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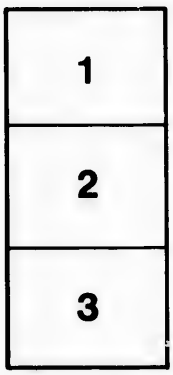

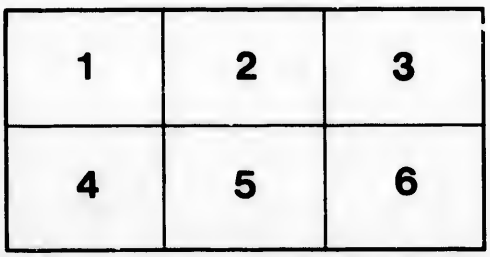

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URSULA VIVIAN

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URSULA VIVIAN

The Sister-Mother

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

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

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URSULA VIVIAN.

CHAPTER I.

DREAMS.

THE Misses Warner's establishment for the board and education of young ladies was breaking up for the session. The examination had been a brilliant success, the pupils having acquitted themselves to their own credit and that of their teachers. Many of the boarders had left for home in the afternoon of the last day of school, but those who had a long journey in prospect remained another night, and early on the morrow The Elms would be deserted by pupils and teachers alike.

In one of the bedrooms four girls were grouped about the window in the fading evening light, watching the darkness stealing over the moor, to

envelop in its folds the roofs of Aldborough and the spire of its venerable cathedral.

They were fair specimens of the young womanhood of England—pleasant of face, lithe of figure, and glib of tongue, as was evidenced by the incessant hum of talk which had resounded through the room for an hour and more.

"Well, I wonder when we four shall meet again?" said Ursula Vivian, from her perch on the dressing-table.

"In thunder, lightning and in rain," quoted Mary Dunscombe, in her merry way, and her mischievous grey eyes glanced up into the grave face of the friend she loved above all others.

In a moment Ursula's hand was laid on Mary's lips.

"I will have no nonsense, Mary," she said threateningly. "We must have some serious talk to-night, for after to-day we are women, remember, and all the frolics of school are done with."

"Suppose you prove that you are serious by getting down off that table," said Mary, demurely. "I think it is not quite customary for women to sit on tables, is it, Isabel?"

The young lady appealed to turned from her

examination of a travelling costume, and answered, languidly.

"Ursula will never learn to be proper, Mary. When she is fifty she will think as little of sitting on a table or climbing a tree as she does at this moment."

"Eccentricity is the privilege of genius," said gentle-eyed Anna Trent, looking up from her task of arranging her music in her portfolio, ready to put into her trunk.

Isabel Fortescue's lip curled slightly, whether in scorn or amusement it was difficult to tell. She was a beautiful girl, and would develop by-and-by into a marvellously beautiful woman. Her figure, though unformed, was all grace; her golden head was set superbly on a beautiful neck; her fair, aristocratic face, with its violet eyes and exquisite mouth, was a study a painter might long to transfer to canvas.

Ursula Vivian rolled up a little bullet of paper, and tossed it at Anna Trent.

"Your doubtful compliment has but evoked a smile of scorn on our beauty's face," she said, with good-humoured sarcasm. "Isabel, do leave your everlasting contemplation of clothes, and talk a little while. Let us each tell what we mean

to do, and what use we mean to make of our lives."

Anna Trent laid down her portfolio, and looked up with expectant interest. After a minute or two Isabel hung up her dress and came over to the window, looking slightly bored.

"You always want something absurd, Ursula," she said. "Well, go on, we are all waiting to hear the programme of your future life."

"We will take yours first, Mary," said Ursula, stooping to pull her friend's black locks as she knelt by the open window.

"Mine!" echoed Mary, her pleasant face rippling with amusement. "Oh, I am hopelessly commonplace. I shall go home to Market Drayton, I suppose, to-morrow, and then there will be six weeks' delightful romping with the boys before they go back to Eton. Then I shall settle down quietly at home with papa and mamma, relieve her of half the worry of three small females in the nursery and schoolroom. I shall learn to wash, bake, cook, and mend and darn, and do sick visiting, as I shall need them all when I go to keep house for John. He will settle somewhere likely in spring."

John was Mary's elder brother, who had just received his diploma in medicine at Cambridge, and

who, after his settlement, would need his sister Mary as a housekeeper.

"I wish I had a brother on shore," said Anna Trent, with a sigh. She belonged to a seafaring family, and her two brothers had sailed with their sailor-father on his last voyage.

"When you were speaking, Mary, you ought to have said you would go to keep house for your brother till he fell in love, and then it would be notice to quit for you," said Isabel Fortescue, who appeared to have the very knack of showing the unpleasant side of things. "Your brother will want you just till he finds somebody better."

"Oh, well, that is understood," said Mary, lifting her fearless eyes to Isabel's face. "When John finds a wife no one will give her a warmer welcome than I, for John's choice will be a woman we can all love."

"Question," said Isabel, briefly.

"I vote that we expel Isabel from the council," said Ursula. "She's caught the griffin to-night, and she'll be a bugbear in our midst."

The "griffin" was the school-girl phrase for bad temper, and it was very frequently applied to Isabel Fortescue.

"I demur," said Mary, "for I am intensely anxious to hear what her future life is to be."

"Very well, I withdraw the motion," said Ursula, heedless of Isabel's frown, "at least till we hear what she has to say. But first we will sum up your ambition in as few words as possible, Mary, and we will compare notes after hearing the report from the others."

"I am not good at summing up, Ursula," rejoined Mary, "but my ambition amounts to something like this. I want to be of use to my father and mother, to try to repay them for all they have done for me. I want to be a true sister to my brothers and sisters, and I want to do as much good as I can in the world in a quiet way. And perhaps," she added with a little absurd laugh, "if you want to have the end, I wouldn't mind having a home of my own by-and-by, and a husband something like John, and then that the world might be a little the better because we had lived in it a while. I believe that is all my ambition, girls."

Ursula saw an expression on Isabel's face which foreboded a few more unpleasant words, which she prevented by saying sharply—

"Thank you, Mary. May we all be as honest.

Verdict reserved. Isabel, we are waiting for you."

"Really, I object to being domineered over in this fashion," said Isabel, petulantly; "but I suppose I must obey as usual. Well, girls, I'm going home to Haydon Hall to-morrow to be mamma's companion, to help her to entertain our guests, and to go with her into society. I shall have nothing in the world to do but enjoy myself. That's all; and, if you must have it, my ambition is to be an ornament to society and to make a brilliant marriage."

No remark whatsoever followed Isabel's speech, but, at a nod from Ursula, Anna Trent, smiling a little, said softly—

"I, too, am going home to London to be a companion to mamma, to comfort her during the absence of father and the boys. And as I find time I shall go on with my beloved painting. My ambition is to be hung in the Academy."

A burst of laughter made Anna aware of her slip.

"Of course, you know what I mean," she said, laughing heartily too. "I hope to have a picture in the Academy some day, and then I hope you will all come to see it."

"That we will. A triumphal procession of revered and adoring friends," said Ursula. "Well, I suppose it is my turn now. I am going home to burn the midnight oil, girls; to toil day and night with my pen until it brings me wealth and fame. My ambition is to be the greatest author of my time."

"A modest one, truly," said Isabel, with a little laugh. "As usual, girls, we must yield the palm to Ursula. She has outstripped us all."

Ursula got down from her perch, and, moving over to the window, stood in the shadow, with her hair lightly touching Mary's head. Ursula Vivian was not beautiful. Many people called her plain. Her figure was angular and bony, her face long and thin, her features strongly marked. It was an original and striking face, and the constant flashing changes of her beautiful hazel eyes gave to it its chief beauty of expression. Her scraggy brown hair, which no brush could induce to lie smoothly, was confined carelessly at the back with a knot of black velvet; her dress was worn and shabby to a degree, yet a certain dignity of carriage and conscious independence gave to her the appearance of a lady, and redeemed her altogether from being uninteresting or common-place. In that quiet

moment her face was softened into a grave beautiful tenderness, the outcome of the lovely hopes blossoming in her heart. She felt the great power stirring within her, and the talent which had hitherto found its expression in school-girl rhymes and nonsense compositions for the amusement of her fellows would henceforth be consecrated to nobler ends. She was very young, and life was all before her. Her dreams were passing sweet. Great yearnings to be good and to do good to her fellows through the medium of her pen filled her heart that night, and excluded everything else.

The pressure of Mary's mischievous fingers recalled her, and she turned her face slowly towards them.

"Well, girls, I wonder whether we shall all reach the height of our ambition, or whether some of us will slip on the ladder before we are half-way up," she said, musingly.

"Yours is the most uphill work, Ursula," said Mary Dunscombe. "Yours and Anna's. Isabel and I tread on lower ground."

"Speak for yourself, Mary," said Isabel with a sharp turn of her haughty head, and Mary immediately asked her pardon with mock humility.

"Well, we must keep up communication with

each other," said Ursula. "But I fear, Isabel, when you are society's chiefest ornament you will forget your humble friends."

"Oh no," said Isabel, with gracious condescension. "I shall remember you, never fear; and you must all come, girls, to Haydon Hall. I am sure papa and mamma will be very pleased."

Ursula glanced at her thread-bare gown, and, meeting Mary's eye, turned her head swiftly away, choking back a laugh.

"Thank you, dear Isabel," said Anna Trent's gentle voice. "I am sure we will all be glad to come. Well, Ursula, it's half-past nine, and we have to be up early. What do you say to bed? Will you come, Isabel?"

"I suppose so," said Isabel with a yawn. "Precious glad am I this is my last night in the stony couch of the Elms. Good-night, Ursula and Mary!"

Then Isabel and Anna, who shared the same room, left the others to their own quiet talk.

Mary Dunscombe rose, and, leaning her hand on Ursula's shoulder, looked into her face.

"Ursula, your eyes are wet. What is it?"

"I am sorry to leave school, Polly. We have had some jolly days here. I shall never forget

them. You will think of me sometimes when you are away?"

"Of course I will. Don't I love you, Ursula, better than any girl in the world?"

"I have no sister, and the love I would have given to her is all yours, Mary," said Ursula, with sudden, passionate earnestness. "It would break my heart to get nothing in return." Mary crept closer to her friend, and there was a little silence.

"There is something else saddening me to-night, my Mary," said Ursula, by-and-by. "I cannot tell what, unless it be the thought that we are girls no longer, but women entering upon life. I wonder how it will be with us, and how it will end. Yours will be a sweet and happy life likely, just like yourself. What can mine be but a storm? I am such a strange, wild, miserable creature. I am sometimes afraid of myself."

"Hush, Ursula," said Mary, touching her lips with pleading fingers. "Do not grow bitter to-night. Let us be quiet and thoughtful, and mindful of God. Could we not just kneel down here, Ursula, and pray for guidance in the future? We have never done it before, but it is the last night."

So they knelt down together in the window, and the moonlight stealing in upon them unawares

touched most lovingly these young heads bowed reverently before their God.

Surely the guidance asked would not be denied; surely that prayer would make more smooth the path of life; surely it was a sweet and fitting beginning to the women's work which lay before them.

CHAPTER II.

THE VIVIANS OF THE GRANGE.

THERE had been Vivians in Kessington Grange for generations. In the earlier days of its existence, the Grange had been a goodly heritage, but bit by bit the spendthrift Vivians had squandered their inheritance, until at the time of which I write it consisted only of the rambling old house, the policy about it, and a few fields adjoining, which were let to a neighbouring farmer.

The Vivians had ever been idle and careless, as well as spendthrift, and their present representative, Geoffrey Vivian, Ursula's father, was no exception to the rule. He married, somewhat late in life, a sweet and gentle girl of good family, but possessing small fortune, and brought her home to the half-ruined Grange. It was a mystery to Kessington how the Vivians lived, and as the little

ones arrived one by one the mystery deepened. The Squire—as he was called through force of old association, the name having long ceased to have any substantial meaning—being a Vivian, disdained all manner of work. His wife and little ones might lack the luxuries and comforts, sometimes even the necessaries of life, but his hands must not be soiled; nay, more, he must have his dainty morsel at meal times, his faultless linen and gentlemanly attire, his dog and gun, his newspapers and magazines—in a word, it pleased Geoffrey Vivian to live as though the bygone revenues of Kessington Grange were still at his disposal.

Such a course either required money or credit, and since the former was not forthcoming, they had to suffice themselves with the latter. Kessington was very long-suffering with the Vivians. Its tradesmen told of almost fabulous accounts run up in the squire's name, but out of respect to the old name perhaps, or from compassion for the sweet and gentle lady, whose face bore the impress of her miserable life, they forbore to prosecute. So the accounts ran on, the Vivians sank deeper and more inextricably into debt, and Mrs. Vivian faded every day.

There were five sons and one daughter, whose

acquaintance you have already made at school in Aldborough. The Misses Warner had been friends of Geoffrey Vivian's wife in her girlhood, and for the sake of the old love the kind ladies offered to educate Ursula for nothing. Mrs. Vivian, while feeling her position acutely, could not see her way to refuse such an advantage for her one daughter, so Ursula went to Aldborough and remained there, studying hard and making no end of mischief and fun at school, in blissful ignorance of the real state of affairs. The Misses Warner, being ladies and Christians, did not make their good deeds public. The eldest son, a young man of one-and-twenty, was engaged in mercantile business in London. As he had grown to manhood his keen eyes had penetrated all the miserable meanness of his father's pride, and not being ashamed to work even with his hands, though he was a Vivian, he had gone off to London at sixteen to seek his fortune unaided and unfriended, for his father had professed himself heartily disgusted with his son's plebeian notions, and had declined to have anything more to do with him. But Robert Vivian was made of manly stuff, and in spite of all the obstacles which lie in the way of a poor and unknown youth in a great city, he found his place, and having found it kept

it. The mercantile house which had been so kind as to engage him without character or recommendation, except what he carried in his honest face and fearless eyes, had had occasion to bless the day Robert Vivian entered their employ. He was now one of their most trusted servants, and there were whisperings among his fellows that the Messrs. Grimsby would ere long make him the head of the whole concern, they being old men now, and anxious to take only a nominal share in the work of the firm.

So much for Robert Vivian. Ursula was four years his junior. Next to her came his father's namesake, Geoffrey, a pale, somewhat delicate-looking youth, whose one passion was for music, whose one aim was its pursuit.

The hours his brothers devoted to all the games and frolics of boyhood were spent by him at the spindle-legged piano in the drawing-room, where he would grow oblivious of everything, and would draw forth even from that miserable apology for an instrument sounds which drew tears from those who listened. He had taught himself, and he lived but in the hope that the happy time would come some day when he could go away to the home of music, and

study under its greatest masters. That was Geoffrey's dream.

Very different in all ways from his dreamy-eyed, soft-voiced brother Geoffrey was Tom Vivian. He was the embodiment of exuberant animal spirits, giant strength, and unutterable stupidity. At fourteen he could read and write and draw a little, nothing more. He was the plague of Kessington Grammar School, the source of unlimited trouble to the masters, his name was before Dr. Abbot for misdemeanour six days a week.

If there was a caricature on the blackboard, a live toad in a master's desk, a pin stuck point upwards on his chair, or some adhesive substance placed there by invisible hands, but which was warranted to bind the hapless victim firmly to his seat, Tom Vivian did it. He never denied anything; he took his punishment like a hero, promised better behaviour, and went and did it again. But everybody loved him, and when he had been expelled once for some unusually grave misdemeanour a deputation representative of the whole school, including the masters, even the one on whom the trick had been played, waited on Dr. Abbot, praying for a commutation of the sentence. Such was Tom Vivian.

The younger two, Charlie and Fred, were ordinary lads, studious enough during lesson hours and wild enough at play. These, then, were the relatives with whom Ursula Vivian was to make her permanent home, now that school days were past.

Fully a year had elapsed since she had been home before, and she was longing to see them all with a great longing. It was nearly a day's journey from Aldborough to Kessington, and Ursula arrived at the trim little station just at sunset. A deputation of four waited her. Needless to say, they were the boys. Mr. Vivian was not so intensely devoted to his daughter that he would take a two-mile walk, on a hot summer evening, to meet her, and I am bound to say Ursula was not disappointed. She was the only passenger by the express. So, save for a few grinning officials, the Vivians had the station to themselves. Ursula kissed her brothers all round, gave Tom, her especial favourite, a sisterly hug, then while the porters saw after her luggage, the four surveyed their one sister with critical eyes.

"You look just the same Ursula," said Geoffrey, perfectly satisfied.

"No, you don't; you look ever so much older, just like Betty almost," said Fred.

