go down before the lance of her despised husband, whose devotion to her in the first year or two of her married life had only excited a sense of contemptuous weariness. Not without a supreme effort! How she hated him all the more for his insolent pretence of pity and consideration for her! If he were avowedly cruel, revengeful, implacable, she could respect him and understand him. To ask or give quarter was repugnant to her. Was she then to give up the struggle, to see herself dethroned, pushed from her place in her husband's heart and estimation, put out of her house to make room for that wretched girl Marjory, whom she had never been quite able to vanquish, and who would become naturally its mistress? And Dick, if wealthy and powerful, would he not trample her under his feet in return for evil she had done him? No; she would *not* live to face all this, was her passionate determination when these thoughts had circled with the rapidity of lightning through her brain. He had refused to let her administer the calmant he needed. Did he think her capable of murder? Why not justify his suspicions? If he took an overdose of chloroform or chloral, how would it affect her?

Not a soul save Mr. Maynard knew that Brand and Philip Cranston were one and the same. He had been so long away, he was so changed, that if any of his old comrades were about, which was not likely, they would never recognize him—and Mr. Maynard would of course be silent; she was not sure that he knew his impecunious cousin had a son.

If Philip was safe in his grave, she could hold on the even tenor of her way till old Maynard was gathered to his fathers. In the meantime she could effect a reconciliation with Dick, and, when the present possessor of Leighton Abbot was no more, appear as the champion of her son's rights, ay! and win them, too. Her marriage lines, the registry of her boy's baptism, all were in order; his claim would be indisputable, for Cranston never appeared to have told his suspicions to any one, and she would pose as the mother of a great landed proprietor, the representative of an old squire-archial family, so evil would become her good. Could she hesitate to secure such advantages? was she weak enough to hold her hand when fortune gave such a chance? The door was safe. If any one attempted to enter it would be supposed that the key had been taken by some of the attendants, a search would ensue during which she might escape. She felt all her steadiness of purpose, all her natural courage, come back to her; she rose, took off her cloak—it might hamper her movements—and put up her veil; then she softly, slowly, opened the door wider.

Though the gas had been lowered the fire burned brightly, and

everything in the room was visible. Brand was profoundly asleep; he had evidently leaned over to place the glass on the table beside him, and had remained in that position, his shoulder supported by the curved back of his chair, his elbow on the arm; his hand had been under his head but had partially slipped away, so that his face was bent over the table; his lips apart, he breathed deeply, quietly, as if relieved from pain.

Mrs. Acland crept noiselessly to the door which led to the passage and locked that also; then she drew near, taking care not to interpose herself between the light and the sleeper.

Yes, he was much changed, she thought. As she calmly stood and watched him the flickering fire light showed the furrows, the sunken eyes, the lines and curves which made the kindly handsome face pathetic. But it did not touch the woman who gazed upon him, who had lured him with tender wiles and lain in his arms; she listened to his breathing, and noted his position with deadly content; then she looked eagerly round to see if there were any letters or paper she could examine, and if necessary appropriate; but nothing of that description lay about, save one, at which she glanced. It was signed 'Beaulieu' and described the death of his baby nephew, finally asking the address of that clever young fellow, Cranston; this she threw away—she was losing time.

Again she glided to the table and took up the chloroform; the top was screwed down tight, it required a little force to open, then the odour made itself perceptible at once; she turned her head lest it might affect herself, and put on the top loosely; removing the smaller bottle she replaced it by the chloroform. The bottle which contained it was broad and short; its position did not satisfy her; she looked round and noticed a large bible, such as the Christian Knowledge Society distribute, lying on a chest of drawers; she swiftly seized it, placed it beneath the bent head of the sleeper, and on it put the chloroform, so that with each breath he should inhale the potent vapour; she withdrew the stopper and laid it on the carpet just at Brand's foot, as though it had fallen from his hand as he became overpowered. Then she paused, glanced round once more, and retreated to the door by which she had entered; there she turned, cast a final look at the inanimate figure and whispered, "I am not beaten yet."

Passing into the next room she felt for the key, there was none, but there was a bolt which she shot, then she put on her cloak, pulled down her thick veil, and still strung to the highest pitch of nervous tension, listened at the door which led into the passage. There was the sound of voices speaking together, of several persons walking to and fro; a fat, loud, authoritative voice was ordering the luggage to be taken up to No. 132.

With infinite caution she opened the door about an inch. A group of persons—an old gentleman and two young ladies attended by a

waiter, and followed by Boots with wraps and umbrellas—were just passing towards the staircase at the further end of the passage; directly their backs were towards her she slipped out, turned and withdrew the key, and walked steadily in the opposite direction downstairs and into the hall. Here she stopped and looking at the clock said unconsciously aloud: "Just a minute or two sooner and I should have caught my train, now I have an hour and a half to wait."

She passed out into the crowded station, dexterously dropping the key on a mat that no sound might attract attention.

But she began to feel faint and dizzy; amazed at her own success, yet strangely breathless, she hesitated, turned into the refreshment room and ordered some tea. While doing so she was suddenly accosted by Mr. Middleton, the clergyman of the church which Mr. Acland's family attended. She was ashamed of the wild terror which paralysed her for an instant. The next she rallied, and smiling sweetly said, "Ah! Mr. Middleton; this is indeed fortunate. I came up this afternoon to see Mr. Acland off for Hampshire, and loitered too long at home, so have just lost my train."

"Much my own case," returned the reverend gentleman. "Going to have some tea? I shall join you if you will allow me, I am going nearly all the way to Folkestone—Mrs. Middleton and the children are at Sandgate—and I shall be very happy to be your escort."

"Much obliged to you. I did not at all calculate on being so late, and am very fortunate to have met you."

"And you are at Folkestone this season. Don't you find it somewhat bleak and exposed?" and so on and so on, about east wind and climate, fine sands and good bathing, which topics Mrs. Acland calmly discussed, firmly believing that her victim upstairs would never cross her path again.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CLOUDS DISPERSE.

It was a new and painful sensation for Marjory to be glad that Dick was away. Nevertheless it was a relief not to be on guard all Saturday and Sunday.

Only seven short days ago she had had that delightful walk with him, and listened to the disastrous confession which had opened her eyes to her own folly and weakness. To feel as she did towards a man who looked upon her as a sister only was unmaidenly and unnatural. Had they been unconnected, and he had shown her atten-

tions which were misleading, there might be some excuse for her. As it was she blushed for herself.

She had a brave spirit, however, and a reasonable soul. So that Sabbath morning she rose with a settled purpose of uprooting the culpable feeling of which she was guilty, and replacing it by simple sisterly regard. "I do not believe it is impossible to master one's emotions and tendencies," thought Marjory, "if one is honest and convinced it is the right thing to do. I will only think of Dick as my friend and brother—or, better still, nor think of him at all," and forthwith she tried to turn her thoughts on Ellis and the curious episode with which he was connected, the result being that she now saw the hidden influence which steeled her against the accomplished diplomat. In her heart she always weighed him against Dick, and found him always wanting. The effect of her cogitations was that she met George at breakfast with an air of alert cheerfulness which delighted that young gentleman.

"You are a jolly girl, Marge!" he exclaimed, as she tied a large print apron over her dress and proceeded to wash up the breakfast things. "You keep a fellow alive. I should have been a confirmed invalid if I had been left alone here. Old Mother Stokes is not half bad; but she is generally doleful."

"Thank you, George. It is something to know one is appreciated. Come, let us be ready in good time, Mrs. Rennie is to send the pony carriage for us that we may go to church with them. They will not be at home for four or five Sundays after this."

All day she kept up the same brave front.

"Why, Marjory!" exclaimed Mary Rennie, "one would think you were glad we are going away."

"Hoot-toot," said her father. They were all gathered on the shady side of the tennis ground after their early Sunday dinner. "Hoot-toot, there's nothing to fret her in a month's absence. It does a man's heart good to have such a bonny blithe lassie beside him," and he smiled kindly on his young *protegee*. Mr. Rennie when pleased and at ease was more intensely Scotch than at any other time. "But, for all that, you haven't such roses in your cheeks as you had a while ago."

"They have faded in the summer heats," returned Marjory. "But what are you going to do while Mrs. Rennie and Mary are away?"

"Do? Eh? I have plenty to do. I have to go to London, and Manchester, and Hull. I am thinking of having another place of business in the north. Perhaps in two or three years Forbes might be fit to manage it, and take George to help him. Your brother is doing very well, Miss Marjory. He was not too quick at first, but he understands what he is about now, and, what is best, he puts his heart into his work. If he goes on as he has begun he will be a useful lad in a while, and shall have an increase of salary, but it was

a good thought of yours to come and stay with him. You have just kept his heart up."

"It is pleasant to hear you say so, Mr. Rennie."

"Why don't you take a holiday yourself? Go and see your father and mother for a bit, eh?"

"And leave George? Oh no, I would much rather stay here."

"Eh? and why, my lassie?"

"Now, papa, don't you go cross-examining Marjory; it ain't civil. Of course she would not leave her brother this first summer. It is nice and airy up in your rooms, I will tell the gardener to send you fruit and flowers twice a week, and when papa is away you'll let Forbes have tea with you; it is lonesome for him at home," said Mrs. Rennie.

"Oh, of course. We are always delighted to see him. You will come in to us whenever you like while Mr. Rennie is away." This to Forbes, who strolled up from the stables with George as she spoke.

"Ay, that I will; it is always so bright and jolly up in your rooms. And, Marjory, how is the writing going on?" (young people soon grow unceremonious, and it had been "Marjory" and "Forbes" for some time).

"It is not *going* at all; it is constantly coming back," returned Marjory laughing and blushing. "What do you know of my lucubrations? I suspect George has been a traitor."

"I did let out the cat; I forgot about it being a secret."

"May I be in the secret too?" said Mrs. Rennie.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Rennie, if you care to know," replied Marjory, laying her hand caressingly on hers. "You see, I have a good deal of spare time, and I have wanted for a long time to make some money, so, as I used to amuse the little ones at school with my stories, I thought I could try to write one, and send it to *Little Folks*, but it was rejected. Nor would *Our Darlings* have it either. I am still trying, however, and hope to get it in somewhere."

"What! Have you written a whole tale by yourself," cried Mrs. Rennie, surprised and delighted. "What a clever girl you are, Marjory!"

"That depends on the sort of tale I have written."

"I am pretty sure it is not nonsense," observed Mr. Rennie lighting a fresh cigar, "and I hope you will have luck, Missee."

Then Marjory was carried off to be catechised by Mary.

"I hope we shall hear something of Mr. Brand from Dick tomorrow," said Marjory to her brother as they walked home together in the fresh crisp autumnal evening, by the light of the rising moon.

"Oh! He will be sure to turn up; there is nothing to make you uneasy."

"No, of course not; but Dick *was* uneasy about Mr. Brand for

some reason or other, and I seem to feel a sort of reflected discomfort. I am really very fond of Mr. Brand."

"Reflected discomfort," repeated George. "Why, Marge, we will have you writing volumes of poetry presently if you indulge in such tall talk to me."

"I am sure there is nothing very poetical in my phraseology," said Majory, laughing; but she continued to talk of the anxious look Dick's face had worn when he spoke of the depressed tone that pervaded Brand's letters.

Monday passed swiftly, every hour being fully employed till evening, when brother and sister waited in vain for Dick, and much of their talk was of him and conjectures as to the cause of his non-appearance.

George declared his intention of going to his lodgings as soon as he could get away from business next day, and Marjory, while approving of her brother's resolution, pictured the missing Dick writing far into the night, pouring out all his troubles, his hopes, to that black-eyed girl in France, for in France she instinctively thought he must have met her. Could it have been the countess of whom he spoke incidently? He had said one day she was a widow. No; Marjory pictured her as quite too old. "There is no use in thinking about it," she said rebukingly to herself; "in due time I shall know everything."

The next day was damp, with occasional drizzling rain, and Marjory, mindful of the rheumatic pains George felt now and then, made a bright little fire about an hour before the usual time of his return. She had disposed some chrysanthemums about the room and fastened a couple at her throat. She was full of the idea she kept repeating to herself that her mission in life was to help and comfort George, at any rate till he was older and stronger.

She had lit her lamp, and was standing by the fire reading the volume of Tennyson which had been given her by Ellis, and which she had opened at random, when a tap at the door, followed immediately by the entrance of Dick, startled her.

"Oh, Dick!" throwing down her book. "I am so glad to see you; we were beginning to feel quite anxious about you and Mr. Brand. Why did you not come up last night?"

"I could not manage it," he said, taking her hand, she fancied more coldly than formerly. "I was tired and had one or two things to do for Brand, who is very unwell. He gave me a scare on Saturday."

"How?"

"You know I went up by the 2.30 train, and got to his hotel about eight. The porter said he was in his room, so up I went. When I came to the door it was locked, and I could not make Brand hear; as I stood knocking and feeling rather uneasy, one of the chambermaids came by; she stopped and said, 'I think the gentle-

man must be asleep, sir ; he took some sleeping stuff about a quarter of an hour ago, for he made me measure it out for him, but I can let you in through the next room." I followed her to the door, but *that* was locked too ; the girl declared she had left the key in it, and called another chambermaid, who remembered having left it also, then they brought a head-woman with a lot of keys, and found one that fitted. I rushed in by a door that led into Brand's room, and found him quite insensible. He had evidently locked himself in, and, no doubt driven by suffering, had opened his bottle of chloroform, dropping the stopper by his feet, where we found it. I thought it was all over with him ; his heart still beat, however. Fortunately there was a medical man staying in the hotel, and we soon had him up. The doctor had all the doors and windows opened, and fanned him, and forced a little brandy into his mouth ; he was going to try electricity when Brand half opened his eyes so at last we brought him round. He was very bad for a bit and I sat up all night with him. I can tell you that I was thankful when daylight came and I found him quite clear and sensible. I never was in such a fright before ; the doctor said that a few moments more and he would have been gone ; we were only just in time."

"I don't wonder at your being frightened," cried Marjory. "He must have been very near death."

"He was. Do you know, Marge, I never knew how fond I had grown of him until I looked at him lying still and lifeless ; till the doctor came I thought he was gone. You see, he is the best friend I have, I ever had, the only one—except you, Marge."

He held out his hand with a sudden impulse of tenderness, she put hers in it, looking up to him with kindly loving eyes, "and George, Dick."

"Yes, of course, but he can never be to me what you are ; though he is a good fellow. I can tell *you* every—at least I used to tell you everything."

"And why not now ?" she cried, charmed to feel quite sisterly for the moment. "You know you *might* tell me everything. I do not think your black-eyed sweetheart in France would mind," smiling.

"In France ?" echoed Dick, surprised. "I have no sweetheart in France."

"I fancied she was in France."

"No, no. I don't want to talk about her."

Marjory kept silence, surprised at his impatient tone.

"When I saw Brand open his eyes I *was* glad," continued Dick, releasing her hand. "But it was some time before he spoke distinctly. I never left him all night, nor next day. It is curious he cannot remember locking his door, nor did he intend to open the chloroform. In fact he is quite confused about everything, but thank God, he is living and on the road to recovery. We got a

nurse to watch him, and I did not leave till eight on Sunday night, so by the time I wrote a letter or two after work yesterday I was ready for bed."

"I should think you were, indeed. Now sit down and have some tea, George will be here soon. He intended going to see what had become of you."

Dick sat down, and resting his elbows on the table leant his head upon his hands, while Marjory put the kettle which had been humming gently beside the fire—on it—"Mr. Brand is all right now. Is he not? You must cheer up, dear Dick," she said presently, sitting down by him and laying her hand on his shoulder, for she was moved by the dejection of his attitude.

"Oh, yes, than God, he will do I believe, but somehow I cannot help worrying my heart about—about what cannot be helped; you are very good to me, Marge." He put his arm round her and pressed her to him, so close that she felt his heart beat. "You never thought at one time that you would be such friends with the monster, eh, Marge? You ought to be good to me, you know you have given me many a stab."

"Don't!" whispered Marjory, who felt terribly inclined to cry, and longing to break away from him, yet not liking to resist his brotherly embrace. "It is you who are good and kind to forgive me, and be friends with me. I wish you would tell me what troubles you. I would do a great deal for you, Dick."

"Not what I want though," he said as if to himself as he released her.

"But I would; I would do anything in the world for you or George."

"Well, I am not going to ask you," he returned with rather a grim smile. "By-the-way, there is something troubling Brand, I fancy. He is in such a furious hurry to get well and about again, I can't help thinking that he is planning something for me. He asks me a lot of questions, especially as to what I remembered of both my father and mother. I think he wandered a little. I know he has put curious thoughts into my head."

"What thoughts, Dick?"

"I do not think it would be honourable—" Dick was beginning when George made his appearance, and the whole story had to be told over again.

The three friends had an animated discussion of the circumstances, and agreed that really Brand should never be left alone since he was subject to such attacks; he evidently did not know what he was doing when he leaned over to inhale that dreadful chloroform, etc., etc. The rest of the evening was spent in friendly kindly talk of plans and hopes and memories. George had had a letter from his father with a kind message from Mrs. Acland, who had gone to the sea-side with the children, but the usual "love to Marjory" was the only mention of that young person.

Altogether it was more like old times, and Dick was more like his old self. He announced his intention of going up to look after Brand on Saturday, but until then he would come every evening "and thankful to have such a place to come to ; you always made things nice and pretty, Marge ; good-night !"

Leighton Abbot was never a very cheerful residence, though rich in natural beauty ; away in the woods and dells, by the clear brown stream chafing against its resisting rocks, in the open breezy pastures, the face of nature laughed cheerfully to the sun, but round the stately house with its formal gardens hung an atmosphere of silence and depression. The spirit of the inhabitant influences his material dwelling place, and the iron had entered deeply into the soul of the present possessor.

This fine old place was not the original home of the Cranstons. It had come into the hands of Edward Cranston by the bequest of his illegitimate brother, John Maynard, a man of great ability and force of character, who devoted his whole existence to amassing a large fortune of which he had little enjoyment.

At the outset of his career he had received some friendly assistance from Edward, who was but a few years younger than himself, and fairly well off. This circumstance impressed itself deeply on his tenacious mind, though he held little or no intercourse with his brother.

