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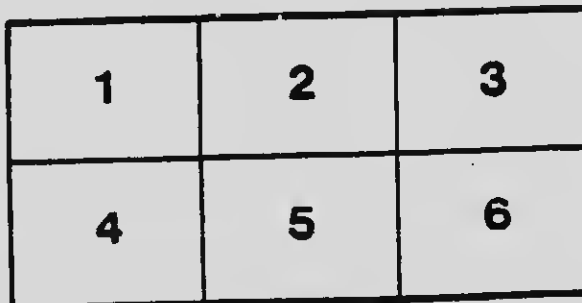
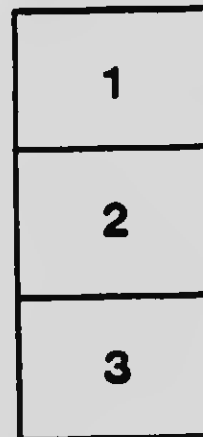
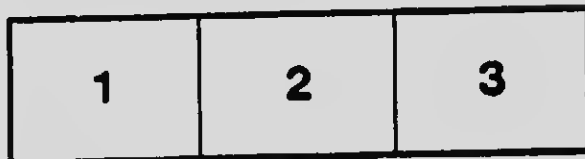
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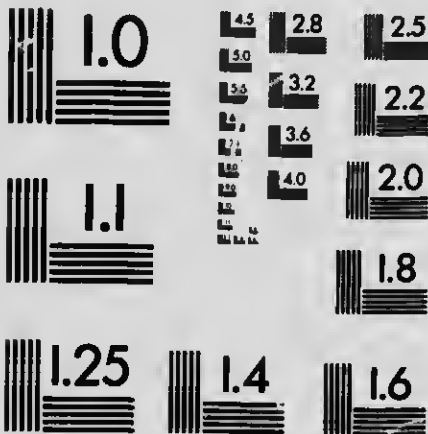
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**FUEL OF  
FIRE**



*Quaker*  
*Nov. 19 1902*

---

**Ellen  
Thorneycroft  
Fowler**

1

6

1. night

2. day



"IN SILVERHAMPTON MARKET-PLACE SHE WAS BURNT ALIVE.

[Frontispiece.]

# FUEL OF FIRE

By ELLEN THORNEYCROFT

FOWLER, Author of *Concerning*

*Isabel Carnaby, Love's Argument, Sirius, etc.*

With Eight Illustrations by Fred. Pegram

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THE MONTREAL NEWS COMPANY, LIMITED

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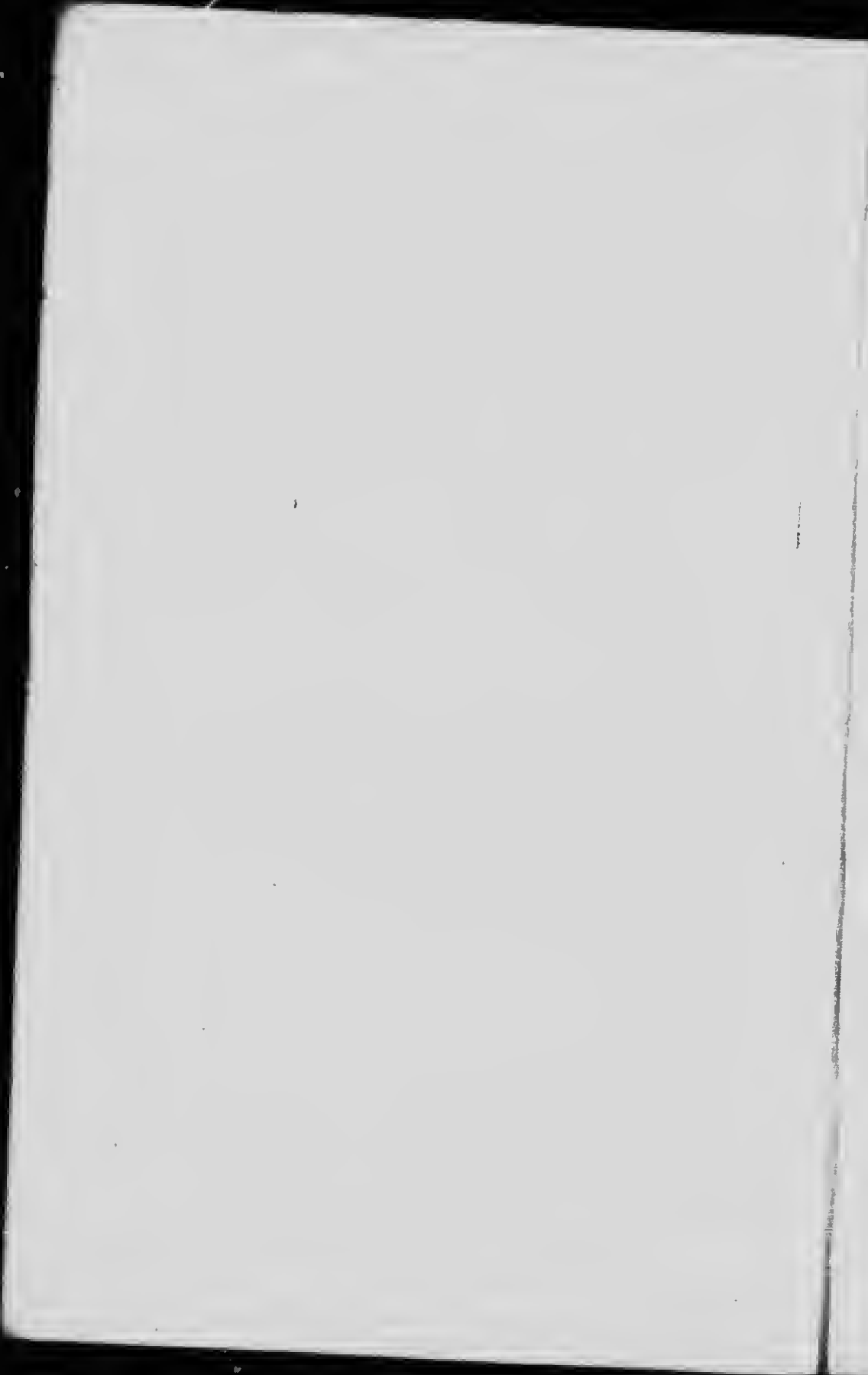
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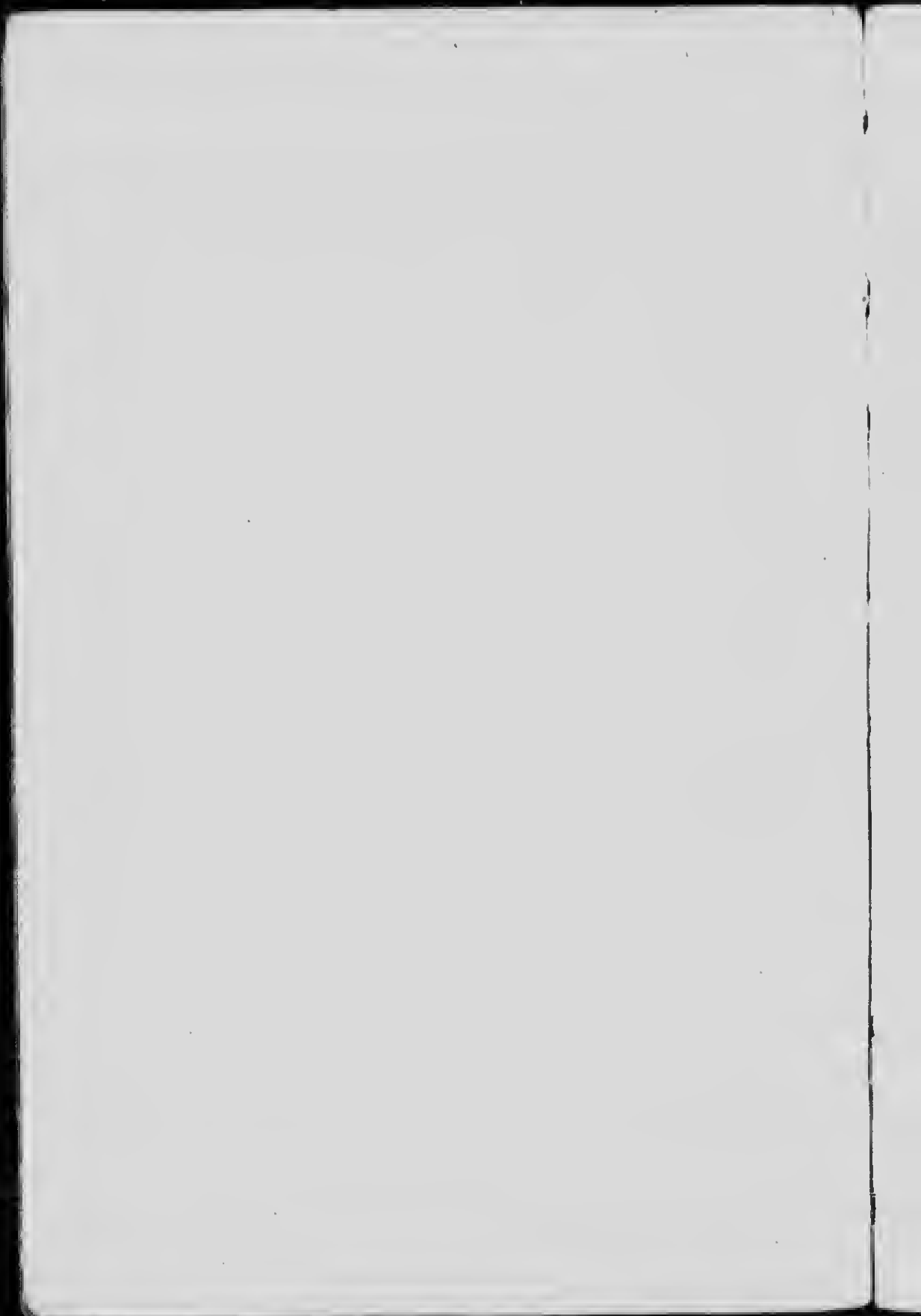
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### Dedication

*For such as take my tale and read it through  
(Unlike the unregenerate reader, who,  
By furtive glances at the final page  
Anticipates the wherefore and the why,  
Spoiling his pleasure and my work thereby)  
I write this book, and beg their patronage.*



FUEL OF FIRE



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## PROLOGUE.

First by the King, and then by the State,  
And thirdly by that which is thrice as great  
As these, and a thousandfold stronger and higher,  
Shall Baxendale Hall be made fuel of fire.

It fell upon a day (so the ancient chronicles tell us), before men had discovered that Mershire was a land whose stones were of iron and her foundations of coal, that Guy, the eldest son of Sir Stephen de Baxendale, went out hunting in the merry greenwood which lay between Baxendale Hall and Silverhampton town. And because Guy was too young to take such heed to his own steps and the steps of his steed, as an older and wiser huntsman would have done, the horse put his foot into a rabbit-hole, thereby bringing himself and his rider to the ground. In much fear and trembling the retainers picked up the unconscious form of their young master and bore him to Gorsty Hayes, a forester's lodge in the heart of the wood, which is standing to this day. There he was nursed back to consciousness by Vivien of the Glade, the forester's fair daughter, much famed in those parts for her skill in discovering healing herbs and distilling soothing potions from the same.

It was many a long day before Guy of Baxendale was sufficiently recovered to be taken home to the Hall, for his leg was broken and his body badly bruised. And



when at last he did go back, he left his heart behind him in the safe keeping of Vivien of the Glade: for even in those far-off times love flew where he listed and no man ordered his goings, just as he does unto this day, and will do as long as this round world of ours shall run its course in the light of the sun.

Then was there war in the house of Baxendale. Guy had made up his mind to wed the fair daughter of the forester; while Sir Stephen and Dame Alice his wife had made up their minds—with equal firmness—that no son of their noble name should mate with a daughter of the people.

Long before William the Norman planted his indomitable foot upon English soil, the Baxendales had taken up their abode in the heart of the Mershire forests, and there had builded themselves a stronghold against their enemies. It was rumoured that one of them had fought on the side of Ethelfleda, Queen of Mercia, in the great battle between the Danes and the Saxons; and that the Queen had delighted to honour him for his bravery on that day of blood. Be that as it may, the family had long ruled over their own fair lands in the centre of Mershire; and had accounted themselves as being made of different flesh and blood from the common people.

Therefore it was a bitter thing to Sir Stephen and Dame Alice his wife when their first-born set his heart upon Vivien, the forester's daughter. But Guy clave unto the woman, and refused to let her go; for the which should all succeeding Baxendales honour him; as a man who is not ready to leave his father and mother in order to cleave to his wife is not the clay out of which the best husbands and fathers are fashioned by the Hands of the great Potter.

While the battle was raging fierce and strong—Guy swearing that he should wed the girl whether or no, and his parents swearing that he should not—a rumour got wind in the neighbourhood (started, men said, in the first place by Dame Alice herself) that the healing skill of Vivien of the Glade had its origin in the sin of witchcraft. Then alas, and alas, for Guy of Baxendale and his ill-fated love! The rumour grew apace until women refused so much as to look at Vivien's fair face, and even brave men crossed themselves if they had to ride by Gorsty Hayes after nightfall. And at last it came to pass that the girl was seized by soldiers and carried to Baxendale Hall, where she was condemned by several worthy Justices of the Peace to be burnt alive in Silverhampton market-place as a punishment for her evil deeds, and a warning to any like-minded persons who might be tempted to follow in her unholy footsteps.

So in Silverhampton market-place she was burnt alive, close to the strange old Druidical pillar whereof no man knows the history. And just as the faggots were beginning to crackle, she broke through the rope which bound her right arm, and pointed to the thickly wooded hill on the other side of the valley, where Baxendale Hall nestled among the trees—the home of the great family who had done her to death for the sole crime of being lowly born. And as she pointed to their house she raised her voice and cursed them as they had cursed her—

“First by the King, and then by the State,  
And thirdly by that which is thrice as great  
As these, and a thousandfold stronger and higher,  
Shall Baxendale Hall be made fuel of fire.”

Then the tongues of flame leaped up and fawned upon her, like dogs of war let loose by fiendish hands; higher and higher they leaped, until the voice of cursing faded into a shriek of agony, and then died away into the silence of the eternities. And the people stood round and gazed upon the awful sight, thanking God—in their blindness and ignorance—that they were not as this woman was; while the old church of S. Peter uplifted its ancient tower above their heads, an unheeded witness to Him Who would fain have gathered them all under His Wings as a hen gathereth her chickens, but they would not; and Who would fain have taught them, in this His temple made with hands, the things that belonged to their peace, but which as yet were hid from their eyes.

Thus perished Vivien of the Glade, because she had succeeded in winning the love of Guy of Baxendale. But her curse lived on and was fulfilled to the letter.

As for Guy, he forgot his sorrow in the fierce joy of fighting in the Wars of the Roses, the love of war being stronger in some men than even the love of women. Then late in life—when he was alike too old to fight or to love any more—he took to wife a well-born damsel some thirty years younger than himself, who bore him a large family of sons and daughters. In a ripe but cheerless old age he was gathered to his fathers, and Hugh his son reigned in his stead. But until the day of his death Guy of Baxendale never again entered Silverhampton town. He turned on his heel and shook the dust of the place off his feet on the day when the woman he loved was martyred underneath the old stone pillar, in the very shadow of the church which brought—to those who had ears to hear it—the message of

peace upon earth and goodwill towards men. And he never set foot therein again.

But his children and his grandchildren married in their own class, and lived happily ever after—at least until they were removed to that strange world where rank and wealth count for less than nothing, and love and duty for so much. If they found it possible to live happily in a place where it was accounted better to be a saint than a Baxendale, no one knows; but it is somewhat difficult for even a chronicler to imagine.

Nevertheless, because human nature is stronger than pride of birth or social ambition—is stronger in fact than anything else on earth except the grace of God (and sometimes for a while apparently even stronger than that)—it came to pass, when Henry the Eighth was king, that again a Baxendale lost his heart to a daughter of the people. Once more, as of old, his parents interfered between him and the soul that God had given him, for the sake of the glory of their ancient house. And because Richard Baxendale—like his ancestor Guy—swore that he would marry the girl he loved, though she was only Agnes Tyler, daughter of a wool-merchant in Silverhampton, Agnes was sent to the convent of Greyladies, and there compelled by her father to take the veil: for how could a plain Mercian wool-merchant defy the wishes of the great Sir Wilfred Baxendale?

So Agnes possessed her sweet soul in patience within the thick stone walls of Greyladies, and passed her time in praying for Richard Baxendale, that he might do honour to his knighthood on earth and finally obtain the heavenly crown which is promised to him that overcometh. There, year after year, she watched the daffodils

cover the earth, and she thought upon those golden streets through which Richard and she should one day walk together; and she saw the wild hyacinths carpet the woodlands, and thought upon the pavement of sapphire before which Richard and she should one day kneel. She prayed also for his wife and his children; for her love was not of the earth earthy, and there was no thought of self to be found therein. As for the wool-merchant, her father, he commended himself in that he had at the same time pleased God and Sir Wilfred, by taking his daughter from the one in order to give her to the Other; and he felt that he had thereby conferred an obligation upon both of these Powers which neither of them could lightly discharge. It is always so satisfactory to a man when he can serve God and Mammon at once! There was no doubt that the wool-merchant of Silverhampton was an excellent man of business; and there was also no doubt that two of the parties involved—namely himself and Sir Wilfred—were completely satisfied with the arrangement. Whether the Third Power concerned in the transaction concurred in the approval manifested by the other two, is a more doubtful matter, and one whereof the chronicler knows nothing; but Will Tyler himself knows all about it by this time, and probably realizes at last the disadvantages of a divided service.

When Agnes was safely out of his reach, Richard took to wife the Lady Anne, daughter of the Earl of Mershire; and by her had three fine sons and four fair daughters. But his heart was always in the convent of Greyladies, some five miles from Baxendale Hall.

It was when Sir Richard's hair was thinning and

his beard was turning grey that the Reformation altered the whole political aspect of England, and Henry the Eighth appropriated to himself the religious house of Greyladies and all the properties appertaining thereto. The convent was sacked, and the nuns fled to Baxendale, taking with them as much treasure as they could carry; for Sir Richard, being but a simple English gentleman, could not understand how even kings should rise superior to the Eighth Commandment and yet go unpunished.

The King's soldiers, in the King's name, commanded Sir Richard to give up the treasures of the convent, or else they would burn Baxendale Hall to the ground; but he laughed in their faces, and swore that the nuns who had fled to him for safety should find it there until his death.

Then the King's soldiers, in the King's name, set fire to the Hall. The Lady Anne and her children escaped; but Sir Richard stayed with the nuns whom he was defending, like the brave knight that he was, and perished with them in the final crash.

Tradition says that just at the end—when all hope or chance of life was over, and death was waiting for them both—Sir Richard threw back the veil which for so long had divided him from Agnes, and kissed her once more full upon the lips, as he had been wont to kiss her long ago in the merry greenwood between Baxendale and Silverhampton. If this were so, no one saw it save the God Who made them man and woman before they were knight and nun; and therefore would not go back upon His Own handiwork; and their souls are in His keeping until this day.

Thus perished Sir Richard and the woman he had

loved: and thus was fulfilled the first part of the curse of Vivien of the Glade.

A third time it came to pass—since history has a habit of repeating itself—that a Baxendale sought a low-born bride. The Hall had been rebuilt for close upon a century when Walter Baxendale, one of the most loyal subjects of King Charles, set his heart upon Charity Freemantle, a pretty Puritan maid. But now it was the lady's father who objected—not the swain's—for Walter had lost both his parents while he was yet a boy. Joshua Freemantle swore a great oath that none of his household should touch the accursed thing: whereby he meant that none of his pretty daughters should be joined in wedlock with a supporter of the Royalist cause.

Again, as of yore, there were sweet stolen meetings in the woodlands lying west of Silverhampton town—meetings which turned the mossy paths into veritable highways of paradise, and the sun-dappled glades into fair land itself; when the shouting of the captains was drowned for a while in the hush and the hum of summer, and the sound of war could no longer be heard because of the murmur of lovers' vows and lovers' kisses.

Then came the battle of Worcester and the triumph of the Parliamentary army, when Charles fled for safety to Boscobel, and there was hid in an oak-tree from his would-be murderers. Cromwell's men suspected that the fugitive monarch was in hiding at Baxendale Hall, and they commanded the master thereof to deliver into their hands the King to whom he had sworn allegiance; a thing which Walter Baxendale would not have done if he could, since he was a

loyal man and true—and could not if he would, as the King was not at Baxendale at all, but had ridden on to Boscobel.

But in the midst of the vain search for King Charles, Joshua Freemantle—one of Cromwell's most fanatical followers—came upon his daughter Charity, in Baxendale Woods, folded in the arms of her devoted cavalier, who had just come back to her alive and unhurt from the field of Worcester. In a moment of frenzy Freemantle fired at the man he hated as men never hate save in the throes of civil warfare; but Charity, seeing what was coming, flung herself between her father and her lover, and so was slain in her lover's stead.

Then the two men engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle, the one being inspired by the love of woman and the other by the love of religion—two of the strongest forces that ever impelled men to shed blood like water.

For many minutes the deadly combat lasted, first the one seeming to get the upper hand and then the other. But Walter's heart was broken, and it is hard work fighting with a broken heart; so it came to pass that the fanatic proved too strong for the soldier and finally overthrew him, running him straight through the body with his sword. Thus the lovers lay dead together in the woodland where they had so often plighted their vows; and who shall dare to say that those vows were not fulfilled in that paradise whereof the forest of Baxendale had been but a foretaste and a type?

Joshua Freemantle then rode on to the Hall, followed by a small company of Roundheads and filled with the



passion of war and the frenzy of religious zeal. With the soldiers' help he burnt the house down to the ground, thinking (poor misguided soul!) that he was thereby doing God service; just as he thought he had saved his daughter's soul alive by slaying her in Baxendale Woods rather than let her mate with a son of Belial—as he considered all who were not supporters of Cromwell.

It was not until after Cromwell's death and the restoration to the throne of King Charles the Second, that the property was given back to Hubert Baxendale, Walter's younger brother. In the meanwhile it lay—a desolate and neglected ruin—silent save for the cawing of the rooks by day and the screeching of the owls by night. But then Hubert claimed it as his brother's heir-at-law; and the King for once recognized his claims, and restored the large estate of Baxendale to its rightful owner.

For some years Hubert Baxendale saved up his revenues in order to rebuild the Hall; and by the time that James the Second was sitting upon his brother's throne, a fine red-brick house had grown up on the old site—a house which was destined to be enlivened by the laughter of several generations of Baxendales before the third part of the ancient prophecy came true.

Thus perished Walter Baxendale and the woman of his choice: and thus was fulfilled the second part of the curse of Vivien of the Glade.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BURTONS.

"A merry heart goes all the way,"  
As Shakespeare once was pleased to say.

"It strikes me, Nancy," remarked Anthony Burton, looking critically at his cousin, "that Laurence Baxendale is inclined to admire you. I wonder at the fact, I confess; but my eagle eye cannot help perceiving it."

"I doubt if he has the sense," replied Nancy; "but it would do him all the good in the world."

Anthony tilted his straw hat still farther over his eyes. "Your lack of humility, my dear child, is only equalled by your lack of justification to be anything else but humble. What there is in you to induce any man, not bound to you by the ties of relationship, to think about you twice, I fail to imagine; but the fact remains that our friend Baxendale does think about you twice; and facts have to be reckoned with."

"Twice?—and the rest," said Nancy laconically.

"Now, if he thought twice about Nora, I should find more excuse for him," continued Anthony, turning his attention to his younger cousin; "Nora—though far from being all that I could wish—has certain claims to good looks."

"Thank you," responded Nora.

Nancy's good humour remained unruffled. "Yes;

there is no doubt that Nora is much better looking than I am. I've discovered that it is a universal law of nature that of two sisters the second is always the better looking and the taller, from the days of Leah and Rachel downwards. If there are any brains going about, the elder sister generally fixes upon them; but as there are no brains going about in our family, this doesn't affect us."

"Speak for yourself, my dear," demurred Anthony; "Nora and I are simply bursting with brain power. But we do not despise you for your inferiority in this respect; we merely pity."

But Nancy was not attending. "I'm very glad you've noticed that Mr. Baxendale is rather taken with me, for I'd got an idea that way myself; and it is a comfort to find it confirmed even by such an idiot as you, Tony."

"Allow me to tender you a hearty vote of thanks for the kind—the too kind—terms in which you are pleased to refer to my intellectual endowments," murmured Anthony.

"But he tries dreadfully hard not to admire me—that's the best of the joke. It entertains me most enormously to see him struggling to defend himself against my charms."

"I know exactly what you mean, Nan," cried Nora; "when you say anything funny he tries all he knows not to laugh, but to be properly shocked."

"Yes; doesn't he? And that makes me try to be all the funnier. And it is a pity it takes him like that; for he really has a very nice sense of humour if he'd give it its head, and not curb it with proprieties."

"Still, I don't see why he shouldn't admire you if he

wants," Anthony continued; "as I remarked before I should never want to admire you myself; but if I did feel any inclination in that extraordinary direction, I should have no conscientious scruples against indulging it to the full."

"I once knew a man," said Nancy, "who divided the girls he made love to into those he made love to on Sundays and those he made love to on week-days; and he said nothing would induce him to make love to me on a Sunday—his mother wouldn't like it—though he'd devote the six other days entirely to the pursuit with pleasure."

"Then I shouldn't have let him," interrupted Nora; "I'd have been made love to by him on Sundays or not at all. I wouldn't let a man pick and choose his times and seasons in that rude way."

"I didn't; and the result was he didn't do it at all."

"I expect that is generally the result when you are concerned," sighed Tony.

Nancy laughed. "Is it? That's all you know about it."

"But why doesn't Baxendale want to admire you? That's what I can't see."

"I suppose because he couldn't afford to marry," replied Nora wisely, "unless he married a much richer girl than one of us."

"Oh! I don't think it's that," objected Nancy. "Mr. Baxendale is just the sort of man to marry the most unsuitable woman he could find. You see he is high-principled and honourable and conscientious; and honourable, conscientious people always have scruples against knowing the right men or marrying the right women."

"Then what is his objection to you?" persisted Tony. "If you aren't rich enough, aren't you poor enough?"

"I don't believe it is money at all; money would never enter into the counsels of such a man as Laurence Baxendale. He thinks I'm common; that's where the shoe pinches."

"Confound his cheek! Where does the commonness come in, I should like to know?"

"Oh! he thinks it is very low not to have strolled into England with William the Conqueror, and sat still here ever since. He is the sort of man who expects you to be always taking your ancestors about with you, and getting them to give you letters of introduction. He never moves without taking a lot of ancestors about with him, just as some people never move without taking a lot of servants."

"I know the sort."

"I thought he'd have had a fit the other day when I said that somehow we'd mislaid our great-great-grandfather; and though we'd searched for him diligently in the rag-bag and the wastepaper-basket, we couldn't lay our hands on him anywhere. He didn't in the least see that it was funny."

Nora shook her pretty head. "How tiresome of him! I can't bear people who don't see when things are funny."

"Well, he generally does see when things are funny—that is one of his principal charms in my eyes; but he regards family and birth and blood and all that sort of thing as far too sacred to be trifled with or lightly spoken of. I'm thankful that I belong to a new family that has no curse, but gas and water laid on."

"There is good reason for your *Te Deum*," agreed Anthony.

"Now Mr. Baxendale has a curse and everything else that is correct and uncomfortable and aristocratic; and he thinks it dreadfully plebeian of us to be making iron. In fact he is one of the people who think it is dreadfully vulgar to make anything but mistakes; and of those they make plenty."

"Oh! I've heard a good deal about him from Faith Fairfax," said Nora. "Mr. Baxendale is tremendously clever, and went to Oxford with a sort of scholarship which they called a post-office-order of Merton, or something like that."

"I believe that Faith Fairfax is in love with him," Nancy remarked.

The other two looked up with interest.

"What makes you think that?" asked Nora.

"Because she always knows where he is, and always pretends that she doesn't."

"Now Faith would be a suitable match for our friend," Tony remarked; "she'd have property enough to set Baxendale Hall on its legs again; and propriety enough not to knock Laurence off his."

Nancy nodded. "I know that; and that would be just the reason why he would never fall in love with her. Trust him for invariably going against his own interests when he has the chance."

"I think it would be rather dull to be in love with Mr. Baxendale," said Nora; "it would be like going to an oratorio every day of one's life, or having board and lodging in a cathedral."

"What rubbish!" Nancy exclaimed. "Besides, oratorios and cathedrals are very nice in their way."

"Of course they are, Nancy dear; I only said it would be rather dull to be married to one."

"Well, I don't agree with you. Mr. Baxendale is an ideal sort of person, with high aims and sound principles and everything else *en suite*. And though it would be horrid to have ideal people for one's relations, I think they are the most satisfactory sort to fall in love with."

Nora looked doubtful. "But why?"

"Well, you see," explained Nancy, "falling in love is an ideal sort of thing; and if you fell in love with a person, and then found he was sordid and commonplace, it would be like seeing an angel and then finding the angelic robes were made of cheap calico. Now Mr. Baxendale is tiresome and trying and absurdly fastidious; but he would always be more or less ideal. I don't mean he is ideal in the sense of being faultless—but that he is ideal in the sense of always seeing the right course and, as far as in him lies, of following it."

"Faith is ideal too," said Nora softly.

"Faith is an angel," Nancy agreed emphatically.

"And not an angel in cheap calico either," added her cousin.

"No; Faith is just perfect," Nancy continued; "but all the same it would do Mr. Baxendale far more good to fall in love with me than with her."

"I should have thought ideal people ought to fall in love with ideal people," suggested Tony, "on the approved principle of 'a hair of the dog that bit you'; and in that case Baxendale and Miss Fairfax seem made to order for each other. It would be a match, not only striking on the box, but striking from every possible point of view."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "'A hair of the dog that bit you' is supposed to be curative, you silly; and love is the one disease that is the worse for being cured."

I think that Laurence and Faith would cure each other of perfection by their own perfectness; and then where would they be, stupid?"

"Goodness—or badness—only knows!"

"Now it is an education for any one to fall in love with one of us Burtons," Nancy went on; "I've often noticed it."

"So have I," her cousin agreed; "and that has led me to make the educational process as easy and pleasant as possible to such young ladies as appeared to me worthy of the training and likely to do it justice."

"You see we are so healthy-minded that we cure any tendency to morbidness at once; and we are so natural that affectation cannot exist within our borders. Then we are funny; and, as a rule, the curse of love is seriousness. Love as a tragedy is a bore; but love as a comedy is a delight to the actors, and is worth ten-and-six a stall to the audience. Now no one could regard a love-affair with one of us in the light of a tragedy, could they?"

"They certainly could not," replied Anthony; "unless, of course, we accepted them."

"Still I'm not sure that this is altogether a virtue," Nora remarked sadly. "I believe people enjoy a love-affair more if they can cry over it; and we never can."

"That's the worst of us," said Nancy with a sigh; "we spoil half the fun of life by laughing at it. If we could only cry over things, and not see that they are funny, we should enjoy them a million times more. I'm sure we should. It spoils a love-affair to see the funny side of it; and yet I always do."

"Mr. Baxendale wouldn't see the funny side of a love-affair," said Nora.



"Oh! yes, he would—that's just the sort of thing he would see the joke of. It is only solemn things—such as truth and honour and the Church and the Baxendales—that he takes so seriously. As a matter of fact, I believe he is too superior a person to fall in love at all; he would think it *infra dig.* for a Baxendale to love an ordinary woman; and that is why it would do him such a world of good to fall in love with me. It is extremely good for people to be obliged to do what they consider *infra dig.*; it knocks the nonsense out of them."

"It seems to me," remarked Anthony, "that there is a good deal of nonsense to be knocked out of Mr. Laurence Baxendale; and that our beloved Nancy would enjoy the job."

"I really believe I should," agreed Nancy.

"The worst of Mr. Baxendale is that he is so frightening," said Nora; "he says such sarcastic things."

"Oh! I'm not frightened of him," replied her sister airily. (But she was.)

"I always feel he is despising us and making fun of us," Nora went on; "he has such a dreadfully sneering way with him."

"I don't care whether he sneers or not," Nancy persisted.

"But I thought you were under the impression that he admired you," suggested her cousin.

"So he does; but he doesn't approve of me; that's all the difference."

"I wonder if he ever laughs at his mother," remarked Nora; "she is so deliciously vague that it must indeed be a privation to be prevented by

the Fifth Commandment from thoroughly enjoying her."

Nancy shook her head. "No, I feel sure he doesn't. Mr. Baxendale is the sort of man that the Commandments would have great weight with. And, by the way, here he comes in the flesh round the corner of the terrace, so I can begin the knocking-out process at once." And the three young Burtons hoisted themselves up out of the garden chairs in which they were lounging, and went to meet a slight, fair, aristocratic-looking man who was being piloted by a footman across the lawn.

It was a summer's afternoon, and Anthony and his cousins were sitting in the garden of Wayside, the Burtons' house, about three miles from the manufacturing town of Silverhampton. Mr. Burton, the girls' father, was an iron-master, as his father had been before him; and he and Anthony drove every day to the Works in the dark valley on the other side of that ridge which divides, as by a straight line, the Black Country of the Midlands from the woods and hills and meadowlands of West Mershire.

Mr. Burton had married a Miss Farrington—a distant cousin of the Farringtons of Sedgehill—and they were blessed with two sons and two daughters: Nancy who had wit and Nora who had beauty, respectively aged twenty-two and eighteen; and two small boys—Arthur and Ambrose—who were enjoying life and neglecting their education at a preparatory school.

Anthony, the only child of Mr. Burton's late brother, had inherited his father's share in the Works, and was now his uncle's sole partner. His mother died when

he was born; and since the death of his father, when Anthony was only ten years old, the latter had made Wayside his home, and had been treated by Mr. and Mrs. Burton exactly as if he were a son of their own. To Nancy and Nora he had always been as the kindest of brothers; and, although he teased them in brotherly fashion, he was—also in brotherly fashion—ready to fight their battles to the death, and to knock down any other man who should ever venture to tease them as he did.

The Burtons were a light-hearted race who had never known either great riches or uncomfortable poverty, and so were innocent alike of the responsibilities of the one and the anxieties of the other. They had never been rich enough to be economical, nor poor enough to be extravagant; so they took life easily, and extracted pleasure from the most unpromising sources; and—as is the custom in this too sorrowful world—were popular in proportion to their cheerfulness. Mankind, as at present constituted, dearly loves the people who make it laugh.

Wayside, the local habitation of the Burtons, was a red-brick house on the high road leading from Silverhampton to Salopshire and thence to the western sea. It was approached from the road by a long, solemn drive, bordered by specimen shrubs, which Nancy said had a depressing appearance, because evergreens always gave her the blues; but the house itself was cheerful and comfortable enough; and the garden at the back faded away into fields, which in their turn ended in some of the prettiest lanes in England. As a child Nancy thought that these lanes led straight into fairyland; as a woman she knew that they did; but this

fuller knowledge only came after she had trodden those green and mysterious ways in company with the man of her choice—and sundry others. There was nothing narrow or exclusive about Nancy: her power of making friends was only equalled by her capacity of turning these friends into lovers on the slightest provocation; and if the friends declined to be thus transformed, no bitterness was excited in Nancy's breast, as it might have been in the breast of a more sentimental and serious-minded young woman. Everything was fish that came to her net; and if it was not fish it was fowl or good red herring, which did quite as well as far as she was concerned. If men fell in love with her, she enjoyed their love; if they were only friends with her, she enjoyed their friendship; and she regarded either as the best joke in the world for the time being. Nora to a great extent moulded herself upon Nancy; for if Nora was the beauty, Nancy had the stronger personality.

Nora Burton really was extremely pretty, with dark brown hair, large blue eyes, and a bright pink colour; she was tall and slender, and carried herself like a queen. Nancy always described herself—and with much truth—as “a Colonial edition of Nora”; she was shorter and paler, with darker hair; and her eyes were smaller than her sister's, though quite as blue. The boys were more like Nora—a merry, good-looking, little couple. All the Burtons were endowed with a very saving faith in themselves and a very sincere admiration for each other, and—which is the secret of all true family (and conjugal) happiness—they appreciated and applauded one another's jokes to the full. Even the love which beareth and believeth all things staggers

now and then when its attempts at wit are greeted with the stony stare of the unamused; but the Burtons knew better than to put their family affection to so severe a test.

Nancy crossed the lawn to greet Laurence Baxendale; and then devoted herself to charming her guest to the utmost extent of her power—as was her invariable custom whether the guest happened to be male or female.

“Come and sit down,” she said; “I have told Frederick to bring out tea and mother at once, as I feel sure you must be dying for one or the other.”

Mr. Baxendale bowed. “Thank you, Miss Burton. Naturally both will be welcome; but it would be invidious—wouldn't it?—to point out which will be the more so.”

“We have just been talking about you,” Nancy observed, as the four young people seated themselves.

Laurence winced; he was one of the few people who dislike being talked about. But this of course was inexplicable to Nancy, who would rather have been abused than not mentioned at all. “Indeed! what have you found to say about me?” he asked.

“We have agreed that you are rather like a cathedral or an oratorio; and that we are decidedly frightened of you.”

“I should not have thought that you would be frightened of me,” replied Laurence, who was frightened out of his wits at Miss Burton, and the terrible doubt as to what she might choose to say next—for whatever she chose, that would she say. “I am a most harmless creature.”

“Oh! yes, you're harmless enough; but you are

dreadfully truthful and upright; and that is what makes you so cathedrally."

"I never feel like a cathedral," Mr. Baxendale protested.

"And you don't look like one. Elephants always look like walking cathedrals, don't you think?—when you see them strolling about at the Zoo; just as if they were built of grey stone, which had been exposed to the elements for centuries."

"I can't say, Miss Burton; I don't know that I have ever seen a walking cathedral."

"But you've seen a circulating library; and that's something of the same sort. But, as I was saying, you don't look like a cathedral—you only shed a gentle and cathedrally sort of influence; and that is because you are so truthful and upright."

"It is generally supposed to be the best policy, isn't it? So at least I have always been told."

"Then you have been brought up on proverbs," said Nora, joining in the conversation; "and they are invariably misleading."

"Of course they are," added Nancy; "if you let yourself be guided by proverbs you will believe that the better you behave the better-looking you will become; which—as Euclid wisely remarked—is absurd."

"Then aren't you truthful and upright?" asked Laurence, endeavouring to divert the conversation from himself and his moral excellencies.

Nancy laughed. "Not we! We never tell the truth unless we are convinced that it is funnier than fiction; and we always take what doesn't belong to us if we happen to fancy it."

"From hearts down to postage stamps," added Anthony under his breath.

"But none of us has ever stolen on a large scale except mother," Nancy went on. "Did you ever hear the tale of mother in the boot-shop, Mr. Baxendale?"

"No; please tell it me."

"Well, one day at the seaside I went with mother to buy a new pair of boots. She tried on several pairs in the orthodox fashion, and finally settled upon a pair that were faintly less uncomfortable than the others; whereupon we left the shop. All the way home we saw people looking at us and giggling; and, though we feel we are worthy of all notice, we see nothing in our appearance to excite mirth. Therefore we wondered."

"Naturally," said Laurence.

"At last one woman, braver than the rest, stopped us, and said to mother, between paroxysms of laughter, 'Are you aware, madam, that you have a bunch of baby's shoes hanging behind you?' It turned out—would you believe it?—that when mother sat down to be tried on, a bunch of children's shoes had caught on the fringe of her mantle; and she had walked with them dangling behind her all up the street. You know the sort; ankle-straps in every conceivable shade of leather. Of course we nearly died of laughing; and that is the only time any one of us has ever been actually convicted of shop-lifting. But here is the thief herself."

Tea and Mrs. Burton arrived simultaneously; and the former was dispensed by Nancy with much enlivening conversation, wherein the others joined, and which Mr. Baxendale—in spite of his efforts to the contrary—enjoyed to the full. And when a man has to make an effort not to enjoy the conversation of one particular woman, things are pretty bad with him.

At last he rose. "I wonder what o'clock it is. I seem to be staying an unconscionable time, like Charles the Second; but to me it has appeared short, as I daresay it did to him."

Nancy looked at her watch-bracelet. "I am not a very good guide as to time, because my watch is always either ten minutes too slow or three-quarters of an hour too fast, and you never can be quite sure which."

"There must be something wrong with its internal arrangements," said Mrs. Burton with her pleasant laugh; "which perhaps accounts for your always being late for everything, Nancy dear."

"Maybe; anyway I must admit that punctuality is the one virtue which I don't happen to possess."

"Can I do anything towards the watch's recovery?" asked Laurence, holding out his hand for the pretty toy.

"No, thank you. When it is worse than usual I just give it a stir up inside with a hairpin."

Laurence smiled. "That's a bit drastic, isn't it?"

"But it always does it good. For at least a week after the hairpin treatment it never loses more than five minutes in the day, or gains more than thirty; but after that it drops back into its old evil ways again, just as we all do the next week but one after a really stirring sermon."

"I am afraid sermons never stir me up at all, whatever hairpins might do," said Laurence.

"Oh! but they stir up Nancy," cried Nora: "sermons I mean of course—not hairpins."

Nancy nodded. "I should just think they do. They give me thrills all down my back, and make me really an exquisite character for about four days. Once for



a week after Mr. Arbuthnot had preached about unselfishness, I went for a walk with Nora every day; and another time, after he'd preached against vanity and love of dress, I let Tony go for a whole afternoon with his tie wriggling up over the back of his collar, and never told him of it."

"And I was not behind you in virtuous behaviour," added Anthony; "that very same sermon led me to leave a smut, which had settled upon our dear Nancy's ineffective nose, unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung for at least four good hours by Shrewsbury cloek. And it was on a day when she was particularly fancying herself, too."

Nancy tossed her head. "What a goose you are, Tony! All the same I wonder how you could resist the pleasure of finding fault with me when there was any just ground for such fault finding."

"I admit it was difficult, my dear young cousin; a less self-denying man could not have withstood the temptation. There are some things which are absolutely necessary to a man's wellbeing and peace of mind, and one of them is pointing out the faults of his female relations."

"Another is pointing out, in a photograph of any place which he has visited, the hotel where he happened to stay," said Nancy; "no normal human being—either man or woman—can help doing that."

"And if we can put a cross opposite our own particular bedroom window, delight reaches the point of ecstasy," added Laurence.

Anthony gazed at Nancy in mock admiration. "My dear young friend, you are too clever by half; if you get much sharper you'll cut yourself."

"Well, I haven't yet, anyhow; though I've often been tempted to cut you."

"There you are, at it again," sighed Anthony. "When shall I persuade you to be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever? It would be such a pleasant change if you would! And, besides, you'll never get a husband if you go on scintillating like this; men don't want a blaze of fireworks on their own hearthstones."

"They'll want me right enough, whether I heart's-stone or whether I firework," retorted Nancy, who never could resist squabbling with Tony when she had the chance.

"In that case," replied her cousin, "they'll soon find out their mistake—at least the fortunate (or rather the unfortunate) one whom you select will. The beautiful firework, so fiercely sought, will become an intolerable nuisance by being confined to its domestic hearthstone. I'm sure I pity the poor fellow, whoever he may be. When I meet him I shall hug my single-blessedness, feeling how far my high failure overleaps the bounds of his low success."

Mr. Baxendale turned to Nancy. "Do you know, I think your cousin is rather wasting his sympathy?"

"No, I'm not," persisted Anthony. "You don't know her as well as I do."

"Which is my misfortune rather than my fault?"

"That may be; but it is a most fortunate misfortune for you. She'll make a strict wife, won't she, Nora?"

"Not she," replied the younger Miss Burton. "Of course she'll expect the man to do things her way instead of his own, but that will only be good for him."

"And though I shall expect the man to do things my way instead of his own, I shall never expect him

to say, or even to think, that it is a better way than his own; that's where lots of women make such a mistake."

"Wise Naney!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton.

"Well, all the same I return to my point," said Anthony, "and that is that Nancy is becoming too clever to get a husband at all."

Naney merely made a face at him, without taking the trouble to reply.

"You silly children!" said Mrs. Burton rising from her chair, and shaking Laurence's outstretched hand. "Well, if you must go, good-bye, Mr. Baxendale. I am afraid you will imagine that I have a most frivolous family."

"I shan't think any the worse of them on that score," Laurence politely expostulated.

But he did—in those days before Naney had taught him how wise it is to be silly sometimes, and how dull it is (when once one has been silly) to become wise again.

## CHAPTER II.

### BAXENDALE HALL.

Upon a hill the old house stood,  
Commanding stream and field and wood.

BAXENDALE HALL, which was built for the third time—having been twice destroyed by fire—in the reign of James the Second, was a fine, square house of red brick, with stone facings. It stood in the centre of an undulating park, on the borders of Mershire and Salopshire, about a mile from a small hamlet known as The Ways; and the house was situated upon such an eminence that its cellars were on a line with the tower of Silverhampton Church. Thus Silverhampton Church and Baxendale Hall looked at each other, from their respective hills, across a fruitful and well-populated valley—a pleasant land of meadows and orchards and comfortable houses, made happy by the money that was coined in the murky coal-fields on the other side of the town.

The Baxendales were one of the oldest families in Mershire, and they had lived at Baxendale Hall ever since Doomsday Book was compiled, and probably before that. But of late years their prosperity had dwindled, as is the way of all prosperity which has its being solely in land; and when the late Mr. Baxendale died of a broken heart, owing to the pecuniary difficulties

which beset him, it was found that the rents of the estate were so reduced, and the mortgages upon it so heavy, that his son came into an income of a very few hundreds a year; and those few hundreds were made still fewer by the enormous fire insurance which all the owners of Baxendale were bound to pay, in consideration of the family curse which foretold that Baxendale Hall should once more—for the third time—"be made fuel of fire".

The late Mr. Baxendale had married for love and not for money—a peculiarity of his race—the Lady Alicia Moate, daughter of the Earl of Portcullis; and by her had one child, a son, Laurence. Her ladyship possessed as little wit as money, but she had beauty in excess; and for her beauty Alwyn Baxendale loved, wooed and married her, and lived beyond his income; and finally died broken-hearted because that income was insufficient to supply her somewhat exorbitant daily needs.

The Ways was probably so called because five ways met there: one went eastward past the Burtons' house, and through the pretty village of Tettleigh, straight to Silverhampton; another took the opposite direction, and led the traveller, by the hills of Salopshire and Wales, to the coast of the western sea; a third went northward down a shady lane, past Ways Hall, the home of the Fairfax family, to Codswell—a picturesque village whose cobble-paved street climbed bravely up a church-crowned hill, which stood as high as Baxendale or Silverhampton; a fourth lay through the well-wooded glades of Baxendale Park, and finally, by slow ascents, reached the Hall itself; and the fifth went due south into a green maze of lanes, which

wandered on and on until they finally lost themselves in fairyland—as English lanes have a habit of doing, if only they are taken in the right way.

There are few things more beautiful than a Mershire lane. It is beautiful in the winter, when the elm-trees that overshadow it are transformed into coral-reefs by the magic touch of the hoar-frost; it is beautiful in the spring, when its hedges are white with May-blossom, and its ditches fringed with the lace-like hemlock; and it is beautiful in the autumn, when the climbing bramble adorns it on either side with crimson and gold; but it is most beautiful of all on a summer's evening, when the low-lying shafts of light touch the bents and the feathery grasses, and turn the pathway into a golden pavement encircled by a veritable rainbow of emerald, until the traveller feels that he is treading a ladder worthy of the feet of angels, leading him—as the beauty of nature is meant to lead men—straight from earth to heaven.

The spot where these five ways met was marked by a group of fine old elm-trees, growing upon a grassy mound; and round about it were clustered a farm or two and sundry cottages, a picturesque post-office and a blacksmith's forge. It was a pretty hamlet in the typical English style; and its quaint little inn, The Crown, slumbered in a cosy bed of blossom, with a coverlet of climbing roses.

Ways Hall was a long, low, white house, clothed with Virginia creeper, which made it as a green bower in summer, while in autumn it appeared as a house which was enveloped by crimson flames, and yet not consumed. It was set in the centre of velvet lawns which—like the famous lawns of Oxford—had been

rolled for five hundred years, and which stoped down to a large sheet of water inhabited—and defended to the best of their ability—by a family of swans. The banks of this lake were covered every spring with daffodils and periwinkles, which looked at their reflection in the water and danced with pleasure at the sight. At least the daffodils did; the periwinkles only nodded and said to themselves, "What pretty blue eyes we have!"

The Fairfaxes of The Ways were an ancient family, which had dwindled down to two—namely, Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter Faith. Mrs. Fairfax was one of those rare women, replete with charm, whom age cannot wither and whose infinite variety custom cannot stale; and Faith was the raw material out of which saints and angels are manufactured. She had soft fair hair, and a Madonna-like face; and in her eyes was that look which dwells in the eyes of all those chosen ones who see beyond this present world. Unselfish was an adjective not applicable to Faith Fairfax; selfless was the only description available for her. Had she lived in earlier times Faith would inevitably have taken the veil, for she was one of the women who have a special vocation for religion, and seem made for the cloister rather than the hearth. As it was, she devoted herself to her mother and the poor; and the human side of her—as far as anything about Faith Fairfax was purely human—fell in love with Laurence Baxendale, and loved him in the ideal, worshipping way in which only such nun-like women can love. The high-minded, inflexible part of his character, which stirred up opposition in Nancy Burton, fitted exactly into Faith's more saintly nature; and,

while Nancy was slightly defiant and greatly afraid, Faith was humbly adoring.

As a boy, whenever anything went wrong, Laurence turned to Faith to set it right again; as a man, he pursued very much the same course. She was a year or two older than he, and filled in his life the place which his mother had left empty; for motherliness was the last attribute which could be laid to the charge of pretty, foolish Lady Alicia.

It is strange how, in the give and take of life, men take from the angelic and give to the purely human women with whom they are brought into contact. They make demands—excessive demands—upon the patience and forbearance and unselfishness of the women who love them; but it is the women who make excessive demands upon them that they love the best. Women who behave well rather than wisely take credit to themselves for carrying their own cloaks, and climbing over their own stiles, and generally saving trouble for the men who are treading life's paths by their side. Foolish creatures! The men want to carry their cloaks and help them over the stiles, if only they will let them. Which shows that the proverbial selfishness of man is as effete and worn out a bogey as the dodo or the sea-serpent or religious disability.

But to return to Baxendale Hall, with which—rather than with *The Ways*—this story has to do. The most interesting feature of the house was a large library, filled with all manner of rare old books and fine pictures, and containing many priceless manuscripts and valuable prints. It occupied the whole length of the front of the house upon the first floor, and was exactly over the great entrance hall. Behind it,



and over the reception rooms, was the suite of rooms always occupied by the master and mistress of the house; and next to these the nurseries and schoolroom, where generations of little Baxendales had played their games and learned their lessons. The guest-chambers were in one wing of the house, over the justice-room and the muniment-room, and the rooms where the men smoked, played billiards and managed the estate; the opposite wing was devoted to the kitchens and offices, and over them were the servants' apartments. The front of the Hall looked east, to where the old churches of Silverhampton and Sedgehill stood as landmarks to the surrounding country; and the gardens at the back borrowed much of their glory from the sun which set behind the distant Welsh hills.

"I wish, mother, if it wouldn't bother you, that you would see rather more of the Burton girls," Laurence Baxendale said to Lady Alicia, the day after he had been to tea at Wayside. "I know they aren't exactly your style; but I should be extremely glad if you would be kind to them, as they are always very kind to me, and I enjoy going there immensely."

"Certainly, dear Laurence, certainly. Mrs. Burton called on me and I have returned the call, but there is no real friendship in conventionalities such as these; and real friendship is so beautiful between neighbours, I think—so very beautiful; and makes everyday life such a touching and exquisite thing."

"Yes; it is a good thing to be on friendly terms with the people about you."

"As you say, dear Laurence, they are not exactly my style or in our set; their father makes iron, and I think it is beautiful to make iron—it must teach men

to be so great and strong. And then it is so sweet and Christian, I always think, to show kindness to persons not quite in one's own rank of society; because I dare say one can do one's duty in an ironworks as well as on a landed property. In fact one can do one's duty in almost any rank of life; that is such a comforting thought, because it is always so nice for everybody to do their duty if they can. There is something very soothing in doing one's duty, don't you think?"

"Soothing isn't exactly the word I should have used," said Laurence dryly.

"And then the Burton girls are so charming, too—such sweet, simple, unsophisticated creatures!"

Lady Alicia had an amiable habit of praising all the people with whom she was brought into contact; but she slightly took the edge off her own commendation by invariably praising them for the qualities which they did not happen to possess.

The next afternoon she walked up to Wayside, and found the girls and their mother at home.

"I am so glad you are in, dear Mrs. Burton," she began in her usual gushing manner; "it always seems so insincere and hollow to call upon people when they are not at home; and insincerity and hollowness are such terrible things, don't you think?—such very terrible things."

"They are certainly not lovable qualities," agreed Mrs. Burton; and Nancy winked at Nora behind Lady Alicia's elegant back.

"I want to see more of you and your dear girls. I was only saying to my son yesterday how beautiful it is to be neighbourly with the people who live near one

—so sweet and Christian—even if they don't happen to be the sort of people one would choose."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Lady Alicia," replied Mrs. Burton, manfully repressing her natural desire to smile.

"And what are your dear girls' Christian names? I am always so much interested in people's Christian names and the months in which their birthdays are. I think one can learn so much from these, don't you? They are so interesting and suggestive, and often such a key to character."

"Do you mean to the characters of the people themselves, or of their godfathers and godmothers?" asked Nancy with ominous demureness.

"Oh! dear child, of the people themselves, of course; how could it be a key to the character of their godfathers and godmothers, when we never know who their godfathers and godmothers are? They are not given in the Peerage, you know; though I am not at all sure that they ought not to be. It would be rather nice and orthodox if they were, don't you think?"

"It would be rather interesting," said Nancy, "as showing from whom they expected to inherit fortunes."

"And there is so much in names. I always think it was such a mistake of dear Shakespeare to say that a rose would smell as sweet if you called it something else; it couldn't, you know. And what are your dear girls' names, Mrs. Burton?"

"Nancy and Nora."