"Her eyes are nicer'n Betty's, though, don't you think?" suggested Charlie.

"You are a guy, Ursula," said Tom, with decision. "Your frock's too short, and your hair's like a mop. You'll need to make yourself smarter before I take you through Kessington on my arm."

Forgetful of her eighteen years and her dignity, Ursula administered him a sharp box in the ear, and ordered him off to get her bag.

"I am certainly obliged to you, boys," she said, with her sweet ringing laugh. "Come, Geoff., we will lead off. You are the only respectable member of the Vivian community. Tell me about papa and mamma."

"Papa's all right," said Geoffrey. "He said he would come to the gate and meet us."

"Unprecedented," began Ursula, but remembering a certain new-formed resolution not to make fun of her father's peculiarities, she checked the words, and asked instead—

"And mamma?"

"I hardly know what to say, Ursula. I don't think mamma's well, somehow; she's so thin and white, I'm frightened to look at her sometimes."

Ursula's lip quivered.

"She never spoke of being ill in her letters to me, Geoffrey."

"I daresay not. She says she is quite well, but——"

"Say, Ursula, I guess you'll be too womanified to field at cricket now, or run races up the Scaur, or go imaginary tiger-hunting in the woods, eh?" cried Tom, coming up breathless, with his sister's portmanteau under his arm.

"I don't know, Tom, I hope not," said Ursula, very soberly, for her thoughts were all of her mother.

"Are you going to get a trailing frock, and do your hair up behind, and wear an eyeglass, and have our new writing-master for a lover?" asked Charlie, innocently. "Tom said you would."

"I'll be even with you, Tom, by-and-by," said Ursula, her face reddening, greatly to Tom's delight. Very easily Ursula slipped into the boyish way of talking. In past holiday times she had amused her girl friends by carrying back to Aldborough a perfect *répertoire* of words and phrases which would have shocked the fastidious ears of the Misses Warner had they happened to hear Ursula reciting them with infinite relish.

"You needn't turn up your nose, Ursula," said

Tom. "Robinson's no end of a swell. He has beautiful auburn hair. The young lady in the stationer's shop says all the girls in Kessington are after Robinson, I tell you."

Then suddenly Tom went off into convulsions.

"He always walks up the High Street at three, though it isn't his way home. Then you ought to see all the young ladies looking out. One day Williams and I for a lark put some gummy stuff inside his hat."

"You did it, Tom. I saw you making the stuff in the stable," corrected Charlie.

"All right, young un, I did it then; and he put it on, and Williams and I dodged him along the High Street. Well, of course in a minute we sees Mrs. Abbot and Miss Agnes coming, and Robinson gets off his hat to make a grand bow—at least he tried to get it off, but it was stuck on to his hair, you know, and it wouldn't come, and he pulled and pulled till I believe some of his hair came out by the roots. I thought I should have died, and Tommy Williams squealed so loud I had to stuff my hand into his mouth to stop him. Robinson never saw us, but of course he knew it was me, and I got half-a-dozen from him in the morning, and now he locks his hat in the desk. I would not

have missed the lark though I'd got ten half-dozens."

Ursula laughed, because it was impossible to help it. She wondered privately whether she would by-and-by be able to show Tom that such mischief-playing was not becoming, and so make him see that he was not sent to school for his own amusement, but to fit himself for a man's work and a man's responsibilities, which were coming to him very fast. She could not repress a sigh, for her whole soul was in the fun. She was herself Tom's very counterpart, and enjoyed playing tricks or talking nonsense as much as he.

"Here we are, and there's papa," said Geoffrey, and Ursula quickened her pace a little.

A massive iron gateway gave admittance to the policies of The Grange. There was also a lodge, but it was uninhabited, and crumbling to decay. A wide avenue of beech trees, with boughs interlacing over head, led up to the house. It was beautiful still, and bore traces of a past grandeur. At the open gate stood Mr. Vivian, waiting to greet his daughter. He was a tall, slenderly-built man, of gentlemanly appearance, and faultless attire; but there was a languid air about him which told something of his idle propensities. His hair and

beard were tinged with gray, and his face was beginning to show its wrinkles, for he was years past his prime. Ursula came to him somewhat awkwardly. She loved her father in her way, but she felt that they were out of the same order. She did not offer to kiss him even, till he bent toward her, saying, blandly:

"Well, Ursula, so you have got home."

"Yes, papa, thank you," said Ursula, and then drew back beside Tom, glad the greeting was over.

Mr. Vivian turned with them, and walked slowly up the avenue, critically eyeing his daughter. She was very plain, offensive almost in his eyes. Mr. Vivian admired the beauty of form and colour rather than that of expression, and he rather resented Ursula's brown and scraggy unloveliness. "What will I do with her?" was his mental question, and it was still unanswered when they reached the house.

In the low, ivy-wreathed doorway stood Mrs. Vivian, leaning slightly against the lintel, as if she required support. She was a lovely woman, with a pure, sweet, refined face, sadly wan and worn indeed, and large, dreamy blue eyes like Geoffrey's, about which lingered many dark shadows. Ursula

sprang to her with a sob, and took her in her strong young arms—the frail mother whom she worshipped, who was her ideal of everything saintly and sweet and good.

"Mamma, mamma, oh, *dear* mamma," she whispered; and Mrs. Vivian, smiling through her tears, smoothed the rough head, and answered back as only a mother can.

"My daughter!"

"Is tea ready, mamma?" inquired Mr. Vivian, looking as if he thought enough fuss had been made over Ursula; and Mrs. Vivian, slipping from Ursula's clasp, answered with her usual readiness to please her husband.

"Yes, I think Betty took it in when I called to her that you were coming. Come, Ursula, run up and take off your hat; papa does not like to wait, you know."

"All right," said Ursula, and ran first into the kitchen for a word with the faithful old woman who had served the Vivians for love alone for forty years.

In an incredibly short time Ursula, who never spent any superfluous time over her toilet, had given her face a vigorous scrubbing, made a wild attempt to smooth her tangled hair, set her collar

straight, and was ready, and ravenously hungry for tea.

It was a pleasant meal. Never had the great gloomy dining-room, with its faded, shabby furnishings, seemed so dear and pleasant a place to Ursula Vivian. Never had the Babel of talk sounded so like music, never had the dear mother seemed so sweet, so lovely, so unutterably precious. Ursula spoke as much as any of them, but sometimes in the middle of a sentence she would break off suddenly to look at her mother with eyes full of dread.

What was it that sent such a strange sharp thrill to Ursula's heart as she looked? It was not exactly that her mother looked ill, it was the expression in her eyes which struck Ursula most of all.

"It seemed to me," she said, talking of it long after to Mary Dunscombe—"It seemed as if mamma had tasted heaven before she said good-bye to earth. I never saw anything so beautiful and yet so solemn in my life."

When she bade her mother good-night before she went upstairs she put her strong young arm about the drooping shoulders and whispered tenderly:

"You will rest now, mamma. I am as strong as a lion, and will do everything for you."

"My darling, I know it," returned Mrs. Vivian, looking up in the brown face, thinking it the dearest and sweetest in the world.

"My rest is close at hand."

Ursula did not ponder on these words—though they were meant to convey to her a deeper meaning. Well, there was time enough—oh yes, time enough. All too soon the truth would come home to Ursula Vivian; all too soon she would need to leave her girlhood behind her and take up the duties and cares of womanhood—taking up with them too a woman's cross.

CHAPTER III.

MAKING READY FOR THE CAMPAIGN.

WHEN Ursula awoke next morning the sun was streaming brilliantly into her room. She sprang up and looked at the little old-fashioned watch which had kept time for her at school.

It was just seven, and the house was very still; but listening intently she heard faint sounds proceeding from the lower regions, which told that Betty at least was already astir. Now if Ursula had a besetting sin it was a disinclination to get up in the morning, and in the list of her new-formed resolutions "early rising" had a prominent place. So by a mighty effort she conquered the desire to jump into bed and dream for another hour, and began to get on her garments in a great hurry, lest the temptation should prove too strong for her. When she was half-dressed, she was wide enough

awake. So she moved over to the window, drew aside the blind, and looked out.

Oh, how gloriously fair the world that summer morning!

The mists were clearing slowly from the green slope of the Scaur, the miniature mountain of which Kessington was so proud, and which had been the scene of innumerable gipsy gatherings and other juvenile escapades of the Vivians every holiday-time for years.

A broad, beautiful meadow, dotted thick with daisies and buttercups, intervened between the Grange woods and the Scaur, and there the cattle were already browsing peacefully, enjoying a dainty bite, unmolested yet by their enemies the flies.

The woods were living green, and resounding with the song of a thousand birds. Listening, Ursula easily recognised the various notes, for the boys kept her well versed in bird lore.

The sweet eyes of the honeysuckle peeping in at the window were wet with dew, and the diamond drops glittered on every blade of grass, and filled to overflowing the dainty cups of the daisies on the lawn.

Unable to express the exuberance of her delight, Ursula broke into a merry snatch of song, till

suddenly remembering she would surely awake her mother, she effectually silenced herself by plunging face and hands into cold water.

In ten minutes she was dressed, and opening her door softly, she slipped downstairs and peered into the dining-room. The window was open, the curtains looped up, and the place ready for sweeping.

Just then Betty entered with her broom.

"Bless me, Miss Ursula, what are you doing up at this time?"

"Why, it's half-past seven, Betty," said Ursula. "I'm going to get up every morning to help, you know. Tell me all the things mamma does, and I'll begin at once."

Betty looked more than pleased, though she did not say much.

"Well, you see, Miss Ursula, I generally call your mamma about this time, an' she comes down in time to dust the dining-room. When that's done I set the breakfast, and she goes down and sees after the master's chicken, or bacon, or fish, or whatever it is. He's very particular, and she always does it herself."

"Well, Betty, I'll not meddle with the cooking this morning, but I'll dust the dining-room and

then I'll set the breakfast, while you put on papa's chicken or whatever it is he gets," said Ursula. "Here, let me sweep the floor, for I need to learn, you know, and I'm abler than you, I believe."

Betty, nothing loth, gave up the broom, and retired to the kitchen, leaving the dining-room in Ursula's hands. Mindful of her hair, Ursula lifted a brilliant-hued anti-macassar from the sofa, and wound it fantastically about her head. Then she set to work with a will, and raised such a cloud of dust that she was enveloped as in a mist. Then she shut the door, went outside to cool herself and to let the dust settle. Looking at the wealth of Gloire di Dijons growing in wild luxuriance in the neglected shrubbery, it occurred to her that a few in a glass of water would be a tempting addition to the breakfast table, so she plucked them, and retired indoors to procure a glass.

The shrill whistling of a popular song warned her that the boys were stirring, so she made haste to get the dining-room dusted and the cloth laid. Not being very experienced in house work, her dusting was of a very superficial nature, and she forgot the table legs altogether. Nevertheless, the dining-room presented a very tidy appearance when she was done with it. She ran down to the

kitchen to wash her hands, and in her absence Mrs. Vivian came downstairs. She was vexed with herself for having overslept, and, as she thought, given Betty too much to do. When lo! up comes Ursula, fresh and red as a rose from her second ablution, and wearing still the fantastic head-dress.

"Good morning, dearest, sweetest of mothers," cried Ursula, whose spirits had risen with the morning.

"Good morning, dear; have you been down beside Betty? I'm sorry I slept so long."

"You need not be, mum," said Betty's voice, "for Miss Ursula's been up since goodness only knows when, and she's cleaned the dining-room, and set the table, and everything."

Mrs. Vivian entered the dining-room, saw that it was in perfect readiness, and turned to Ursula with a tender kiss.

"My helpful daughter," was all she said, but was it not enough, ay, more than enough, for Ursula?

"Didn't I tell you I was going to do everything for you, mother mine?" she said, gaily. "When do the boys generally make their appearance?"

"They drop in one by one, Ursula," answered

Mrs. Vivian. "We seem to be unable to keep regular hours here. I have made all sorts of rules, but they seem made only to be broken. I——"

"Hulloa! here's an Indian Begum or a princess of the Fiji Islands," cried Tom's voice in the doorway, and with one bound he sprang to Ursula, caught one end of the anti-macassar, and caused her to execute a war dance through the room. In the middle of the interesting performance Mr. Vivian entered, looking gravely displeased.

"Tom, leave your sister alone," he said, sternly. "Ursula, I am ashamed to see that you are still the hoyden whose unladylike behaviour made us forget your sex. Mamma, I wonder you do not check them."

"It is only a little harmless nonsense, Geoffrey," said Mrs. Vivian, quietly. "We cannot expect Ursula to be an old woman all at once."

"Harmless nonsense, indeed; it is very unbecoming to a young woman. My sister Frances at eighteen was as sedate and dignified as she is now," said Mr. Vivian.

Tom made a grimace, which nearly upset Ursula.

"I'd rather see Ursula like a red Indian than a

poker like Aunt Frances. She's enough to hurt you, even to look at," said Tom, daringly, and immediately made his exit to escape his father's scathing rebuke.

Mr. Vivian rang the bell furiously, which brought Betty up with the breakfast, and Geoffrey having appeared, the meal was begun.

Ursula sat silent, keeping her eyes on her plate, but she noted, oh, very keenly, how little her mother ate. There was not much to tempt the appetite truly, coffee and bread and butter being all that was on the table, except the dainty morsel of chicken which lay on Mr. Vivian's plate.

It was an unsociable meal, and Ursula began to feel for the first time in her life that there was some mistake, some jarring discord, in the home life, and she made a silent resolution to do her best to improve matters. She had won a great victory already that morning by keeping a bridle on her tongue while her father was speaking. In times gone it would not have cost her a qualm to speak back, smartly and even impertinently; but, if she was to be of any use to those she loved, if she was to do good to her unruly brothers, she must first be gentle and humble herself.

Tom did not appear in the dining-room again,

but coaxed a few scraps from Betty, and in about fifteen minutes Ursula heard him go whistling down the avenue. She looked out and saw that he had his books under his arm, and was evidently off to school. It was a fortnight yet till breaking up at Kessington Grammar School.

Presently Geoffrey and the others followed him. Mr. Vivian went out with his campstool and his newspaper to the lawn, and Ursula was left alone with her mother.

"Now, mother, what do I do next?" she said. "Wash cups or make beds?"

"Betty will wash up the things, dear; you can come and help me to make the beds, if you like; that is always my work."

Ursula was rather a harum-scarum housewife. She made a gale flapping the sheets up and down, and caused pillows to fly about in rather an alarming fashion; but she was strong and very willing, did not mind being scolded or laughed at for awkwardness, so she was a most promising pupil.

"Now, that is so much. You are a great help, Ursula," said Mrs. Vivian. "I am going down to see after dinner, and you can read or play, or go outside. There is nothing particular to do now."

"Very well, mamma," said Ursula, and suddenly taking her mother in her arms with a grip which hurt, she murmured passionately, "My own, own mamma, how I love you; I could die for you, I verily believe!" Then she dashed off, humming a song, and her mother saw her no more for hours.

Ursula only went up a garret on an exploring expedition. The attic flat of the house was only used as a place for stowing lumber, and there was plenty of it in the shape of old trunks, broken furniture, and every conceivable kind of rubbish.

There were three apartments, and Ursula went from one to another eyeing them with a critical air and as if she had some object in view. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision, for she threw open the funny little diamond-paned window in the smallest room, and immediately began to carry the lumber out of it into the other. When it was quite empty she glanced ruefully at the cobwebbed roof, the dusty walls and floor, for a few minutes, and then darted off to the kitchen like an arrow. No one was there, so she purloined Betty's broom and dust-pan and flew upstairs again. Then she tied a piece of an old counterpane round her head, pinned up her gown, and set to work. In about half-an-hour there was a considerable improvement

in the appearance of the place, but the floor looked as if it would be infinitely the better for an application of a washing-cloth, so Ursula stole down again, and after a hasty scramble got a pail, emptied the kettle of its contents, and triumphantly retired.

She had to get off her knees sometimes to laugh at the thought of what Isabel Fortescue and the rest would say if they saw her now. She gave the floor a vigorous scrubbing, washed all the cobwebs off the window panes, and then regarded her work with unalloyed satisfaction. The walls had no plaster on them, to be sure, and the traces of sweeping with a not too clean broom were very visible on the whitewash, but all the cobwebs and the spiders were demolished, the floor was respectably clean, and if the window was rubbed up Ursula's first attempt at house-cleaning was complete. She set the pail on the landing outside, took off her head-dress, and worked as vigorously on the glass panes. She paused often to watch the sunny picture which stretched away beyond the low-lying roofs of Kessington, a beautiful picture of hill and dale, green meadow and dark woodland, and waving corn almost white unto harvest.