His will, after a few legacies, constituted Edward Cranston residuary legatee, provided he took the name of the testator's beloved mother, thus as it were making him her debtor. The will further provided that should Edward leave no son the property was to go to the eldest Cranston living at the death of Edward, be the degree of relationship what it might so long as the Cranston inheriting was a direct descendent of John Cranston, the testator's father.

It was no small trial to the legatee to have the name of his father's mistress thus imposed upon him. The pill, however, was well gilt, and Edward Cranston took possession of his fortune, and, though a proud cold man, administered it well. He had married late in life, and at the death of John Maynard had an only child, a boy in extremely delicate health, whose birth had cost his mother's life—this son he idolised, and when, after infinite care, after all the aid that modern skill and science could bestow, he strengthened into fairly vigorous manhood and married a charming high born woman, Cranston felt that fortune had no further favour to grant.

Cruel as had been the blow dealt him in the loss of this son, the death of his grandchild was even a more bitter stroke. With the infant went all hopes of seeing a descendant to carry on his name and occupy his place. He had grown attached to the splendid home with which he had identified himself. Pride was the strongest

passion of his nature, and lay at the root of his dislike to his nephew Philip, whose degrading choice of an artistic life was to his mind unpardonable. Then his obscure marriage, his poverty, his Bohemianism, all made up a cairn of offence which was not to be surmounted. Yet Cranston Maynard was not ungenerous; that is he was always ready to pay for what he wanted, and in giving an annuity to his offending nephew he considered that he had bought him off cheaply, and removed an ugly spot from the family scutcheon. In all human probability there would be no chance of his ever succeeding to the property, but if there were, it was better he should be out of the way.

Now all his hopes, his plans, his pride lay buried in the grave of his little grandson, and the old man's heart would have been dead to all human feeling but for the intense anger he felt against his poor young daughter-in-law. He was too proud and haughty a man to admit the rector's orthodox consolations. He absolutely refused to see him, and day after day he sat silent, brooding, morose, in the study which adjoined his bedroom. His valet, who had been with him for some years, and was somewhat attached to the generous, masterful old man, grew alarmed at his mute stern grief, his sleeplessness and total loss of appetite. In vain the cook sent up her most cunningly contrived dishes to tempt him—in vain the butler ransacked the cellar for the choicest wines; the lord of the mansion turned with loathing from all alike.

The hesitating but earnest entreaty of the housekeeper that he would see the local doctor was met by a grim refusal. It was then a relief to the household generally when Captain Hugh Cranston, the master's nephew, arrived. He was Mr. Maynard's heir presumptive, and on friendly though not intimate terms with his uncle. He was a highly scientific naval officer, had been employed on various "search" expeditions, had dredged up monsters from the briny deep, had written a treatise on an uncomfortable rudimentary creature, consisting of digestive organs and eyes, which had excited much interest among naturalists, and contributed endless papers to the *Transactions* of various learned societies; occupations Mr. Cranston Maynard was given to "pooh, pooh," but which he did not consider derogatory to a gentleman.

It was nearly twenty-four hours before the bereaved old man could be persuaded to see his future successor, although he had come on his own invitation, and when he consented to receive him he scarcely spoke at first.

Captain Cranston was tall, like most of his race, but round shouldered, with a broad brow, thick grizzled whiskers, and mild thoughtful blue eyes.

The meeting was extremely awkward, Maynard glared at his nephew as if he begrudged him his length of days, and Captain Cranston, as is not unusual with some of the kindest Englishmen,

was at a loss how to express his heartfelt sympathy with his desolate kinsman.

"I scarcely know why I sent for you," said Mr. Maynard at last. "Those busy-bodies, Lambert and Green, suggested it. I suppose *you* were ready enough to come and look at the property. I suppose you consider it already as your own?"

"You wrong me, uncle. I never gave your fortune a thought. I came because I believed you had some need of me, and because I most deeply and sincerely regret the terrible loss you have suffered."

"I forbid you to speak of it, sir. I do not want your pity. Perhaps it is as well you should know something of the estate you will inherit."

"It is not so sure I shall inherit it; life is very uncertain, returning to town I may be smashed up; you are just as likely to outlive me as I am to outlive you. Indeed, I am not the sort of man to be owner of a large estate. I am an old bachelor, I have enough for all I want, property would only bring me trouble. I wish that poor fellow Philip had not been drowned; he would probably have been a better and certainly a more picturesque——"

"I do not wish to hear his name mentioned," again interrupted Maynard in a tone of disgust. "It is the one drop of bitterness I have been spared to know that worthless Bohemian is—is out of the way."

"I suppose you had some reason for disliking him; I must say I found him companionable and pleasant enough. He was perhaps weak and too easy going; I lost sight of him after his marriage, however."

"He was a worthless vagabond," exclaimed Mr. Maynard with some vehemence. "Reckless—reckless to a degree, and when he could not face his creditors he ran away, deserted his wife and child; I was obliged to give her a hundred pounds to start with in some business, or to go abroad. She promised she would never trouble me again, and, by George, she never did!"

"Then you do not know what became of the child. Was it a boy?"

"Yes."

"Something ought to be done for him. I suppose he is younger than Bernard Cranston's boys?"

"I know nothing about him."

Having exhausted this topic, which Mr. Maynard was evidently not at all disposed to pursue, Captain Cranston unfortunately asked how and where poor young Mrs. Maynard was; this called forth a flood of bitterness. "Thanks to her preposterous ridiculous fancies I am robbed of my last hope," exclaimed the old man. "The air of Leighton Abbot was too trying for her; a change to the sea would do the boy good; as if we did not thrive well enough here. So she dragged the child away to that cockneyfield seaside hole,

Eastbourne, because her sister was staying there ; got into an ill-drained house, and was the death of my grandson. She is in London, I believe, but I neither know nor care ; she writes me long and no doubt canting letters—but I don't read them ; I won't read them."

"You are too hard on her, sir, and she has been hit hard enough already I imagine by the loss of her baby."

"Her baby ! What's her loss to mine ! The boy was not the sole representative of her family ; she is young, she will marry again before the year is out. She has a brother and sisters, and I—I have nothing. Do not name her to me again——"

Hugh Cranston was infinitely shocked at this outbreak. "Certainly not if such is your wish," he said, and, as science does not develop tact, he added, "but I must say that I don't see why you should blame the poor young mother."

"Don't you ?" grimly. "Then we are not likely to agree. Now I am tired. You had better go and walk round your property. I am no companion for any one. I wish I could go to sleep and never wake."

"Shall I not see you at dinner, uncle ?" said Hugh Cranston, to whom the valet had confided his fears that his master was starving himself to death.

"No ; I have done with life and it's ways. Leave the old dog to die in his own kennel ; I don't want to be troubled with any one or anything. But as in *you* I shall have at least an honourable gentleman for a successor, I authorise you to come and go as you choose ; make yourself acquainted with the property and the tenants, all will soon be yours. If I do not care to speak much with you do not consider that any mark of ill-will. Now go. I shall try to sleep."

Captain Cranston retreated, not unwillingly.

As the day was dry and clear he spent the afternoon in roaming about the park, inspecting the fauna and flora with much more interest than he did the marketable productions of the soil.

And thus three days passed, on each of them Captain Cranston paid a visit to his uncle, who endured his presence for a few moments and then peremptorily dismissed him. The rest of his time passed peaceably in preparing notes on some rare fungi peculiar to the district, and in long rambles by flood and field. The servants treated him as their future master ; the head groom inquired each morning if there were "any orders," and was quite disgusted to find that the future lord of Leighton Abbot preferred his own pair of feet to four of any other animal.

Still he began to wish for his bachelor quarters in Half Moon Street, his rubber at the Athenæum, and his preparation for the coming sessions of the Entomological Society.

Mr. Maynard however would not listen to his suggestion that he should return to town.

"Can't you amuse yourself here? Are there no horses in the stables, no birds in the covers, no hounds? You can surely find something to do." Captain Cranston explained that he really was so unorthodox as not to care for killing anything, unless indeed he wanted a specimen, thereby lowering himself a good deal in his uncle's estimation.

The weather had changed the next afternoon, and being caught in an open field by a severe shower of rain and hail, Captain Cranston returned to the house earlier than usual, having been drenched to the skin.

"There is a strange gentleman with Mr. Maynard, sir," said the butler, who appeared to have been on the watch for him.

"Indeed! Did he not give his name?"

"No sir. He sent in a note, and Mr. Maynard saw him directly. Nicholls says they have been talking loud, and would you mind going in, sir."

"I hardly like to intrude."

"You might go in promiscuous-like; Nicholls is afraid Mr. Maynard will be upset, sir."

"Very well; I will change my coat and boots first."

In a few minutes Hugh Cranston quietly opened the door of his uncle's sitting-room, and saw the old man grasping the arms of his chair, a look of fierce anger on his pale, gaunt face, while the fire-light gleamed upon the form of his visitor, a man little over middle height, well, though rather unconventionally dressed, thin and worn looking, but still handsome, who stood on the opposite side of the fireplace, his eyes fixed resolutely, but not unkindly, at the agitated countenance before him.

Hugh Cranston paused a moment in growing surprise, his honest blue eyes brightening, then, making a stretch forward with outstretched hand, exclaimed, "Philip Cranston! why—how—where have you come from!"

"Hugh!" cried the stranger, grasping the offered hand, and the two men stood still gazing at each other.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RECOGNITION.

CRANSTON MAYNARD fell back in his chair with a deep sigh, as if he had received a sudden blow.

"I am afraid your unexpected appearance has been a little too much for my uncle," said Captain Cranston.

"I fear it has," returned the other, as both turned to look at the old man; "I should not have intruded upon him," he continued, "had not duty to my son compelled me."

"False; false as ever," said Maynard hoarsely; you promised when I offered to give you the annuity I have since paid that you would disappear, and now you come to—to—rob a better man than yourself."

"Your deep sorrow commands my endurance of almost any insult. Will you not hear my explanation?"

"Then you knew he had not been drowned," cried Captain Cranston, much amazed.

"I did; but he had voluntarily renounced his rights. I did well to cut off such a withered branch from the family tree."

"Ask him to hear me," said Philip (who has been hitherto known as Brand) appealingly to Captain Cranston; "I do not deserve the prejudice he has against me."

"Come, sir, at least hear what he has to say."

Mr. Maynard bent his head in token of willingness to listen. Philip Cranston, turning so as to face his uncle, and with a slight unsteadiness of voice, began:

"When I met you in London I was at the lowest ebb, and cared little what became of me. I was broken by ill-health, and would have done almost anything to get some physical comfort, food to eat, a comfortable shelter, clothes to wear; I assure you it is extremely hard to keep up to the mark in the teeth of fierce bodily need. When you offered me enough to keep body and soul together on condition of burying Philip Cranston, for ever I thought I had the best of the bargain. I did not expect to be long a recipient of your bounty, I did not then know I had a son; even if I did, there seemed but small chance of either of us inheriting after you. I therefore did not believe I wronged any one in accepting relief from you. Soon after I found my boy was living under the roof of the man his mother had married, believing me to be dead. There he was well treated, safe, respectable, and given a career, as

he had been taken into his supposed stepfather's office. What had I to offer him in exchange? Why should I bring more trouble on his mother whom I had already injured? The truest kindness to both was to remain in the grave of oblivion to which I had already been consigned."

Here Captain Cranston murmured something about legal obligation, but his uncle said hoarsely, "Go on."

"I therefore avoided my boy," resumed Philip, "and left England, wandering about in a purposeless way. But rest, food, certainly recruited me. I began to live once more. The old love of my art came back to me. I began to sketch; I began to like work once more. Then, while in the south of France, I fell in with Lord Beaulieu, whom I had known slightly in America. He liked some views I had taken on his property there, consulted me about the decorations of an old château he has about to repair, and finally asked me to undertake those at his place in England. I went, and there I found my boy, who had, for reasons I will not trouble you with now, left his mother and turned mason, hoping to become an architect. I have never quite parted with him since. I feel with you, sir," he continued huskily, "because my love for that boy teaches me *what a bereavement you have sustained.*"

The old man raised himself with a look of indignation. "Nay; hear me out," cried Philip; "more than that, I can honestly say that if the grave could give you back your dead I would rejoice. It is not so much the wealth and position I grasp at for my son—I believe firmly it is in him to make both—but I will not rob him of his possible rights. I could not rest in the hereafter and think that he might reproach me for having kept back knowledge which might be all important to him. I wish, sir, I could persuade you to see him—not to acknowledge him as an heir—that he is not. I may be carried off at any moment; mine is not a good life, then Hugh would succeed you; but my boy is a Cranston every inch—he is the soul of truth and honour; to know that I have such a son has made a different man of me. He is in the first flush of manhood, with the keenest sense of enjoyment, but he is master of himself as his father never was, as strong men only are. I wish you would see and acknowledge him."

"See him! see the young plebeian who has thriven when my son, a thoroughbred, was cut off in the opening of a fair life full of promise. Never, never! and from this hour I withdraw the allowance I have hitherto made you; you have broken the conditions on which it was granted," almost screamed the old man.

"I have," said Philip, bending his head. "So I cannot complain. At least, you both acknowledge my identity. I shall now reassume my name. As I said before, it is highly probable I may go before you, then Hugh will be head of the house; and a very good one he will make, but I'll not sacrifice my boy's chance nor will

you," turning to Captain Cranston—"refuse to treat him as a kinsman?"

"Certainly not," replied Hugh promptly.

"I suppose you have nothing more to communicate," said Maynard harshly.

"Nothing," said Philip. "I shall therefore leave you, for——"

"Never to return," interrupted his uncle. "For you shall never be admitted inside my doors again; and, hark ye, I'll live, I'll outlive—you! The hope of keeping so unworthy a representative from ruling in my place will give me force to outlive you. Go! Let me never see your face again."

"I have never deserved your dislike," said Philip quietly, "and your denunciations do not affect me. I still hope that time may heal your wounds; believe me, I will never intrude again."

He bowed slightly and left the room.

"I can't let him go without a word," said Captain Cranston. "I will send your man; you ought to have something after such a shake."

So saying he hurried after his cousin, whom he found at the entrance and looking about him with some interest.

"You must not mind him, poor old fellow; he is awfully broken," said Captain Cranston, joining him. "Come and have a glass of wine with me; you look no great things yourself. I want to hear how you come to be alive, and lots of things. How have you managed to get so deep into my uncle's black books? As far as I can make out, you have been reckless and imprudent, but nothing more."

"I do not understand it myself; his anger does not move me much. I am sorry for him, but I will not eat or drink in his house. If you will walk back with me to the gates I will tell you my tale in *extenso*. I shall get a conveyance at the 'Plough' and catch the night train at Helmstone. This is a fine place; I never had a chance of seeing it before. Come along, Hugh, I want to win your friendship for my son; it would be of great value to him."

The two men walked away down the avenue, which they soon left for the green sward, strolling under the grand old trees which were rapidly losing their leaves, towards the village which clustered near the park gates.

When Mr. Maynard's man came to his master he found him standing erect, looking through the window. "Bring me some champagne," he said, turning sharply on his valet, "and something to eat—game, cold meat, anything. Send one of the men at once for Doctor Brown; if he can come to-night I shall be glad, if not, early to-morrow, and let Parkinson know I will dine with Captain Cranston this evening. I'll defeat that blackguard Bohemian and his schemes yet," he muttered to himself, as Nicholls hurried away amazed to execute his orders. He paced slowly to and fro.

" Ah ! my limbs are stiff and weak, but I have an object to live for now, and I'll live—I'll live ! "

Mrs. Acland's pallor and usual restlessness attracted the notice and consternation of that important functionary nurse, who communicated her impression to the parlour-maid (who also accompanied the family out of town) that " Missus was not like herself, and was in her (nurse's) opinion, sickening for a fever which would make a pretty "how-do-do" in seaside lodgings." Mrs. Acland was rather liked by her servants: she ruled with a firm and equable hand, she did not worry about trifles, neither was she penurious.

After church on the day which succeeded her visit to town she complained of a headache, and asked nurse to go with the children for their afternoon walk, not feeling equal to accompany them, as was her usual habit of a Sunday.

Then she established herself on a hard horsehair covered sofa with a book which she could not read. She was acting over and over again every hour of the day before. She was calculating her chances—of detection she had little fear—not a soul could ever know she had re-entered Philip's room. Then, as to his identity, that was not so sure. Did he pass as Brand, or as Cranston at the hotel? Brand was the name by which she had asked for and found him, and Lord Beaulieu's letter was addressed to " Mr. Brand, Water Street, Dockborough."

There was nothing in all that to give any clue to the murderer. It was not a pleasant term, but she unhesitatingly applied it. She had had a narrow escape. Had she escaped? or had *he*, by any chance, escaped?

How she longed next day for the morning papers! There would certainly be a paragraph in some of them about " Death from the use of chloroform at the Charing Cross Hotel."

The day dragged through, and at night, being worn out by the incessant action of her brain, she slept deeply. But Monday's papers contained no information, nor the next day's, though she searched the columns eagerly and sent for every newspaper to be had at Folkestone. So the week slipped by, and on Saturday Mr. Acland arrived to enjoy his week's holiday with his charming wife.

That week was the most trying she had ever known. She could gain no tidings of Brand (as he must still be called). She dared not make the smallest inquiry. Insignificant—unknown, as he was—there would surely be some notice of such a death in so public a hotel. Another possible danger which occasionally flashed across the immediate peril of Brand's survival was the idea suggested by him that Blake was in London, if he had not been mistaken. She well knew that meant further extortion—greater complications. But

would he dare to return to London? No; not when a warrant was out against him, and with such a record as his."

Haunted by such thoughts, even her power of self-mastery could not enable her to present her usual aspect of serene cheerfulness to her husband. He was much troubled by the change in her appearance, by her dejection and variable moods, and requested her to consult the famous Sir James Pettigrew. To this, with apparent reluctance, she assented, and promised to go up to town one day in the ensuing week; this was an opportunity not to be lost. Once in town she could ascertain something.