"Oh, how sweet! How very sweet, for them both to begin with the same letter! I always think there is so much sympathy between people whose names begin with the same letter. It was such a comfort to me that

my dear husband's name began with A, like mine. Do you know, I don't think I could ever have loved a man whose Christian name began with B? He would have seemed so far off; almost as if he were living in another planet. I remember once meeting a man and his wife who were called Francis and Frances. I thought it so very touching and beautiful."

"It will be rather a bore if Nancy and I have to marry men whose names begin with N," said Nora; "because there are so few nice men's names beginning with N."

"And it would be horrid to marry men who weren't nice," added Nancy.

Lady Alicia took it all in solemn earnest. "Oh! dear children, there is Nathaniel—not exactly a pretty name, but so Biblical and suggestive. I think it must be lovely to have a Bible name, especially on Sundays; it must make one feel in such perfect harmony with the day."

"But we can't both marry men who are called Nathaniel," persisted Nancy; "it would be so very confusing, and we should get them all mixed up."

"So you would, my dear; but I feel sure there are other nice names beginning with N if only one could recall them."

"But you didn't call your son by a name beginning with A," suggested Nora.

"Ah! no. Dear Laurence was called after an ancestor of his who did something very heroic and touching; I forget exactly what it was. And I think it is so ennobling to call one's children by names which remind one of heroic deeds, don't you? It seems to elevate the tone of everyday life by beautiful memories; and

there is nothing more refining, I find, than beautiful memories. Ah! what a priceless gift memory is! What should we do without it, I wonder?"

The girls thought that Lady Alicia ought to know; but they did not say so.

Her ladyship ambled on as usual, without giving any one else a chance to speak. "I do hope, dear Mrs. Burton, that your girls are cultured. I think it is so sweet for young people to be cultured, and to read nice poetry. I remember when I was a girl I used to read all the poetry I could lay my hands on, except Lord Byron's *Don Quixote*; dear papa never would allow that."

"Ah! we have not been allowed to read it either," remarked Naney.

"Haven't you? How very interesting! I think it is so very beautiful when parents overlook their children's reading; it seems to bring the Fifth Commandment into everyday life. And it is so sweet and Christian to keep the Commandments when one can. I think one should always try to do so for the sake of setting the servants a good example, if not for one's own."

"I think it is nice for parents to take an interest in everything that their children do," said Mrs. Burton.

"It is indeed, dear Mrs. Burton. And I do hope your young people are fond of culture. I am devoted to reading myself; but unfortunately the minute I begin to read my thoughts begin to wander, so unfortunately I am unable to indulge my literary tastes as I should wish. It is a great deprivation!"

"But you have the pleasure of your own thoughts," suggested Nora; "and that is far greater. I'd much rather think my own thoughts than read other people's."

Lady Alicia sighed. "Ah! my dear, that is because you are not literary; if you had my temperament you would live upon books. I remember once starting a Shakespeare-reading-society when I was living with my dear brother, Lord Portcullis, for all the girls in the neighbourhood. I thought it would train their minds; and it is so nice for the minds of the young to be trained."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Burton; and she had not time to say more before Lady Alicia went on:—

"Of course there are things in dear Shakespeare not altogether suitable for the young to read; so I asked the clergyman's wife to mark all the passages which she felt could be read without detriment to the fresh and untrained minds I was endeavouring to cultivate. I think clergymen's wives are just the people to do that sort of thing, don't you, dear Mrs. Burton? It seems exactly the kind of duty they would enjoy."

"I feel sure they would. And did this particular one justify the confidence you had placed in her?" Mrs. Burton asked.

"Well, it was very unfortunate, but there was a mistake. Instead of marking all the passages to be read, as I had asked her, she marked all the passages to be left out. And so naturally the class read those and left out the others. But how could I help it? I assumed that she had done what I had asked her."

The two girls coughed violently in order to stifle their laughter, and their mother managed to inquire with a fairly sober front: "But didn't it occur to you at the time what had happened?"

"Well, it did occur to me that the remarks were a little disjointed. But remarks are often disjointed in

plays—to allow for changing the scenery or the actors' clothes, I suppose; so I took it as a matter of course. But it was annoying all the same. It made people laugh; though what there was to laugh at I cannot imagine. But that is a growing evil of the present day. People treat everything as a joke, and speak lightly of quite serious things."

"It is a virtue of the present day, I think," argued Nancy, "to laugh instead of to cry, whenever it is possible. My heart is like Beatrice's—'poor fool, it keeps on the windy side of care'; and I'm thankful for it."

Lady Alicia sighed her dainty little sigh. "Ah! my poor dear husband was like that, and so is Laurence. They both of them have always laughed at things that seem to me quite pathetic. But then I am extremely sensitive, and my poor husband was not, nor is Laurence. They could not of course help being so unlike me, nor do I in any way blame them for it; but it has been to me a matter of regret."

"What sort of things does Mr. Baxendale laugh at?" asked Nancy, who was athirst for any form of knowledge concerning Laurence.

"Just the things his poor dear father used to laugh at—things that you would have expected them to be quite sorry about instead. Our poverty, for instance, and the way we have come down in the world; and his own shyness and unpopularity; and the fact that he can't afford to marry; and lots of really quite sad things like that."

"I see." And Nancy's voice was very low.

"I often say to him what a pity it is that he can't afford to marry, because a charming wife is such a nice

thing for a man to have. In fact, I should quite pity him about it, poor boy! if only he would let me. But whenever I mention the subject he just turns it off into a joke, and never seems to take it seriously at all, so my sympathy is wasted. And I am such a sympathetic creature, that Laurence's callousness pains me."

"I don't think it need," said Mrs. Burton gently.

"Ah! but I am so tender-hearted; I shrivel up like a sensitive plant when my feelings are hurt, and Laurence is always hurting them. I am sure he does not mean to do so; but he is so thick-skinned that he does not understand a sensitive nature like mine. His poor father was just the same."

"What sort of things did he laugh at?" repeated Nancy with unslaked curiosity.

"Oh! he used to laugh at our poverty too, and at what a wretched match he had turned out for me. Of course I ought to have done much better, and I used to say so; but he just treated it as a joke. And it really was no joke at all for me, who had so many really good offers when I was young."

Nancy's lip curled with scorn, and she judged Lady Alicia with the merciless judgment of those who have neither married nor been disappointed in marriage.

"People used to say," her ladyship continued, "that Alwyn died of a broken heart when he found that he would be obliged to turn out of Baxendale. But that was quite a mistake, and merely shows how people ought not to talk about things which they do not understand. That is another of the faults of the rising generation, dear Mrs. Burton. People are so prone—so sadly prone—to talk about matters which are quite beyond their comprehension."



"And not only of the rising generation," said Mrs. Burton dryly.

"Ah! no; it was a fault of my poor dear Alwyn's. He never in the least understood my finer perceptions, and yet he was always talking about them in a slightly sarcastic way; and he had none of his own, poor dear!"

"Ah!" interpolated Nancy.

"And as for dying because he could not afford to live at Baxendale," Lady Alicia continued, "it was all nonsense. He never really felt it at all, but made jokes about bringing me to the workhouse till the hour of his death. Now I did feel it, who had been brought up in such luxury, and always expected to make such a brilliant match."

"I have no doubt that you did," said Mrs. Burton kindly, endeavouring—as was her custom—to make the best of everybody. "Both you and Mr. Baxendale must have felt leaving such a beautiful home."

"But he didn't feel it; that was the remarkable thing. He just laughed at it as he did at everything else—a sad habit, as I remarked a few minutes ago, and one which I grieve to say dear Laurence inherits! Almost the last thing he said to me, about an hour before his death, was to make a half-laughing apology for having given me only a heart full of love instead of a purse full of money; but adding that he was about to make the only reparation in his power."

"Poor Mr. Baxendale!" And Mrs. Burton's eyes were full of tears.

"Oh! do you think so? For my part, it quite shocked me to hear him speaking sarcastically at such a time. I cannot think that a deathbed is the place for sarcasm. It seems to me so sweet to read the

Bible and speak lovingly to all your friends at a time like that, so as to leave a nice impression behind you."

Nancy tossed her head. "It is a pity that a trifling incident, such as death, should divert the minds of some people from the importance of making an effective exit." She was very impertinent—there was no doubt of that; but perhaps there was some excuse for her.

Her impertinence, however, was lost upon Lady Alicia. That lady would as soon have expected a girl Nancy's rank to be pert to her, as she would have expected a polyanthus to jump up and bite her. So she innocently continued: "In death as in life my poor dear husband never cared about what sort of impression he was making upon anybody; he was far too thick-skinned for that, and Laurence is just like him. Which is really very hard upon me, as I always think it would have been so nice to live with people who really understood one and sympathized with one, and who were alive to the higher traits of a really refined nature. But I suppose such crosses are intentional, and so must be borne uncomplainingly, as patience under misconception is such a beautiful thing." And Lady Alicia again sighed her dainty sigh as she rose to take her leave, having effectually succeeded—as was her wont—in preventing those with whom she was conversing from taking any part in the conversation.

## CHAPTER III.

### LAURENCE BAXENDALE.

The pride that goes before a fall  
Had ruled the master of the Hall.

SOMEWHERE in the middle of the maze of lanes which lay between The Ways and Tettleigh Wood stood an old, red farmhouse, sentinelled by a row of poplar-trees. From its front windows one could see the stretch of green fields that lay between it and the wood, and beyond them the distant mountains which hid from the casual observer the wonderful doings of the setting sun; and from its back windows one could see Baxendale Hall, standing on the top of a green hill and supported by regiments of trees on either side.

It was at this old, red house—called Poplar Farm—that Laurence and his mother took up their abode when the second marriage of Lord Portcullis made that nobleman's castle too full (and some people said too warm) to hold them. It belonged to them, being situated on the Baxendale property; and, though small, was quite as large an abode as their very limited means permitted.

Poplar Farm was about five minutes' walk from Wayside; and propinquity did all that even the late Arthur Hugh Clough himself could reasonably have expected of it for Laurence Baxendale and Nancy

Burton. It so happened that they had never become friends until the Baxendales took up their abode at the farm. In the old days, when the Baxendales lived at the Hall, Nancy had been a small girl whom Laurence may have known by sight, but to whom, so far as he remembered, he had never spoken. In those far-off days—they seemed far-off to him, though in fact it was but a short time ago—Laurence had been a quiet boy, reserved and sensitive to a degree, with few acquaintances among boys of his own age, and no friends. Even then he gave evidence of a pride which seemed to have been his by birth—pride in the long line of Baxendales, stretching back until it was lost in the dim mist of bygone centuries; pride in the ancestral Hall, whose red bricks and square windows he so much loved; pride even in the family curse, which filled him when a child with a most delightful dread, a most fearful joy. As he grew older and found that, despite this terrible curse, no one seemed one penny the worse, he would look back with a smile at the time when he feared to go to bed at night, fully expecting to be burnt alive before morning; yet, for all that, he hugged the ancestral imprecation to his breast as a most cherished possession. But as a boy he chiefly showed his pride to the outside world in what seemed a studied reserve. Part of this was no doubt shyness; but, in addition, he intentionally held aloof from companions of his own age. The Baxendales, even then, could not afford to mix much in society; so that, except when he paid a rare visit to Drawbridge Castle, he did not come across boys who by birth were his equals. Yet, in spite of his pride and reserve, in spite of his unsociable reticence, he was a refined, well-bred boy, with great

capacities for good. For his father he had a passionate love and devotion; and it was his father who chiefly influenced his early years. Lady Alicia was fond of her child, proud of his good looks and distinguished air; but she paid far more attention to his clothes than to his character. She was one of those women who only look on the outward appearance of their darlings, and who never win, nor even care to win, their children's confidence. From his father Laurence had inherited two excellent gifts: a quick feeling for the humorous and a strong sense of honour. He seemed instinctively to shrink from anything mean and underhand. A hater of cruelty, and naturally disposed to be lenient in his judgments, in any matter touching honour he was pitiless in condemnation, and never would allow mercy to temper justice. Having no companions of his own age, he would have found time hang heavily on his hands, but for his love of books: hour after hour did he spend in the magnificent library of the Hall. He would probably have turned into a desultory bookworm, as his father could not afford to send him to a public school, had not the then vicar of Tettleigh happened to be an admirable scholar. When Laurence grew too advanced for his father, he was sent for three or four hours every day to the vicarage to be instructed in Latin and Greek and other excellent things. He was a clever boy, and the vicar took the greatest delight in his instruction. His tutor not only laid the foundation of accurate scholarship, but also instilled into him a love for the English classics; cultivated his naturally good taste until it became almost fastidious; and not only taught him the knack of producing passable Latin and Greek verses, but also

the art of writing excellent English prose. Nevertheless Laurence did not grow up a milksop. He had a great love of fresh air, and rode his pony daily, and took long walks in Baxendale Park and the maze of adjacent lanes. Moreover he had boxing and fencing lessons from the retired sergcant who was engaged at the Grammar School of the neighbouring town of Silverhampton. Wherefore, though slight, he was strong, healthy and active. He had his faults, no doubt, as so many of us have; his pride in his race bred in him a certain tolerant scorn for those of humbler birth; his pride in his intellect was accompanied by something like contempt for his less gifted brethren; his finished culture shrank from contact with people whose manners were less perfect than his own. Again, his delicate sensitiveness in all matters affecting honour gradually developed into an excessive scrupulousness. In his anxiety to avoid anything to which the most exacting moralist could take exception, he invented scruples where none could fairly be said to exist. He was an adept in finding a lion in the path in all matters affecting his own pleasure or advantage; and he elevated conscience to a position of such eminence that it became almost a bogey. With all this he was not a prig; he was saved from that by the quickness with which he saw the ridiculous side of things; and it is only fair to acknowledge that he was as ready to laugh at himself as at another. From the humorous to the pathetic it is but a step; and Laurence had a vein of tenderness and sympathy which he strove manfully and not unsuccessfully to conceal, but which was evident enough to the few who knew him well. He loved dumb animals, especially horses and dogs; but he was never much at

home with children. An only child himself, and avoiding both through pride and shyness the companionship of others, he had lived a more or less solitary boyhood, and knew little and understood less of children. Which, perhaps, accounts for the fact that he quite ignored the short-frocked Nancy and her sister when he met them taking their walks abroad under the protecting wing and vigilant oversight of their governess; and was quite unconscious that their eyes were not only blue, but uncommonly bright and pretty. He had a quick eye for the flight of a bird or a cricket ball; but in things which really matter he was in those days as blind as a bat.

In due course Laurence went to Oxford, having won a postmastership at Merton, thanks to the admirable coaching of the vicar. His father was only able to make him a scanty allowance, so that even with his scholarship he had to lead a very quiet life and to indulge in few luxuries. Yet he enjoyed his college days, better perhaps than if he had been able to gratify expensive tastes, and to frequent frivolous (if not rowdy) society. He read hard, and rowed hard, and had plenty of friends of a quiet sort. He had not much difficulty in securing a First in both Moderations and Greats. Moreover he won the Gairford Prize for Greek Verse, a feat which greatly delighted his quondam tutor, the vicar.

During his last year at Oxford Laurence made his first real acquaintance with sorrow. His father, whose finances had been straitened for some years owing to agricultural depression and the extravagance of Lady Alicia, found that he could no longer maintain his position at Baxendale Hall. He decided to move

to a small house—but this decision was never carried into effect: grief at leaving his ancestral home broke his heart; and his last days were rendered even more wretched than they need have been by the selfishness of his foolish wife, who was continually bemoaning her hard fate in having to resign the position in the county which was her due. Thus a narrower home than even the one he had contemplated claimed the broken-hearted man—a home of quietness and peace, where he found rest for his soul.

Mr. Baxendale's death was a terrible blow to Laurence. He had always been devoted to his father, who had made himself a companion and friend to his son. That a time would ever come when that companion and friend should be no more had never occurred to Laurence; and when the blow fell it crushed him. He did not believe at first that it was true; it seemed to him as though his father had gone on a journey, and would soon come back. Then, as he began to realize that it really was true, that never again on this earth would he see his father's smile or clasp his father's hand, his faith was staggered. Was God indeed a loving Father if He could thus deal with His children? How could He (so Laurence cried in his anguish) permit His creatures to be thus tormented? Why should He have thus cruelly deprived him of his father, in the plenitude of that father's powers, with so much good left undone which he alone, it seemed, could accomplish—so much duty neglected which he alone could fulfil? If God were really pitiful and compassionate, why did He permit such misery and unhappiness to innocent men and women? Where was the justice, where was the love, of the Creator?



For a time the mystery of pain and grief overwhelmed Laurence's soul. But he faced his doubts, and came through the darkness into light at last; and it was the remembrance of the father he had lost that was his sheet-anchor in this time of storm-tossed doubt and sorrow.

Shortly after his father's death, Laurence took his degree. Meanwhile his mother had gone to her brother, Lord Portcullis (whose wife had recently died), and had taken charge of his household. As a tutor was required to teach the rising Drawbridge how to shoot, it occurred to the heads of the family that Laurence Baxendale might take the post. He was not specially attracted by the prospect; but his pockets were so empty that there was room in them for his inclinations as well as his salary; so he was compelled to pocket both.

Meanwhile the Baxendale estates were managed by an agent; but when the agent had been paid his salary, and the heavy fire insurance which the owner was bound to maintain had been discharged, there was not very much left from the diminished rent-roll. The residue, such as it was, was given to Lady Alicia by her son for her apparel, which was always of a most expensive and effective style.

So time rolled on until Drawbridge was ready for Eton, and as a consequence his cousin's services were no longer required. It so happened that about this time it occurred to Drawbridge's father that Lady Sarah Sassenach had a pretty face and a charming manner. On pursuing the train of thought thus suggested, he began to speculate how the same face would look at the head of his own table. On the whole, he came to the conclusion that he should prefer it to his sister's.

In his case, for once, the course of true love ran smooth ; as a consequence, Lady Alicia, as well as her son, found her occupation gone.

It would have been well for Laurence Baxendale if he had withstood the allurements of the immediate income he secured by becoming his cousin's tutor ; and, instead of devoting such money as he possessed to the decoration of his mother's person, he had spent it on the preparation of himself for the learned profession of the law.

This at the time had to his scrupulous conscience savoured too much of selfishness ; whereas, if he had only used common sense, he would have seen that in the long run his mother would have benefited by a temporary restriction in the number and expensiveness of her gowns. But it is so difficult to use a sense that one does not happen to possess ; and few of us care to borrow another person's for the occasion—to which minority Laurence did not happen to belong. As things were now, he had lost precious years. Moreover he had to find a home for his mother, whose exodus from Drawbridge Castle was necessitated by the advent of the new countess. His opportunity was therefore lost ; and, as the idea of another tutorship was distasteful to him, he determined to dispense with the services of an agent, and manage his estate himself. So he betook himself and his mother to Poplar Farm, which happened to be vacant at the time, and—having learnt much while he was at Drawbridge from his uncle's agent,—found himself quite competent to manage his own property. With the salary saved, and the rent of the house occupied by former agents added to his assets, his income was brought up to a few hundreds a year—sufficient for the needs of him-

self and his mother, but quite inadequate to the introduction of a Mrs. Laurence Baxendale. He tried to let the Hall; but it was a large, rambling building, too old-fashioned for the modern merchant-prince; and its proximity to the town of Silverhampton was against its being let, as it is a notorious theory—which no amount of fact can controvert—that the surrounding country is as dark as Erebus; although any one who has sojourned in South Mershire knows full well that the much maligned county is—like a certain distinguished personage—not nearly as black as it is painted.

The management of an estate is a healthful occupation, as was evidenced by the bloom upon Laurence's face and the easy carriage of his slight but athletic frame. Yet it did not occupy his time to the full. The above-mentioned personage is credited—and there are apparently some grounds for the persuasion—with the power of finding occupation for idle hands. This potentate has many local agents—some paid and some honorary—whom he engages to carry out his designs. On this occasion the vacant post fell to Miss Nancy Burton. Nancy herself was nothing loth to fulfil this useful office. She had an appetite, which would have done credit to Alexander himself, for new worlds which should finally be conquered by her bow and spear. There was nothing of the "little Englander" about Miss Burton; in her policy there was no continent too vast to be annexed—no tribe too unmanageable to be added to her dependencies. Therefore she hailed Laurence Baxendale as one of those unknown yet conquerable spheres for which her great prototype sighed in vain. She was very adaptable, and had no difficulty in charming all with whom she came into

contact, and in persuading them that they and their concerns were objects of absorbing interest to her. There was no insincerity in this. As long as she was in the company of any person, however dull, her desire to put that particular person at ease, and to find topics of conversation agreeable to him or her, led to this result.

Young Mr. Baxendale was an exceedingly clever man, but unfortunately he had the knack of hiding his light under the bushel of shyness. Now Nancy did not know what it was to be shy; more than that, she defied any one to be shy when in her company. Wherefore, as the two met not infrequently, she quickly discovered Laurence's abilities, and found to her delight that he was very different from the average man of her acquaintance, whose superabundance of wealth was more than balanced by a plentiful lack of wit—not to say brains. Like other men, Laurence found it impossible to be shy in her presence, though he still maintained a reserve which Nancy thought as extraordinary as it was unnecessary. Yet they became close friends, in spite of scruples and of struggles on the man's part. Nancy did not exactly set her cap at the impecunious owner of Baxendale Hall. But she dearly loved power; and finding (she was exceedingly quick at discerning feelings) the man resisting her influence, she determined that she would conquer his indifference. She had no intention of breaking his heart, still less her own; but she decided that he should be made to care for her sufficiently to satisfy the point of honour, and then he might depart with slightly scorched fingers, but otherwise unhurt.

As for Laurence, he began by thinking that he disliked Nancy; her very frankness he critically put

down to forwardness, her wit he regarded as pertness, her good humour as casual indifference. But he soon found himself convicted of folly. He began to recognize the charm of this brilliant young woman; to see that her frankness was the result of absence of self-consciousness, her easy tolerance the perfection of good manners. From this he rapidly progressed to a recognition of the brightness of her wit and the fascination of her strong personality. A day seemed lost if he did not see her; a day appeared well spent if he had but five minutes of her charming society. Yet, strange to say, the more he was attracted, the more reserved he himself became. This puzzled Nancy, who was perfectly aware of the fact of his being attracted, and equally conscious of his studied reserve. Laurence himself knew, but he was unable to gratify the girl's natural curiosity. In short, he had fallen in love with Nancy, and his sensitive conscience would not allow him to mention the fact to her. If he had done so, nobody would have been more surprised than she.

No one knew what a struggle he had with himself. Day by day, as he saw her, he fell deeper into the toils. He realized that, so far as he was concerned, Nancy was the only woman in the world, and he accepted this elementary truth without a murmur. Yet his conscience told him that he could never marry her. She was a girl accustomed to walk delicately along the luxurious ways of life; he—with his ancient birth and pride of race—had nothing to offer her but a rambling mansion, with a superb library which the terms of his grandfather's will had made it impossible for him to sell; and a large estate that brought him in a scanty income, made scantier by the fact that this same will

stipulated that both Laurence and his father could only succeed to the property on condition that they paid a heavy fire insurance to protect the Hall from the consequences of the old curse. Moreover he had a mother, with by no means inexpensive tastes, to support.

So it came to pass that in his relations with Nancy he was a man of many moods. Sometimes he would yield to the seductive charm of her bright talk. At such moments he would unbend, and become his own natural self; he would allow his pleasant vein of humour and natural kindness of heart full play. Then would Nancy regard him as the most delightful of men. But all at once he would freeze up, and become stiff and affected, to Nancy's great astonishment. She would ask—and ask with reason—what she had done or said to justify such a change. But to this Laurence would only reply with much stateliness that she had done and said nothing, and would even deny a reserve which no one felt more strongly than himself. When he was in this mood, Nancy thought with some justice that Laurence was most disagreeable, and determined that she would drop his acquaintance. She would perhaps have passed a gentler judgment on the unhappy prisoner at her bar if she had only known that these sudden fits of chilling reserve were simply signs of a devotion and a love which Laurence felt were getting beyond his powers of self-control. If Nancy at such times was irritated almost beyond measure, it is equally true that the man whom she regarded as absolutely devoid of human feelings was suffering the tortures of a self-made inquisition, which would have put to shame most of the inventions of mediæval Spain.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MRS. CANDY.

A husband, even though he be a fool,  
Teaches far more than any boarding-school.

THE post of caretakers of Baxendale Hall was filled by a worthy couple of the name of Candy. Candy himself had been head-gardener, while the house was yet inhabited; and he still potted about the neglected old garden, picking up a stick here and a weed there as the fancy moved him. His better-half was a Norfolk woman; and had been wooed and won at Cromer, when Candy was an under-gardener at one of the big houses near that delightful town. She always felt herself to be a stranger and a sojourner in Mershire; for she had left her heart with her two little children in Overstrand Churchyard, amid the poppies which keep guard over the slumbers of them that await the great Awakening within sound of the Northern Sea. At least she had left half of her heart there; the other half was filled to overflowing with respectful admiration of her lord and master, who was the greatest and wisest man in the kingdom, according to Mrs. Candy. It is a great satisfaction to every woman to have a final court of appeal for the settlement of all doubtful questions; and it is still a greater satisfaction to be married to that court. Which blessing was Mrs. Candy's in full measure.

It was on a day in the early summer, before the snow-drifts of May-blossom had quite melted from off the hedges, that Nancy Burton crossed the fields lying at the back of Wayside, and went through the iron gate into the lanes. To her (apparent) surprise, whom should she meet there but Laurence Baxendale, who—strange to say—had of late contracted a habit, in common with the elder Miss Burton, of perambulating—nominally in search of exercise—those said lanes.

“Good-afternoon,” said Laurence, also trying to show a decorous amount of astonishment at finding Nancy in the very place where he had come to look for her.

“Good-afternoon; I was just going to the post-office,” explained Nancy, ignoring the impertinent fact that it took twice as long to go thither by the lanes as by the high-road.

“So was I,” exclaimed Laurence, likewise ignoring the equally impertinent fact that he was walking in precisely the contrary direction. But which of us, who has learnt anything at all, has not discovered that very often the shortest cut to a place takes us several miles in an opposite way? County Councils would compute distances more accurately than they do if they measured by companions instead of by mile-stones.

So Laurence turned with Nancy, and walked beside her: which was the only sensible thing to do, if he were really aiming at the post-office, as he would never have reached it by his original route—at least not without going right round the world.

“After I have been to the post, I want to walk up to Baxendale to speak to Mrs. Candy about something,”



he continued. "Won't you come with me? It is a perfect afternoon for a walk."

"All right," agreed Nancy, who was a very obliging young woman. "I am always glad of an excuse to cultivate Mrs. Candy—or rather to let Mrs. Candy cultivate me."

"Mrs. Candy certainly repays research."

"Doesn't she? And I make it my duty and my delight to research her."

"To dig for knowledge out of Mrs. Candy's stores is not an elaborate mining operation," said Laurence dryly. "I never met a woman who found it so easy to begin talking; and so difficult to stop."

"I never try to stop her; I feed upon every word she says."

"But don't you want to put your own oar in sometimes, Miss Burton? I should have imagined—from the superficial estimate I have formed of your character—that silence was not your favourite rôle."

"Oh! I'm not a great talker."

"Ah! how appearances sometimes deceive," murmured Laurence under his breath.

Nancy laughed. "Well, not such a very great talker; at least I've met greater ones—once or twice."

"So have I; my dear mother, for instance, and the aforesaid Mrs. Candy; but that doesn't entirely exonerate you from the charge."

"You are very rude!"

"Indeed I'm not; I'm exactly the reverse. I don't know which is the greater—my pleasure in the feats of great talkers, or my wonder at how the dickens they do it."

"Then don't you find it easy to talk?"

"By no means. You can't think how often I am on the verge of brain fever through scouring the hidden places of my mind for something to say, and finding nothing."

"Poor thing! Now I never have to scour the hidden places of my mind for something to say."

"So I should have supposed."

"Every drawer and cupboard in my mind is so full of remarks that it simply won't shut; and the more I try to empty it by making the remarks, the fuller it seems to get."

"My envy of you even surpasses my admiration."

"But I know why you find it difficult to talk," remarked Nancy thoughtfully; "it is because you are so reserved, and reserve is the scourge of conversation."

"Ah!"

"I disapprove of reserve on principle," continued Nancy, shaking her head reprovingly; "and I consider it your besetting sin."

Laurence smiled. "Well then, having diagnosed the complaint, won't you prescribe the remedy?"

"There's no remedy except not being it—like Nora and me. Now I haven't the least reserve about me; I tell everybody everything I think and feel; and that makes everybody comfortable and at home, don't you know?"

"Yes; naturally it would have that effect."

"And it makes people fond of you if you are unreserved," added Nancy wisely; "I have noticed that. Reserved people are never popular, because they are always inviting you to an intellectual Barmecide's feast; the dishes and plates are put on the table with nothing on them, and you have only to pretend to eat. When you

talk to reserved people there is all the outward show of an actual conversation; but the dishes and plates are really empty, and it is all a sham."

"That sounds very pretty. But it depends, doesn't it, a little on the nature of your thoughts and feelings as to whether their publication would add to your popularity? In your case, no doubt, it would; but not in mine. Indeed I put down any little popularity I may possess (small enough it is, goodness knows!) to the fact that people know so little of me. The more they knew my sentiments, the more they would dislike me, I take it. Wherefore my reserve is perchance as clever as your unreserve, Miss Burton. I can't pay it a higher compliment, can I?"

"Not a bit of it! That just shows how ignorant you are. If you are an angel and hide it, nobody will be really fond of you; I don't believe any one ever was really fond of an angel unawares. Angels unawares are esteemed but never loved; and it is a most uninteresting part to play."

"Perhaps."

These short answers of Mr. Baxendale always irritated Nancy, as much as so good-tempered a young woman was capable of being irritated. She was never quite sure whether he was laughing at her or with her—a most disquieting doubt. Neither, as a matter of fact, was he; so she could hardly be blamed for not understanding him, when as yet he did not understand himself.

"Now, on the contrary, if you are a devil and say so," she continued, "everybody will be charmed with you, and say it is so sweet and dear of you to be so outspoken."

"Possibly."

"If I had wings and covered them, people would only say what a had figure I had and how badly my clothes fitted; but if I had cloven feet and went barefoot, everybody would smile and pity rather than blame; and if I went on to put my feet on the table, the world would end by thinking them quite pretty, and pointed toes would entirely go out of fashion."

"Which shows that truth—like water—no longer lies at the bottom of a well, but is turned on to every house—in an unlimited supply—by artificial water-works. What an enlightened age we live in; and how thankful we ought to be to the goodness and the grace which smiled upon our birth with so subtle a sense of humour!"

Again that sense of irritation crept over Nancy. But she refused to be balked by it and continued bravely: "All English people are too reserved; it is the principal national fault".

"So you think foreign nations have more attractive shop-windows?"

"Rather! Well, you know how extremely difficult English girls are to talk to when first you are introduced?"

"I do; by most bitter and exhaustive—not to say exhausting—experience."

"Well, foreign girls aren't, simply because they are less reserved. I remember once, when we were in London, some Mexican people came to call upon us who had had dealings with father in business; and my heart sank when they were shown in, as I hadn't an idea what to say to them."

"Even you?"

"Yes; even me. It fell to my lot to talk to the daughter, a very handsome girl; so I began by asking, 'Have you any sisters?' A feeble opening, but the best I could think of on the spur of the moment!"

"And what did she say?"

"Oh! she was delightful." And Nancy bubbled over with laughter at the remembrance. "She said, 'Yes; I have two sisters; and I will tell you all our love-affairs, and then you will feel that you know us thoroughly.' Wasn't it killing?"

"Charmingly so. And what did she tell you?" In spite of all his resolutions not to grow too fond of her, Laurence never could resist the temptation to bring the laughter into Nancy's blue eyes.

"She said, 'In England you do not know how to love; you are too cold, and you have too much to interest you. In Mexico a woman has nothing to amuse her but to go to Mass and to get married; but in England you have so much to amuse you that you have not time to do either of these.'"

"There is some truth in that," declared Laurence.

"There is. Then she went on, 'Now in Mexico we do know how to love; and we do always love a man who has no money'. I said I had known cases of that kind even in England." And Nancy looked slyly at Laurence through her long eyelashes to see what effect this announcement had upon him.

But Laurence's heart was not within measurable distance of his sleeve, so he inquired stolidly: "Well; and what did the Mexican lady say to that?"

"She said, 'Oh! but we are very bad in Mexico; and when we find that the man is so poor that we cannot marry him, we fret and fret till we are quite ill, and

the doctor says to our parents, "She will die unless you do give her the money to marry this man". So then our parents give us the money, and we marry him, and are quite well."

"A most satisfactory conclusion," said Laurence piously; "and had the lady herself suffered in this fashion?"

"No; but her sister had. She told me, 'My sister was like that, till my parents did give her the money to marry the man she loved; and now she writes to us that she used to have pains all over the body, but that now she has not a single pain in any limb'. So they know how to manage their affairs in Mexico, don't they, Mr. Baxendale?" And again Nancy looked through her eyelashes to discover the effect of this remark.

Again Laurence was equal to the glance. "So it seems."

But Nancy was bent on mischief and was not to be daunted. "Don't you believe in falling-in-love, then?"

"I suppose there must be some foundation for the tradition. At least poets and novelists could hardly get on without it, could they?"

"And do you think it is a nice feeling?"

"After I have been reading *The Merchant of Venice* I think it must be; but after reading *The Idylls of the King* I have my doubts."

"He is a stupid idiot," said Nancy to herself.

But she was wrong. It required more strength and self-control for Mr. Baxendale to be stupid just then than was dreamed of in Miss Burton's light-hearted philosophy.

"Don't you think we'd better do the post-office on our way back?" suggested Nancy, after a few moments'

silent meditation upon the density of men in general and of Laurence Baxendale in particular.

"Of course we had; what a happy idea! And now we can go straight to the Hall by the lanes and up the park, without getting the dust of the high-road on our feet at all."

So the young people threaded their way along the green by-roads and then across the undulating park, until they reached the imposing front door which was crowned by the arms of the Baxendales; and as they went they talked by the way of all the trifling matters which are of no moment in themselves, but are of such absorbing importance in the mouth of the one person whose prerogative it is to turn life's smallest coins into gold, and earth's commonest corners into paradise.

Mrs. Candy gave them a hearty welcome. It was somewhat lonely up at Baxendale Hall, and the worthy matron was truly thankful when any listeners chanced to come her way. But her replies to their kind inquiries after her health were by no means satisfactory.

"Thank yew, sir, but I be but dowly—very dowly indeed."

"Why, how is that?" asked Laurence politely.

"Well, yew see, sir, we've just lost our pig—the one as we bought off neighbour Simpkins; when we'd only had it a week, it died. And I'm that put out about it as niver was; it du seem such a thing to have lost it, havin' only had it just a week in the sty!"

"It certainly is most provoking in every way; and a considerable loss, too."

"It is that, sir, and no mistake; and just at first I was that upset that I thought I'd niver get over it. But this very mornin' while I was a-feedin' the

chickens and frettin' about our pig, it comes into my mind all of a sudden-like, just like a flash o' lightnin', 'I've got my husband left'. And I says to myself, 'So I have,' I says, 'and it's my dewty to look at what's left, rather than at what's taken,' I says, 'and to be thankful for the blessin's I keep, rather than frettin' over them as are gone,' says I; and since then I've felt that much better as niver was—quite myself agen, as yew may say."

"I hope you enjoyed the village tea-party, Mrs. Candy," said Nancy, after Laurence had transacted his business with his housekeeper; "I thought you seemed to be having a good time."

Mrs. Candy put her hands upon her hips, and considered for a moment. Then she replied in the refined voice and with the clear-cut accent which are characteristic of all East Anglians. "Well, Miss Burton, I waun't deceive yew. When I comes into Tettleigh schoolroom I spreedes my hankyshire on my knees, and I looks up to see what there was t' eat."

"You considered the menu, in short," suggested Laurence.

"Percisely so, sir," replied Mrs. Candy, not in the least knowing what he meant, and so agreeing with him all the more readily. "Well, when I looks up, and sees nothin' but maunch-cake and buttered buns, I says to myself, says I, 'The Lord's Will be done; if I must be ill, I must'. So I takes both."

"And how are you to-day after it all?" Nancy asked.

Mrs. Candy shook her head. "Sadly, miss, very sadly. It's wind in the head, miss, wind in the head, and I'll tell yew how it happened. I was a-waitin'



on Mrs. Betts down at The Ways, two years ago come Michaelmas; and she was a paraletic, if yew remember, miss."

"I remember her quite well: and I am bound to confess I never knew any one get so much pleasure out of paralysis as she did. She enjoyed to the full the minute recitation of every symptom."

"Well, miss, I was a-waitin' on her; and when she was a-comin' downstairs and a-leanin' on me, her feet slipped, and she druve her elba' into my side, and that druve the wind into my head. So when I went to see t' doctor he says to me, says he, 'My good wumman,' he says, 'yew should ha' come to me when that furst happened; now,' says he, 'I can't du nothin', that there wind ha' got into your head,' he says, 'and it'll niver come down, no niver no more.' That's what t' doctor says, miss, and that's what's t' matter wi' me."

Nancy endeavoured to look as sympathetic as she was expected to feel. "I am very sorry, Mrs. Candy; it must be a most uncomfortable feeling."

"It is indeed, miss; and my poor father was just the same. Wind in the head is in our family, it is, from livin' so near the sea, and all them terrible gales. And Uncle Willum was just the same, tew. I remember when Uncle Willum was bad, Aunt Selina she says to me, 'Lizzie,' says she, 'I du wish as yewr uncle wud go one way or t'other; he du burn such a sight o' candle, and me rubbin' hira up and down all the night wi' them imprecations."

"Did he finally recover?" asked Mr. Baxendale.

"Not he, sir, not he: recoverin' is not in our family," replied Mrs. Candy with slightly ruffled dignity; and Laurence felt that he had made a mistake. "At t' end

I went to help Aunt Selina to nurse him. I give him his medicine at tew o'clock, and he trew it up; I give him his medicine at three o'clock, and he trew it up; I give him his medicine at four o'clock, and he trew it up; at five o'clock he lay like a cabbage, and at six o'clock he went off like a bird."

"Dear me, how sad!" exclaimed Laurence; while Nancy looked out of the window to hide her emotion, which unfortunately was not of the kind expected of her.

"And my childern was just the same," continued Mrs. Candy, inflated with the pride of race; "there wasn't one of 'em healthy—not one; and they all died afore they was turned five."

"Oh! I am so sorry," cried Nancy, who was really sympathetic now. "How you must miss them!"

"I du, miss. I misses 'em and I wants 'em; but I misses 'em more than I wants 'em. They're a sight o' trouble, childern are; especially when they've wind in the head."

"But Candy looks strong enough," suggested Nancy by way of consolation; "he must be a comfort to you."

Candy's spouse cheered up at once. "Eh! he's a wonnerful man, Candy is; I niver knew his like for eatin' roley-poley pudden'—niver since I was born. T'other day Mrs. Fairfax sent us a roley-poley pudden' up from Ways Hall; and when we sits down t' eat it, Candy says, says he, 'May the Lord bless this here pudden' to my soul, and them as was the instigators of it!' And he eats it up every scrap. Eh! but he's a wonnerful man, Candy is, and he thinks a sight o' pudden', and has done iver since I furst kep' company wi' him."

"And a not inexplicable taste," said Laurence.

"I remember onst he was iver so much put out at a village dinner in Teteigh schoolroom, twenty years ago come next Christmas. There was a roley-polcy pudden', and Candy got a good slice. But—wud yew believe it, sir?—they give him his slice stark naked, wi' not a scrap o' jam, nor even o' syrup, to cover it. Oh! he was put out, Candy was, and no mistake."

"Where did you first meet him?" Nancy asked.

"Well, he was a gardener at Cromer Hall while I was in service at Overstrand. I had lots o' lovers in those days, bein' as I was tall, wi' a nice pink colour; and Candy he come a-courtin' me."

"And I suppose of all your lovers you liked him the best?"

"Well, miss, I can't ezactly say that; there was several as I liked quite as well as he, him niver havin' been much of a one to look at."

"Then why did you finally choose him?"

"Well, miss, though Candy was niver much of a one to look at, I heard as he was notable at cookin'; the notablest man at cookin' in all them parts. So I picked him; and I keeps him up to it, miss, I can tell yew."

Laurence smiled. "A most wise choice, Mrs. Candy! I think of selecting a wife along the same lines. But what did the rejected lovers do? Did they fling themselves and their broken hearts wholesale into the sea?"

Mrs. Candy bridled. "Well, sir, only tew days after I'd fixed on Candy, who should come a-courtin' me but Fison, him that was coachman up at t' Hall? And a much finer man he was than Candy, bein' better set up all round."

"Then I suppose, in true feminine fashion, you regretted your choice, and expressed your readiness to exchange the small bird already in your hand for the larger one just emerging from the bush."

"Well, sir, I says to Fison, 'Fison,' says I, 'I'm real sorry as I can't keep company wi' yew, yew bein' such a fine, well-set-up man all round. But yew've come a day too late; I'm bespoke."

"And how did Fison bear the blow?"

"Well, sir, Fison says, says he, 'Lizzie,' he says, 'I'm rare sorry as I've come too late; but there's as good fish in the sea as iver came out of it; and p'raps yew won't mind lookin' out for a nice girl for me, as there's no one knows as well as yew ezactly what wud suit me!'"

"Did you look out for one?" asked Nancy. "I don't believe I should have done so in your place. I think it is horrid when one's lovers fall in love with some one else, even if one hasn't cared for them."

But Mrs. Candy was not made of such slight elements as Nancy. "In course, I did, and found one just to his taste. A bright girl she was, Peggy Postern by name, our sexton's daughter, and one as had been the life o' many a funeral in our parts. Eh! but she was a merry girl, Peggy was; and she attended every one o' the funerals in Overstrand Churchyard. I niver knew such a girl for pleasure; if there was anythin' goin' on she must be in it, must Peggy; and she'd go to the poorest funeral rather than stay quietly at home. 'Half a loa' better than no bread,' she'd used to say, when I passed the remark that a funeral wi' no mournin' coaches wasn't no better than no funeral at all."

"Miss Postern seems to have been somewhat of a philosopher," remarked Mr. Baxendale.

"Eh! but she was a merry girl and no mistake; and then Overstrand was a pretty place for funerals. I remember onst when old Mrs. Parkinson died up in Lunnon, she left it in her last will and testament as she must be buried in Overstrand where she was born. I always think it seems more cheerful to be buried where yew was born, and takes away all the strangeness like."

"Much more cheerful," said Nancy; and she had no time to say any more before Mrs. Candy went on. "But I was a-tellin' yew about Candy when he come courtin' me. He niver wud walk intimate wi' me—arm in arm, yew know—because he said as it looked soft-like to show as yew was that gone on a wumman; and I thought it looked soft-like for a wumman to keep company wi' a man as wasn't that gone on her. But I just made no fuss and bided my time. It niver will du no good to make a fuss wi' a man; if yew just waits and lets him have his own way, he'll punish himself i' the end."

"And did Candy punish himself?"

"He did, miss. For when we comes to a stile wi' nobody a-lookin' on, Candy he says, says he, 'My lass!' he says, 'I'll help yew over this'. 'No,' says I, 'if yew won't walk intimate when folks is a-lookin' and there's some credit in it, yew shan't help me over stiles when there's nobody by!' And I niver let him—not onst—till we was married; though he went on his bended knees he did about it. Eh! but he's a notable man is Candy for hidin' his feelin's when folks is by, and showin' 'em when they're no credit to nobody."

Nancy thoroughly sympathized with the speaker. "How very trying! It would make me simply furious if I'd a husband who behaved like that."

"It's tryin', as yew say, miss; but most things is tryin' i' this warld, and so they're meant to be, for some wise purpose which we don't understand now, and maybe niver shall. But it's the queer ways o' men that give yew somethin' to think about, when it's bad weather and yew've no neighbours droppin' in whiles. Why I'd as soon be an old maid wi' a stuffed canary-bird, as have a husband as was as easy to see threw as another wumman. That's the bewty o' married life; yew can niver tell what yewr man'll do next nor what mischief he'll be up tu—no, not if yew lives wi' him till Doomsday. But if yew've got such a man as Candy to deal wi', yew know as whatever he does it'll turn out for the best."

"Yes," said Nancy; "I quite agree with you that on the whole married women have a jollier time than single ones."

"Well, miss, I thought so, and I married in consequence, but it wean't on account of any complaint as I'd got agen my last place; though the kitchen-stairs wean't as convenient as might be. But that wean't my reason for gettin' married."

"What was your reason, Mrs. Candy?"

"My reason, miss, was this; that if yew don't get married when yew've the chance, yew grow into an old maid; and if yew're an old maid, yewr married sisters think nothin' of yew, and yewr brothers' wives think less. And that's what I wudna and cudna abear—no, not if yew was to crown me for it."

"Come upstairs," said Laurence to Nancy, "and have

a look at the library. I happen to have the key in my pocket."

"Do you always keep it locked up?" she asked, as she followed him up the wide oak staircase.

"Yes; always. I don't want to have good Mrs. Candy pottering about with a candle among all those priceless old books. The house is insured for a hundred thousand pounds, and the value lies chiefly in the library; the rest of the furniture isn't worth much."

"A hundred thousand pounds? What a lot of money!"

"Oh! the library is worth far more; in fact some of the prints and first editions are practically priceless. I am strictly forbidden by my grandfather's will to sell a single book or print, or to lessen the amount of the insurance. But it seems a lot, as you say; and especially when I have to pay for it out of an already very limited income."

And then Laurence unlocked the massive oak door, and spent a delightful hour in showing Nancy some of his rare treasures.

"I did not know you were so fond of old books," he said, as they walked home together.

"Oh! I simply revel in them. I should like to spend a month in that library, and never put my nose out of doors the whole time."

"If you would really like it, I could let you have a key to the library, and then you could go and sit there whenever you wished."

Nancy's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "How sweet of you! I should simply adore it."

"Then you shall have it with pleasure; and I'll lend you a key to the house as well, so that if Mrs. Candy happens to be out and the house locked up, you can still

go in and up to the library. Only be careful to lock it all up again."

"Oh! I'll be very careful, I promise."

"Then that's all right," replied Laurence, experiencing a thrill of delight at having it in his power to give Nancy pleasure.

And he delivered the two keys into her hands that very day.



## CHAPTER V.

### ANTHONY'S SUGGESTION.

What is greater than the King?—  
Perfect knowledge of a thing.  
What than State is more immense?—  
Of a surety, common sense.

ALL the next day Nancy went about singing and making melody in her heart.

There is something strangely delightful in the beginning of anything—in that early dawn of a fresh joy, while the newborn interest is as yet too nebulous to have attached to itself the inevitable cares and responsibilities which cannot fail to come later; when the object of our regard is already dear enough to make us happy by being present, but not yet sufficiently dear to make us miserable by going away. A land where “everlasting spring abides” means something far more than eternally green fields and budding trees; it means a land where disillusionment can never brush away the dew of the morning, and where the pearly haze of dawn shall never be dispersed. “Behold, I make all things new,” does not prophesy that once and for all the house not made with hands shall be refurnished according to the latest improvements; nay, it rather foretells that the mystic gladness of spring and of morning shall no longer be the transient delight which

now it is; but shall become a part of that everlasting joy which shall one day crown the heads of those who are counted worthy to attain unto it.

The first dawn of love was just now transfiguring the world for Nancy Burton. Afterwards the sorrow came, which is the inseparable companion of all earthly bliss; but at present Laurence appeared to her the embodiment of human perfection. In later days she laughed bitterly at the remembrance of how marvelously happy she believed she was going to be, before disappointment had taught her how little it is wise to expect from life; but as yet all things were hers, because she was gradually making the wonderful discovery—that discovery whereby the most ordinary mortals for once in their life throw Columbus into the shade—that she loved and was loved in return.

Possibly if the immortal Christopher had penetrated a little farther into the future—if he had foreseen the horrors of the great American War, for which he was paving the way—he would have turned his galleon round, and gone ingloriously home again; and, in the same way, if all the women who make the other great discovery could perceive what heart-burnings and heart-rendings they were thereby preparing for themselves, they too would turn affrighted from the unknown land. But if Columbus had seen farther still—if he had seen the mighty kingdom which was to grow up on the further shore of that sea of blood, filling the earth with its knowledge and glory, he would have gone on rejoicing and unafraid; and, likewise, if those fond souls, who are preparing for their own footsteps the sorrowful way, could see to the very end of the road, they too would go hopefully forward, knowing that

only such as have sown in tears shall reap the full joy of the eternal harvest.

Nancy was too happy to stay indoors, so she walked down in the morning to Ways Hall to see Faith; and on her way she met Lady Alicia.

"Good-morning, dear Miss Burton," said her ladyship, in whom the neighbourly spirit had not yet evaporated; "may I turn and walk with you? I am taking my daily constitutional, which I always think is so very, very necessary, if one wishes to be kept in health; and health is so very beautiful, don't you think?"

"I don't know about its being beautiful; but it is very jolly," Nancy replied, trying hard to remember that Lady Alicia was Laurence's mother, and therefore not meet to be laughed at.

"And illness is very beautiful, too," Lady Alicia went on; "I often think that thinness and a hectic flush suggest such touching and elevating thoughts. I always wish that it had been my lot to be thrown with people whose illnesses were beautiful and improving to the character; but my poor dear husband's were quite the reverse."

"Tell me about him," besought Nancy, whose thirst for information regarding the house of Baxendale was hourly increasing.

"Oh! there is nothing to tell you, my dear; he was quite a prosaic and commonplace character, so different from me, who am simply overflowing with poetry and romance. I often think what a pathetic picture it must have been to see a highly-strung, sensitive young girl like myself, tied to a hard-headed, hard-hearted man, such as Mr. Baxendale."

"But are you sure that he was as hard-hearted as he

seemed? Often people appear unfeeling when they are only shy and reserved; and all the time that they seem so cold they are suffering most intensely."

Lady Alicia drew herself up. "My dear, of course I am sure. Is it likely that a man's own wife would not understand him? And, besides, Mr. Baxendale was a very easy person to understand; he wasn't complex as I am, but just straightforward and matter-of-fact, with—I am sorry to say—a sad habit of making fun of things."

"I am afraid that is rather a weakness of mine," remarked Nancy humbly.

"Then, my dear, struggle against it and suppress it at all costs. To my mind there is nothing so vulgar as a sense of humour; it coarsens the finest natures, and throws a horrible, amusing light upon things which in themselves are quite beautiful and serious. And I always think it is so elevating to take life seriously—a thing which my dear husband seemed constitutionally unable to do; and I fear poor Laurence is not much better."

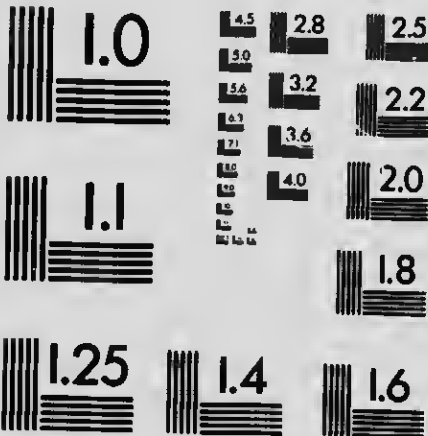
Before Nancy had time to take up the cudgels on Laurence's behalf, she and Lady Alicia had reached the door of Ways Hall; but all the same her heart was hot within her as she realized how completely his mother misunderstood him; and she longed passionately to make up to him in some way for all that he had missed in life. Suddenly she understood—by what means she could not say—how much the sensitive father and son had been to each other, and what a terrible blank the death of his father had left in the life of Laurence Baxendale.

When women of the Nancy Burton type admire a



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man they are fairly safe; it is only when they begin to pity him that their hearts are in real jeopardy.

Mrs. Fairfax and Faith were sitting out on the verandah at the back of the house; and their visitors joined them there. The verandah at Ways Hall was quite an institution; Faith and her mother principally lived in it for the greater part of the year. It occupied the whole length of the house on the south side, and had a stone roof supported by massive pillars. Each end was of glass, lined with rows of rare plants in pots; so that there was no admittance to any manner of wind save a south one; while all the sunshine in the garden collected itself in the verandah, as cream collects itself at the top of a can of milk. Therefore, there were few days in the year when the verandah at Ways Hall was not suitable for habitation.

Mrs. Fairfax and Faith loved their garden; and in return their garden educated them, as only well-loved gardens can educate men and women. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches find a powerful antidote in a garden; for those who abide near the heart of Nature learn from her lessons of peace and patience which she does not teach to her more bustling children. Now, as of old, the Lord God walks in the garden in the cool of the day; and well for those who hearken unto His Voice as It speaks to them, through the trees of the garden and the flowers of the field, of laws that cannot be broken and of promises that must be fulfilled!

"I have made a new fernery," said Mrs. Fairfax, after she had greeted her visitors in her gracious manner, and Faith had carried Nancy off for a girlish confabulation; "and I wish you to see it, Alicia, when you have rested awhile."

"Oh, how delightful!" exclaimed Lady Alicia; "to my mind there are few things more beautiful and suggestive than ferns. They always seem to me like graceful women, who have charm rather than actual beauty; and there is nothing more interesting than charm, don't you think?—so attractive and yet so elusive."

"I have arranged that all the water from the garden should drain into the fernery and so run into the lake," continued Mrs. Fairfax.

Lady Alicia and the mistress of Ways Hall always enjoyed a conversation with one another—for the good reason that each talked of her own concerns, utterly regardless of what the other was saying; which resulted in the equal satisfaction of both.

"And flowers are suggestive, too," Lady Alicia went on; "I once had a beautiful idea that it would be so sweet for people to try and copy the flowers which grow in the month when their birthdays are."

Mrs. Fairfax went on in that wonderfully musical voice of hers: "It has the same effect as a dropping-well; the water trickles down a rockery, covered with ferns, and forms itself into a stream at the bottom".

"That is why I am always so much interested to find out in what month people's birthdays fall; then I know what type of character they should aim at. And it is so sweet to have an aim in life; it gives one something to think of in the winter evenings and on Sundays."

"And over the stream I have built a rustic wooden bridge; it is extremely pretty now, and will be far more so when the creepers which I have trained over it are fully grown."



Lady Alicia pursued the even tenor of her way: people rarely listened to her when she talked, so she had ceased to expect it. "My birthday, you see, is in October; and I have always tried to copy chrysanthemums, by dressing in those sweet art-shades, and by showing myself a friend for dark and cold days rather than for sunny ones. That is so touching in chrysanthemums, I think; they come just when one is sad and lonely, and the bedding-out plants are all gone. And that is such a beautiful allegory of friendship—to visit people when they are in trouble rather than in their prosperous days."