A great rugged beech tree grew just at that end of the house. Its topmost bough reached far above the windows; its green leaves made a pleasant shade from the burning midsummer sun. When the window was duly polished Ursula retired into the larger attic to select certain articles of furniture for the sanctum. It was a rueful collection of dilapidated articles, some of them ancient enough to be almost curiosities in their way. Ursula proceeded first to examine an ebony table lying face downwards on the floor, with three scratched and chipped legs sticking appealingly into the air. She turned it up, propped it against the wall, and regarded it with favour. It was the very thing if she could but find its missing leg. She proceeded to hunt for it, but in vain, so the next course was to find a leg of something else and make it do duty on the table. To her delight she came upon a paper of small nails and a hammer, which Mrs. Vivian had mislaid in the garret; so she would be saved another journey downstairs in search of these articles. After considerable deliberation she knocked the leg off another small old-fashioned tea-table, which had been laid aside because one of its folding ends was broken in two, and proceeded to nail it on the vacant place. By

a lucky chance it was exactly the proper height, so to her joy the table stood perfectly steady on three black legs and a brown one. She carried it into her sanctum, set it against the wall near the window, taking care to place the brown leg in the shadow, and then stood back to admire her ingenuity. She was getting on famously. All she wanted now was a chair and a strip of carpet for the floor. So back she went to the curiosity shop. All the chairs but one lacked either one or two legs, and that one had a broken back. Ursula surveyed it meditatively for a minute or so, and then knocked the back off entirely with the hammer, thus making a four-legged stool, which was exactly what she wanted, if it were but high enough. Unfortunately it was not, but that could easily be remedied by putting a bassock on it when she wanted to sit at the table. A strip of faded Brussels was found, one of which was laid in front of the hearth, the other at the table. Then indeed Ursula's labours were ended, her study ready; she had nothing to do now but get a box for her manuscript, carry up pens, ink and paper, and begin. No young housekeeper ever felt such a glow of loving pride over her pretty drawing-room as Ursula Vivian felt over her attic sanctum that summer morning. Her face

was beaming through the smudges on it; her heart was as light and hopeful as a feather. She must, however, see that there was a key for the door, for her secret would not long be hid from the boys, and if Tom once found his way into her den, farewell for ever to her peace of mind and body! The key-hole was empty, so she lifted the pail and proceeded downstairs. On the drawing-room flat she encountered her mother, who looked dumbfoundered amazement at the grimy figure carrying the pail of dirty water.

"Child, what have you been doing? I have been looking for you!" she exclaimed.

"I've been up garret, mamma," laughed Ursula, "fitting up a chamber of horrors. Come and see;" and she set the pail on the drawing-room mat and turned upstairs again, followed by her amused and wondering mother.

"Don't say I can't clean house," she said, flinging open the door of the transformed attic. "'Will you walk into my parlour?' said the spider to the fly. All the spiders are dead and drowned, mamma. And what a lot there were! They ran up and down me like anything. I believe there's some roosting in my hair yet."

"My dear, you have certainly done wonders

here, but what is it meant for—"a place to study in, or what?" said Mrs. Vivian.

"It's an author's den, mamma," said Ursula, more soberly. "Seriously, I think I can write, mamma; at least I am going to try my hand, and I wanted a quiet place away from the boys. I've been carpentering, too; didn't you hear the hammering?"

"No, we can't hear any noise from the attics downstairs, you know, owing to the construction of the walls and ceilings, I suppose," answered Mrs. Vivian. "You have done very well, Ursula, and I wish my daughter every success."

Ursula turned and kissed her mother, gravely and quietly.

"You will not tell, mamma, honour bright," she said, with a little rippling smile.

"I shall be dumb," Mrs. Vivian laughed back.

So the study was set in order. Little dreamed either of the two who laughed that morning what great things were to be done in it, and what widespread influences for good were to emanate by-and-by from the garret of Kessington Grange!

CHAPTER IV.

A BITTER HOUR.

"MAMMA, how long is it since Robert was home?" asked Ursula one morning a few days later.

"He was down for a few days at Christmas, dear," returned Mrs. Vivian. "He does not care very much about The Grange, Ursula. Your father and he do not get on very well together."

"It is eighteen months since I saw him," said Ursula, with a great sigh, "and he never writes to me. What a funny family we are, mamma! Why did Robert choose to go to London and begin business? The Vivians used always to be professional, were they not?"

"Yes; but it was stern necessity in Robert's case, Ursula. There will be no college course for any of the present Vivians."

Ursula opened wide her eyes.

"For none of them? Why, mamma, Charlie must be a minister. Would you not like to see the youngest of the boys a clergyman?"

"Like it?" echoed Mrs. Vivian, bitterly. "When you grow older, Ursula, you will learn that it is not what we would like in this world that falls to our lot, rather the reverse."

Never had Ursula heard her gentle mother speak with so much bitterness, and another question forced itself from her lips, before she was aware of it.

"Is papa's income smaller than it was? Are the farms let at a lower rental, or what, that money is such a scarce commodity with us now?"

"Farms!" re-echoed Mrs. Vivian. "Come and look here, Ursula."

In considerable astonishment Ursula joined her mother in the window. Mrs. Vivian pointed with her thin finger to the meadow lying at the foot of the Scaur.

"That and two other fields are all that remain to us of the Grange lands, Ursula; their rental all the Vivians have to live upon. My slender fortune is all gone long ago; so you see I was right in saying there could be no college course for any of my sons. This must be Geoffrey's last session at Kessington, and I must bestir myself, for your

father will not, about getting him something to do."

She did not speak complainingly, the time had been gone for that, but there was an undertone of hopelessness and despair almost in her voice which went to Ursula's heart like a knife. She had not dreamed things were so bad as this. In that moment many things she had marvelled over, even in her unthinking girlhood, were made plain to her. The meagre table, the shabby clothes, the lack of needful domestic help in the house,—all had their explanation now. One thing, however, required to be cleared up to Ursula's satisfaction.

"Mamma, where did the money come from to pay my bills at Aldborough? They were long ones, I know."

Mrs. Vivian's face flushed, but the truth could not be kept from Ursula now.

"The Misses Warner were old and dear friends of mine when I was a girl like you, Ursula. Fortune had been very kind to them, not so kind to me. Can't you guess how it was?"

The hot blood rushed to face, neck, cheek, and brow, dyeing even her finger tips. Better, far better, she thought, that she had been taught to read and write at home, rather than receive

the highest education without payment; but, for her mother's sake, she kept her thought unspoken. There was no more said on the subject then, and presently Ursula, taking thought of her neglected household duties, left the room slowly and went downstairs for a broom and dust-pan. As she neared the kitchen door she heard Betty in conversation, or rather altercation, with some tradesman out in the back-yard.

Peering through the scullery window, and seeing a butcher's van in the yard, she lifted her broom and was about to retire, when a sentence fell on her ear which made her stand still.

"Well, all I can say, missis, is that you can't get any more meat till there is cash paid down for what's gone," said a man's voice rudely and sullenly. "Them's my orders. My master's not goin' to be took in as Barnes was. He's only beginnin' business, an' has a lot of mouths to feed, tell the squire; an' he's as good a right to live as the squire has—better, indeed, for he's an honest man."

Ursula waited to hear no more. Dropping her broom, she rushed upstairs and into her mother's presence with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Mamma, there's a man at the kitchen door—a butcher's man—quarrelling with Betty. He seems

to want money, and he is insulting papa. Give me what you have and let me go down to him."

Mrs. Vivian shook her head.

"What I have by me, Ursula, would be of no use. We owe him nearly £40."

Ursula absolutely stared.

"Mamma," she gasped, "have we fallen so low as to be a butt for all the vulgar, spiteful impertinence of tradesmen's boys? Do we eat meat every day which has not been paid for? Tell me, it is some mistake."

"Sit down, Ursula, and hear me speak," said Mrs. Vivian, her white lips quivering sorely. "It is time now that you knew all the truth—time you were told of the burden which has been killing me for years. Yes, time," she added, under her breath, "for the burden ere long will change hands."

But Ursula could not sit down. She paced to and fro the room like a caged lion, while her mother recited to her all the pecuniary embarrassments which you already know something of. When done, Ursula ran out of the room up to her garret and locked the door. She did not sit down to cry or to fret over the terrible humiliation and degradation of the Vivians. No; she drew her stool over to the table, sat down, and opened the box which

contained her manuscript, written and unwritten. She crushed all the closely filled papers up in her hand, tossed them into the empty grate, and drawing a clean sheet towards her, lifted her pen.

Her lips were compressed, her brows knit, her whole face set in grim resolution. She had found her life-work now. Henceforth there must be no idle scribbling of sentimental verse or comic prose for her own amusement; no, henceforth it must be writing in dead earnest, with a settled aim in view. It was possible, with her one talent, to redeem the honour of the Vivians; to lift the load of carking care from her mother's heart; aye, and to shame her father in his selfish indolent indulgence, in his sinful neglect of his most sacred duties! Before she wrote a word that morning Ursula registered her vow, first to consecrate her power to the service of the Lord; and second, to know no weariness nor fainting, to occupy every available minute of her leisure hours in her study; and thirdly, to devote entirely whatever proceeds she might derive from her labours to one aim.

She dropped her head down upon the page for a brief moment, and up from the depths of her sore heart went the voiceless prayer:

"God help me; God give me strength and power to fulfil my vow; God bless my work."

So Ursula's first book was born in pain, cradled in prayer; its first pages written in what was to her a dark hour indeed. I am not sure that it was not better so. It gave to her writing a deeper earnestness, and was the mainspring of that exquisite pathos which by-and-by was to be the marvel of reviewers and readers alike.

It was Saturday, and the boys came home at one o'clock, with a programme ready for the disposal of their half-holiday.

"Where's Ursula?" shouted Tom, the moment he was in at the door.

"Ursula's busy, dear," said his mother, who had stolen upstairs a little while before, and peeped in upon Ursula unawares.

"Busy where? What with? We want her to go camping up the Scaur as we used to in the jolly old days. She promised these two Saturdays, but it always rained."

"Come and get your dinner first, and I'll see about Ursula," said Mrs. Vivian; but Tom, throwing down his books, proceeded upstairs to look for his sister.

"She's up garret, of course," he paused to shout

over the railing. "She's up to something, and I'm bound to find out what it is."

Being a cunning youth, Tom slipped off his boots at the foot of the attic stair, in order to catch Ursula unawares. Her door was a little ajar, and he had a good view of the room and its occupant. At the table sat Ursula, writing with a speed which seemed miraculous to the slow-handed youth who watched her. I wish I could describe to you the expression which came on Tom Vivian's face at the discovery of Ursula's secret occupation. Incredulity, amazement, and unalloyed disgust, all combined to make his broad face a study.

"Hulloa! I'd like to know the meaning of this, anyhow," he said at length, and advanced boldly into the room. Ursula started up, and then laughed. She was not so miserable yet but that she could laugh, and heartily, too.

"You're not going to take to writing books, of all awful things," said Tom. "Say, isn't it only a lark, old girl?"

"No, it isn't a lark; it's real earnest, Tom," said Ursula, with a strange deep gravity which almost appalled him; it was so unlike Ursula. "Don't look so unutterably horrified," she added, in a

lighter voice; "I'm not going to turn into a dragon, or a blue-stocking, or anything."

"If you go on writing books, goodness only knows what you'll turn into, I don't," said Tom. "Well, I came to see if you'd camp up the Scaur this jolly afternoon; but I suppose it's no use?"

"Yes, of course I will," said Ursula, pleasantly. "My head aches anyway, and I could not go on much longer. Is dinner ready, and are the rest home?"

"Yes; come on," cried Tom, his face clearing at the unexpected consent. "I believe it is a lark, Ursula. Women who write books never go camping with boys, do they?"

"What do they do then?" asked Ursula, beginning to gather up her manuscript.

"Sit round in a dirty room in a trailing frock and inky face and hands, and frighten men out of their wits," said Tom; with which startling revelation of the habits of authors he retired, leaving Ursula to follow at her leisure.

"You have been very busy, dear," said Mrs. Vivian when Ursula entered the dining-room. "I looked in upon you, but you were so absorbed I think you did not hear me."

"No, I did not hear, mamma," said Ursula, with

her old smile, which told the anxious mother that the first sharpness of the blow was past, and that peace reigned again in her daughter's heart.

She entered with her usual zest into the boys' discussion of their plans, and made original suggestions to add to the enjoyment of their excursion up the Scaur. The talk was more unrestrained than usual, for Mr. Vivian had ridden up to the market town, ten miles distant, and would not be home till evening. The Grange stables had long been empty, but Mr. Vivian was never at a loss for a steed when he wanted one, his reputation as a borrower being established in Kessington and the neighbourhood. That morning Mr. Sandon of the Grange farm had reluctantly lent the Squire a high-spirited young mare, newly broken, and had seen him depart with considerable misgiving. But Mr. Vivian had laughed his plainly expressed apprehensions to scorn, and ridden away gaily, his fine figure showing to advantage in the saddle.

When dinner was over the boys retired to array themselves in sundry old garments, which could not be much harmed by scrambling up the rocky sides of the Scaur, and Ursula was about to follow to pack a basket of eatables when her mother detained her a moment.

"Ursula, you will tell mamma what plan there is maturing in your mind. I can fathom something of its nature from your eyes."

"Yes, mamma. I am going to try with my whole soul to turn my gift to good account. I have registered a vow that my hands will clear the honour of the Vivians, and that I shall lift the terrible burden from your heart; and with God's help I think I shall succeed," said Ursula, with shining eyes.

"I pray God to prosper you, my daughter," said Mrs. Vivian, and drew Ursula very close to her.

CHAPTER V.

UP THE SCAUR.

IT was an exquisite and beautiful thing to see how very dear Ursula Vivian was to all her brothers. They made fun of her, teased her, played endless tricks upon her, but they worshipped the very ground on which she trod. They formed a small regiment round her at the door, Geoffrey carrying her waterproof cloak for fear of rain, Tom the basket of eatables, Fred the battered tin kettle, which had done service so often on similar occasions; and last, but not least, Charlie had under his arm a brown paper parcel containing sticks and matches. Ursula had bethought herself of the sticks, for in all probability the pieces they might gather on the way would be soaked with the recent rain.

"Say, Ursula," said Tom, as they passed out of the woods into the meadow, "guess who's going to picnic with us to-day?"

"Nobody, I would fondly hope, considering the elegant appearance we present, and the somewhat meagre nature of our provisions."

"Well, Robinson's coming. He saw you in Kessington with mamma yesterday, and he's hopelessly smitten, so out of pity I invited him up the Scaur."

Ursula laughed, knowing Tom was speaking perfect nonsense.

"That is a very stupid joke," she said. "Who's that coming across the meadow?"

Tom's eyes were like needles, and could recognise people he knew from a great distance.

"It's Mrs. Abbot and Miss Agnes and Laurence, junior. I heard the fellows saying to-day that he came from Oxford last night," he answered, promptly. "Let's go and speak to them, Ursula. Laurence Abbot is the jolliest fellow in the world, I tell you, though they say he's the cleverest student at Oxford."

Ursula looked down at her woefully shabby gown, her ungloved hands, and laughed merrily.

"All right, I want to see Agnes Abbot, and I don't mind how I look; so come on."

So the party made straight for the Abbots, and there was quite a Babel of greetings.

I need not describe the Abbots at length. A few words will suffice to introduce them to you.

Mrs. Abbot was a gentlewoman and a mother, the light of her own home and the idol of the boys under her husband's charge. Her daughter was her counterpart, with the added charms of youth and girlish grace. Agnes Abbot was sweet and pleasant to look at because of these things, but her brother Laurence was undeniably handsome. He stood six feet in his shoes, and carried his fine figure with ease and grace. His face was a pleasant one to see, because of its frank, manly expression, and because of the lurking spirit of fun in his deep grey eyes. They twinkled unmistakably when they lighted on the picnic party, and when Ursula looked up into his face and smiled comically he laughed outright.

He remembered that wild brown little girl who used to come and play with Agnes long ago, but he had not seen Ursula for years.

"My dear, why have you never come to see us?" asked Mrs. Abbot, in gentle reproof.

"Because I did not like," answered Ursula, with perfect candour. "I have wanted to see Agnes dreadfully often, but I could never summon up courage to present myself."

"If you have grown so shy, you are not the Ursula I used to know," said Agnes, with a mischievous smile.