As to the visit to Sir James Pettigrew, she could easily manage that, and furnish herself with a valuable prescription, carefully copied from an old one, redated and signed with the great doctor's initials. It was a mere precaution, for Mr. Acland rarely questioned his wife's proceedings. She could thus secure a day and night in town, for, of course, she must go to town the day before her visit to the famous physician, in order to be in time for his early consulting hour. After much reflection she determined to call at the bureau of the hotel and inquire boldly if Mr. Brand were still in town. It required immense resolution, but she would not permit herself to falter; she was safe, she repeated to herself—absolutely safe. Yet it was no ordinary proof of her nerve power to walk calmly into the hall and put the question to the busy clerk:

"Is Mr. Brand still here?"

"Mr. Brand? No: he is gone out of town for a few days."

"Has he left any address?"

"Yes; here it is."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Acland, rapidly copying it on the envelope of a letter, and walking away with trembling limbs.

Her desperate *coup* had failed and her position was as alarming as ever. Had the tide turned and her luck left her? She thought hard as she threaded her way down the crowded Strand, intending to take a cup of tea at the first pastry-cook's she came to, and write a few lines to Brand, appointing a meeting. As she went slowly along her eye was struck by the figure of a man who passed her and walked on a few paces in front. There was something familiar to her in the broad shoulders, the short neck, the carriage of the head she quivered with terror and repugnance. The man was dressed in a frock coat, much be-frogged, and a curl or two of reddish hair appeared from under a large soft felt hat pulled over his eyes. The clothes seemed foreign, but the gait was English; presently he stopped to look into a shop window; Mrs. Acland saw his face. What with the shadow of his hat, a quantity of dark red beard and moustache, and a pair of blue spectacles, there was very little to be seen of the features, yet Mrs. Acland did not doubt that it was her former lover, her cruellest foe—Blake. She passed him steadily, quickly resolving not to make any sign of recognition. Without

turning she knew, she felt, he was following her. In profound agitation she rapidly debated in her mind, whether she should hold to her intention of taking a cup of tea or dodge the enemy by taking refuge in an omnibus. Blake, she thought with some satisfaction, had now no evidence against her, and with her husband her word would far outweigh that of the felon she still feared. No ; she would not fly from him. Her position was still worth fighting for ; she would with a steady hand pluck safety from the nettle danger. Her whole future, her chance of keeping her children with her (and her all of human feeling existed for them only) depended on her management of this selfish scoundrel. She would face the foe as her decision, as with courage, which in a better cause would have been splendid, she strove to steady her pulses, and turned into the first cake-shop she came to ; walked through it to the dingy portion at the back, where little tables were laid out, and asked for some tea and bread and butter. As she had anticipated, before the refreshment she had asked for was brought, the figure she expected appeared. The man with the blue spectacles paused, then approached, bowed low, and said, almost in a whisper, "May I sit at your table?" Mrs. Acland bent her head in assent.

He drew a chair forward. When the waitress brought Mrs. Acland's cup, she asked, "What can I bring you sir?" He said, in a rough feigned voice, pointing to the cup and plate, "Tea—bread."

Then, leaning towards his companion, he whispered, "I must have an opportunity of speaking with you. I have risked much to see you, not daring to write."

"I do not want to hold any communication with you," she returned, setting her face to an agreeable conventional smile, so that any chance observer might fancy it was a friendly conversation. "You pledged yourself not to trouble me after you had driven me to a desperate expedient to supply you with money."

"Bad luck has left me no choice ; besides, I have some good news for you, Judith ; good news of a matter in which you will need my help."

"You can never bring me any good. I suppose, then, you want money?"

"I do ; but a mere trifle this time. We cannot talk here. You had better hear what I have to say. Can't you hear me now? I have come partly on your business at a risk to myself."

"Where can we be safe?" she asked. "If you will tell me how I can be rid of you I will listen."

"I'll show the way," he said eagerly, "I don't want to force myself on you, but I'll have my share of the plunder. As soon as you have swallowed your tea I will go out and get a cab ; turn left when you come out of here and you'll see me ; we'll drive up and down the

Embankment, where it is quiet, and I can leave you at one of the Metropolitan stations when we have had our talk."

Mrs. Acland shuddered, but bent her head in silent assent.

"It was a bit of luck stumbling on you to-day. Do you know what brought me this way? I saw in one of the evening papers that a man called Brand had nearly killed himself with chloroform in the Charing Cross Hotel; and I wanted to find him, for he might be useful if he is Cranston's old chum. He has gone, but I have got his address."

"Do not talk to me any more till we are alone," said Mrs. Acland faintly. He nodded and soon after rose, made her a low formal bow, paid for his tea, and went out. She summoned the attendant and paid for hers while she thought: "He does not dream who Brand is, while Philip knows him. Thank Heaven, I never told that villain of his visit to me, his recognition of Dick."

She left the shop, and stepping into the cab with Blake, the driver, who had received his instructions, at once drove off to the Embankment, where in the comparatively quiet Blake began;

"First, for my bit of good news. Old Cranson Maynard's grandson died about three weeks ago, and your boy Dick is the next heir."

"Yes; I know."

"But do you know that the property is worth ten or twelve thousand a year? and I tell you Dick is the next heir. There are, I believe, some queer conditions about the will. I would have had a look at it, only I have strong reasons for not obtruding myself on Government officials, but *you* can ask for it straight enough."

"I suppose so."

"What's come to you, Judith? I thought even *I* would be welcome with such tidings."

"I am inclined to throw up the game, confess everything to Mr. Acland, and retire to a penitentiary, if I am to be persecuted by you."

"You would never be such a cursed fool," cried Blake fiercely, "now when the best chance we have ever had has turned up. Mrs. Acland laughed faintly. Keeping her cold light eyes fixed on his she said, 'I am certainly a fool to trust myself here with you; there is murder in your eyes.'"

"Nonsense, Ju, I am no fool, and will certainly not kill my goose with the golden eggs."

"True," she returned with the same indifference which had roused his ire.

"Now listen to me Ju. Something has gone wrong with you—I see that—never mind; there is scarce anything that money won't set right. Do you know where Dick is? Yes; well, you go and see the will—old Maynard's I mean, the fellow that made

the money and bought Leighton Abbot ; then send for Dick, make it up with him. I never approved of you turning him out."

"Oh ! you did not approve"—bitterly—"perhaps you also disapproved of the only means I could contrive to get the money you needed."

"Well, I did rather ; of course it could not be helped ; but don't let us waste time on bosh. Explain to Dick the good fortune before him, promise to devote yourself to his cause, make him understand that he and you are under deep obligations to me. With that will behind him he can raise a lot of money and lift me out of my difficulties, and make you independent of old Acland."

"Thank you ! I am not dependent on Mr. Acland. He is dependent on me. So my son's first use of his hopes will be discount them for the benefit of his father's worst enemy ?"

"I can't think what's to come to you, Judith. You are so d-----cantankerous. Of course the money will not come out of your pocket."

"Tell me," she asked slowly, "how is it you have ventured here ?"

"Because I have been cleaned out in Valparaiso. It is too long a story to tell you how I got to Havre, and so on to London, as a negro melodist ; anyhow, I saw the child's death in the paper, and determined to put you up to your work as regards Dick. Don't be cross, old girl. I don't want to do you any harm, but I am bound to take care of myself."

"A duty you are certain to fulfil. Now you have told me your errand, tell the driver to stop at the Temple Strtton."

"Not so fast," said Blake, with a heavy frown. "You are not going to send me empty away. I have tried a lot of things, but somehow nothing turned up trumps. I have spent a lot of money waiting for you. I went to your house, and heard you were at Folkstone—all of you, the governor included—so I did not like to go down while he was there, nor to write either. Now I have barely a sou left ; I am afraid I should have been driven to write a playful imitation of my friend Robert Acland's signature on a slip of paper to secure to-morrow's food had I not fallen in with you, my darling," and his bold black eyes, from which he had removed the blue spectacles, dwelt on her with a mockish devilish glance.

Mrs. Acland shuddered—nor did she reply at once ; in this dilemma she thought of the man she had nearly succeeded in murdering. He would protect her from Blake. He would never suspect her of having put that bottle of chloroform under his drooping head. Yes ; the husband she had despised, defied, tortured, would be forbearing and merciful, even though he suspected that she had done her best to destroy his son's character. She must

temporise with this brute ; she must gain time, and throw herself on Philip's mercy.

"As to money," she said in an altered tone, "I have but five pounds and a little silver about me. I will give you the five pounds, and as I am specially engaged to-morrow with Mr. Acland you must wait to see me till the day after ; it will cost me some trouble to stay in town, but I will do it for your sake, and we must see what we can contrive for our mutual benefit out of this new turn of Fortune's wheel. Where can I meet you ?

"Now you are talking like the woman of sense I always thought you were. Hand out the sovs. It is not a note, I hope."

"No," taking out her purse and handing him the gold pieces.

"Good. Well about meeting. I am not sure ; some quiet place out West would be safest. There is a decent restaurant in Wilmington Street, near to Westbourne Grove. Here ; I will write the name and number for you. I will engage a private room. Mind you bring some more money with you, or I'll be kept in pledge ; bring Dick's address and some writing materials in your bag. What hour shall we fix ?"

"Let me see—that will be Friday," returned Mrs. Acland, as if considering deeply. "I am afraid it would not be safe to promise earlier than two o'clock."

"Two o'clock will do prime," returned Blake cheerfully.

"It will go hard if we don't manage a good haul, and Dick will not be a penny the worse. I have an idea myself, but I would like to compare it with yours, for you have a capital head, Ju—always had."

He scribbled a line on a leaf of his notebook, which he tore out and gave to her.

"You flatter me," she said with a peculiar smile, and put away the leaf in her purse. "I do not pretend to sentiment, but for my own sake I should be glad to know you were provided for life."

"I daresay you would, no matter how," returned Blake with a chuckle. "Well, we will see what we can do ;" he adjusted his spectacles again. "I should be undone were I to forget my goggles."

"Now, as there is no more to be said, I must leave you."

"You are in a monstrous hurry, Ju, but I suppose you can't well stay longer. Is old Acland up in town ?"

"He is."

"Doing the usual treadmill, I suppose ; off at nine ?"

"Yes. I shall meet him in town to-morrow afternoon—which is one of the reasons I cannot meet you," said Mrs. Acland with an air of simple sincerity, as if she had not invented the appointment for the occasion. "Pray make the driver stop, or drive back to Charing Cross."

"Very good. See about some more cash, Judith. I am not exorbitant. I'll make twenty pounds do until we can borrow something for Dick on a *post obit*."

Blake talked on in a careless rambling way that struck Mrs. Acland as unlike his former manner. She kept silent; she was almost exhausted by the fearful strain to which her nerves had been subjected.

But she was not to rest yet.

As soon as she was free from Blake she hastened to the lady's waiting-room, and there penned a few hasty lines to Philip Cranston.

"I will call on you at the address I have just found at Charing Cross Hotel to-morrow about one; let nothing prevent your being at home to see me." This safely posted she at last sought the shelter of her own house, stupefied by the painful excitement through which she had passed, and half surprised at the sense of terror and reluctance with which she contemplated her expected interview with Philip Cranston.

"It would indeed be a strange freak of fortune," she murmured to herself, "if he was saved from me to befriend me. What if I send *him* to keep the trust with Blake?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EXIT ELLIS.

MEANWHILE, in the complete unconsciousness of the schemes and passions which were twining their dark threads into the warp and woof of her simple life, Marjory held on her ordinary quiet course, striving resolutely against her own feelings, with more or less success—restless, watchful, uneasy when Dick Cranston was present, and longing terribly for him in spite of herself when he was away. There was an extraordinary charm to her swift mercurial nature, her keen impatient perception, in his steady gentle strength, his clear intelligence, his calmness and decision. Both his character and his appearance were in advance of his years; besides these qualities the undeniable advantages of form and face made him pleasant to the eye. He could not be ungraceful or undignified if he tried; then he had always been so kind, so true to Marjory, so utterly forgiving, that the thought of all she had inflicted on him in the past sometimes made her heart swell with the longing to repay him in some—in any—way; but she never dreamed till that day when he told her he was in love of how *she* loved him. Well, at all events,

she was strong enough to hide it. It would kill her should he ever discover the true nature of her affection. But *that* he never should.

Moreover, Dick was greatly changed by his attachment to that dark-eyed French girl. He was no longer so even-tempered, so satisfied with the present, so quietly certain of the future. He was depressed, and a little inclined to take offence at what Marjory said or did. He was uneasy too about Brand, who had prolonged his absence now over a fortnight, but Marjory felt certain this was not the only source of anxiety to him.

A curious sense of expectancy kept her on the stretch; why, she could not tell. There was no visible reason why things should not go on for months as they were, still her vague but vivid impression was, "Something is going to happen."

This presentiment was, she thought, amply fulfilled by a letter from Mrs. Carteret—an event of rare occurrence—and Marjory was much gratified by the mark of remembrance. The concluding paragraph, however, soon put all the rest out of her mind; "I find Mr. Ellis is going to spend a few days at Sir Wilfrid Trumpington's place, somewhere near Dockborough. He has promised to take you a little present from me, and to give it into your own hand." Ellis was coming there to worry and frighten her, but he should not succeed in doing either. She could defy him now and Dick would back her up. She wished much to tell Dick about the expected and dreaded visit, but he had quite given up his friendly habit of coming in half-an-hour or more before George returned from the office, and somehow or other Marjory did not like to write and ask him to see her alone. It was not likely that Ellis would come just yet, and some opportunity would offer, when she would give Dick Mrs. Carteret's letter and discuss it with him.

She was alone when it reached her, and a curious reluctance to broach the subject kept her silent respecting it when both George and Dick joined her at tea; the next day she would tell them, then Dick—unless indeed he was too much absorbed in his French flame to care about his once beloved sister—would find some way to talk the matter over in a *tete-a-tete*.

The day went over at once rapidly and slowly. It was amazing what a shifting, cloudy, yet impassable barrier her self-consciousness had accumulated between her and her dear friend and confidant. She longed yet feared to mention Mrs. Carteret's letter. The midday delivery brought her another, which, had it not been for the first, would have gladdened her heart. The editress of *Crumbs for our Chickens* was pleased with her story, which she would print at once, and pay the munificent sum of three pounds for it. "If 'M. A.' was disposed to submit any other productions of her pen to the editorial eye, they would be favourably considered." This was almost beyond Marjory's wildest hopes, and she could have

cried with vexation to think how the pleasure of the little success was tarnished by the trouble that was coming on her.

"Well, I will tell George and Dick everything *this* evening, at all events," she thought; but she had lost her chance, the momentary hesitation had been unfortunate.

It was approaching the time of George's usual return from the office that evening, and, having made herself and all things ready for him and that other brother she loved so well, Marjory took out her aunt's letter and read it over once more. It was dated nearly a week back and the post-mark was London. While conjecturing what this might mean the door was opened in an emphatic manner by the melancholy Mrs. Stokes, who said, "There's one seeking you, miss." Before Marjory could reply, Ellis stood before her.

"I do not suppose you are very glad to see me," he said with his peculiar fine smile.

"No, of course not," exclaimed Marjory, on the impulse of the moment; speaking, as she too often did, first and thinking after. "That is, I am not exactly sorry—it would be too ungracious to say so; still, you know, you do not deserve that I should be glad. How strange it is to see you here!" She gazed at him, half smiling as she compared his distinguished figure, his fashionable attire, and the homely room in which he stood.

"Do not apologise," he said; "there is war between us, but even in the bitterest warfare there are occasional truces. Imagine that I am the bearer of a white flag;" he held out his hand. Marjory put hers into it with evident reluctance. "Have I your permission to sit down?" he asked, as he released it.

"Oh, certainly."

"Then, before we quarrel afresh—as is most probable—let me present my credentials." He took from his breast-pocket a small oblong parcel, and laid it before her. "Mrs. Carteret charged me with this," he continued, "when I parted with her at Interlacken. Are you not anxious to open it?"

"It can wait," said Marjory more collectedly as she recovered from the surprise of his sudden appearance. She looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to speak, which he was in no hurry to do. He looked at her with keen scrutiny, and gradually a smile stole over his face. "This is not exactly a palace of delight," he said at length, "nor do you look as brightly youthful as you did, though I am not sure the tinge of pensiveness does not make you more womanly and attractive. Even now, if you were to bestow a few caresses on me and say, 'I love you,' I might lose my head again for a short time. There is some change, some new development in you, my sweet Marjory, which I don't quite understand."

"Pray do not take the trouble to try. I am very happy here—I am of some use to my brother; we have peace and freedom."

"And you are content to live over the shop?" he interrupted.

"Don't you think life might have been brighter, might have offered a little more variety, had you not broken faith with me? An apartment in Paris, theatres, galleries, the companionship of my companions, the——"

"The necessity of masking my existence from my own friends, the doubtful position——" interrupted Marjory in her turn. "No, Mr. Ellis; I infinitely prefer the honest obscurity of my present one; and you—you like to torment and annoy me, but you know you would not wish to marry me *now*." Ellis's face darkened as he said slowly "No, Marjory, I would not marry you if I could."

"Then——" she began with animation, when George walked into the room in his office coat and with rather untidy hair. He stopped short on the threshold, greatly surprised: "Mr. Ellis! I had no idea you were in England."

"Only for a very short time," returned Ellis, rising and shaking hands with him very cordially. "I am glad to see you have so far recovered the effects of your conflict with the madman—you are really a very plucky young fellow."

"Glad you think so; I fancy any man would have done the same," said George, drawing a chair forward. "At any rate it has pushed me on, for I have a very comfortable berth and the hope of a better when I am fit for it. It is jolly living here, with Marge to keep house for me."

"That I quite believe," replied Ellis with air of conviction. "And you feel no ill effects from the mauling you got?"

"Not much now. The stump aches in bad weather and my head was queer for awhile, but it is nearly all right now," etc., etc.

Ellis conversed for a few minutes with every appearance of interest, then he said blandly: "I shall not stand on ceremony with a kinsman. I am here on a secret mission from Mrs. Carteret. to your sister; I was just opening the subject when you came in; perhaps you will be so good as to leave us for a few minutes."