"I am not sure whether I shall be able to keep some of the ferns out of doors all the winter; I fear it would be a risk for those that I brought from abroad, and even for some of those that came from Devonshire. You see the frosts here are somewhat severe."

"I remember when dear Mildred Swain married her curate—such a sweet young man, with a lovely complexion and no money, just like a girl!—I proposed a month's visit to them immediately in their dear little home; and I took my maid with me to show that their being poor made no difference to me."

"Exactly what a chrysanthemum would have done in the circumstances," remarked Mrs. Fairfax, for the first time paying attention to what her companion was saying.

Her ladyship smiled complacently: jokes were things undreamed of in her philosophy. "My dear Emilia, how quickly you grasp an idea! You and I always have so much in common!"

Mrs. Fairfax laughed. In her day she had been a

greater beauty than her friend, and Lady Alicia's little elegancies were completely lost upon her.

"Then," continued the latter, "I think it is so nice for people whose birthdays are in April to cultivate humility, and try to copy the dear little modest violet."

"What nonsense, Alicia! If there is one virtue more objectionable than another, that virtue is humility. It is a most tiresome and aggravating attribute."

Lady Alicia fairly gasped. "My dear Emilia!"

"I mean what I say. There are no people who give so much trouble in the world as the unassuming, deprecating people; their humility is far more aggressive in reality than the conceit of the most conceited."

"But, dear, dear Emilia, think how beautiful humility is, and how altogether sweet and Christian."

"I don't care; I simply detest it. The conceited person calls upon you, and comes in, and bores you for a quarter of an hour, and that is the end of him; but the deprecating person rings the bell and won't come in, and so you have to go and talk to him in the hall; which is always a most wearisome thing to do."

"But don't you think we should rather look at the spirit which prompts an action than at the action itself? I always endeavour to do so; it seems to make life so much more beautiful and full of meaning."

"My dear Alicia, it is the actions and not the meanings that give trouble to other people."

"Still, we should always endeavour to enter into another person's feelings, and to look at things from another's point of view."

"Then the other person should likewise try to enter into our feelings, and look at things from our point of

view; and if he did he would quickly discover that his humility is not a matter of sufficient importance to entail any trouble on the part of persons to whom his spiritual vicissitudes are incidents of supreme indifference."

Lady Alicia sighed profoundly. "Alas! how hard you are! Had you my delicate and refined nature you would enter into the feelings of those dear, human sensitive-plants, and admire instead of abusing their modesty."

"Extremely humble people always have a little tickling cough, you will notice; and if there is one thing that irritates me more than another it is a little tickling cough. Yet I never met a truly unassuming person without one."

Lady Alicia was busy preparing a suitable platitude whereby to silence the doubting spirit of her friend when the two girls joined their elders.

"Faith and I are regretting that to-morrow is Sunday," exclaimed Nancy, sinking into a seat. "We were planning a picnic without thinking and suddenly the Sabbath rose up and hit us full in the face."

"Ah! I too find Sunday rather a dull and depressing day," said Lady Alicia plaintively; "but I always try to observe it for the servants' sake. It is so bad for them to see people of our class enjoying themselves upon a Sunday; so I always stretch a point in order to make the day as dull as possible. And, after all, there is something very English and suggestive in a dull Sunday; it makes one feel like a Radical or a Roman Catholic or something dreadful of that sort, if one does anything amusing on a Sunday afternoon."

"I heard of a lovely new Sunday game the other

day," remarked Nancy with dangerous demureness, her love of mischief exorcising for the moment her sense of the relationship between Lady Alicia and Laurence.

"What was that, my dear?" asked Mrs. Fairfax, who enjoyed Nancy's jokes only one degree less than Lady Alicia's reception of them. The proverbial duck's back, clothed in a mackintosh to make assurance doubly sure, would be less impervious to water than was Lady Alicia's consciousness to anything in the shape of humour.

"First all the men went to one end of the room, and all the girls to the other; and the girls were Christians and the men were heathens."

"That sounds Sunday enough," said Faith.

"It is beautiful, dear child, quite beautiful," agreed Lady Alicia; "to my mind there is something very touching and picturesque about heathens and people of that sort. I always think of them standing under palm-trees on the edge of a river, looking as if they were just going to bathe. I remember once saying to Laurence that the Serpentine on a summer's evening reminded me of missionary magazines. I thought it a most beautiful and poetical simile, but Laurence merely laughed, though I had not the least intention of being amusing; but he has unfortunately no eye for the allegorical and suggestive."

Mrs. Fairfax's bright eyes twinkled. "Go on about the Sunday game, my dear," she said.

"Well, the object of the game was to induce the heathens to embrace Christianity."

"Good gracious, child, what will you say next?" exclaimed Mrs. Fairfax. But she laughed all the same.

Not so Lady Alicia. "Ah! how sweet and beautiful—and just what should be done in everyday life. I think it would be so nice if all the nations—even the Boers and the Chinese and dreadful people of that kind—were to embrace Christianity. It might steady them down a bit, don't you know? and make war quite a pleasure instead of a pain. There is nothing so really soothing and improving as Christianity. I know for my part it makes me feel so contented and pleased with myself all Monday and Tuesday if I have made an effort and walked to church and back on Sunday morning."

At tea that afternoon Nancy regaled her always appreciative family circle with a graphic account, which did not lose anything in the telling (Nancy's tales never did), of how Lady Alicia had received the story of the Sunday game.

"After all," remarked Anthony when their laughter had subsided, "it must be rather a tight fit for Baxendale to be always obliged to keep a tame mother like that hanging about the premises. If I'd a mother of that kind I should try to get her received into an Orphan Home or a Shoeblack Brigade or some other similar charitable institution, which would take the sweet creature off my hands."

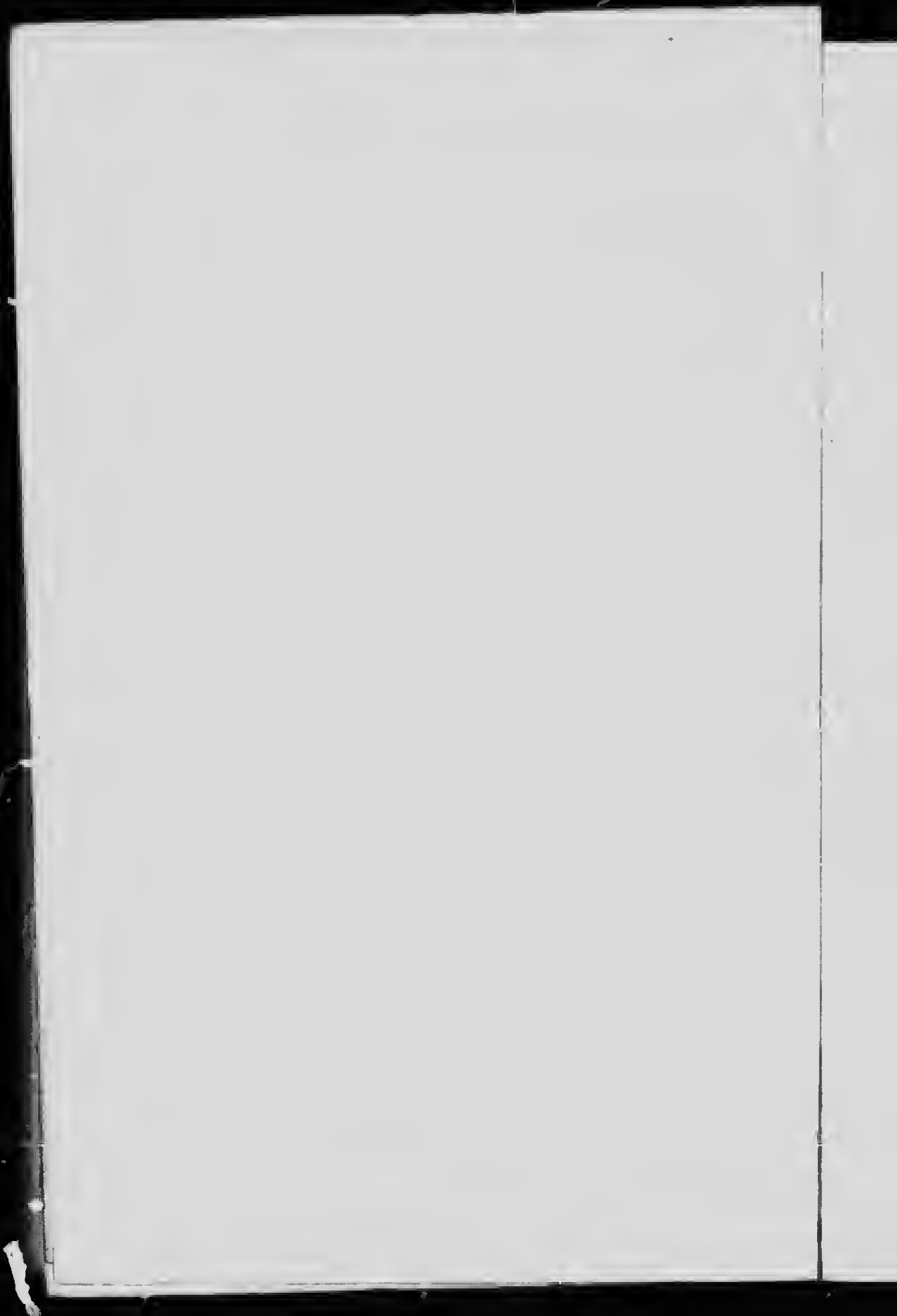
"She must be a trial to him," added Nora, "because Mr. Baxendale is so clever himself. Mr. Arbuthnot was saying only yesterday that he thought, taking him all round, Laurence Baxendale was the cleverest person he had ever met."

Anthony sat upright in his chair, and gazed thoughtfully at his cousin. "So our dear young vicar is beginning to take people all round, is he? I shall have



"ANTHONY SAT UPRIGHT IN HIS CHAIR, AND GAZED THOUGHTFULLY AT HIS COUSIN."

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to keep my paternal eye open, or else he will be taking you all round, my beloved Nora; and then what will mamma and the parish say?"

"Tony, don't be an idiot!" And Nora blushed so becomingly that it was a pity there was no man but a relation to see it.

"Can't help it, my love; we are all idiots in our family; it is too late to change, as the man said when he got home and found he had received twenty shillings for half a sovereign."

"Well, anyhow I wish you wouldn't start foolish gossip about me and the vicar," expostulated Nora.

"*Mens conscia recti*, a mind conscious of the rector (only in this case it is the vicar, but the principle is the same) is independent of, because superior to, parochial gossip," murmured Anthony.

Nora changed the subject, returning to her original muttons. "Mr. Baxendale was considered a tremendous swell up at Oxford, Faith says; he passed all his examinations splendidly."

"Examinations," remarked Anthony pensively, "are considered by the uninitiated to be a method of discovering the ignorances of the examined; but the initiated recognize them as a means of displaying the pedantries of the examiner."

"Mr. Baxendale has lots of things to bother him," said Nancy. "Of course his mother is a trial; and then he is so frightfully poor. I think it is having to pay such an enormous fire insurance that pinches them so."

"Do they pay such a big insurance?" Nora asked. "How horrid!"

"Yes," replied Nancy; "they have insured the house and the books and the whole concern for a hundred



thousand pounds. How much a year would they have to pay for that, Tony?"

"I can't tell, exactly, as they'd insure the house and the furniture and the books and the pictures separately; but I should think it would tot up to something close on a hundred and fifty a year."

"That's a great deal for people who have only about five hundred a year to begin with, isn't it?"

"It is, my dear Nancy. If I were friend Baxendale I'd chuck the whole concern, and pocket my entire income myself, such as it is."

"But he can't, you see," Nancy explained; "it is put in the entail, or something of that kind, that the library is part of the estate, and may not be broken up or sold; and that every Baxendale who inherits the property shall go on with the full fire insurance, because of that old prophecy. The tradition said that Baxendale Hall should be burnt down 'first by the King and then by the State'; and so it has been. And the last part is sure to come true also, so the Baxendales have to be prepared for that."

"And it has got to be burnt the third time by something 'which is thrice as great' as the King and the State, and 'a thousandfold stronger and higher'; I wonder what that can be?" said Nora.

"Common sense, I should think," replied her cousin. "If I were Baxendale I should quietly put a match to the family roof-tree when nobody was looking, and so save the annual hundred and fifty; and pocket the hundred thousand pounds in addition."

Nora laughed. "Oh, Tony, what an idea!"

"It is a very good one."

"But if Mr. Baxendale did such a thing he'd be sent to prison," persisted Nora.

"Of course he would if he was found out, my good child; but that would be a mistake on his part. He should just light a cigarette in the charming old library, and throw away the match; and the thing is done."

"Really, Tony, what nonsense you do talk!" exclaimed Nancy.

"And if his maternal parent were included in the ruins thereof, it would be a benefit to the whole neighbourhood," added Anthony; "excepting that burnt goose-quills make such a horrid smell."

And then he went on to talk—equally foolishly—of other things, forgetting his suggestion of arson as soon as it was uttered.

But Nancy did not forget: he was not cast in the forgetful mould.

## CHAPTER VI

### RUFUS WEBB.

O Lord, I knew Thou wert austere ;  
And so my heart was filled with fear,  
And dared not count Thy creatures dear  
In awe of Thy great Name.  
And if the terror of Thy Rod  
Has left my heart a lifeless clod,  
Untouched by love for man or God,  
Dread Lord, am I to blame ?

"I HAVE no patience with Alicia Baxendale," said Mrs. Fairfax to her daughter that same afternoon.

"Why not, mother?"

"She talks so much nonsense."

"She does; but if it is any pleasure to her, I don't see why she shouldn't. She has very little pleasure in her life, poor thing!"

"Not at all. She has a good son, and that is pleasure enough for any woman," argued Mrs. Fairfax, who had never quite forgiven Faith for having been born a girl instead of a boy: a mistake which it is difficult to rectify in after life, even by a woman as obliging and unselfish as Faith Fairfax.

"But, mother, think of coming to live in that little farmhouse after being mistress of Baxendale Hall and of Drawbridge Castle!"

"Humph! That was a come-down, I admit."

"And she really bears it beautifully. It is always disagreeable to be poor; and most especially for such a woman as Lady Alicia."

"Well, it is a great deal her own fault that she and Laurence are so poor now. If she had been less extravagant when she was first married, Alwyn would not have lived beyond his income as he did."

"Still it wasn't altogether her own fault that she was extravagant. Remember the way in which she was brought up."

"Really, Faith, the way you have of always defending the absent is most aggravating! I believe if any one said that the devil himself was not altogether a nice character, you'd find some excuse for him in the way he was brought up."

"But as a matter of fact he was brought up among the angels; so I'm afraid I couldn't find much excuse for him on that score."

"Well, then, you'd say he had been too well brought up, which comes to the same thing nowadays. By the way, what are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I'm going to see Mr. Webb, and to take him some flowers."

"You are a wonderful woman, Faith; you are always doing something for somebody else's happiness. I wonder if you ever think of your own, my child."

"It doesn't do much good thinking of one's own," replied Faith rather wistfully. She did not consider it necessary to add that hers was bound up in Laurence Baxendale; and that the truth was slowly dawning upon her that his, in turn, was bound up in Nancy Burton.

"You would make an ideal clergyman's wife," con-

tinued her mother reflectively; "you are energetic and capable and amiable and unselfish; and you have not the ghost of an idea how to dress yourself or to do your hair."

Faith only laughed.

"Unmarried women with energy," Mrs. Fairfax went on, "remind me of those terrible motor-cars, which, when some unforeseen obstacle stops their career, have no power of standing still, but plough up the earth all around them, and dig their own graves. There are scores of single women in England digging their own graves with wasted and unappropriated energy."

"I am afraid there are, mother; but it isn't altogether their own fault, poor things!" And Faith left the room with a sigh.

Rufus Webb, for whom Faith had designed her flowers, lived alone in a little white-gabled house in the lanes leading from The Ways to fairyland; but the gates of this latter were for ever closed to him. Those who have once heard these gates shut behind them can never enter that magic territory again; but for them, as for all of us, there is still prepared some better country, which shall cast fairyland into the shade; a country of green pastures and living waters and cities whose foundations are of jasper and gold; in short, a country whereof fairyland at its best is but a type and an image, where we shall find as abiding realities the things of which in fairyland we only dream.

Rufus was a big, red-haired and red-bearded man of about fifty. Originally he had been a missionary; but the great tragedy which spoilt his life had likewise cut short his career; and now he lived in the cottage

at The Ways, as guide, philosopher and friend to all the poor people for miles round. He had a certain knowledge of medicine, which he had studied in his missionary days, and which he had practised successfully among his Chinese converts; and this knowledge he exercised for the benefit of all the cottagers in the neighbourhood, who were too poor to employ a doctor on their own account, and too proud to do so at the expense of the parish. But he never preached now; nor had done since he left China twenty years ago. He had passed condemnation upon himself as unfit for God's ministry; and no arguments could induce him to take up his sacred office again.

He was a man subject to terrible fits of religious depression and spiritual anguish, when he believed that the heavens were closed against him and the Face of God was turned away; but through it all he was faithful to the God Whom he maligned. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," was his cry; and he believed that God would indeed slay him were it desirable, and would have no pity. "I am willing to be eternally damned, should my damnation redound to the glory of God," was his heartfelt confession; and he knew not as yet that such a conception of Divine Power was an injustice towards Divine Love.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Webb; I have brought you some flowers," said Faith, as Rufus opened the door to her and showed her into his bare little sitting-room. "I know you are fond of them."

"Thank you, Miss Fairfax, I am," replied he, taking from her the bouquet which she had prepared for him, and sniffing its scent with the epicurean delight of the born flower-lover. For a moment his stern face softened

as he gazed into the hearts of the roses; then suddenly it hardened again, as he threw the posy upon the floor and trampled its soft petals beneath his feet. "And because I am fond of them I destroy them," he cried, his voice metallic with suppressed suffering. "Is this a time to be gathering flowers, and going down into the garden of spices to see whether the pomegranates have budded? Nay, it is rather a time to be girding oneself with sackcloth and covering one's head with ashes; for the day of the Lord is at hand; and who shall abide the day of His coming?"

Faith looked pitifully at the bruised roses, and at the man who was yet more cruelly bruised. "And even if His day is at hand, is that any reason why we should despise His gifts?" she asked gently.

"He brings no wreath of flowers but rather a crown of thorns; and in His Hand is a sword which shall pierce us to the quick. Child, be not deceived; it is only by self-repression and self-renunciation that men can attain unto salvation; and not all of them even then."

"Yes, Mr. Webb, self-repression and self-renunciation for another's sake, by all means; but not merely for the pain's sake. I can see that God would be pleased if you, who love flowers so much, gave them up to some one who needed them more; but I cannot see that you will please Him by trampling them under your feet, and so spoiling them for yourself and for everybody else."

"Child, blind not yourself by vain words: the God Whom you serve is a jealous God, and He will brook no rival in the hearts of sinful men. Remember that those who love houses or lands, gardens or flowers

more than Him, are not worthy of Him; and from such He shall hide His Face in anger."

Faith looked up with sweet severity. "No one would be so foolish as to love the gift more than the Giver; but it is for the sake of the Giver that one loves the gift—and the more so the more one loves Him."

"Do not tempt me," Rufus cried, walking up and down the small room, as was his custom when at all moved; "for His sake I have put away from me all pleasant things, and have abjured the world with its many delights, in the hope that when He sees my anguish and humiliation, He may turn again to me and forgive me my sin."

"You do Him an injustice, believe me: He did not make the world so beautiful only in order to torture us with unsatisfied longings: He gives us every good gift in order that we, in our gratitude, may love Him all the more. And it is because we love Him that we find His gifts so fair. I do not think that we ever properly enjoy a fair landscape or a beautiful sunset until we realize that He is in it all, and through it all, and beyond it all: just as we never enjoy any other books and pictures as much as we enjoy those that are written and painted by the hands we love."

Rufus was silent; so Faith—being a wise woman—changed the subject.

"I wish you would let me lend you some books, Mr. Webb. They would divert your mind, and rest you altogether."

"I read no book but my Bible: that is enough for me; and it ought to be enough for all."

"We ought not to read other books instead of our



Bibles," persisted Faith; "but I don't see why we shouldn't read them as well."

"What sort of books would you wish me to read?" asked Rufus, and his voice was very stern.

But it took more than sternness to frighten Faith. "I would advise you to read novels," she calmly replied; "I think there are few things which rest one's mind and divert one's thoughts as much as reading good novels; and I am sure that just now you are sorely in need of such rest and diversion."

Again Rufus began to stride up and down the small room, like some caged wild animal.

"Read novels, do you say? Why, I would rather pluck out my right eye than it should offend by reading such trash as novels."

"But I would advise you to read such novels as are not trash," persisted Faith.

"All novels are trash—and, what is worse, they are vanity and lies. Child, do you not know that whosoever loveth and maketh a lie shall have part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone? Those who write novels make and love a lie; and those who read what they have written are like unto them."

"Then would you call all forms of art vanity and lies too—pictures and statues and poems for instance?"

"I would; and if I had my way I would burn them all, so that they should not lure the souls of men to destruction."

"Burn books and pictures?" gasped Faith.

"Yea, every one of them on which I could lay my hand; for they are indeed the false gods and graven images which we are forbidden to worship. And is it not better that they should be destroyed by earthly

fire, than that men's souls should be destroyed by the fire which is never quenched?"

"But art would never destroy men's souls; it is a revelation, or rather an interpretation, of truth; and so is meant to bring men nearer to God instead of driving them away from Him."

"Child, child, do not prophesy vain things. All false gods shall be destroyed, and likewise those who have set them up and worshipped them," persisted Rufus, growing more and more excited. "Look at that fine house yonder," he continued, pointing to the top of the hill, where Baxendale Hall gleamed red among the trees; "is it not written that it shall once more be made fuel of fire? And blessed shall be the day that sees it reduced to ashes, and blessed shall be the hand that sets it alight! Rase it, rase it even to the ground, until not one stone shall be left upon another!"

"Mr. Webb, you don't mean what you say. Think of the sorrow it would be to Mr. Baxendale if the home of his fathers, which is so dear to him, were to be burnt to the ground; and surely he has had sorrow and disappointment enough in his life already, without your wishing this final blow to fall on him."

"I do wish it. My soul yearns over the soul of Laurence Baxendale; and I pray that whatever comes between his soul and God may perish for ever. Have you forgotten that other young man who went away sorrowful because he had great possessions? And shall I sit still and see this young man also condemn himself to the outer darkness, because he loves houses and lands better than the God Who made him? No; Baxendale has once more to be made fuel of fire by

something which is greater and stronger and higher than King or State; and that I hold to be the fear of God."

"I think there is no need for Baxendale Hall to be burnt in order to teach Laurence to fear God and to keep His Commandments; he has learnt that lesson already from God Himself, and from his dead father."

"May-be; but science falsely so called, and pleasant pictures, and the sorcerer's spells which men call novels, are fast blinding his eyes to the hidden things of God's law, and are making him of the earth earthy; nevertheless the Lord shall destroy them in His displeasure, and the fire shall consume them."

"You have no right to say such things of Mr. Baxendale," replied Faith, for the first time showing signs of a weak spot in her almost perfect temper; "he is the best and noblest and most unselfish man I ever met."

"The young man in the Gospels had kept every Commandment from his youth up, yet his great possessions were the undoing of him. Child, listen to me: I love Laurence Baxendale, though I had sworn never to love mortal man or woman again. To my everlasting shame I love him—I, who had abjured human love as a snare of the evil one; and I pray that his house and his books and his pictures may be destroyed by fire before he has offended past forgiveness that God Who hath said, 'Ye shall have none other gods but Me'."

"There is no possibility of offending that God past forgiveness," said Faith softly.

"So I thought when I was your age," groaned the fanatic, sinking exhausted into a chair and burying

his face in his hands; "but I fell away from my high calling—I loved the creature rather than the Creator—and now outer darkness is reserved for me for ever. And because I love Laurence Baxendale—love him against my will and against my vows and against my conscience—I would destroy my soul again, were it possible, to save him from the pit wherein I have fallen myself."

"You are unjust to Laurence, but you are still more unjust to God."

"Child, you know not what you say; did you ever hear my story?" asked Rufus, looking up; and Faith's anger against him died down before the abject misery of his face.

"No; please tell it to me," she said gently, seeing that silence and loneliness had well-nigh thrown Webb's brain off the balance, and believing that confession—even to her—would be good for his soul.

"I was the child of stern and godly parents; and was brought up by them in the fear of God, and in the knowledge that His All-seeing Eye was ever upon me to mark iniquity should I do amiss. With all my heart I strove to obey His word and to fulfil His precepts and to keep His laws. Like the infant Samuel, I had been dedicated to His service from my birth; and when I was old enough I took Holy Orders, and offered myself as a missionary, so that I might go forth and make known His word among the heathen, and among the kingdoms that had not called upon His Name."

"Yes, I understand," said Faith; and, encouraged by her evident sympathy, Rufus proceeded:—

"But a few months before I started for China—the spot to which the Church had seen fit to appoint me—

I met a woman—a young and beautiful woman; and I—the man set apart by God to bear upon the mountains His tidings of peace—turned away from my high calling, and loved this one woman with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my mind and with all my strength; loved her as I ought to have loved my God.”

“And as you would have loved Him, if men had not lied to you about Him,” added Faith softly—so softly that Rufus did not hear her, but went on:—

“So I married her, and took her out with me to China. And I loved her—my God! how I loved my little Lettice; I, who had given up all human love for the sake of the Cross, having put my hand to the plough turned back because of the beauty of a woman. Yes; I loved the curls at the back of her neck, and the dimple on one side of her mouth, and the way her eyelashes turned backwards making stars of her pretty eyes. And, to my shame, I remember all these things, and love them still; for which God will bring me to judgment.”

“Again I say you are doing Him an injustice. Your love for her ought to have taught you something of His love for you; instead of which you turned His good gift into one of the nails whereby you have crucified Him afresh—for surely Annas and Caiaphas did not misjudge Him more terribly than you have done.”

“But He punished me,” Rufus went on, heedless of the interruption; “our God is indeed a jealous God; the idols which we worship instead of Him shall be cut down and cast into the fire; and wherewithal a man sinneth, by the same also shall he be punished. I let her deck herself with fine garments, though I ought to

have known that a meek and quiet spirit is the only adornment which becomes a woman; I let her read novels, though I ought to have known that she who loveth a lie is no whit better than he who maketh a lie; and I let her laugh and sing all over my house, though I ought to have said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What doeth it? And for this also will God bring me to judgment."

"Then what became of this beautiful woman whom you loved and married?"

"Listen, and I will tell you; and then you will see what a terrible thing it is to fight against the living God."

"But you are fighting against Him still."

Rufus did not seem to hear what Faith was saying. The memory of the past was so strong upon him that for the time being it effaced the present.

"I took Lettice out with me to China, and for a year we were perfectly happy together—so happy that God was wroth with us for letting mere human bliss fill the place in our hearts which ought to have been filled by Him. Then there was a rising out there against the missionaries, and the mission-house was besieged. I and my brethren held out for as long as we could; but our adversaries were too many and too strong for us, and at last we were overpowered and taken prisoners."

"And your wife? What became of her? Was she taken prisoner too?"

"Do you think I was going to let her fall into the hands of those yellow devils? No. When I heard the walls crash in, and knew that our enemies were upon us, I shot her dead with my own hand; shot the tender heart which had lain upon my own, and dabbled

the pretty hair in blood. For love of her, and to save her from a fate which I could not bear to contemplate, I broke God's Commandment which saith, 'Thou shalt not kill'; and so lost my own soul in order to save her body from torture. And for love of her I would do the same again—yea, even were my punishment ten times greater than it is."

Faith was almost breathless with interest: "And you did not try to kill yourself as well?"

"No; I should have held it a cowardly act to save myself from the consequences of my disobedience to God's word. The Chinese made me and my comrade prisoners, intending to torture us to death; and welcomed their tortures as some meet punishment for the sin I had committed. But God, in His justice, saw fit to make my punishment even greater than a lingering death at the hands of the Chinese: when two of us were dead, and two dying—we were four in all—relief came, and we two survivors were rescued. And since then my soul has suffered agonies, compared with which my bodily sufferings in that Chinese prison were as nothing."

Faith's grey eyes were full of tears. "Poor Mr. Webb! I am so sorry for you. I don't wonder, after all that you have suffered, that you have formed false ideas of God; and I am sure that He doesn't wonder, either."

But Rufus did not hear her; his eyes had grown dreamy, and his thoughts were far away. "She had such pretty eyes," he murmured, half to himself; "and when she smiled she nearly shut them, which gave her a dreamy look, as if she were smiling at something which other people could not see. And she never could

keep her hair neat, though she used to laugh and say that a clergyman's wife ought at any rate to be tidy; but how could I blame her when it went into such dear little curls at the back of her neck, as soft as silk and as yellow as gold? And as for the dimple in her cheek——”

But Faith did not stay to hear any more; she felt that she was treading on holy ground, not intended for any feet save those of the woman who was dead. So she slipped out of the room and out of the house; and Rufus Webb never heard her go, being lost for the time in the memory of a dimple which had been dust for twenty years.



## CHAPTER VII.

### A WOMAN TEMPTS.

You took my life, and filled it all ;  
Then turned its sweetness into gall,  
And doomed me to despair, dear.  
The life you spoiled is nearly done ;  
And if there be another one  
In some strange land beyond the sun,  
I hope you won't be there, dear.

THAT summer was a wonderful time for Laurence and Nancy ; so wonderful that it would always stand out in their minds' eyes, as long as they both should live, in a sort of bas-relief against the ordinary winters and summers and seed-times and harvests of everyday existence.

For a while Laurence forgot his anxieties and his poverty and the many trials which beset him, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of those repeated coincidences which so often brought himself and Nancy together. He deliberately shut his eyes, for the time being, to the lions in his way—of which there were a veritable menagerie—and made the most of the beauty of Nancy's eyes and the music of her laughter. And it is but fair to Nancy to add that she in no way stinted his opportunities of enjoying these simple pleasures, but promoted the frequent recurrence of them by every means in her power.

As for her, she was radiantly happy; happier than she would ever be again, in the same irresponsible, light-hearted way. Locked up in a remote cupboard, at the very back of her mind, was the certainty that Laurence loved her, although he had not told her so; and she was never weary of weaving, for her own discomfiture, doubts of him and of his honourable intentions, which she enjoyed to the full, supported as they were by that locked-up cupboard in the background.

She and Laurence talked a great deal about their friendship, and pretended both to each other and to themselves that this was the correct name for the thing. But they would have been terribly disappointed in their own cases, and extremely disgusted in each other's, if the pseudonym had finally proved itself to be anything but the flimsiest *nom de plume*.

Laurence found it so easy to talk to Nancy. He had not found it easy to talk to anyone since his father died; and there is a luxury in the rare unreserve of reserved natures, which the habitually outspoken find it impossible to appreciate. Nancy, on the contrary, felt more shy with Laurence than she had ever felt with anybody; in fact he was the only person she had ever met who could give her an inkling of what the sensation called shyness really is; and the naturally shy person has no idea how exquisite is a faint *soupeçon* of that sensation to the person who has hitherto but known it as a name.

"Isn't it funny," Nancy remarked confidentially to Laurence, when he and she were walking in the lanes, "that it is so easy to say you are glad to see people unless you really are glad to see them; and that then it is impossible?"

"Is it?" he replied with a smile. "Then I am to conclude that you are always glad to see me save when you happen to mention the fact, and that then you are distinctly annoyed."

"I never do say I am glad to see you," said Nancy innocently; and then became rather pink when she had realized the inference which might naturally be drawn from her statement.

Laurence pretended not to notice this inference, though in going over the conversation afterwards in his own mind (as he had a knack of going over all conversations wherein Nancy had taken a part) he treated that particular remark as if it had been the utterance of an inspired sibyl. But at the time he merely said, "I thought that you prided yourself on never making inane and conventional speeches, Miss Burton; although of course I am aware," he added, "that to pride oneself upon not doing a thing is by no means the same as leaving it undone."

"That's true," agreed Nancy with a laugh. "Do you know I pride myself upon being a good listener?"

"Ah!"

"And upon never saying indiscreet things?"

"So I should have supposed."

"And upon thinking too poorly of my own charms and excellencies?"

"I can quite believe it."

"You are very rude, Mr. Baxendale."

"Far from it. I am merely avoiding the rudeness of contradicting a lady."

And then they both laughed, with the careless and delightful laughter of the young and foolish.

"But you are right in thinking that I can't stand the

civil and obvious in the way of conversation," Nancy said; "there is a class of people who always make certain stereotyped remarks which almost drive me mad."

"As for instance?"

"Well, when you have been away from home for a week or two, they invariably call you 'a bird of passage'. It is a most ridiculous expression; but that type of conversationalist revels in it. And then they say, 'How the days are closing in,' and 'Christmas will soon be upon us'; as if Christmas were a movable feast, and as if the days hadn't closed in and lengthened out at the same rate since the time of Adam."

"And even before then, if science is to be believed."

"Exactly. Do you know it is such a comfort to talk to you, Mr. Baxendale, because you have what the Psalmist calls an understanding heart."

"You mean that I understand you pretty well? Perhaps I do. But I don't know that that presupposes any unusual perspicacity on my part."

"Because I am so prone to say what I think?" suggested Nancy.

"Not altogether. As a matter of fact it is when you don't say what you think—when you go out of your way to say the exact opposite—that you are most enlightening and instructive."

"Then why doesn't the understanding of me prove your abnormal cleverness?" Nancy persisted.

"Because even a fool can generally master one subject, when that subject occupies the whole of his thoughts and attention to the exclusion of everything else," was Laurence's reply.

Whereupon Nancy was seized with one of her de-

lightful and inexplicable attacks of shyness; and consequently confined the conversation to most uneventful and ordinary grooves until she and Mr. Baxendale had parted at the iron gate which guarded the back entrance to Wayside.

When Laurence reached home that afternoon, he found his mother as usual in a chatty mood. She was sitting in the little drawing-room, watching the haymakers at work in the meadow below the garden; and as the sweet scents and the sweeter sounds of summer filled the air, which was as yet vibrating with Nancy's laughter, Laurence felt that the world was indeed very good, and that life was abundantly worth the trouble of living. But Lady Alicia soon dispelled the golden glamour: she had a knack of spoiling the sweetest illusions and the most exalted moments with a rapidity and completeness which fell little short of genius.

"Isn't it a lovely afternoon, dear Laurence?" she began, as her son sat down on the chair beside her; "I think there is nothing that gives one such beautiful thoughts as the smell of new-mown hay—except, perhaps, the sound of a band in the distance. A few days ago there was a Flower Show at Tesleigh Wood; and as the wind was in that direction, I could hear the band as I sat in the garden."

"I shouldn't have imagined that the band at a Flower Show was in itself a liberal education," said Laurence, in a voice from which all the boyish ring had been suddenly eliminated.

"Ah! that is because you're so prosaic and commonplace that you never see or hear all the sweet and romantic things around you; but I cannot blame you for this, as you inherit it from your poor dear father—

the most unpoetical and unromantic creature that ever lived."

"What sort of beautiful visions did this particular band call up before your mind's eye, my dear mother?" asked Laurence, wincing—as he always did—at his mother's way of speaking of the father whom he had adored.

"Oh! it made me feel so tender and softened and chastened (it was playing *Two Lovely Black Eyes*, if I remember rightly; or else *The Girl I left Behind Me*; I'm not sure now which), that I felt I quite forgave your poor dear father for all the trouble and poverty and economy that he had entailed on me by his most unjustifiable marriage with a young girl brought up in luxury as I had been—too young, alas! to know her own mind."

Laurence did not speak. However trying Lady Alicia might be, he never forgot that she was his mother; and this remembrance often obliged him to take refuge in silence, so that he might not offend with his tongue against that Commandment which makes no exceptions in favour of those who have no sympathy with the idiosyncrasies of the father and mother whom they are bidden to honour.

Lady Alicia placidly continued: "The power of association is very strong in poetical natures such as mine, and that is why sounds and scents affect me so much. I remember dear Wordsworth spoke very sweetly about something—I forget what it was, but I fancy it was a pet lark or a daisy—which made you think of things 'too deep for tears'. I so often feel like that."

"Indeed." Laurence knew he was ungracious, but

for the life of him he could not help it when his mother talked in this way.

"For instance," she went on, "I never smell mint-sauce without thinking of the day when dear Lord Watercress proposed to me. We were at a dinner-party at the time, and the lamb was just being handed round; and even yet, after all these years, the smell of mint-sauce always recalls poor dear Watercress—how beautifully he spoke, and how heart-broken he was when I refused him. Ah! I had such good offers when I was young; and it was the knowledge of how much better I might have done that made it so hard for me to forgive your poor father when I discovered that he was not as well off as I had been led to expect."

Then Laurence felt constrained to expostulate. "I am sure my father never deceived you as to his income. He was the most single-minded and upright and honourable man I ever came across. He was incapable of deceiving anybody—least of all the woman he loved."

"Well, he didn't exactly deceive me in so many words; and even if he had, my dear father would have ferreted out the truth about his prospects."

"Then what do you mean by saying that father was not as well off as you had been led to expect?"

"I was such an unsophisticated romantic young creature, full of love and fire and poetry and things of that kind, don't you know? that when he told me he was poor, I imagined I loved him all the more for it. Even now, and although I am speaking of myself, I cannot help feeling that there was something very beautiful and touching in a young girl, who had been brought up as I had been, being ready to sacrifice the world for love. It is the sort of thing that one

would read about in a novel, and think so very, very sweet."

"But like the celebrated sacrifice to Baal on Mount Carmel, the fire from heaven was apparently wanting in your case," remarked Laurence somewhat bitterly.

Bitterness, like humour, was however lost upon Lady Alicia. "Yes," she went on in her well-bred, expressionless voice, "I can see now how unspoiled and unsophisticated my nature was; and such simplicity was indeed beautiful in a girl who had never done her hair herself, or put on a dress worth less than twenty guineas since she was born. I can remember now how beautifully I spoke to Alwyn about caring more for him than for wealth or rank or any of the other necessaries of life; and how the tears came into his eyes when he kissed me, and said he hoped to God that he should prove himself in some measure worthy of such love. Oh! it was all so very, very touching and pathetic."

"But if you said all that to him, how can you blame him for believing you?"

Lady Alicia sighed plaintively. "Ah! he was older than I was, and knew more of the world and of how very unpleasant it is to be poor; and he ought not to have taken advantage of my nobility and generosity. I blame him for taking me at my word; and I always shall consider it showed a sad selfishness on his part."

"Did you ever tell him that you blamed him?" asked Laurence quietly.

"Of course I did, over and over again. I think it is such false kindness to keep from people the consequences of their own folly and selfishness. We are put into this world to help other people; and how can



we do this better than by pointing out to them their faults and their mistakes, and so helping to correct them?"

"Ah!" murmured Laurence. His mother's loquacity threw most instructive lights upon his father's character.

"But I grieve to say that your poor father never took his chastenings in the right spirit. When I used to tell him what a bitter disappointment my marriage had been to me, and how I regretted the too great sacrifice which he had demanded at my hands, instead of apologizing as he ought to have done for having exposed a woman of my rank to such inconvenience, he used to become quite sarcastic, and say things which he apparently intended to be funny though I never could see the point of them."

"I wonder if all women end by hating their husbands, unless those husbands happen to be rich," said Laurence, meditating as to whether—should he succeed in attaining his heart's desire and winning Nancy's love—she would finally break that heart as his mother had broken his father's.

"Of course they do—all nice-minded women, that is to say, who are too delicate and sensitive to put up with a hugger-mugger home, and to do without the refinements of life. It is very beautiful to believe that love is everything when one is quite young—very, very beautiful—and it would pain me inexpressibly to think that I had not believed it in my innocent girlish days; but as one grows older—and one does not mind growing older when one thinks of how beautiful the autumn tints and flowers are, and how attractive it is to grow old gracefully—one cannot but realize

that a thoroughly capable butler makes a house more comfortable than the most devoted of husbands; and that one cannot really get enough to eat, unless one has a cook who can make good entrées and savouries; the young may digest plain joints, but not the middle-aged."

A flood of pity for his poor silly mother rushed into Laurence's heart. He had not understood before how much she minded being poor. Like his father, Laurence would have believed that a man could make a woman happy, quite apart from the question of money, if only they loved each other enough. And so he could, were the said woman's heart of the best quality. But many women have hearts not of the best quality; and these also have to be reckoned with. If a man build his house upon the sand, the plea that he mistook that sand for rock will in no wise avail him when the rains descend, and the floods come, and the winds blow, and the house falls.

"I'm afraid our present circumstances are a bit rough on you, mother," Laurence said very gently; "I wonder if there is anything that I could do which would make things easier for you."

"Dear Laurence, what a dutiful son you are! You are more unselfish than your poor father after all. I suppose it is the Portcullis strain in your blood which makes you superior to him and more like me and my people. The Moates are all peculiarly sensitive; and this poor Alwyn could never understand."

"Still my father's family is a considerably older one than yours, if you come to that." Laurence had made up his mind to keep his temper whatever his mother might say; but it was no easy matter.

"Yes; there is no doubt of that. Your ancestors were owners of Baxendale while mine, poor dears! were selling wool or leather or something equally unpleasant. Nevertheless there is a refinement and delicacy of perception among the Moates which is sadly lacking in the Baxendales."

"Then, my dear mother, considering that—according to your own showing—my density is rather my misfortune than my fault, won't you take the trouble to point out to me, more clearly than would be necessary were I a Moate, how I can make life easier for you?"

"Ah! now you are reasonable, and remind me of my dear father, who was ever the most sensible and trustworthy of men. Well, you see, poor as we are to begin with, this horrid fire insurance makes us still poorer. A hundred and fifty pounds a year is a large sum to pay out of an income of barely five hundred."

"It is, mother; confoundedly large! No one knows that better than I do."

"Then, dear Laurence, couldn't you leave off paying it? We should be much better off if you did."

"I know we should; and to tell you the truth—were I free to follow my own judgment—I should leave off paying it, and should take the risk of Baxendale being burnt down for the third time. More than a quarter of one's entire income is a good deal to pay to insure oneself against an off-chance; for it is only an off-chance that the Hall should be burnt down again, at any rate in our time."

"Dear Laurence, you are a Moate at heart, though outwardly you resemble poor dear Alwyn. Then why not leave off paying that tiresome insurance mouey?"

"Because, unfortunately, I can't. It was st

my grandfather's will that my father and his son only inherited the property on condition that we insured the house and the books and the pictures for a hundred thousand pounds. And if I fail to fulfil this condition, I forfeit my claim to the estate, which then goes to the Hampshire Baxendales."

"You are sure of this, dear Laurence?"

"Perfectly certain. You don't suppose I should pay all that money without assuring myself that I was bound to pay it, do you? But I grant you it is a confounded nuisance."

"Then why not sell some of the books? There are lots of clever, interesting people who would only be too glad to buy some of the dear, dirty, old things."

"Because that tiresome old grandfather of mine only left his library to my father and his heirs in trust; we have no right to part with a single volume."

Lady Alicia was silent for a moment. So was Laurence, while his thoughts ran riot on what he would say to Nancy if only he were not so horribly poor. He did not believe that his mother was right, and that Nancy's love would be measured according to his riches; nevertheless Lady Alicia's remark had conjured up an uncomfortable doubt in his mind as to how far Nancy was actually superior to the ordinary run of girls; and he ground his teeth as he realized that his poverty made it impossible for him to set this detestable doubt at rest, once and for ever, by putting a single question to her and reading the answer in her pretty blue eyes.

Then Lady Alicia began to speak again, in her sweetest and most ingratiating manner—that manner in which she used to clothe herself for the opening of bazaars and the giving away of prizes and such-like

functions, in the days of her prosperity; and which invariably elicited a very ecstasy of appreciation from the local newspapers, whose pleasing duty it was to send forth a report of her ladyship's graciousness to all such dwellers in outer darkness as had not enjoyed the privilege of beholding it for themselves with the eye of flesh.

"Does it never strike you, dear Laurence, what a good thing it would be if the Hall were burnt down, and we had that hundred thousand pounds to live upon?"

"But we couldn't use it for anything save rebuilding the house, mother; my grandfather's will sees to that."

"I know we couldn't touch the capital, my love; but we might live on the income. Or else we might spend half the capital on rebuilding and live on the interest of the rest. We could build a sweet house for twenty thousand pounds, or even less; a dear, lovely home, with all the refinements of life and a green drawing-room carpet. I cannot tell you how I long for a green drawing-room carpet, Laurence; it has such a softening influence on the character, I think, and makes one feel as if one were living in the primeval forest, or the Garden of Eden, or some other sweet spot near the heart of nature; just as a sky-blue wall-paper seems to bring one nearer to heaven, don't you know?" For all her sentimentality, the spirit of her commercial ancestors still lived and moved in Lady Alicia Baxendale; and she knew to a penny how that hundred thousand pounds should be invested if only she could lay hands on it.

"I wish I could afford to buy you a green drawing-room carpet, mother." And Laurence sighed.

"Well, so you could, if you were not so absurdly careful—old-maidish, I should almost call it—in seeing

after dear old Mrs. Candy. I have often heard you caution the good soul against carrying a lighted candle into the library. Now, why shouldn't she, if she wants to?—and if a spark did fall amongst the old books and manuscripts, all the better for us!"

"Oh! mother, you are not thinking what you are saying."

"Yes, love, I am; and I have often thought it. Sometimes, when I recall the old legend, it seems to me that it would be a positive duty, instead of a sin, to burn the Hall down for the third time and so fulfil the prophecy. It is really a duty to fulfil prophecy if one can; see how anxious Daniel and Isaiah and people of that kind were to do so; and they were remarkably good men, and have always been considered so."

"Nevertheless those who do evil that good may come are not considered remarkably good men—or at any rate were not by S. Paul," replied Laurence, his lips tightening into a grim smile.

"Ah! dear child, it does not do to dwell too much upon S. Paul's sayings; I often think he was a little hard and narrow, especially where women were concerned."

Laurence thought that the Apostle to the Gentiles had some excuse for his opinions, even if Lady Alicia's strictures upon him were correct; but he did not say so, and his mother went on:—

"For my part, I think you would be quite justified in lighting your pipe in the library at Baxendale, or in insisting upon Mrs. Candy's keeping up big fires, or in putting up hayricks close to the house."

"Oh! mother, don't; I can't bear it," cried Laurence, an almost physical spasm of pain clutching his heart. He had always wondered why his father had been so

glad to die—so glad to say good-bye to the red earth and the green woods and the sunset glories of the western hills. Now he knew.

“You see, dear Laurence, the Hall has got to be burnt down once again; we all know that; and it would be so much nicer if it happened in our time, while we were still able to enjoy the benefit of it. It isn't as if the Hall needn't be burnt again; if that were so, I should say it was very, very wrong to do anything that could occasion the slightest danger; and you know I am the last person to countenance what I consider really wrong. But the Hall is obliged to be burnt once again by something which is stronger than King or State. I so often wonder what that can mean.”

“Avarice, according to you, mother,” was Laurence's bitter rejoinder.

“Oh! no, dear child—something much more poetical and beautiful than that; perhaps the love of a son for a mother, or a mother for a son, or some other of those delightful and touching emotions which are so refining to the character. In fact it seems to me that it would not only not be wrong—it would be actually right—to help to fulfil that strange old prophecy, and show one's faith in the supernatural; for there is nothing that elevates one's own mind, and has such a good influence on the servants, as belief in the supernatural. It keeps one from growing sordid or mean or commonplace.”

Laurence fairly groaned. Never had the gulf which separated his mother and himself yawned so widely as it did now. And he knew it would be useless—worse than useless—to argue with her: he and she spoke different languages, and moved on different planes.

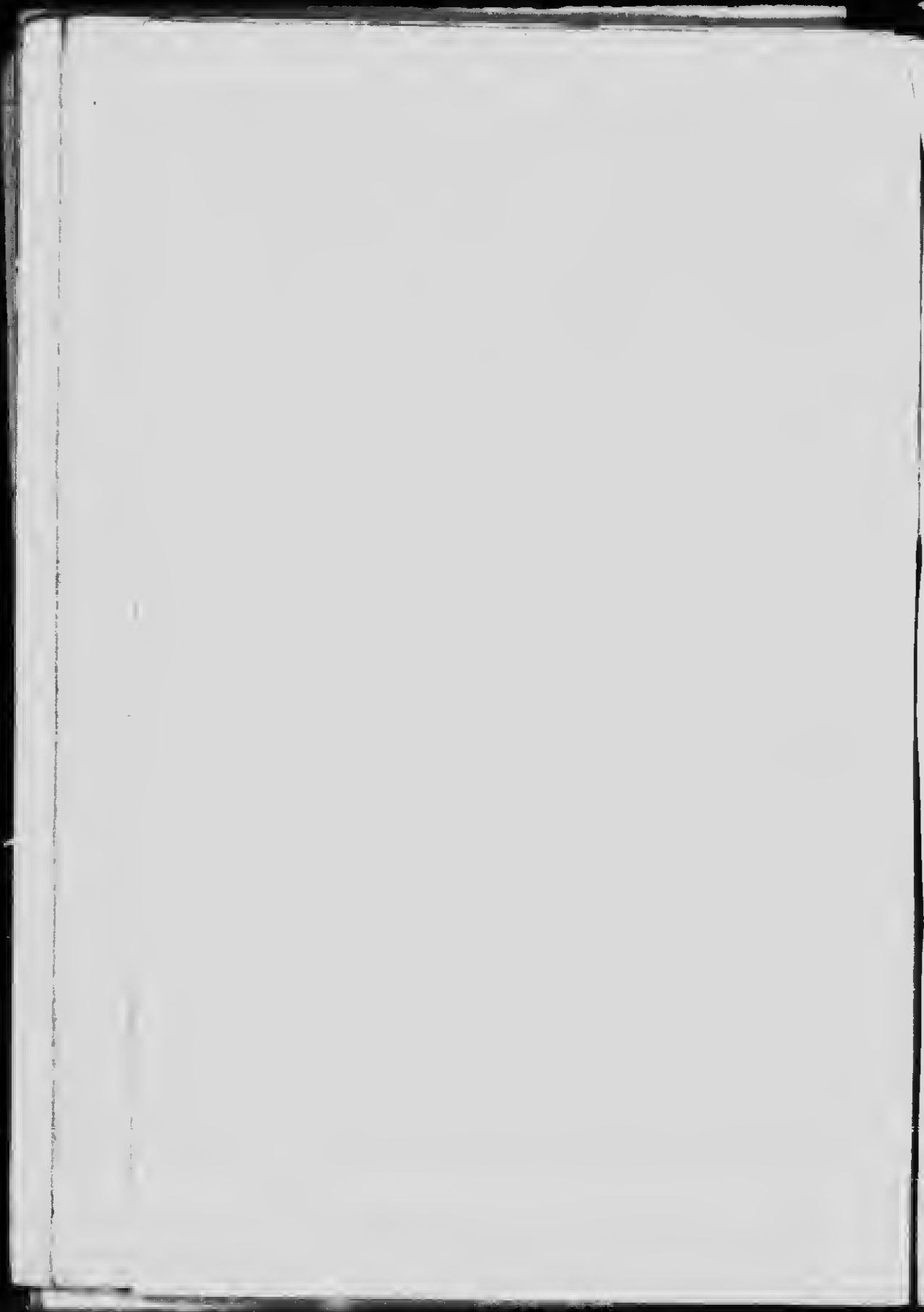
“And then,” she went on cheerfully, “think how nice



"AND HE KNEW IT WOULD BE USELESS—WORSE THAN USELESS—  
TO ARGUE WITH HER."

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it would be for you, dear Laurence, to have an income of two or three thousand a year. You might marry some nice girl, who would cure you of the somewhat morose and unsocial habits which are fast growing upon you. There is nothing like a charming wife for making a man sociable and unselfish; though, alas!" with a sigh, "his marriage never had that effect upon your poor father. I'm sure it wasn't my fault; I was always as agreeable and well dressed as it was possible to be on our limited income; but he never seemed to appreciate my efforts to make his home attractive to other people—which I hold to be one of the chief duties of a wife."

Still Laurence was silent. A darkness which might be felt was enveloping his soul: it was all so hopeless.

His mother continued: "I sometimes think that Nancy Burton is attracted by you; and I don't know that she would be a bad wife for you, though you ought to do better. She is always well dressed, and has quite nice manners for a person of that class. I feel sure she would jump at you, as people like that are always so glad to ally themselves with us; and no doubt Mr. Burton—dear sensible creature that he is!—would allow his daughter a handsome sum in consideration of her making such a brilliant match. But I don't think his allowance would be sufficient to marry on, as of course you would have to keep up a separate home for me; you will understand that I—with my sensitive perceptions—could not possibly live in the same house with a girl whom——"

But this was too much for Laurence. "Excuse me, mother, but I would rather not discuss Miss Burton even with you," he said as he bounced out of the room and banged the door behind him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

"The course of true love never ran  
Quite easily since time began :"  
So said our wisest Englishman.

MICHAEL ARBUTHNOT, the vicar of Teteleigh, was a man of about five-and-forty, endowed with exceptional gifts. In the first place he was extremely good-looking, having brown hair and eyes, excellent features, and a pale complexion ; in the second place he was undeniably clever, owning an admirable knack in the composing of sermons ; and in the third and most important place he was a very good man, being distinguished by unusual keenness of spiritual insight. He also possessed in full measure that uncommon sense known as common sense ; but in one of the most important decisions of his life this sense had signally failed him. Fate and circumstance and the general fitness of things—and all such powers as go to the shaping of the ends of men—deemed that Faith Fairfax was the proper wife for Michael Arbuthnot. She was made and fashioned specially to fill the rôle of a clergyman's wife ; she had sufficient intellect to appreciate his powers and attainments, and sufficient grace to help instead of hindering him in his duties as a parish priest. True, she was in love with Laurence Baxendale ; but her affection was a

very early growth and was not returned; and love—whatever poets may say to the contrary—is not a flower which flourishes in arctic regions.