Ursula laughed at the memory of certain escapades Agnes and she had shared in these long-gone, but still-remembered, days.

"You *will* come now, though, Ursula," said Mrs. Abbot, kindly.

"Thank you, I will, some day. If mamma could come with me," she added, with a little wistful sigh. "But she is not strong, you see."

Laurence Abbot was busy talking with the boys, but he was watching Ursula closely, and heard every word she uttered.

"I will come down and drive your mamma and you up to Kessington one of these days, if you will permit me, Miss Ursula?" he said.

"Thanks, I should like it of all things," responded Ursula, promptly. "And I'll hunt up some gloves and things, so that the good folk of Kessington may not take fits, like you, when they see me." With which characteristic speech Ursula offered her hand to Mrs. Abbot, saying they must be going, or they would be too late of reaching home at night.

"I don't know what Ursula Vivian would look

like if she were dressed as other girls are," said Mrs. Abbot. "As it is, I must say she presents rather a comical appearance."

"I like Ursula, mamma," said Agnes, "and I hope she will come and see us. There is no nonsense about her, and she is such fun."

"Ten years after this Miss Vivian will be the handsomest woman in Kessington, see if I'm not right," said Laurence. "She has glorious eyes, and as you say, Agnes, there is no nonsense about her. She will be a splendid woman some day."

"I am very sorry for her," said Mrs. Abbot, in her gentle, motherly way. "Her mother is evidently far gone in decline, and their affairs are in a frightful state, your father says. There must be a great crash some day."

"I'd like to horsewhip old Vivian," said Laurence Abbot, with boyish irreverence. "He's the meanest old vagabond in Christendom."

"Strong language, my son," said Mrs. Abbot.

"No stronger than the occasion warrants, mother mine," said Laurence lightly, and the subject of the Vivians was dismissed.

Meanwhile the picnic party had managed to get across the swollen stream at the base of the Scaur without more serious mishap than the loss of the

sticks, which Charlie let drop as he tried to find footing on some perilous stepping-stones. The matches were fortunately rescued, and they proceeded to climb up the steep side of the Scaur, hoping to find some firewood on the summit. It was hard work, and they had to pause often for breath, but at length their climb was over, and they stood on the green hill-top and looked down on the clustering roofs of Kessington, lying far below. Ursula could have feasted her eyes on the beautiful panorama for hours, but the boys were impatient for tea, and began at once to build a fireplace of loose stones, while the younger ones went hunting for sticks.

"I'll look after the fire, Ursula," said Tom, "if you'll get out the things. Oh, I say, we've forgotten to fill the kettle."

Each one looked blankly at the other, and at last Geoffrey volunteered to descend the hill and get the most indispensable element for tea-drinking; but Tom, snatching the kettle without a word, went flying down over the slippery stones with a speed which occasioned Ursula some anxiety for the safety of his neck.

The fire was built and kindling beautifully when Tom returned with the full kettle, so it was

planted firmly in the middle of the flames, and in an incredibly short time was singing gaily. Needless to say that their meal was enjoyed. They were as hungry as hawks, and though the tea savoured of smoke it was pronounced to be splendid.

"Tell us a story, Ursula," cried Charlie. "You always used to, you know, up the Scaur. Didn't she, Tom?"

"Yes. Come on, Ursula, a real adventure, one with plenty of ghosts and robbers and fearful things in it. We can sit ever so long up here; it's so jolly and warm, and the sun won't be down for hours."

Ursula looked towards the west, and shook her head.

"He will be down in one hour, or less, Tom. Can't we be quiet for a little while. I don't mind any stories just now," she said.

"Tell the one you are writing up garret," suggested Tom, slily.

Ursula blushed, and Geoffrey looked mystified.

"You wouldn't like it; besides, I don't know the end of it yet," said Ursula. "Suppose we talk together—a real nice chat, you know, about all we are going to be and do in the future."

"You first, then," said the incorrigible. "Tell us what kind of a frock you'll have on when you marry Robinson, and who are to be the bridesmaids. That's the kind of talk girls like, isn't it?"

Again Ursula's hand was applied with some force to Tom's ear.

"That's the kind of punishment small boys get when they are pert to their elder sisters," she said. "Geoffrey, tell us what you are going to do?"

"I know. He's going to buy a piano and sail away in a balloon with it," said Tom. "Well, Ursula, if you'll tell us really all you are going to do, I'll sit quiet and be dumb. Come on."

"Very well," said Ursula, half-dreamily. "Well, do you see all the lands round and round the Grange, boys?"

"Yes!" they cried in chorus.

"Once they all belonged to the Vivians, and I'm going to buy them all back again."

"How?" cried Tom. "You haven't any money, not a copper! for you couldn't lend me a penny for toffee the other day."

"I'm going to make it," said Ursula, more dreamily still. "I'm going to work hard and be successful."

"Oh, I know you're going to write books up garret," said Tom, half scornfully.

Ursula nodded.

"And, Ursula, when you have made all the money and bought back the lands, what will you do? That won't be the end of your life," said Geoffrey.

"I hope not, Geoffrey, but at present I look no further than that."

"I'll tell you. She'll marry Robinson, or perhaps Laurence Abbot, and live happily ever after."

Ursula reddened, and turning to Geoffrey, said it was his turn.

"Well, I'd like to go to Germany," said Geoffrey, timidly almost, for he was making public a very cherished dream. "I'd like to go and study under Wagner or Litsz, and compose music like them. And that's what I mean to do if I can."

"We'll shake hands. We are kindred spirits," said Ursula, laughing a little, but speaking earnestly too; and brother and sister shook hands over it accordingly.

For a wonder Tom didn't laugh.

"Well, I have nothing to say; I haven't any ambition; and when I grow up I don't know what I'll do with myself," he said. "Spend my days

in humble obscurity, and live off my rich relations."

"I'm going to sea," said Fred, without a moment's hesitation.

"And I'm going to be a clergyman, and preach every Sunday, like Mr. Gresham," said Charlie. "I'd like to stand in the pulpit and swing my arms about like he does."

They all laughed, but presently Ursula turned to Charlie, and, laying her hand on his shoulder, said in a low voice: "Yes, Charlie, I hope to see you in Mr. Gresham's pulpit some day, and I'll just give you a text now for your first sermon."

"Well?"

They all waited breathlessly, and after a few minutes' quiet her answer came, in a very grave voice: "Owe no man anything, but to love one another."

Ursula's text seemed to sober them somehow, though none of the boys knew anything of the feelings which had prompted her to say it, nor suspected its hidden meaning. She rose and began to gather the cups together in the basket. Geoffrey sat still, watching with dreamy eyes the crimson setting of the sun, while Tom and the

others amused themselves silently by setting little stones rolling, and watching them chasing each other out of sight.

"I think we'd best be moving, boys," said Ursula, by-and-by. "Mamma told us not to be late."

"All right," said Tom, picking himself up, and lifting the basket. "This hasn't been such a jolly camping as we used to have. It must be your blame, Ursula."

"Perhaps it is," assented Ursula. "I am afraid I shall never have such jolly campings again."

"Why?" asked Geoffrey.

"Because I'm getting to be a woman, I suppose. I must begin and feel pokey and old," said Ursula; a statement which so disgusted Tom that he set off at a trot down hill, to the music of the crockery rattling in the basket. He kept ahead of them all the way, whistling to himself, but paused at the wicket opening from the meadow into the woods.

"I hope you've had a pretty quiet walk, Sobersides," he said to Ursula.

She did not answer. There was a strange sinking at her heart, a prevision of evil, for which she could not account, and which she did not care to speak to her brothers.

Tom trotted off again, grimacing violently, and presently they were at home. The front door was wide open, and at sound of Tom's whistling Betty came running out, holding up a warning finger.

"Hush, hush!" she said, in a strange awe-struck voice. "Step light, boys, for there's come an awful trouble on the house. Miss Ursula, dear, your father got thrown from that wild horse outside Kessington, and ——" She paused, unable to complete the sentence.

"I knew," said Ursula, with a strange quiet calm. "Papa is dead, Betty. Let me go to mamma."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF LIFE AND DEATH.

IT was a strange, still, miserable house next day. The boys crept about on tip-toe, looking as if they did not know what to do with themselves. They avoided the western room, where the quiet sleeper lay, waiting to be carried to his last rest; but they would creep often to the door of another room, to knock softly and ask Ursula how mamma was now. The shock had utterly prostrated Mrs. Vivian, and she lay white and still upon her bed—so still, indeed, that Ursula, watching beside her, sometimes feared she too had slipped away. The physician had come in the morning, and had shaken his head. He looked at Ursula keenly and curiously, as if to judge whether she was able to bear his verdict. Then he called her outside, and laid his kind hand on her shoulder.

"The heart's action is frightfully weak," he said.

"The whole system has received a shock which, in its present condition, is very serious—nay more, absolutely dangerous."

Ursula lifted her eyes to the doctor's face, and asked, oh so calmly—"Is my mother's recovery a matter of question, Dr. Hall?"

"It is, Miss Vivian, a matter of very grave question indeed."

Ursula heard, and was calm with the calmness of despair.

"I shall look in again in the evening. My dear, I would advise you to take care of yourself," said the physician, disturbed by the strangeness of Ursula's look and manner. "There may be much for you to do in the sick-room yet."

Only "may be." These words rang their changes in Ursula's ears, but she only lifted her eyes somewhat wonderingly to the doctor's face, and asked if he had any charge to leave concerning his patient.

"She is asleep now," said the doctor. "Do not wake her, for sleep is life. But when she does awake give her the medicine, as I directed. Good morning."

Mechanically Ursula returned his good-bye, and went back to the sick-room. The blinds were closely drawn, but a stray sunbeam crept in at the corner, and touched lovingly the white face on the

pillow. Ursula knelt down by the bed, and fixed her eyes on it. She had never felt such a dead, stony feeling in her heart. She had read of mental anguish which dried up the well-springs of natural grief, anguish without tears or outward sign of any kind, and this was it. She looked on the sweet face so deathly pale, at the long lashes sweeping the cheek, at the white lips with the strange blue lines encircling them, then bowed her head and tried to pray. But she could not. Her lips were dumb, her heart would not uplift itself even to ask that the beloved might be spared. While she knelt, there came a low tap to the door, and Betty entered with a telegram in her hand.

"What did the doctor say, Miss Ursula?" asked the faithful soul, her eyes overflowing.

"There is no change since last night; he cannot tell how it will end," returned Ursula, breaking the seal of the envelope. "This is from Robert. Are the boys about, Betty?"

"Yes, Miss, hanging round downstairs. Poor things, it makes my heart sore to see 'em."

"Come away down then, Betty. Mamma is asleep. She needs no watching for a few minutes," said Ursula, and they stole softly downstairs to find Tom sitting disconsolately on the bottom step.

Ursula laid her hand gently on his bent head, and tried to say something to comfort him, but failed.

"Mamma is much the same; no worse, at any rate," she whispered. "This is a telegram from Robert. He will be here at once. Some of you had better go to the station and meet him. You and Charlie, and Fred perhaps. Geoffrey might be needed while you are gone."

Tom got up—glad, thankful for something to do—took up his cap, and went out to tell the rest. Then Ursula stole down to the kitchen to see what there was in the house for dinner. It was strange how, even in her great agony, she was so mindful of little things. Not one needful duty escaped her memory. She thought of everything and everybody, as she had need, since all were dependent upon her. When she had given Betty all necessary directions she stole upstairs again, but before entering her mother's room a strange impulse bade her cross the corridor and enter the chamber of death. She did so very quietly, but her heart was beating wildly, for Ursula Vivian had never yet looked upon the face of death. The night before she had been entirely occupied with her stricken mother, and other hands had prepared the Squire of Kessington Grange for his burial.

In this room also the blind was down, but Ursula, before glancing at the bed, drew it up to the top, and admitted the full glory of the sunshine. Then she approached the bed, turned down the sheet, and looked upon her father's face. It was perfect peace. His death had been immediate and painless. There was not a trace of struggle on his face. There stole into Ursula's heart as she looked a strange deep peace, and before she was aware her eyes were blinded by tears.

In that moment she remembered all that was good and loveable in her father; remembered only his kind words and looks—all the rest was forgotten. Into her heart, too, there crept bitter pain over her own past conduct, unavailing regret, a great longing that she might but whisper into ears which heard all her love, all her sorrow for the lack of daughterly tenderness and care. It is ever thus; our grief over our loved and lost would be less hard to bear were it robbed of the sting of self-reproach. Oh, that we had done more! is our constant cry; oh, for one, only one, opportunity to gladden the quiet heart with a word of unutterable love, to ease our own burden by one prayer for forgiveness. Too late!

Ursula knelt down there and prayed for forgive-

ness, for help, for strength, for endurance, and rose comforted. Bending over the lifeless figure she touched the brow with her lips.

"Farewell, my father, I know now how I have loved you."

Then she stole back to her mother's bedside, to watch and wait and pray. About two o'clock she heard footsteps approaching the house, and rising she drew aside the blinds and looked out. It was eighteen months since she had seen her brother Robert, and during that time he had grown more manly in appearance. He was very like Ursula, but his face lacked something that hers possessed. It was a hard, stern face to see in one so young —the face of one who had done firm battle in the field of life. After that look Ursula dropped the blind with a sigh, and, stepping from the room, stole down to welcome him.

She came so softly that Robert, busy with his portmanteau at the lobby, was unaware of her presence till she spoke.

"Robert, I am glad you have come."

He wheeled round, looked her all over with his keen eyes before he kissed her. He was astonished at the change in Ursula, she looked so old and worn and sad.

"This is a bad business, Ursula," he said curtly. "How is my mother?"

"Come into the dining-room, Robert. Dinner is served I think, and I will tell you all about it while we eat. Time is precious now," said Ursula. "Call Geoffrey, please Tom, he is outside somewhere. We cannot ring the bell, you know."

Ursula sat down with the rest, but Robert noticed that while attending to the wants of others she touched nothing herself.

Before the meal was half over she rose.

"I must go upstairs again," she said, in a hurried, restless way. "If mamma is awake I shall tell her you have come, and call you, Robert."

"Has Ursula been up all night, Geoffrey?" asked Robert, when she had left the room.

"Yes, she has been with mamma ever since it happened, you know," said Geoffrey. "She looks ill, don't you think?"

"She does. Will you take me up to the room where my father is?" said Robert.

"I'd rather not," replied Geoffrey, timidly, and Robert's lip curled at what he thought an exhibition of womanish weakness.

"I'll come," said Charlie, void of fear on his own

account, though he had been influenced by the behaviour of the others.

So the eldest and the youngest of the brothers went upstairs together. At the door, however, Robert turned, and bidding Charlie run downstairs, entered alone. He did not stay many minutes, and as he closed the door Ursula looked out of her mother's room and beckoned to him.

"Mamma is awake. I have told her you are here. You had better come in now," she whispered, and Robert Vivian obeyed her noiselessly.

When he came to the bedside he could not speak. His feelings were deeply seated and difficult to reach, but his love for his mother was almost a passion with him.

Mrs. Vivian held his hand in both of hers, looked up into his face, and shook her head.

"I am glad you have been able to come, Robert; I was afraid," she said, with difficulty. "This is a sudden change. You will be kind to your sister and brothers, my son, when they have no one else?"

"There is surely no need to ask, mother," said Robert, huskily.

Mrs. Vivian looked satisfied, and then her eyes wandered from his face in search of another dearer even than her first-born son.

"Ursula!"

"I am here, mamma," said Ursula, choking back her rebellious grief.

Robert Vivian stood back a little, and watching Ursula's gentle, womanly tenderness marvelled greatly, for this was not the wild tomboy who had generally grated on his sensibilities, but instead a sweet, helpful woman, with gentle hands and a low, soothing voice—a very angel in a sick-room. Ah, there were possibilities in Ursula's nature undreamed of by many besides her brother Robert.

A few sympathising friends called at Kessington Grange in the course of that day and the next, but Ursula, absolutely refusing to leave her mother, saw none of them. Among the first to come were Laurence and Agnes Abbot. Robert Vivian made all the necessary arrangements, and upon the third day they carried Geoffrey Vivian the elder to his last rest in Kessington churchyard. Ursula alone remained at home, but from the window she watched the sad procession out of sight, and then went back to her now unconscious mother. Doctor Hall had told her plainly that morning that there was no hope now, and that it was only a question of hours. He could not tell whether she would recover consciousness before

the end, but thought it improbable. Ursula, knowing all this, kept calm, but all that day she went about with a constant prayer in her heart that there might be recognition at the end, a last look and word to cherish in the desolation at hand. Her prayer was answered. The brothers returned from Kessington about four o'clock, and Ursula called them all up at once, for she observed a tremor in her mother's white lids which seemed to indicate the return of consciousness.