"Oh, certainly," cried George. "It's a fine night; I'll go and take a turn. Perhaps I'll meet Dick and stop him; he is almost sure to come up to-night." So saying George departed.

"You had just received my ungallant avowal that I would not marry you if I could with apparent satisfaction," resumed Ellis where they had left off.

"Yes," looking straight at him with frank clear eyes. "I am pleased to hear you speak honestly and sensibly. If you do not care about me any more, which is quite natural, you can forgive me, and we need not cross each other again."

"Ah! you think you can get off so easily," said Ellis with an unpleasant smile. "I should have thought so philosophic a young lady as you are would be aware that there is a curious counterpart to love, as ardent, as tenacious, as ingenious. They run in parallel lines, these passions, but now and then comes a cataclysm, when

the existing order of things smashes up, and these lines clash together—this other potent passion is hatred.”

“But,” cried Marjory, shivering a little; “you do not hate me. A mere insignificant girl, who is heartily sorry for the trouble and annoyance she caused you—you cannot hate me!”

“You forget,” said Ellis sternly, “that you inflicted on me the bitterest mortification and disappointment, the most utter defeat, that man could suffer, and, my dear, delicate, disdainful Marjory, I am determined to have as much revenge as circumstances will permit; yet I will not stoop to double-dealing. I warn you again, that though I do not wish to marry you myself, nether do I intend you to marry any one else, or if you do it will be a desperate risk. No man would like to wed a woman with your history.”

“I know that,” she returned with a bright smile that surprised him. “But I am content never to marry; on that point I have quite made up my mind.”

“Have you?” said Ellis, gazing very intently at her with knit brows. “You are not the woman to go through life without loving—loving passionately, I count on that. It strikes me the secret of the indefinable change I notice in you is that you already love—your readiness to renounce marriage suggests that between your love and you some barrier intervenes. Ha! I have guessed right,” he added, as Marjory coloured crimson and the quick beating of her heart might almost be heard.

“A barrier will always exist between me and any one I may love,” she said, pride lending her composure. “How could I deceive any one I loved? Do you think I would leave it to *you* to tell the tale of my folly, or do you think I could face the shame of confessing it?”

“I cannot conjecture what you would do,” said Ellis moodily.

“If you only came to see me to reiterate what you have told me many times before, I think you might have spared yourself trouble and me pain. You have released me from my promise and I am not the least afraid of your threats; there can be no use in your remaining, and still less in our ever meeting again. If you can help it, don’t hate me; if you cannot, why, it is worse for yourself than for me.”

“I do not think I do hate you, Marjory, after all,” said Ellis in a softer tone. “You exercised an extraordinary influence, some spell, upon me, and I don’t think it is quite exhausted yet. You are the only woman I ever met who is transparently true, and when I am with you I am honest from contagion. How I should have liked always to live under the influence of that contagion is another matter. However, I owe you a large debt, and hatred or no hatred, my sense of justice to myself will compel me to pay it whenever I can. I suspect the first instalment is being lodged now, or I am much mistaken. Good-bye, Marjory; I am going up to town to-night and shall not—”

He was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of Dick followed by George.

"Have we come in too soon?" asked the latter. "It seemed a long time and Dick there is raging for his tea." Dick bestowed a stiff bow and a very stern look on Ellis. Not speaking a word to Marjory he planted himself beside the fireplace.

"Oh no—by no means," replied Ellis graciously; "we had discussed our secrets and were talking on mere commonplace subjects." He rose. "Then you will write fully to Mrs. Carteret yourself," he said, offering his hand to Marjory; "and so I must reluctantly wish you good-evening. Glad to have found you so well," shaking hands with George. "Ah! my friend, the young mason, still dabbling in stones and mortar?"

"Still doing honest work, I hope," returned Dick sharply.

"Indeed, not a common style of art," and with a general bow and a warning look to Marjory, which she alone perceived, he retreated.

Dick looked after him, the most angry expression Marjory had ever seen on his face, and then turned his eyes on her with no diminution of displeasure, to her great surprise.

"To divert attention from herself she exclaimed: "Let us see what Aunt Carteret has sent me," and proceeded to open the parcel Ellis had left with her.

Unfolding many papers she came to a neat morocco case, on opening which a bracelet, brooch, and earrings of classic heads carved in lava appeared. Marjory exclaimed and admired them more warmly because Dick was ominously silent. What could be the matter with him?

"Are they not pretty, Dick?" she persisted, holding out the case to him.

"Yes, they do credit to Mr. Ellis's taste," he said carelessly.

"But they are Aunt Carteret's choice. Do you suppose Mr. Ellis would make *me* a present?"

"I do not know, I am sure," contemptuously.

"Come, Marge, let us have tea," cried George, and no more was said. The trio, however, were out of tune; George rattled away as usual, but a curious embarrassment hung round Marjory and Dick, though the latter made an effort to throw off his ill-humour.

"I wonder what a high and mighty chap like Ellis thought of finding his relations in a sky parlour over offices," said George when his hunger was somewhat appeased. "He says he is a relation, doesn't he Marge?"

"I suppose he is, and I am sure it is not much matter what he thinks; he is going away to London to-night, and probably we shall never see him again."

"I don't believe that," said Dick emphatically, though in a low tone.

"You don't seem to like our illustrious cousin," exclaimed George.

"No, I do not," very decidedly.

"Well, I do. I know when I went down to stay at Langford Priory I'd have gone to smash with old Carteret and his wife if Ellis hadn't backed me up. It was wonderful the way he used to finish what I wanted to say, pick me up when I stumbled, and that was pretty often, for I was altogether in strange sounding down there."

"Yes," said Marjory thoughtfully. "It would have been quite awful at Langford if Mr. Ellis had not been one of the party."

No one spoke for a few moments after this, until Dick suddenly changed the subject by observing:—

"I have not heard from Brand for two or three days. I don't know what he can be about; he ought to be doing his work here."

"When is he coming?" asked Marjory.

"I do not know exactly. There are some letters for him, and I am not quite sure where to send them. I wish he would come back."

Soon after Dick rose to leave them, the cloud which hung over him all the evening not yet dispersed.

"Will you come with young Rennie and me over to Hollishead to-morrow? We are going to look at a horse his governor wants to buy. It will be a pleasant outing if the weather is fine."

"No, thank you," returned Dick promptly. "Brand may be back and I should not like to be out of the way." He paused and looked very steadily at Marjory. "Are you going out too!"

"Who?—me? No, of course not. The boys don't want me."

"I shall be free to-morrow about three, as it is Saturday. I have a letter or two to write and then I will come on to you, if you will have me," said Dick turning to Marjory.

"Very well," but somehow the idea of his coming did not give her unmixed pleasure; she felt in an indistinct way that she was to be called to account and she braced herself to do battle.

"I do not know what has come to Dick," cried George when they were alone. "He has turned quite crusty. I walked nearly as far as his lodgings before I met him and he seemed all right, but when we came near here I thought it was too soon to come in, and told him that Ellis had come with a message to you from Mrs. Carteret. He grew as black as night, and said he did not suppose you wanted us to keep away, and that Ellis was a double dealing schemer. What did he mean, Marge?"

"Oh, George; how can I tell? I think Dick must have something on his mind; he has not been a bit like himself lately."

She sighed and fell into a fit of deep thought while George talked of his intended excursion next day, repeated some witticisms of Forbes Rennie, and finally demanded her fullest attention to the question of a new overcoat for the winter.

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Away in London, Brand waited with impatient patience—if such an expression may be used—for Mrs. Acland's appearance. Returning from Leighton Abbot he removed from the hotel to obscure lodgings, both for safer communication and for cheapness.

A wonderful change had come over the Bohemian.

The companionship of his son seemed to have transformed his nature. The simple directness of Dick's character, his broad kindly spirit, his deep sense of justice, awoke both respect and affection in the father's impressionable heart, and roused in him the desire to attract and deserve his regard. He was deeply penitent for having deserted his boy, for having believed his mother unfaithful on insufficient evidence. He had been so irritated, so outraged by her contempt, by her reckless display of rage and regret at having married him when she found her hopes of his being heir to a fine estate fade away, that he was ready to accept any doubt as proof against her. Now he was more embittered against her than ever for her cold-blooded cruelty to his son; he would far more readily have forgiven her attempt on his own life had he known of it. Of this, however, he was in total ignorance. He was much puzzled as to how the bottle of chloroform came to be so near him, as by no effort of memory could he recall any attempt on his own part to draw it to him or to open it. A vague kind of unacknowledged idea that his wife must have some hand in it, but how? He had asked the chamber-maid if she had seen the lady who was with him, and she had replied, "Yes, the lady was going to the stairs." That seemed to settle the question. Well, he had escaped at all events, and now he was quite as determined to live as old Maynard himself.

"I wonder," he murmured to himself as he sat *tete-a-tete* with his pipe, "which of us will win in this waiting race. He is more than twenty years my senior, but then he has an untried constitution, while I tampered with my vitality and am but the wreck of what I was. He is animated by hatred—and—I am buoyed up by love. Which has the greatest staying power?"

"How shall I break it to Dick! I dread—and long to do so. He is fond of me in a way; how will he like to know I am the father he has been taught to look upon as a dastardly deserter? Well, he shall know all he has to thank his mother for. Yet for his sake I am disposed to spare her. It will be an awful crash for that unfortunate Acland. What can he do? I wonder did she tell Blake that I have come to life again? I fancy he has been her counsellor and confidant all through. She might have been a different woman perhaps but for him. Still her heart must have been stony by nature or she never would have treated her son—such a son—so cruelly."

He looked at his watch—one o'clock. Was that woman coming? It was an hour after her own appointment. If she came and they could arrange some place of action, some system of communication, he would return to Dockborough. He pined to be once more with

his son—to open his heart to him ; to drop in and have a quiet chat with Marjory, of whom he had grown quite fond, to sketch her pretty brown head, or excite George's boyish laughter by descriptions of life among the negroes of the Southern States, or the keen Yankees of the North.

Yet another hour, and Brand's patience was exhausted, still he did not like to go out. He took his pencil and the sketch-book, without which he rarely moved. He was now really industrious, working hard to maintain himself and save his annuity, to leave a little ready money to Dick. Now that would be taken from him. Almost unconsciously his hand drew the outline of his son's head ; the occupation brought tranquillity. Brand had no business out of doors—the day was damp and dull—so he drew on ; then an idea for a picture crept over his brain, and he sketched that. At length the shadows of the now early-closing day gathered over him. He was surprised to find it was so late, and sat on in the dusk building castles in the air about Dick's future.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the little servant of the house, rousing him to a sense of the troublesome present. He opened it and read, "Cannot come. To-morrow at twelve, without fail."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A BATTLE WITH FATE.

WHEN Mrs. Acland so readily promised to meet Blake, her rapid brain darted upon a plan by which she hoped to play off one enemy against another. Philip Cranston was evidently disposed to spare her for her son's sake. She would throw herself on his mercy, and interpose him between herself and her persecutor. She would tell him her difficulties, and get him to meet Blake in her stead. Then they would fight it out ; whatever was the upshot she would be in no worse case than she was at present, and should Philip succeed in buying or bullying Blake, he would be easier to deal with than the coarser foe.

With this view she made the appointment with Brand (as he must still be called), and almost enjoyed the picture her fancy drew of Blake's dismay when the apparition of his former friend, whom he had so basely deceived confronted him.

Still she could not shake off the chilly sense of dread and reluctance to encounter her former husband ; she felt as if he must, in meeting her eyes, divine that she almost succeeded in murdering him.

If indeed he could be induced now to aid her in dealing with Blake, he had been preserved to shield her. But after? how was she to get rid of him? How retain her position of lofty respectability?

Let her defeat the more immediate enemy, however, and then circumstances would guide her in dealing with the other. The existence of her son was one strong point in her favour.

So musing she partly recovered herself, but when her husband returned to a sort of picnic dinner in their dismantled house, he was much distressed by her extreme pallor and exhausted air.

"Very glad I persuaded you to see the doctor, my dear. What hour are you to go to him?"

"At twelve. I shall go on to do a little shopping in Regent Street, get my prescription made up, and then take a cup of tea at the station, so as to be back at six or seven o'clock."

"I wish I could go down with you, but I have one or two particular appointments to-morrow."

"Oh, do not trouble about me, I am not half so ill as you imagine. I will write you a few lines after I see the doctor."

"You had better not get up to breakfast; I want mine earlier than usual."

"Very well, dear."

Mrs. Acland breathed more freely when she heard the front door close behind her husband. Fortune still favoured her; she would start a little earlier than she had intended in order to have more time with Brand.

She gave directions to the servants who remained in the house with her usual clearness, and was in the act of placing pencil and paper in her little hand-bag when the front door bell sounded loudly. Mrs. Acland started, with a sudden prophetic dread. Then the servant came in with a note. Mrs. Acland tore it open. It contained but one line, "I must see you." No signature, nor was any needed, neither dared she refuse.

"Tell the man to come in," she said, and shut her mouth close, determined to fight to the last.

The next moment Blake crossed the threshold, his hat in his hand, his hair a disordered tangle, rough and coarse from the attempts he had made to bleach it a lighter colour, his blue spectacles awry, his face pale and pasty.

"What brings you here?" asked Mrs. Acland in a low fierce whisper.

"The old thing, Ju, the old thing. I swear I am almost ashamed of myself. But last night I happened to turn into a place--oh, no matter where; they were playing euchre, and I took a hand, just to while away an hour. I was in such wonderful luck, I thought it would be a sin to stop; then the tide turned. I thought to regain

what I had lost, so I went on, till I hadn't a blessed rap left. I thought I'd catch you before you went to meet the governor. Just give me a sovereign to keep me going till to-morrow ; then you know you were to give me more cash."

"I will not give you a sou, you ruffian ! not if you were to ruin me by your treachery the next moment," she returned in the same suppressed tone of bitter hatred and indignation. "It is impossible to buy safety from such as you ! I give up the struggle, but I will destroy *you* ! I will inform the police that you have returned to your old haunts, and you may tell your tale against me in the dock. Let me pass," she added, advancing towards him with flashing eyes, and a look of desperation on her set face.

"Not to hand me over to the police if I know it," he exclaimed, letting his hat fall and grasping her upper arm painfully hard. "How dare you defy me ? You know I can——"

Mrs. Acland uttered a low cry, for as she stood facing the door, she saw it open abruptly, and Mr. Acland with an air of amazement entered exclaiming, "What is the matter ? Let go the lady this moment ! What does he want ?"

"The game's up, by ——" said Blake, grinding his teeth.

His voice struck Mr. Acland who had placed himself between him and his wife, and now looking keenly at the intruder, said, in tones of almost awe-struck surprise, "Good God ! Why, is it Blake ! What—what do you want here ?"

"Money !" replied Mrs. Acland, who for a moment lost her self-command, so infuriated was she by the frustration of her plans. "The coward thrust himself upon me in your absence, hoping to extract money from me by a pitiable tale, and when he found I was not to be imposed upon, he was about to use violence."

"I *was* about to extract money from her," retorted Blake, taking off his spectacles and glaring at the woman who stood to her ground so resolutely. "Money I am entitled to because I have kept her secrets and shielded her reputation. And if you are wise, *you* will make up for what she has failed to give me."

Mr. Acland gazed first at one and then the other in bewildered astonishment as if he but half understood what was going on.

"Money—secrets !" he stammered, feeling that the solid ground would crumble away next, that the end of all things was at hand. "What—what does he mean ?"

Mrs. Acland was silent, nerving herself for a final effort to keep her hold upon her husband. Blake, exasperated by her scorn and defiance, cast all restraint to the winds. "I mean that I know your wife's history better than any one else ! That I found a husband for her when I began to fear she would be a drag on my own career ; that she got sick of him, and nearly drove him out of his mind ; that I held letters of hers which would prove what I assert : and that when I came to a smash she bought them from me with the cash she

stole from *your* safe, and laid the blame on her own son! I can swear to this, and if you give me up to the police, there is not a crooked corner in her queer life I will not turn out to the light of day. The world shall know what sort of a mother *your* children have! It is for you to judge whether it's worth while to make me hold my tongue."

While he spoke Mrs. Acland watched her husband's face, and saw that the accusation was too monstrous to be accepted by him; she saw, as by an electric flash, the value of *her* word against that of a detected cheat, and when the alarmed incredulous husband turned his eyes upon her she met them with a proud superior smile.

"Do you believe this probable tale?" she asked. "No, I see you do not. Yet I must insist on your hearing my version of it before this liar's face."

"Let him begone first!" cried Mr. Acland. "I shall claim the protection of the police: let him escape if he can."

"As you will. My revelations will make fine food for the society papers."

"Hear me! I insist on your hearing me," reiterated Mrs. Acland, moistening her parched lips with her tongue, and still keeping a steady front, though she trembled with fear and anger.

"This man was the constant companion of my unfortunate husband. I tried to keep him out of our house, seeing he was an evil influence. He clung to the acquaintance, because he believed he would make money of it when my husband inherited the property which then seemed likely to come to him. He hated me because I tried to win my husband from bad and reckless ways. He sowed dissension between us, then, when I was alone, he appeared anxious to atone for the past. Finally, being in sore straits, needing money to enable me to accept the position of companion, I took a small loan from him. It was the only chance I had of securing the means of existence for my boy; this he declared I might pay back how and when I could. My one error has been in keeping this hidden from you, my best, my most generous friend! Out of the allowance you give me for my personal expenses I saved enough to pay him by degrees, and the last instalment which cleared me of debt to him happened to be paid just before he disappeared. There is my story. I am ready to stand to it, in court or out of court."

There was a quiet look of deadly determination in her eyes as she fixed them on Blake, who was himself staggered by the air of truth she put on.

"Why, why did you conceal this from me?" cried Mr. Acland, greatly shaken—horrible visions of a magistrate's court, of evil reports, of slanderous paragraphs, rising before him.

"Because I shrank from distressing you, but chiefly because I feared, knowing your fine nature, that the idea of my having received

help from *him*”—she pointed scornfully to Blake, who was stunned by the readiness and plausibility of her defence—“might have helped him to gain a hold on you, too! You know how anxious I was to get you out of his hands. Should I have ventured to act as I did between you had that man held me in his power?”