Although the course of the truest love may be a stony channel with countless rocks ahead, the stream of inferior quality, which runs smoothly along neat and artificial canals, is not without its compensations. Real romance has its moments, compared with which commonplace attachments become flat, stale and unprofitable; it opens the gate into a fairyland which must for ever put into the shade all the ordinary comforts of the dusty highway. Who that has once danced in a fairy-ring, wants to jingle up and down the road in a tram-car? And who that has once been dazzled by the light that never was on sea or land, can go into ecstasies over incandescent gas? Nevertheless, tram-cars and incandescent gas have their uses; and for those people who have never caught glimpses of some better thing, they are very excellent inventions indeed. It is not to be denied that when the world has been well lost for love, they who have thus lost it gain their own souls in exchange, and enter into life's Holy of Holies; but when love has been well lost for the world, there are compensations likewise. The Parisian style of the rousseau and the solid nature of the wedding presents are capable of affording a joy which more romantic lovers could in no way enter into or appreciate. So that the wise and the foolish are both happy after their kind; and which of them is wise and which foolish, each man must decide for himself, and each woman also.

But Mr. Arbuthnot (either fortunately or unfortunately—that is a moot point) was of the romantic

manner of man who is set upon marrying the woman of his choice, and not the woman whom his world has chosen for him; consequently that rebellious heart of his inclined towards Nora Burton and not towards Faith Fairfax; and whither his heart inclined, there Michael himself followed.

His world blamed him even more for loving Nora than for not loving Faith. As a matter of fact, it always does seem worse to do those things one ought not to have done, than merely to leave undone those things one ought to have done; although the General Confession puts the two sins on the same level. And his world went even farther: it decreed that if Mr. Arbuthnot must so far forget himself and his sacred calling as to fall in love with a Burton at all, Nancy rather than Nora was the one for him.

Nevertheless it is possible—though it seems both ungrateful and presumptuous to suggest such a possibility, when we consider how generous and unsparing our friends and neighbours always are in meting out condemnation upon our past, and counsel with regard to our future, actions—that Mr. Arbuthnot knew his own business best.

Now it may be taken as an axiom that if a man is a good son—and, still more, a good brother—that man will be a good husband; and any woman is safe in entrusting her happiness to him, until death them do part, with an absolute certainty that her trust will not be betrayed. But, on the other hand, strange to say, it does not follow that a good daughter and sister will necessarily make a good wife—she may or she may not. In fact very often the case is reversed. The reason for this lies in the deep-rooted difference

between a ruling and a subject race. If a man has learnt to govern wisely and kindly the women of his father's household, he will wisely and kindly govern the women of his own; but if a woman had submitted herself with all meekness for the first term of her natural life, she grows weary of subjection and wants to reign in her turn. Therefore, in all probability, the most dutiful daughter will make the most wilful wife; while the revolting daughter, who has implicitly disobeyed all her father's commands, will be as tired of rebellion as her gentler sister is of subjection, and will settle down quite meekly into double harness. In the same way it is a noticeable fact that the naturally bad-tempered woman is amiable towards nobody except the man she loves, while the naturally good-tempered woman is amiable towards everybody except the man she loves; which proves that to the normal woman the world is divided into two unequal parts, to which she shows the two directly opposite sides of herself—the man she loves being the larger half, and everybody and everything else the other. But, after marriage, the real nature of the woman reasserts itself; thenceforward the naturally good-tempered woman is good-tempered, and the naturally bad-tempered woman bad-tempered, to the end of the chapter. Wherefore it behoves the man who is wooing to walk circumspectly and with wide-open eyes.

Although Nancy was the more amiable and adaptable sister in the home life, Nora was the easier to get on with from a lover's point of view. As far as in her lay, Nora provided that the course of true love should run smooth; but Nancy amused herself by making artificial little rapids and shallows, in case nature had

not supplied sufficient excitement for her in this respect. She loved to tease Laurence in and out of season, and to rouse his jealousy; she was always inventing some excuse for a quarrel and making it up again; and he never delivered himself of the simplest statement that she did not openly dispute. Nora, on the other hand, sweetly obeyed the law which Mr. Arbuthnot laid down; and contented herself and him by letting him make up her clever little mind for her. He had not yet told her that he loved her, but she was perfectly cognizant of the fact; and, having once grasped it, would never again doubt it, as Nancy would have done fifty times a day—and would thoroughly have enjoyed the doubts, too. No, Nancy was not altogether easy sailing; but she was great fun, and there are men who enjoy amusement more than ease.

“What are you thinking about, Mr. Arbuthnot?” Nora inquired of the vicar one afternoon, as he and she were walking together from Tettleigh to Wayside.

“Well, to tell the truth, I was wondering how far short of our ideal we may fall without being in any way to blame. One cannot always be at one’s best; that is impossible; but I wonder how far below one’s best one’s daily walk and conversation may lie.”

“I understand what you mean. You are wondering how many half-holidays we may take from the ideal without playing truant.”

“Exactly,” agreed the vicar with a smile.

“And half-holidays are absolutely necessary, aren’t they?”

“They are; but, on the other hand, the ideal ought to tinge our half-holidays; if we have once seen the heavenly vision, we must never be disobedient to it.”

Nora was quick to catch his idea. "You mean that though we can't always be looking at the vision, we mustn't forget that we have once seen it," she said.

"Yes; that is exactly what I do mean. And I think it is a little difficult to hit upon the happy medium between disobeying the heavenly vision on the one hand, and dwelling upon it to the exclusion of our daily duties on the other."

"Which of the two evils do you think the least?"

"Undoubtedly the latter. If one has ever seen the best of anything, in love or life or art as well as in religion (for I believe the heavenly vision comes to us in innumerable ways), it is sin for us not to obey it. We need not be always thinking about it; but we must never be disobedient to it. Therefore, it seems to me that the few amongst us to whom it is granted to see the best in any walk of life have duties entailed upon us from which ordinary men and women are exempt."

"Then we have to pay even for our heavenly visions," said Nora with a sigh.

"We have. There is an old heathen saying that the gods give nothing—they only sell; and I believe there is some truth in it. We can get nothing for nothing in this world; and I think it is a very good thing that we can't."

Thus Michael taught and Nora learned; and in the process they grew to know and love each other better every day.

It happened that while these two were holding sweet converse on the road from Teteigh to Wayside, Laurence and Nancy were holding anything but sweet converse on their way back from Baxendale Hall; and



the head and front of this offending was as follows: a friend of Anthony's, Bertie Crawshay by name, had been spending a few days at Wayside—nominally with Anthony, but actually with Anthony's cousin. There is no use disguising the fact that Nancy had flirted outrageously with this young man, actuated thereto by two powerful reasons: first, by a natural desire to make life pleasant to herself; and, secondly, by an equally natural if less laudable one to make it unpleasant to Laurence Baxendale. And in both respects she had succeeded beyond her utmost anticipations: the flirtation had amused her and annoyed Laurence more than she had dared to hope; consequently she was in high spirits.

"I haven't seen you for ages," she exclaimed, after she and Laurence had greeted each other in the park—she with an extreme pleasantness which was meant to be unpleasant, and he with an excessive politeness which was intended to be rude; "it is at least two hundred and seventy-five years since we met."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed it, Miss Burton," replied Laurence stiffly, who knew that exactly four days, three hours and twenty-five minutes had elapsed since he last set eyes on Nancy.

"How are you?" she inquired with engaging sweetness.

"I'm all right, thank you," was the response, with no sweetness at all.

"Are you? I'm so glad. I asked, because you don't look particularly grand. I'm afraid you've been doing too much this hot weather; though it is very jolly, it takes it out of one."

"The weather seems to me perfect; and I can assure

you, Miss Burton, that your anxiety as to my health is entirely misplaced—I never felt better in my life.” He really was very disagreeable, but then what right had a girl to go about with an ass of a fellow such as Crawshay for three days, and behave as if she liked it? he asked himself in excuse.

“You mean you never felt worse,” Miss Nancy said under her breath; but aloud she merely remarked with the utmost suavity, “It is so nice to see you again! Do you know we hadn’t met for such centuries that I had forgotten the colour of your hair and the shape of your nose? I really had.”

“I am flattered to find that you waste time in striving to recall my uninteresting features. But, believe me, you make a mistake; they are not worth remembering.”

Nancy was delighted. Laurence was even angrier than she had expected him to be. “Oh! your nose is well worth remembering, it is such a nice shape. You don’t do it justice. Its loveliness increases, and it will never pass into nothingness, according to Keats. But though I did forget the shape of your nose, I didn’t forget you, because I have been telling Bertie Crawshay all about you, and that has served to keep my memory green.”

Laurence bowed. “Thank you; I am however as unworthy of Mr. Crawshay’s notice as of yours. I’m sorry you and he could not find a more interesting subject of conversation than myself.”

“Oh! but we could—heaps upon heaps, and much more interesting; but you happened to crop up now and then among the rest.”

“Then I have no more to say.” Laurence was highly indignant. He had held Nancy too sacred to be dis-

cussed even between himself and his mother; and, in return, Nancy had talked him over with this young jackanapes. It really was unpardonable, and he had no intention of pardoning it. So much for the futility of masculine intentions!

"What? No more to say when you haven't seen me for a whole week? Well, you are a most disappointing person! I expected you to have an immense deal to tell me after this long separation."

"Yes, I am disappointing enough; but your error lay in expecting too much of me. You know, 'Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed': that is my favourite beatitude."

Nancy's blue eyes appeared to be full of sympathy and interest. "Then do you ever feel disappointed in people, too, Mr. Baxendale? Oh! I am so sorry." Yes, Laurence was right; she really was unpardonable.

"Pray do not waste upon me sympathy which might be so much better expended," he replied with exaggerated ceremony. "You misunderstood my remark. I meant that I don't often meet with disappointment, for the simple reason that I am not such a fool as to expect much from people."

"How very interesting and clever of you! But don't you find it rather dull?"

"Not disagreeably so. I do not—like you—expect people who have not seen me for a week to be ready to greet me with an accumulation of brilliance which they have been storing up for me at compound interest in my absence; on the contrary, I expect them to have forgotten my very existence in the society of more cheerful and congenial companions; and—unlike you—I admit I am rarely disappointed."

They walked on in silence for a minute or two, until they came to the gate which separated Baxendale Park from the lanes. Then Nancy asked in her most airy manner, "Shall we go home the long or the short way?"

Laurence looked at his watch without in the least seeing what time it was. "You must of course please yourself, Miss Burton. I must get back home as quickly as possible, as I am rather busy to-day."

Then came another silence; and Nancy—knowing to an inch how short was now the distance to the turning where the way to Poplar Farm branched off from the way to Wayside, and having an instinctive knowledge that Laurence would say good-bye at that turning and not walk home with her—began to think it was time for a change in the tactics of her warfare. "You seem rather cross to-day," she said quite meekly, looking up at Laurence with a face out of which the mischief had died.

Laurence raised his eyebrows in apparent surprise. "I—cross? What do you mean, Miss Burton? I am afraid I must be very bad mannered to give you such an idea; for which bad manners please accept my humble apologies."

"Then aren't you cross?" Nancy's voice was meeker than ever.

"Not in the least. What ever put such an idea into your head?"

Nancy began to feel rather frightened. It is one thing to play with fire, and quite another (and a much less agreeable one) to burn one's own fingers. "I thought perhaps you were vexed with me about something."

"I—vexed with you? Impossible. I am afraid that too brilliant imagination of yours is leading you astray. You are inventing offences on my part for the express purpose of showing resentment on your own. I fancy you will find that both offence and resentment are mythical."

Nancy felt it was time to play trumps if she did not wish to lose the game altogether. "I thought you were vexed with me about Bertie Crawshay," she blurted out. It was a most feminine card.

But Laurence held trumps in his hand, too, and took her queen with his king. "My dear Miss Burton, what earthly right have I to dictate to you who shall be, and who shall not be, your friends? It would be a gross impertinence on my part to express annoyance at anything which you might think fit to do; an impertinence of which I hope I am incapable."

Nancy looked at him sideways with an expression in which fear and shame and curiosity were equally blended. Laurence happened to turn round at that moment and caught the look. He wished he had not seen it, as it somewhat weakened his intention to maintain his superiority over this most insolent and unfeeling young woman. Nevertheless he continued: "As I said before, I extremely regret that anything in my unfortunate manner should have led you to believe me guilty of the unpardonable liberty of criticising or even discussing your conduct; but, if you will overlook it this time, I can promise you that for the future I will take care to avoid even the appearance of such an evil."

Nancy had nearly lost the game, and she knew it; but still she held the ace. The question was, should she play it, or should she uphold her dignity as high as

Laurence was now upholding his, and throw down the cards, refusing to play any longer against so determined an adversary. She hesitated a minute, and looked round. They were in the most secluded of the lanes, and nobody—not even a scarecrow—was in sight. Yes; the ace would have to go; there was no doubt of that. As far as it was in Nancy to be shy of anything, she was shy of the strength of her own feelings; she generally kept them resolutely out of sight, and

made a curtain  
Out of her laughter to hide her love.

But now she laid an entreating little hand on her companion's arm, and—for the first time in her twenty-two years—she allowed her whole heart to well up into her eyes as she raised them to his and whispered:—

“Laurence, I know I've been a brute. Won't you forgive me?”

And then and there, in spite of his praiseworthy desire to uphold his own dignity—in spite of his justifiable intention properly to punish her unbecoming behaviour—in spite of his laudable decision to tell no woman of his love until he was in a position to marry her—Laurence Baxendale suddenly took Nancy in his arms and covered her face with kisses.

“My darling,” he murmured, “I love you, I love you! It was I who was the brute; but I shouldn't have been if I had not cared for you so much, and been so confoundedly jealous.”

Nancy laughed as well as she could in the circumstances. “You silly boy, were you very jealous?”

“Rather! Couldn't you see it?”

“Distinctly; a blind bat could have seen it with his

eyes shut. And, do you know, I think jealousy is my favourite virtue in a man?"

"And I'm a brute to make love to you now, considering that I'm such a poor beggar I shan't be able to ask you to marry me for years and years, probably; but I simply couldn't help it when you looked at me like that."

"Then do you love me very much?"

"My darling, I adore you."

After another hiatus in the conversation, Laurence said: "You haven't told me yet that you love me, sweetheart. Nancy, do you love me?"

Then Nancy put her two hands on his shoulders and pushed him away from her, looking him full in the face with her heart still in her eyes. "I love you with all my heart and soul and strength, and I always shall love you; and there never has been and never will be any man in the world for me except you; and now let us be funny again, and forget that we're so badly in love."

So the ace won the trick after all.

## CHAPTER IX.

### ANOTHER WOMAN TEMPTS.

"The woman tempted me and I did eat:"  
Such the apology once made by Adam,  
Who paved a way more trodden by men's feet  
Than any fashioned by the great Macadam.

ONE afternoon not long after this, Nancy was silent with the silence which accompanies excessive happiness, even in the most loquacious people. When one has just been treading the highways to Zion and beholding visions of angels, it is difficult to bring oneself down to the level of ordinary conversation with one's fellow-creatures—particularly when those fellow-creatures happen to be relations. And so Nancy found it.

Anthony, in true cousinly fashion, was not slow to observe this unusual reticence on the part of his generally talkative kinswoman.

"What is the matter with our beloved Nancy?" he asked of Nora, in a stage whisper loud enough to have pierced ears much more remote than Nancy's. "Is it her liver or her lover that is out of order, and so produces this distressing and unnatural depression?"

"You must ask her," replied Nora; but Nancy did not take any notice. She found Laurence's past remarks much more nourishing food for meditation than Anthony's present ones.



Tony gazed at her pensively; then murmured,

“Oh, that those lips had language! Life has passed  
But slowly with me and Nora since we heard thee last.”

Then the mystic roused herself sufficiently to speak; and her speech was to the point. “Don’t be an ass,” was all she said.

“I will try not—indeed I will; but, as I have remarked before, it runs in the Burton family as it did in Balaam’s; the only difference being that Balaam was amazed when his ass spoke; we, on the contrary, marvel when ours is silent.”

Nora laughed, and Nancy tried not to do so.

“But the reason for the upset is the same in both cases,” Anthony went on; “the ass saw an angel in the way.”

“I’d rather hold my tongue till Doomsday than talk as much nonsense as you do,” said Nancy.

“Nevertheless your daily walk and conversation give the lie to this statement.” And Anthony sighed. “Would that it were not so!”

“What are you going to do after tea, Tony?” asked Nora, who naturally did not take an absorbing interest in this accurate diagnosis of her sister’s amatory condition.

“I shall go for a stroll in the lanes, I think, in order that my always delicate digestion may recuperate itself between the efforts of tea and dinner. I always find, if I don’t take exercise at this particular hour, that I am incontinently launched upon my dinner before I have duly forgotten my tea. And there is something rather indecent in that—like marrying again before one’s first wife is sufficiently dead, don’t you know?”

Whereupon Nancy woke up thoroughly. "You can't go for a stroll in the lanes, then—I am occupying the lanes myself this evening," she said, as if she were referring to a bathroom which was used in turns.

Anthony fairly gloated over her discomfiture. "Ah! now we have hit the nail—that is to say our beloved Nancy—upon the head. Then how are Nora and I to get such exercise as the state of our digestions and the size of our teas demand, I should like to know?"

"You can go for a walk along the road. The high-road is good enough for relations," replied Nora indifferently.

Anthony clasped his hands in mock admiration. "Oh, wise young judge, how I do honour thee! Where did you learn all these truisms, my dear young friend?"

"In various places."

"I am going to write a new version of *Eyes and no Eyes*," said Tony. "It will be about a good little girl who never made eyes, and so the high-road was as uninteresting and un instructive to her as the loveliest lane; and about a naughty little girl who always made eyes wherever she went, so long as there was somebody (it didn't matter who) to make eyes to; and in consequence the dullest field-paths to her were full of delightful and sentimental memories; and the less frequented a road by ordinary traffic, the more pleasure she got out of it."

"It will be a very nice story," applauded Nora, to whom also the lanes at the back of Wayside were not altogether untrodden ground.

Anthony sighed. "Then do you agree with Nancy in preventing yourself and me from keeping the even tenor of our way along the cool sequester'd lanes of

life; and condemning our tottering foot-steps to the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer of the 'ard 'igh-road?"

Nora nodded. "Nancy and I always play fair about the lanes. We never enter them when they are being occupied by the other; and we keep the rest of the family away, too."

"How do you keep my esteemed uncle and aunt away on these interesting occasions?"

Nora smiled demurely. "We tell mother that there are tramps about, and father that it is damp under foot."

Anthony shouted with laughter. "Well, you and Nan are two for a pair, as my old nurse used to say."

"We certainly are intelligent young women," said Nora with complacency.

Then Anthony again turned his attention to his elder cousin. "If I were you I should learn a lesson from the sermons in stones—those stones which are laid down for the prevention of traffic by the County Council; and I should station at the entrance to your particular lane a youth with a red banner bearing the strange device, 'This road is closed for repairs without the *re*'. Now I call that a distinctly neat idea."

Nancy could not help laughing, although she was in love. "Really, Tony, you are killing! Your bitterest enemy couldn't deny that you are convulsing at times."

"With which compliment let me withdraw, lest you should think better of it and add a codicil or a post-script which might give me pain, and undermine that absolute self-appreciation which is the keystone to my interesting and complex character," replied Anthony, getting up from the easy chair where he had been lounging and going out of the room. "Come along,

Nora, and we'll get the dogs, and leave our dear Nan to derive what intellectual pleasure she can from the society of one who is a man but not a brother."

"All right." And Nora obediently followed him.

When the others had started for their walk, Nancy put on her hat and wandered through the orchard and across the field to the iron gate which led straight into fairyland; and as she strolled along the grassy road, with its high green hedges on either side shutting off the common workaday world, she wondered how anybody could ever feel unhappy on such an exquisite earth as this. She had always been susceptible to the beauties of nature, though hitherto they had awakened in her a sort of indefinable craving—she did not know for what—a sort of unconscious questioning, to which apparently there was no answer. Sometimes there had seemed to her to be a useless prodigality of beauty, as if the foolish old earth had put on her glorious apparel and decked herself with her jewels for a gala day which never came. Surely simpler garments would have been sufficient for the trivial rounds and the common tasks which do not furnish all we ask—even if they furnish all we ought to ask—when we are on the sunny side of thirty. But now at last Nancy understood why the earth beneath her was paved with emerald, and the heavens above her were crowned with a sapphire dome—why each wild flower was a marvel of delicate workmanship, and why each star in the firmament had its place in that majestic choir whose *Te Deum* was begun in the dawn of creation by the sons of God. It was "because the birthday of her life had come—because her love had come to her"—that she had found out why the world had been made so beautiful. For Laurence's feet the emerald pave-

ment had been laid down; over Laurence's head the canopy of sapphire had been unrolled; and now, because Laurence loved her and had told her so, the mountains and the hills brake forth before her into singing, and all the trees of the field clapped their hands.

Nancy's friends—with the singular blindness of those who have known us from our youth up—would have said (in fact did say) that she was too shallow and light-hearted to fall in love in the ordinary accepted use of the term. Because she continually laughed and hardly ever cried, they decided that the deeper things of life were a closed book to her merry blue eyes; and because she chose to wear upon her sleeve such selections from her heart as she considered suitable for publication, they made up their minds that these selections constituted her whole property in that line; and that—because she talked freely about some of her feelings—such feelings as she did not talk about were non-existent.

There are no people so sorely misjudged in this world as the people who go through life as laughing philosophers; just as there is no figure in nursery lore so pathetic as that of the jolly miller who lived by the river Dee. Does any one imagine that the man of meal would have troubled to inform his world that he cared for nobody and nobody cared for him, if such a statement had indeed been true? Not he! He would rather have made affecting speeches at Charity Organisation meetings, and wept copiously at the imaginary woes portrayed in theatres, and told pathetic stories of his early love-affairs, and generally conducted himself as all such elderly gentlemen conduct themselves who are

actually what the (so-called) jolly miller pretended to be. It was because he cared so much that he pretended to care so little. Nevertheless he thereby deceived all children both of smaller and of larger growth; which, after all, is what he desired and intended to do.

Nancy had not wandered far along the lane, when she saw a well-known figure in a light tweed suit coming towards her from the direction of Poplar Farm. For a second she was possessed by an insane desire to run away and hide herself where that tweed-clad figure could not find her; and yet she was fully aware that—for the rest of her days—all roads that did not lead to that figure would be unfit for traffic as far as her feet were concerned. Such is the contrariety of the feminine mind.

There was a look in Laurence's grey eyes as he greeted her which made her want more than ever to run away from him at once, and never to run away from him again as long as she lived—two desires which naturally were incompatible. So she gave herself—and him—the benefit of the doubt, and remained.

After they had strolled together right into the heart of fairyland, using by the way such fond talk as lovers are wont to use when no reporter happens to be present, they finally arrived at a stile, set in the middle of an unfrequented field, as far from the madding crowd as it is possible to be in Mershire. And upon this stile they sat, side by side, after the approved fashion of the ballad-monger and his Mary.

Why tradition has assigned a stile as the seemly resting place for lovers is an interesting problem. Taken as a seat, *quâ* seat, it is indefensible, combining as it does the minimum of comfort in remaining on,

with the maximum of danger in falling off; and, even putting so commonplace a consideration as comfort out of the question, the difficulty of balancing oneself for any length of time on so limited a space, must always in some degree interfere with the fluency of the conversation of persons thus delicately balanced. Nevertheless a stile always has been, and always will be, the regulation throne of King Cupid; and any attempt to substitute for it a more convenient and less uncomfortable resting place would be on a par with reorganising a Monarchy or disestablishing a State Church.

"And you are quite sure you love me, sweetheart?" asked Laurence, with his heart in his eyes.

Nancy nodded. "Absolutely certain. I'd take an oath to that effect before a magistrate's clerk or a coroner's jury, without running the slightest risk of seven years for perjury."

"You silly little child, what nice nonsense you talk!"

"So do you. Do you know you really have been frightfully silly this afternoon?"

"I know that, baby. I like being silly. Anybody can be clever—in fact I was clever myself, long before I'd ever seen you. But it takes a man who is absolutely and devotedly in love to be becomingly silly; and there are precious few of that sort in this wicked world, I can assure you, Miss Burton."

"How much do you love me?" asked Nancy.

"As much as I can; and that's a jolly lot."

"But how much can you?"

"As much as this," replied Laurence, covering her face with kisses.

"That's no answer; it's like saying 'as big as a lump of chalk'. You're as bad as I was when I once wrote

to a bookseller's shop and ordered a prayer-book the same size as a birthday-text-book. You can imagine how father and Tony roared at me."

"I can."

"I want you to tell me exactly how much you love me," Nancy persisted.

"A little bit more than you love me."

"Then how much do I love you?"

"Ah! that is your business. You can't expect me to give an accurate diagnosis of your symptoms, my darling, when I am so culpably ignorant of my own. Now I must confess that I should have thought a clever girl like you could have answered a simple little question like that."

"And I should have thought that a clever man like you could have answered it."

"But I don't set up as being clever, and you do."

Nancy smiled. "You were considered very clever at Oxford, weren't you?"

"I was; but I'm not responsible for all the traditions to which so antique and interesting a city gives birth."

"And mathematics were your strong point, weren't they?"

"I always prided myself upon being able to put two and two together."

"Well, then," and Nancy nodded her head triumphantly, "a good mathematician ought to be able to measure so simple a thing as his own love for a girl."

"Excuse me; but the very best mathematicians cannot measure infinity." And Laurence kissed her again. "But I'd spend the rest of my days in trying to show you how much I love you," he continued more seriously, "if only I wasn't so confoundedly poor."



"It is a nuisance," and Nancy sighed, thereby cutting Laurence to the heart. It was intolerable to him to think that he—who desired nothing so much as her happiness—should be the one to bring that pathetic note into her voice and that sad look into her eyes.

"But never mind," he said, after a moment's pause, trying to take a more encouraging view of things; "the luck is sure to turn soon, and then I can speak to your father, and we can be properly engaged. Probably I shall succeed in letting some of the farms that just now are empty—I might even be able to let the Hall—and then you'll soon see how much I love you, sweetheart."

"I suppose that fire insurance hampers you a good deal," remarked Nancy thoughtfully.

"It does; confound the beastly thing!"

"And you couldn't leave off paying it?"

"Not without forfeiting the property, according to my grandfather's will."

"And you couldn't sell the old library?"

"Not without the same disastrous result."

"I think it is very unfair of people to make wills like that."

"So do I; but when they have made them, there is no use in defying them."

"I wish the prophecy would come true and the Hall be burnt down again," remarked Nancy with another sigh.

"So do I, for some things; but the misfortunes that we desire are invariably the misfortunes from which we are preserved."

"I suppose if it did come true, you would have plenty of money?"

"Plenty, my darling; but it won't come true, so it's no use thinking about it."

After a minute's silence Nancy said: "I wish we could call down fire from heaven to consume Baxendale Hall; and be happy ever afterwards."

"But you see, we can't, dear love."

"Couldn't you light your pipe there—or have a bonfire on Guy Fawkes' day—or something of that kind?"

Laurence was struck—as we all are struck now and again—by the strangeness of that unwritten law which rules that history, even in the smallest things, shall repeat itself. We hear the name of a place or a person which we have never heard before, and during the next day or two that place or person is again mentioned in our hearing; we come upon a word that is entirely new to us, and in the next book we open that particular word hits us full in the face. We are all familiar with this phenomenon, yet it never ceases to surprise us; therefore it came as a shock to Laurence when—in accordance with this remarkable law of chance—Nancy said the very same thing which his mother had said to him so short a time before.

"My darling, don't say such things even in jest. It hurts me to hear you say them."

"But I can't help wishing them. Oh! Laurence, you don't know how much I love you, and how horrid everything is without you." And Nancy's lip quivered.

Laurence took her in his arms and tried to comfort her. "Don't fret, sweetheart. Things will take a turn for the better soon, I know they will. And then think what lovely times we will have together!"

"But not until we are too old to enjoy them," argued Nancy disconsolately. "It won't be much fun going about together, if we have to go in two bath chairs with the glass down."

"We shan't do that, my pet."

"Yes, we shall; and I shall look at you through blue spectacles, and you will make love to me down an ear-trumpet, and everything will be simply detestable."

"Dear little child, don't fret," repeated Laurence.

"But I must fret—I can't help fretting—you should never have kissed me if you hadn't wanted me to fret. And we might have such fun if only you'd made a bonfire of the silly old place. I hate the sight of it!"

"Oh, Nancy!"

"Yes, I do; and it has got to be burnt down a third time by something which is greater and higher than King or State—and what can that be, I should like to know, but love? I don't believe you're really in love with me at all, or else you'd be only too pleased to burn down your house in order that I might warm my hands at the blaze. In fact that is what you would do, if you were a really nice, obliging, chivalrous, Sir Walter Raleigh kind of a man."

"Perhaps I might, if it wasn't insured; that makes all the difference, don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't you see that it would have taken the shine out of old Raleigh's cloak-trick if he'd covered the puddle with a borrowed mantle, knowing that he should get a bran-new one out of the transaction?"

"I can't think why you don't fire Mrs. Candy with a desire to read some of the old manuscripts, so that she might study them by candle-light, and in her turn fire the Hall."

Laurence believed that Nancy was talking the broadest nonsense and did not mean a word she said; nevertheless it hurt him that her suggestions should so

exactly coincide with his mother's. "My darling," he entreated, "don't make life harder than it already is by saying things that cut me to the heart."

But Nancy only laughed. "You see the Hall has got to be burnt down a third time—everybody who knows anything at all knows that—and it would be so lovely if only it would happen now. Nobody will ever get as much fun out of the money as you and I should, Laurence dear."

"Perhaps not, my sweet. You know I mind it all as much as you do, don't you?"

"I suppose you do," rather doubtfully; "but you remind me of the old Scotchwoman who went for the first time to a Roman Catholic church and said, 'Na doot they love the Lord; but, sakes! they've a funny way o' showing it'. You've a funny way of showing it, too."

But Laurence's face was too sad to smile. "I'm sure you don't want me to be more unhappy than I need be, Nancy?"

"I don't want you to be unhappy at all, silly; that's what I keep proving, if you'd only attend to what I say. I want us both to be happy—perfectly, gloriously, frightfully happy—until every week seems like a cricket week, and every day like a bank holiday."

"So do I, sweetheart; and we will be some day. But in the meantime don't break my heart."

"Certainly not. I'm not such a goose as to go about smashing my own property."

"Well, you will break it if you go about saying things which you don't mean in the very least, but which somehow lower my ideal of you."

Nancy made a face. "Now we shall hear something

really improving. The preacher for this afternoon will be the Reverend Laurence Baxendale, some time Postmaster of Merton. His subject will be the follies of young women in general, exemplified by largely exaggerated magic-lantern slides of the peculiar negligences and ignorances of Miss Nancy Burton."

But Laurence would not be put off by her jokes. "My dear, you don't want really to hurt me, do you?"

"You silly old boy, of course I don't. Do you think that my usual way of annoying a man is to tell him that I love him? Because, if you do, it isn't particularly complimentary to me."

"Then promise me you will never say anything again, even in jest, about burning down the Hall."

"All right; you shall make out an *Index Expurgatorius* of the things I mustn't make jokes about. It will include everything that begins with a B—Baxendales and Burning and Burtons and Beatitudes, and so on and so on."

"Give me a kiss to seal your promise."

And she kissed him full on the lips.

Nevertheless it was many a long day before either Laurence or Nancy forgot that conversation. They imagined, in the blindness of their hearts, that they had cancelled it with kisses; but no kisses, nor tears, nor even death itself, can ever wipe out the effects of the spoken word whereof it is written that men and women shall give account in the Day of Judgment.

## CHAPTER X.

### MRS. CANDY'S HOLIDAY.

With mine own people I awhile must dwell,  
Just to find out if they are strong and well,  
And hear the things which they alone can tell.

"I'm just thinkin', sir, as I should like a holiday," Mrs. Candy said to Laurence the next time he was up at the Hall. "I was sayin' to her leddyship only t'other day that it was many a long year since I'd had a sight o' my own people; and though yewr own people may try yew sore when they're with yew, there's no doubt as yew want to see 'em now and then—just as camomile tea is as bitter as bitter when yew are drinkin' it, and yet yew can't get on without a dose of it from time to time."

"I suppose not."

"So I says to her leddyship, says I, 'I'm wantin' to go back to Norfolk for a spell,' I says; and she says to me, 'Why don't you ask Mr. Baxendale for a holiday,' says she; 'I'm sure as he'd give it yew this bewtiful summer weather.' And Candy he says as her leddyship had right on her side to his thinkin'; so I've made bold to ask if I may go away for a bit."

Laurence could not help wishing that his mother had not furthered the evacuation of the Hall so soon after her unpleasant suggestions to him; but he immediately put away the thought as an insult to Lady Alicia, and

said quite agreeably, "Of course I shall be glad to give you a holiday, Mrs. Candy, if you wish it. But how will Candy manage to get on without you?"

"He won't manage, sir. Bless yew, Candy couldn't get along without me to look after him, and slave for him, and wash his clothes and listen to his grumblin's, no not if it was iver so; he's a good husband is Candy. But her leddyship says as may-be yew'd give him a holiday tew; and we thought as it would be a good time to go back to Overstrand and see as the family grave is in good order, ready for me when it's my turn to lie within it," explained Mrs. Candy cheerfully.

"A strange fashion of spending a holiday! But people must enjoy themselves in their own way, I presume."

"And there'd not only be the pleasure o' puttin' the grave in good order, sir; but my niece, Maria Jane, she's just had twins, she has, poor soul!—twins, like misfortunes, niver comin' singly, as they say. And what time I had to spare from weedin' i' the churchyard, I could be lookin' after Maria Jane and the twins. Oh! there'd be plenty to pass the time, Mr. Baxendale; so that Candy and me need niver have a dull minit."

"I see."

"And Candy 'ud take a few cuttin's o' different sorts o' flowers to plant on the grave, so as to make it look more cheerful-like when my time comes. He said, if I'd no objection, he'd try a bit o' carpet-gardenin' on it, carpet-gardenin' bein' so hardy and lookin' well nearly all the year round. 'And yew'll want it all the year round,' he says with a laugh, 'it ain't only a summer residence,' says he as peart as peart. Oh! he's one for his joke, is Candy."

"You already seem to have provided yourselves

with a full and interesting programme," remarked Mr. Baxendale.

"Well, yew see, sir, that's the bewty o' goin' among yewr own people—there's always somethin' to du and to talk about, be it christenin's or funerals. And I du say as next to a death there's nothin' like a birth for cheerin' a family up a bit."

"I suppose not."

"That's the worst o' bein' but a stranger and a sojourner, as yew may say, as I have been iver since I left Norfolk. Folks die and folks are buried all the world over; but I deny as yew iver enjoys findin' fault as to how they have left their bit o' money, as much as yew du when it's yewr own flesh and blood as is to blame."

"That is true, Mrs. Candy." And Laurence laughed.

"Now there was my Uncle Willum—him as I've so often told yew about; bless yew, sir, we niver got tired o' talkin' of his bit o' money and how unfairly he'd left it—niver. If iver we'd a family party, Uncle Willum's bit o' money 'ud come up as sure as fate; and then there'd be plenty to talk about, niver fear, howiver late it might be afore the party broke up. Afore his death we'd talk of how he ought to leave it, no tew bein' o' one mind on the subject, which kept the ball a-rollin' and gave the men somethin' pleasant and interestin' to argufy about; and after his death we'd all abuse him for the way he had left it, and that was more pleasant, if less excitin'. Oh! I am sure I dunno what we should have found to talk about many a time if it hadn't been for Uncle Willum and his bit o' money."

Laurence sighed. "Money—or the want of it—



certainly does seem to be the root of most evils: at least if one is to judge from history."

"Oh! don't yew worry yewrself over history, Mr. Baxendale," said Mrs. Candy in a soothing voice; "Candy's no opinion of history, hasn't Candy; and he's no patience wi' learnin' children about it at schule. 'What's the good o' learnin' 'em all about past and gone Kings and Queens?' he says, 'they're dead and buried, and let 'em lay;' says he. That's what Candy thinks about history." And Candy's better-half nodded her head triumphantly at this unanswerable refutation of the testimony of all living or dead historians.

"I didn't know that Candy was such an authority on education."

Mrs. Candy fairly bridled. "He is, though—and on most things else. There ain't much in this world as Candy hasn't got to the bottom of—I can tell yew that, sir. And he don't hold wi' schules, Candy don't, niver havin' had much schulin' himself."

"A most natural disapprobation," murmured Laurence.

"And he don't hold wi' scholars, neither. I remember, i' the late Mr. Baxendale's time, Candy got a new gardener's boy which was a perfect scholar. 'How du the new boy get on, Candy?' says the late Mr. Baxendale. 'Get on, sir?' says Candy, 'why he don't get on at all; he don't know nothin' o' nothin'. And how shud he, sir, he havin' been at schule all his life?' Oh! he isn't one for much schulin', isn't Candy."

"Obviously not."

"He says it's all very well for the gentry as haven't got nothin' else to du but to turn their heads inta pottin' sheds and rubbish heaps; but them as has got

their own livin' to get can't afford to waste their time over such stuff as book-learnin'."

Laurence smiled. "I am afraid then that Candy doesn't share my late grandfather's weakness for books, as shown in the library upstairs."

"Not he, sir; yew don't find any nonsense o' that sort about Candy. And he says if he had been in yewr place, beggin' your pardon, sir, he'd sune have sold all that waste-paper upstairs for what he could get for it, grandfather's will or no grandfather's will."

"But, you see, my grandfather's will made it not only impossible for me to sell his library, but also obliged me to preserve it at great expense."

"Well, it's a good thing as yewr grandfather's will has yew to deal wi', sir, instead o' Candy; for Candy wud ha' stood no nonsense o' that kind. He'd ha' sold the whole bag o' tricks for what he cud get for it—that he wud, if all the grandfathers in Christendom had tried to stop him, and all the grandmothers, tew."

"Then I am afraid the law would have stepped in and prevented him."

"Oh! he don't hold wi' the law any more than he du wi' schulin', don't Candy. He says as the law is all very well for poachers and criminals and the like o' them, but that it hasn't no right to come interferin' wi' honest men; and if it iver dares to interfere wi' him, he'll sune show it its place, says he. And so he wud; I should like to see the law as dare interfere wi' Candy when onst his spirit's up."

"I suppose when you were living in Norfolk you sometimes saw the King on his way to and from Sandringham," suggested Laurence, who always enjoyed drawing Mrs. Candy out.

But Mrs. Candy seemed to be shocked at the suggestion. "No, no, sir; I ain't as warldly as all that, though His Majesty did pass through the station of the village where my brother Jacob Henery lived. 'Come and see the Prince o' Wales go threw, Lizzie,' says Jacob Henery to me one day, when I was a-stayin' wi' him. (He was the Prince o' Wales in those days, yew see.) 'No, Jacob Henery,' says I, 'I'm not so warldly,' says I; 'now if it had been Abraham wi' Lazarus in his bosom, a-sittin' in a first-class carriage, I might 'a gone,' I says; 'but not for all the Kings o' the earth,' says I, 'will I run half a mile as hard as I can, just on the top o' my dinner'. And no more I wud."

"You were most sensible, Mrs. Candy, not to allow that feeling of loyalty, which is so apt to run riot in England, to lead you into indigestion."

"Just what I thought, Mr. Baxendale, sir. What wud the Prince o' Wales and all the crowned heads o' Europe have cared if my dinner that day had lain on my chest like a lump o' lead? Not they; it wud have made no difference to them whatsoever. But it wud ha' made all the difference to me, I can tell yew; and I wudn't ha' visked it, no not for the Emperor o' China or the Pope o' Rome."

"By the way, Mrs. Candy," Laurence said more seriously, "I suppose you wouldn't go for your holiday by yourself, and leave Candy to look after the Hall?"

"Laws a mercy, Mr. Baxendale, what be yew a-thinkin' of? Why I wudna go on a journey without Candy to tell me which way I was a-goin', no, not if yew was to crown me. Do yew think I'm a-goin' to set up a lot o' guards and porters and engine-drivers

and such, above my own wedded husband, and take their word instead of his? No, sir, I trust I knows my dewty as a wife better than that."

"You see, Candy could take your ticket at Silverhampton and put you into the train; and your own relations could meet you at the other end."

But Mrs. Candy stood firm. "No, sir, I took him for better and for worse, and for better and for worse I'll stick to him. And if for worse don't mean for them horrid screechin' railway journeys, I'm sure I don't know what it du mean. No, sir; unless Candy goes wi' me to Norfolk, to Norfolk I don't go."

Like all sensitive people, Laurence could not bear to give pain; and the disappointment which his suggestion had called into Mrs. Candy's ruddy countenance was too much for him. "Well then, I suppose Candy must go too. Do you know anybody who will come and take care of the Hall in your absence?"

"Well, sir, it's not for the likes of me to go teachin' the gentry, and passin' my remarks on what they may please to du," said Mrs. Candy in the tone of those who are about to do the very thing they deprecate. Did the apology, "Far be it from me to speak irreverently," ever precede anything save the most startling irreverence—or the prefatory clause, "I never repeat malicious gossip," ever introduce any item of information which was not in direct opposition to the Ninth Commandment? And Mrs. Candy was but as her fellows—and her betters. "But if yew ask my opinion, I think as it will do more harm than good to bring strangers into the Hall, pokin' their noses into where they've no business, and their fingers into where they've less."

"You mean it would be better to shut the place up altogether for a week or two, than to trust any temporary caretakers?"

"I du, sir. Yew see, me and Candy has known yew from a baby, sir, and the family afore that; and so we've patience with all that nonsense about takin' such care o' that old rubbish heap upstairs. But strangers wud have no patience with it—how cud they?—seein' as waste-paper is waste-paper all the world over. So if they didn't take proper care of all the rummage that this old house contains, who cud blame 'em? Certainly not me nor Candy," continued the worthy matron, feeling that if suspected persons passed successfully the ordeal by Candy they were innocent indeed. "Why, last week's newspaper ain't no good; much less them old books as has been writ iver so much afore last week, or the week afore that."

"Then you would just lock up the house and leave it?"

"I shud, sir. Yew see, nobody has a key to it except yew and her leddyship, so nobody cud get in to du any mischief, for there's shutters to all the down-stair windas; and yew cud look in ivery tew or three days to see as all was goin' on well. And there wudn't be any need o' fires this weather to keep the place aired, for I'd draw up the blinds to the upstairs windas so as the sun cud get in and keep the damp out o' them old books; and there is no damp to speak of at this time o' year. If I was yew, sir, I'd rather leave the place empty, than have folks a-runnin' all over it as I didn't know."

"There's Williamson and his wife at the Home Farm. They would come up and stay here while you and Candy were away," suggested Laurence.

"Well, Mr. Baxendale, yew knows yewr own business best," replied Mrs. Candy, in a tone of voice which implied that if there was one person on earth who did not know anything at all about Mr. Baxendale's business, that person was Mr. Baxendale himself. "If yew can trust Mrs. Williamson, yew can trust her; and that's an end o' that."

"Oh! of course I should be guided by you," Laurence hastened to say with culpable weakness; "but Mrs. Williamson always seems to me to be a tidy woman with plenty of work in her."

"Well, sir, if yew thinks so, yew thinks so; and if yew du believe in her, yew du." Mrs. Candy was evidently of opinion that faith in a myth is better than no faith at all.

"But what is your objection to Mrs. Williamson?"

"I hasn't no objection to her, sir; far from it. But I've looked into her house, I have; and what I've seen I've seen." Fatima herself could not have spoken more mysteriously of Bluebeard's locked-up room, than did Mrs. Candy of the interior of the Williamsons'.

Laurence owned to considerable curiosity. "But what did you see, Mrs. Candy?"

The lady thus urged shook her head and pursed up her lips with the usual firmness of those who have decided not to say a thing, and intend to say it at all costs. "It's not for me to speak evil o' my neighbours one wi' another, even if she du sit in her best parlour on a weekday, and wear out the albums and the anti-macassars in a way as is neither decent nor respectable."

"You must tell me more, please, Mrs. Candy. I really

don't quite grasp the full meaning of Mrs. Williamson's behaviour at present."

Mrs. Candy extenuated nothing, nor set down aught in malice. "Yew see it's this way, sir," she began in a calm and judicial voice; "our best parlour is given up to the Sabbath, so as Sunday shall be different from the days o' the week, as it ought to be. And I hold that to sit in the best parlour on any other day but Sunday, is nothin' more nor less than Sabbath-breakin'. Why, sir, I'd as sune think o' readin' the Bible on a weekday as o' lookin' at the family albums. Only t'other day Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' he says, 'there's some talk i' the papers o' openin' museums and picter galleries and the like on Sundays, but I don't hold wi' it,' he says; 'if yew begin makin' Sunday as cheerful-like as a weekday, what'll become o' the religion of England?' he says. Oh! he doesn't hold wi' Sabbath-breakin', doesn't Candy."

"Still there are two sides to the question," Laurence feebly expostulated, "as there are to most questions, I suppose."

But such sophistry was not for the like of Mrs. Candy.

"Yes, sir, so there be—a right side and a wrong side; and yew can't have tew right sides to anythin', any more than yew can have tew right-hand boots or tew right-hand breeches; leastways so Candy says, and he's got to the root o' most things, has Candy."

Laurence knew when he was beaten, so held his peace.

"Yew see, sir," Mrs. Candy reverted to her former subject, "Candy and me wud be back from our holiday in a fortnit at most—that wud give us plenty o' time

to neaten the grave up, and to give a start to Maria Jane's twins; and there cudn't much harm come to the Hall i' that time, perticularly at this season o' the year, when there's no fires needed, and considerin' as no one has a key to it save her leddyship and yewrself."

Laurence was silent. He did not think it necessary to mention before Mrs. Candy those keys which he had lent to Nancy Burton. That he felt was his business—not Mrs. Candy's nor another's.

"Very well, Mrs. Candy," he said, rising to take his leave. "You and your husband shall have your holiday at once; and I'll make a point of coming up to the Hall every two or three days to see that all is going on right in your absence."

So it was arranged that Mrs. Candy should go to sojourn among her own people for a fortnight, and that Mr. Candy should accompany his better-half in the train for fear she should fall out by the way.

On his way home from Baxendale Hall by the lanes, Laurence caught sight of a blue-robed figure (it was one of Nancy's whims always to wear blue) in the distance; and he accordingly quickened his steps until he overtook it. Now it is an extremely interesting fact that if two lovers go to a particular place, with the express and sole purpose of meeting each other, they are in a mutual agony of fear lest they should miss. To the ordinary onlooker the only remarkable thing about this fear is its utter groundlessness. In any other walk of life, if A went to a place at a time when he knew B was bound to be there, he would conclude for a certainty that he would meet B, and would suffer no further doubts upon the question; if he knew, moreover, that B was going to that place for the especial



purpose of meeting him, his doubts as to their eventually seeing each other face to face would be still more completely set at rest. But not so with lovers. Oh dear, no! He knows, and she knows—with a certainty which no mere friendly or business-like relation would justify—that the object of meeting one another is the sole consideration which, for the time being, guides their respective steps; nevertheless they are both tortured with agonizing doubts as to whether—in a space probably of some dozen yards or so, totally uninhabited save by their two selves—they shall succeed in catching sight of each other; and whether, having so caught sight, they shall succeed in exchanging those few words which are as daily bread to their starving hearts. It never seems to occur to them that nothing short of a miracle could keep them apart in the circumstances; nor to wonder why the natural laws which govern the universe are likely to be suspended for their special discomfiture. If they go to the same place at the same hour they are bound to meet, unless gravitation be nothing but a passing whim, or the shadow on the dial be as liable to be turned back as it was in the reign of Hezekiah; any one in his senses would understand as much as that. But who is in love and in his senses at the same time? And if he were, who would care to be in love at all? Love stiffened by sense is as unwholesome as cream tinctured by boracic acid; and both are the signs and the product of an over-civilized state of society.

As no natural law was suspended and no miracle wrought in order to keep them apart, Laurence and Nancy met each other in the lanes on that particular summer afternoon; and Laurence—after certain im-

material remarks which had no bearing whatsoever on the subject in hand—informed Nancy of Mrs. Candy's promised holiday, enriching the recital by such flowers of the good lady's conversation as he was able to recall.

"I'm glad the dear old soul is going away," said Nancy when he had finished; "she'll thoroughly enjoy dosing the twins and weeding the grave; and it'll be a splendid occasion for you to—oh! I forgot; I beg your pardon."

"Forgot what, my darling?"

"A promise I once made to you. That is the worst of making promises—you never can remember them. And how can you keep them if you have forgotten their existence?"

"Do you mean to say you forget promises? Oh, Nancy!"

"Forget them?—I should just think I do. I once promised father never to read a certain book; but as I've forgotten the name of the book, how on earth can I keep my promise? And I once promised Nora not to flirt with a particular man; but as I've completely forgotten who it was, how can I keep that promise either? And then you are always making me promise not to repeat things, which is very absurd; because promising you that I won't tell things, doesn't mean that I shan't tell them—it only means that I shall make the people I tell them to promise not to tell you that I've told."

Laurence laughed. "Nancy, you really are incorrigible!"

"I can't help that. And you've made me promise scores and scores of things besides—always to be something, and never to be something else—and always to

think this, and never to think that—and hundreds of other things, which for the life of me I can't remember.”

“You naughty, unkind child!”

Well, that's the truth. So if I break my promises to you, don't be touchy and think it is rudeness on my part. If I remember them, I'll keep them fast enough; but I'm sure not to, so there's an end of it.”

When Laurence arrived at the Poplar Farm, having parted with Nancy at the iron gate which barred the field path to Wayside, he explained to his mother as briefly as he could the arrangement he had made with Mrs. Candy. He hated having to mention the subject to Lady Alicia; and he hated himself for hating it.

But it never occurred to him to regret having spoken of the matter to Nancy Burton.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE BURNING OF BAXENDALE.

Higher the flames rose, higher and higher,  
When Baxendale Hall was made fuel of fire.

Two days after the Candys started on their holiday, the weather broke. Up to that time—the middle of August—it had been a wonderful summer; one of those summers which stand out in men's memories as a type of all that a summer ought to be. But suddenly the face of the heavens changed; the rain fell, and there blew a tremendous gale. For several years past there had not been such a storm of wind in Mershire; it tore the tiles off the roofs, and made merry with the slates, and opened the doors without knocking, and broke the windows, until Silverhampton presented the appearance of a city which had been besieged rather than of a comfortable manufacturing town. In the country the wind behaved no better. It tossed the big trees about, tearing them up by their roots, until it looked as if some giant hand was playing a monster game of spilikins in the woods; and as the ground heaved and shook with the efforts of the tree-roots to escape from their prison at the bidding of the storm-fiend, it seemed as if an earthquake were following in the track of the wind. As it was summer, the trees still had all their leaves; and that made them

less able to bow before the gale, and more liable to be overthrown by it.

Right opposite the west front of Baxendale Hall there stood a huge old elm-tree, which was known as "The Luck of the Baxendales," because there was a tradition to the effect that whenever it fell, ill-luck would overtake the house of Baxendale; but as it had cheerfully remained upright, clapping its hands and tossing its long arms about, while poverty drove the Baxendales out of their home and left their habitation desolate, their luck and it seemed to have parted company, and the tradition was now held to be of no effect. But the great gale accomplished what the poverty of the Baxendales had failed to bring about; it tore up the roots of the old elm-tree, and laid its proud head in the dust.

"What do you think? the old elm-tree at the back of the Hall has been blown down," shouted Laurence, on the morning after the gale, to Nancy, whom, by some strange accident, he had come across in the lanes.

But the wind, which though less violent than it had been, was still inimical to conversation, carried his words eastward into Silverhampton, instead of to the little pink ear for which they were intended.

"What?" shouted Nancy in response, holding her hat, while the gale played havoc with her dress till she looked like a little blue flag. "I can't hear a word that you say in this awful wind."

Laurence came nearer and repeated the piece of information in a still louder key. This time it reached its destination.

"The tree that is called 'The Luck of the Baxendales'?" asked Nancy.

Her lover nodded. It was the weather for signs and signals rather than for spoken words.

"Oh, what a pity!" Nancy exclaimed. "I do hope it won't spoil your luck."

The man smiled somewhat grimly. "It can't very well spoil what doesn't exist, my dear; and for it to fall now seems to me a little behindhand, considering that we've been about as unlucky as we could be for the last twenty years."

"It does seem the wrong way about," gasped Nancy, struggling against the wind; "like wagging a dog's tail to make him good tempered."

"Come up to the Hall and have a look at the tree," Laurence begged when again the wind gave him a chance of being heard.

"All right." Nancy was always what Anthony called "a good plucked one".

"I'll take care of you, and see that no branches fall on your pretty head," said Laurence with as much tenderness in his voice as such a gale permitted.

"It isn't a pretty head just now, as it happens; I've put on an ugly hat on purpose, so that the wind shall not spoil more beauty than is absolutely needful."

"Keep to the windward of the trees and as far away from them as possible," Laurence cried; "I daren't walk with Amaryllis in the shade on such a day as this."

"And the wind is so busy with the tangles of Neaera's hair that there isn't one left for you to play with," added Nancy.

"I say, darling, you aren't frightened at crossing the park in such a fearful gale, are you? Because if you are, I'll take you home before I go," said Laurence, after

the next gust had subsided, and the very wind itself was stopping to take breath.

Nancy pouted. "I believe you are tired of me and want to get rid of me."

"Do you, my baby? Well, if you believe that, you'll believe anything."

"I do. I believe that you've seen somebody you like better than me, and that another woman's eyes have put my nose out of joint."

"Silly darling! You know that for me there never has been, and never will be, any woman in the world but you. But are you sure you're not frightened of this awful storm?"

Nancy looked up at him with fearless eyes. "Good gracious, no! I couldn't be frightened at anything when I am with you. That's the beauty of being in love—it makes fear impossible; and fear is such a horrid thing. Why, if you were with me, I dare drive down Piccadilly in a Victoria, and merely smile when I felt a reckless hansom in my pocket and a blood-curdling omnibus in my back hair; and, if you were there too, I shouldn't mind going through a whole battle, with nothing but a waterproof and an umbrella to keep the bullets off."

"My sweet, what a dear foolish little child you are!"

And so these two fearless young people ploughed their way in the teeth of the westerly gale right up to the Hall, and stood together by the ruins of the old elm-tree. And with Nancy at his side, Laurence felt as unafraid of ill-luck, and as ready to meet and overcome it, as Nancy felt with regard to the congested traffic of London or the perils of war; which showed that as yet he underrated the strength of those mysterious princi-

palities against which men have to wrestle rather than against flesh and blood.