While they watched, a sad-eyed band, the mother opened her eyes.

"Are they all here, Ursula?" she asked, clearly and distinctly.

"All here, mamma," Ursula answered.

"That is good. Love one another, stick close together, and never forget God," she murmured. "Ursula, my darling, I leave them all with you."

These were her last words.

Even as they looked, another Watcher stole into the room, and the happy spirit recognising Him and obeying His call, exchanged a cross for a crown, and went to "be with Christ, which is far better."

"It is all over, Ursula," said Robert Vivian. "Orphaned in three short days. How great is the mystery of life!"

CHAPTER VII.

PLANS AND HOPES.

"URSULA, I must return to London to-morrow," said Robert Vivian. It was the evening of the day in which Mrs. Vivian had been laid to rest beside her husband in Kessington churchyard.

The boys were all in bed, and Robert and Ursula alone in the dining-room. Robert was standing, leaning against the mantel, Ursula with her hands listlessly folded in her lap. There was not a vestige of colour in her face, and there were great deep shadows about her eyes and mouth which told of sleeplessness and sorrow. She lifted her eyes to her brother's face and asked listlessly:

"Is it imperative that you go to-morrow?"

"Absolutely so," returned Robert, in his brief, curt way. "So now that we are alone we had better discuss what is to be done with you all."

Ursula winced. She was a woman now, and she did not like to be spoken of in that manner.

"I have been thinking it all over," said Robert Vivian, "and the best thing will be to sell the Grange, and come all of you to London. I shall leave my lodgings, of course, and rent a house." Ursula sat up suddenly, all her listlessness gone.

"Sell the Grange!" she repeated. "That would be a strange and, to my thinking, a very wrong thing to do. We have no right to sell the birthright of the Vivians."

"It is mine," her brother reminded her somewhat unkindly; and Ursula had no answer ready for that. "None of us can afford to indulge in any sentimental nonsense at this time, Ursula," said Robert, with asperity. "These lads upstairs must learn to work for themselves; and what scope is there in this country place? I cannot afford to keep up two establishments, so the Grange must go. Perhaps at some future time we can buy it back, and improve upon it."

Robert Vivian meant kindly; his heart was all right at the bottom, but he had not the knack of saying disagreeable things pleasantly. Ursula put her hand over her eyes a moment, for rebellious

tears were welling up in them, which she did not choose her brother should see.

"I have heard your plan, Robert," she said, after a brief silence. "Will you listen to mine?"

He nodded, and Ursula continued:

"I have thought the matter entirely out, and I am certain that I could keep myself and the boys off what income will still be coming in every year from the fields, which are ours yet. You would only have the boys', Fred's and Charlie's, school fees to pay for. Geoffrey and Tom must leave at once, of course. Will you let me try it for six months?"

"What income is there?" asked Robert.

"About a hundred pounds," returned Ursula, and again there was a silence. The plan was feasible enough, and Robert Vivian was not altogether sorry at the prospect of a release from the necessity of making a home for his brothers in London.

"It will be pretty tough work for you, Ursula," he said; "but if you are bent upon trying it, you may."

"Thank you," said Ursula, very gratefully. "You will not regret it, I promise you."

"I shall look out for something for Tom to do in London. As for Geoffrey, I don't know what

he is fit for, neither one thing nor another. I have no patience with him. When I was his age I was fighting my own battle, and winning it too, unaided in the city," said Robert, with conscious pride.

"Do you know what Geoffrey has done, Robert?"

"No. What?"

"He told me not many minutes ago. He has hired himself as shop-boy to Mr. Aarons, the music-seller; and Mr. Aarons' son, you know, is the organist of St. Michael's, and will, I am sure, help him in every way, if he proves satisfactory."

Robert Vivian looked much surprised, but also pleased.

"I did not think Geoffrey had so much pluck in him. Well, Ursula, how will you like to see a Vivian sweeping out a shop and selling cheap music over a counter?" he said, with just a touch of sarcasm.

"Work is not dishonourable, even to a Vivian," Ursula answered quietly. "There is another thing, Robert, about the debts," she said, hesitatingly. "Papa owed a lot of money in Kessington."

Robert Vivian's brow grew very stern.

"How much? Have you any idea?"

Ursula shook her head.

"Hundreds of pounds, I should imagine," she answered. "These must be paid, Robert."

Robert Vivian began to pace up and down the floor with his eyes bent upon the ground.

"I am going to Kessington to-morrow, to ascertain the exact sums from the different tradespeople," said Ursula, "and we must pay them between us."

Robert Vivian stood still and stared at his sister, thinking she was losing her wits.

"I must pay them, you mean," he said, with unmistakable bitterness, for it meant giving up the greater part of his hard-earned savings to pay debts which ought never to have been incurred.

"No, you will pay one half, I the other," said Ursula. "I can work for myself too, Robert, and in time be as rich as you."

She rose as she spoke and took a magazine from the sideboard drawer. Turning over its pages she pointed him to a story which occupied a prominent place.

"That is mine," she said. "I got ten pounds for it, and the editor asks me for something more, as soon as I can write it."

If ever man was amazed, Robert Vivian was at

that moment. He had never received so many shocks of surprise in his life as Ursula had given him since he came to Kessington a week ago.

"You wrote it, Ursula? Impossible!"

"Yes, I did. My initials are at the end, and the cheque is right enough," said Ursula, without pride or elation. "So, Robert, if you will pay all the debts I shall consider myself your debtor for the half of it. I shall be able to pay it, I expect, in a year or two at most. Will you?"

Ursula rose considerably in her brother's estimation, and he regarded her with interest.

"You are a brave woman, Ursula, as well as a clever one," he said, with a heartiness which brought a faint smile to Ursula's lips.

"I promised mamma," she said, with a sob in her voice, "that I would restore the honour of the Vivians; and I promised myself, Robert, that I would buy back all the lost Grange lands; and I will, ay, every acre of them!"

"If you do that, Ursula," said Robert Vivian, "I shall relinquish all my small claim on the Grange, and it will be your own. I wish you every success."

"Thanks," said Ursula. "Well, will you agree to my plan?"

"Certainly. Tell the tradesmen to send their

accounts to me, and I'll return cheques at once. Then we can make out our contract, Ursula, which will form a new relationship between us."

"Debtor and creditor," repeated Ursula. "How I hate these words! Then that is settled, Robert?"

Robert Vivian nodded. Then Ursula bade him good-night, and went away upstairs. It did not occur to him that there was anything mean or unbrotherly in his conduct. He simply knew the value of money, and if Ursula could get her £10 cheques so easily and so quickly, it was but fitting that she should share the burden with him. He was essentially a worldly man. His chief aim and ambition was to be rich, to count his money by thousands and tens of thousands, and to enjoy all the prestige wealth gives to its owner. Don't judge him too hardly; he had been trained in a hardening school, and as yet very few of the softer, sweeter influences of life had crossed his path. Over his last cigar—the only luxury he permitted himself—Robert Vivian thought about his sister and her independence till his admiration and respect for her increased still more. And Ursula, in the meantime, was kneeling by her bed weeping, and praying that the aching void in her heart might be filled; praying that all rebellious bitterness

might be removed, and that she might truly and humbly say, "Thy will be done;" and that she might be kept from useless repining, and enabled to do her duty in all the relationships of life as befitted a woman and a Christian. These were the terms she applied to herself—the madcap Ursula, who had been the plague and the sunshine of The Elms, and of whom nobody expected either usefulness or good. Surely this was a change indeed!

Early on the morrow Robert Vivian left for London, and the little band of orphans were left in their desolate home to make the most of what was left, and comfort each other. As she had planned, Ursula dressed herself in the afternoon and proceeded to Kessington on her unpleasant business.

Many pitying glances followed the girlish figure in deep mourning wending its way through the streets, and many wondered that Miss Vivian cared to be abroad so soon after the double bereavement which had fallen upon the Grange. She performed her task unflinchingly, and was received by the various shopkeepers with a courtesy and respect she had hardly dared to expect. They were without exception surprised, not expecting such

speedy and satisfactory settlement of their claims upon the estate of the late Mr. Vivian. When Ursula was done she breathed freely, and came back through the High Street walking with a lighter step and holding her head more erect, feeling that she was without reproach in the eyes of the trades-people now.

At the music shop she paused half-a-minute, and then went in. Mr. Aarons was behind the counter himself, and received her blandly. He was a fussy little German Jew, who by some queer trick of fortune had settled in Kessington, and who purveyed for the musical taste of its inhabitants.

"I have called, Mr. Aarons," said Ursula, lifting her veil and looking straight into the old man's face, "to thank you for your kindness to my brother Geoffrey, especially at this time when we need it so much."

"Not at all, not at all, my dear madam. It was but a small thing," said Mr. Aarons, in his fussy way. "I needed a smart lad who had a taste, mark you, a taste for the profession, and they are very few, believe me, in this dull place. I knew your brother boy, Miss Vivian. He often dropped in here on his way from school, so when he asked,

would I give him something to do, I jumped at the chance, of course."

Ursula smiled. That was Mr. Aarons' way of doing a favour. She wished others in Kessington could learn of him.

"I think Geoffrey will suit you, Mr. Aarons," she said, "if you don't let him dream over your instruments. I warn you when he sits down to a piano he forgets everything."

"Don't I know it?" said the music-seller, gleefully. "Haven't I seen it, and is not that what I want—a being with a soul for the profession? Your brother has that soul, and he will be a great man yet. Listen," the music-seller lowered his voice as if he were imparting a great secret, "my son Franz will be going back to the Fatherland some of these days, and he will prepare your brother to take his place at St. Michael's. He says so. The lads are great friends."

Ursula's eyes glistened, and she held out her hand to the old man.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Aarons," she said, simply and earnestly, "except that I thank you for your great kindness to an orphan."

Suspicious drops glistened on Mr. Aarons' eyelashes, and when Miss Vivian left the shop

he had to blow his nose very violently, and it was some little time before he could settle to his work again.

As Ursula was passing St. Michael's Church she saw Laurence Abbot on the other side of the street. She bowed to him, and was about to pass on, but stood when she saw him taking strides towards her. He offered no words of condolence or greeting, but he held the thin hand in a grasp of iron, and looking straight into her eyes said:

"Come up and see my mother, Miss Ursula;" that being in his idea the surest way to comfort her.

"Thank you, I think I will," said Ursula simply, wondering why she should feel so completely at home with this young man, and why she should ever feel a kind of comfort in his presence.

So in the eyes of Kessington they turned together round St. Michael's corner, and up the hill to the Grammar School.

"I was sorry I did not see Agnes and you when you called," said Ursula, feeling that she must say something, she was so dangerously near breaking down.

"We hardly expected it," returned Laurence. "Miss Ursula, I wish I could tell you how I feel for you. It is in moments like these one feels the miserable inadequateness of the English language."

"I know very well," said Ursula, gently. "One feels unexpressed sympathy just as well as the other kind. Your hand-shake was enough," she added, with a trace of the old smile not quite lost yet. "My fingers tingle yet."

The rest of the way was gone in silence. In silence, too, Laurence took her into the house, saying, when he opened the drawing-room door, "Mother, I have brought Miss Vivian to you."

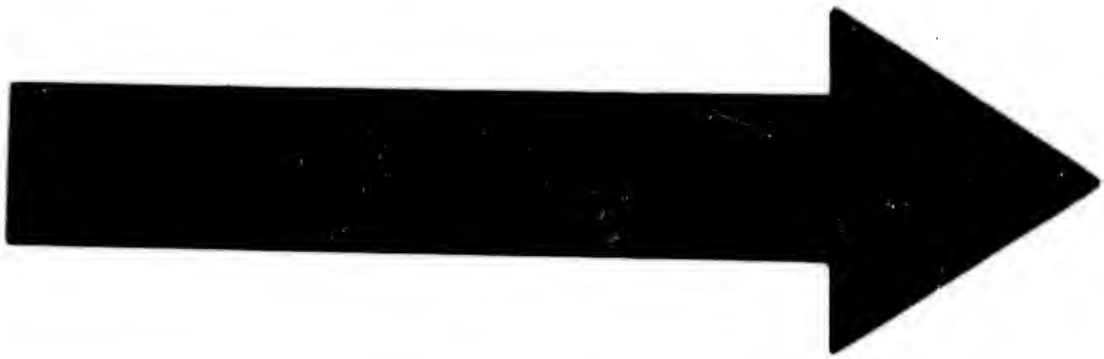
Then he slipped away to look for Agnes, who was busy in her own garden behind the house.

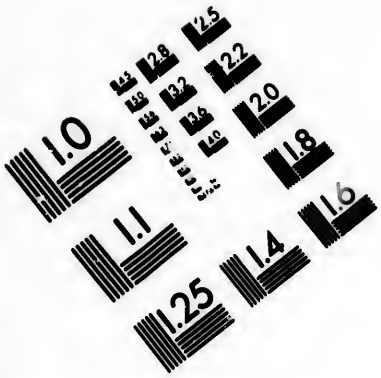
"Agnes, I met your friend Ursula Vivian in the High Street, and I brought her up. She is in the drawing-room with mother," he said, when he found her.

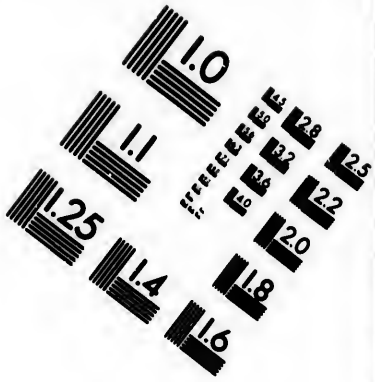
Agnes Abbot laid down her hoe, and began to draw off her garden gloves.

"What does she look like, Laurence?" she asked, with a suspicious tremor in her voice.

"Like a brave woman who has passed through sorrow like hers, but who can bear it nobly,"







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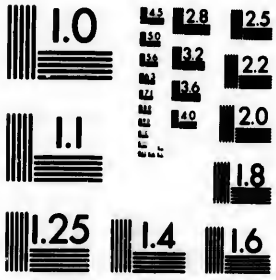

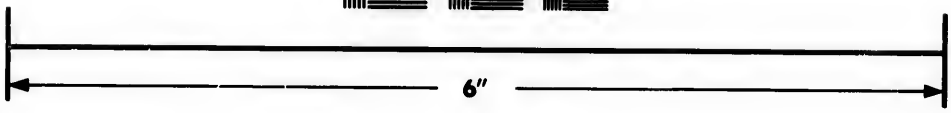

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returned Laurence; and his sister wondered at the earnestness with which he spoke.

"I am afraid to go in, Laurence," she said by-and-by. "I don't seem to know this Ursula. The one I knew was a wild girl, who led me into all kinds of scrapes; and besides, I am so stupid—I can only cry when I am speaking to people in sorrow."

Laurence thought of the Bible words, "Weep with them that weep," and smiled a little.

"You always know just the right thing to do at the right moment, Nessie," he said, using the old childish name which Agnes had rebelled against in her young ladyhood. "But we will wait a little, and let mamma do the comforting, which is her forte."

So they lingered awhile among the flowers, talking of Ursula, and then went together into the house.

Mrs. Abbot and Ursula were sitting side by side on an ottoman in the drawing-room. Both had been weeping. Agnes took her old friend in her arms, and whispered her ready words of sympathy. Then Mrs. Abbot said pleasantly:

"Ursula will stay tea, dear; take her upstairs, and I will order it at once."

So it came to pass that Ursula spent an unspeakably pleasant hour, the first of many to come at Kessington Mount.

To Ursula Vivian sympathy and love were very precious, and comforted her as nothing else could have done. If ever Mrs. Abbot deserved the name, the "Doctor's Angel," which the pupils of the Grammar School had given her when she came among them thirty years before, she deserved it that night for her treatment of Ursula Vivian. It was little wonder that Laurence Abbot thought his mother the most perfect woman in the world. She was as nearly perfect as it is possible for humanity to be. She lived so near to God that her very presence seemed to raise the thoughts of those with whom she came in contact to higher and better things.

At sundown Laurence Abbot took Ursula home.

"My boys will be thinking something has happened to me," she said, when they paused at the gate. "Perhaps I ought not to have stayed. I am the head of the house now, you know."

Laurence Abbot looked at her compassionately.

"Pardon the question, I cannot help it, but do you intend to remain at the Grange still?"