“No, certainly not. Now you, you villain. Leave this house! And remember I will inform the authorities of this impudent attempt to extort money.”

“She has the invention, the pluck of a hundred devils! Still I will tell *my* tale if I am caught; and remember if enough mud be thrown, some will stick,” exclaimed Blake. “By —, I speak truth, and you will find it out in a day! Anyhow, it is more for your comfort and respectability that I should disappear, and I haven’t a rap. I gambled away five pounds *she* gave me yesterday.”

“Gave you yesterday,” interrupted Mrs. Acland with infinite scorn. “There is no limit to this man’s lies! Where and how did I give you five pounds?” then turning to her husband, “*you* know I had not five pounds about me? I had to ask you for money for the doctor’s fee this morning.”

“That proves a good deal,” sneered Blake.

“Begone!” cried Acland, angry, alarmed, bewildered, yet still believing in his wife. “Never let me see you again.” His hand moved furtively towards his pockets. Mrs. Acland with a sudden gesture of dignified resolve seized it.

“No, Robert,” she said, “you shall not give him a penny—my reputation demands that you should *not*. I can bear the brunt of his accusations. Who would believe *his* word against mine! Let him go and do his worst. Yet I am not inhuman! Should he escape detection, and return to confess the infamous falsehood of what he dares to assert, to humble himself before the woman he has tried to ruin, I would *not* hold your hand. I would give him the chance of repentance and reform.”

“There is small chance of either,” said Mr. Acland. “Come, leave the house, or I will seek help you would not like.”

Blake looked straight into Mrs. Acland’s eyes. “Your match,” he muttered, “was never created, but,” with a deep curse, “you have not done with me yet.”

An awful sense of deadness seized Mrs. Acland as he disappeared. She could afford to breathe, but what an abyss of danger still yawned under her feet. She had contrived to throw a plank across it—would it bear her safely to the other side? Still, she had gained time. All depended on her own courage.

Strange compound of contradictions as are most natures, in this desperate pass, though hardened to the pitch of being ready to dare any crime rather than be beaten by the traitor who tried to sacrifice her, the thought of her children nearly broke her down

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They were at once the evidence and support of her highly-prized respectability; her feeling for the boy Herbert was the nearest approach to real affection she had ever known. She had become so accustomed to the quiet orderly routine of an easy assured life that the idea of its being torn from her was insupportable.

She sank exhausted into a chair, while these thoughts crowded upon her.

"He is an awful ruffian," said Mr. Acland, too much upset by the fear of scandal and gossip to think even of his precious wife. "It is perfectly frightful to think of the mischief such a fellow can do," and he began to walk up and down; "as he said, some mud is sure to stick."

"There is no danger in him, except to those he can frighten: rest assured he will be here on his knees to-morrow. I do not fear him,—what I do fear is your just displeasure for bringing such annoyance on you by my foolish attempt to spare you the humiliation of knowing that I was indebted to that wretch. Can you forgive me, Robert?"

"Yes, yes, of course; but what steps ought I to take to silence him? You were too precipitate in stopping me when I was going to secure his silence. Imagine the terrible effect his scandalous charges would have, if made public. Our laws ought to provide some safeguard against the machinations of such a scoundrel."

"The only chance of preservation from them is to defy them."

"But did you know the fellow, before you married Cranston?"

"Yes, for a short time previously," she returned with unflinching readiness.

"It is well," resumed Mr. Acland, pausing in his troubled walk, "that I returned in time to protect you. On reaching the office I found that a man I expected on very particular business was obliged to leave town, so as Cross was there, I returned at once, intending to go with you to the doctor's. I am appalled by this dreadful attack! The truth or falsehood of such a story is of little consequence to the scandal-mongers; all *they* want is a nine days' wonder, the stigma of which will stick to you—to us—however innocent you may be," and he resumed his walk.

"It is enough for *you* to know I am innocent, in order to uphold me," she returned, struck by his indifference to the shock she had sustained, compared with his somewhat cowardly fears for his loss of character through the imputation cast on hers.

"Why did you not tell the whole truth about that scoundrel, and his loan to you?"

"It was a fatal mistake, I own; but, Robert, I am bitterly punished in seeing you turn against me in my hour of need."

"I do not," cried Mr. Acland impatiently. His hitherto infallible wife had lost her prestige in admitting her error, and his tone had changed. "I am of course ready to stand by you, but I wish you

had not dismissed the fellow so sharply. It would be wiser to make terms with him. The whole affair is frightfully horrible."

"I should have been false to you, to my self-respect, had I permitted him to parley with you. Once give him hush-money, and you bind yourself to pay a steadily increasing black-mail; the fact of paying anything would ruin your case and my reputation. You cannot believe me, Robert, or you would never dream of giving Blake 'hush-money'?" she sank into a chair, and burst into tears—real tears, thankful to have an excuse for this relief. She felt her brain turning.

"Yes, I do believe you, my dear, and I am afraid you will be made seriously ill," he exclaimed, softened by her distress and reassured by her courage. "I suppose it is too late to see Dr. Nesbett. But you must stay in town and see him to-morrow. Telegraph to nurse that you will not return this evening; you had better lie down, and have some wine or tea, or something."

Mrs. Acland assented. How was she to get rid of her present husband? How was she to communicate with her former spouse? The toils were closing round her, her courage was failing; supposing she succeeded in her bold defiance of Blake, nothing could avert the disclosures of Brand. He would help her to silence Blake's, but as regards his own, she had no power to silence him. Still, come what might, were he as helpless in her hand to-morrow, she would not attempt his life. She was safe from detection, even *he* could not have no idea whose hand had brought him so near death, and she began to see he might be more useful to her alive than dead. Her own pluck had won her a moment's breathing time, but Blake would return.

The memory of her first husband's generosity, his unselfish tenderness, the chivalry of his nature, came back to her,—all that she used to despise,—and something within her, which yet was not herself, seemed to say the strongest, the most adamant cannot get through life altogether without the sympathy, the disinterested help of their fellows; were all like her the world would be a scene of moral carnage, were the ultimate conqueror would be left to perish in his isolation. Had the husband towards whom she had been so cruelly hard been by her now, what amount of slander would have made him shrink from her! How he would have laughed the fear of gossip to scorn, if he believed her. If she could but sleep and get a moment's respite from thought, anything to rest her overstrained nerves.

Presently Mr. Acland came into the room softly. He said that as he could do her no good he would go back to the office and clear off some letters, so as to be able, perhaps, to go out of town with her to-morrow.

"Do, dear," said Mrs. Acland. "If I feel equal to it I will go out for a turn later, the air may do me good. Don't fret yourself,

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I feel sure that dreadful man will not trouble you again. Shall you consult with Mr. Cross?"

"With Mr. Cross? No; certainly not. Do you suppose I should mention such a disgraceful matter to him? Shall I telegraph to nurse?"

"No, thank you, I want to write a line to her."

Some hours later, as day closed in, Mrs. Acland rose, dressed with care, ate a biscuit and took more than one glass of dry sherry, an unusual excess for her, as she was nearly a total abstainer. Then she bent her steps, which she was alarmed to feel were somewhat unsteady, to the post-office, whence she despatched two telegrams.

When Brand had read the telegram, he put away his drawing and took up a volume of French memoirs, into which he dipped from time to time. The light grace, the keen semi-cynical observation of its pages amused him, and diverted his thoughts without costing his brain much effort. From this he was disturbed by the announcement of "A gentleman for you, sir," while the speaker, an ordinary lodging-house slavey, handed him a card, "Captain Hugh Cranston, R.N., Junior United Service Club."

"Show him in by all means— Glad to see you. How did you find me out?"

"By inquiring at Charing Cross, where you said you were staying. I am not very satisfied with the state of things, and I thought I should like to have a talk with you," said Captain Cranston, drawing a chair beside the table which held Brand's book and lamp. "I suppose you have no objection?"

"No, I am glad to see you. We were good friends enough in the old times—how long ago—some twenty-five years?"

"Yes, quite that. But you look as if it were longer, Philip."

"I daresay I do. I have led a very different life to yours. But there is not much to be gained by looking back. Tell me, how did you leave that poor old fellow, our uncle?"

"In a curious feverish excited state, determined to live and yet acting as if he wanted to kill himself. I wish he was not so prejudiced against you."

"So do I, and I fancy it is half envy because I, with all my evil-doing and short comings, have a living thriving son, and his has been wrenched from him."

"He was always a man of strong unreasonable prejudices, and physical weakness seems to have increased them. First, I want to tell you that he has had his solicitor down to Leighton Abbot, and made a will bequeathing me all he can. His savings have been very considerable. This alone, should you outlive him, will make me richer than I ever expected or indeed cared to be. Now I want to know what you are going to do about your boy. If he is to inherit

this fine property, he ought to be prepared for it in some way. I should like to see him. What are your plans and views?"

"I have none," returned Brand slowly; "and I do not feel disposed to make any. Dick is well educated—a great deal better than the generality of heirs. He has full employment in a life he enjoys; I hesitate to disturb him. He has more than usual firmness of character, but we have both seen so many men, men full of promise, ruined by the shifting lights of delusive expectations, that I would rather spare him that trial. I may die before Maynard; you may marry. He had better stick to his trade."

"I do not think there is a more confirmed bachelor in Europe than I am," said Captain Cranston, smiling. "I should feel ashamed were I to hold back a helping hand from my young kinsman or yourself, and I fancy—though you have certainly made mistakes—that you have had hard lines generally. I do not want to be intrusive, but don't you think that you ought to tell your son who you are? He ought not to be kept in the dark any longer."

"I know that. My difficulty is the mother. I want to spare her as much as I can—though I do not know that she particularly deserves consideration at my hands. Still, I wronged her, undoubtedly. I have been meditating how I shall break the painful news to that unlucky Acland. He may wish her to divorce me in order to marry her himself, to which proceeding I shall of course offer no opposition. It is a most unfortunate affair for their children, and I now regret I did not avow my existence three years ago. She implored me to keep it dark, and I then thought it was the best thing I could do for all parties; who could foresee the turn affairs would take?"

"Who indeed! No doubt all deviation from the straight and open road is fatal, but I believe you acted to the best of your judgment; now I am convinced your only course is to make a clean breast of it to both Acland and your son. It is a curious complication."

"You are right, yet I half dread opening the matter to Dick. He is fond of me now. If I see him shrink from me I could not bear it. I never thought I could love any creature as I love that lad."

"I think you are more sinned against than sinning. How old is he?"

"Three-and-twenty. His mother docked him of a year, but he is twenty-three, all told. I have been reflecting that I might tell him my story in a letter and then talk matters over with him."

"Perhaps it might be the best plan, but lose no time either in writing or opening the matter to Acland. You owe him what reparation you can make."

"I know that. The day after to-morrow I will make some decisive move."

"I suppose Maynard will fulfil his threat to stop your annuity."

"I have no doubt he will. In fact, having broken the conditions, I could not with decency accept it. The worst of it is, one cannot stir in any direction, where law is concerned, without putting your hand in your pocket."

"No doubt. Well, Philip, this is such a curious case—so desperately hard on your unoffending son—that I am willing to assist you."

"And for *his* sake I am willing to accept your assistance. I had better consult some sound lawyer before communicating with Aeland. Unlucky devil! I wonder if he will stick to her."

"Hard to say."

"As soon as I have had advice I will let you know."

After a little more desultory talk Captain Cranston rose to say good-bye.

"You have done me a real service by your visit," said Brand, shaking hands with him warmly. "You were always a good fellow, but I never expected you to stand to me like this. Whether I live or die you will be a friend to Dick. You two will be sure to be friends."

When he had striven to eat some dinner and settled himself to his solitary evening, he took pen and paper, determined to pour out his confession to his son. He wrote and tore up what he had written over and over again, till midnight found him still struggling with his painful task.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DISCOVERY.

MARJORY had various errands out of doors the day following the visit of Ellis, and by the time the short autumnal day had begun to close she was somewhat tired and glad to sit down. There was a tinge of uneasiness in her anticipated interview with Dick. Yet, on the whole, pleasure dominated. He was generally so reasonable that she felt no doubt a little confidential conversation would make them friends again, as they used to be. He had not been himself of late, but never so decidedly cross as he was yesterday. Ellis always had an irritating effect upon him. So thought Marjory as she arranged her hair and tied a knot of crimson ribbon round her throat to brighten her gray gown.

Then she made up the fire, drew the sofa beside it, and regulated the lamp. These preparations made, she stood in deep thought, one little foot on the fender, the firelight dancing on her nut-brown hair

and shining in her wide open speculative eyes, as they gazed far away into the dim future.

Though she expected him, Marjory was obliged to collect her thoughts with some slight effort when Dick came in.

"It is a sharp dull evening," was his first, not very original remark. "When do you think George will return?"

"Not for some time yet." There was a pause. Marjory sat down by the table, drew her workbasket to her, and began to darn a pair of George's socks very steadily. Dick watched her for a moment or two in silence as he stood on the hearthrug.

"What lots of socks you must have darned, Marjory," he said at length. "I remember your first bit of friendliness to me was offering to darn mine! What ages ago it seems."

"Yes; and with your usual plain speaking you told me I did not do them well." She gave him an arch upward glance.

"Sometimes you did not," he returned, laughing, and showing the fine white teeth under his thick golden-brown moustaches. "I don't think you are as touchy as you used to be, Marge." Then his face grew grave and he did not speak again.

It was some time since he had called her by the old familiar diminutive of her name, and it thrilled her with a sad pleasure, yet it was difficult to break the silence. What had she better say? She knew they were both thinking of a subject they half feared to begin; finally, with a sudden impulse, Marjory dashed into it. "Well, Dick, if I had grown better tempered I think you have grown worse; you have been rather cross lately, and last night you looked at me as if you could send me to a penitentiary; I did not deserve it." Her colour rose and her lips trembled as she spoke.

"Perhaps not," he returned gloomily, and he threw himself on the sofa opposite to her, leaning his elbow on the top and resting his head on his hand; "it set me mad to think of you sending George off, in order to give that fellow Ellis a chance of talking with you alone."

"But I did not send George away—Mr. Ellis did. You know, having kept the secret from George, I could not contradict him—Mr. Ellis, I mean—when he said he had a private message from Aunt Carteret; you don't suppose I wanted to talk to him?"

"I don't know what to think, Marjory. I hate that fellow—I fear his influence over you; he has such a smooth tongue and wily ways, I am always in dread of his winning you yet!"

"You little know me, Dick. Why, my most earnest prayer is that I may never see his face again! When I had Aunt Carteret's letter telling me that she was sending me a present by Ralph Ellis——"

"Then you knew he was coming!" cried Dick, the colour leaving his face, his blue eyes darkening with anger as he sprang up and paced to and fro, and you never told me—never consulted with

me how to avoid him ! This does not agree with what you say about wishing never to see him again."

"Yet I tell you simple truth when I say so," cried Marjory. "I scarcely ever have a word alone with you ; I cannot speak before George, and I had an odd stupid hesitation about mentioning that letter."

"But you could have sent me a line—a word would have brought me to you. I cannot tell you the pang it gives me to think of your being alone with that double-dealing villain, who was so nearly your husband. Why did you not send for me, Marjory ?"

"I don't know exactly—but," her voice grew unsteady, "now that you are, naturally enough, taken up with the girl you love, you do not of course care to be troubled so much, at least with your sister."

"My sister ?" repeated Dick, laughing harshly, and he resumed his position on the sofa. "You have no right to say that."

"I assure you I am glad I *did* see Mr. Ellis alone, for it gave him an opportunity of saying that he would not marry me if he could."

"He said that !" cried Dick in great surprise.

"Yes, he did indeed, and I believe him. I know he dislikes me now though he can't help worrying ; all he wants is to punish me by preventing me from marrying any one else, and that is no punishment—for you know, Dick, I could never even wish to marry any one."

Dick did not answer immediately. "Not now perhaps, Marge, but there are a good many years of youth before you, and—and some one may make you think differently. But at any rate that fellow has given you back the promise he extracted from you."

"I do not think he could release me more completely than by telling me he would not marry me if he could."

"It's amazing," murmured Dick.

"I cannot think it is. I am sure if I were Mr. Ellis I should hate the sight of Marjory Aeland !"

There was a short pause, then Marjory said softly : "Now do you understand me, Dick ? and can you spare me a little brotherly affection from your black-eyed darling ?"

"No," he returned abruptly, his eyes growing dreamy and gloomy. "I cannot spare a heart-throb—a thought of love from the girl who has entered into my soul and dwells there. Let me tell you how I love her ; she is always before me, when I work, when I sleep—oh, it is best when I sleep, for then she comes and bends over me and kisses my brow, and for a minute or two of Heaven, I feel she loves me. Then I think how the hope of having her with me always would give me power and genius ; of the delight of keeping all troubles and griefs from her, of even bearing with her when she is vexed, and winning her to reason—for the girl I love is

no angel, but a bright vivid creature not yet come to the full power of her fine nature ; and I even dream of growing old with her, of resting with her after we have borne the burden and heat of the day together."

There was a wonderful music in the low deep tones of his voice that wrung Marjory's heart with grief to think what a treasure had been laid at the feet of another ; she could not speak.

"Do you think me a sentimental fool, Marge?" he asked with a quiet smile.

"Indeed—indeed I do not," she exclaimed, with difficulty holding back her tears. "I only hope and pray that you may be happy with the woman you love so well."

"I do not think I shall, Marge."

"Why? Do tell me more about her, Dick. Does she love you?"

"Ah, no, I must not think of it. Now, Marge, I will not tease you about Ellis any longer ; let us be fast friends—you feel for me so kindly that I am ashamed of being ill-tempered and jealous ; besides, I ought to govern myself better—do you forgive me, Marge?"

"Oh yes, Dick. I am never happy when I am out with you."

"Then shake hands upon it ;" he rose and took her hand, drawing her from her chair till she stood beside him. "There was a time," he went on huskily, "when we made friends with a kiss ; why do you shrink from me now, Marge?"