While Laurence and Nancy were fighting their way up to the Hall, Mr. Arbuthnot called to see Rufus Webb; and found that the disturbance of the elements had worked the fanatic into a state of semi-insane enthusiasm.

"It is a tremendous gale," the vicar remarked after the usual greetings, "and will do a lot of damage I'm afraid."

Rufus had a rapt look upon his face. "'A great strong wind rent the mountains,'" he murmured, "'but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small Voice.'"

Michael, being a man of much tact, fell in with Webb's mood. "And what did the still small Voice say? Did it encourage the prophet to shut himself out from sympathy and communion with his fellows? No; It asked, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?'—a question which that same small Voice is asking every one of us, and waiting for our answer."

"Well, God knows that I—vile as I am—can still say truthfully with Elijah, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts'; that at least I can answer."

"I know you can; and do you think that that answer will satisfy God now, any more than it satisfied Him in Elijah's time? Certainly not. He will send you away from the mountains, as He sent His prophet of old, back through the wilderness of Damascus to the anointing of earthly rulers and the choosing of human friends."

"You mean that I shut myself up too much from my kind?"



"I do. I know that when once one has stood upon the mountain of Transfiguration, the mole-hills of the valley seem contemptibly small and petty in comparison; nevertheless it is among the mole-hills of the valley that our daily tasks lie. And I do not believe that it is only in order to make us despise and chafe against these mole-hills that we are allowed to stand upon the mountain top now and again; I believe that it is rather in order that we may thereby learn that the mole-hills are but mole-hills after all, and are but for a moment; while the mountains stand fast for ever."

But Rufus shook his head. "I am not upon the mountain top; I am down in the deep waters."

"So we all are now and then. But the path of duty lies no more permanently through the deep waters than upon the mountain top."

Just then a sudden gust of wind seemed as if it were going to blow the cottage down.

"What a gale it is!" exclaimed the vicar; "I don't remember such a wind as this since I first came into Mershire."

"'And after the wind an earthquake,'" repeated Rufus, with the rapt look again upon his face.

"Well, there does actually seem to be an earthquake going on, if you see how the ground is shaking and quivering with the upheaval of the trees. That is the worst of elms; their roots lie so near the surface and are so widespread, that they fall sooner than any other tree, and in their fall do more damage." Mr. Arbuthnot tried to bring the soothsayer back into everyday life.

"'And after the earthquake a fire,'" continued Rufus, in the monotonous voice of one who is speaking with strange tongues.

"Well, I only hope there won't be a fire anywhere, for this wind would fan it into an uncontrollable flame in no time. If once a fire were lighted, there would be no putting it out in such a gale as this."

"'And after the fire a still small Voice.' It was not until the fire had done its worst that the still small Voice was heard. Mark that! It is not until our possessions have been destroyed and our souls purged so as by fire, that the still small Voice speaks to us—and, speaking, can induce men to listen to it."

As Rufus Webb sat with this mystic look upon his face, the vicar was able to notice how sadly lined with care and want that haggard face was. In spite of all his eccentricity, Rufus was still a gentleman; and it is very difficult for one gentleman to intimate to another that the former does not believe the latter has enough to eat. Nevertheless that was the idea which struck Mr. Arbutnot, and which filled his warm heart with distress—distress all the more poignant because he saw no way of setting things right. There was something about Rufus Webb—some trace of inborn gentleness and former culture—which forbade any one to take the shadow of a liberty with him, be his behaviour and conversation never so insane.

Knowing that a religious train of thought was apt so quickly to degenerate into frenzy in the mind of the ex-missionary, Michael endeavoured to turn the talk into less exciting channels. "By the way, have you heard that this wind has brought down the huge elm-tree that stood on the other side of Baxendale Hall?"

He had touched a responsive chord; Webb turned to him at once with awakened interest. "The great

elm-tree which was named 'The Luck of the Baxendales,' do you mean?"

"Yes. It must have stood there for two or three hundred years."

"And I am glad, glad that it has fallen, and that ill-luck will henceforth dog the footsteps of Laurence Baxendale. Is it well for that young man to find rest in the house of his fathers, and to marry the woman of his choice, and to have children at his desire, and to leave the rest of his substance to his babes? Nay; better for him that his house shall be left unto him desolate, and that sorrow and poverty shall drive him to the one Refuge where true help is to be found! 'For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'"

So Rufus Webb rambled on; and Mr. Arbuthnot—having in vain tried to reduce the hermit to a more reasonable state of mind—took his leave; but as he went away his heart was heavy within him, because of that actual want which he felt sure was undermining the health of Rufus, and yet which no one dared take the liberty of recognizing and relieving.

During all that day the gale continued; but at sunset the wind fell, and was succeeded by a great calm. The next morning dawned beautifully fine and hot, but with a stillness which seemed almost oppressive after the boisterous weather of the last few days. There was not a cloud to be seen; and although those Jeremiahs amongst men, who cannot feel warm without prophesying thunder, or cold without foretelling snow, did predict a thunderstorm, no thunder came, for the simple reason that the sky was so clear there was nowhere for it to come from. It was one of those days



"SINKING DOWN ON A FALLEN TREE WHICH LAY BY THE ROAD-SIDE."



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)

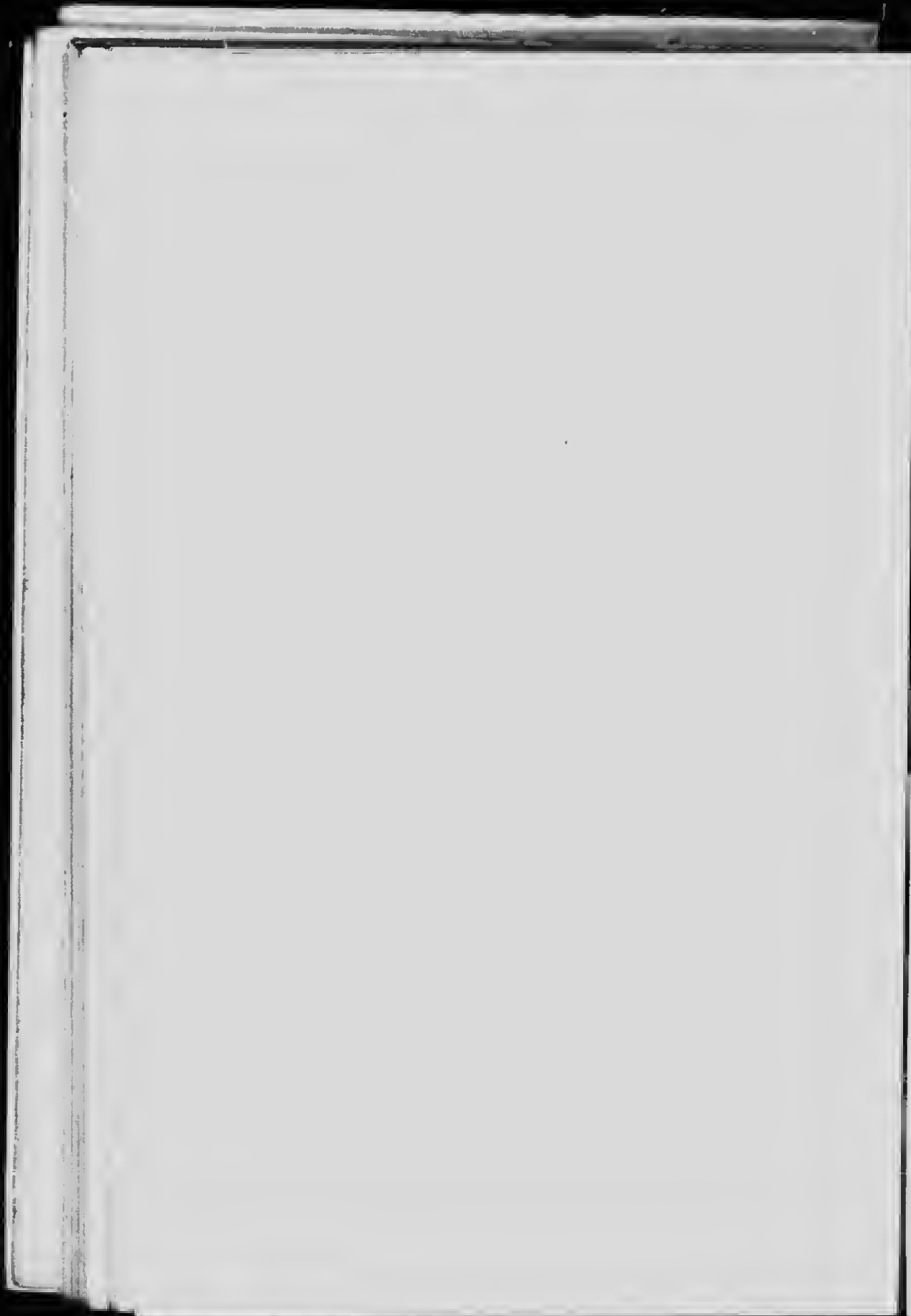


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when even to the hale and hearty the grasshopper becomes for the time being a burden; there was no life in the air, and effort seemed unendurable if not impossible. Even the wings of love himself could not fly far afield in such an atmosphere; so in the afternoon Laurence and Nancy betook themselves to those untrodden ways which lay nearest to Wayside and Poplar Farm.

"It's too hot to walk up to the Hall this afternoon," Nancy said, sinking down on a fallen tree which lay by the roadside. "Arthur and Ambrose have gone, as they wished to investigate the fall of the tree more minutely; and it never seems too hot for boys to do things. But it is too hot for us."

"Much too hot, sweetheart. Besides there is no need to go; I was up there before breakfast this morning to see if the gale had done any more damage."

"And I was up there just after breakfast to see if I could find a missing light in *The Queen* acrostic for this week."

"Oh! were you? What a pity you didn't tell me you were going, darling, and we'd have gone together."

"It didn't occur to me till this morning that I might find that particular light in a particular book. I did look out for you at the cross-roads; but I only saw your mother starting for her daily constitutional up to Baxendale Hall and back: so, as she unfortunately didn't happen to be you, I went on by myself. It was too hot to go far in search of anybody or anything, the finding of which did not involve a prize."

"How cruel to think more of an acrostic prize than of me! Did you succeed in finding your missing light—for you certainly didn't deserve to?"



"Of course I found it. I always get everything and deserve nothing; it is such a much more satisfactory plan than getting nothing and deserving everything, as you do. But the whole place is rather in a mess after the gale, isn't it?"

"There are a good few tilcs lying about, but no more trees are down near to the house; and no windows are broken, although the glass roof of one of the greenhouses is smashed in. But that won't matter; there were no plants of much value in that particular greenhouse; and those that were there I have moved into a potting shed until Candy's return."

"Do you mean to say you removed them with your own hands in this heat? O excellent young man!"

"Certainly: I'm not made of sugar and salt, dear heart, or any such melting material."

"Well, I couldn't have carried pots about when I reached Baxendale this morning; it was as much as I could do to walk so far on such a day as this," said Nancy.

"Poor little thing, did it feel the heat?" whispered Laurence, kissing her.

"Yes, it did; and, what is more, the heat takes its fringe out of curl, which annoys it very much and spoils its good looks," replied Nancy, submitting to the embrace.

"Nothing of the kind! I won't allow you or anybody else to find fault with the fringe or the good looks of my young woman; so please remember that, Miss Burton."

After a few minutes' silence Laurence remarked: "You are very quiet this afternoon, my pet; is anything worrying you?"

"Oh, dear no! things never do worry me. But it is too hot to be brilliant, or even to be affectionate," she added with a laugh, edging away from her lover.

"You unkind child to throw back a nice young man's affection in his teeth, when according to Shakespeare you ought to be down on your knees thanking heaven fasting for his devotion. You aren't half grateful enough for having such a well-set-up young man all round, as Mrs. Candy would say."

"Yes, I am; but it doesn't seem to me exactly the weather for rehearsing *The Huguenots* every three minutes, as a tableau vivant."

"Then let's change it for *The Black Brunswicker*, it would suit me every bit as well," suggested Laurence.

Nancy looked at him through her long eyelashes. "You really are rather nice," she said, "when one doesn't consider you too closely."

"That's a nice thing to say to a fellow! It would serve you right if I kept you at a distance and talked to you about the political situation, and the decay of poesy, and things of that kind."

"I shouldn't mind it half as much as you would."

"So if I am such a fool as to amputate my own nose in order to spite your pretty little face, you won't prevent me?"

"Certainly not. Besides, I'm jealous of your nose—it is such a much better shape than mine," said Nancy, stroking her own offending feature thoughtfully; "and I really don't see what you have done to deserve a better nose than I."

"I haven't—I really haven't; my conscience is quite clear on that score."

"Then why is your nose so superior to mine?"

"I'll give it up; ask another."

"Your eyes aren't as nice as mine, though," said Nancy more cheerfully.

"Nothing like; and as you've two superior eyes and I've only one superior nose, you are twice as well off as I am after all. Two to one is a good working majority, don't you know?"

And so these two young people went on talking nonsense, little dreaming how short-lived such nonsense was doomed to be.

At sunset that evening the wind rose again, and for the whole of the night the westerly gale was more boisterous than ever. The wind had evidently been scotched, not killed; and it now awoke, as a giant refreshed with wine, and rushed to and fro across the heavens like some devastating fiend.

At about three o'clock in the morning Laurence was awakened by the violence of the gale, and roused himself sufficiently to look out of his window in order to see whether that ghastly game of spilikins was again going on in Baxendale Woods. He was struck by perceiving a rosy light opposite his window, which at first sight he mistook for the first flush of dawn; but as he grew more wide awake, he realized that the sun does not rise in the west, and that therefore there must be some other reason for this phenomenon; and by the time he was thoroughly awake the awful truth dawned upon his drowsy brain that Baxendale Hall was in flames.

Even while he stood spell-bound at the first horror of the sight, tongues of flame darted up into the summer sky, and clouds of smoke rose up and blotted out the stars which hung low over the horizon line.

Yes, Baxendale Hall was on fire, and the ancient prophecy had once more come true. There was no doubt of it. For a second, which seemed like an eternity, Laurence stood still, feeling—as we all feel under the first shock of some great calamity—that the terrible thing which was now happening had been happening ever since the foundation of the world. There seemed no prehistoric time when Baxendale Hall had not been on fire—no half-forgotten date when the third part of the ancient doom was as yet unfulfilled.

Then with a great effort he roused himself and wakened his household; and, hastily dressing, he made his way, as well as he could in the teeth of the wind, up to the scene of the disaster, followed by such servants and labourers as he had been able to waken on the road. But it was too late. In such a gale as this the fire ran on apace; and no human agency could extinguish it after it had once taken hold. The old library, with its reams of dried-up parchment and paper, acted as fuel to the flames; and although Laurence and his followers did all in their power to extinguish it, their efforts were utterly futile.

The fire, however, had only touched the first and upper storeys; the ground floor was still intact. So, as the news of the disaster spread wider and more help came, the men succeeded in saving the downstairs rooms and their contents—which contents were after all nothing save ordinary furniture.

But when the day broke and the full extent of the catastrophe was revealed, it was found that the upper part of Baxendale Hall—including the fine old pictures and the still finer old library—was reduced to a heap of ashes.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SUSPICION.

To give a dog an unrespected name,  
As hanging seems to be about the same.

THE burning of Baxendale Hall caused a great sensation, not only in Mershire but throughout all England. In the first place people were genuinely sorry that a house containing such fine pictures and so magnificent a library should be destroyed—it was a loss to the whole country as well as to the possessor; and in the second place they were devoured by curiosity as to the identity of the culprit who had actually set the Hall on fire. Somebody must have done it—on that point all were agreed; but there was much discussion—and for many a day—as to who that somebody could be. Some said one, some said another; and none were weary of going over the question again and again, sifting and resifting the evidence. The temptation to transfigure mole-hills into mountains, and to discover mares' nests—to find something new to talk about, and to pluck the mote out of a brother's eye—in short to relieve the tedium of life in a manner which would not have found favour in the eyes of the first Bishop of Jerusalem—proved too much for the British public; they discussed the matter until they gradually lost their power of discrimination between what actually,

and what they supposed, had happened; they revelled in guesses as to whether A or B could possibly have set fire to the Hall, until they believed that A or B really had done so; and they hoped that C or D had not been guilty of the crime, until C and D stood red-handed in their mind's eyes. As for the curse, it was meat and drink to them; and they tried to find out what was thrice as great as King or State, with an energy which was worthy of a weightier problem. And all this, be it noted, not from any enmity against the present owner of Baxendale Hall, nor from any wish to work him harm; but merely from a passionate thirst for excitement, and an unthinking intention to slake that thirst at all costs. Of course if the Hall had not been insured, or had only been insured for a modest sum, none of this gossip would have arisen; the catastrophe would have been a nine days' wonder, and that would have been the end of it. But a hundred thousand pounds was too big a sum to be lightly passed over; and it also provided, in the minds of the really well-meaning though actually mischief-making public, a motive why Laurence Baxendale should have burnt down the house of his fathers and placed himself in danger of the law; for human nature, alas! is such that in all courts of justice a motive for a crime on behalf of a certain person is strong evidence in favour of that particular person's having committed that particular crime. Wherefore we daily pray, "Lead us not into temptation".

When the news of the disaster was brought to the Burtons' breakfast-table by the servants the following morning, there was great excitement; and there were wide differences of opinion with regard to the

origin of the catastrophe. Mr. Burton and Anthony were convinced that the Hall had been burnt of set purpose by some person or persons unknown; Mrs. Burton and Nora were equally sure that the occurrence was purely accidental, and that the culprit—whoever that might be—was actually innocent in intention if not in fact; and Nancy thought—well, nobody knew exactly what Nancy did think, because Nancy did not choose to say.

She and Nora walked up to the Hall immediately after breakfast to see what damage had actually been wrought, accompanied by their two brothers, who regarded the burning of Baxendale as a treat especially prepared for their greater enjoyment of the summer holidays. The rooms on the ground floor were still standing; and though their contents had been sadly spoiled by the water which had been thrown upon them, they were not destroyed. But the ground floor was all that was left of Baxendale Hall; and even these rooms had been robbed of their ceilings, and stood open to the ravages of wind and weather. The fire had evidently begun in the library, and ascended, devouring everything that barred its upward course. The old books and manuscripts had been as tinder to the flames, and the pictures had not been much better. Then, the wind being so high, when once the flames had a start they literally travelled as wild-fire; there was no possibility of quenching them; thus, in a few hours, the upper part of the fine old house had completely vanished.

Mr. Baxendale was upon the scene of the ruin when the Burtons arrived there; and Nancy was shocked to perceive how he had changed in that one night:

he looked ten years older than when she parted from him the preceding afternoon; his face was white and set, and there was a stern look about his mouth which she had never seen before. It seemed strange, she thought, that an event which had suddenly brought their marriage into the region of practical politics should have turned Laurence into an old man; she had expected him to be so glad that he could marry her, that all regret at the loss of his home would be swallowed up; instead of which he seemed so pre-occupied that he had hardly time to notice her at all.

The two girls did not stay long upon the scene of the ruins. They saw that Laurence was really too busy to attend to them; so when they had gazed their fill on the wreck they turned away, leaving their small brothers to that fuller enjoyment of the disaster which only the immature male mind could adequately appreciate. For a short time Nancy felt rather depressed by her lover's apparent indifference; but her natural high spirits soon reasserted themselves, and comforted her with assurances of how happy she and he were going to be in the good time coming. And during the rest of that day, and for several days afterwards, she built most delightful castles in the air for the occupation of herself and him. She did not see him again for nearly a week; but she easily accounted for this, since his time was naturally occupied with saving what he could out of the wreckage of his house, and getting the place into something like order again. The fire had not touched any of the stables or outhouses; it was only the Hall itself that had suffered.

What Laurence himself was enduring at that time Nancy had not the ghost of an idea. It would have



been impossible for her to understand, even had she been told, how he was simultaneously trying to harden his heart against her, and longing to take her into his arms—how he was making up his mind to tell her that henceforward everything must be at an end between them, and at the same moment deciding that, come what might, he would marry her on the income of the insurance money, and defy the world and whatever the world might choose to say. Nancy was one of those natures to whom conflict is an unknown quantity: S. Paul's testimony to the flesh lusting against the spirit was to her as the original Greek in which it was written. She might succumb to a temptation on Tuesday which she had safely resisted on Monday; that was quite possible; but she would never feel the full power of the temptation, and the passionate desire to resist it, at one and the same time. She might change her Government with startling rapidity; but as long as the Government was in power it was unanimous. Like the rest of us, she presumably had her guardian angel and her tempting demon in attendance, to guide her feet respectively in the narrow way that leads upwards to life, and the broad path that goes downwards to destruction; but in Nancy's case these two opposing influences made a sort of spiritual Box-and-Cox arrangement, and were never upon the ground at the same time. Therefore she was spared the wear and tear of conflict, though not the agony of remorse.

"People are all wondering whether Baxendale burnt down the Hall himself for the sake of the insurance money," remarked Anthony Burton to his uncle.

Nancy started up in amazement. "Then I'm certain

he didn't. It's a horrid lie! Laurence is 'the last man to do that sort of a thing;'" That her lover himself should be suspected of the crime was a possibility that had never occurred to her.

But Anthony took no notice of her indignation. "What do you think, Uncle Richard?" he asked.

Mr. Burton laid down his newspaper and shook his head. "It is a queer business; I don't know what to think."

Nancy again rushed in. "Surely you don't think that Laurence did it?"

"Gently, my child, gently," her father replied; "I say I don't know what to think—I did not give any opinion on the matter."

"The world in general seems coming to that conclusion," said Anthony. "I've heard it from no end of people to-day."

"That is just like people!" exclaimed Nancy; "nasty things!"

"No," expostulated Mr. Burton judicially; "I do not think one can altogether blame the public for suspecting Mr. Baxendale, when you remember how much he had to gain by the accident; and also when you consider that the public do not know the man as we know him. I am bound to say that if I had not met Baxendale personally—if I knew nothing either in his favour or against him—I should need to be convinced of his innocence."

"You think things look rather black against him?" said Anthony.

"Yes, my boy, I am sorry to say I do. Mind you, I don't say that I think Baxendale burnt down his own house; I only say that I am not surprised at the world in general suspecting that he did."

Nancy looked frightened. "But why, father?"

"First, because it was his interest to do so. Not only does he come into a large sum through the burning down of the Hall, but he also is relieved from paying a yearly tax which there is no doubt was often a great strain upon his slender resources. In short, the accident turns Baxendale from a poor man into a comparatively rich one."

Anthony nodded. "Yes, that's true enough; and there is no doubt that this is a consummation devoutly wished by others than our friend Baxendale."

"So much for a motive for the crime," continued Mr. Burton; "now let us look at the evidence. The caretakers of the Hall were sent away on a holiday by Baxendale, and no one was put there in their place; thus the house was quite uninhabited. Further, the fire obviously started upon the first floor and travelled upwards; the ground floor is untouched; this indubitably proves that the fire began from the inside, and also from the upper storey, for no one could have set it on fire from the outside, unless they had begun from the ground. The key of the outer door, and, mark you, the key of the upstairs library, were in Laurence Baxendale's possession, Mrs. Candy having given up all the keys into his hands before she left home. The above facts are public property; and can you blame the public for arriving at an obvious conclusion?"

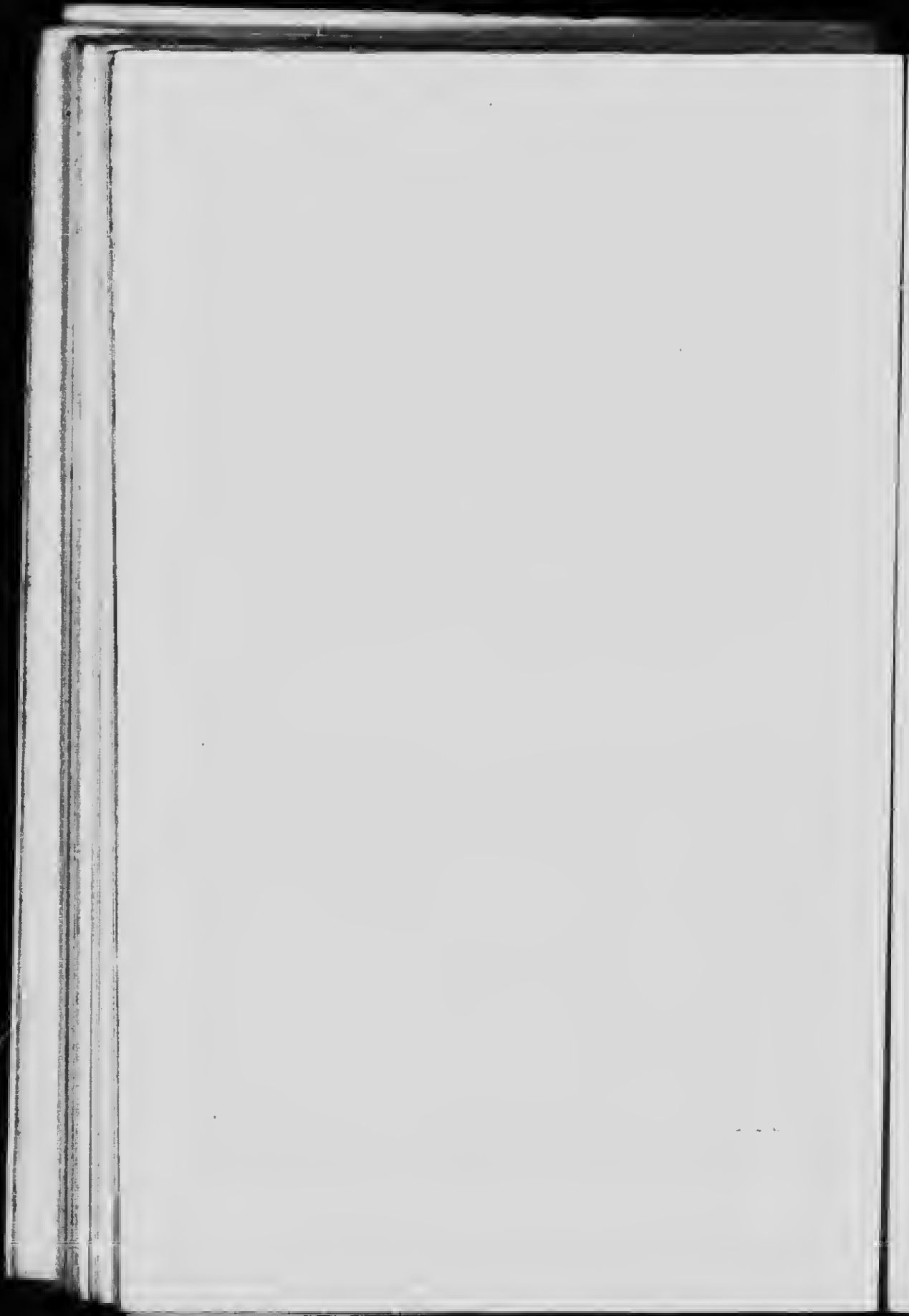
"It does look rather queer," Anthony allowed; "and you think it impossible for the fire to have been lighted from without?"

"Utterly impossible, I should say. All the windows were carefully fastened, and there were no ladders anywhere about; therefore, if the house had been fired from



“DO YOU MEAN THAT HE WON'T GET THE HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS?”

[To face page 178.]



outside, it would have been fired from the ground and not from upstairs."

Nancy was very angry. "It is rank lunacy to imagine for a moment that Laurence was capable of doing such a thing," she said.

Her father took no notice. "Baxendale admits that he went all over the house on the very morning before it was burnt, to see whether any windows had been broken by the gale. In that case—had the fire already been smouldering—he must have discovered it."

"Besides, it couldn't very well have been smouldering in the summer," added Anthony, "because probably there hadn't been any fire in the place for months."

"There had not. Baxendale says that no fire, except the one in the kitchen for the Candys to cook by, had been lighted for many weeks; and that particular fire could not have been responsible for the mischief, as the kitchens are practically untouched."

"And of course the Candys hadn't been cooking there for over a week."

"Exactly. Had they left any live coals behind them, the place would have been burnt down a week or more ago. Yes," Mr. Burton looked very serious, "I am bound to say the case seems very black against Baxendale, and I am afraid he will have a good deal of trouble with the insurance people about it; they won't be very likely to pay up until things are made to look a little less suspicious."

Nancy's face grew very white. "Do you mean that he won't get the hundred thousand pounds?" Her heart seemed to stand still; surely this thing had not been done for nothing!

"I should doubt it," replied Mr. Burton; "the whole

business has a very suspicious flavour. Even putting upon it the most favourable construction, Baxendale has been extremely unlucky; for everything—even to the smallest trifle—bears witness against him.”

“Where did you get hold of all these details?” Anthony asked.

“From Baxendale himself at the Club. He was talking to half a dozen men, including myself, and told us all that I have told you about the incidents of the fire. He made no secret of the facts of the case.”

There was a long silence. Mr. Burton drew his brows together and went over all the evidence again in his own mind; he hated to think evil of his neighbour, but the case against Laurence certainly stood out in somewhat dark colours. Anthony drummed with his fingers upon the table, and said to himself what an unlucky dog Baxendale was, and how sorry he felt for him. And Nancy sat still, her air-castle tumbling about her ears, and wished that she had never been born, or else that Baxendale Hall had never been burnt—she did not much mind which.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE LOSING OF THE KEYS.

Like Bluebeard's wife I lost the key ;  
Thenceforth it was not well with me.

"I SAY, Nora," said Nancy to her sister one afternoon, a day or two after the foregoing conversation, "have you seen my keys tumbling about anywhere?"

"Your keys? no; have you lost them?"

"I must have done so; but goodness knows where!"

"Which keys are they?"

"Oh! there is the key of my jewel-case, and the key of my cash-box, and the key of the box where all my old love-letters are kept, and—and—one or two others."

With the strange and sudden reserve which now and again attacks outspoken people, Nancy did not mention that the other two keys on the lost bunch were those of the front door and the library at Baxendale Hall. There is no secret so well kept as the secret which is guarded by the occasional reserve of habitually unreserved natures. If a man is naturally secretive, we expect him to keep back something, and allow for the fact; but it never occurs to us that the usually outspoken are capable of keeping back anything, and so we conclude that the thing which they do not tell us does not exist. Hence the unreserved have



powers of concealment which are denied to the naturally silent.

"How inconvenient!" exclaimed Nora.

"It is; most frightfully inconvenient! And it isn't a bit my own fault, because I distinctly remember taking them out of the pocket of one frock, and putting them into the pocket of another."

"I suppose one's pocket isn't really a very safe place for things."

"Yes, it is; the safest place in the world, because the things are always in one's own keeping, don't you see?—and other people can't get at them."

"Perhaps there was a hole in your pocket, Nan."

"Well, if there was, it wasn't my fault; it was Pearson's." (Pearson was the Miss Burtons' maid.)  
"If a maid can't mend a hole in one's pocket, what is the good of having a maid at all?"

"Or perhaps you pulled them out with your pocket-handkerchief," Nora suggested further.

"Well, if I did, that wasn't my fault either. What is the use of a pocket-handkerchief that you never take out of your pocket? It would be worse than a chained Bible, or a captive balloon, or an army that never leaves the country except in cases of invasion."

"Never mind, Nan. I can lend you my pearl-beads till your jewel-case is opened again, or anything else that you need." Nora was a very good sister.

"Oh! the jewel-case doesn't matter, because it doesn't happen to be locked."

"Then if it is the cash-box, I can lend you as much money as you want till the keys are found again."

"That doesn't matter either, because I've spent all this quarter's allowance already, and the cash-box is empty."

"Then if it is only the old love-letters, I can lend you plenty of them, too, heaps upon heaps; and they're all pretty much the same, whoever they happen to be addressed to, so one set is as good as another."

"Good gracious! It isn't the love-letters that matter, because the lock of that box is broken; so that anybody can get at them, and as well without the key as with it."

"Then why bother about the keys at all?" asked sensible Nora.

"I wasn't bothering about them," replied Nancy hastily; "only it is stupid to lose things."

"Never mind; they are bound to turn up: our things always do."

And with that scanty comfort Nancy had to be content; and the conversation drifted into its wonted channel—namely, the Baxendale catastrophe.

"I wonder how Laurence will bear all these horrid suspicions about him," remarked Nora thoughtfully; "he's the sort of person to take them to heart."

"I know he is; that's just the bother."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh! I mean that's just the—the—bother, don't you know?" As shown in the matter of the keys, a reserve contrary to her nature seized Miss Burton when discussing anything connected with Mr. Baxendale. Until now she had been the most transparent person imaginable, only too glad to retail her innermost thoughts and feelings to any one who had patience to listen to them; but a new shyness, born of her love for Laurence, made her shrink from talking openly about her feelings towards him; and a new loyalty to him and everything concerning him, made her shrink still more from talking openly of his feelings towards her.

"Do you mean that you think he'll die of a broken heart, or anything thrilling of that kind?" persisted Nora, who liked to sift a matter to its dregs.

"Oh, dear, no! But I'm afraid he'll mind dreadfully; and that he won't laugh it off as we should, if people said we'd done anything queer."

"Yes; he's much more sensitive than we are; and that's a pity."

"It isn't a pity at all," Nancy fired up; "it only shows what tremendously fine material he is made of, and how immensely superior he is to us."

"He may be superior to us, but he isn't superior to Mr. Arbuthnot; and Mr. Arbuthnot says it is enervating to care as much for the censure of other people as Laurence Baxendale cares."

"Mr. Arbuthnot should mind his own business and not interfere with things that don't concern him!"

"He doesn't interfere. He told me he was longing to tell Laurence how much he sympathized with him, and what a pity he thought it was that Laurence was taking the matter in the way he is taking it; but that he didn't venture to do so for fear Laurence should think he was taking a liberty."

"Then he ought to have spoken to Laurence and shown his sympathy with him, and advised him not to take idle gossip so much to heart. It was his duty as a parish priest to do so, and I think it has shown great neglect on his part to leave poor Laurence so much to himself," cried Nancy, with fine disregard of her last remark.

"But it is difficult not to leave people to themselves, when they persist in keeping to themselves: and you can't deny that Laurence Baxendale is doing that. He

hasn't been near us since the Hall was burnt down; and he used to drop in nearly every day."

A woman will always endeavour to prove a satisfactory *alibi* on the part of a man who has not been to see her as often as she thinks—and would rather die than own she thinks—he ought; and the more clearly she sees that he could have come if he had wished to do so, the more conclusively does she demonstrate that his advent would have entailed a suspension of all the laws of nature. Wherefore Naney quickly replied: "He couldn't possibly have come; he's been much too busy, putting his own fire out and consuming his own smoke, to pay calls. He's had no end of things to do since the Hall was burnt down."

"I daresay he has; but, all the same, he might have looked in, just for five minutes, if only to tell us that he hadn't time to do so. However busy a person is, he has always time to write and say that he hasn't time to write; at least that has been my experience; and the principle is the same with calls as with letters."

"How silly you are, Nora! He has been up at the Hall every day, looking after things."

"I know that; but he might have come here before he went or after he came back, so that we might have told him how sorry we are for him."

"But that is just what Laurence would hate—to feel that people were sorry for him."

"That's what I call so stand-offish and unneighbourly. I always like people to be sorry for me, even if they've no cause to be. I love to be pitied; it makes people so fond of one."

"And I hate to be pitied—there's the difference between you and me, my dear Nora. I adore admira-

tion and I hate pity. Whatever I had to suffer, I couldn't bear anybody to be sorry for me, except—nobody." Nancy stopped just in time.

Nora gazed thoughtfully at her sister. "You and Mr. Baxendale aren't really so very different, after all. I believe you are as proud underneath your outspokenness as he is underneath his stiffness; and you would hate to be pitied every bit as much as he would."

"Yes, I should, I should; and that's why I understand the reason of his not wanting to come and see us," explained Nancy, forgetting that she had just proved that there was no such reason, nor any need for one; "he feels that we should pity him, and that we should show it; and that's just what he couldn't stand."

"Well, I can't grasp the idea. Do you mean to say, Nau, that if you were unhappy, it wouldn't comfort you to know that other people were sorry?"

"Good gracious, no! It would make everything a thousand times worse. I wish people to envy me; I don't even mind their disliking me; and I enjoy their disapproving of me. But all the time I insist on their regarding me as a brilliant young woman, and admiring me even while they detest."

"Well, you are funny! I'm not made a bit like that."

"I am; and it's a very good make, too."

"Do you mean to say you would rather be admired than loved?" asked Nora.

"Much rather. Admiration without love I delight in; but love without admiration would make me positively ill."

"I expect that is why you and Laurence get on so

well together; you are both proud, though in such different ways."

"Yes; we are alike in some things, but not in others—I only wish we were!"

"You mean you wish he was more like us."

"Oh, dear no! I wish I was more like him."

Nora was silent for a moment; then she said: "You admire him very much, don't you, Nancy?"

"I should just think I do. More than any one else I ever saw—or ever dreamed of." Nancy's reserve was beginning to thaw in the warm atmosphere of sisterly communion.

"I wonder if you admire him as much as I admire Michael Arbuthnot."

Nancy laughed the laugh of the scornful. "I should rather think so! There's so much more in him to admire."

But her sister was not going to stand that. "Oh! no, there isn't. In the first place, he is a layman; and in the second, he hasn't half so much to say for himself; nobody could admire him as much as the vicar."

"Well, I can—and do." Nancy could be obstinate when occasion demanded it.

Nora's pretty forehead was wrinkled with thought. "Do you feel that you thoroughly understand Laurence Baxendale?" she asked; "I often wonder if you do."

Nancy paused for a second before replying: "Yes—and no," she said slowly.

"Oh! how very interesting; do explain, Nan."

"I always know what he will do in any given circumstances, but I don't always know why he will do it. Just as I always know when I have hurt him, but hardly ever how I have hurt him."

"I see; you know exactly where he will get to, but you don't know by what road."

"Yes; that's it. For instance, I understand that because he is hurt and sore he will not come near to any of us for fear we should pity him; but why the idle gossip of the people about here should make him so sore and hurt him so much I haven't the ghost of an idea. If I knew I hadn't done a thing, I shouldn't care who said I had."

"He evidently is tremendously cut up about it, or else he wouldn't shut himself up in the way he is doing."

"Yes; and I'll tell you more," exclaimed Nancy in a sudden burst of sisterly confidence. "I knew he'd go like this, the minute I heard what nonsense people were talking; though why he should take it so hard I can't conceive."

"And it's such a mistake; because, as father says, it makes people think that their suspicions against him are correct."

Nancy wrung her hands. "I know, I know; that is where he is such a good, noble, stupid darling. He has no idea of taking the course most advantageous to himself."

"It is a pity," sighed pretty Nora, with the not altogether unbearable sorrow which even the best of women feel over the follies of a brother-in-law (either *in esse* or *in posse*); "heaps of men would have turned this misfortune to their own account, and made quite a piece of good luck out of it."

"Do you think I don't know that?" And poor Nancy fairly groaned.

"But your dear Laurence never will. Now, if only

he'd manage things the right way," continued Nora, "the whole affair would turn out for his good. He would be saved for the future from paying that tiresome insurance money; and would pocket a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds into the bargain. But some people have a knack of taking occasion by the hand; and others haven't."

"That's true. King Canute, for instance, was built after the Baxendale pattern when he rebuked his courtiers for saying that he could rule the waves, *à la* Britannia; and then had his throne put where he knew the sea would wash over him, after he had specially forbidden it to do so."

"Yes; that's exactly what Laurence would have done."

"Now had I been in Canute's place," Nancy went on, "I should have placed my throne just half a yard above high-water mark; and I should have ordered the sea not to touch my feet; and of course it wouldn't. Then I should have turned to my courtiers and said, 'Right you were!'"

"But they wouldn't have believed either you or themselves; they'd have seen through your little dodge, and have known that the sea didn't really obey you."

"Of course they would; but they'd have winked behind my back to one another and said, 'She knows a thing or two, does Mrs. Canute!' Now it seems to me that great men are like Canute; they show to the world how small a thing is their own greatness compared with the greatness of abstract truth. But clever men are like me: they adapt the greatness of abstract truth to increase their own greatness; and the world



isn't always quite sure where the one ends and the other begins."

"I wonder which feels the nicest—to be great or to be clever."

"It depends on the sort of things that you enjoy most. If you want your biography to be read on Sunday afternoons by the next generation, be great; but if you want a Peerage or Westminster Abbey, be clever."

"B. I don't want either, as it happens," Nora explained.

"Then if you don't know what you want, what's the use of asking me how to get it, silly?"

"I do know what I want, though."

"Oh! if you only want a sweetheart for youth, and a husband for middle-age, and a widower to plant forget-me-nots on your grave—which is all that most women want—you needn't trouble to be either great or clever; it will be quite enough if you do your hair nicely, and wear your best clothes when there's an off-chance of seeing him," said Nancy.

"Oh! Nancy, how wise you are—about always wearing one's best clothes, I mean; but, all the same, it comes rather expensive."

"It does; I know that from experience. I don't mind telling you as a secret that the return of the Baxendales from Drawbridge Castle has taken three months off the average life of a new hat, as far as I am concerned."

"I know; and yet it doesn't do to go out in an old one when there's a chance of meeting anybody." And Nora looked very serious.

"Of course it doesn't. Why, my dear, I once heard

a dreadful tale—and it was quite true, too—of a man who was very fond of a girl, and was just going to propose to her; but he happened to meet her at a party where she wore her last year's hat; and she looked so dowdy that it fairly choked him off."

"Then do you think men always like us less when we don't look nice, Nancy?"

"I think they always like us better when we do, which comes to pretty much the same thing. And why strain their affection, poor dears! to the breaking point? They are bound to love and cherish us in sickness and poverty, and all sorts of similar unpleasantnesses; but there is no absolute necessity for them to love and cherish us in shabby hats; and I should never worry them for an extra such as that."

"I see."

"After all," continued Nancy, "love—like a canal bridge—ought not to be expected to carry more than the ordinary traffic of the district; and I consider a last year's hat on a par with a traction-engine—greatly in excess of the ordinary traffic, and to be feared accordingly."

"Yes, Nan, you are right; it doesn't do to strain even love too far."

There was a few minutes' pause, and then Nancy suddenly asked, *à propos* of nothing: "Do you think that the end generally justifies the means, when you want any particular thing?"

"Mr. Arbuthnot says it doesn't."

"Still, you see, he is a clergyman, and so would take stricter views of things than ordinary people. Being a clergyman must make every day like Sunday, don't you think?"

"Then should you say that being a clergyman's wife would make every day like Sunday, too?" Nora's face was quite anxious as she put this question.

"Not quite; more like Saints' days and Harvest-festivals and Christmas—neither one thing nor another. But don't you think that with an ordinary man or woman the end would justify the means?"

"I really don't know. Do you think it would?"

"Yes," replied Nancy seriously, "I do. I think that if you want a thing with all your heart—and are convinced that the thing will do you good and not harm if you get it—you are justified in leaving no stone unturned in trying to get that particular thing."

"But you wouldn't do anything that was actually wrong in trying to get it, would you, Nan?"

"Ah! there's my difficulty: it's so hard for me to know what is actually wrong and what isn't. I'm sure that different people have different kinds of consciences, just as they have different kinds of ears and eyes."

Nora looked puzzled. "How do you mean? I don't quite understand."

"I mean that one man has a sensitive ear, so that he can tell at once if a note is out of tune; and another man hasn't. And one man has a sensitive eye, so that he can tell at once whether colours harmonize with each other or not; and another man hasn't. And one man has a sensitive conscience, so that he can tell at once if a thing is wrong; and another man hasn't."

"Then haven't you got a sensitive conscience, Nancy?"

"No, I haven't; I can't tell instinctively whether a thing is right or wrong, as some people can. If any one proved to my entire satisfaction that a thing was

actually wrong, I wouldn't do that thing for worlds; but I have no power of finding out for myself whether things are right or wrong."

"Haven't you? How funny!"

"Well, I can't help it if I'm made like that, any more than unmusical people or colour-blind people can help it."

Nora looked doubtful. "I don't know; I'm afraid it's rather wicked of you."

"No, it isn't; it really isn't. Things that you can't help can't be wicked. You might just as well say that it is wicked to be deaf, or blind, or lame. It is better not to be, I admit; but there's no wickedness about the thing."

"Then do you mean to say, Nancy, that your conscience never acts at all—neither backwards nor forwards? If it doesn't keep you from doing things, doesn't it make you miserable after you've done them?"

"Not of itself. If other people prove to me that I oughtn't to have done something that I have done, then of course I'm dreadfully sorry that I did it. But I can't find out for myself that I oughtn't to have done it."

"Well," remarked Nora, "you can't say that you and Laurence are alike in this respect, if you are in others; for a more active conscience than his I never came across."

"Active?—it's more than active! It's always in a state of eruption, like Vesuvius."

"And I should think you find it very difficult to understand this part of his character."

"I find it more than difficult," replied Nancy; "I find it utterly impossible. One thing, however, I have learned from observation and experience; and that is,

however incomprehensible a man may be, it is always a mistake for a woman to try to translate him for the benefit of the audience. She only makes matters worse. Her translation doesn't render him an atom easier to be understood; but it has such an irritating effect upon him, that he makes himself more troublesome and obscure on purpose. If a woman wants to study men, she must do so in the original; it is useless attempting to publish them in one's own mother tongue."

"Men are, like poetry, aren't they? If you attempt to translate them, all the rhyme and most of the reason are lost in the process."

"What ever brings you girls stuffed up in the house this lovely afternoon?" exclaimed Anthony Burton, bursting into the room where the two sisters were sitting.

"I'm going out almost at once," replied Nancy; "but I thought the longer I waited the cooler it would get."

"I imagined that our beloved Nora would be attending evensong," remarked Nora's cousin, with a malicious twinkle in his eye; "but evidently I exaggerated that young woman's devotional tendencies."

"I *am* going to evensong," Nora demurely replied; "I always go on Wednesdays and Fridays. But it isn't time to start yet," she added, looking at the clock; "it is only a quarter past four."

"Only a quarter past four by this clock," Anthony retorted; "but other clocks tell a very different story."

Nora started up from her seat aghast. "Do you mean to say that this clock isn't right? What a nuisance! I was depending upon it, and thought I had

heaps of time. Now I shall have to hurry, and get so frightfully hot. What is the right time, Tony?" And poor Nora pinned on her hat, and patted her fringe, and looked for her gloves in a great hurry.

"That depends upon what country you are referring to," replied Anthony cautiously.

Nora stamped impatiently. "Don't be silly, but tell me what time it is by your watch."

"The same as by your clock; sixteen minutes past four."

"But you said that this clock was different from the others," argued Nancy with a frown.

"So it is; quite different from all the clocks in Australia and America and Africa, and even on the other side of Europe. But I never said that it was different from the other clocks in this country; because it isn't."

The two girls burst out laughing.

"What a goose you are!" exclaimed Nora; "you did give me a fright."

"That, my dear child, was my intention."

"Well, at any rate I shall start now," she added, "so as to be in church by five o'clock, as I don't want to hurry."

"I'm going out, too," said Nancy; and the two girls left the room together, and then went their several ways—Nora to church, and Nancy towards Baxendale, in search of her lost keys. As the latter walked across the field, and through the iron gate into the lane, she looked at the ground in the hope of recovering her missing property; but in vain—not a sign of her keys could she see. She had not been quite open with Nora as to where she remembered seeing them last.

Nancy had never told her sister about Laurence's loan of the keys of Baxendale; and now she did not wish to mention the fact to anybody. She was clever enough to know that—in the present unpleasant state of affairs—the less that was said about any one's having access to the Hall the better. She did remember putting the keys into the pocket of a clean blue muslin dress the morning before the fire; but she further remembered going up to Baxendale Hall that very day, and using both the key of the front door and the key of the library. But from that time she had no recollection of seeing the bunch of keys at all. She had only just discovered her loss. It had occurred to her that as she had no further use for the keys she had better return them to Laurence; and on looking for them in order to give them back to him, lo! they were nowhere to be found.

She had been searching for them all the morning in the house and garden of Wayside; and now she thought she would walk up to Baxendale, by her accustomed path, and see if she could find them either on the way or there. But though her eyes were busy peering in every possible spot for the missing keys, her thoughts were filled with Laurence. In accordance with her usual light-heartedness, she resolutely put from her the thought that the burning of Baxendale Hall could be anything but a blessing ordained for the special purpose of putting her lover and herself in a position to marry; nevertheless she could not quite banish the consciousness that hitherto the catastrophe, instead of bringing her and Laurence together, had served to drive them apart. It was very strange, she thought, that Laurence did not come to her in his trouble, as she

would have gone to him had the trouble been hers ; but there was a certain ghastly familiarity in the strangeness—a certain cruel convincingness in the impossibility—which men and women experience when they realize that the incredible has come to pass, and that the unbearable has to be borne.

Also there clutched at the heart of Nancy the first pangs of that world-old agony which comes to all of us when we first understand that there are limitations to our gift of consolation towards those whom we love best—that our power to love and our power to console are by no means synonymous. It is when our best-beloved are writhing from the effects of a wound which no touch of ours can heal or even soothe, that we are brought face to face with the incapacities of human affection. We would gladly give our very lives if this pain could be in any way diminished—but it cannot ; our powerlessness is as complete as is our sympathy. As we go through the world, we love and are loved by many ; we cheer and are cheered by many ; we help and are helped by many ; but if, in the whole course of a lifetime, we find one human heart which we are able perfectly to heal and to comfort—one human hand which is able perfectly to heal and to comfort us—we may of a truth consider ourselves blessed ; for this is the greatest and the rarest gift vouchsafed to the sons and daughters of men.

As Nancy was struggling against the conviction that Laurence had gone down into the shades of the prison-house, and had shut the door in her face in spite of all her longing to follow him, she suddenly raised her eyes and saw her beloved coming towards her along the grassy lane. She had looked for him at the cross-roads,



and he was nowhere to be seen ; so she had gone on her way with that heart-sickness which is the invariable result of not finding the expected person at the accustomed place. But now she met him at another point of the road, on his way from Baxendale to the Poplar Farm—not, as she was quick to perceive, on his way from Poplar Farm to Wayside ; and the perception cut her like a knife.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE FINDING OF THE KEYS.

Sometimes the finding of a thing  
More sorrow than the loss doth bring.

NANCY'S first impulse, on meeting her lover in the lane, was to rush into his arms and tell him straight out how her heart was overflowing with love and pity for him, and ask him why he had not come to her for comfort. But the sight of his face as he drew nearer nipped this inclination in the bud.

There was something about Laurence Baxendale—something intangible and indescribable, yet nevertheless to be felt by all who were brought into contact with him—which impressed other people in spite of themselves, and forbade them to take the shadow of a liberty with him, or even to treat him with the “hail fellow well met” of common familiarity. It may have been the innate distinction born of a long line of noble ancestry; it may have been the still higher dignity conferred by an honourable and single-minded character; but, whatever it was, nobody who came within the sphere of Laurence's influence could be unconscious of its presence, or could fail to perceive that, in some subtle and indefinable way, this man was made of finer material than his fellows. It did not make men love him any the better—rather, perhaps, it made the

majority of them love him somewhat the less; but it made them one and all respect, even if they feared, him; and it caused all sordid thoughts and mean aspirations to shrivel up in his presence, as flowers in a frost.

Nancy had always been conscious of this characteristic in her lover, and now and then it had frightened her; frightened her with the thought that some day she should do something not in accordance with the strict and honourable code of Laurence Baxendale; and that then there would be found for her, in his merciless judgment, no place of repentance, even though she sought it carefully and with tears. She felt that Laurence's own truthfulness and consistency would only serve to make him all the harder in his condemnation of those who were neither true nor consistent; and that he would say, with the Apostle, that those who offended in one matter offended in all.

She had often said to herself that if ever she did what he considered wrong, she should never have the courage to confess her fault to him and beg for his forgiveness. No; she should have to deceive him as to her deficiencies as long as she could; and, when deceit was no longer possible, she should have to go out of his life altogether; for the well-bred disdain which he meted out to all whom he considered unworthy of his respect was more, Nancy felt, than she could bear.

She was by nature a woman of quick perceptions; and there is no such sharpener of natural perceptions as love; therefore her first sight of Laurence's face told her that he was in one of the moods when he was most terrible to, and unattainable by, his inferior fellow-

creatures. She had meant to tell him about the loss of the keys; but the way in which he greeted her showed her that this was not the occasion for enlightening her lover as to any of her shortcomings; so she decided on this matter to hold her peace until a more opportune moment presented itself.

But although Nancy was a woman of quick, she was not a woman of deep, penetration. She saw that on the surface Laurence was severe in his strictures and stern in his judgments; and there she stopped. She did not go below the outer crust of the man, and fathom the depths of tenderness hidden beneath the apparent coldness and hauteur of his demeanour. At present she had nothing to draw with, and the well was deep. In time it might be that her own love for him would teach her fully to comprehend his love for her; but love is a slow—though a competent—schoolmaster, and his plan of education is by no means a rapid one: the cramming system is not his. And wherefore need he hurry, seeing that he is indeed immortal, and that his pupils will be through all eternity his pupils still?

But in the learning process men and women make sad and many mistakes; and Nancy was making one now, in allowing Laurence's chilly greeting of her—a chilliness arising solely from the shyness which found it difficult for him to express deep feeling, and the sensitiveness which feared that any such expression should be misunderstood—to blind her eyes to the real anguish of the man's soul, and to deafen her ears to his silent cry for her help and sympathy in his hour of need.

So it came about that poor, foolish little Nancy met Laurence with a half-jesting manner which put him

farther away from her than the coldest stiffness would have done; and added greatly to the weight of that burden which he already felt was almost greater than he could bear.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" she remarked airily, as if his appearance (which she had vainly looked for at the cross-roads) was a complete surprise. "Where are you going to, my pretty sir?"

"I'm going home," replied Laurence; and the misery in his eyes almost broke through Nancy's flippancy; but not quite.

"I haven't seen you for ages and ages—four hundred years at least, if not five. It is so long since you have been to Wayside that I concluded you'd forgotten where the place was situated; and I meant to send you a map with the spot marked specially on it in red ink, as if it were a station for a projected railway." If Laurence could be indifferent, so could she, Nancy remarked to herself; as if indifference and the look in Laurence's eyes were on speaking terms with each other! But there is no one so blind as the woman who has made up her mind beforehand to see something else.

"I have been very busy for one thing; and for another, I didn't feel much in the humour for paying calls."

It was an inadequate speech, and Laurence knew and regretted it; but for the life of him he could not think of any less lame excuse.