"Yes. My brother Geoffrey has got a situation

in Mr. Aarons' shop, one after his own heart, seeing he is a born musician," said Ursula, without hesitation or shame. "My brother Tom will go to Robert in London. I expect the others will be with me, and continue at school here. These are our present arrangements."

It was Ursula's way to be perfectly frank and open, but she felt already as if she had known Laurence Abbot for years.

"Won't you come up to the house?" she said, presently, wondering why he did not speak.

"No, thanks, not to-night. Another time, I will bring Agnes, if you will permit your invitation to stand."

"Of course, why not? Thank you very much for your kindness, Mr. Abbot. I have been greatly comforted to-day," said Ursula.

Then they shook hands warmly, and went their separate ways.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHADOW AND SUNSHINE.

WITHIN a fortnight, Ursula received a letter from Robert stating that all the accounts had reached him from Kessington, and that the debt, amounting in all to £420, was now paid. Ursula breathed freely when she read it. She had let her imagination run away with her at times, and had magnified the sum to double and treble that amount. So it was £210 she had pledged herself to pay. How many hours up garret would be required to make that sum, she wondered, with a little smile; then she turned the page to finish the letter:—

"You will get Tom ready as fast as possible," Robert wrote, "and send him on to me. The Messrs. Grimsby have agreed to receive him, as they received me, into their warehouse as an errand boy, and he will have exactly my chance. If he

does not improve, it is his own blame. He will board with me, of course, and what he earns will be sufficient to keep him in clothes. He had better come on Tuesday by the morning train, and I shall meet him at the station. Hoping you are all well, and in good spirits,—I am, your affectionate brother, R. VIVIAN."

The letter was wholly satisfactory, yet Ursula could not repress a sigh as she folded it up. It was a good thing for Tom in all ways, yet what would the Grange be without the harum-scarum youth, whose gay laugh and irrepressible fun were the life and sunshine of them all? What would become of him, working hard with his hands all day, and in the evening confined to the companionship of his grave, silent, practical brother. In Ursula's eyes Tom's was likely to be the hardest lot of any. She put the letter in her pocket, and proceeded out of doors to look for the boys. It was holiday time now for them all, save Geoffrey, who trudged contentedly into Kessington to the music-shop, every morning at eight o'clock. She found them apparently holding a solemn conclave on the roof of the hen-house.

"Come down, Tom; I want you for a few

minutes," she said; and Tom, sliding like an eel from his elevated position, was at her side in a moment.

"A message to Kessington, is it?" he asked, shaking the dust off his jacket.

"No, there is a letter from Robert," she answered, so gravely that Tom immediately asked,

"What's up?"

Ursula took the letter from her pocket, and pointing to the last page bade him read, which he did, and then handed it back without a word.

"Well," said Ursula.

"Well, I suppose I've got to go," said Tom, in a choking voice; "though I'd about as soon be hanged. I can't go back to school, and then fear them as I thought."

"No, Tom, we cannot afford it," Ursula answered very gravely; and Tom turned his face away to hide the great shadow clouding his bright eyes.

"On Tuesday, he says; this is Friday; three days. O Ursula! how can I bear it?" he said; and breaking down very suddenly, Tom leaned against a tree and buried his face on his arm.

"It will be hard for you and hard for us, dear," said Ursula, in voice very tremulent, "but if it is to make a man of you we must all bear it. You

know, Tom, life cannot be all play. The days for work and real living must come sooner or later, and it has come sooner to you than to some perhaps, that is all."

"I don't mind the work. I'd work my hands off for you, Ursula, if I could only stay at home and do it like Geoffrey," said Tom, rebelliously. "I'll never get on with Robert; he won't let a fellow laugh scarcely. I don't feel as if he were my brother at all."

What answer could Ursula make to that? None at all.

"You will keep up a brave heart, Tom, for my sake," she said at last, "and do your best in London. Always remember that mamma would like you to do your duty, and that I expect it from my brother."

Her words touched the better nature of the boy, and he flung up his head with a new, bright look of resolution in his face.

"I will do it, Ursula. You won't be ashamed of me. I'll be a man, and, though I am dying of home sickness and general misery, I will never give in," he said; and Ursula laid her arm about his neck and kissed him tenderly. Such endearments were not common between the Vivians, and meant a great deal. Ursula was doing her best to fill her

mother's place, doing her best to speak words of strength and comfort to the young brother, for whom life was just about to begin.

"God bless you, Tom. He will help you to succeed," she said, almost shyly; for in the past such expressions had never crossed her lips, and she was not sure how they would be received. Tom looked up at her with all his heart in his eyes, and his answer was characteristic.

"Ursula, you are an out-and-out brick, I declare. I didn't half know you before. Well, it'll go hard with me if I don't raise a little fun among the fellows in London. There'll be larks going there as well as here."

Ursula smiled, for Tom was himself again. He went back to the hen-house by-and-by to impart the news to Fred and Charlie, while Ursula retired to the house to fill yet another mother's duty, viz., to examine Tom's wardrobe, and see what repairs and alterations were necessary to fit him for going from home.

Since Ursula returned to the Grange she had heard only from Anna Trent, who was busy with her painting in London, working to win, like Ursula, although she had not such stern necessity for an incentive. Isabel Fortescue was away to a

gay watering-place with her family, and was too much engaged with the occupations of a young lady at the seaside to remember her promise to write to her school-fellows.

The morning after the arrival of Robert's letter brought one to Ursula, addressed in the most lady-like handwriting, which had been Mary Dunscombe's chief accomplishment at school.

Thus it ran—

"COMBE HOUSE,
"MARKET DRAYTON, *September* 18*th.*

"MY OWN URSULA,—I would have written to you long ago, but I did not know what to say to you. Where would I find words to express all I feel for you in your terrible, terrible sorrow? I can only say, God comfort you, my dear, dear friend, and help you to see that what is His will is good. Mamma thinks and speaks often about you, as I do. If we could only have you here a little while we could show you how full of sorrow and sympathy all our hearts are for you. I have so often thought of you, especially during the last few days, for you will be beginning to realise that you are the head of the house now, and that you need to be father, mother, and sister in one to your dear brothers. Oh, my poor darling, what a

responsibility for you. You will find it hard perhaps, at first, especially as your household duties will inevitably involve considerable sacrifice of your own favourite work. I have felt rebellious about it for you, because I know you would be so successful in literature; but I am calming down again, when I think it may be God's leading, that in the end, purified and sanctified by sorrow and self-abnegation, your works may go forth into the world to touch the heart like living water. I wonder so how you feel about it. Whether just at first you felt wild and wicked, or whether you were enabled to bear it all calmly and beautifully, because it came from God. I had not meant to write so much, Ursula, but the words would go down. I have had a letter from Anna Trent, but none from Isabel, who is at Brighton this month. You will be surprised to hear that my brother John has given up the idea of travelling altogether, and that papa has bought a practice for him at Sunnybeach, the village nearest to Isabel's home, Haydon Hall. He will settle there in October, and I shall have to take up housekeeping, without much knowledge or experience. Now, even I am not afraid, for though John is so particular in everything he will not be hard on me. After we

are settled, Ursula, I shall expect you to come, and you will see Isabel too, for she will be at home. That should be a double inducement. I am very busy always. Papa has such a lot of patients among the poorer class this autumn, and he likes me to visit them as mamma used to do. She has not had time to do much in that way for some years. Well, I will be done, I think. If you are able to write, dearest, I should be so glad, even of a little line, saying you are well in health. I dare not hope you can be well in spirits. That will come in God's good time. Now, and at all times, believe, my Ursula, your sincere and loving friend,

"MARY DUNSCOMBE."

That letter comforted Ursula as nothing else could have done. It came just when she was feeling very bitter about Tom, just in the very moment when she was asking herself rebelliously what good there could be in the double bereavement, and in all the woeful change it involved for her and hers.

"God's leading," Mary said. Oh, how sweet and precious the assurance. It was like balm to her aching heart. She stole away upstairs by-and-by, and, locking herself in her garret, sat down by the window to read the letter again, and to pray once

more with a tranquil heart for endurance, strength, and patience. Then she wrote the answer, only the line for which Mary craved, because at that moment her heart was too full to permit her to write of plans and ways and means.

"DEAR MARY," she wrote hurriedly, "God put it into your head to write that letter, I believe. It came this morning just like a flash of sunlight through a cloud. I am well in health, and my heart is resting with the great Comforter. Another time I will tell you more, something of my struggle and victory.—Till then, my friend and sister, I am, yours as ever, URSULA VIVIAN."

In the afternoon, while the boys were away to watch from a distance the issue of a great cricket match being played on Kessington Common, Ursula went out to prune the rose trees a little, and to pull up some of the weeds on the broad walk in front of the house. She felt too unsettled for up garret work, and so had decided to let it rest until after Tom's departure on Tuesday. While she was busy with her gardening, and humming a hymn to herself, she heard footsteps on the avenue, and looked round to see Laurence and Agnes Abbot. She put down her scissors

and went forward to meet them, with a frank smile and welcome.

"I can't shake hands, at least till I have washed them," she said; "but I am very glad to see you, especially as I am quite alone. The boys are off to the Common."

"We met them," said Agnes. "Why don't you put on gloves, Ursula? Don't you get your hands scratched dreadfully poking about among rose-bushes and things?"

"Yes, but I don't mind," said Ursula. "Are you very much shocked at my disregard for the proprieties of young ladyhood, Mr. Abbot?"

Laurence Abbot's lips parted in his pleasant smile.

"Not at all," he answered. "You have splendid roses here, Miss Ursula. They are much finer than ours, which I think get too much of the pruning-knife."

"Perhaps ours just get leave to blossom every year unmolested," said Ursula. "Come away in; you must stay tea. I shall order it early."

Ursula led the way into the house, the oppressive stillness of which struck the brother and sister very forcibly. It had an empty feeling, too, and the tea-table seemed to lack the presence of an

older head than Ursula. Yet Agnes Abbot could not but think how gracefully and well Ursula fulfilled all the duties of the house, and how different she was in all respects from the Ursula of old.

"We shall be quieter than ever next week," said Ursula, trying to speak cheerfully. "Robert has sent for Tom. It is time he was beginning to do for himself, especially in the present circumstances, but we shall miss him very much."

"I am sure you will. Tom is a very lively young man from all accounts," said Laurence Abbot.

Agnes laughed.

"I shall never forget that day mamma and I met Mr. Robinson in the High Street, when he could not get his hat off. That was Tom's doing, Ursula."

Ursula laughed also.

"He is the living embodiment of mischief. I shall live in a state of painful suspense regarding his movements in London," said Ursula. "You see, Robert will not bear with his nonsense, nor relish it as we do here."

"Geoffrey enjoys life under old Aarons, evidently," said Laurence. "I looked into the shop the other day and saw him at a piano, with a rapt expression on his face. The old gentleman

nodded violently to me and pointed to him. It is amusing to see the interest he takes in Geoffrey."

"I shall never forget Mr. Aarons' kindness as long as I live, and I have constant remorse for the tricks I have played on him in my youth," said Ursula, with a laugh which had a tremor in it, telling of a deeper feeling underlying it.

"Aarons junior says Geoffrey will be able to play in St. Michael's in six months," said Laurence. "And that he is a perfect genius. A little more tea, Miss Ursula, if you please. It is excellent."

"I beg your pardon; you must just look after yourselves. You see I am such a poor hostess," said Ursula. "Yes, it is a great joy to me that Geoffrey has got so good a beginning. At first when we were left alone my only thought was despair. It is so hard to bear trouble, so easy to forget it is 'God's leading.' I often wonder He bears so long with us."

Laurence Abbot looked at Ursula in amazement, which had in it something of reverence. "When such trouble overtakes me, Miss Ursula," he said very gravely, "I pray I may be able to meet it in a spirit like yours."

Ursula turned her shining eyes on his face, and answered quietly, "It is only such awful trials,

and they *are awful*, which make us aware of our own weakness and send us straight to our Father. Without Him I think they could not be borne," she said, simply. "Shall we go outside now for a little? The days are so pleasant, and they are passing so quickly, one grudges hours spent indoors."

A pleasant time was spent in the old-fashioned garden, and then the brother and sister took their leave.

"You will come again soon, Agnes," Ursula said at parting, "and you also, Mr. Laurence," she added. "I do not entertain very well, but it is a real kindness to come and see me."

"I shall be back very soon, I promise you. I have had such a pleasant visit," said Agnes. "Laurence leaves us to-morrow, you know."

"Yes; but when I come back I shall not forget your invitation, Miss Ursula," said Laurence Abbot, looking straight into Ursula's lovely eyes. "Shall I be welcome?"

"Surely," smiled Ursula; but somehow she could not meet those grave grey eyes so fearlessly as was her wont.

"Ursula, I fear you are a fool, my dear," she said to herself as she went into the house.

"Things have come to a pretty pass when you can't look a young man straight in the face. Yes, you are a fool; but, all the same, you can't help being glad he was so earnest about it, and you hope he will come back, that's all.

CHAPTER IX.

AT ST. MICHAEL'S.

ON Tuesday morning Tom went away. He bore the parting bravely. So did Ursula until he was fairly gone, then she let her grief have its way. But it was past when Fred and Charlie, with very sober faces, returned from seeing Tom away, and she was able to talk to them cheerfully.

"Now, boys," she said, "I want all these ugly weeds rooted out of the avenue, and if you would do a little bit every day while the holidays last it would soon be tidy. Run for your hoes, and do a bit this morning, and I'll give you something very nice for dinner."

Ursula knew what she was doing when she put up her plea for the neglected avenue that morning. She had proved by experience that work was the best antidote for care, and knew that if she could

interest the boys in outdoor operations they would not be so apt to fret over Tom's absence. Willing and eager to do anything for Ursula, they went off to the toolhouse for hoes and a barrow, and, looking out shortly after, Ursula saw that they were working in real earnest, and enjoying it too.

Then Ursula's thoughts turned to her own work. She had promised the editor of the *Family Magazine* to try a long story for its pages, and it was already maturing in her mind. She set apart a portion of each day to be spent in the garret, always reserving the evening free for her brothers. She was always in the dining-room when Geoffrey came home at seven. Then they would have a little music, for Ursula did not think there was any want of loving respect for the memory of those gone before, though they made the slow evening hours pass more quickly and pleasantly by listening to Geoffrey's exquisite playing, or joining together in the singing of some beautiful hymn. Ursula could play well herself, and her voice was as clear and sweet as a bell. So the music and singing was enjoyed by them all, and sent them to bed, I am sure, with lighter hearts than sober talking would have done.

A letter came from Tom in the course of a few

days, full of fun and grammatical mistakes. His descriptions of the various employés in the Messrs. Grimsby's establishment were a source of considerable amusement to Ursula and the rest.

"There are six kids downstairs in our lodgings, and when Robert is out, which he often is," he wrote, "I bribe old Mother Hill, the landlady, you know, to let me down among them, and we do have fun. Hill junior, the eldest of the family, a clerk in the city, is an awful swell, and gets himself up to kill, regardless of expense. I mean to have my fun out of him yet. Tell Fred and Charlie, and Tommy Williamson, when you see him, that Hill junior is a second edition of Robinson, only more so. Robert is speaking of seeking quieter quarters, where there's no kids you know, but I hope he won't. I hope you're all getting on fine, as I am.—I remain, your affectionate brother, T. VIVIAN."

Then on the blank page was a clever pen-and-ink sketch of Hill junior, which showed that Tom had not forgotten that part of his education.

The letter lifted a load from Ursula's mind, for unless Tom were actually in good spirits she knew he would not have written in such a tone.

So things promised brighter for the Vivians. The younger boys went back to school, Geoffrey continued at Mr. Aarons', growing fonder and more proficient at his work every day, and Ursula went on with her story for the *Family Magazine.* It was not all smooth sailing for our young authoress. There were days when she grew sick of her work, when she felt so miserably conscious of her own ability to write something worth writing, that she could have tossed the manuscript into the fire. She could not work up to her own ideal. What author can? And she could not be content to go upon lower ground. In despair, one day, she despatched the first eight chapters in its rude state to the editor, begging him to read it and tell her if he thought she should go on with it; she was so dubious about it herself. It was returned in a day or two with the following brief note:—

"DEAR MADAM,—Go on with your story by all means. It will make its mark.—Yours faithfully,

"SAMUEL MAYFAIR."