"But I do not," she said, feeling strangely moved and even frightened, yet resolved to accept his kiss as from a brother ; he bent down, he nearly touched her lips, then he suddenly drew back and almost pushed her from him, stepping back : "It is no use," he exclaimed brokenly ; "I dare not kiss you. It would not be honest, I cannot keep back the words even though I distress and shock you. You are no sister of mine, Marge. I want more than a sister's love from you ; I do not suppose I ever loved you as men love their sisters ; I never remember the day when you had not the power—first to wound, and then to charm me. I never had any one to love but you, and no one else ever can be to me what you are—perhaps you have perceived this, and turn from it as strange and unnatural, considering the relations between us. I always felt you were dear to me, but *how* dear I never knew till that day you threw yourself into my arms, and told me you had escaped from Ellis ; since that it has been almost as much pain as pleasure to be with you. I sometimes fancy that you have divined my feeling, for you are changed—certainly changed. Now I cannot bear the pain of being with you, yet divided from you ; I will not offend you more ; I will keep away. I invented the dark-eyed girl that I might relieve my heart by confessing the love I had for *you* ! Marge, dear Marge ! there is no wrong in what I feel, only you have been accustomed to

look on me as a brother, a somewhat uncouth brother, that no doubt you will again consider me a monster. Tell me that you will forgive me this outbreak ; I will never offend again."

Marjory had stood quite still with wide-open alarmed eyes which slowly drooped, her hands clasped and pressed against her bosom, giddy with the intoxicating delight his words excited ; when he paused, her hands unclasped themselves to hide her face ; she could not speak. Dick Cranston misinterpreted her gesture, her silence.

"I am afraid it is all over with me in your estimation, Marge. I will leave you. Perhaps some day when you fall in love yourself, you will be able better to understand and pardon me ;" he walked to the door ; he put his hand on the lock.

Then she cried out to him : "Do not go, Dick ; stay—stay with me."

"It is only pain to us both, Marge ; I know your kind heart, and I rage against myself for having burst the bonds which ought to have held me. Good-bye."

"No, Dick, I will not let you go ;" she flew to him and clasped her arms round one of his, pressing her cheek against it and murmuring, "I wish you to stay with me always, Dick, always."

"But, Marge, if you knew the struggle—the——"

"Then don't struggle ! Oh, Dick, don't you understand me ;" her left arm stole across his chest to his shoulder ; she leant against him till he could feel the throbbing of her heart.

"Why, Marge ! Good God—is it possible you could—you do love me ! I dare not hope it, Marge ;" then, as she still clung to him, he drew her back near the lamp, holding her from him to gaze into her face. "Speak !" he said hoarsely, "I cannot bear this doubt another moment."

"Dear, dear, Dick !" the loving tenderness of her voice told him more eloquently than the most abundant speech how dear he was ; a great light of pride and joy came to his eyes ; he lift his head elated for an instant, then pressing her close to his heart, bent down to seek the soft quivering lips so frankly given to his passionate kisses.

"But I cannot believe it," he cried. "Marge, my darling, how did you come to love so uncouth a fellow as I am."

"I don't know," she murmured, "but I somehow grew fond of you, and that I believe was the reason I could not bring myself to marry Mr. Ellis, but I did not know it till—till you told me that frightful story about your black-eyed young lady, sir ;" she tried to assume a playful tone, though her voice trembled, as she strove to withdraw from his embrace.

"Not yet," he pleaded, holding her fast yet gently ; "I am only able to believe the reality of my joy while I have you in my arms ! Can life be the same thing it was ten minutes ago ? I feel as if the

world was under my feet ; and you believed my transparent invention ? It was a blessed thought, if it taught you something more than sisterly affection. Yet I am ashamed of the sort of infidelity that made me profess even an imaginary devotion to black eyes—I only care for these brown ones that danced before me for many a long hour of absence. Marge, you can defy Ellis now. You may tell him that between *us* he can never make mischief. Are you sure you love me, that it is not a feeling of pity melts your heart. It is such a tender, true heart."

"I do not pity you at all," said Marjory with as good an imitation of sauciness as she could manage, considering that she was so agitated and shaken she could hardly stand. "You are a wicked, deceitful monster—a worse monster than ever—but still a very dear monster," she ended with a sob that would not be suppressed.

"Now you must let me go, Dick, indeed you must."

"Then give me another kiss, my darling ! When your sweet mouth is against mine I know you love me."

The bewildering delight this discovery of each other's hidden treasure bestowed was too exciting to permit of much distinct or continuous conversation. Yet time flew so fast that both were amazed when George appeared, followed, to their annoyance by Forbes Rennie.

"Give us some tea, Marge, will you ? We have had a long drive since dinner."

"Sorry to give you the trouble, Miss Aeland."

Of course Marjory was quite ready to be troubled ; so tea was prepared with some confusion and many mistakes, which seemed rather unaccountable to George, who had a high opinion his sister's handiness and capability. Dick was very helpful, and had his wits considerably more about him than Marjory expected. He talked and laughed, and attracted the attention of the new arrivals to himself, till George exclaimed, "Why, Dick, you are quite another man to-night. Have you come into a fortune ?"

"Not exactly," with a happy laugh, "but I have made a splendid find."

"How ? Where ? Tell's all about it."

"If I were you George I'd cry 'Halves' as Scotch boys do. Eh, Mr. Cranston."

"No one shall share *my* treasure-trove," returned Dick.

"Well, but— What is it ?"

"Oh ! I will tell you by and by."

Possibly the reply suggested to Forbes Rennie the wisdom of leaving them alone to discuss family matters.

When he was gone, and George had returned from seeing him off the premises, he indulged in the brief but leading question, "What's up ?"

"We three must have no secrets," said Dick, laying his hand on

George's shoulder. "Prepare for a shock—Marge has promised to marry me."

"Good Lord! but it—it's not lawful," cried George in dismay.

"Yes, it is; Marge and myself are in no way related, or even connected, there is no blood tie between us"—a few more exclamations and explanations, then George sat down stunned. "What a fury the governor and your mother will be in," he said.

"I don't think so," remarked Marjory, coming behind his chair and resting her arm round his neck. "They do not much care what becomes of us. We must fight for our own hand. My father always liked Dick."

"Why, you haven't a rap between you."

"I have no fear of the future," returned Dick, "but it will be an awful long time before I can make a home fit for Marjory."

"Perhaps that is all the better," said Marjory smiling, "you know we are both 'ow'er young to marry yet."

"I do not see that, but at any rate I have something to live for and work for now," cried Dick.

"Well, the ways of woman are past finding out—to think of your ever consenting to marry the monster," said George solemnly.

"And on the first time of asking too," said Marjory with a bright blush and saucy look.

"What on earth will Brand say?"

"Ah, Brand! I had forgotten him, more shame for me; he will be enchanted—he adores Marge. Marge, we must always look after Brand."

"So the upshot will be I shall have to live alone."

"Not for a long time, dear old Geordie!"

"I'll tell you what it is, I'll marry some one myself."

"Who?" cried Marjory and Dick together.

"Mary Rennie!" The newly engaged pair laughed heartily, and soon after, at Marjory's command, Dick withdrew.

The letter which had cost Brand so much pain and difficulty to write he took care to post so that it might reach his son when he returned from his daily work, that he might have the evening and night to think over it, and compose himself before he went forth again to his allotted task.

Dick, who was all impatience to join Marjory and George as had been arranged, was almost vexed to find so thick a letter awaiting him. It would take half-an-hour to read it, he thought; then with quick self-condemnation he thought how ungrateful it was to begrudge half-an-hour to his friend and benefactor.

The first words riveted his attention; with eager eyes he read it through. The history was clearly and dispassionately told, but little was said of the deceit practised by the writer's unscrupulous wife,

nor was any mention made of the inheritance which might fall to him. Brand dwelt much on the strong temptation to leave his wife and son undisturbed in the certain and respectable position in which he found them. "I know," he added, "that this was not strictly honourable, but I was ill; I believed I had only a short time before me. Your mother's entreaties, and a certain promise I had given, of which more hereafter, all combined to convince me that the best and wisest course was to keep out of sight. Then came our accidental meeting; I do not suppose that it is possible for you, in the first flush of youth and manhood, to imagine the quiet happiness I found in the companionship of my son—to find that son a sympathetic friend! How bitterly I lamented the wrong I had done you, how profound the pride I felt in a character, a nature superior to my own; yet, my dear boy, I should have kept out of sight had I not found it necessary for your interests to prove Philip Cranston was still alive. I will not now go into this matter; I long, yet dread to meet you. Can you forgive your father? If so, I will come to you at once. Much remains to be told, and we must consult together how best to shield your unhappy mother from the effect my appearance will have on her fortunes. For Mr. Acland I have sincere compassion; he seems to have been a kind friend to you, and the break-up of his home, the unmasking of the wife in whom he appears to have had the most absolute trust, will be terrible indeed. In her marriage with him your mother was blameless; she fully believed me dead, but her extraordinary enmity, and I believe treachery, to you I can never forgive. Write to me, when you have thought over this letter."

Dick's first clear idea when he had finished this strange outpouring was pleasure in finding his father. He remembered with warm satisfaction the remarkable attraction Brand had had for him from the first—his next, that this newly-found father had been basely blind. Then what did Brand—no, his father—mean by speaking of his mother's treachery to himself; was it the insinuation that he took the money from Mr. Acland's safe! He was always suspicious of her, in spite of his mental resistance; still, there was a very evil quarter of an hour before them all! How would it affect Marjory? What a painful story to tell her, even though she need not hear all the details. She would always be true, that he could no doubt, but her father might strongly object to her marriage with the son of the woman who had brought so much misery and shame upon him. Still, neither that nor anything else should prevent their living together. Marge, dear, sweet, saucy Marge, loved him, and this inspiring consciousness would enable him to remove mountains.

Why should cool deliberate experience sneer at the divine folly of youth? What can life give of after-triumph to compare with the boundless realm of joy and faith which a first ardent happy love bestows? It may be but a brief possession, yet while it lasts it is

real ; and in hearts of the higher order even to the end, " the scent of the roses " hangs round its memory, lending the charm of fuller compassion to whatsoever things are pure and lovely and noble ; for love informs as much as knowledge.

How glad he was to think that Marjory always liked Brand ; they would get on well together, and she would help him to make the rest of his life peaceful and happy. To Dick's kindly nature the idea of having a parent he could regard with sympathy and affection was delightful ; it removed the sense of isolation which used, not exactly to depress him—nothing had ever shaken his quiet self-reliance—but to make him grave, reserved, and wary. But what was to be done with Mrs. Acland ? he rarely named her " Mother " in his thoughts—that was a problem beyond him. He must wait till he consulted with his father to answer the question.

He looked at his watch ; it was too late to post for London that evening. He would go and see Marge, tell her and George of the wonderful disclosure he had received, and write a long letter to his friend and father before he slept.

Having made a rapid but careful toilet as a lover, he issued forth, and a few steps from his own door ran against George.

" Why, what has brought you here ? " he cried with vague uneasiness.

" I have a note for you from Marge. Mrs. Acland has met with a bad accident, and my father has desired Marge to come home immediately, for everything is at sixes and sevens. I have just seen her off by the 5.50 express for London."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CLOUDS BREAK.

THAT letter to his son cost Philip Cranston infinite pain. The whole night long he pondered what effect his confession would have on Dick's truthful straightforward mind. Hitherto the young man's evident liking for him and confidence in him had been inexpressingly cheering ; now he dreaded falling in his estimation.

The first glance at his fine expressive face would tell how he had taken this revelation—even the expected answer might convey it, for Cranston thought he should be able to read between the lines.

Yet he was glad it was done, that his son knew the truth. No matter how urgent, how imploring the mother who had treated him so cruelly might be, she could not undo what had been done.

Cranston felt weak, unnerved, unequal to the impending inter-

view with his wife, and waited her coming with impatience, eager to have it over.

Then he might be free to go back to his boy, if his reply was all he hoped for. If not, well—he could think of no alternative.

But the weary hours of that terrible morning rolled on, and again Mrs. Acland failed to keep her appointment.

This greatly puzzled Cranston. It was of the last importance to her to confer with him, and it would be something very unusual for her to be foiled in her purpose twice. He was at a loss what to do. He did not like to make inquiries at her house, lest he might meet Acland. He dared not write. Perplexed and uneasy, he resolved to wait till nightfall, and if she did not appear, to seek his cousin Captain Cranston at the Minerva Club—as he no longer need avoid the haunts of men he used to know—and take counsel with the scientific sailor.

Captain Cranston was not at his club, however; he had had a telegram that afternoon which had obliged him to go out of town, and he left no address. Phillip meditated on this information as he walked slowly back to his remote lodgings.

Had the summons been to the vindictive old man who clung so tenaciously to his rank and riches, and was he ill or dying? Was Dick to find a father and a fortune at one stroke?

“It is ill coveting dead men’s shoes, when I am rejoicing over a living son,” thought Cranston, resolutely turning from a pleasant fancy-sketch of Dick installed as master of Leighton Abbot, and doing credit to his name and race. “There is nothing for it but patience. I daresay Hugh will write to me; I cannot hear from Dick at the earliest before Tuesday evening, and that is more than sixty hours; I must get through them as best I can.”

It was a trying interval. Mrs. Acland made no sign, and Cranston scarcely liked to leave the house lest he might miss some communication from her. On Tuesday morning came a few lines from Captain Hugh. Mr. Maynard had insisted on driving without an overcoat in an open carriage, had walked a considerable distance to inspect the progress of some farm buildings he had begun for a new tenant; a sudden storm had come on, and before he could reach shelter the old man was drenched; next day he had a severe feverish cold, which soon became bronchitis, and he was then in a very precarious condition having been weakened previously by his excessive grief for the loss of his grandson.

“I think,” continued the writer, “it would be well if you made yourself known to Messrs. Thorpe and Son, Lincoln’s Inn, my uncle’s solicitors, I enclose a line of introduction. They ought to know your existence, and might be useful to you in many ways. My own opinion is that the poor old man cannot pull through, though the doctors think it is possible he may recover.

Atwell, the great chest doctor, came down this afternoon, and approves what the other men have done."

"No, said Philip Cranston as he slowly put the letter back in its envelope. "I will not trouble the lawyers while the poor fellow lives; it will not make any difference, especially as Hugh is ready to acknowledge me. I will stick to the house till I get Dick's answer."

"The day drags on though storms keep out the sun," and this long spell of weary waiting came to an end. Cranston had lit the gas, and opened a book with a desperate intention of attending to it, when a letter was handed to him. At sight of the address his cheek grew pale, and his long slender hands trembled; he hesitated to open it and paused before he hastily tore off the envelope, and with a beating heart read the contents eagerly, thirstily; then he sank into a chair mumuring. "Thank God! thank God!" and in silence and solitude of his quiet room he covered up his face and wept. He had a son then—a son who loved him already, who was ready to condone his offence and compassionate the sorrows which he had partly brought upon himself. How he longed to press the boy he had learned to love so much to his heart. English though he was—to show him to his friendly cousin Hugh—to boast of him to the whole world!

But the conclusion of the letter demanded his attention. "I have just heard that my mother has met with a serious accident, and Mr. Acland has just sent for Marjory; pray ascertain what it is, and come down as soon as possible. I long to see you and consult with you? we have a difficult and trying task before us."

"This complicates matters," was Cranston's reflection, when he was able to divert his thoughts from Dick. "It would have been better for herself had she been saved from death what is before her."

Late as it was, Cranston sallied forth, and hailing a cab, was soon set down at the door where he had recognised his wife in the beginning of this true history.

He rang the bell, and waited anxiously before it was answered.

"Is Mr. Acland at home?"

"No; master's away at the hospital."

"Then could I see Miss Acland?"

"I am sure I do not know; she is in sad trouble."

"Pray give her my card."

"I don't think she will see you," said the girl. "Step inside."

In another moment she came back, and in a changed tone said, "Please walk into the dinning-room, sir. Miss Acland will be down directly." The room was oppressive; a solitary gaslight made its darkness visible; the fire burned low.

Cranston stood by the table, thinking of the terrible confusion he was about to bring upon the innocent family—of the shameful story

he was compelled to tell. Marjory at least need not know the whole of it. But she was beside him, with a sad grave face.

"Oh, Mr. Brand, I am so glad you have come! Have you heard of the dreadful accident to Mrs. Acland?"

"Dick has written to me to inquire particulars, so I venture to intrude upon you."

"I do not know much myself; my father is in such distress that he could scarcely speak to me. It seems that on Friday afternoon Mrs. Acland had gone out to send a telegram to nurse, who is still with the children at Folkestone. I suppose she went to shop after, for crossing one of the streets leading out of Edgeware Road a cart coming round the corner knocked her down; she was taken up much bruised and insensible, so they carried her to the hospital. The doctors are afraid the spine has been injured, and that she may be paralyzed in the lower limbs. She cannot be moved yet, and my poor father is gone to the hospital, though he is not allowed to see her, she was so dreadfully agitated the first time he went. They say she will be quite helpless; think what a fate for such an active masterful woman?"

"It is appalling!" exclaimed Cranston, deeply shocked. How cruel it would be to attack a prostrate helpless creature whose sufferings demanded forbearance.

"You used to know her, and Dick's father—was he really as bad as Mrs. Acland makes out?"

"I was rather partial to him," returned Cranston gravely, "so I may not be a fair judge; but he did not seem a bad fellow to me."

"I am sure he was not, or Dick would not be as nice as he is," said Marjory thoughtfully. "I hope you are going back to him soon, Mr. Brand. You will be a comfort—he is so fond of you?"

"Is he?" said Cranston with a happy smile.

"Yes, indeed he is, and you will let George come to you in the evening too, I hope, as I shall not be able to leave my father for a long time, I fear. He was so dependent on Mrs. Acland. I do not know what will become of him. When she can come home I am sure she will wish me away; she never could bear me, and now she has been so suddenly struck down I feel ashamed of disliking her so much."

"I do not think you have reason to be ashamed of yourself. It is, however, probable I may remain in town some time longer—perhaps Dick may join me. Meanwhile, should Mrs. Acland wish to see me, I will leave my address with you."