Nancy tossed her head. "Oh! you needn't apologize to me for not coming, if you didn't want to come. There's nothing bores me so much as apologies. If people want to come and see you, they'll come and see you; and if they don't want, what's the use of telling

fib about it? It isn't one of the seven deadly sins not to yearn to call upon the Burtons every other afternoon. It's merely a matter of taste."

Laurence felt himself visibly freezing under this treatment of Nancy's. There is no barrier which so completely estranges man from man—and, still more, man from woman—as flippancy, whether real or assumed; it is a little matter which indeed separateth very friends—and lovers even more effectually.

Therefore he did not reply, but looked at Nancy in dumb misery.

"I never quarrel with people for not coming to see me, any more than I quarrel with them for not writing to me," she went on in her most nonchalant style; "because a quarrel is no fun when there's some ground for it. It is when there is absolutely no excuse for it that a quarrel is pure joy. Just as there's no pleasure in saying nasty things that you really mean; the pleasure is in saying nasty things that you don't mean. I make a point of never making sharp speeches to people who deserve them, because I find if I do the culprits are so pained by the accurate fit of the cap that they never rest till it is publicly removed. Don't you think that is so?"

"I don't know."

Nancy stamped her foot. "I wish you wouldn't always say, 'I don't know,' when I ask you things; it is a habit of yours which aggravates me almost to distraction. What do I care what you know, as long as there is something you can find to say? I'm not a Cambridge Local Examiner, or a Bishop preparing you for Ordination, that you need be so careful to treat me to nothing but accurate knowledge."

Again Laurence was silent. Was this heartless coquette the woman he had clasped in his arms just one week—a long eternity of one week—ago? And if so, which was the real Nancy? he wondered. Was this flippancy merely a cloak to hide her warmer and deeper feelings; or had she been playing with him all along? Perhaps he ought to have known her better than to suspect her of this latter insincerity; but when a man's heart is bleeding from the effects of Fortune's buffets and his neighbours' sneers, he is not always capable of judging righteous judgment.

"You are very dull this afternoon," the girl continued, in defiance of the tugs at her heartstrings which the tone of Laurence's voice produced. The woman who can hear the sound of pain in her lover's voice unmoved has yet to be born; but the women who can hear that sound without showing that they are moved are by name Legion. "And dulness is the one thing that my soul abhors," she added; "it is bad enough to say, 'I don't know'; but it is ten times worse to say nothing at all; and you've been guilty of both enormities during the last five minutes. Think of committing two unpardonable sins in less than five minutes! I am downright ashamed of you, Mr. Baxendale. Here is a nice rule-of-three sum for you to work out: if a man commits two unpardonable sins in five minutes, how many unpardonable sins will he commit in seventy years?"

Laurence raised his hat. His spirit was so sorely wounded that Nancy's cruelly careless touch upon the raw was more than he could bear just now. "I cannot help being dull, Nancy, but I can help inflicting that dulness upon other people; so I will wish you good-afternoon."

And before the girl could reply he had passed on.

Nancy was very angry; and she was all the more angry with Laurence because she knew that she herself was to blame. So she walked on, with her chin in the air, repeating to herself the uncomfoting formula that if he was too proud to ask for her sympathy she was too proud to offer it. And as she so walked, whom should she meet but Lady Alicia returning from her daily constitutional?

"Oh, my dear Miss Burton," exclaimed her ladyship, as soon as she was within earshot; "how glad I am to meet you! I have not seen you since our terrible catastrophe, and it is so necessary to have some one with whom one can talk one's troubles over—some other woman, I mean; there is no comfort in talking over one's sorrows with a man."

"No, there isn't, is there? Men either say that a trouble is no trouble at all, or else that it is incurable; just as they see no medium between being able to walk twenty miles a day without turning a hair, and being tied down to one's own back by a spine-specialist."

"Exactly, dear child; what a sweet and charming way you have of putting things! It is when I am in trouble that I so sorely regret I never had a daughter; because if only I had had a daughter, I could have talked over all my troubles with her, and shown her how I have always been a martyr to other people's interests; and she would have sympathized with me, and blamed those who had brought so much sorrow and inconvenience upon me. I think it takes half the sting out of a trouble when you can lay the blame of it upon some one else, don't you?"

"Perhaps so; and it certainly adds to the sting of it when one realizes that it is all one's own fault."



"Oh! I daresay it does; but as none of my troubles were my own fault, I have been spared that pang; and that has always been so nice for me. But Laurence never seemed to understand how his poor dear father spoiled my life; and so he never blamed his father and sympathized with me, as a dear, sweet daughter would have done. Dear girl, how I should have loved her! And I am sure she would have been good-looking, because all my family are. No Moate could have borne the disgrace of having a plain daughter, because we had done nothing to deserve it; and it is so hard to bear troubles that you feel you do not deserve, isn't it, dear Miss Burton?"

"Horrid," agreed Nancy; "and even worse if you feel you do. If a disagreeable thing happens to you which you don't deserve, you have an idea that some day it will be made up to you. But if you do deserve it, you feel you are only paying your own bills, and that is a most wearisome occupation."

"Yes, dear child; and now I want to talk to you about this sad, shocking, dreadful fire! Were you ever so surprised in your life as when you found dear Baxendale burnt down, and so quickly too?"

"It was an awful thing to happen," Nancy said, trying to speak as lightly as she could of the matter whereof her heart was full; "but I don't think one can be altogether surprised when one recollects how inflammable all those books and pictures and parchments must have been; and how violent the wind was that night."

"Yes, yes, of course; so very violent, as you say, and there is nothing that spreads a fire so quickly as wind. Just see what a pair of blow-bellows will do when you

think the drawing-room fire has actually gone out, and that you will have to ring for a servant to relight it; and it always annoys servants to have to relight a fire in the middle of the day, though I'm sure I don't know why it should. But, as you say, dear child, the fire at Baxendale, though very sad and shocking, was what we might have expected." Lady Alicia appeared to be much pleased by this opinion of Nancy's.

"And I really cannot see why people should be in such a state of curiosity as to how it began," continued Nancy; "the merest accident—which in a newer house on a less windy day would have had no effect at all, and would never have been even heard of or known about—would be quite enough, in the circumstances, to account for the whole thing."

"Of course it would, my dear Miss Burton—or may I call you Nancy? It is so nice and friendly to call people you really like by their Christian names, don't you think? How very wise and sensible you are! So much common sense is quite remarkable in such a young girl; perhaps the fact that your father is such a clever business man has something to do with it. As you say, the fire at Baxendale was not at all to be wondered at, considering all the circumstances of the case; it was, in fact, quite the natural consequence."

"So I think."

"Yes, my dear, and you are quite right. And would you mind mentioning this view of yours to dear Laurence—just in casual conversation, you know, for I think so much real good is often done by casual conversation—as it may not have struck him quite in the same light? Common sense is not his forte, you see, my dear, any more than it was the forte of his

poor father. But just a word from you to him upon the subject might do him a world of good." It is always more or less of a tragedy when the time comes for a mother to influence her own son through the medium of another woman's newer and stronger power; and especially when she does so openly. It is the public acknowledgment of a Queen Regent that her term of office is over, and that the Queen Regnant has entered into her kingdom.

Nancy understood the situation, and recognized the pathos of it. She was clear-sighted enough when not blinded by her own passions.

"I'll say it to him if you wish, Lady Alicia," she replied very gently, "and if he gives me the opportunity; but it is not always easy to speak to him about things that he doesn't want you to speak to him about, you know."

Laurence's mother sighed. "Ah! yes, dear Miss Burton—Nancy, I should say—how wise and far-seeing you are, and what quick perceptions you have! I always think it is so nice for a young girl to have quick perceptions; it keeps her from making such a lot of social mistakes, even if she marries above her. But in a matter like this I think one should make a little effort, don't you know? Because it would be such a pity—such a sad, sad pity—if dear Laurence, through any morbid sensitiveness as to how the fire arose, were to have any scruples about accepting the insurance money."

The two women looked each other full in the face, and the same fear was in the eyes of both—namely, that the longed-for conflagration had been all in vain.

"It would be a great mistake, too," said Nancy

slowly, "because it would suggest to outsiders that there was something queer about the fire after all, which of course there wasn't. It was the most natural thing in the world."

"Yes, yes—most natural, as anybody who gave five minutes' consideration to the matter could see for himself. But Laurence is like his poor dear father, and is always longing for an occasion to sacrifice himself and all his family for the sake of some sentimental scruple."

"It is very noble and good of him," exclaimed Nancy loyally; "but I don't know that it is always wise."

"I'm not so sure about its being either noble or good. Of course it is very beautiful and touching for men who are monks and hermits and anchorites, and sweet weird things like that, to sacrifice themselves for sentimental scruples, because they have only themselves to consider, and it will be so nice for them to have such a high place in heaven when they get there; but I think that men with mothers and wives, and people of that kind, ought not to consider only themselves and their heavenly crowns—they ought to have a little consideration for the women belonging to them. You see, poverty is much more inconvenient and sad for us than it is for men, because—if the worst comes to the worst—they can wear one dress-suit for two or three years, and can take all their meals at the Club." In spite of all her silliness, Lady Alicia knew what strings to pull when she gave her mind to the pulling of strings.

Nancy's mouth grew very firm, not to say hard: a woman is capable of being jealous of anything which a man puts before his love for her, even if it be an abstract principle. "I don't think, either, that a man is justified in purchasing a heavenly crown, and then

sending the bill in to the women who had given up their lives to him," she said; "and yet that is what the masculine saints of the earth are very fond of doing. Doubtless they reap their reward; but it comes expensive on the women!"

"Indeed, it does, my dear child. Not that I don't agree with Laurence that it is all very nice and sweet to be good and upright if one can, without interfering with other people too much; but, like everything else, it can be carried too far."

"It is admirable for people to be good at their own expense," agreed Nancy; "but it is sometimes a little trying when they are good at yours. And especially when, although you have shared the cost with them, they never have the slightest intention of letting you share the crown."

Lady Alicia sighed again. "And it does seem to me such a pity—quite wrong in fact—not to get all the good one can out of one's misfortunes. I remember dear Shakespeare once said something about adversity being like a frog, because there is always some good to be got out of everything if only one will look for it; and I do so agree with him. If this sad affair of the fire can be turned into a blessing by everybody being made so much more happy and comfortable because of the insurance money, I do think it would be really wicked of Laurence not to avail himself of the silver lining which is hidden in the frog's head; don't you?"

"Not wicked, Lady Alicia; certainly not wicked. Mr. Baxendale couldn't do anything that was wicked, I am sure. But I think it would be very foolish and very misguided."

"So do I, dear child; and, after all, we are sent into

this world to turn our sorrows to good account, aren't we?—so that it is flying in the face of Providence not to let everything work for our good, as far as we can. I mustn't keep you any longer now; but I know you will say something nice and convincing to Laurence on the subject—just in casual conversation—won't you?"

And with that her ladyship pressed Nancy Burton's hand and went on her way to Poplar Farm, whilst Nancy walked on towards the Hall, her mind aflame with the desire to punish Laurence for treating what she considered a ridiculous scruple as of more importance than her future happiness. Yet only yesterday she had been possessed by an equally intense longing to fall at his feet and tell him that she worshipped him for setting his conception of honour and duty before every other earthly consideration!

All the way across the park she looked in vain for her bunch of keys; and, as she had failed to find them there, she peered about the ruins with a wild hope that she might come across them among the débris. As she was continuing her search, a voice suddenly said:—

"Pardon me, Miss Burton, but are you seeking for anything? In the fall of this house, which was great, is there any treasure of yours lying buried?" And, looking up, Nancy found herself face to face with Rufus Webb.

"Oh, is it you, Mr. Webb? Good-afternoon. Yes, I am looking for something, namely, a bunch of keys which I lost some days ago."

Rufus put his hand into his pocket and drew out the missing bunch. "Are these they?"

"Yes, these are mine," cried Nancy, seizing them

with a little shriek of thankfulness. "Where did you find them?"

"I picked them up, just outside the front door here, on the afternoon of the day of the fire, exactly eight hours before the judgment of God descended upon Baxendale Hall."

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## CHAPTER XV.

### IN THE LANES.

"I could not love thee, Dear, so much  
Loved I not Honour more";  
A noble precept this: but such  
Make hearts of women sore.

EVEN as Lady Alicia and Miss Burton had foretold, so it turned out. Their worst fears were realized: Laurence took no steps whatever to obtain the insurance money to which he was legally entitled. It was no hasty decision on his part; he had many a mental struggle before he came to the conclusion that he could not take the money. The temptation was indeed great. Could he only overcome his scruples—his absurd scruples, as the world would call them—how easy would life be for him! He would be enabled to place his mother in a position suited to her birth, and thus free himself from the constant irritation of her complaints against men in general, and her late husband and her living son in particular. He would be able to repair the damage wrought by the fire to the Hall, and to live once again in his ancestral home. Best of all, he would have a sufficient if a moderate income, and could offer a home to the woman he loved—ah, how he loved her!—he never knew how much until he had convinced himself that honour bade him give her up.

Yet, for all this, he felt that he could not take the



money. He was a man who might possibly, in a fit of impulse, commit a great crime; but who would shrink from availing himself of any advantage, pecuniary or other, which might result to himself. And that he had committed a great crime, the world in which he dwelt—as expressed by the majority of its voices—had no manner of doubt. With the verdict of society Laurence was fully acquainted. Naturally, no one directly made such an accusation in his presence: the law of libel is specially constructed to meet such cases. Few men care to face an action for defamation of character; even if the unfortunate defendant wins his case—which is a rare occurrence—he is saddled with a lawyer's bill, which no so-called costs, even if wrung from the unsuccessful plaintiff, will satisfy. Wherefore Mr. Baxendale had no direct accusation to face. But he knew well enough the meaning of the shakings of head, the suggestive glances, and the innuendoes which prevailed wherever men and women congregated. He had often professed the profoundest contempt for public opinion; he had looked down with scornful eyes on those men and women who play pitch-and-toss with the Ninth Commandment; yet now the iron entered into his soul, and all his philosophy was insufficient to enable him to be careless of the idle chatter of the village. It was sufficient, indeed, for outward show; he held up his head bravely enough, and even careful observers were unable to discover the pain he was too proud not to conceal. He knew in his heart of hearts that his best friends were right when they counselled him that the surest way of crushing malicious gossip was to take the money, and face the world with an unruffled brow. This indeed he would have

done, but for a terrible doubt which he could not stifle.

It must not be supposed that Lady Alicia permitted her son to have his way in this matter without a struggle. Many a time and oft she combated his pride, and strove manfully to overcome his scruples. It was all in vain; Laurence listened with exemplary patience to the maternal homilies; yet steadfastly declined to discuss the matter with her. He was very sorry—he would willingly do anything he could to give her the luxuries for which she pined—but duty was duty, and he could not oblige her in this matter.

But Lady Alicia's persistence was an additional trouble to her son; her arguments that it was foretold that the Hall should a third time be destroyed, and that the person who set fire to it was one deserving of all credit as the instrument of an overruling Providence, hurt him more than he would admit.

As far as the world was concerned, he might just as well have taken the money. Those who had overtly or covertly insinuated that he had set fire to the library for the sake of the insurance money, now said that the Insurance Office declined to pay the money in so suspicious a case; and that Mr. Baxendale dared not prosecute his claim by legal proceedings, for fear of having to submit to cross-examination in the witness-box.

As a matter of fact, the Insurance Company, as was only natural, had sent down one of their officials to inquire into the particulars of the fire; and had privately informed Mr. Baxendale that, strange and mysterious as were the circumstances, nothing had been discovered which would justify them in refusing to pay the money. This fact was pretty well known

among his friends; but the pride, which prevented him from claiming the money, likewise forbade his publishing this intimation upon the house-tops. If he had done so it would hardly have made a difference. There are some people so constituted that, when engaged in the fascinating occupation of gossiping away another's character, they are not so much unwilling as unable to pay heed to the clearest evidence.

Those who acquitted the young squire were much exercised as to how the fire arose. As there is no smoke without fire, so it is unusual for there to be fire without hands to kindle the flame. Whose were the hands? To this very natural question there seemed no reasonable answer; and if Mr. Baxendale waited until a reasonable answer was forthcoming before claiming the money, it seemed as if a considerable interval of patience were before him. This idea occurred to the unfortunate man himself; and, after much self-communing, he decided that it was only fair to let Nancy know the state of affairs. He could not marry her so long as there was a cloud of suspicion hanging over him, even if she were willing to share his modest income—with a mother-in-law thrown in! And as a dispersal of the said clouds was exceedingly problematical, there seemed no course but a termination of their hopes.

Having come to this conclusion it only remained to carry it into effect. This was a hard task—far harder than the resigning of a handsome fortune. He was no coxcomb, but he fully believed that he had won Nancy's love—that her heart was completely his. How could he deliberately wound that dear heart? How could he steel himself to deal that fatal blow, when all the time his own heart was overflowing with love and

tenderness? He thought he had sufficient stoicism to bear any pain himself; but it was another thing to inflict with his own hand misery and suffering upon the woman whom, despite that torturing doubt which he could not stifle, he still loved so dearly. Still, horrible as was the situation, it had to be faced; cruel as was the deed, it had to be done. Postponement, he felt, would make the task no lighter. So he set out to call at Wayside, and bring matters to a climax.

As he walked along the lanes—those lanes filled with memories once so dear but now so bitter—he tried to find comfort in the thought that Nancy might possibly have fallen in with the current belief, and might regard him as guilty. That would make things easier; for she would be ready, nay anxious, for an end to be put to their relation. He told himself that Nancy was always ready to fall in with the latest opinion; yet all the time he knew that he was doing her an injustice, and that no amount of gossip would ever shake her belief in him. And again the hideous doubt arose in his own mind. "If that is so," he muttered to himself, "she will know the truth about me." And then he bitterly rebuked himself as unworthy for admitting a doubt, which he knew Nancy was incapable of entertaining in his case.

Then he wondered whether she would be at home—whether he would find her alone. He half hoped that he should discover the whole family assembled, in order to have a reasonable excuse for a postponement. Do not we all know what a relief it is when circumstances render impossible the thing which we would not and yet know we ought to do? Yet he had a feverish desire to get this thing done at any cost as soon as

possible. This doubt was set at rest by his meeting Nancy herself a short distance from the gate leading into the fields at the back of Wayside.

Nancy's heart began to beat loudly when she saw her lover coming towards her; but she managed to assume a fine affectation of indifference.

"Is that really Mr. Baxendale?" she asked with apparent surprise. "What can you be doing walking in the lanes in an afternoon? Are you sure that you are not a wraith, like Jamie in *Auld Robin Grey*, and that I oughtn't to be dreadfully frightened of you, and wear my hair *à la* 'fretful porpentine' in consequence? Every one says you have determined to become a saintly hermit on account of your lordly disdain for the unworthy persons who inhabit these regions. I must say there seems some foundation for these rumours, for we haven't seen you at Wayside for a month of Sundays."

Nancy rattled on in this fashion in order to conceal her own agitation. At the sight of Laurence she had jumped to the conclusion that her belief in her power over him was now about to be justified. He had tried to keep away from her, and had failed; now he was coming to tell her so, and to make it up. Wherefore it became absolutely necessary to postpone the making up as long as possible; and nothing was more calculated to effect this desirable result than an affectation of shallowness.

But Laurence, though as a rule he had not shown himself backward in playing the game, on this occasion proved to be unaccountably remiss. The old Laurence, with his stiffness and shyness, seemed as by magic restored.

"I am afraid you are right," he said; "I must have seemed sadly negligent of social duties."

"Don't be silly, Laurence," cried Nancy; "fancy talking of 'social duties'! What I want to know is, why haven't you been to see me? Do you call me a 'social duty'?"

"I haven't been to see you because it would have been painful to us both," said the young man, thinking that he had never seen Nancy look so pretty as she did now. "However I was intending to call this afternoon. Indeed I am now on my way."

"Mother will be very pleased to see you," replied Nancy, thinking that Laurence had never looked so stiff and unapproachable. "We had better go in at once. You will have some difficulty in making your peace, I can tell you."

"No, don't let us go in. I will call on Mrs. Burton another day. It is you I want to see."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Nancy with a little curtsy. "After your behaviour lately, you don't deserve it; still I don't mind going for a walk with you, if you like. In what direction will you 'turn, gentle hermit of the dale'?"

"Let us go to Baxendale. I wish to speak to you about the fire."

Nancy assented silently, and they set off in the direction of the Hall. For some minutes neither of them spoke. The man was too full of what he had to say; moreover he dreaded beginning. The girl, for her part, was not particularly pleased with Laurence for his silence and his stiffness. He did not seem, she thought, in any especial hurry to begin the process of making it up. However it was not her nature to

keep silence for long; wherefore she soon began to speak.

"So people are right when they say you propose becoming a hermit, are they?" she asked. "I am sorry, because I don't like hermits; they are generally so dirty and disagreeable."

Laurence answered her question with another. "Do you believe everything that people say of me, Nancy?"

"It is only right for a properly brought-up young woman to believe what people say, isn't it?" she asked, with a swift glance from her blue eyes. She was rather frightened at the sight of her lover's face.

"I am not jesting," said Laurence. "You must have heard the common talk that I set fire to my own house in order to secure the insurance money."

"Yes, of course I have heard all that," remarked Nancy cheerfully.

Laurence's heart sank at the tone of her voice. He thought that she believed him guilty, and that she was glad so to think. He had only just been hoping that she *would* think him guilty—but it was to be accompanied with a proper revulsion from one who could commit such a crime. Yet she seemed rather to be rejoicing at iniquity.

"So you believe this report?" he said at last, with a touch of resentment in his voice.

"Believe it? You silly boy! You don't suppose that I could ever think that you would do such a thing, do you? Why you are far too proper a person to do anything so sensible! You would have scruples and conscientious objections and searchings of heart at the bare idea! Oh! no, Mr. Baxendale, I know you far too well

to suspect you of common sense." And Nancy shook her head with the most profound conviction.

"Then you don't think I did it?" persisted Laurence, with an eagerness he could not suppress.

"I know you did not do it," replied Nancy emphatically.

"You *know* I did not do it?"

Nancy nodded with renewed emphasis.

"But how can you be so certain—unless indeed you know the real culprit? But that is impossible?" Laurence could not help the last sentence becoming a question instead of a statement.

"If you are so silly as not to be able to guess how I know, I am not going to tell you," replied Nancy.

For the second time that afternoon Laurence's heart sank. It was true, then, his horrible suspicion! No, he would not go so far as that; yet it looked as if it might be true.

"It does not matter a straw to me," went on Nancy, "what stupid people say. But isn't it lovely that the old curse is fulfilled at last? Now you will have a good income, and all your money troubles will be over, and ——" Then Miss Burton stopped, as it seemed to her only reasonable that her lover should finish the sentence. But this expectation, like many other reasonable expectations, was not fulfilled.

"That is just what I want to speak to you about," began Laurence, and then he paused.

Nancy looked at him, but made no effort to help him on. To tell the truth she was by no means satisfied by what she saw in his face. Love was there, and passion, too; but the passion was kept in restraint, nor was the love of the kind which casteth out fear. Something



of this she saw ; but she did not know what it cost him to refrain from clasping her in his arms and defying the world. Yet he did it; more than that, he spoke calmly, almost coldly :—

“ You know that I love you, don't you, Nancy ? ”

“ I thought so once,” replied the girl, piqued by his tone—“ but you are behaving so queerly that I shall soon begin to have my doubts.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ It is very evident what I mean. A month ago you not only professed to love me, but you seemed eager to see me as often as you possibly could, and appeared glad when you did see me. Ever since the fire you have avoided me as if I, instead of the Hall, had had scarlet fever! And now we have met, you behave as if I were a mad dog or a poor relation, so persistently do you keep me at a distance. A month ago you told me that in all your joys and in all your troubles you would come to me for sympathy. Since the fire, every joy and every trouble has driven you at least five miles in an opposite direction.”

Nancy was fast coming to the conclusion that her original idea as to Mr. Baxendale's intention was erroneous; as a natural consequence her temper was sorely tried.

“ Why don't you answer ? ” she cried with a stamp of her foot. “ Have you lost your tongue, as they say to children ? ”

“ I hesitate to speak,” said Laurence gently, “ because I know what I have to say will pain me, and I fear it will also pain you.”

“ In that case the sooner you speak the better. When one visits the dentist, one doesn't care for much time to

be spent in the dreary waiting-room furnished with superannuated magazines."

"Nancy, I hate to say it; yet I must—no other course is possible. I love you, my darling, I love you; and yet we must never see one another again."

"Never see one another again? How can you be so ridiculous, Laurence? This is really absurd! You say you love me, and I have told you that I love you. What is to prevent our continually seeing one another and being happy ever afterwards, as they are in fairytale?"

They were now in Baxendale Park, slowly walking towards the ruins. Laurence pointed to the Hall as he said, "The reason is there. The old curse has come true; and the blow falls upon me. I cannot in honour marry you."

"It seems to me that it is quite the other way. You have won my love, and I should say you were in honour bound to marry me. As for the curse, it is really a blessing. You might have had scruples about marrying before; but the fire has provided you with an adequate income."

"No, it has not," muttered Laurence gloomily.

"You seem to have exalted ideas as to adequacy. Anyway the interest on a hundred thousand pounds is enough for me; so don't be silly, there's a dear, and compel me to say that the fire at Baxendale has cooked my goose for me. You are a goose, you know—and mine—but I'll take you uncooked, if you don't mind."

"Nancy, cannot you understand that I am unable to claim the insurance money?"

"Most certainly I cannot. I never heard anything more ridiculous! What are insurance companies for,

except to make it worth people's while to die or marry or be burnt to death? They made no difficulty about taking your money as long as there was no fire; and now that there has been a fire it is your turn to take their money. I don't see why, as the Irishman said, the reciprocity should be all on one side."

"But people say it was no accident."

"What does it matter what people say, as long as they don't speak the truth? And that they hardly ever do, if they are women—which the majority of people are, in England, according to the last census. worse luck!"

"But how can I take this money, when it is said that I set my own house on fire in order to get it?"

"But you didn't," replied Nancy; "and, as a matter of fact, your declining to take the money will be regarded as a proof that you did; just as conscientious scruples against supporting any Nonconformist charity prove that people were brought up as thorough-paced Dissenters, and innocent questions about the habits of the middle-class prove that the anxious inquirers were born and bred in Tottenham Court Road. Nobody apparently knows so little about a thing as those who really know too much."

"I can't do it, Nancy, I can't do it," cried Laurence. "Don't ask me to do it. It's hard enough as it is to do what I know to be right."

"I suppose you think it very fine to sacrifice your own interests for the good of the Insurance Company. That is all very well. But you have no right to sacrifice me on the altar of your absurd scruples. I never set myself up as being an Iphigenia or a Jephthah's daughter up to date."

Laurence made no reply. They were now standing close by the Hall, looking at the ravages made by the fire. For a few minutes neither of them spoke; then he felt a soft hand steal gently into his own.

"Laurence darling," whispered Nancy, "you don't mean what you say. Tell me it was all a mistake. Just think of what it means to me. Oh! my love, why can't we be happy together, now that the difficulty of your poverty has been removed? Not that it was ever a difficulty to me: poverty always seems to me a nice, cheerful, picnicky sort of thing, with a man one really likes. But you made a silly fuss about it while it was here; and you seem to make a still sillier fuss about it now that it has disappeared."

"Don't tempt me, sweetheart; don't tempt me!"

"Surely you were in earnest when you told me you loved me better than anything on earth?"

"You know I meant it, Nancy. Oh! my darling, don't make it harder for me than it is. I love you better than life itself. But it is a question of honour. I cannot let you marry me so long as suspicion rests upon me. Nor can I take the money."

Naney turned to her lover with a look he had never before seen in her blue eyes—love and pride, offended dignity and spurned affection mingled there with a misery that cut him like a knife.

"Then you prefer your scruples to me? Having won my heart you weigh it in the balances with your conscience, and find that the latter is by far the heavier of the two. Then you scribble *Mene tekell* all over my heart, and pitch it out of the window as being light weight. But you hug your own conscience in an ecstasy of appreciation. As for what becomes of

my rejected heart—whether some other man picks it up, or whether it is trampled to death in the dust—is a matter of no moment to you. You have your own dear, large, honourable, superfine, extra-weight conscience in its place, and that is enough for you.”

Laurence could only say, “You do not understand me now; some day you will”.

“Then all is over between us?”

Laurence literally could not speak: he could only bow in silent misery.

Nancy drew herself up, and with a scornful “Good-bye, Mr. Baxendale,” turned away.

Baxendale for a few seconds stood rooted to the spot. Then all his love rushed over him with overwhelming force, and he felt he could not let her go.

“Nancy,” he cried, as he started to follow her.

But she shook her head, and walked proudly on.

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“GOOD-BYE, MR. BAXENDALE.”

[To face page 226.]



## CHAPTER XVI.

### MRS. CANDY'S OPINION.

Some actions, which could never have been meant,  
Are brought about by purest accident.

THUS it came to pass that Nancy Burton had to break off the thread of her life and begin all over again *minus* the principal element—a task the stupendous difficulty of which is not understood save by those who have tried it in person.

Laurence Baxendale had so completely permeated all her thoughts, words and works, that it seemed well-nigh impossible to eliminate him from every hour of the day and from every event of life, including the most trivial and the most sublime. The beauties of art and literature and nature owed half their *raison d'être*, in Nancy's philosophy, to the fact that she loved Laurence; the passing irritations of the trivial round and the common task lost half their sting in the consciousness that Laurence loved her. And now she had to face a world where there was no longer, as far as she was concerned, a Laurence to add glamour and intensity to her soul's most exalted moments, to relieve the weariness of its most uninteresting duties. The prospect of the dreary path which lay before her was almost more than she could face with equanimity; yet it had to be borne, and borne with a brave front, as Nancy was the



type of woman to whom pity is an insult. Her only comfort in the matter was that her engagement with Laurence had never been made public—had not been so much an actual engagement as an arrangement between their two selves that they would become engaged at some future time if fortune favoured them; so that she had to suffer none of the unpleasantness attendant upon an openly broken-off engagement. This she felt she really could not have endured. Of course all the world knew that Mr. Baxendale and Miss Burton had "walked out together" and "kept company," so to speak; but a laxity is allowed to mere company-keepers and walkers-together which is not permitted to those whose betrothal has been advertised by letters of congratulation and a diamond ring. The former bond can be broken at the will of the parties concerned, for no better reason than that they are tired of it and want a change: at least their world would be satisfied with this. But an actual jilting must be justified by a difference over the settlements, or the discovery of some disgraceful family secret; or else all the gossips of the neighbourhood will know—or will invent—the reason why.

Mrs. Burton was very good to her daughter just then. She showed her no open sympathy—she knew Nancy too well for that; but in a thousand little ways, too minute to be described, she comforted Nancy as only a mother can comfort.

Nora, too, was kind to her sister; but her own love-affair with Mr. Arbuthnot was just then proceeding along such smooth and pleasant lines, that Nancy's sore heart was inclined to be restive under Nora's tenderest touch. And then Nora agreed with Nancy in blaming Laurence!

The only people who can really help us when we are in great trouble are those who have suffered more than we are suffering, and those who love us better than we love ourselves; and although Faith Fairfax could not lay claim to the latter qualification, as far as Nancy was concerned, she could to the former; so Nancy found a certain consolation in Faith's society just then. She knew that Faith had loved Laurence and had loved him in vain; therefore she recognized that Faith's burden was a heavier one than hers; for, however desolate the rest of her existence was doomed to be she had once lain in Laurence's arms and had felt his kisses on her face, and nothing could ever rob her of the bitter-sweetness of that memory.

The woman who has never been in love has no power to help the woman whose love is a sorrow to her; the woman who has found nothing but happiness in love has even less; for they live in a different atmosphere and move along a different plane from their less fortunate sister. The former talks a language foreign to her; the latter, though acquainted with the same language, is read in a widely diverse lore; therefore she and they have but little in common. But Faith knew what it was to be in love—knew even what it was to be in love with Laurence Baxendale; and therefore Nancy called at Ways Hall far oftener than was absolutely necessary for the mere maintaining of neighbourly relations. Finally—most important of all—Faith did not agree with Nancy in the latter's condemnation of Laurence's refusal to accept the insurance money.

While we are as yet young and inexperienced (which comes to the same thing), when a woman confides in us her grievances against the man of her choice, our

natural inclination—should we desire to please the woman—is to take her part against him, and to tell her so. But as we grow older and learn better to know our world, we do nothing of the kind; we understand that to tell her that she is right and that he is wrong, and that we unanimously second all her votes of censure upon him, is to make her our enemy for life; while to put it plainly before her what a fool she is compared with him, and how utterly he is in the right and she is in the wrong with regard to the matter in dispute, is to earn her undying friendship. It may be taken as an axiom that a woman is never more bitter towards any one than towards those well-meaning but misguided persons who take her part against her lover. Therefore the more Nancy worked herself up into a state of righteous indignation with Laurence for throwing away his happiness and her own for the sake of a (to her) absurd scruple, the more did she love Faith for defending the course he had elected to pursue; and the more (which really was unjust and unjustifiable) did she blame Lady Alicia and Nora for taking exactly the same view of the matter as she took herself.

“I can approve of people who sacrifice their lives for a principle,” she said to Faith, when the two girls were discussing—as all Mershire was discussing—Laurence’s action with reference to the insurance money; “but I really haven’t patience with those who sacrifice everything for a mere scruple, such as Laurence Baxendale; have you?”

“Somehow he is different from other people; one cannot judge him by the same standards; and he seems to elevate a scruple into a principle.”

"But don't you think it is stupid of him to choose to go on being poor, when he might now be rich?" persisted Nancy.

"No; I can't say that I do. I think it is simply splendid of him to sacrifice everything, in the way he is doing, to what he considers right."

"But the world in general doesn't consider that it is right; it condemns him as absurdly quixotic. Of course I should admire his action as much as you do if it was actual wrong-doing that he was so firmly set against, and if he deliberately chose poverty rather than dishonour. But it isn't. He is sacrificing himself and his mother for the sake of a sentimental scruple, which everybody except himself thinks ridiculous as well as sentimental."

"That, I think, is where he is behaving so nobly. If all the world agreed with him that the only alternative to poverty was something wrong or dishonourable, he would have no choice in the matter; any man would prefer poverty to what other men condemned as dishonourable and despised accordingly; but to be poor rather than do what he himself considers dishonourable, although nobody else agrees with him, seems to me a splendid sort of thing, and just what any one who knows Laurence would expect of him."

Faith certainly took a higher and more ideal view of the matter than did Nancy; but then Faith's life had not been included in Laurence's holocaust, and Nancy's had—which makes all the difference in an abstract discussion on sacrifice as a fine art.

"Let us look in and see Mrs. Candy," suggested Nancy, as the two girls had by that time reached the cottage where that worthy matron was, for the present,

pitching her moving tent. She and her husband had incontinently fled from their holiday as soon as the news reached them of the catastrophe at Baxendale; and Laurence had felt himself bound to provide them with a cottage at once, and remove thereto all their Lares and Penates, which, fortunately having been upon the ground floor at the Hall, were practically none the worse for the fire. A vacant lodge at one of the park gates exactly suited them; and there good Mrs. Candy took up her abode, and discussed with every passer-by the accident which had driven her and her husband out of their former home.

"Yes, dear," agreed Faith, "she is always delightful company." So the girls entered the little garden gate, and found Mrs. Candy shelling peas in the porch.

"Well, it du seem good of yew young ladies to come and see me," remarked the good woman when the customary greetings had been exchanged, and her guests had found themselves fairly comfortable resting-places upon two upturned flower-pots; "for what with the fire, and our holiday, and the trains, and all we've been threw i' the last fortnit, I've got such a lot to say that I don't know how to keep it in, I don't; and yet there's nobody to say it tu when Candy goes to his work; and it's sorry work, it is, to keep yewr words back when yew are fairly burstin' with 'em."

"I know that feeling, Mrs. Candy," said Nancy. But Faith kept silence, because she did not know it.

"It du seem an upset to come back after such a pleasant holiday-time as me and Candy has just had, and to find no home to come tu," continued Mrs. Candy. "I haven't felt so upset as I did when Mr. Baxendale wrote with his own hand to tell us that the Hall was

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burnt down, no, not since all the red currants fomented i' the preservin'-pot three summers ago, and had to be given to the pigs instead o' makin' jelly for the gentry roundabouts. I was put out that time, and no mistake. 'Candy,' I says, 'I've treated the red currants this year the same as I've always treated them, and yet they niver before turned agen me in this way; then what's the reason of it, I wants to know?' I says. 'Missis,' says he, 'there's some reason, yew may be sure o' that, or such a thing niver would ha' come to pass.' Oh! he's a wise man is Candy; there ain't much i' this world as puzzles him."

"I knew you'd be immensely surprised to hear of such a catastrophe," exclaimed Nancy: "as we all were," she added as an afterthought.

"I was indeed, miss. When the letter came we was havin' tea wi' my sister, who is housekeeper up at Cromer Hall; and—wud yew believe it?—there was sangwiches for tea made out o' hard-boiled eggs. 'Well,' says I, when I seed 'em, 'I thought as I'd been iverywhere and seed iverythin'; I says; 'but sangwiches made out o' eggs is news to me.' And afore I'd done a-bein' astonished at the sangwiches, the letter come bringin' word as Baxendale Hall was burnt down. Yew see the postman knew we was havin' tea wi' my sister; and knowin' as a letter generally means bad news, he thought we'd be pleased to get it at onst. And then on the top o' them egg-sangwiches comes the downfall o' Baxendale; and I feels how trew it is as winners niver cease."

"I am sure you grieve, as we all do, that such a blow should fall on your master," said Faith.

Mrs. Candy placed a hand on either knee, and looked



Miss Fairfax full in the face. "Waal, miss, I wean't deceive yew; it wadn't be right, and I wean't du it. When we'd read Mr. Baxendale's letter, Candy says to me, he says, 'Lizzie, this'll be a blow for the master, and no mistake'. But I shakcs my head. 'Candy,' I says, 'there's good to be got out of ivcrythin', as we can all learn from nettle tea; and it's my opinion,' says I, 'that Providence has taken this oppertewnity o' gettin' the better of old Mr. Baxendale's will.' That's what I says."

Nancy looked up quickly. "And you were quite right, Mrs. Candy."

"So Candy said. 'Lizzie,' says he, 'I doubt but there's somethin' in what yew say.' 'I'll be bound there is,' says I, 'or I shudn't ha' said it: du yew suppose as folks are goin' to be allowed to make them foolish wills, like the master's grandfather did, and that Providence ain't a-goin' to be even wi' them? Not they! And that is just what I should have expected o' Providence, seein' that the master's grandfather was such a fule (beggin' his pardon) that he bound the present Mr. Baxendale to pay goodness knows what ivery year to keep a lot o' rubbish from bein' burnt, as any sensible man cud see wasn't worth the burnin'.' That's what I said and what I thought. And to my mind Providence has behaved very sensible in the matter, seein' that there'd be no peace and no plenty for nobody, as long as them rubbishy old books was above ground."

"You never did approve of the Baxendale library, I remember," remarked Faith with a smile.

"No more I did, miss, and why shud I, seein' that it cost such a lot to them as cud ill afford it, and brought no good to nobody? Yew see, miss, Candy don't hold

wi' books, don't Candy; and it seems to me as if Providence was o' Candy's opinion, seein' as how all that old rubbish-heap was burnt up in a night, as yew may say. If Providence had had any patience wi' all old Mr. Baxendale's nonsense, that there library had niver ha' been burnt; yew may take my word for that," said Mrs. Candy, giving good reason for the hope that was in her.

Nancy nodded. "Yes, yes, Mrs. Candy; there's something in that. After all, if things ought not to happen, they would not be allowed to happen." Her logic was consolatory if unsound.

"Yes, miss, that's what me and Candy thinks; and we can't hold wi' Mr. Laurence goin' agen Providence, as yew may say, in not takin' all that money as is his right and his dew, and which was Providence's makin' up to him for all that rubbish in his grandfather's will."

Faith drew herself up rather haughtily. "Surely Mr. Baxendale has a right to take what he considers the honourable course, without consulting the whole neighbourhood."

"Not he, miss; we can none of us du without the advice of our neighbours; and it's a wunnerful help sometimes hearin' what they say of us, though we mayn't enjoy it at the time. Now he's got a regular bee in his bonnet, Mr. Baxendale has; and the suner folks can teach him to take it out, the better for him. He shud just hear what Candy says of his behaviour; that wud open his eyes, that wud."

Nancy laughed ruefully. "I am afraid I agree with Candy."

"Yew see, miss, there's nothin' so troublesome as when folks get werriting about what's right and what's

wrong. 'Let 'em do what's right,' Candy says, 'and think no more about it;' and he's a wunnerful knowledgeable man, is Candy. But always thinkin' about one's dewty, and dwellin' upon it, is more than anybody can stand; and that's the bad habit as Mr. Baxendale has got inta, as his poor father did before him."

"Yes; it is a pity, of course, to grow morbid upon the subject of one's duty," said Faith.

"So it be, miss, so it be; and when onst yew get doubtin' about things, there's no more rest for nobody—neither for yewself nor for them that lives wi' yew. I remember old Mrs. Phillipson, as I lived with afore I was married. She was one o' the werritin' sort. And when I lived wi' her she'd wake me up i' the night and say: 'Lizzie, I doubt if the front door's locked; will yew just run down to make sure'. So off I had to go i' the cold. Then no suner was I safe back in bed and dozin' off, than she'd begin agen: 'Lizzie, I don't remember if we douted the candles in the drawing-room; will yew just run down and make sure'. And off I had to go agen. And that's how folks get, who are full o' conscience and scruples, and things o' that sort; a trouble to theirselves, and worse than a trouble to them as lives wi' them."

"Still a sense of duty is a fine thing, and so is a tender conscience. I had rather have a conscience that was too tender than one that was too tough."

"May-be, Miss Fairfax, may-be; but Candy don't hold wi' folks as make a god o' their conscience, Candy don't. I remember onst Mr. Arbuthnot preached a sermon about a saint—I forgit his right name, but I know he were a saint—who spent all his life o' the top of a pillar, just for the sake o' his conscience; and Candy

was that set agen him as niver was. He said, Candy did, that if folks was meant to live at the top o' pillars and posts, they'd ha' been made to grow up 'em, like peas and kidney-beans; and he didn't hold wi' such Jack-and-the-Beanstalk ways, didn't Candy."

"Simon Stylites was the name of the saint," said Faith.

"And Mr. Baxendale was made on the same last," added Nancy.

"So he was, Miss Burton, so he was; yew niver spoke a trewer word. But I make bold to say as that there saint didn't stick his lady mother on the top o' the pillar alongside of him, because there wudn't ha' been room for her; and yet that's what Mr. Baxendale does with her leddyship, beggin' his pardon."

Again the proud look crept over Faith's aristocratic face; but Nancy said bitterly, "Yes, it's dull for women on the tops of pillars, Mrs. Candy".

"So it be, miss, so it be; and most perticular for a leddy brought up as Ledy Alicia was. I remember her when she was livin' at the Hall in old Mr. Baxendale's time—Mr. Laurence's father that is to say—and he worshipped the very ground she trod on, and thought nothin' too good for her; which it wasn't, considerin' what a pretty face she had in those days, and a figure like a willa-wand."

"She must have been very handsome," Nancy exclaimed.

"She was, miss—a perfect picter; and a sight handsomer than all them old picters at the Hall, which Mr. Baxendale's grandfather set such store by. She was one o' the sort as seem made to be waited on, bless her!"

"She hasn't had much waiting on in late years, poor lady!" said Faith with a sigh.

"No more she has, miss; and it don't seem becomin' somehow. I shall niver forgit the first time I saw her come into the kitchen at Poplar Farm to give an order herself, instead o' ringin' the bell for the footman to take it, as she used to du up at the Hall. I remember onst when I was in service it give me such a turn as niver was when I see the kitchenmaid mix the mustard in one o' the room tea-cups. 'Yew must always use a kitchen tea-cup for mixing the mustard in, yew careless hussy,' I says; 'and niver let me see yew speak disrespectfully o' one of the room tea-cups agen.' And it give me just such another turn when I see her leddyship come into the kitchen at Poplar Farm."

"Yes; life has been hard for Lady Alicia," Faith agreed.

"So it has, miss; and therefore I hold it is Mr. Laurence's bounden dewty to spend all that there insurance money in makin' his poor mother comfortable in her old age, instead o' sittin' all by himself up on the top of a pillar, as yew may say. I don't deny as conscience is an invention o' Providence, and shud be respected as such; but Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' he says, 'the same Providence as invented Mr. Laurence's conscience invented the Fifth Commandment; and it ain't honourin' the Fifth Commandment to keep a leddy o' that quality in a farm house, without so much as a single-handed footman to answer the bell'. That's what Candy said; and he's one to stick to what he's said, is Candy."

"I wonder how the house did catch fire after all, and whether the mystery ever will be cleared up," said Faith dreamily.

"Well, miss, he's got his ideas on that matter, has Candy; and so have I, beggin' your pardon."

Nancy looked up, her face alive with interest. "Let us hear your explanation of the matter, Mrs. Candy," she begged.

Mrs. Candy, nothing loth, replied: "Well, miss, it ain't for poor folks like me and Candy to set our opinion above the gentry; but what we thinks we says, and what we says we sticks to. Now I wean't deceive yew by sayin' as I believe Mr. Baxendale burnt down his own house on purpose, as some folks say he did; but they aren't them as knows him."

"I should think not!" Faith exclaimed under her breath.

"But I think as he did it hisself, all the same, though he's no more knowledge of it than the babe unborn."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Nancy.

"Well, miss, I think as Mr. Baxendale burnt down the Hall hisself, but he did it by accident. First, nobody but hisself cud ha' done it when me and Candy was away, because nobody but hisself had the keys. He had three sets of his own, and I give our set up to him afore I went away; and all the folks say as the Hall was set afire from the inside o' the library. Then he's tu fond o' smokin' is Mr. Laurence—sadly tu fond. Why men shud make a chimbley o' their mouths is more than I can say; but Mr. Laurence is terrible fond o' doin' it, and many a time he's give me a fright for fear the sparks and matches shud get among them rubbishy old books. Why, he'd light his pipe up at the Hall, and throw the match away, and laugh at me when I said it was enough to burn the house down

over our heads. 'Yew needn't be afeard o' me, Mrs. Candy,' he'd say as peart as peart; 'if yew are as careful as me,' says he, 'the Hall won't be burnt down agen in our time.' As if any man—even Candy hisself—cud be as careful as a woman! But poor Mr. Laurence, bein' but a single man, didn't know no better."

Nancy's face was positively pale with excitement. "Then you really believe that that is the explanation of the fire, Mrs. Candy?"

"I du, miss; not a doubt on it. As soon as we heard on it, Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' says he, 'mark my words; this comes o' the master bein' so fond o' smokin', and lightin' his pipe all over the place.' (He don't smoke hisself, Candy don't.) 'I make no doubt,' he says, 'as he's lighted his pipe onst too often in that rubbishy old library.' Yew see, miss, he'd throw the match away, as he was so fond o' doin', and go away, and lock up the house, and forgit all about it. And the match wud smoulder and smoulder till it got to them rubbishy old books; and then the whole place wud be in a blaze like one o'clock, and nobody cud put it out agen; perticularly as the wind happened to be so high that night, which made it burn the quicker."

But Faith laughed this suggestion to scorn. "What an absurd idea, Mrs. Candy! As if Mr. Baxendale would be so careless as to burn down his own house."

"Yew aren't married, miss, beggin' your pardon, and so yew don't know how careless men can be—even the best o' them. Why, even Candy hisself 'll leave his boots dryin' at the fire till the toes is burnt out, unless I happen to be handy to take 'em away as sune as they begin to smell. But he'd niver notice it, bless yew! not till the smell o' burnt leather had got on your

stomach till it was enough to bring the house down. That's a man all over!" And Mrs. Candy fairly bridled with pride at the extreme virility of her lord and master.

Faith was silent, and smiled the smile of the unconvinced.

"But what puts me about," the garrulous matron continued, "is that it was all my fault. If I'd ha' been content to stay at home and not got werriting over our gravo and Sarah Maria's twins, Baxendale Hall wud niver ha' been burnt. Candy wud ha' seen to that. Don't go tellin' me as the Hall wud ever ha' caught fire if Candy had been here to look after it, because it wudn't. But that comes o' carin' too much for this vile body and for other folk's babies, which are made to be cut down like grass. Yew see, Candy niver fashed hisself about the grave nor the twins; and why shud he, seein' as they was neither o' them his flesh and blood?"

"But they were yours," suggested Faith, "and you and he are one."

Mrs. Candy shook her head decidedly. "Now, Miss Fairfax, when yew've got a husband o' your own, don't yew go believin' no rubbish as to his relations bein' the same as yours, or t'other way round; because they ain't. Why, things as wud ously make him have a merry laugh if his relations did 'em, wud fairly turn his stomach if they was done by yours. And it'll be the same wi' yew. I remember when my sister Carrie was a bit flirty I thought it a rare bit o' fun; but when Candy's sister Jennie carried on wi' a young man, she fairly turned me sick, the forward hussy! I niver did get on wi' Jennie; her tongue was too sharp for my taste, and I niver cud abear a sharp tongue."



"Then wasn't Carrie's tongue ever sharp?" asked Nancy silyly.

"Oh! Carrie was different. Her tongue was a bit sharp sometimes, I don't deny; now and agen she'd be as peart as peart and have an answer for anybody. But somehow she didn't rile yew as Jennie did. When Carrie laughed at yew, she just set yew a-laughin' at yewrself; but when Jennie laughed at yew, oh my!—she just made yew all agog to slap her. She was always a-gettin' the better of yew, Jennie was. I remember when my childern died and hers lived, she was that lordin' it over me as niver was; as if anybody wud want childern to live as had got noses like Jennie's childern! And such bad behaviour too, just like taeir mother. No, I wean't deceive yew; there niver was anythin' genteel about Jennie, nor niver will be, no, not if she lives to be a hunderd."

There was a moment's pause while Mrs. Candy's mind revelled in the memory of the unsatisfactory manners and profiles of her sister-in-law's offspring; then less soothing thoughts intervened, and she went on more seriously: "No, young ladies, I shall niver cease to blame myself for havin' been the cause o' the Hall bein' burnt down. If I'd stopped at home, as Candy wanted to, it wud niver ha' come to pass. So let it be a lesson to yew—if ever yew get husbands o' your own—to du what they want yew, whether yew see the sense of it or not. The Prayer-book tells us as we are to obey our husbands; and them as wrote the Prayer-book knew what they was a-talkin' about, unless I'm much mistaken. Anā if I'd ha' given heed to Candy's words, instead o' to my own sinful heart coupled with the grave and Sarah Maria's twins, Baxendale Hall

wud ha' been standin' on its own legs to this blessed day."

And Mrs. Candy looked round her with the dignified despair of one who has sinned greatly and has been greatly punished.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### VAIN OBLATIONS.

To gods both false and true I'll humbly pray,  
If only they will give me my own way.

GREAT was the interest felt and expressed all round Tettleigh when the vicar's engagement to Nora Burton was announced; which announcement occurred about three weeks after the burning of Baxendale, and for a time threw that catastrophe into the shade.

It is strange how the fact that a man loves a woman, at once raises that woman in the estimation of her fellows. One might naturally suppose that women would reserve their admiration and affection for the woman who is unloved by man, and therefore has time to exhaust and gratitude to expend upon the less intoxicating brand of devotion supplied by the weaker vessels. But not they! As a rule women waste their affection upon the woman who has won a man's, and therefore does not thank them for it; and reserve but little for those lonelier sisters who, being shut out from the feast, gladly accept such crumbs as fall from the tables of the more blessed among women. Therefore her world spoke well of Nora, because she was so happy in the acknowledged love of Mr. Arbuthnot as to be independent of and indifferent to its approval; and at the same time it turned a somewhat

tepid shoulder towards Faith Fairfax, because for the second time a man, obviously fore-ordained for her, had slipped through her fingers and had gone openly over to the Burtons' camp, leaving Faith in need of friendship and sympathy to supply in some measure the place of the deeper happiness which Fate had so sternly denied her.

In a measure, too, this same world shook its head over Nancy's affairs. It was kinder to her than to Faith, because she had obviously turned the man's head; but apparently she had not secured his heart, and so—though superior to Faith in the esteem of a world which judges effort entirely by result, and endeavour entirely by success—she was distinctly inferior to Nora, and was treated accordingly. Faith was utterly unconscious of the judgment and condemnation which her world had passed upon her; and, had she known of it, would have been profoundly indifferent. But not so Nancy; she knew to a grain how much Nora now outweighed her in society's balance; and she raged in her heart against Laurence accordingly.

As a rule sisters are alike in physical and mental attributes, and different in the deeper matters of character and disposition—which difference is not generally perceptible until they leave the garden paths which they have trodden together, and go out either into the Valley of Humiliation or on to the Delectable Mountains—whichever the case may be—by falling in love. Until now Nancy and Nora had been regarded as convertible terms; in fact they had so regarded themselves; but at last they had come to the parting of the ways. Nora, who had hitherto been the spoilt

and wayward one, was so softened and elevated by her lover's influence upon her that her character mellowed and sweetened day by day; but poor Nancy, who had always been regarded as the embodiment of easy-going good-nature, was fighting such a battle and kicking so violently against the pricks, that her scars could not help being more or less perceptible. She was very angry with Laurence for so persistently putting his own scruples before her happiness; and she was all the more angry in that she did not in the least understand the motives that guided him. That the very depth and purity of his love for her made it all the more impossible to him to gain her by any save the highest means, was simply incomprehensible to her; she had no idea that, had he idealized her less, it would have been easier for him to subordinate his conscience to the winning of her.

She was also angry with him for having so utterly transformed her character—for having taken away the light-hearted, irresponsible Nancy of old, and put this passionate, tempest-tossed creature in her place. Love, like genius, is not an integral part of character; it is a gift, an inspiration, direct from heaven. Sometimes it is in harmony with the natural man or woman to whom it is sent; sometimes it is in direct opposition to each one of his or her inborn characteristics. Yet none the less is it of God, and so must in the end prevail.

One afternoon, not long after the announcement of her engagement, as Nora was starting for evensong, Nancy joined her.

"I'll walk with you as far as Teteigh," the latter said. "There are so many things I want to talk to

you about; but when a girl has a lover, her own family get crowded out somehow."

"I don't want my own people to get crowded out, Nan; I think it is horrid of a girl not to find room in her heart for the old interests as well as the new ones."