So Ursula took up the unfinished threads again, and wove them into one beautiful web, without a flaw or blemish. It was a marvellous production for one so young. Yet Ursula felt anything but

elation or pride over it. She read it over when it was ready for despatch, trying to judge calmly and clearly of its merits. But she failed, of course. Some of its parts pleased her, but others fell very far short of what she thought they should be. So one morning, early in December, it was despatched to the editor, with sinking of heart. She permitted herself a few days' rest after that, and then took up the pen again, for it must know no weariness while that two hundred and ten pounds remained unpaid. Ideas crowded in upon her, but she could not always find appropriate language wherein to express them. She was inclined to favour a high-flown style, the absurdity of which was made plain to her when she re-read it. Then she would begin to re-write, and go to the opposite extreme. In the end she generally managed to hit the happy medium, but it was the outcome of a labour and thought which none can guess save those who have experienced it.

A month slipped away. And Ursula, unacquainted with the ways of editors and publishers, grew heart-sick with hope deferred. When the business-like letter at last arrived, one morning in December, when they were all at breakfast, she was frightened to open it, and her fingers trembled

as she broke the seal. But the manuscript was not returned, so there was hope for her yet. I will transcribe it here, in the hope it may prove a tithe as interesting to you as it was to Ursula.

"PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON,
"*December 15th*, 187 .

"DEAR MADAM,—I have finished the perusal of your story, and am wholly satisfied therewith. It surpasses my expectation, and is undeniable proof of your ability. If you will but pursue diligently the line you have taken up, the world will hear of you yet. I herewith beg to offer you the sum of fifty pounds for permission to print it in the pages of the *Family Magazine*. When it has run its course there, it might with great advantage to you be published in book form. Anyway, it is sure to be popular, for it possesses the charm of simplicity and perfect naturalness. Should this offer be acceptable to you, upon receipt of a communication to that effect, I shall enclose cheque to you and make immediate arrangements for its appearance in the new series to begin with the year.—I am, Madam, yours faithfully, S. MAYFAIR."

When Ursula read the letter to the end she let it flutter from her hand, and leaning her arms on

the table, hid her face upon them. Her joy was too much for her. The boys looked at her in consternation.

"Has anything happened to Tom?" was the threefold cry.

Then Ursula lifted her face, which was radiant through her tears.

"Oh no, boys, something very different. I must tell you, I suppose. Well, I've written a story, and this is a letter from the editor, and he offers me £50 for it, and I was so glad I could not help crying—that's all."

Blank amazement sat on the faces of the three; then Charlie, remembering perhaps what Tom would have done had he been with them, sprang up and cried, "Hip! hip! hurrah!" Presently the others joined him, and Ursula had quite an ovation, the noise of which caused Betty to pause in her work, and wonder what it was all about. Such explosions had not been so common in the house since Tom went away.

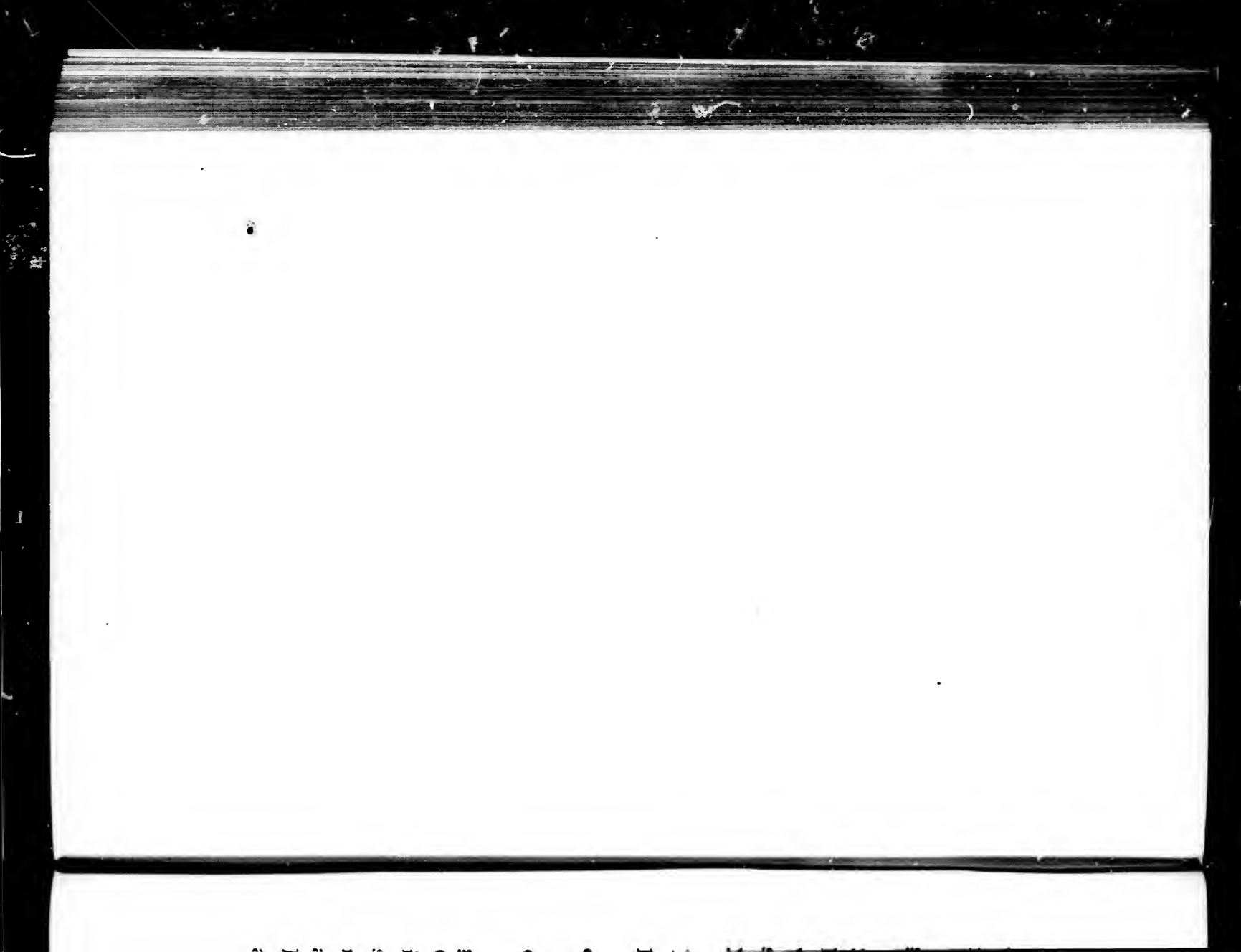
Needless to say the offer was gratefully accepted at once, and in due time the cheque arrived. Ursula went to the town to cash it, and returned with five crisp ten pound-notes, which were carefully locked up in the safe in the study, the nucleus

of the £210. It was a very good beginning, she thought, with pride and joy, and yet in the middle of it all there came a terrible aching at her heart, because whatever success the future might hold for her she must be content to miss always the sweet smile—the glad, loving pride of her whose approval would have been Ursula's best reward. It is ever thus. God wills that in this life there should be no joy without its attendant pain, no rose without its thorn, so that we may the more firmly fix our thoughts on the sure hope that is to come.

Her success gave her an impetus to go on with her new story, and her work grew easier and pleasanter for her every day. The cold winter weather forbade her writing in her garret unless a fire was lighted in it; but being a prudent, careful housewife, Ursula did not see any necessity to burn coals solely for her own use when there was a fire in the dining-room all day. So the writing materials were carried downstairs, and "up garret" deserted till summer.

While Ursula was busy with her literary labours, Geoffrey was equally so with his music. Ursula noticed a daily improvement in his playing, and she began to think Mr. Aarons might not be far

The Young Writer.



wrong in thinking Geoffrey would soon be ready for St. Michael's.

One night he came home looking unusually glorified and excited.

"I'm to play in St. Michael's on Christmas Sunday, Ursula. Mr. Franz asked me to do it long ago, and I have been practising every night with the choir. I didn't tell you for fear I shouldn't get proficient enough, you know, and you would be disappointed."

Ursula grew more excited than her brother. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes danced with pleasure.

"And Mr. Franz thinks you are proficient enough?" she asked, eagerly.

"He says I shall do far better than he could do," said Geoffrey, modestly.

"O Ursula! to think I shall actually play on the grand organ in St. Michael's on a Sunday, and Christmas too," he said, with a strange trembling in his voice. Then he broke down all at once, and sobbed for very joy. "Mr. St. John, the choir-master, you know, was afraid at first," he said, by-and-by. "But now he's more anxious for it than Mr. Franz, and he hopes I'll be the organist altogether some day."

"So you will, soon enough," said Ursula, emphatically.

Geoffrey shook his head.

"Not for years and years. I should never survive it, any way."

"Christmas Sunday!" re-echoed Ursula. "Everybody goes to St. Michael's on Christmas Sunday. The family will be there from Aldencotes, and the Earl and Countess of Derrington, and *all* the aristocracy. O Geoffrey! you *must* do well. It will be the making of you."

"I shall be shaking with fear till I have played a few notes, then I shall forget all about where I am, likely," said Geoffrey. "I wish Tom could be down. He won't be coming for Christmas, I suppose?"

"No, Geoffrey, we could scarcely expect it. He will need to be content with a full and detailed account," returned Ursula.

During the ten days which intervened till Christmas, Ursula was so much occupied thinking of Geoffrey that she could not fix her mind on her own work.

That Sunday morning they were all up early, and Ursula was very particular both in her own dressing and in looking after that of the boys.

Geoffrey looked well. He was a handsome lad, and nobody could ever take him for anything but a musician, Ursula told him, laughingly; and truly the refined, earnest face, the dreamy blue eyes, and the curling fair hair, gave him a look very different from that of his rosy-cheeked, rollicking brothers. He could not eat any breakfast, and Ursula did not press him. He left half-an-hour before them, and they followed more leisurely, yet they were among the first to enter the church. From the Grange pew there was a good view of the organist, and Ursula could not take her eyes off him. He sat very still, looking at his instrument, Mr. Franz beside him. It was not time to play the voluntary yet.

The church filled rapidly. All the aristocracy of the county flocked to St. Michael's on Christmas morning, for in addition to Mr. Gresham's reputation as a preacher, the music was always something worth hearing. By-and-by, when the seats were nearly all full, Ursula saw Mr. Franz touch Geoffrey's arm, and she held her breath in an agony of suspense. Only for a moment, for presently there stole through the building the sweet, grand strains of the Christmas hymn, played without doubt by a master-hand. All eyes were turned

towards the boy-musician, and Ursula saw surprise and incredulity on hundreds of faces. Never had such music been heard in St. Michael's since a certain great composer had inaugurated the organ, ten years before. Franz Aarons could manipulate the keys skilfully enough, but he had not Geoffrey Vivian's soul for his profession. Ursula had to bow her head often to hide the tears brought by the music, and by the thought of what a joy it would have been to her mother to have been a listener with her.

At the close of the service Ursula and the boys went out leisurely, and they were listeners to many flattering remarks. In the porch Mrs. Gresham was speaking to the Earl and Countess, and the organist was the subject.

"We must have him up to the Castle; his touch is divine," the Countess said.

"Who is he?"

"A son of Vivian of the Grange. Hush, that's his sister, see. She is literary, I have heard. A remarkable family, and orphans too, Lady Derrington."

Ursula heard no more, for presently she was taken possession of by the Abbots. Laurence was the last to touch her hand, and to utter his words

Christmas Morning.

of manly greeting and congratulation. They stood a few minutes talking together, then Ursula seeing Mr. St. John, the choir-master, and Geoffrey beckoning to her at the church door, bade them good-bye.

"I am coming to the Grange, Miss Ursula," Laurence Abbot came back to say. "I only got down from Oxford last night, you know."

"All right," said Ursula, merrily; "good-bye."

"Good-bye, Ursula," said Laurence Abbot; "I never spent such an interminable quarter at college in my life. Perhaps you can guess the reason?"

CHAPTER X.

ON BUSINESS.

CHRISTMAS passed pleasantly for the little family at Kessington Grange. The Abbots often dropped in upon them, and there were several quiet tea-drinkings at Kessington Mount, at which the boys forgot to be in awe of Doctor Abbot, and marvelled greatly to find what a "jolly old fellow" (as they expressed it) he could be in his own home.

The Countess of Derrington did not appear to have forgotten her desire to see more of the boy-musician, for one day there came a note for Geoffrey bearing the Derrington crest, and which contained her ladyship's compliments, coupled with a request that he would come up to the Castle that afternoon. Geoffrey, shy by nature, did not appear to care about it, but Ursula was urgent for him to go.

"Lady Derrington is a great musician herself, and there will be glorious instruments at the Castle. You need not be afraid, Geoffrey. She will not patronize you," said Ursula, adding a little proudly, "the Vivians are as old a family as the Derringtons, and I don't doubt they visited each other generations ago, though they don't now."

Geoffrey laughed at his sister's argument, but departed to get himself ready. Not many minutes after, Ursula was amazed to behold a carriage sweeping up the avenue, and somewhat confused to recognise it as the equipage from the Castle.

Nevertheless, she managed to keep calm, and when Betty, in great confusion, ushered in the Countess herself, Ursula was able to receive her with a grace and self-possession her ladyship was very quick to notice. She was a little woman, past middle life, still retaining the prettiness and dainty winning ways which had won her husband's heart.

"Good morning, Miss Vivian," she said, with a charming smile. "I ought to apologise, I suppose, but perhaps you will forgive my intrusion. I was so afraid your brother would not come that I have come to fetch him. I have a special reason

for asking, for Herr Baerstein is to be with us this evening, and I should like him to meet our youthful genius."

Ursula smiled.

"You are very kind, Lady Derrington; Geoffrey is just dressing, I think," answered Ursula. "He is very shy, but I persuaded him to go."

"That was right," said the Countess, heartily. Then her voice lowered, and she looked straight into Ursula's face with motherly sympathetic eyes.

"My dear, I was very sorry to hear from Mrs. Gresham of your sad trouble; you have my heartfelt sympathy."

"Thank you," answered Ursula, very simply; and there was need of no more.

"The world will hear of your brother yet," said her ladyship, by-and-by. "And of you too, if report speaks truly," she added, with a little sly smile.

Ursula's face flushed deep crimson. She had not thought her secret was public yet.

"Forgive me, I have touched a tender spot," said her ladyship, hastily. "I am an inquisitive old woman, but I love young people, perhaps because I have none of my own."

"There is nothing to forgive," answered Ursula, in her frank, genuine way. "It is I who am foolishly sensitive; here is Geoffrey."

Her ladyship turned to greet the young musician with a frank cordiality which removed all his shyness at once.

"I have come for you, fearing you might decline my invitation," she laughed. "You will not decline to escort me home, surely?"

"Surely not, Lady Derrington," answered Geoffrey. "I am much indebted to you."

"Nay, the debt is mine. I am selfish; I want to hear you play. I am passionately fond of music, and play a little indifferently myself. Well, shall we go?" she asked, and turning to Ursula, she said, "Perhaps you will one day be induced to visit us with your brother?" Ursula drew herself up a little; she could not help it.

"Nay, my dear," said the Countess, good-humouredly, "you need not freeze. The Vivians and the Derringtons were friends of yore; why should they not be again? Well, I shall come to you if you will not come to me."

So saying the little lady kissed Ursula on the cheek, and withdrew to her carriage under Geoffrey's care.

So it came to pass that day that Kessington had the sight of the Derrington carriage sweeping through its streets, containing Lady Derrington and Geoffrey Vivian, Mr. Aarons' shopboy, sitting side by side. It would suffice the gossips for many a day.

Geoffrey came home late in the evening, bringing glowing accounts of his visit to Averham Castle. Herr Baerstein had taken such an interest in him, and promised her ladyship to do all in his power for him by-and-by, when the time came for him to leave Kessington and seek his fortune out in the world.

That was the beginning of a warm friendship between the Castle and the Grange, and it was not very long before Ursula was persuaded to accept the invitations given to her so kindly and frankly. It made a great talk in Kessington, but Miss Vivian was held in such high estimation that even the envious forgot to be spiteful, and said she deserved it all. There were no accounts run with trades-people now. Everything Miss Vivian bought was paid for with ready-money. To her the word debt was a bugbear, which she would keep far away from her all her life.

Meanwhile, her new story was progressing. It

was a more ambitious effort than her former one, and she had resolved to send it to one of the best publishers in London. She had thought of taking it herself, but when the time drew near, her natural shyness came over her, and it was despatched by post to seek its fate. It was April before it was finished; and, when the strain was off her mind, Ursula felt languid and wearied. Her head troubled her somewhat, and she began to contemplate seriously accepting Mary Dunscombe's invitation, which had been renewed in every letter since their settlement at Sunny Beach. She had sense enough to know that, in her own best interests, change and rest were necessary for mind and body at times. She would wait, however, till she saw the result of her new venture.