"Do you think she might wish to see *you*?" asked Marjory, with such evident surprise that Cranston felt she had heard Mrs. Acland express an unfavourable opinion of him.

"She may find it necessary to confer with me respecting some matters; but I have trespassed too long on you."

"I wish you could stay—or that I could ask you to stay," said Marjory, blushing and hesitating. "It is awfully lonely—the children are away—and it is better to keep them away. My poor father does not seem to know what to do. I think it is a comfort to him to find me here when he comes in. I will write to Dick to-night and tell him you have been here."

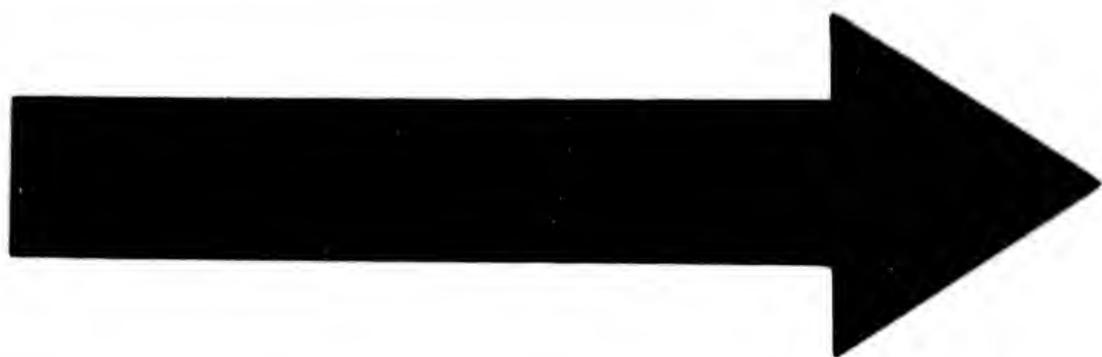
"Do so. Good-night, my dear young lady." He stooped and kissed her hand in a tender, fatherly fashion that touched her; the tears sprang to her eyes. "Good-bye, I am so glad to have seen you." He left the house, and walked on in the deepest perplexity.

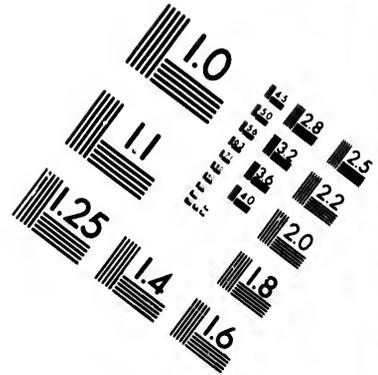
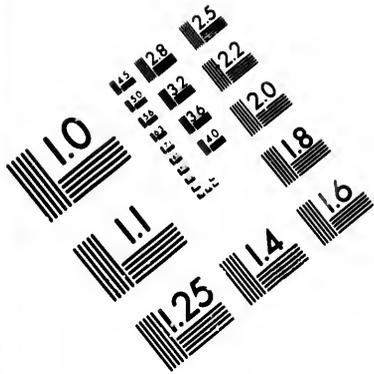
What was to be done? It might be better to break his painful tidings to Acland while it was impossible for the unfortunate woman to interfere, and arrange some plan for her future when she was able to be moved. On one point he was resolved; she should confess the truth respecting the money he was convinced she had taken. Should he attempt to see her in the hospital, or lay his statement before Mr. Acland? He could come to no decision.

Meanwhile, the wretched woman who occupied his thoughts had, as her mind recovered its powers, gone down into a hell of anticipated shame and exposure. She knew she was powerless to move—absolutely at the mercy of her foes. She knew the weakness of the man she had ruled and dominated—that he was only a broken reed—and if he listened to Cranston and believed him as he must, his horror of scandal, of being a nine days' wonder, the subject of newspaper paragraphs, would turn him too against her. Her only hope of mercy was from the husband she had despised and driven away. She felt that life was over for her, and she would fain have ended it, but lacked the physical power that would have given courage enough to do the deed. Her mental condition did not escape the notice of the doctors, who told Mr. Acland that his wife's recovery, so far as she could recover, was retarded by her evident uneasiness, and exhorted him to ascertain, and, if possible, to remove the cause.

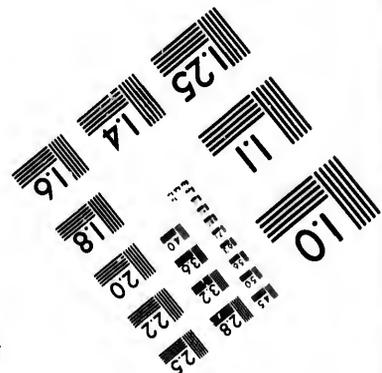
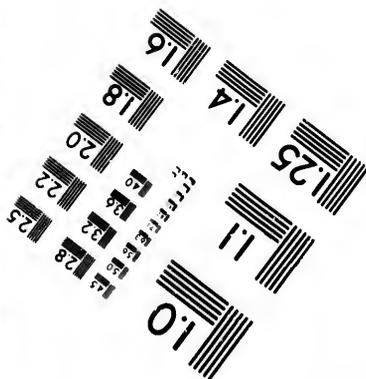
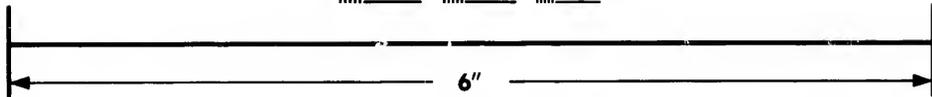
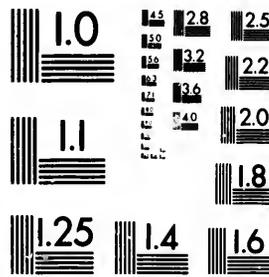
The cause was clear enough to Mr. Acland. All could be accounted for by the dreadful threats of Blake.

His own fears prompted him to buy the rascal's silence—to do anything to avoid the horror of publicity. But how to trace him was the question. He had left no address, and any attempt to discover his whereabouts might only lead to his apprehension. Still, Mr. Acland hoped that his necessities would compel him to apply once more either to Mrs. Acland or to himself. Nor was he mistaken. The fifth day after the accident, he was almost rejoiced to receive a short note signed B—, the writing of which was well known to him. It stated that the writer, being penniless, had determined to give himself up to the police and reveal everything, if within the next week he was not furnished with funds to fly the country.





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"I will not endanger myself by going to you," he continued, "but I will keep indoors for the next three or four days, and you must come here. Ask for Mr. Eisenberg. If you have any sense we will soon settle matters."

This effusion bore the address: "Schmitt's Coffee House, Crown Street, Prince's Road, Kennington."

Mr. Acland did not hesitate an instant in deciding to keep the appointment. He hurried away to the hospital, where his wife had been placed in a private room and surrounded with all that skill and care could do to alleviate her sufferings. He would show her the note, and assure her he would buy off the needy scoundrel whose venom they both dreaded. Mrs. Acland had now recovered from the stunning effect of the shock she had received. Her bruises were less painful, and she did not suffer any acute pain; she even began to hope that the terrible numbness which made her lower limbs inert might not prove incurable. She had been at first exceedingly averse to see her husband, his presence exercised a peculiarly disturbing effect upon her, but now she asked constantly for him, and he was always ready to sit by her and listen to her moans and complaints.

Having then begged the nurse to leave them for a few minutes, he read Blake's note aloud in a hushed tone, and proceeded to assure his eager listener that he was determined to arrange matters so as to free her from all apprehension in future.

"I trust you may be able to do so, but it would be wiser to defy him. I leave all to you; I only wish I were not to be a burden to any one," she returned feebly.

"Do not talk like that, my dear, the doctor says you are doing wonderfully well; we must hope the best."

"Ah! we must—see—" moving her hands on the coverlet, "my hands are quite right. I think I could use a pencil—give me yours and that note," she began to scribble on the back of it. "Yes, I can write, that is something. I wish you would leave me both the note and pencil. I have a few ideas I should like to note down as to what you should say to Blake," and they came so slowly.

"But I am afraid you may let the note be seen."

"Trust me," she returned, smiling grimly.

"Let me take the address," said Mr. Acland, much perplexed. He did not dream of refusing his wife, yet he dreaded the note being seen, and he was impatient to get the interview with Blake over. "I should like to have seen him to-day, if possible."

"Better not. He will be more ready to come to terms if you keep him waiting."

"Well, perhaps so; I am afraid I am staying too long."

"It does not seem long," she said softly, "I wish, dear, you would give me a little money; the daynurse has been peculiarly good to me—I should like to make her a present."

"Certainly." He gave her a sovereign and some silver.

"Thank you; I suppose I must let you go; be sure and call to-night or to-morrow for my 'ideas.'"

As soon as he was gone, and nurse installed with her needle-work beside the fire, Mrs. Acland asked very quietly, "Have you any envelopes, nurse?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will you fetch me one?"

"Law, ma'am, you do not want to write a letter?"

"Oh no," smiling, "only to enclose one Mr. Acland has forgotten."

"Very well," and nurse left the room.

She returned in a few minutes, and handed an envelope to her patient. "There," said Mrs. Acland, smiling sweetly as she slipped Blake's note into it, "see how well I can write," and she addressed it to Mr. Cranston, Camden Town lodgings. "Now," she added, "get a stamp and post this at once, if you would ensure me a quiet day. Here, take this to pay for the postage and for—*discretion*."

"Dear me, ma'am," said nurse hesitatingly and eyeing the sovereign, "I hope as how I am not doing any wrong."

"That is my affair—go, take it instantly; it is on my husband's business." Her tone of command imposed on her attendant, who left the room. When she returned, the patient appeared to be in a profound slumber.

The few words Marjory had spoken to him dwelt in Philip Cranston's mind, and seemed to run through the tangle of his perplexed thoughts like a pleasant strain of music. What a sweet sympathetic voice the gipsy had—what bright steadfast eyes! How fond she was of Dick—and *he*—did he himself know how he loved her? To Cranston's experience, the condition of his son's heart had long been perceptible—but how would the matter end? He was not sure of Marjory, and when the true state of affairs became known to Acland, he might very naturally refuse any further communication with a man who had been fatal to him. Well, the solution of this and many other difficulties could not be anticipated.

He wrote to Dick thanking him for his prompt and affectionate reply, and advised him to give up his present employment, or ask for leave of absence, as his presence in town might be necessary. He gave him the particulars of his interview with Marjory, and described the nature of the accident to Mrs. Acland.

Then he resigned himself to wait, nor was it long before the curtain drew up on the last act of the drama.

The following morning brought him no tidings of the wretched woman he knew was burning to see him, and he was debating

whether he should attempt, with Marjory's help, to see her, when a telegram was laid before him.

"My uncle died rather suddenly this morning about 5-30. Have written to Thorpe that you will call to-morrow before noon."

The paper fell from Cranston's hand, and for a few minutes he strove in vain to realise the immense change in his fortune; gradually, as his eyes cleared, he felt that one difficulty—want of money—was removed. For this he was thankful, otherwise no sense of exultation swelled his heart for a moment. He hated poverty, its ugliness, its privations, he loved the power of *giving*—but as to rank and riches, with their accompanying parade, their irksome necessity for being constantly in gala costume, he hated them also.

"I wish the poor old fellow had not disliked me so much; I fancy he thought me even blacker than I was painted! Well, Dick must play the part of the noble squire, and pay the penalties of wealth and position, while he gives me a corner of the big house to paint and smoke in. If this had come a few years sooner, how Judith would have queened it as Mrs. Cranston Maynard of Leighton Abbot. Ah! few women ever had so stony a heart, so iron a will as she has. I wonder if she will recover? if determination could compel and conquer nature she would rise up from her bed to make the most out of our present crisis." While he reflected, Cranston prepared to set forth and keep the appointment Hugh had made for him.

The details of the meeting with the family solicitor would lengthen this chapter too much. Philip Cranston found that his cousin had prepared the legal mind of Mr. Thorpe for his claims. The highly respectable solicitor himself had had some dealings with the nephew of his old client years ago, and though he was so changed, recognized him, the more readily because Captain Cranston had no doubt of his identity.

"It is fortunate," said the sedate punctilious lawyer, "that your cousin's recognition of your claims preclude any necessity for litigation. These cases of disputed identity are most tedious, costly, and uncertain. Captain Cranston is a man of most honourable principles, and I am sure you will be glad to know that your late uncle has bequeathed him the whole of his very large savings. Our excellent client lived very quietly of late, and you will find the estate perfectly free from debt or encumbrance of any kind. Indeed his administration of the estate has been admirable—most admirable;" he sighed as he repeated this note of admiration.

"Ah!" returned Cranston with a smile, "I see you fear for its management in my hands. My dear sir, I have a son who is the most prudent of youths. I shall leave everything to him and to you, my dear sir."

"We shall be happy to do our best for you as we have done for our late respected client," returned Mr. Thorpe complacently;

"meantime, it might suit you to have a small sum lodged to your credit at some bank, for current expenses till the formalities connected with your succession are arranged."

"I should be much obliged,"—some further talk and then Philip Cranston drove to the hospital and inquired for Mrs. Acland. She was not so well, having had a bad night, and was unable to see Mr. Acland that morning. There was no more to be done in that direction, so he went away back to his little lodging more oppressed than elated by his sudden accession of wealth and responsibility.

On entering his sitting-room he beheld a letter lying on the table—a letter addressed to him in pencil. He tore it open and found Blake's note; on the back was written, "*Prevent their meeting, for God's sake! Get him out of the country—I am helpless.*"

"J. A."

Blake in London! Blake within reach! All Philip Cranston's easy unambitious supineness vanished at the idea. This was the one man in existence towards whom he was actively implacable. To punish the treacherous scoundrel who had deceived him from first to last—whom the woman he had once tenderly loved preferred to himself, and from whose cowardly persecution she was suffering—would be the keenest pleasure. It was not too late to begin the attack. He would at once seek the tiger in his lair. No need to spare cab hire *now*. He only paused to write a hasty line to Dick, directing him to come up directly—his presence was much needed. Then he drove off to the address given by his intended victim.

When, after a restless night, Mr. Acland paid his usual morning visit to the hospital, he was dismayed to receive so bad an account of his wife, and finding that he could do little or nothing at his office he returned in the afternoon, hoping to be admitted.

Mrs. Acland however was in a profound sleep, from which she was on no account to be awakened; so he turned away with a heavy heart, and after walking a little way in uneasy thought, determined to disobey his liege lady for once, to go to Blake and so bargain with him that he might have the good news that all had been made safe when next he was able to speak with his wife alone. The very idea of action gave him courage—he would not wait for her ideas. In a matter of bargaining he was surely to act on his own judgment.

It was a long and dreary way to the obscure alley where Blake had run to earth—a tavern of the humblest description where a little coffee and a good deal of beer was dispensed. A huge piece of boiled beef and a basin full of flabby lettuce were set forth alluringly in a window thick with dust of ages—such was the Café Schmitt. A stout man in a grimy white apron, who was conver-

sing affably with a group of customers, answered Mr. Acland's inquiries. "Eisenberg, ay—this way," opening a door into a dark passage, "turn to your right and go upstairs first floor front. He said he was expecting a gent." It was an evil-smelling passage; the sand with which it was strewn grated under Mr. Acland's neat well-cleaned boots. The darkness was sufficiently visible to prevent his tumbling upstairs, and the first floor being a little lighter he made out a door at which he knocked, and was desired to "Come in."

The room he entered was dull, dirty, disordered. There was a square of carpet from which all trace of pattern had disappeared, a fire fast dying out, before the fireplace a hearth strewn with ashes and torn scraps of paper, a table covered with dark American cloth much marked by the bottoms of tumblers, some writing paper, a penny bottle of ink, a much corroded pen, the blue spectacles and a stumpy pipe lay on it. The atmosphere was redolent of brandy and stale tobacco. Mr. Acland felt it was degradation to breathe it. Blake was sitting at the table in his shirt sleeves, his rough unnatural-looking hair, his grubby coloured shirt, his much-befrogged coat hung over a chair, his dogged unkempt aspect all seemed in keeping with his abode.

"Ha! Acland!" he said, rising with much composure, "I expected you yesterday—better late than never. Glad to see you had the sense to answer my summons."

His affronted abashed Mr. Acland. He felt as if he should never be able to purify himself from even such a momentary contact with such an unsuccessful rascal.

"Sit down," continued Blake, as he noticed the hesitation of his visitor, "the chairs ain't first rate, but they'll do." Mr. Acland reluctantly took one of the three worn, horse-hair covered seats which were available.

"I do know that I *am* sensible in coming here against my wife's wish and advice, but——"

"Ay! she is a plucky one—never met her match; she always was since I knew her, and that's—let me see—well on for thirty years—Lord, what a figure she had!"

"I do not care to hear your reminiscences," returned Acland with an unspeakable sense of loathing which showed in his face. "Nor do I believe your unwarrantable assertions against Mrs. Acland. Her reluctance to make terms with you is sufficient proof of their falsehood. But since your audacious intrusion into my house, circumstances have changed." He paused.

"Oh, I see! you are not the least afraid of any disclosures I may make. You only came to assist me out of pure benevolence!" said Blake with a contemptuous laugh.

"I do nothing of the kind," returned Acland sharply, "Mrs. Acland has met with a very serious accident, and is still lying in

the hospital where she was first taken. I dread the agitation of your threats. I want to be able to assure her that she is safe from your reappearance."

"She is not going to die?" cried Blake eagerly, with emotion of some kind.

"God forbid—she may be unable to move for some time, but"—his voice broke—"do not name her again," he exclaimed fiercely, for so quiet and respectable a man. "Tell me what you want, and I will do what I can; but do not suppose I will sacrifice much for you."

"Then we will cut it short. I want twenty pounds down now to clear out of this, and three hundred pounds in a week to keep out of sight."

"That I will certainly not give you. I will give you ten pounds to get away to Havre or anywhere else, and I will give you two hundred and forty pounds, spread over three years, paid quarterly, at any address you like, to be forfeited if you come to England or molest me."

"Pooh! a beggarly eighty pounds a year. What good would that do me?"