"I want to have a talk with you about myself."

"All right; I'm listening," said Nora, who had learnt that when a girl says she wants to talk about herself it means she wants to talk about her lover. "I am afraid you are worrying over Laurence Baxendale and his stupidity."

"I am, and that's a fact; he really is very trying!"

"He is, Nancy." And the sisters sighed in sympathy.

"You are in luck to be properly engaged to a man without a conscience!"

But this was more than Nora could stand. "Oh, Nancy, what a story! Michael has got a splendid conscience, and one in capital working order, too. Clergymen always have."

"Oh! yes, I know that. I didn't intend to say anything disrespectful about Michael—in fact I meant it as a compliment. But you don't know what it is to be in love with a man who is everlastingly arranging a sort of spiritual steeple-chase for his conscience, and making the jumps so high that it bucks at every one."

"Yes, that must be tiresome!"

"It is; most frightfully tiresome. I've the greatest respect for the Ten Commandments and the Thirty-nine Articles, and old-fashioned things like that; but I really can't get up any reverence for a lot of home-made Commandments and amateur Articles of Faith and fancy-work of that kind; and it's no use pretending that I can."

"Poor old Nancy! And you really are in love with Laurence, aren't you?"

"Yes; that's the nuisance. If I wasn't, I should just laugh at him and his scruples, and think of something else. But I can't, though I've tried my hardest. However much I try to forget him, he just gets into everything and flavours everything, like the taste of turnips in the winter; and there is no getting away from him."

"I can't think why he doesn't quietly take the insurance money, and marry on it, and live happy ever after," said Nora.

"No more can anybody else; it is rank lunacy on his part."

"Still I suppose a man has the right to sacrifice himself to his own conscience if he wants to."

"But he hasn't the right to sacrifice a woman as well; that's my point. If Laurence hadn't made me love him, he could have played S. Simon Stylites to his heart's content. But a man has no right to sit alone on the top of a pillar all the week, and on a stile with a young woman on his Sundays out. The two rôles aren't compatible. He can go in for the stile or the pillar—whichever he prefers; but he can't have both."

"I wonder if you really would be happy with Laurence Baxendale?" said Nora thoughtfully.

"I don't know that; but I do know one thing—and that is that I shall always be miserable without him. Oh dear, oh dear! I wish he'd never made me love him. I used to be so happy in the old days when love was a game instead of a martyrdom."

"And games are much more in your line than martyrdoms."

"Of course they are. Now some women—such as

Faith, for instance—really relish a martyrdom, and get the full flavour out of it. But it is as much thrown away upon me as is caviare upon the general.”

“I’m not sure that you would be happy if you were married,” persisted Nora; “you might find it rather dull, you are so fond of change and variety and excitement. Mrs. Fairfax says that marriage is a luxury to a rich woman, but a necessity to a poor one. It is certainly not a necessity to you; and I expect, if you were to marry Laurence, you’d say afterwards that you would have had a jollier time if you had married somebody else.”

“Pooh! that’s nothing; it wouldn’t mean I wasn’t happy if I did say that. Did you ever in your life know a day’s shooting, however good, that wouldn’t have been better if the birds had done something, or the dogs had done something else? Men invariably tell you that, after the most enormous bag. But it doesn’t mean they haven’t enjoyed themselves, bless you! It’s part of the game.”

“You can’t deny that Laurence has been very wearying, Nancy; those conscientious, over-scrupulous men always are.”

“Nevertheless,” demurred Nancy, “a certain amount of conscience is a comfort—in a husband I mean; not, of course, in oneself. I can’t help feeling that in the medium stage—after a husband had ceased to be a treat and before he had begun to be a habit—it would be nice to regard him in the light of a religious service. It would make one feel so good and happy, like singing hymns on a Sunday evening.”

“It does; it is a most lovely feeling, I can assure you.”



"And you'll have it all your life; that's just your luck." And poor Nancy looked with envy at her more fortunate sister.

"Yet you used to be quite as lucky as I."

"I know; that is the funny part of it. I believe that in falling in love with Laurence I resigned my good-luck, and took the ill-luck of the Baxendales instead. They have been renowned as an unlucky family, you know, ever since the witch pronounced the curse on Baxendale Hall; and especially so whenever one of them fell in love with a daughter of the people."

"And you wish that you had never fallen in love with him then?"

"Sometimes I do; and sometimes I feel glad that I have given up everything for him—even my good-luck."

"I believe you were happier when you and Laurence were only friends and not lovers," said Nora.

"No, I wasn't. I dare say I should have been, if he had let me; but he was troublesome even then. He was always constrained and queer because he was so poor—as if there were a duty on friendship as there is on tobacco!"

"But how did his poverty interfere with his being friends?"

"Oh! I don't know. He was in love all the time, I suppose, and was afraid of its showing."

"And of course it showed in the end. Those over-scrupulous people always do the thing that they have sacrificed themselves in avoiding; but not till it is too late to be of any use."

Nancy groaned. "That's Laurence all over; when

we were friends he was always trying not to be lovers, and now we are lovers he is always trying not to be friends. He is wearing me to a thread. Oh! how I wish I could induce him to see the matter in a sensible light, and let us both be happy on the income of the insurance money!"

"Here we are at the church; I suppose you are going on to Silverhampton?"

"No, I'm not; I'm going to church with you."

Nora opened her pretty blue eyes wide in astonishment. Nancy was not much of a church-goer as a rule, except on Sundays. "Coming to church with me?"

"Yes. When I have set my heart on having anything, I leave no stone unturned in trying to get my own way," replied Nancy, with praiseworthy fixity of purpose, though lamentable ignorance of theology. And the two sisters entered the church together.

When evensong was over Nancy paid some calls in Tettleigh, while Nora and her lover walked back to Wayside together; and as they walked they talked of their love for each other.

"Isn't it difficult to believe," said Nora, "that you and I can ever leave off loving one another, even after we are dead?"

"Not difficult, my child, but impossible; for love carries in himself the proofs of his own immortality. None who have truly and deeply loved can doubt that their beloved are theirs for ever; for there is something in the very essence of love which defies death and brings immortality to light."

"You mean that when we really love another person we feel that our love is stronger than death?"

It was noteworthy that, while Laurence Baxendale

devoted himself to the interpretation of Nancy, Nora spent her time in interpreting the thoughts of Michael Arbuthnot.

"We know that it is, from its own internal evidence, quite apart from any Divine revelation. Roughly speaking, I should say that those men and women who doubt their own immortality have never experienced deep and passionate devotion. They may refuse to accept the Christian doctrine of immortality—that is a different thing; but a human being, who has once absorbingly loved another human being, can never doubt that his love—and therefore himself—is immortal; he is conscious that it is too strong and too godlike an emotion ever to see death."

"I wish Nancy were as happy in her love as I am," said Nora with a sigh.

"Poor little Nancy! I am afraid she has much to go through before she is perfected; and yet she is the sort of person that one feels is only suited to success and sunshine. It is difficult to think of Nancy as anything but Nancy Victrix."

"Yes; pity and Nancy don't dovetail into one another somehow."

"No, they don't," agreed the vicar; "I can think of you as ill and sorrowful, and yet yourself—your dear, sweet, lovable self; but Nancy ill or unhappy would not be Nancy at all."

"Come and walk round the wood," said Nora when the lovers reached Wayside; so they crossed the lawn and entered the little coppice on the farther side of it.

"Hullo! what's that?" exclaimed Michael, spying a small, dark object under one of the trees.

"That's our idol. Haven't you seen it before, Michael?"

"No," replied the vicar, standing still in front of a little stone image. "What a quaint object! Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. It has been here ever since I can remember; and when we were children Nancy and Tony and I used to burn sacrifices before it."

Michael laughed. "You little heathens! On what occasions did you offer up these vain oblations?"

"When we wanted anything. We used to think that the idol would help us to get our way, if only we bribed him with burnt offerings. It was rather shocking of us, wasn't it?"

"I don't know that you were worse than many scores of so-called religious people, who treat God very much as you treated your graven image. But look here, what's this? Somebody has been offering up sacrifices lately." And the vicar turned over with his stick a little heap of ashes in front of the stone image.

"It must have been the boys," said Nora with interest. "We'll ask them. Boys," she called to her two small brothers, who were just then in the middle of the wood, busily engaged in digging a short cut through the earth to Australia.

Arthur and Ambrose rushed up to the lovers. "Yes what's up?" inquired Arthur, as spokesman.

"Have you and Ambrose been offering up sacrifices here?" their sister asked.

The two children knelt upon the ground and examined the heap of ashes with interest. "No," replied Arthur; "somebody's been sacrificing here, but it wasn't us; was it, Amby?"

Ambrose shook his head. "We haven't offered up a



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sacrifice for a long time—not since the day at Baxendale Hall, when the big tree was blown down.”

“Why did you do it then?” asked the vicar.

“Because we wanted to please the tree-spirit,” Arthur replied; “we thought the tree-spirit would be very angry at having his tree blown down; so we tried to put him into a good temper by offering up a sacrifice to him in the roots of the tree.”

“And did you succeed in pacifying him, I wonder?” continued Michael.

Both little heads shook violently. “No, we didn’t; he was so angry that that very night he burnt down Baxendale Hall. We knew he’d be in a wax, but we never thought he’d do anything as bad as that.” And then the boys rushed back to continue their underland route.

“I wonder who did offer up the sacrifice?” mused Michael, absently stirring up the ashes with his stick.

Nora looked up with a solemn expression in her eyes. “I know; it was Nancy. I see now what she meant by saying that she never left a stone unturned when she wanted very badly to get her own way.”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### WEDDING BELLS.

You came: then undiscovered lands  
Sprang straightway into view;  
You took my life within your hands,  
And all things were made new.

"So you, too, have taken to yourself idols, and made merry, and have forgotten the living God," said Rufus Webb to Michael Arbuthnot once when the vicar was calling upon his weird parishioner.

"No, Mr. Webb, I have done none of these things. I have merely believed God's statement that He is love; and have ruled my life accordingly."

"And do you think that He will permit His chosen servant and minister to put the love of women before the love of God?"

"He will not have to permit it, as far as I am concerned," replied Michael with unruffled patience; "and there is one thing He knows as well as—nay, better than—I do; and that is that my love for a woman has taught me more than I ever learnt before of His love for me. It is only by loving one another that we learn anything of God's love for us."

"Beware lest you are crying peace where there is no peace, and are imagining vain things."



"I have imagined plenty of vain things in my time, goodness knows! But this one thing does not happen to be vain, neither is it of my own imagining. I maintain that of all God's revelations of Himself to sinful man, there is none that teaches us so much about Him as our love for one another."

"How can our love for anything besides Himself be reckoned as other than idolatry?" asked Rufus.

"Because our love for each other is not separate from our love for Him, but is a part of it; just as the sparkle of a running brook does not detract from the glory of the sunshine but rather adds to it, because they are really one and the same thing."

Rufus merely shook his head, and the vicar continued: "Besides, loving another person with a deep and sincere love gives us so much larger views of God's love for us. When we feel how tender is our own love—how we would rather die than cause the beloved one pain, and what we would sacrifice to ensure the beloved one's happiness—all our petty doubts and questionings regarding God's dealings with us disappear. We know that we—faulty and imperfect as we are—are nevertheless incapable of leaving anything undone which would ensure the happiness of that one living creature; and is it conceivable that our love is a more perfect thing than God's love—that He created beings superior to Himself? Nay, we rather see that as we are each capable of caring for one other human being and one only, so He is capable of caring for the whole human race. Otherwise we should be greater than He."

"I fear you are comforting yourself with false doctrines."

But the vicar stood firm. "I think not. To my mind the mediæval ascetics and the Puritans, who in turn taught that human love was an evil thing, did more than any other heretics in placing false barriers between man and God, and in giving men incorrect ideas of Him."

"I cannot agree with you; I only wish I could. But how can you still go on cherishing these delusive dreams when you see the ruin which overtook that young man, known to both of us, who had great possessions and loved them too well?" And Rufus pointed out of his window to the spot where the ruins of Baxendale Hall gleamed red among the trees. "He loved houses and lands more than God—I loved my wife more than God—and it pleased God to take from each of us the desire of our eyes at a stroke. Then learn wisdom from our afflictions, and take care that a like thing does not happen unto you; for cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, and taketh man for his defence, and his heart goeth from the Lord!"

"I think, Mr. Webb, you are unjust in saying that Baxendale loved his house and lands inordinately; personally I never met a young man who, to my mind, put so true a value upon worldly possessions. Like his father before him, he has one of the most refined natures I ever met with. The word *gentleman*, even in its most restricted and subtle sense, would always be descriptive of Laurence Baxendale; and that most perfect and exhaustive portrait of a gentleman, the fifteenth psalm, is entirely applicable to him."

"Yet the wrath of God came upon him, and burnt down his house before his eyes."

"I admit that his house was burnt down, Mr. Webb;

but—speaking with all reverence—I do not see that the wrath of God had anything to do with it. I have no patience with people who put down to God's account all the evils which most distinctly are wrought by man."

"Then do you deny that the burning of Baxendale was a judgment upon Laurence Baxendale—or rather a discipline necessary to the saving of his soul?" Rufus Webb's excitement, never much under control, was rapidly getting the better of him; he began to walk up and down the small room, thrusting his hands the while through his masses of unkempt hair.

"I do not believe it was anything of the kind," said the vicar; "though I hold that all afflictions, by whatever agency they may be wrought, will do good to our souls, if taken in a proper spirit. But I say that if any human being—whatever the motive may have been—set fire to Baxendale Hall on purpose, that human being was guilty of actual sin, and ought to make confession of the same."

"No, no, no; not if Laurence Baxendale's soul is saved thereby."

"It cost more than the burning of Baxendale Hall to redeem his soul; we must let that alone for ever. And we have no right to do evil that good may come."

"But it is not doing evil to burn the accursed thing; it is not doing evil to destroy false gods and to cut down their groves."

"It is doing evil to devote ourselves so exclusively to our brother's mote that we have no time for the extirpation of our own beam," said the vicar rising to depart; for he knew that argument was worse than useless when Rufus was, as now, in one of his fanatical moods. "Good-morning, Mr. Webb; come up and have

a chat with me at the vicarage whenever you feel inclined."

And with that they parted.

Nora meanwhile was holding a very different sort of conversation upon her prospects with Mrs. Candy, whom she had elected to go and see while Michael was calling upon Rufus Webb.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Candy," she began; "I hope you are very well."

"Thank yew, Miss Nora, I am as well as cud be expected, seein' as I had to get up extra early this mornin'."

"Why was that?"

"Because Candy's got a busy mornin' before him, killin' a sheep."

"Oh! can he kill a sheep? How clever of him!"

"Yes, miss, he can kill a sheep all right, Candy can; there isn't much as Candy can't du; but he doesn't get the pleasure out of it he does out o' killin' a pig, and it's no use pretendin' that he du."

"Of course there are degrees of pleasure in every-thing; no two treats are quite the same," said Nora, taking a seat upon the chair which her hostess had just dusted with her apron for that purpose.

"And so yew be a-goin' to be married afore Miss Nancy," said Mrs. Candy as soon as her visitor was seated; "well, to be sure, it du seem the wrong way about for the youngest to be married first; I niver cud abide it. I was always so glad as my sister Carrie was safely married when Candy come a-courtin' me, as I wudna ha' married afore her, her bein' sixteen months older than me, for anythin'; and yet it wud ha' gone agen the grain wi' me to give Candy the pass-by."

"Well, I am very sorry, but I don't see how I can help it," said Nora penitently; "and—as you say—it is a mistake to give really nice men, such as Mr. Arbuthnot and Candy for instance, the 'pass-by'."

"It is, miss, and I wean't deceive yew; and her that 'will not when she may,' ten to one dies an old maid, or else has to put up wi' a widower wi' a family. I'm sure I don't know what I shud ha' done, if I'd ha' let Candy slip threw my fingers; it wud ha' been the death o' me, I doubt! Even now I sometimes dreams as Candy is married to Polly Postern, and I'm still in service at Overstrand; and it gives me such a turn, yew can't think!"

"I'm sure it must."

"Yes, miss, it be a fine thing for a wumman to have a man of her own to make up her mind for her, and keep her clear of fallals and the like. I don't hold wi' wummen keepin' single, I don't; they git all sorts o' notions i' their heads wi' no man to sweep away all the nonsense out o' them. There was my aunt Mehetabel as niver married, and she took it into her head to be an invalid, if yew please; always enjoyin' some fresh complaint, as no sensible folks had ever heard so much as the name of, and drinkin' medicine by the gallon. Why, no husband wud ha' stood such nonsense, and quite right tu."

"That is true, Mrs. Candy; men do keep us out of all sorts of silliness."

"Then there was my aunt Hephzibah—she ni'er married neither; but with her it didn't run to health-rubbish—it took her in a religious way, and she joined the chapel-folk."

"Well, there wasn't much harm in that," said Nora

with a laugh; "Satan might have found some worse mischief for her idle hands—or rather her idle heart—to do."

But Mrs. Candy looked serious, and shook her head. "He don't hold wi' chapel-folk, don't Candy; he says as if Providence had meant folks to go to chapel instead o' to church, there'd ha' been a chapel instead of a church in ivery parish. And then chapel-folks are always askin' for money; and what's the use o' payin' for a chapel, he says, when yew can get the church for nothin'? Oh! but he's a wunnerful clear way o' puttin' things, has Candy."

"You certainly seem to find him very convincing," said Nora dryly.

"Oh! he's got a wunnerful clear head, Candy has. I often wish they'd got him up in Lunnon i' the Houses o' Parliament, when I read a bit o' the papers, and see what tu-and-agen work they make of it up there. He'd sune teach 'em what for, wud Candy."

"What side would he be on—Liberal or Conservative?"

"Oh! he wudna' take sides—he don't hold wi' takin' sides, Candy don't. He'd just put his foot down on all that tu-and-agen work, and he'd have his own way or nothin' at all. Eh! but he's a grand one for havin' his own way, is Candy; there's nothin' double-faced or reasonable about him—he don't hold wi' it."

"Then I don't expect he'd have consented to wait till your sister had been married first," suggested Nora.

"Not he, miss, not he," replied his better-half with pride; "when Candy's onst set his mind upon a thing, yew might as well try to turn the way o' the wind as him. He ain't the shilly-shallying sort, as will listen to

reason—not he! So I was thankful as Carrie was safely wedded afore Candy come a-courtin' me."

"And whom did Carrie marry?"

"She married a man from our parts o' the name o' Parker. If when yew marry yew live all among yewr own people, marriage don't seem quite so bad, said she; so she took up wi' Parker."

"She doesn't appear to have been as much in love as you were, Mrs. Candy; for you came far enough away from home when you married."

"She wasn't, miss, and I'm the last to deceive yew; but who cud ha' thought she wud be, seein' as it was only Parker as she was a-marryin'? Parker was a decent man and a regular church-goer, wi' twenty-two shillin's a week; but he wasn't Candy, and it's no use pretendin' as he was."

"Then didn't you mind coming such a long way from home?" Like all women who are truly in love, Nora was interested in the loves of all other women.

"Not wi' Candy, miss; I'd ha' gone to the very ends o' the earth wi' him. And yet, till I see him, I'd niver been ten miles away from Overstrand; and I darena' ha' gone as far as Yarmouth—no, not if yew'd ha' crowned me."

"But Candy made all the difference; I understand that."

"I'll be bound yew du, Miss Nora, havin' been took that way yewrself. Eh! but it's wunnerful how a man du make all the difference; after onst he's come across yewr way, nothin' iver looks the same agen, nor iver will. He seems to get inta iverythin', as yew may say, and to turn it all topsy-turvy."

Nora laughed. "You are not very complimentary to the man, to say he turns things topsy-turvy."

"Bless yew, miss, yew c'n't think as it's topsy-turvy; it seems to yew as if it was all topsy-turvy afore, and that he's just turned it the right way up."

"Like a dream seems topsy-turvy, and the awa'kening turns things the right way up," Nora suggested.

"That's just it, miss; and yew laugh at the dream when yew remember how contrairy it all was, and how right iverythin' is now that yew are wide awake."

"Yes, Mrs. Candy, falling in love is just like that; the past is the dream, and this is the awa'kening."

"And it seems to me, miss, as dyin' will be like that, tu. It'll turn things topsy-turvy, I don't deny; but it'll be the right way up as it'll turn 'em, and we shall laugh when we remember the topsy-turvyness o' this world, and wunner how we put up wi' it as contented as we did. I'm sure I wunner now how I eud bear myself afore I'd met Candy; 't seems as if there eud ha' been nothin' tu du and nothin' to think about; and I don't doubt as we shall feel like that when we wake up in heaven, miss, and see what bewtiful things Providence has pervided for us up there."

"But don't you often think it is strange that we haven't been told more about the next world, and what it will be like?" said Nora. "I do."

"Oh! don't yew go werritin' yewrself about that," replied Mrs. Candy soothingly; "it isn't done out o' disagreeableness, as yew may say, I feel sure. We aren't told more about it, because we eudn't understand it if we werc. Why, miss, it's the same i' this world. If I'd been told, when I was a little gell, what happiness was i' store for me in workin' hand and foot to make Candy comfortable, and bein' ready to lay down my very life at his feet if he wanted it,



bless him! I shudna' ha' knowed what they was a-talkin' about. I thought what I shud want, when I was growed up, wud be to have my own way and enjoy myself; instead o' which my happiness is in lettin' Candy have his own way and enjoy hisself. But it wud all ha' been Greek and Latin to me if they'd ha' told me that when I was a little gell and tew young and soft to understand it. And I hold that it's like that wi' the next warld, I du; we're tew young and soft to understand it yet, even if we was to be told; so where wud be the sense o' tellin' us?"

"Well, Mrs. Candy, I believe you are right; and now I must be going," said Nora, rising from her seat. "Good-morning."

"Good-morning tu yew, miss; and may yew be as happy in yewr wedded life as I've been in mine—and I can't say nothin' stronger than that; the gentry theirselves cudna' ha' been happier than Candy and I ha' been. I can't deny as sometimes I wish as the childern had lived; it wud ha' been pretty to hear 'em call Candy 'Daddy,' and to see 'em a-climbin' over his knees. But the Lord knows best what is good for us, so we must just submit ourselves to His Hand. May-be if they'd ha' lived, they might ha' come between me and Candy, and I cudna' ha' stood that."

"Thank you, Mrs. Candy, for all your good wishes; and if only I make as excellent a wife as you have been I shall be quite content; and so will the vicar, or he ought to be."

"Bless yew, miss, who cud ha' helped bein' a good wife to such a husband as Candy—one in a hunderd, as I often tell him? And, when all's said and done, them as has husbands are happier than them as has none;

it's dull work bein' an old maid, Miss Nora, say what yew will. It's every wumman's right to have a man o' her own; and them as has missed that, has missed the best i' this world. Why, if yew've got a man o' your own, there's always somebody to be sorry when yew are sick, and pleased when yew are about and busy; and there's always somebody to listen to what yew say, and to show yew what a fule yew was for sayin' it; and there's always somebody to find fault wi' all your little fads and fancies, and yet to like yew all the better for 'em. Mark my words, Miss Nora, there's no love i' this world like the love o' the man who loves yew as his own flesh; and hem as pretends that there is talks nonsense."

"They do, Mrs. Candy; I havcn't patience with people who try to make out that parents and brothers and sisters can ever make up to a woman for not having known what the love of a husband means.

"Well it don't, whatever them old bachelors chewse to say. Why, Miss Nora, when my first baby come, and I'd got the baby *and* Candy, I felt as no leddy in the land cud be happier than me; because, yew see, there cudn't be anythin' better in the whole world than a husband like Candy, and a little baby as well. In fact it was tu much happiness for this sinful world, so the good Lord took the baby, and is savin' her up for me when I gets to heaven. Yes, miss, I sees it all now, as plain as plain; Candy and the childern was tew much happiness for this life, so the Lord is savin' up the childern for the next; just as we don't let our childern have all their cakes and toys on one day, but we put some by till to-morrow."

And then Nora completed her farewells, and went

out into the lanes, where she found her lover awaiting her.

Early in October Michael Arbuthnot took Nora Burton as his wedded wife; and great were the rejoicings in Tettleigh accordingly. The bridesmaids wore soft blue dresses, the colour of Nancy's eyes; and no one, to see her, could have guessed how heavy with unshed tears were those apparently laughing orbs. Nancy really played her part very well; and it was by no means an easy part to play. To a proud woman the knowledge that her world regards her with pity is about as unpleasant a branch of instruction as she will ever have to master; and Nancy was fully cognizant of that particular fact just then. Though people in general did not know exactly what had happened, they were aware that Laurence and Nancy had once walked and talked together, and now walked and talked together no longer; and they drew their own conclusions accordingly; which conclusions, it must be admitted, were not altogether wide of the mark. As a rule the public blamed Laurence as a fool for not taking the insurance money and marrying upon it; for the fact that—owing to malicious reports—he had declined to accept the compensation to which his loss entitled him had become public property by this time. Nancy was quite aware of this; there was not much that that young lady was not quite aware of; but it is not a source of any solid comfort to a woman to know that her world condemns as a fool the man to whom she has given her life's devotion.

And yet, do what she would, she could not rid herself of her overmastering love for Laurence Baxendale. She did not clutch her misery and make much of

it, as a more sentimental girl would have done; on the contrary, she hated it so much that she would have escaped from it at any price. It was no pleasure to Nancy to be unhappy, as it is to so many women; success was her rôle in life, and she sorely resented having to play a part so sadly out of character with her preconceived notions of herself. Nevertheless, go where she might, she was all the while conscious of an under-lying homesickness for Laurence, which time did not cure nor diversion allay. "I want him so! I want him so!" she kept saying to herself; and nothing else in any way appeased that consuming need.

Yet Nancy Burton was a girl whom other girls condemned as heartless and shallow, and whom the world in general envied rather than pitied, and laughed with rather than cried over. So penetrating and foreseeing as a rule is the judgment of a woman's world, and especially of her female friends!

But she bore herself with a brave front, and no one noticed that she was gradually growing thinner and paler. Laurence would have noticed it fast enough if he had seen her; but he went with Lady Alicia to stay at his uncle's, soon after the burning of Baxendale, and did not return until the middle of the winter. He had been so sorely wounded by the gossip about himself and the cause of the fire, that for a time life in the neighbourhood of Baxendale was insupportable to his proud and sensitive spirit. And Mr. and Mrs. Burton were so full of their second daughter's affairs, and the new life upon which she was entering, that they did not give much attention to their elder for a while.

So Nancy faded away day by day; and no one noticed, no one knew.

One afternoon, not long after Nora's marriage, Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter were sitting in their entrance-hall, as was their custom when the weather closed the verandah to them for a time. And an ideal hall it was, with its carved oak chimney-corner, and its archways hung with costly curtains, and its walls lined with the portraits of dead and gone Fairfaxes. At no season of the year was Ways Hall without flowers—flowers in the rooms and in the hall and on the staircase, and in every available space. Certainly in this case when Mahomet could not go to the mountain, the mountain came to Mahomet; when Mrs. Fairfax could not go to her garden, her garden came to her; so that it was always spring inside Ways Hall, whatever ridiculous tricks the weather might be playing outside. Fascinating Mrs. Fairfax had grasped the truth, which so few gardeners seem able to master, that a greenhouse is a means and not an end. In the autumn and winter her flowers were born and bred in her numerous hothouses; but that was merely for educational purposes; as soon as they reached perfection they were brought at once into the Hall, and there made happier, by their beauty and freshness, the lives of Mrs. Fairfax and Faith. And by always living with flowers these two women imbibed some of the nature of the flowers by which they were constantly surrounded; the brightness and freshness of the plants entered into the human beings, and made them thereby better and truer women for time and for eternity.

"My dear," Mrs. Fairfax remarked after a few minutes' silence, *à propos* of nothing but her own meditations, "Laurence Baxendale is a fool."

"Oh, mother, what a thing to say!"

"It's the truth, and the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Laurence and his father were always fools; nice, well-mannered, lovable fools, I will admit; but still fools of the finest water; the sort of fools whose folly is always getting between their own feet and tripping them up."

Faith sighed. "Yes; I think poor Laurence's mistakes always tell against himself more than against any one."

"So did his father's. Some people's omissions are always on the debtor side of the account, and never on the creditor side; they forget what they owe to other people, but never what other people owe to them. But the Baxendales are the very opposite of that; their blunders invariably tell against themselves."

"And their undertakings always seem to turn out badly, somehow."

"Yes; the gift of success was withheld when the fairies presided at the Baxendale christenings. As a rule there are two means by which a man may attain success—his own competence or the incompetence of his fellows; but neither of these means has been of any use to the Baxendale men."

"And yet they are splendid men in their way."

Mrs. Fairfax shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "Humph! I suppose they are cast in a somewhat heroic mould, but they are the sort of men who always put their money on the wrong horse, and identify themselves with the losing cause. In the time of the Reformation the Baxendales were Romanists; in the time of the Commonwealth they were Royalists; in the days of

the Georges they were Jacobites; and I feel sure that in mediæval times they were often nearly converted to Hebraism by the frequent persecutions of the Jews."

"But all that merely goes to prove their glorious courage and loyalty." Faith had a strong strain of obstinacy in her composition.

"I think it often goes to prove their stupidity. Baxendale Hall, like Oxford, has always been the home of lost causes and impossible beliefs; and personally I'd rather live in the homes of governing majorities and established churches; it is more comfortable and less draughty."

"But men must have their ideals, mother."

"And servants must have their beer; but there is such a thing as beer-money, my dear child, which does instead, and is often both more convenient and more profitable to all parties concerned."

"And then the Baxendales are all so truthful and honourable," persisted Faith.

"Far too much so; they tell you truths that you'd rather not hear. I don't like people who always tell me the truth. Who wants to hear the truth? I'm sure I don't, it is always so humbling; and humility is the most depressing of virtues; though all virtues are more or less lowering unless taken in very small quantities."

Faith smiled. "Dear mother, what things you say!"

"Well, I mean them—at least some of them now and then. But the Baxendale trick of truth-speaking really does depress me, and makes the perpetrators of it so unpopular, too. If you want people to be in love with you, you must begin by making them in love with themselves, and then the desired result will soon

follow. But few people have learnt this elementary truth—least of all the Baxendales.”

“Still there are people who love even the Baxendales.”

“My dear, there are people who eat coal and slate-pencils and enjoy them; I never legislate for exceptions. But I own I sometimes wonder if little Nancy Burton isn't one of the exceptions who love Laurence Baxendale.”

Faith shook her head. “She may and does, I think, like him; but it isn't in her to love anybody. Nancy is a dear girl, full of life and high spirits, and is a most delightful companion; I always feel that a sight of her is like a breath of mountain air on a stuffy day; but hers is not a nature capable of deep affection.”

Yet Faith had got over her love for Laurence Baxendale, and Nancy was slowly dying of hers! So do the saints of the earth sit in judgment upon their more human sisters.

“Well, I hope you are right, for any woman who loves Laurence will find life a perpetual Lent, both as regards doctrines and dinners. Trust a Baxendale for finding out an altar on which to immolate himself and everybody belonging to him; all the Baxendales have keen noses for a sacrifice. And then, as I said before, I can't stand their way of putting one out of love with oneself.” And the quondam beauty tossed her head in disgust.

Faith was amused. “Poor Laurence seems to have annoyed you.”

“Certain plain-speaking I am accustomed to, and can stand. For instance, no man ever went to another man's house without saying that the shrubs wanted



thinning, and that there was too much window-room; everybody is prepared for plain-speaking of that kind, and nobody resents it. But what I can't stand is when people show up all your little ignorances. What does it matter whether a woman is ignorant or not, as long as she has pretty manners and is well-dressed? Yet Laurence once corrected me for not knowing the difference between Addison and Pope. As if there really were any difference that mattered!"

"It is a pity that Laurence has taken to heart the absurd gossip about his burning down his own house; for it was very absurd," said Faith.

"I should think it was, and showed an utter absence of knowledge of the merits of the case. As if any Baxendale would ever do anything, either wrong or right, that in any way redounded to his own advantage! It isn't in the blood."

"I wouldn't breathe a word to any one but you, mother; but I always suspect poor old Rufus Webb of having set fire to the Hall in a fit of religious frenzy; though how he managed to do it from the upper storey I never can conceive. He would imagine that by doing so he was saving Laurence's soul."

"I know you think so, my dear; but I don't think anything of the kind. I have my own ideas as to how Baxendale Hall was fired."

Faith looked surprised. "Who ever do you suspect, mother dear?"

"For goodness' sake don't go repeating what I say, and sending your mother to prison for libel; but my impression is that no one did it on purpose."

"Then do you agree with Mrs. Candy that Laurence himself did it by accident?"

"No, my dear; but I think that those tiresome little Burton boys did." Mrs. Fairfax could never quite forgive any other woman for having borne sons, while she herself had only had a daughter.

"Oh, mother! How could Arthur and Ambrose have set fire to Baxendale Hall?"

"Mischievous boys will find a way of doing anything that is troublesome and naughty. I don't know how they did it; but that they did do it I have no doubt, with their nasty bonfires and sacrifices and things. I found them offering up a sacrifice one day in the lanes, and it at once struck me how Baxendale had been burnt."

"But it is proved that the fire began from the inside; and the boys couldn't get into a locked-up house," said Faith.

"They could do so as well as that Webb man could, and you suspect him."

"It is only an instinctive sort of suspicion; I cannot for the life of me see how he could do it—much less how those little boys could."

"They might have climbed through a window," suggested Mrs. Fairfax.

"But the windows were all shut and the shutters fastened."

"Then perhaps they stole the keys and let themselves in. My dear, I don't pretend to say how they did it; but that those boys did it, I repeat I haven't the shadow of a doubt."

## CHAPTER XIX

### WINTER DAYS.

The dying year is covered o'er with leaves,  
And weeping Nature for her children grieves.

THE vicar and his bride went to Italy for their honeymoon, and did not come back until the beginning of December. On their return they found that winter had begun earlier than usual and also with unwonted severity; and that it was finding out all the delicate people, and numbering them with an accuracy which would have put the strictest census-paper to shame.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Burton had discovered that all was not well with their elder daughter, in spite of the apparently high spirits she so persistently maintained; the same depressing conviction had also been borne in upon Anthony, and the trio were deeply concerned thereat. Not only was Nancy thinner and paler than she was at the time of Nora's wedding, but the cold weather had endowed her with a hacking little cough which went through the hearts of those who loved her. Nora and her husband were shocked to see the change that two short (to them, extraordinarily short) months had wrought in the once radiant Nancy; and Mrs. Arbuthnot seconded her parents' fear that there was something very wrong indeed with her sister. Nancy carried her head as high as ever, and was as

independent as of old of sympathy or pity; but the vulpine gnawing must tell in the long run, however great be the fortitude of the Spartan boy, or his equivalent; and it was getting near to the end of the run, as far as Nancy's particular fox was concerned. She had staked her all on one cast of the dice, and had lost; bereft of the one love of her life, she was indeed bereft. She simply could not live without Laurence Baxendale: that was the long and the short of it.

Some women are made after this pattern. They not only put all their eggs into one basket—a most unscientific mode of packing!—they also find it impossible to sustain life without an adequate supply of eggs, eggs being absolutely indispensable to their existence; hence when the one basket breaks down, as those single baskets are so prone to do, there is nothing left to keep the starving creatures alive. Heaven help such poor fond souls, for earth is apt to be too hard for them!

It is but fair to add that Laurence himself had no idea how hardly things were going with Nancy. If he had guessed that she was slowly dying for want of him, nothing could have kept him away from her; for underneath his somewhat strained scrupulousness the man was a true man, and his love for Nancy was of the finest quality. But he was so little of a coxcomb that the notion that a woman could die for love of him never once entered into his head, and he would have scorned it as an absurdity had any one suggested it to him.

There was another reason why he dared not yet return to Poplar Farm, and that was his undying love for the said Nancy, and his fear that if he were brought face to face with her again all his scruples against marrying her while he was under a cloud would avail him

nothing, and he should throw honour to the winds and take her to his heart, swearing that he would never let her go. And this he was not yet prepared to do. Let other people say what they would, Laurence was fully persuaded in his own mind that Baxendale Hall had been set on fire by one of two persons--either by his mother or by Nancy. These were the only two (except himself) who had any motive for doing this thing; these were the only two (as far as he knew) who had access to the keys of the front door and the library, and the house had evidently been fired from the inside and from the upper storey; and these were the only two who had ever suggested to him the possibility of committing the crime.

His doubts upon this point formed in his eyes an insurmountable barrier between himself and Nancy. If Lady Alicia were guilty, then his mother's shame was his, and he felt he had no right to ask any other woman to share his dishonour; if, on the contrary, Nancy were guilty, then he was ready to lay down his life to shield her good name; nay, more, he was even prepared to exchange it for his own as soon as his pecuniary circumstances would permit of his so doing; but first he must know the truth. Which shows that time and Nancy together were playing sad havoc with Mr. Baxendale's principles. He had not even yet gauged the overwhelming force of human love in general, and of his own in particular; but he had gauged it sufficiently not to want to be brought into contact with Miss Burton just then. So he kept out of temptation's way.

There is no doubt that he was sorely to be pitied. To feel certain that either one's mother or the woman whom one loves has been guilty of a dishonourable

act—of a crime, in fact, in the eyes of the law—is not a conviction belonging to the peace : any man's soul, even of the most callous and unscrupulous; and Laurence Baxendale was neither unscrupulous nor callous, so that the bitterness of this conviction was to him as the very bitterness of death. If his mother were the criminal, then Nancy was indeed separated from him for ever: if Nancy were the culprit, then honour no longer forbade him to renew his old relations with her; but he felt that she could never again be to him the old Nancy of clean hands and unstained record, though he still loved her for old Nancy's sake. He could not yet forgive her for having fallen short of his ideal of her. He had still to learn the omnipotence of love, and the completeness of love's forgiveness.

When the vicar and his wife were sitting at breakfast one morning, not long after their return to Tettleigh, the maid brought in the card of Dr. Arrow-smith, one of the Silverhampton doctors.

"What on the earth can he want?" said Michael, looking at the card.

"Let's have him in and ask him," Nora suggested; "it will be the simplest way of finding out; just as opening one's letters is so much simpler than trying to guess from the post-mark who they come from—yet nearly everybody tries the latter method first."

"Shall we have him in here?" asked the vicar doubtfully.

"Of course; I want to hear what he's got to say."

"Still, darling, he may not wish you to hear what he has got to say."

"Oh, Michael, what a fussy old maid you are! I can't think what induced me to marry an old maid."

"Possibly because an old maid happened to fall in love with you," suggested the vicar.

"That must have been it. Nobody but old maids ever did fall in love with us, worse luck! Laurence Baxendale is an older maid than you are—a younger man I know, but an older maid—and he fell in love wit' Nancy; and I can't keep count of how many others have done it besides. It seems an old-maidish trick that they fall into."

"But what about Dr. Arrowsmith, Nora?" said the vicar, again looking at the card.

"I've told you—go and bring him in here; if you don't, I shall have to fetch him myself."

Michael did as he was bid, kissing his wife as he passed by her chair on his way to the door; though how his wife's chair came between him and the door, considering that his chair was just in front of that egress and his wife's at the other end of the room, it is difficult to understand. Still, it was only on a par with his having maintained, in former days, that the nearest way from the church to the vicarage at its gates was by Wayside, a mile and a quarter distant. Evidently Mr. Arbuthnot had not the bump of locality. Many men, especially young ones are similarly lacking; he was by no means peculiar.

As Nora had hidden him, her husband brought Dr. Arrowsmith at once into the dining-room.

"I am so sorry to trouble the vicar thus early in the morning, Mrs. Arbuthnot," began the latter, shaking hands with Nora; "but I am aware that a man called Rufus Webb is a parishioner of his—and a very remarkable man, too."

"Yes," replied Nora, "he is quite a character; everybody knows him about here."

"I hope you do not bring bad news of him," added her husband.

"I do, Mr. Arbuthnot—the very worst, I fear, that I could bring. Webb has been knocked down and run over by a heavy dray, and is now dying in Silverhampton Hospital, where he was taken immediately after the accident."

Nora's pretty eyes filled with tears. "Oh, how sad!—how dreadfully sad! When did it happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon. At first we hoped that we should pull him through; but this morning it is quite evident that there is no hope of his recovery."

"How came a dray to run over him?" asked the vicar; "the streets of Silverhampton are not generally so crowded—especially in an afternoon—that there need be any danger in crossing them."

"He says he was so dizzy that he did not see the dray coming till it was upon him."

"Dizzy?—what made him dizzy? A big, strong man like that ought not to have been feeling dizzy," said Nora; "was he ill, do you think?"

"No, Mrs. Arbuthnot, he wasn't ill; but I am afraid he was hungry." And the doctor's voice was a trifle husky.

"Hungry?" cried Michael; "Rufus Webb hungry I knew that he was poor, but I hadn't an idea that things were as bad with him as that."

"He was dying of hunger," said Dr. Arrowsmith.

The vicar's lip trembled. "Good heavens! and I never knew. What a blind fool I have been!"

"He has evidently been starving for some weeks," continued the doctor, "and that is why he has no strength to rally from the accident. A man in better condition would soon have recovered from such injuries



as Mr. Webb has received; but he is so sadly weakened by want of proper nourishment—I might say by want of any nourishment—that there is not the slightest chance of his recovery.”

“Poor Mr. Webb! Poor, poor Mr. Webb!” exclaimed Nora, who was fairly crying by this time.

“He cannot live many hours; and as he particularly desires to see Mr. Arbuthnot I came at once to fetch your husband. I gather that he has some sort of confession to make, as he keeps saying that he cannot die with an unconfessed sin upon his soul.”

The same thought flashed simultaneously through the minds of Michael and his wife, as the same thought so often flashes simultaneously through the minds of two people who perfectly love and understand one another—the thought that the mystery of the burning of Baxendale Hall was about to be solved, and that at last Laurence would feel himself free from any shadow of suspicion, and be at liberty to take the money and marry Nancy. And the thought filled them with joy; for the sight of Nancy’s pinched face, upon which time was already beginning to write lines which told a sad story of faith disappointed and hope deferred and love unsatisfied, was a sight which cut both the vicar and his wife to the heart.

But aloud they only said how grieved they were for Rufus Webb’s misfortune; and Michael made himself ready with all speed to accompany Dr. Arrowsmith to the hospital.

“It is as much as we shall do to get there before he dies,” the doctor said.

“God grant that I may be in time to hear his confession,” murmured the vicar, as he started on his way.

## CHAPTER XX.

### TO WHAT PURPOSE?

It surely would have been but common sense  
To sell this ointment for three hundred pence,  
And give to those who cannot food afford;  
Say, to what purpose was this waste, O Lord?

WHEN they arrived at Silverhampton Hospital Rufus Webb's sun had well-nigh gone down. But he knew Michael, and evinced a wish to speak to him alone; so the doctor went away, leaving the two together.

"I am so thankful you have come," the sick man gasped; "I was afraid you would not arrive in time, and I cannot die in peace until I have extracted a promise from you to do something for me after I am gone."

"I will do anything in my power for you, Webb," replied Michael.

Rufus drew a key from a ribbon which was tied round his neck. "This is the key of a tin box which you will find in my cottage at The Ways. Promise me faithfully that you will burn the contents of that box—that you will destroy them utterly, and let them be consumed by the fire that may be quenched, lest the fire that never can be quenched shall consume my soul."

"I promise."

"Promise also that no one shall read the contents of that box save yourself—and, may-be, your wife, since those whom God hath joined together man may not put asunder."

"I promise," repeated the vicar.

"I meant to burn them myself, so that other men should not see my iniquity and glory in my shame; but the God of vengeance has ordered it differently. For He has ordained that what is done in secret shall be proclaimed on the house-tops, and that what is hidden shall be made manifest."

"I faithfully promise that I will burn whatever I find in that tin box, and that no one shall ever look upon its contents save my wife and I."

An expression of peace stole over Webb's white face. "I knew I could trust you," he murmured.

"Yes, you knew you could trust me, a mere sinful man such as yourself; but you could not trust the God, Whose minister I am. And why should you believe that the God you worship is inferior to His Own servants?"

"I have served Him and feared Him with all my heart."

"That may be; but you have neither loved Him nor trusted Him."

The dying man lay silent for a few minutes, with closed eyes; then he opened them again and said: "I wonder if you are right, and if I have misjudged Him all these years?"

"I am sure of it."

"And do you think He will pardon me that also, in addition to my many other sins—for I am beginning to hope that there is mercy reserved even for me?"

"I am sure of it," repeated the vicar; "although it is hard, even for Him, to be misjudged by those whom He loves; there are few things harder."

There was another pause and then Rufus roused himself again and rambled on: "I have a sin on my conscience which I fain would confess. I have made idols to myself with my own hands and worshipped them. You will find them in the tin box."

"Have you nothing on your conscience also with regard to the burning of Baxendale Hall?" Michael spoke very distinctly; he saw that the time was growing short, and he longed for Laurence to be cleared by Rufus before Rufus died.

"Yes, yes—that is it. I was so busy watching for Lettice to come and meet me that I forgot what I was saying. She always meets me when I come home in the evening, you know, but to-night she is late. And it is growing dark, too. Ah! there is her white dress among the poppies; and there are such a number of poppies this year, and they are so red—so red. Red like crimson, and white as—as——"

"As wool;" the vicar finished his sentence; "though your sins be red like crimson they shall be made white as wool; you know that, Webb."

But Rufus was wandering. "Yes, the poppies are red—see how red they are—and Lettice's dress is quite white—white as her own sweet soul. And the flames of Baxendale Hall are red, too—like tongues of fire—look how red!"

Michael made another effort to recall the sick man's senses. "Listen, Webb; answer me one question; had you anything to do with the burning of Baxendale?"

The fading intelligence flickered up again. "Yes, I had; I saw that the young man's soul must be saved, though so as by fire; and I prayed God day and night that he would send down fire from heaven to consume Baxendale Hall. And the Lord Who answered by fire, He was God."

"But did you do more than pray? For God's sake tell me this, Webb, for the happiness of many depends upon your answer." The vicar was desperate: it was so hard to get a sensible reply out of Webb in his present condition, and it seemed cruel to press for one; yet Nancy's life depended upon the matter at issue, and Nancy's life must be saved if possible.

"Speak, Webb," the vicar urged; "did you do more than pray for the burning of Baxendale Hall?"

"Yes; but I could not enter the library where all Laurence Baxendale's idols were set up, as only he possessed the key." Webb was fully conscious now.

"Yes; go on; tell me all quickly."

"I prayed for an occasion, and yet none came."

"And you never had the chance of doing what you wished. Yes, I understand; get on—for heaven's sake get on!" said Michael, putting to the sick man's lips a cordial which the doctor had left with him in case it was needed.

The cordial did its work well; and for a few moments the scul came back into Rufus Webb with a flash of its former fire. "And then the mighty wind came, and the Lord was not in the wind; and the earth shook and quaked withal, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And I stood before Baxendale Hall, and saw it as a reed shaken in the wind; and

I prayed that the Lord would raise it even to the ground, so that the soul of Laurence Baxendale might be saved."

"Yes, yes; and what happened then?"

"My prayer was not answered; the great and strong wind passed by, and Baxendale Hall stood firm. The next day there was a great calm; and I stood before the Lord and prayed Him again that Baxendale should be destroyed for Laurence's sake; and as I prayed I looked down to the ground, and beheld lying at my feet a bunch of keys--among others the keys of the Hall and the library. And I said, 'God has delivered the Hall into my hand; I will go in and do with it even as I will!'"

Michael's heart beat fast, and he prayed that Webb's life might be spared until he had made a full confession. "And so you went into the house?" he prompted.

The dying man's eyes were bright with unnatural excitement; it was the last flicker before the light went out. "No; just as I was going to open the front door I heard a Voice say in my ear, 'What doest thou here, Rufus?' And I answered, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts, because Thy children have forsaken Thy covenant and torn down Thy altars, and have followed after false gods; but now I will destroy their idols, and cause their images to cease out of the land.'"

For a few seconds Rufus struggled for breath, and Michael's heart stood still in fear that even now Webb would die before the whole story was told; but the unnatural exaltation still upheld him, and he went on again: "Then the Voice said unto me, 'Son of

man, turn thee yet again; thinkest thou that the Lord seeth not, or that He hath forsaken the earth? To Him belongeth vengeance and recompense, and it is He that killeth and He that maketh alive. He alone can create and He alone can destroy; neither is there any that can deliver out of His Hand.' And when the Voice had done speaking unto me, I turned me away from Baxendale Hall, for I knew that I was not counted worthy to save the soul of Laurence Baxendale, nor to offer up his dwelling-place as a sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts. It is only clean hands that can offer up burnt-offerings, and mine were red with blood—the blood of my own wife."

"Good heavens, Webb! Do you mean to say that you did not set fire to the place after all?"

"Nay; the burning of Baxendale was not to mine honour; for the Lord delivered it into the hand of a woman."

"How could you tell it was a woman and not a man that burnt down the Hall?" The vicar was now almost as much excited as Rufus Webb himself.

"Because the keys belonged to a woman—to a woman who had left the house just before I prepared to enter it, and who had done there as she listed, with none to hinder her or make her afraid. And blessed among women shall she be—blessed shall she be above women in the tent! For to her it was given to save the soul of Laurence Baxendale, and to hurn his images with fire, and to destroy the accursed thing within his house!"

Rufus fell back on his pillow exhausted, and Dr. Arrowsmith came and stood behind Arbuthnot. "It is nearly over now," he whispered.

Michael put his mouth close to the dying man's ear. "The name of the woman—for heaven's sake tell me the name of the woman," he entreated.

Webb's voice was so weak as to be scarcely audible. "The name—of—the woman—do you say? There is but one woman's name—in the—whole world—and that is Lettice—my Lettice—my wife. See—there she is coming—to meet me—through the field of poppies—the red poppies. Don't you see her—in her—white dress—and the little curls—on her neck—and the dimple—in her cheek? I knew—she would come; she never keeps me waiting. Look, how the wind—is blowing—the little curls—across——"

But Rufus never finished the sentence on earth; Lettice herself heard the end of it.

"It is all over," said the doctor softly.

Michael stood as a man stunned; one thought and one only possessed his mind, and branded itself into his very soul. "It must have been Lady Alicia," he kept saying over and over again to himself; "it must have been Lady Alicia."

He now felt no doubt in his own mind that Lady Alicia was the culprit, since (so far as he knew) she was the only woman who had access to the keys of Baxendale Hall; but the discovery of her guilt would make matters worse instead of better for Laurence. No honourable man would touch money obtained by his own mother's crime; and his misery would be increased tenfold if that mother were publicly convicted of arson. So the vicar was thankful that Webb's confession was locked in his own breast, never to be revealed to anybody.

The following day he and his wife went together to



Webb's cottage at The Ways, and found there the tin box, as Rufus had said. Save this one box there was hardly any furniture left in the house; Webb had parted with almost everything he possessed in order to buy bread.

"What do you think there is inside?" Nora whispered to her husband.

"Probably some relics of his dead wife; but we will open it and see."

So they unlocked it, wondering what pathetic little mysteries they should find therein.

To their surprise they found no love-tokens; only heaps of manuscript in Webb's own handwriting; and—to their still greater amazement—they discovered that these were the manuscripts of unpublished novels.

At the top of the box was the following paper:—

"It is my intention to burn these manuscripts before I die, so that my secret may perish with me and my sin be covered; but if God in His justice sees fit to prevent this, I solemnly adjure whosoever opens this box utterly to destroy its contents, and to let not one escape. May God forgive me my sin in writing them!—but they were so burnt into my brain that I felt I must write them in spite of myself—even though I knew I was denying the living God in so doing. I believe my brain would have burst had I not given expression to the ideas which consumed it; nevertheless it would have been better for me to enter into life having stamped out the intellect which separated me from my God, than with all my powers to be cast into hell, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched. I hold that novel-writing and novel-reading are heinous sins; for whosoever loveth and maketh a lie sha! have their

part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone; and I would rather die for lack of bread than earn money by such a means as this. I will never endanger the souls of others by letting them read that which I, in my folly, have written; but may-be (I speak as a fool) the mere writing of it may be forgiven me, if the memorial of it perish with me, and it be destroyed for evermore.

(Signed) "RUFUS WEBB."

Before burning them Michael and his wife read Webb's manuscripts, as he had given them permission; and they were astonished at the brilliance of the novels. Admirable in elegance of style, masterly in delineation of character, powerful in portrayal of feeling, they bore the rare hall-mark of genius; and might have ranked—had they been published—among the most popular novels of the day.

When they had finished reading the books the vicar said that he must burn them at once. Nora besought him not to do so. "It seems a sin," she said, "to burn books which might give pleasure to hundreds and thousands of people, and do them a lot of good, too, besides winning fame for the author."

But Michael was as adamant. "Can I break a promise made to a man who is dead?" he asked.

"But, Michael dear, it seems such an awful pity that all that genius should be utterly wasted."

"To what purpose is this waste? Is that what you would ask, my Nora?"

"Yes, it is. Think what a great deal of money these manuscripts would fetch from any publisher, and what an immense amount of good might be done with the

money! Wouldn't it be better to found a hospital or an orphanage or something in memory of Mr. Webb, than to keep a senseless promise which he extorted from you when probably he was delirious."

"He wasn't delirious, Nora; he was perfectly conscious when he asked me to make the promise, and it is enjoined on the paper in the box."

"But so much good might be done with the money," persisted Nora.

"It might have been sold for three hundred pence and have been given to the poor," quoted her husband; "nevertheless, dear child, I must keep my promise. Webb knew what he meant when he asked me to make it. Doesn't it strike you what it meant to him, when you realize that he literally died of starvation rather than earn what he considered were the wages of sin; though the source of considerable wealth lay in that box all the time, and he knew it?"

Nora began to cry. "Poor, poor Mr. Webb!" she sobbed; "it is all too sad to think about; but he was a good man."

"He was one of the saints of God," said Michael gently, "but he never found it out."

"I expect he has found it out by now."

"I am sure he has."

And then they burnt the heap of manuscript.

When the last scrap of paper had been consumed Nora said through her tears: "Oh! Michael, how terrible it is to think that all that poor man's genius and strength and capacity for feeling were utterly wasted."

"Not wasted, Nora; there is no such thing as waste in God's economy."

The following Sunday the vicar of Tettleigh preached a sermon on the success of failure from the text, "To what purpose is this waste?" He showed that futile efforts, disappointed hopes, unrequited loves, unfulfilled ideals, unrealized ambitions, misplaced trusts—none of these are really wasted; that it was only when the money had been spent, and the alabaster box had been broken, and the spikenard had been spilled, that the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

People said that it was the best sermon he had ever preached; but he said that it was the best sermon that Rufus Wehh had ever preached, and perchance he was right.

All this time Laurence Baxendale was keeping away from Poplar Farm, and Naney was slowly dying for the want of him. Anthony saw what was wrong with his favourite cousin, and for a while held his peace upon the subject; but after a bit silence was unendurable to him, and he felt constrained to speak.

"I say, Nan," he airily remarked, "you don't seem in especially good spirits."

"Who could he in good spirits such weather as this?" asked Naney, looking at the rain which was drearily running down the window.

"I admit it would be difficult—and then it would be only spirits and water. By the way, why doesn't our friend Baxendale come back home again? He has been away an unconsionable time."

Naney's pale face flushed. "How can he come back to live among people who have said such horrid things about him?"

"My dear child, ser .tiveness as to the remarks of our neighbours is a sure symptom that our livers want

attending to. No healthy animal cares a rap what its neighbours do or do not say about it. Therefore I should strongly advise friend Baxendale to drown his woes in calomel, and return to rest in the house of his fathers; by which I mean the farm of his mother."

Nancy did not reply, and there was silence for a moment. Then Anthony suddenly blurted out: "I say, I wish you wouldn't fret after that brute; he isn't worth it, Nancy; he really isn't."

"I suppose nobody is really worth fretting after," replied Nancy ruefully, "when you come to that; but that doesn't prevent you from doing it, if you are that way inclined."

"Still I wish you wouldn't do it, Nancy; and especially about such a prig as Baxendale."

"I know I'm an idiot for doing it—nobody knows that better than I do; but I can no more help fretting after Laurence than I can help breathing. And it is so unlike me, too; I used to enjoy things so, and never to mind about anything; but after he came into my life everything became different, and now I can no more put him out of my life again than the leopard can change his spots"

"Confound the fellow!" said Anthony under his breath.

"It is no use blaming him, Tony; he can no more help it than I can."

"You are the last girl that I should have expected to sacrifice her life to a brute of a man, after the fashion of a suttee and rot of that kind."

Nancy laughed a sad little laugh, out of which all the merriment had departed. "I couldn't have sacrificed myself on a common altar—not on an altar that hadn't

been passed by an inspector and licensed by the local authorities—but Laurence happened to be all that. He is the best, and the most honourable, and the highest-minded man I ever met. I couldn't help loving him, nor could I ever leave off when once I had begun."

"I say, Nan, I wish you'd marry me, and forget all that Baxendale stuff."

Naney looked up in amazement. "Marry you, Tony? What an idea! Why, I thought you were cut out to be an old bachelor."

"The ancients remarked, 'Call no man single till he is dead,' or words to that effect; and they were intelligent people."

"But, Tony——"

"Oh! you needn't say you don't love me—I know that well enough, bless you! But I don't mind admitting you to my confidence to the extent of confiding in you that I do love you—little as your own conscience will tell you that you deserve such an honour; and I think I could cure you of that Baxendale rot if you'd let me try. Do let me try, Naney, there's a darling!"

Naney shook her head. "No, Tony; I once gave myself heart and soul to Laurence Baxendale; and, whether he values the gift or not, I cannot take it back again. I am his for time and for eternity, even if he doesn't know it."

"Confound him!" repeated Anthony.

"And there is another reason why I couldn't marry you, Tony, even if I would. Can't you see that I am dying, and shall never marry anybody now?"

"Rubbish!" said Tony roughly.

"It isn't rubbish, dear. I am dying, simply because

I can't live without Laurence—just as other people die because they can't live without food or air or water. And even in dying I only care about him. I know it's wicked of me, but the whole point of going to heaven at all seems to me to be that Laurence will be there, and that I shall walk in unending lanes with him through all eternity. That is all I care for. If the angels say to me when I get there, as people say in banks, 'How will you take it, Miss Burton?'—I shall say, 'One Laurence Baxendale, and the rest in lanes'. That's my idea of heaven." And Nancy went out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Confound the brute!" said Anthony under his breath once more. Only this time he did not use the word "confound".

## CHAPTER XXI.

### LADY ALICIA.

If sin performed is worthy blame,  
Is sin intended just the same?

AFTER the New Year came in the weather was so severe and Nancy so fragile that Mr. and Mrs. Burton decided to take her to Mentone for a time, in order to see what a warmer climate would do for their darling; and simultaneously Lord and Lady Porteuillis—with Lady Alicia Baxendale as their guest—likewise found refuge from the ferocity of an English spring in the south of France.

On his relations' departure from Drawbridge Castle Mr. Baxendale returned to Poplar Farm; which return occurred just a week before the Burtons fled, on the wings of the winter wind, to where they hoped the winter wind could not reach them.

Poor Nancy never walked in the lanes now, for to her they were as one huge, green cemetery of buried hopes and joys; and not being the kind of woman who haunts burying-grounds, she wisely avoided them.

There are some natures that cling to the last resting-places of what they have loved, and delight to plant flowers there, watering these flowers with tears; and there are others that cannot bear the agony which the mere sight of such sepulchres arouses, and who would



therefore fain hide their dead away out of their sight, and let them be as though they had never been. God pity those bereaved hearts, whose sole happiness lies in remembrance; for their sorrow is indeed great! But God help those more sorely afflicted ones, whose sole happiness lies in forgetfulness; for their misery is infinitely greater!

Therefore it never came to pass that Laurence met Nancy walking in the lanes, as they used so often to meet in the happy, far-off days; but on Sunday he saw her face to face, coming out of Tettleigh Church, and the sight cut him to the heart. Was that thin, pale, careworn woman his sunny little Nancy? And was his the hand that had wiped the sunshine out of that wan face, and written sorrow, in capital letters, all over it?

As his heart went out silently, in an agony of pity, towards the girl whose life he had deliberately spoiled, a fierce hope took hold of Laurence that his mother was innocent after all, and Nancy the real culprit. If this were so matters might after all be put straight between himself and the girl he loved. He could not ask her to condone a crime committed by his mother, and so in a way entailed upon himself; but he could condone—nay, now he felt he could fully and freely forgive—wrong-doing perpetrated by Nancy out of too great love for him. His shame he could not allow her to share; but he would willingly take hers upon his shoulders, and bear its consequences if possible in her stead.

If Nancy was heartsick for Laurence, he was none the less heartsick for her. The agony of separation was not killing him as it was killing her, because a man's physique is made of stronger elements than a

woman's; but he hungered and thirsted and prayed and agonized not one whit less than she. She was the one human being to whom he had shown all that was in his heart—before whom he had poured out the hidden treasures of his soul; and—having once broken down the hedge of his reserve—the longing to do it again was almost uncontrollable. At the first sight of her altered face he knew that he could forgive—nay, that he already had forgiven—her, whatever she might have done: love had once and for ever blotted out all her offences, and he yearned to take her in his arms and defend her against the whole world: yet honour made this impossible until his mother's innocence was proved.

While Laurence's pride was melting away in the heat of his love for Nancy, and his soul was hourly crying out for her, the Burtons and their daughter started for Mentone; and he looked in vain in all the familiar places for the pale little face which had become the centre of his universe. Nancy was now out of his reach.

But that did not put her out of his thoughts; in fact it had a precisely opposite effect. All that early spring—when the roads were swept clean by the east wind, and the fields smelt of the daisies that were yet to be (for there is always a smell of future daisies in the air on the first spring days)—Laurence's heart went out to Nancy, and cried for her as thirsty men cry for water in a barren and dry land where no water is. Nevertheless the more he thought about it the more fully he became convinced that it was his mother who had set fire to Baxendale Hall; his poor, foolish mother, who had never been able in all her life to discover the distinction between good and evil—much less to choose the one and refuse the other. He remembered how she

had begged him to do the deed himself, and how utterly futile had been his efforts to convince her that such a suggestion was of the nature of sin; and he knew her well enough to understand how she could succeed in convincing herself that she was actually performing a righteous act in fulfilling the old prophecy, as well as in making her son (as she thought) a rich man for the rest of his life. And if this were so, then, alas! Nancy could never be his; for though pride was disappearing, honour stood firm as ever.

The warmer climate of the sunny south did not do as much for Nancy as her parents had hoped. She lost her cough, and the doctors could find nothing organically wrong with her; but neither climate nor medicine can do much in the way of ministering to a mind diseased. Had the last miserable six months been blotted out, Nancy would speedily have become as strong and well as she had ever been in her life; but she could not forget, and the memory of what in one short year she had won and lost was killing her as surely as, if more slowly than, any disease defined by the faculty.

And yet she prayed to forget—she hated to remember; that was the hard part of it. There are sweet-natured women who can cherish their sorrow until it becomes to them a familiar friend on earth and a guide to heaven; who order their harmonious goings by the thought of what their loved ones would have wished, until upon these gentle souls those loved ones exercise a stronger influence than they ever exercised in the days of their flesh; and such women are tried by sorrow as by a refiner's fire, and come out of it as burnished gold. But Nancy was not after this kind.

She was passionate rather than tender, and so the "grace of a day that is dead" had no hold upon her. On the contrary she chafed against it, and longed to blot it for ever out of the book of her remembrance. She wanted no tender memories of Laurence to occupy the place he had left vacant in her heart; she desired not that grief should fill the room up of her absent love, and remind her of all his gracious parts; gentler women would have wished this, but not Nancy. She wanted the man himself, just as he was, with all his overscrupulousness and impracticability and unreasonableness, to have and to hold, for better for worse, till death should them part. Failing this, she prayed for forgetfulness—prayed that he might depart out of her existence altogether and the memory of him might not trouble her again—that he would leave her free to live her own life, unvexed by the haunting shadows of what might have been. And yet she was so fashioned that oblivion was impossible to her; the boon she craved was strictly denied to her by the peculiarities of her own nature; the more she strove to hate and to forget, the more passionately did she love and the more vividly did she remember. For the which surely heaven pitied her.

Spring had fully dawned when Lady Alicia came back to England and to Poplar Farm. Her son was delighted to see the change which the journey had wrought in her; she looked younger and happier (and consequently handsomer) than she had looked for years.

"I am so glad to see you so well, mother," said Laurence affectionately.

"Yes, dear Laurence, I know I look well; I noticed it myself in the looking-glass, which so often tells us

anything but a flattering tale, as dear Somebody—I forget his name—remarked.”

“The warm weather suited you.”

“Ah! it was not only the climate, dear Laurence, that renewed my youth, though I confess sunshine is very sweet and soothing, even if somewhat trying to the complexion; but it does no real damage if one always wears a gauze veil. Your dear aunt’s maid would not permit me—positively would not permit me—to step out-of-doors without a white gauze veil, and I felt most grateful to her for her forethought. She is an excellent person—quite excellent; I don’t know what I should have done without her.”

Laurence sighed. “I wish I could afford for you to have a maid of your own, mother.”

“Well, dear child, I cannot deny that a maid has a very beneficial effect upon a woman’s character. It is quite impossible to find any leisure for cultivating one’s higher nature, if one has to do one’s own hair and look after one’s own wardrobe; and yet it is so sweet to cultivate one’s higher nature if one can find time—almost a duty in fact.”

“I suppose it is.” Laurence with difficulty repressed a smile.

“I always think dear S. Peter’s—or was it S. Paul’s—remark (I invariably confuse the two) about a woman’s not plaiting her hair or putting on gold and apparel, but having a meek and quiet spirit instead, is so very beautiful and appropriate. But it is only those women who have a maid to see to the plaiting of their hair and the putting on of their apparel that get the time to attend to the development of meek and quiet spirits. One woman really cannot undertake

both departments herself; and yet it is so sad for either to be neglected."

"I suppose if you had only time for one you would consider the former the more important?" said Laurence.

"Of course, dear child, of course; because one loses caste if one's hair is badly done or one's clothes are shabby, while nobody thinks any the worse of one for not having a meek and quiet spirit. Not that I don't think it is very sweet and Christian to do both—I do indeed; but of course the things that show are always of more importance than the things that don't show. Anybody can see that."

"Of course." Laurence's tone was dry.

"And now I have a confession to make to you, dear Laurence; a most serious confession. I am afraid you will be very angry with me—you have a somewhat unreasonable temper, as your poor dear father had—but I feel sure you will pardon me in the end."

Laurence's heart stood still for a second, and then went on at double-quick speed. So the confession he dreaded to hear was coming at last, and his darling and he were to be separated for ever. "Well, what is it, mother?"

"You see, dear child, poverty is peculiarly repellent to any one of my refined and sensitive nature; and not only repellent—it is also positively injurious. It creates faults—or rather, I should say, weaknesses—which otherwise would not exist, and which have never distinguished any of the Moates before; and it prevents the full development of virtues which properly belong to my character."

"Yes, yes; I hear." Laurence was impatient, but his mother was not going to be hurried.

"Therefore I feel it to be my duty to myself, and to all around me, to escape from a state which is so injurious to my higher nature. You see it is the duty of us all to cultivate our higher natures—dear S. Paul says something about working out our own salvation, and I am sure he means by this that we must avoid all things which are not profitable to us—in fact he uses those exact words, if I remember rightly."

"And poverty is not profitable to your salvation. Is that what you mean, mother?"

"Yes, dear child; how quickly you comprehend things! If only your poor dear father had understood me as well as you do, what a much better and happier woman I might have been."

Laurence had his doubts as to the accuracy of the deduction; but he wisely refrained from putting them into words.

"Therefore I have felt for some time that it was my duty at all costs to escape from poverty. I was not doing myself or my higher instincts anything like justice; and it is so beautiful to do justice to one's highest and best self, whatever sacrifice it may involve!"

"Even if it be Baxendale Hall itself that happens to be the burnt offering."

Lady Alicia sighed. "But that sacrifice was wasted, you see, owing to your unfortunate wrong-headedness and obstinacy."

"Then what is the second sacrifice involved in this moral regeneration?"

"It is hardly a sacrifice, dear Laurence; though I shall always believe that Baxendale Hall was burnt by a miracle in order to give my higher nature a chance of fuller development. I remember once coming upon

a beautiful little poem about something 'for which I pant,' and 'fuller something else I want,' which exactly expresses all that I feel."

Laurence could hardly control his impatience to hear the worst and have done with it. "As I unfortunately spoiled sacrifice number one, for goodness' sake tell me what sacrifice number two is; and be quick about it."

"It is not a sacrifice, as I have told you, dear Laurence; it is only a sweet, beautiful change and development. Dear Lord Watercress, with whom at Cannes I renewed my former friendship, has again asked me to be his wife; and I have accepted him."

Laurence was dumfounded. He had never dreamed of his mother's marrying again.

"I think it is so touching and beautiful," continued Lady Alicia, "that I should be given another chance of happiness, after having been so foolish as to refuse him for the sake of your father all those years ago. As dear Shakespeare says, there is a divinity which puts things straight again, however much we may make a mull of them ourselves."

Then Laurence found words: "I hope Lord Watercress will make you very happy, mother," he said gently.

"I am sure he will, dear child; he has twenty thousand a year, and two most charming places. He says we must each go our own way, and neither be bothered with the other, as there is money enough for both. So different from your poor dear father, who was always wanting me to be with him, and never could be happy without me! Ah, dear Lord Watercress could have given him a lesson in unselfishness!"

"We'll leave my father out of the conversation alto-



gether, if you don't mind, mother, and devote our attention to—his successor."

"You see, dear Laurence, I am sure it is my duty to marry a rich man if I can; and it is very sweet of you to take it so nicely. You don't seem a bit angry, and I was so afraid you would be."

"No, I am not angry. I've no right to be."

"And I want to tell you something else just to show you how much harm poverty was doing to my character; and how necessary it is for me to be rich if I am to be as good as I should like to be—and as I ought to be, for it is everybody's duty to be good, don't you think?"

"I suppose so; but it's a pretty hard job sometimes!"

"Of course you will keep what I am going to tell you quite a secret, won't you?"

"Mother, is it necessary to ask me that?"

"Well then," said Lady Alicia in a nervous, deprecating manner, totally unlike her usual calm serenity, "would you believe it of me, dear Laurence?—I so hated being poor that I made up my mind to set fire to Baxendale Hall on purpose to get the insurance money! I did indeed! Isn't it awful to think that poverty could bring a gentlewoman and a Moate to such a strait as this?" And her ladyship began to cry.

"Don't cry, mother dear; but tell me all about it." Laurence was putting a tremendous restraint upon himself.

"That is all; and it is bad enough, goodness knows! I see now how wicked of me it would have been; but at that time I wanted money so dreadfully that I didn't care what sin I committed to get it."

"Then didn't you carry out your intention after all?" asked Laurence, with a strange, tight feeling round his heart.

"No, no," sobbed Lady Alicia; "but that was no credit to me. It was when I was contemplating this wicked step that somebody forestalled me—goodness knows who!—and actually did what I had intended to do. And then—when I heard what people said and thought about the crime—I realized what a lucky woman I had been to have just escaped committing it. I never knew how wrong it was till I heard other people say so."

Laurence fell on his knees at his mother's feet. "Mother, swear to me that you are speaking the truth—that you did not carry out your intention. Remember, even if you did, I would freely forgive you, and keep the secret with my life."

"But I didn't do it, Laurence; indeed I didn't. Though I don't see that I am really much better than if I had. It was not my fault that I didn't carry out my sinful intention. Oh, it is dreadful to think that I—a Moate—could have sunk so low!"

Laurence stretched out a trembling hand and seized a Bible that was lying on his mother's work-table. "Will you kiss this, and swear that it wasn't you who set fire to the Hall?"

Lady Alicia kissed the Book. "I swear that it was not I," she said solemnly; "though I feel my guilt is the same as if it were."

Laurence rose from his knees with a look of exultation in his eyes, for he knew that his mother was speaking the truth.

She rose also. "I think I will go to bed now. Of course you will never mention to dear Lord Watercress what I have just told you."

"I swear I will never mention it to anybody as long as I live," replied Laurence, kissing her. "Good-night, mother; I hope you will be very happy."

When Lady Alicia had left the room he sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "Thank God, Nancy did it after all," he murmured; "and I love her as I love my own soul."

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE LANES AGAIN.

In spite of all the ways you tried  
To stifle him with vain endeavour,  
Love never for a moment died  
But lives for ever.

LAURENCE BAXENDALE was rejoiced to find that his suspicions were incorrect so far as Lady Alicia was concerned, but none the less he repented him of having done his mother an injustice in suspecting her—although Lady Alicia's confession of her unlawful intention robbed this injustice of most of its grossness; and he tried in every way to make up to her for the imagination of his heart by an unwonted tenderness.

He had just been through a time of storm and stress which left a lasting impress upon his character. He had done his best to tear Nancy from his heart; but it was all in vain. It may be possible—indeed it is sometimes necessary—for a man to pluck out his offending eye or cut off his offending right hand; but to eradicate from his heart the woman who has firmly ensconced herself therein is an operation which a certain type of man cannot perform and yet live of which type was Laurence Baxendale. The memories—bitter memories they were—of her lovely eyes and

her bright wit, of her sweet temper and cheerful stoicism, of her tolerant good nature and tender sympathy, would come back and flood his soul with an agony of regret, making forgetfulness impossible. At such times his passions would rise superior to his reason, and he would swear to himself that, whether his mother were guilty or not, nothing should separate him from Nancy. Then would come the reaction of better feelings; and he knew that for him such dishonour was impossible.

Throughout all this turmoil of doubt and despair he loved her still; nay, he loved her better than ever, in spite of the sin which he suspected her of having committed. He seemed possessed by an overmastering passion, which he strove in vain to control. There was a constant struggle in his heart between his love and his pride: pride demanding the sacrifice of Nancy on the altar of stained ancestry and outraged family propriety; love putting in a plea for happiness at all costs, which he felt had no justification whatsoever. Thus the conflict went on—a conflict which was none the less severe because silent, and which told on the man more than he would have cared to own. He shunned society more than ever; he became irritable and moody; he carried out all the routine work of the estate with exemplary care, but he had plenty of time on his hands. As he abjured any companionship, he devoted this spare time to wandering about and thinking of Nancy, holding the balance between his passions and his pride. But he never went into the lanes where he and Nancy used to walk in the golden days of old; that, he felt, was more than he could bear.

Now, however, the long struggle was over—the

weary warfare accomplished. Love and honour had met together at last, and he was free to indulge in the one without sacrificing the other—free to take upon himself the fighting of Nancy's battles and the expiating of Nancy's sins—free to give in full measure where he had been too proud only to receive.

Matters also had been going very hardly with Nancy. She was one of those women who are like thoroughbred horses; she would go on until she dropped. But it was borne in upon her that the time of dropping was near at hand. Although she likewise had hitherto studiously avoided the lanes, one afternoon, when she was feeling specially low, a curious idea came to her that she would go to the stile where Laurence had first kissed her, and there bid farewell to her brief spell of perfect bliss.

By some subtle action of that force which men in their ignorance call Chance—though it may be the Providence which shapes our ends—Laurence Baxendale became possessed of a similar notion on that same afternoon; and found himself, almost to his own surprise, wandering down the winding lanes where he and Nancy had passed such happy hours. The sweet memories of those days of bliss came back to him, and with them a passionate desire to see that dear face again,—ah! how sad it was when he last saw it—to kiss again a look of happiness into those blue eyes, to bring back the old brightness, the old mirth. What mattered conventional standards, what mattered his own pride of race, compared with Nancy? Had not his mother meditated the very deed of which he suspected the girl? It was for no mercenary motives he knew that she had done the deed; in a moment of thought-

lessness she had done it for love. For love! Yes, her love for him was so great that she had dared even a crime for his sake. He looked into his own heart, and asked himself who was he to pass judgment upon her? He had never committed a crime it is true; yet did he not confess himself every Sunday a miserable sinner? And should he, a sinner like the other Galileans, condemn her for a mad deed, done for love?

As he thought on these things he looked up and behold! there was Nancy herself at the stile. She did not see him; but at the sight of her the last vestige of pride disappeared. He was filled with a passionate love; but with his love there came a new feeling—humility. While not condoning Nancy's fault, he condemned himself for his Pharisaism—for how did he differ from him who thanked God that he was not as this Publican? Dare he approach her? Dare he speak to her? How would she receive him? These thoughts crowded thickly upon his brain. He hesitated for a moment, and then walked on.

"My darling," he said softly.

Nancy looked up with a startled cry.

"You, you!" she cried; "why do you come here to torment me? You have destroyed my happiness and spoiled my life; cannot you leave me to die in peace?"

Laurence was stricken with remorse at her words, still more at the sight of her face.

"Nancy," he whispered gently, "can you ever forgive me? I have come to tell you that I am sorry. I was mad when I said that we must part. I cannot live without you. Sweetheart, I love you, I love you!"

Nancy still looked at him with dilated eyes. She seemed not to have heard a word he said.

"So you have come to gloat upon the ruin you have wrought; to see what a wreck a woman can become who has been fool enough to love a man! Truly, a kind thought, a manly action!"

"How can you speak so bitterly, my own love? I am here to own my fault, and to beg your forgiveness. Can you not understand that I adore you; that I cannot live without you?"

Naney shook her head sadly. "You should have considered that before. It is your own doing. You said that we must see one another no more—you threw me aside without a thought. If you now see that it was all a mistake, you have only yourself to blame."

Laurence found this reception a rude shock. He had looked at the matter from his own point of view alone; and had supposed, now that he was ready to overlook Nancy's crime, he had only to propose a restoration of their old relations to be received with open arms. He was not prepared to find any reluctance on the girl's part to a renewal of their lease of love. He was so consumed by his conviction of Nancy's guilt that he had taken for granted that she was aware that he knew. It had never occurred to him to look at the matter from her side, or to imagine that he had failed in any way in what was due from him to her; so that her attitude came upon him with a shock of surprise. He was in a difficult position; he was anxious, nay eager, to take her again to himself; he had a passionate desire to clasp her in his arms, and swear that nothing in heaven or on earth should separate them again. But he could hardly say to her, "My dear, I know you are a criminal, but I am prepared to overlook the fact".



And unless he said something of the kind it would be hard for him to explain his past conduct, should she demand an explanation. He had expected her to jump into his arms at the first hint of a relenting from his stoical attitude; it was perhaps a useful lesson for him to find that pride was not a monopoly of the Baxendale family. So many families have an idea that pride and sensitiveness are peculiar to themselves—as white cattle to Chartley, and black rabbits to Hawkestone.

"I know I have only myself to blame," he said at last humbly; "but you would be merciful and forgiving if you knew the state of misery I have been in for the last six months."

"It has been all your own doing."

"I know it, but that only makes it the worse. Hell is not the less hell because a man has prepared it for himself," said Laurence with some bitterness.

"And do you suppose I have not been miserable, too? In your pity for yourself have you never had a thought to waste on me? It is the old story: a man plays with a woman's heart as he plays with a football; it is a good game and requires some skill. And when the heart is broken and he cannot play with it any more, he just gets a new ball and goes on with the game. One ball is as good as another for him. Naturally—being a man—it is the game itself he cares for, not the necessary implements."

"Heaven knows you are doing me an injustice," cried Laurence passionately; "I have loved you all through; when I have seemed most cold and most heartless I have adored you most."

"You had a strange way of showing it."

"I hoped and thought you would forget me when

you were in fresh scenes, and saw new faces. No one knows how cut to the heart I was when I saw your face on your return, and recognized how much you had suffered."

"Why did you not tell me so?" asked Nancy.

"Why did I not?" replied her lover; "I cannot tell you; you must not ask me. But believe me, my darling, that I love you more than life itself. I am filled with remorse for all the suffering I have caused you, and if you will only forgive me I will have but one object for the future—your happiness."

Nancy did not speak, so he went on: "I cannot offer you a luxurious home such as you are accustomed to, but I can at least offer you reasonable comforts. My mother, you may have heard, is about to marry again. For the future I shall not have her to support, nor"—here Laurence winced—"have I to pay the premiums on the insurance. I do not wish there to be any mistake—so I will say at once that I cannot—it is not I will not, but I cannot—take the insurance money. But my income, though small, will enable me to maintain you without that."

He paused after this lengthy and somewhat unloverlike speech. On the whole he might have done worse. During the recitation of these prosaic details Nancy had time to recover herself, and the subtle influence of the man began to make itself felt. When Laurence paused, Nancy said:—

"You don't suppose I care a straw about your money or your comforts or your luxuries, do you?"

Laurence was quick to perceive a change in her tone.

"Nancy darling," he whispered, "don't you know

where we are? Don't you remember the dear old stile, and the lovely times we used to anticipate? It cannot be all over. You *will* forgive me, won't you? You love me; I know you love me; and we could be so happy together."

As he spoke his arm stole gently round her waist. Nancy did not withdraw herself, though she stiffened slightly.

"Sweetheart," he went on, and his voice shook in its passionate entreaty, "you do not know how much I love you. I adore you. I love your sweet eyes, I love your dear face. Look up, my beloved. Surely the winter is over, and the summer is at hand. You love me, my darling; say that you love me and will forgive me."

"You said that it was better that we should see one another no more."

"If I did, I lied."

"You preferred your pride to me."

"If I did, I was a fool. But love has conquered pride, and you have conquered me."

They had walked a short distance from the stile; now by mutual consent they turned and walked back in silence. When they reached it, Laurence again whispered, "Nancy—my own darling—cannot you love me just a little?"

And Nancy looked up with swimming eyes. She did not speak, but her look was enough for Laurence. Their lips met in a long kiss; the estrangement was at an end.

And they were happy, supremely happy, ridiculously happy. For the time Laurence forgot his suspicions—indeed he determined to blot them out of his remem-

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brance. As for Nancy, the bloom already began to come back to her pale cheeks, and her blue eyes were bright with her deep love.

"Laurence dear," she said, "you have made me very miserable in the past. But I am almost glad of it; because now it makes the new happiness all the greater."

"And you forgive me, my own?"

"I forgive you—but on one condition, that you never refer to all this horridness again. Let it be as if it had never been. We won't remember the miserable time; we will be happy in the future! When Nora and I were little, and the games went wrong, and we quarrelled over them, we used to say, 'Let's pretend it didn't happen'; and then we began the game all over again in peace. It was such a good plan, because it didn't leave any sore places. And now I say again, 'Let's pretend it didn't happen'; and we'll begin the game all over again, and leave no sore places."

They went on, hand in hand, wrapped up in their present bliss. And, in spite of all her cleverness, it never once entered Nancy's head that her lover had ever suspected her: indeed his present behaviour seemed satisfactorily to prove the contrary.

So little may men and women—even when they are in love with one another—read each other's inmost thoughts.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE PROFESSOR'S VISIT.

Love evermore is fresh and young :  
So may it please your Royal Highness  
To banish from your mother tongue  
Such words as *Finis* ?

THERE was great delight throughout Tettleigh and the neighbourhood when the engagement of Mr. Baxendale to Miss Burton was announced. An engagement which we have seen coming on is always so much more flattering to our self-esteem (and therefore more popular in proportion) than an engagement which suddenly jumps out upon us and takes us completely by surprise. The former shows us how wise and far-seeing we on-lookers have been; while the latter proves (or, rather, tries to prove) that we can see only what is under our own noses, and no farther through a stone wall than other people; which deduction is, of course, absurd.

Although it might be a good match for Nancy socially, it was by no means a brilliant marriage from a pecuniary point of view; and to this fact Mr. Burton could not close his paternal eyes; but now that Lady Alicia was provided for, Laurence could just afford to keep a wife. Moreover Nancy's mind was made up to marry him or die; and she had shown such unmistakable signs of actually fulfilling the latter alternative

if the former were denied her, that her father decided in his own mind that, as a living married daughter is better than a dead single one, he would not withhold his consent from Nancy's becoming the wife of Laurence Baxendale.

As for the two lovers themselves, words could not describe their happiness. It is true that there is no heart-sickness harder to bear than that of hope deferred; but, on the other hand, there is no tree of life whereof the fruit is sweeter than that of the long-deferred desire at last fulfilled; and now Laurence and Nancy were enjoying this fruit to the fullest extent of their by no means limited powers. Compensation is one of the great laws of life; and those people whose hearts' desires have been given to them at the mere request of their lips, have no idea of the ecstasy of bliss vouchsafed to those whose happiness arrives late, after having tarried long upon the way.

In the whole course of true love there are few things more conducive to pleasure than the mutual contemplation and discussion of those varied obstacles and difficulties which at one time prevented the stream from running with unorthodox smoothness, and even threatened its eventual dispersion. And the worse these have been in the past, the more agreeable they are in the present as subjects of conversation. Nevertheless it must be admitted that this is not the sort of conversation that best lends itself to reproduction for the benefit of such persons as have not the privilege of hearing it first-hand; therefore the dialogue of these lovers at this particular point of their career is best left unchronicled.

In the sunshine of her restored happiness Nancy



soon began to grow strong and well again; while Laurence resolutely put away from him all remembrance of the crime which had once well-nigh wrecked his life, and decided that as he had forgiven so he would forget.

Lady Alicia was married very quietly to her old lover in London on the 12th of June; Nancy's marriage was fixed to take place at Tettleigh Church on the 10th of September; and in the interval it happened that Professor Gottfried—a most distinguished scientist with whom the Arbuthnots had made friends on their honeymoon—came to stay at the vicarage.

The professor was not one of those clever people whose noses are always in the air; he was one of those men of genius who know that nothing is beneath the notice of man since nothing is beneath the notice of God; so he was immensely interested in everything that was going on around him, and—having learned much—was always longing to learn more. While he was staying at Tettleigh he heard the story of the burning of Baxendale Hall and the mystery connected with it; and his attention was immediately aroused thereby.

Over and over again he made Michael and Nora describe every detail of the incident, with all the evidence that told so strongly against Laurence, until they grew quite tired of the recital; and then Nora suggested that they should take him up to the ruins of the Hall so that he might study the question more minutely upon the very scene of the tragedy. Consequently, one glorious afternoon in August the Arbuthnots, Professor Gottfried, Laurence, Nancy, and Nancy's two small brothers strolled up to examine all that was left of Baxendale Hall.

It was a lovely day—just such another day as that which had preceded the catastrophe exactly a year ago, only there was no gale this August as there had been last; one of those perfect summer afternoons when Nature seems to be at a standstill, simply because there is nothing better to do than she has already done—she is at her wits' end how to find another treat for her already spoilt children.

They walked slowly through the lanes—those lanes which were as holy ground to at least two of the party, who considered the others guilty of sacrilege in daring to walk there at all—until they reached the park; and then across the velvet grass to the ruins, which stood gaunt and grim and blackened, the one inharmonious touch in the idyllic picture of English summer time.

“Isn't it pushing and impertinent for them all to come bothering into our lanes?” said Nancy by the way to Laurence, who—with her—had dropped behind the rest of the party.

“It is decidedly intrusive, I must confess.”

“They are as bad as some people who once, when we were staying at an hotel, mistook our private sitting-room for the public drawing-room. I wish you'd been there, Laurence; you'd have roared.”

“I'm sure I should. What did they do?”

“They strolled in, in a most leisurely and airy fashion; looked over all our books and papers and letters which were lying on the table; and finally ensconced themselves in the two most comfortable chairs they could find. We were all simply shaking with laughter. It was such a natural mistake, and yet seemed so frightfully impertinent.”

“It was distinctly funny, and distinctly uncomfort-

able for the people themselves when they found out what they had done."

Nancy bubbled over with laughter at the remembrance. "Oh! yes, they were in a tremendous agony then, but of course we laughed and said it didn't matter in the least. But these people aren't in a tremendous agony at being found in our lanes; they don't seem a bit ashamed of themselves, do they?"

"Not a bit; that is what is so objectionable in them. There'd be some hope of them if they did."

When the party reached the deserted house Laurence took the professor all over it, pointing out, as well as he could, where the fire broke out and how it travelled. The man of science followed him with absorbing interest.

"It is most strange, most strange!" he kept saying; "I cannot it at all find out."

"It never will be found out now, I expect," replied Laurence—adding under his breath, "and hope".

But Professor Gottfried had no such wish. It was his business to solve problems and to make discoveries, and he did not like to be beaten.

"It must have been on fire from the inside set," he continued; "there is of that no doubt. A house on fire from the outside to set, and on the upper storey to begin, is a most impossible and not-to-be-believed-in thing. Yet the ground floor by the fire quite untouched has been. But why did you not the floor again roof-over before anything spoilt was?"

"Because I couldn't afford to do so," said Laurence simply.

"Ach! it is a bother not things to be able to afford."

"It is; there's no doubt of that." And the master of Baxenda's laughed somewhat bitterly.

"And there was no one in the house living, you tell me, at the time; even the caretaker for a short holiday gone away had: was that not so?"

"Yes."

"And they had all the keys into their hands before going given? So did Arbuthnot tell me."

"That is so." Laurence hated this endeavour to discover a secret which his chief desire now was to keep inviolate. He had forgiven Nancy with all his heart; but he was by no means sure that the world—if it found out her guilt—would be equally ready to forgive her; and he was quite certain that he did not wish the world ever to have the chance. So he tried to divert the professor's attention. "If you will come with me across the lawn to that clump of beech-trees on the other side, I will give you a glimpse into five counties," he said.

But it required a stronger man than Laurence to divert the professorial mind when once it had set itself to the solution of a particular problem.

"I do not want five counties to see—no, nor fifty counties; I do want the mystery of this house to solve."

"It's no good trying to do that, professor. We've all tried, and have given it up as a bad job; and you'll be compelled to do the same."

"Ach what nonsense you young men do talk and how idle you are! 'A bad job' indeed! Whoever heard of in mathematics 'a bad job'? To every question there an answer is, if only one it can find; and I mean this one before I go to find out."

"It's no good, professor; you'd better take my advice and give it up."

But the professor was not to be balked. He potted

about the ruins for another hour, with poor Laurence at his heels; and then was so hot and tired that he was obliged to join the group sitting under the beech-trees, and partake of tea which Mrs. Candy had carried up from her cottage in a basket.

"What a perfect afternoon it is!" exclaimed Nora with a sigh of absolute content, laying her hand upon her husband's and looking at her sister, from whose face joy was already beginning to play the part of india-rubber and rub out sorrow's handwriting. "Nancy dear, do you ever wonder what you have done to deserve such happiness?"

Nancy shook her head. "No; but I sometimes wonder what Laurence has."

No one laughed louder than Laurence himself at this sally; it was so exactly like Nancy.

"Isn't it funny that food always tastes so much nicer out-of-doors than it does indoors?" remarked that young lady when the meal was well under weigh; "I believe that even boiled mutton and rice pudding would seem regular delicacies in the open air."

"Food eaten out of doors is nice even to read about in books," said Nora.

Her sister agreed. "Yes, isn't it? Now when you read about Robin Hood and people of that sort feasting on venison-pasties and stoups of claret in the 'merrie green-wood' (spelt with *ie* instead of *y*) it sounds the most delicious fare; yet I'm certain that claret handed round in stoups (whatever a stoup may be) would taste extremely sour in a modern dining-room; and as for venison——!"

"Well, what's wrong with venison?" asked Laurence with a smile as Nancy paused. He was already un-

consciously acquiring the manner peculiar to those men who are blessed with brilliant wives; he led up to her best stories, played up to her smartest repartees, and—when she was in full swing—his lips moved slightly, as do the lips of prompters in amateur theatricals.

“Oh! venison is nothing but mutton with its head turned; and it’s as troublesome as are all the people whose heads have been turned. You never can catch it at the right moment—like a pear or an eclipse, don’t you know? It has either not been kept long enough, when it is mutton too high to eat; or else it has been kept too long, in which case either it or you has to leave the house at once in favour of the other; and then to return to your mutton is dangerous to life, from a sanitary point of view.”

While Nancy was rattling on in her old, airy, inconsequent fashion, with nobody but Laurence paying much attention to what she said Professor Gottfried was showing the little boys some grass and flowers through a powerful magnifying-glass which he produced from his pocket.

Suddenly Arthur raised the glass, and regarded the surrounding landscape through it. “I say, Amby,” he cried, “do come here and see how funny all the trees and everything look through this!”

Ambrose flew to his brother’s side and gazed through the glass with one blue eye, puckering up the other until every muscle on that side of his small face was taut. “It is awfully queer!” he exclaimed; “everything looks so big and wobbly, doesn’t it?—as if the world was full of water, and we were at the bottom of the sea, and the trees were made of seaweed!”

“Let me look,” said Nancy, whose fingers were never

for long out of any pie. She could not bear to be outside of things.

After she had gazed her fill—which was a very short one—Laurence took the glass from her (more for the pleasure of touching her fingers, it must be admitted, than from any desire to behold the phenomena which it presented), and idly raised it to his eyes.

“It makes me feel like a child again,” he remarked after a moment; “there used to be a flaw in the nursery-window here, which magnified things when you looked through it, and—as Ambrose said—made everything wobbly and watery. I likewise remember imagining that the world was the bottom of the sea in those days, when I looked through that particular pane in the old nursery-window.”

“Eh! what is that? what is that?” cried the professor, with suddenly awakened interest.

“I was only saying that looking through your glass at this view reminded me of looking through my old nursery-window, as there was a flaw in one of the panes that magnified everything,” replied Laurence languidly. The professor’s almost childish interest in trifles, and curiosity regarding the same, bored him considerably.

Professor Gottfricd started to his feet and clapped his hands in an ecstasy of enthusiasm, thereby upsetting his tea and bread-and-butter in one fell crash. “I have it, I have it!” he cried; “the mystery of the fire at last is cleared! The never-to-be-solved problem is solved! The bad job is not any more given up to be, but is a very good job after all!”

“What on earth do you mean, professor?” asked the vicar in amazement; while the others looked on, imagin-

ing that too much learning had made the little German mad.

"I mean that to me it has been given the great mystery of this house to solve; I mean that I do know how Baxendale Hall by accident burnt was; that is what I do mean!" And the professor fairly skipped with excitement.

Laurence's face turned as white as a sheet. "For heaven's sake tell us what you are driving at," he said between his teeth.

"Listen, pay attention, and I will all tell," cried the professor; "see, the thing is quite simple. But tell me first; was the nursery to the library at all near?"

"It was next to it," replied Laurence; "and on the same floor."

"And for what was it, after the Hall was shut-up used?"

"As a sort of overflow-meeting for the library," Laurence answered; "some books and papers, for which there wasn't room in the library, were stored there." He kept himself well in hand; but he could not quite hide the trembling of the fingers that twirled his moustache in a vain show of indifference.

"Then it is all as child's play simple," fairly shouted Professor Gottfried; "when the sun upon the able-to-magnify flaw in the window did shine, the flaw a fire-glass did become; and so the great sun himself did thus to the books and papers in the room set fire. See here!" And while they all stood breathless with surprise at the professor's discovery, he held his magnifying-glass where the hot August sunlight could fall upon it, and quickly burnt a large hole in Mrs. Candy's best table-cloth.

Nancy was the first to find words. "Then you believe



it was the sun that set fire to Baxendale Hall? And, if so, the old prophecy was actually fulfilled; for the sun is thrice as great as King or State, and a thousand-fold stronger and higher!"

"I make no doubt, dear young lady, that it was none other than the great sun himself that did the crime commit. Who else could have the library entered without first opening the door and walking up the stairs? The fire would in the afternoon begin, when the sun at the south-west windows was shining in; and for some hours it would smoulder; and then the strong wind would fan it, and the books and the papers would like so much tinder burn."

Nancy's face was pale with excitement, and her eyes were dim with joyful tears. "Yes, yes; I'm sure you are right. And oh, I'm so glad that the secret has been found out at last!"

Suddenly the professor's jaw fell. "But stop; I do not see; why did the sun that particular afternoon to Baxendale Hall set fire, when for two hundred years or more he on that very window shining every day had been?"

There was a pause—a brief yet interminable silence—and then Nancy cried: "I know why; the great tree, which stood at the back of the Hall, was blown down by the gale the day before; so that the sun shone for the first time on the nursery-window that particular afternoon."

Professor Gottfried positively flung his arms round Nancy in his excitement. "That is it, that is it, clever, clever girl! That does everything most clearly explain. The tree, which had always that window shaded, did fall; the sun on the flaw in the glass did shine; the

flaw in the window did as a sun-glass act, and did to the books set fire; the books and the papers did so quickly burn that the fire to the house itself did extend; the strong wind did fan the flames so fast that they like wild-fire did travel; and so in one day and one night Baxendale Hall was down burnt."

"Then no one entered the Hall that afternoon." It was Laurence that spoke, but the voice was not his own.

"No one, no one; if they had, the fire discovered would have been. When you, as you told me, in the morning of that day were here, the sun had not on the window shone, and the fire had not begun. It was when the sun on the west front of the house was shining that the flaw in the pane of glass to the Hall did set fire; and then no one ever into the house again did come."

"And this explains why the fire started from the upper storey," continued Laurence in the same unnatural voice.

"It does all things connected with this matter explain," replied the professor; "it does explain how the fire from inside and from upstairs did begin; and how it did begin though all the doors were locked, for the sun can without any keys enter."

Professor Gottfried's words brought full conviction to the minds of all his hearers; and the sudden enormous relief was almost more than Laurence could bear. So he turned away in silence and went alone into the beech-wood that fringed the lawn of his old home, and there struggled to regain that control over his feelings of which the unexpected joy produced by the professor's discovery had almost robbed him.

After a few minutes Nancy left the group that were so busily engaged in discussing Professor Gottfried's

solution of the Baxendale mystery—finding fresh proofs of its truth in every new aspect of consideration—and followed her lover into the wood.

“Darling,” she said, laying a caressing hand upon his arm, which was still trembling, “I am so glad.” But she was not as glad as he was. Conscious all the time of her own innocence, she had naturally never suspected herself.

Laurence could not speak; but he raised the little hand to his lips and covered it with kisses.

Thus it came to pass that the mystery of Baxendale Hall was solved by the ingenuity of Professor Gottfried. All the false suspicions, and the heart-burnings which they had caused, were over for ever; and everybody was heartily ashamed of having suspected everybody else. The professor's discovery caused a considerable sensation both socially and scientifically; and for a time people were almost as much afraid of magnifying-glasses as they were of gunpowder and dynamite. The Insurance Company were so thoroughly satisfied with the professor's explanation of the otherwise inexplicable mystery, that they again expressed their willingness to pay Mr. Baxendale the sum to which he was entitled; and this time he had no option—and no desire—but to avail himself of his rights. After much consultation and discussion, he and Nancy decided that they would invest eighty thousand pounds and live upon the income of it, settling the capital upon the estate; and that they would spend the other twenty thousand in building a new house upon the old foundations—a house not too large for their present means, and yet capable of being enlarged should prosperity shine in the future upon the Baxendale family.

One sunny September afternoon—about a fortnight before their marriage—Laurence and Nancy were sitting together upon the old stile which had proved such an important stage-property in the drama of their lives; and they were going over—for the two hundred and fiftieth time—the story of the burning of Baxendale. They had just gone over—for the two thousand and fiftieth time—the story of their love for one another, and the peculiar unsmoothness of its course; so they turned their attention to the fire as a slight diversion, before beginning the two thousand and fifty-first recital of the more interesting narrative.

“Darling, are you happy?” Laurence asked in conclusion.

“I should just think I am; simply bursting with happiness.”

“And you like being engaged to me?”

“Adore it. Life is like a game; and as long as you live with your own people you have to wait for your turn to play, and let them all take their turns in due order. But when you are engaged, it is always your turn to play; and you never have to wait for the others, because the only other player is the best part of yourself. It's just like being a child again; and—still better—a child who is always out to tea. Oh! I think it is simply lovely!”

Laurence put his arm round her. “My sweet,” he said.

“Everything seems different since I became engaged,” Nancy went on; “it is just as if I had gone through the looking-glass into the room on the other side. The things are the same as in the old room, but they are all in different places; and I look at everything from the opposite point of view.”

"And is it as nice as the old room?"

"A million billion trillion times nicer."

"My darling, my own darling," murmured Laurence.

"I'll tell you something else about being engaged," said Nancy; "namely, that it is extremely early-Victorian."

"How so, my sweet?"

"It is so old-fashioned and feminine and conventional and altogether correct; and makes one have such sweet, meek, womanly, early-Victorian feelings. Of course I know that I *look* like a fashion-plate in this week's *Queen*; but all the time I am *feeling* like Agnes Copperfield and Amelia Sedley and Mrs. Barrett-Browning."

Laurence laughed as he kissed her.

"I assure you," she went on, "that every time I look in the glass I expect to see myself with bunches of ringlets on either side, like a water-spaniel or a great-aunt; and yet before I was engaged I used to be the very essence of the thing which present-day writers call modernity."

"A horrid word!" murmured Laurence under his breath.

"But rather a nice thing in its way, all the same; and a thing which has completely fallen away from me. You can't think, Laurence dear, how funny it is to watch oneself growing early-Victorian. I feel like a motor-car that is gradually developing into a mahogany sideboard; or an embroidered art-needlework *portière* that is slowly evolving into a pair of rep curtains."

"But you like it, don't you, my own?"

"I adore it; that's where the early-Victorianism

comes in. I know that you are my master, and I am so degraded as to enjoy knocking under to you. Isn't it antiquated? Each day that I live sends me long strides farther back into the last century."

"And yet you are happy?"

"Ideally so—in a nice, comfortable, respectable, rep-and-mahogany, early-Victorian way. I am an advanced young woman; but I am bound to admit that of all delicious sensations the most delicious is steady retrogression. It is really divine; and the more modern one has been, the more exquisite is the tumbling back again—on the same principle as a toboggan-slide or a switch-back railway, don't you know? I used to laugh at Mrs. Candy; but now—in the matter of imbecile, unreasoning, abject, idiotic devotion—I could give her points. The only difference between us is that I know it's funny, and she doesn't. Here—but for my saving humour—goes Mrs. Candy!"

"Thank heaven for that same saving humour!" quoth Laurence piously.

"And yet not being engaged was very nice too," continued Nancy; "all that secret-society-in-the-lanes business was great fun. Being openly engaged is like belonging to a State Church; and being secretly in love is like belonging to persecuted Nonconformity; and I must confess that persecuted Nonconformity is not without its compensations."

"Cruel little child, I believe you are getting tired of me already."

"I say, I wonder which really will be master—you or I?" remarked Nancy after a pause.

"Ah! that is a nice question. At present you always maintain that you are."

"But that's only because I know I'm not. If I didn't know that you were master, I should be the first to pretend that you were. But there's one thing that rather worries me."

"What's that, baby?"

"I'm so afraid you've left off being jealous; and if there's one thing that entertains and interests me more than another, it's a jealous man. It seems that being sure of me has robbed you of your most compelling charm."

"Not it! No fear of that, my sweet."

"But you're not as jealous as you were before we were engaged," persisted Nancy regretfully; "and it's no use pretending that you are."

"Yes, I am; but in a different way. There are two kinds of jealousy—the one inspired by a thief and the other by a trespasser; and though I trust you too completely ever again to feel the former variety, I can plead guilty to the latter to any extent."

Nancy was appeased; and the talk wandered back to the burning of Baxendale and all that it had involved.

"You were dreadfully silly to mind all the stuff that stupid people talked about your having done it yourself," remarked Nancy.

"I daresay I was; I often am dreadfully silly, you know—it is a way I have. But I did mind it confoundedly, nevertheless."

"Foolish boy! As if anybody, who had ever had as much as a bird's eye view of you, could sincerely suspect you of doing anything that Sir Richard Lovelace or the Chevalier Bayard hadn't done every day of their lives"

"But they did suspect me, my sweetheart—and those

who had enjoyed considerably more than a bird's eye view of me; and example speaks louder than precept, you know."

"They didn't really suspect you; they only pretended they did just for the fun of the thing, because it's always so interesting to suspect people of doing what you know they couldn't possibly have done. Half the fun of being good is that it gives such flavour and point to your few lapses, which the lapses of habitually faulty people entirely lack."

Laurence stroked Nancy's cheek with his forefinger. "What shockingly immoral teaching!"

"Well, it's quite true. Think how glorious it is when mother upsets her tea or father his claret on the table-cloth; yet if I or the boys do such a thing there is no real joy in it at all. And that is why people pretended that they thought you had set fire to the Hall; if you'd been less sans-peur-and-sans-reproachy, there'd have been no point in even suggesting such a thing."

"My darling," said Laurence after a pause, still fondling the cheek that he had made so pale, "did you ever think I had done it?"

Nancy's blue eyes grew round with amazement. "I? —good gracious, no! I'm not such a goose as all that, Though I was so foolish as to fall in love with you, I have still sense enough left not to suspect you of any redeeming fallibility, and honesty enough not to pretend that I do. Let my folly stand out in its true colours. Having discovered a man who is absolutely perfect, I have been idiotic enough to promise to marry him; although he never attempted to conceal any of his virtues, nor assume faults which he was not so fortunate as actually to possess."



"My dearest, I've something horrible to confess to you; I wonder if you can ever forgive me."

"Of course I can; I'm silly enough for anything where you are concerned. What is it? Fire away."

Laurence knelt on the ground and hid his face in Nancy's lap. "I know I was a brute; you can't be more disgusted with me than I am with myself; and if you refuse to marry me after you hear what I am going to say, I cannot blame you. My darling, I actually believed all the time that it was you who had set fire to the Hall, more shame to me! Now, can you ever bring yourself to forgive me?"

There was a pause; then Nancy said slowly, "You believed that it was me all the time?"

Laurence groaned. "Yes; curse my blind folly!"

"When did you find out it wasn't me after all?"

"When old Gottfried found out how it really had been done."

"Not till then?"

"No; not till then."

"And you asked me to marry you, believing that I was the guilty person?"

"I couldn't help it. I loved you so dearly that I meant to marry you whatever you had done. Guilty or not guilty, you were the only woman in the world for me. But I shall never forgive myself for thinking you guilty; and I feel I cannot ask you to forgive me. Oh, my darling, what a brute I've been to you! And although I was so vile as to suspect you, my own innocent angel, you were believing in me all the time! My sweetheart, I am not fit to touch the hem of your garment." And poor Laurence groaned once more in his anguish.

But Nancy did not groan; she laid her hand on her lover's head while her eyes shone like stars! "My dear, I've nothing to forgive; you have made me prouder than I ever was in my life before. I don't blame you for suspecting me, because I'd once suggested that you should burn the Hall yourself, if you remember, though I only said it in fun; and besides, I'd got the keys. So there was nothing in that. But what makes me so proud and happy is that your love for me was great enough to overcome all obstacles—even your suspicion that I had done the thing which you abhorred. Oh! my darling, my darling, I know now how much you love me. God grant that I may prove myself worthy of such love!" And Nancy took the bowed head into her arms, and covered it with passionate kisses.

A new house now stands on the site of old Baxendale Hall—a picturesque, red-brick house, designed after the fashion of the Elizabethans, but with every modern comfort and convenience. It smiles across the valley at Silverhampton Church on the opposite hill, as its three predecessors smiled before it; but now there is no shadow on its smile—no shadow of a curse as yet unfulfilled. And to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the new house and the old church bring the same message—the message that good is stronger than evil, and therefore is bound to conquer in the end, be the warfare never so long and the battle never so hard. To all who possess their souls in patience it is given to see that morning joy which is the sure successor of the night of weeping—to behold that marvellous light which must finally disperse all clouds and darkness; either here and now, where there fall

other shadows and where fresh clouds return after the rain—or else in that fairer country, where there is no need of the sun to lighten it, and where the winter is over and past for evermore.

So the story of the Baxendales ends well—as all stories must inevitably end, if we will only wait long enough; but the end is not always yet, and we are in such a hurry. Since good is stronger than evil, and truth than falsehood, and blessing than cursing, no story can possibly end badly; while it is going on badly we know that this is not the end; just as we know that the end of anything is only the beginning of something better—and always must be as long as “God’s in His heaven,” and “all’s right with the world”.

Once more—as before the days of Vivien of the Glade—the Baxendales dwell at ease under their own roof-tree and till their lands in peace, unhampered by the haunting dread that yet again their home will be destroyed by fire and their house left unto them desolate; that yet again their pride, which exalted itself to heaven, must be abased, and their sin, which was the sin of Lucifer, expiated. That age-long fear is over and past; the old curse has exhausted itself, and the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter; for

First by the King, and then by the State,  
And thirdly by that which is thrice as great  
As these, and a thousandfold stronger and higher,  
Has Baxendale Hall been made fuel of fire.

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**FUEL OF  
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**Ellen  
Thorneycroft  
Fowler**