"Nothing can do a gambler of your sort any good."

They chaffered for some time. At last it was agreed that Acland should give him the ten pounds down, a hundred when he gave an address at Havre, and another when he landed at Buenos Ayres.

Blake at once pocketed ten sovereigns with which Acland had provided himself, and they were trying to devise some form of agreement which might bind each to the other, when the door was suddenly dashed open and Cranston walked quickly into the room, pausing opposite Blake. He was looking better and younger than when he introduced himself to Mr. Acland as Brand. Blake's face grew a dirty white, his eyes dilated with terror and amazement; he started up, and drew back as if with the instinct of flight. "My God!" he stammered, "Philip Cranston, alive! How is this?"

"Yes, Philip Cranston, alive enough for the purpose of punishing you. Dog! I am in time to prevent your imposing on another victim; from me you can hope nothing. You can injure me no more."

To this rapid exchange of question and answer Mr. Acland listened, almost too stupefied to understand fully, except that a stunning conviction that Brand was the real husband of his adored wife, and that she had known he was alive for some years. It was no matter what happened now, all was over.

"That will do!" cried Blake, struggling to regain courage and self-possession. "What is the use of disturbing every one when you can do them no good—you have no money; what the devil has brought you here."

"To take possession of the Maynard estates ; my uncle is dead, and I have succeeded him."

"The game is up," said Blake, sitting down with a sullen air of defeat. "With a bank against you there's no use showing fight ; and—and Judith, does she know ?"

"She does ; it was from her I had your address."

"And she never let me know that you were alive, devil that she is !"

"I am at a loss how to address you, Mr. Acland, you suffer most from the concealment I have practised," said Cranston, turning to him. "Whatever course you and your legal advisers think best for you I shall agree to. Let me beg of you to make no terms with this scoundrel. Nothing he can say can do you much harm ; leave him to his fate—it will no doubt be what he deserves."

"But, Cranston, I——"

"Silence," said Philip sternly. "There is no use in appealing to me. If I trust myself longer in your presence I shall not be able to preserve my self-control ; your rascality puts you beyond the pale of compassion. I warn you that I shall give notice to the police of your whereabouts."

"But," said Mr. Acland, who had risen and stood trembling in every limb, "my first duty is to shield my wife—" he stopped and exclaimed with a groan, "but she is not my wife ; what will become of her, what is to become of my unfortunate children," and he sank upon a chair.

"Ay," said Blake with devilish spite, "the son she persecuted and threw the blame of her own theft upon will hold up his head now ; there is no stain of illegitimacy on him."

Acland, driven almost mad by his taunt, with a cry of, "Liar, I do not believe you !" attempted to throw himself on the speaker, but Cranston interposed.

"It is not for men of our age to commit personal violence," he said, "let us leave him to the law ; come, there is no more to be said."

"I do not know what to do or where to turn," said Mr. Acland helplessly. "Are you really my—my—Mrs. Acland's first husband ? Will you take her away ?"

"Most certainly not ; she is the last creature in the world I should like to associate with, but I wish to do what is right and just by her for my son's sake. We are both too old to begin life again ; let us be guided by the interests of the young creatures who depend upon us—my son and your daughter have little to thank his mother for."

He opened the door while he spoke, and Mr. Acland went slowly and mechanically out of the room. Cranston turned one backward glance as he followed on the defeated vagabond who stood as if turned to stone, his head dropped, his figure shrunk together ; then

he hurried after the miserable man whose home had been destroyed by his reappearance, and who seemed hardly able to take care of himself.

Cranston, as soon as they were in a thoroughfare, hailed a cab, into which Acland entered as if moving in a dream.

"Where shall I tell him to drive to?"

"I—I don't know; I have no home. I will go to see Mr. Cross, No. 15 George Street."

He rolled away out of Philip's sight, and they never spoke again.

"It's a curious eddy of the stream that sent me to help my successor. Well, he was a good friend to my son, though *per contra*, an indifferent father to his own daughter. If it cost her life, I will make that woman confess the truth about that money. I wonder did she contrive to put that bottle of chloroform under my nose? No, it is not possible, she had left the hotel. Ah! the complications of reality leave fiction far behind. I don't think we shall be troubled with Blake again; and to-morrow—to-morrow, I may see my son."

So Cranston communed with himself as he walked northwards, till, overtaken by a hansom, and suppressing a wish to pay Marjory a visit, he made the best of his way home.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE END.

It was a dismal period to Marjory. She soon began to feel there was a vague unpleasant veil of mystery wrapping itself round her father and Mrs. Acland. She was thankful when, after the first week, the children were recalled from the seaside, and an increase of household cares kept her busy. Dick's letters were brief and intermittent; there seemed something behind them too, which she could not quite make out, and the atmosphere felt as if surcharged with gathering troubles.

The day Mr. Acland had had the interview just described, he did not return at his usual time, and when the children had gone to bed, Marjory sat down in the dining-room to wait for him with a chilly feeling of coming evil. Probably her father had been detained at the hospital; why should she feel so uneasy? Yesterday he had seemed in better spirits, and talked more than usual. She was low and weary with the loneliness of her life. When should she see Dick again?

"Messenger waiting for an answer, Miss," said the parlour-maid, breaking in upon her musings, and presenting a note. It was from

Mr. Cross : "Your father was taken with a sudden giddiness talking with me, and I have persuaded him to stay the night. There is nothing to alarm you in this seizure ; it is the result of distress of mind. Pray send what is necessary by bearer. It is probable your father may pass a few days with me ; the change, slight as it is, will do him good, and he is nearer the hospital in my house. I will, if possible, see you to-morrow evening."

Marjory at once put up all she thought her father might need, and wrote a few dutiful lines to accompany the packet ; then she sat down again and gave herself up to very grave thoughts—something was wrong, unusually wrong, when Mr. Acland absented himself from his home. She had never known him to do such a thing before, unless indeed he were out of town on business. The matter was beyond her comprehension, she must hope the best ; so she put out the lights and went softly upstairs to nurse.

This important functionary was more friendly than of yore. She was the only one of the former servants who remained, and she was not a little offended at not being allowed to see her mistress, perfectly perceiving that had Mrs. Acland chosen to receive a visit from her, no one, at least not Mr. Acland, would have resisted her will.

"My father must be very unwell, nurse, to stay away from home,"

"And no wonder, Miss Marjory—I suppose Mrs. Acland is taken worse ! It is my belief she will never leave that dreadful place alive, and then there will be a heavy burden on your shoulders."

"I do not think Mrs. Acland is in any danger, she was much better this morning."

Nurse shook her head.

"That might be the light'ning before death, Miss ; anyhow, I am sure you'll do your duty by them poor children, though I must say you had rather hard lines yourself."

"No use looking back now. I think I shall go to bed ; good-night."

The next day passed heavily. Mr. Cross sent a brief telegram stating that Mr. Acland was better. Nurse visited the hospital, and brought a very bad account of Mrs. Acland ; she had been almost raving to see her husband.

The second day of her father's absence was cold and bleak, but Marjory forced herself to go out with the children after breakfast ; she felt the need of fresh air, the constant strain of expectancy made her nervous. Nurse was thus set free to inquire for her mistress.

"There is a gentleman waiting to see you in the dining-room," said the servant who admitted them.

"Run up to Mary, and get your things off," said Marjory to her young charges, while she thought, "It may be Mr. Brand : they had better not see him." Herbert was disposed to resist, but the parlour-maid, a young person of much decision, swept them both upstairs.

Marjory opened the dining-room door, and had scarcely recognised the visitor before she was in Dick Cranston's arms. The first few delightful moments of confused exclamations and kisses over, Dick turned her to the light.

"Why Marge, you have grown pale and thin, you look all eyes, sweet eyes, yet I do not like to see them so big."

"I have been so miserable, Dick; I feel as if everything was breaking away from us. Oh, what a relief to feel you so near me!" and pressing close against him, Marjory allowed herself to cry quietly. Dick held her tenderly, but did not at first try to stop her tears.

"It is a trying time for us all, and I have a great deal to tell you; a great deal this is painful, also some good. First of all I went round this morning with my father to inquire for Mr. Acland; he is better, more composed, and is even going to—"

"Your father, Dick, what are you talking about?" said Marjory, drying her tears, and looking at him with an amused smile.

"Sit down." He drew a chair beside the sofa where she had placed herself. "There is much to explain, but I have found a father in Brand, who is really Philip Cranston, who disappeared long ago."

"Mr. Brand really your father," cried Marjory, without stopping to think, "you will be glad, will you not? I know you always had a strong feeling about your father."

"Yes, Marge, I am heartily glad on my own account, but it's awfully bad for the rest."

"Yes, of course, I see; why, Dick, it is perfectly awful, what will become of my father? He must know it—this is what keeps him from home. Oh, Dick, what shall we do?" She clasped his hand in both her own, which trembled.

"Love each other, and stick to each other through thick and thin." replied Dick, promptly changing his chair for the sofa, and putting his arm round her. "You must listen to the long story I have to tell." Whereupon he commenced, and gave her rapidly and clearly the details which it has taken so many pages to recount.

"When I joined my father yesterday evening," he concluded, "I was quite unmanned by his joy and agitation on meeting me. He has had a hard lot, and my mother has had a still harder heart. I can never forgive her harshness, though he did her injustice I can hardly explain to you, Marge."

"Tell me one thing, did she—did Mrs. Acland take that money she accused you of taking?"

"It is not absolutely certain, but my father believes she did. One more page of this curious history, Marge. Do you remember that pretty widow at Beaulieu, Mrs. Maynard? Well, her husband was my father's first cousin; now as he is dead and the poor little baby my father has succeeded to the estate, old Mr. Cranston

died a few days ago ; so I have found a father and a fortune together."

"A fortune, Dick," faltered Marjory—"what fortune?"

"The estate of Leighton Abbot and eight or ten thousand a year, as far as I can make out."

"But, Dick, this—this is appalling ;" she grew pale and moved a little way from him.

"Why?" he asked, tightening his hold on her. "It is too much. a great deal more than one wants, but it is better than too little. It will give my father the power to smooth some difficulties. It will enable us, dearest, many years before we could otherwise have done. But I must not let myself sink into a mere man of wealth : you do not suppose I would ever let anything save your own will come between us."

"Still, Dick, it is an awful state of things. Think of the terrible position of your mother as regards my father and yours. There never was anything like it. I do not believe we ought to marry."

"On that head I have no doubt at all," said Dick with an air of conviction.

"I do not know what to say or to think," said Marjory trying to loosen Dick's hold of her. "My poor father, I must think of him ; and these poor children—what will become of them? Oh, Dick, it was very wrong of Mr. Brand to keep himself out of sight so long."

"Yes—secrets and hiding never come to good, I fancy ; but there was some excuse for him. Then he never intended to show up again. You must not be hard on my father, Marge."

"Oh no, Dick, I like him too much ; but I am too bewildered to judge anything fairly, and I am frightened—unhappy—not knowing what to do."

"Will you trust me, Marge ! Let things arrange themselves, as they will do, and then, if all this unfortunate complication does not turn you away from me—Why do you look so sad and tremble so, Marge?" interrupting himself.

"Because I cannot help feeling the great change in your circumstances, and all this confusion will put a barrier between us. Mr. — I mean your father, will want you to marry some great lady, as I suppose you might."

Dick laughed pleasantly.

"My father thinks nearly as much of you as I do, Marge, and we will both do our best to make all things square. Listen, my darling, we have but an hour to talk to each other just now, for I have to meet my father at Lincoln's Inn ; tell me about yourself and let us leave these troubles for the present ; we cannot change them by worrying ourselves. Tell me again that you love me and will let nothing and no one come between us."

While these two young hearts comforted each other with assurances of true and steadfast love an interview of a very different description was passing between Cranston and his sorely-stricken wife. He had ascertained that Acland had not been to see her since they had met, and knowing the state of suspense in which she must be, he applied, through Mr. Cross, for a line of introduction to the doctor. This Acland sent at once. A short and partial explanation satisfied the doctor, and Cranston was left alone with the sufferer.

He stood by her for a moment in silence, while her eyes were fixed with dread and eagerness on his. Her fine fair hair was carefully arranged, but her cheeks were hollow, her lips bloodless, only the eyes looked alive, and they glowed with an intensity that deepened their colour and made the rest of her face more ghastly, her thin white hands lay helplessly on the coverlet. The picture of what she was five-and-twenty years ago, when he had passionately loved the woman he believed her to be, came back vividly to his memory. And all the misery of his awakening from the dream in which for a while he had been happy, even hate for her, had left him. He could only feel compassion, not untinged by contempt, for the wreck before him.

The silence was first broken by her exclaiming in a hoarse forceful whisper :

"Blake?"

"He has fled," returned Cranston. "He will never trouble you again."

"And—my husband?"

"He knows all, and is struck down with grief and despair."

"What about old Maynard?"

"He is dead."

"Dead!" she uttered, the word with a cry of agony. "Dead!" she repeated, striking her hands together. "Then you are a wealthy man of large estate, of importance, and I am a maimed and ruined beggar—I have lived in vain. Why do you let me live to be a burden and a curse?"

"Hush, Judith, you may find a use in life yet."

"Ah! had I been able to fulfil my wishes you should have died; then Dick would have had all and he would not have deserted his mother."

"Had I died Dick would not have inherited a sou. The property would have gone to the eldest Cranston living at the death of my uncle—that would have been my cousin Hugh."

To this Mrs. Acland did not reply; she tossed her head from side to side and muttered almost incoherently :

"Dick is the conqueror; had I succeeded all would have been lost! cruel! unfair!—not worse than others, only too heavily weighted. Then she closed her eyes, looking like death. Philip

Cranston thought she was dead, and was trying to overcome a strange reluctance to touch her hands when they closed with a sudden convulsive movement and she opened her eyes; fixing them gloomily on his she asked in a sharp, weak, discordant voice:

"What is to become of me—am I to go to the workhouse?"

"My son's mother shall want no necessary or comfort," said Cranston gently; then, as she made no answer, but continued to stare at him, he continued:

"If you and Acland wish for a divorce and remarriage I will do all I can to help you, on one condition."

"Divorce—remarriage," she repeated with a horrid laugh, "for a helpless log like me! It is not worth the trouble. I will die Mrs. Cranston Maynard! But what is your condition?"

"Confess that you took that money—do justice to your son."

"No! you can give me nothing in exchange."

"I can leave you a burden on the man whose home you have destroyed."

"Is that my fault? It is yours! Ah! I was a good wife to him—I am blameless as regards him, and yet he has deserted me!"

"No; the unhappy man is struck down powerless by the greatness of his misfortunes."

"He is a coward," she returned coldly. "He would sacrifice me to his respectability."

"You have no right to say so."

"If I loved any one I would suffer torture for him!" she cried.

"Did you ever love any one!" asked Cranston.

"Yes," fiercely, "a base hound who threw me off to battle with degradation as best I could."

There was a pause.

"You had better see Acland and agree upon some plan of action, but remember mine is contingent on your confession," said Cranston.

She thought in silence, her fingers clasping and unclasping themselves.

"It is possible I may recover, though not likely," she exclaimed.

"If I do will you give me the allowance I might have had had we separated by mutual consent—I living on the Continent—you spreading no evil reports about me?"

"I will," replied Philip.

"I believe you; you were always foolishly scrupulous about your word. Write down the confession and I will sign it."

"No—you must speak it face to face, and Acland must write to Dick to say his suspicions have been cleared away."

"Then you will see that I am provided for, and that I may have Herbert in his holiday time."

"I promise you faithfully."

"It is a cruel defeat. It is the torture of the damned to lie here helpless in the hands of my enemies."

"No enemies save of your own making," were the words that rose to his lips, but he could not taunt a creature so prostrate, so bankrupt of all that makes life worth living.

"Would you like your stepdaughter to call?"

"No—no—no—a thousand times no—I want neither her nor Dick! I want no canting superior creatures to pity me in my low estate. I do not want to see you either unless it is necessary. After all, you do not oppress me as the others do. Remember, it is what religious idiots call the judgment of heaven, not the strength or cleverness of others, that has beaten me down—go—I do not want you."

The experienced reader can want but little more detail. He, or more probably *she*, will anticipate that the comfortable well-appointed house in Falkland Terrace has been broken up, and the doubly-widowed Acland and his children removed to a suburban villa a few miles out of town, where their name was as little known as if they had come from the other side of the Atlantic. The once admirable Mrs. Acland was supposed to have gone to some health resort, and the family vanished from the ken of society in the north-west district. That Marjory presided over the unhomelike home until the children went to school—that Uncle and Aunt Carteret finding it necessary to visit London the following year, celebrated the modest wedding of their favourite niece in the house they had hired—that Lord Beaulieu was Dick's best man—that his young widowed sister put on gray and graced the occasion—that Philip Cranston was the kindest and most cheery of inmates—and if ever a father and father-in-law was spoiled, he was the man—even the fair widow, Mrs. Maynard, clung to him, remembering how her precious baby used to stretch out his little hands and laugh with delight whenever the wandering artist approached him—that all things fell into natural and satisfactory order.

Away in a pretty south coast town, celebrated for the balmy softness of its sea-breeze, vegetates a helpless invalid whose attendants have from time to time to be changed, so wearing is her bitter vicious irritability. She has all the comforts and convenience that can be found. She has books and work—for her lower limbs only are paralyzed—but nothing soothes or softens her. Twice a year a handsome boy spends part of his holidays with her, and is loaded with presents and luxuries, but nothing makes him tender or patient with his suffering mother.

Every two or three months a lady and gentleman come to stay at the chief hotel there, and the lady goes daily to see the querulous invalid. The gentleman never crosses the threshold, he waits for his companion on the beach or on the esplanade. When he sees her coming his face brightens and they stroll too and fro talking gently and gravely.

Mr. Acland has become the most silent of men; he has grown

miserably too, so bent is he on leaving a fortune to his children—a fortune that may in some measure obliterate the bar-sinister on their scutcheon. He seems to have no life left save in business and a faint relish for *The Times*. He is coldly deferential to his married daughter and still endeavours tenaciously to cover all expenses by the moderate income derived from his "Life Interest."

THE END.

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