Before a fortnight elapsed the answer came. It was not quite satisfactory. The publishers seemed to think highly of the work, and yet to be dubious of its success if published.

"It is crude in some parts, and would be the better for being re-written. Shall we return the manuscript for that purpose?"

Ursula was puzzled to understand what they meant. Nothing was said about accepting or declining it. So, after a day's consideration, she

made up her mind to journey to London and seek an interview with the publishers. It would be more satisfactory to all concerned. She read the letter to the boys that night, and they all agreed that it would be the best plan; so, without sending notice to either of her brothers, Ursula proceeded to London on the following day. Fearing lest her courage should fail her, if she had time to think over it, she took a hansom at the station, and drove directly to the establishment of the Messrs. Farrel, in Paternoster Row. In considerable fear and trembling, she gave her name to one of the clerks, and asked him to take it to the principal. In a few seconds he returned, and requested her to follow him to Mr. Farrel's private room. Ursula was shown into the presence of the publisher, and lifted her veil somewhat confusedly to meet the gaze of a pair of very kindly eyes, which put her at her ease at once. He was an old man of benevolent aspect, very different in every respect from the gruff and forbidding individual Ursula had conjured up in her own mind.

"Good morning," he said, heartily. "So this is Miss Vivian. You are very much younger than I expected."

"Am I?"

Ursula smiled as she asked the question, that rare smile which so beautified her face!

"I received your letter yesterday, sir, and as I did not feel that I understood it rightly, I thought the best thing would be to come and see about it."

"That was right. I did not write the letter, Miss Vivian. My son wrote it, and I did not see it before it went. I told him to ask if you had any objections to re-write it, and curtail the opening chapters a little; they are too diffuse. I liked the story very much, and I am very willing to publish it for you in any way we may arrange about."

Ursula's face flushed with pleasure.

"Thank you, sir," she said, in her simple way; and the publisher looked at her curiously.

"Pardon the question, but I regret to observe your deep mourning; have you lost a near relative?" he asked, kindly.

"I lost my father and mother within a week, sir," answered Ursula, trying to speak calmly. "And it is an absolute necessity that I should earn something for myself."

The publisher looked at her most compassionately.

"I am glad you have told me this," he said. "Well, we will have a look at this story, and you can take it away with you."

So saying, Mr. Farrel took from one of the drawers the bundle of manuscript which Ursula had despatched in fear and trembling a few weeks before. He turned over the pages one by one, pointing out what he thought might be altered to improve, talking of it so kindly and appreciatively that Ursula felt her heart glowing with gratitude towards him.

"Do you return to Kessington to-day?" he asked, when the interview was ended. "If you would stay a day or two with us my wife would be pleased."

"Oh, thank you very much, but I have two brothers in town, Mr. Farrel," returned Ursula, gratefully. "You are very kind, sir, to a stranger."

The publisher smiled a little sadly.

"The kindness is nothing. I had a daughter just your age, Miss Vivian. She was our only one, but God took her. You remind me of her very much. My wife would like to see you on that account, as well as on your own."

"I will come next time, sir. Perhaps I shall bring the story to London myself when it is finished. I shall be going south then at any rate, to visit a friend in Kent."

"We should be very pleased indeed," said Mr.

Farrel; then he shook hands warmly, and Ursula went away, pledged to visit a lady whom she had never seen, but whose sorrow made a bond between them.

It was five o'clock when Ursula reached her brothers' lodgings in Allanton Road. Mrs. Hill, a weary-eyed, anxious-looking woman, looked at her curiously, but showed her into the sitting-room at once.

"I am Miss Vivian," Ursula said. "I have come unexpectedly. When will my brothers be in, Mrs. Hill?"

"Half-past six, miss. Will you be staying till to-morrow?"

"Yes, if you can accommodate me."

"Surely, Miss Vivian. Come upstairs; my three-pair back's empty just now and you'll get the bedroom, and welcome, for Master Tom's sake."

Ursula smiled, and followed the landlady to the mysterious region of the three-pair back. It was a dingy little room; indeed, all Mrs. Hill's apartments were dingy, but they were clean and comfortable in their way.

"If you could get me a cup of tea, Mrs. Hill, I would be so much obliged. I am too tired and hungry to wait till my brothers come home."

"Yes, miss, with pleasure. Just come downstairs when you're ready," said Mrs. Hill, and bolted off downstairs to prepare refreshment for the unexpected visitor.

In a few minutes Ursula returned to the sitting-room, and proceeded to examine it well, feeling an intense interest in the place where her brothers spent so much of their leisure time.

There was not much to be seen. It contained the usual boarding-house sofa and chairs arranged primly around the room, the usual faded carpet on the floor, the usual dingy hangings at the windows, the usual cheap prints on the walls, and cheap ornaments on the mantel. It was not a pretty room, nor one which a woman of any taste would choose for an abiding-place. The rent was moderate, and therefore it suited Robert Vivian. Ere long Mrs. Hill brought in the tea tray, and Ursula took a hearty meal. Then she sauntered to the window, and looked out upon the quiet thoroughfare, with its strip of dusty grass and stunted trees over the way.

The minutes passed slowly till half-past six, and punctually at that time Ursula beheld the two coming together down the middle of the street. Her eyes dwelt most fondly on Tom's face, and

she felt her heart beat quicker at the thought of the meeting. Robert opened the door with his own key, and came directly to the sitting-room, while Tom as usual tumbled down to the kitchen for a word with the baby.

"Ursula!" exclaimed Robert Vivian, as much surprised as it was in his nature to be, "how and why are you here?"

"On private business," said Ursula, gaily. "I'll tell you about it after. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Yes, very," said Robert, looking as if he meant it. Then he kissed his sister, and went out to call Tom.

"I hear two people speaking upstairs, Mrs. Hill," said Tom, following the landlady up with the tea; "I hope it isn't that humbugging old fellow in to tea."

Tom Vivian was altogether regardless of proprieties, and stated his opinion of his brother's friend, with unflinching candour, at all times and in all company.

But at the landing Tom heard the strange voice again, and in a moment he had bounded past Mrs. Hill, and burst into the sitting-room.

"Ursula, as I'm alive! Oh, I say, what a jolly

old lark. It isn't you, old girl, is it? I don't believe it," he got out breathlessly, then his feelings got the better of him entirely, and he cried like a baby.

CHAPTER XI.

ANNA TRENT.

"I CAME on publishing business," said Ursula, when the first excitement was over, and they drew into the table for tea. "And I can stay till to-morrow."

"Only till to-morrow!" exclaimed Tom, with a grimace.

Ursula nodded.

"Yes, but I'm coming back soon. My story requires some alterations before it is fit for publication, Robert," said Ursula, turning to her elder brother; "I can do them in a week or two."

"Couldn't you stay here, Ursula?" Robert asked; "it seems a needless expense incurring another journey."

Always about expense, Ursula thought, and wondered whether years would make her so careful over £ *s. d.* She hoped not.

"I need to come at any rate, Robert," she answered; "I am going to Kent to stay a fortnight with one of my school friends. I have not been well for some time, and Doctor Hall advised a change to the seaside."

Robert had no more to say. Looking at his sister he was forced to admit that she looked thin and worn, and perhaps she was taking precautions in time.

"I have a friend in London, Robert," said Ursula, by-and-by. "Her address is Parkside Crescent. Is it far from here? Could I call for her to-night, do you think? I should like it very much."

"Run round to the stationer's, Tom, and ask a loan of the directory," said Robert. "I know nothing of the streets about here, Ursula. It may be quite near us."

Tom darted off like an arrow, then Ursula turned to her brother eagerly.

"How is Tom doing, Robert?"

"Better than I expected," he answered, drily. "The firm seems to have taken a fancy to him. He works well enough, but the tricks he plays on the others are scandalous. He surely had not been properly checked at home. The habit has grown upon him till it cannot be overcome."

"Tom's tricks are harmless," Ursula ventured to say. "He cannot help his mischievous nature."

"It is to be hoped he will sober down as he grows older. Well, Ursula, are the Kessington tradespeople satisfied now?"

"Yes," answered Ursula, and taking her purse from her pocket she counted out five notes and handed them to her brother.

"There, Robert, that is my first payment. I brought it with me. It is as well you should have it; it is safer with you."

Robert Vivian took the notes in silence, and fingered them almost lovingly.

"You make money fast, Ursula," was all he said.

Ursula smiled a little bitterly.

"Not without working for it, Robert; how hardly you cannot guess! But I hope to be free of debt in a year, or little more."

"'Out of debt, out of danger,' is my motto," said Robert Vivian. "If I were a rich man, Ursula, I would not take this; as it is I feel it due to myself to accept it."

"Of course, our bargain was made," Ursula said, and rose.

The old feeling of restlessness, impatience even, which used to come upon her in the presence of her

elder brother was rising in her breast. The fear in her heart that he was making Mammon his god made her brave to speak a word in season.

"Robert," she said, timidly, "I am afraid sometimes when I hear you speak of money. It is not ours, remember—it is God's, held in trust for Him; it is not worthy our worship—scarcely of our thought, except how we may best use it for Him."

Robert Vivian's head was turned away, and at that moment Tom burst into the room; and Ursula never knew how her word of sisterly counsel had been received.

The directory was duly examined, and Parkside Crescent discovered to be within easy walking distance of Allanton Road.

"Tom will take you round, Ursula," said Robert. "I promised to look in on my friend to-night. When shall I come for you?"

"If I am not home at nine, you may come," answered Ursula, and went upstairs for her hat.

"Oh, I say, Ursula, how really jolly it is to see you again," said Tom, thrusting his arm into hers, when they went out into the street. "I never knew how much I wanted to see you till to-night, you know."

"You don't know how we miss you at home, Tom," said Ursula, with a sigh.

"It is a great joy to me to hear from Robert that you are really working at business."

Tom whistled.

"Did he say that? He's always abusing me for something. I'm glad he'll admit that to you; anyway, he never does to me."

"Hush, Tom!" said Ursula, not quite liking the tone.

"Oh, I know you want to preach, Ursula, but I must have it out. Robert's awfully mean. If I'd as much money as him I'd sink with shame to grind down Mother Hill the way he does. She's honest, though she's miserable and dingy to look at, and though there are so many kids. Would you believe it, he knows the price of butter and tea and sugar and greengroceries, and everything. It makes me sick to see him going over the weekly bills, as if he thought everybody was conspiring to cheat him out of a halfpenny. I know you're real mad, but I'd have burst if I hadn't told you."

What could Ursula say? Silence was best.

"Oh, I say, though it's prime at business. I do like the governors. They're awfully kind to me, even when I play tricks. I can't help it, Ursula."

"You might help such an abundant use of slang, Tom; it is not an elegant embellishment to conversation."

"Oh, come; one word's as good as another. Don't they ever talk slang in your stories, Ursula? 'cos if they don't they won't be like real people. Here's Parkside Crescent. Who are you going to see?"

"Anna Trent. She was at school with me at Aldborough."

"Oh yes, I remember. Well, shall I wait for you outside?"

"Oh no, Tom; I can find my way round nicely alone. But if she is at home I shall wait for Robert. Good-bye, just now," said Ursula.

"Good-bye. It seems a horrid shame for you to go visiting when you've only one night. I think I'll go home and pack up to go back to Kessington with you to-morrow," said Tom, and went whistling away.

Ursula found the number she sought, and going up the few steps to the door rang the bell. In a minute a servant answered the summons, and, in answer to her request to see Miss Trent, ushered her into the drawing-room, and she asked the visitor's name.

"Simply say, an old friend wishes to see her," Ursula said; and while the girl was absent she glanced round the pretty room, seeing on the walls many specimens of Anna's talent. She could almost fancy, too, that Anna's tasteful fingers had been at work in the arrangement of the room.

In a few minutes she heard a light footfall on the stair, and the door opened to admit the slight drooping figure and sweet, patient face of Anna Trent.

"O Ursula!" she said, "I am so glad, so very glad to see you."

There was no mistaking the welcome; no mistaking the clinging, loving pressure of the arm about her neck. To at least this one of her schoolfellows Ursula was dear as of yore.

"I was in London on business—a flying visit, Anna," said Ursula, by-and-by. "But I could not go without seeing you."

"I am glad you could not," answered Anna. "Poor Ursula, you look so old and worn and sad. I am so sorry for you, dear!"

Ursula nodded.

"Don't talk like that, Anna; I don't want to break down to-night. How have you been? You look ill and pale, as if you had been working at your easel very hard."

"So I have, and mamma has been very ailing and fretting about the ship—my father's, you know. It is a few days overdue, and she always fears the worst. It is a terrible thing to have dear ones at sea, Ursula."

At that moment a loud and peremptory ringing of a bell caused Anna to start and redden.

"That is mamma's bell, Ursula. Excuse me just a moment," said Anna, and left the room. She was not many minutes gone. "Can you take off your hat and stay a little?" she asked when she came in; and Ursula fancied the wearied look had deepened on her face. "Mamma would like to see you."

"Thank you, Anna, I shall be very glad to stay," returned Ursula frankly; and Anna led the way to her own bedroom.

"You must not mind, though mamma talks crossly, Ursula," she said, flushing a little. "She is far from well, and very anxious about papa and the boys."

"Why should I mind, Anna, my dear? I am concerned to see you, you look so ill and worn."

"Oh, I am quite well," said Anna, smiling faintly. "If you are ready, Ursula, we will go down. Mamma is in the dining-room."

Ursula followed her friend down-stairs, marvelling much what it was that made her apparently so ill at ease.

The dining-room was a large and pleasant room, but Ursula had not time to look about her; her attention was so arrested by the lady lying on the couch. That she was in poor health was evident from the paleness and thinness of her face, but the peevish, discontented expression was very painful to witness.

"This is Ursula Vivian, mamma," said Anna, gently.

Mrs. Trent held out her hand languidly to the visitor, and bade Anna place a chair for her by the couch.

"You see a sad, poor wretch here, Miss Vivian," she said. "A piece of useless lumber, nothing but a burden in the world."

Anna's eyes filled, and turning away she busied herself at the work-basket on the table.

"I am sorry you feel so ill, Mrs. Trent," Ursula answered bluntly, for she was beginning to have an inkling of the truth, and to know something of Anna's work.

"Yes, it is a great trial to a woman of an active temperament to be laid helpless as I am," continued

the invalid, in her grumbling, querulous tones. "A great trial, too, to a sensitive spirit to be a burden on those from whom we have a right to expect consideration and kindness."

Ursula was silent, feeling much for Anna, and not knowing what to say.

"Has Anna told you that, in all probability, the sea has claimed her father and brother at last?" she said, burying her face in her handkerchief.

"Anna told me Captain Trent's ship was a few days overdue; but, Mrs. Trent, there is no ground for supposing that they are lost!"

"You don't know anything of the agony a sailor's wife has to endure, Miss Vivian," said Mrs. Trent resignedly. "I often wish I had Anna's stoical indifference, but my feelings are so acute. I shudder at every blast of wind, picturing the wreck of the *Bosphorus*."

Ursula glanced at Anna compassionately. Her face was deadly pale, her fingers trembling at her work.

"Anna, will you order supper?" said Mrs. Trent. "Miss Vivian, if you will stay all night I shall be pleased, though I am not able to see personally after your comfort."

"Oh, thanks," said Ursula hastily. "I shall stay

with my brothers, Mrs. Trent. They board round in Allanton Road. My elder brother will call for me at nine."

"Oh, then we shall wait for him; but, Anna, go down and see that Jane has something nice," said Mrs. Trent, and Anna slipped obediently from the room.

"Anna means well, I believe; but she is very careless and a little selfish, as most young people are," said the mother. "She would sit all day at her painting, Miss Vivian; positively she would, if I was not very firm with her, because her father is proud of her work of course, and praises her for it. He would rather see Anna at her easel any day than helping about the house. That is the selfishness of men, Miss Vivian."

"I don't know anything about the selfishness of men, Mrs. Trent," said Ursula bluntly, "but if Anna is careless and selfish now she has changed very much in a year. She was a kind of daily sermon of meekness and gentleness and unselfish patience to us girls at Aldborough."

Mrs. Trent smiled a little scornfully.

"Yes, Anna always makes a good impression outside. I was sorry to hear of your sorrow, Miss Vivian. You have a great responsibility on your head now."

"Yes, but God has helped me hitherto, Mrs. Trent," Ursula answered, with simple reverence.

"Ah yes, God is a great Helper. Without Him I could not bear my cross so patiently and accept all my trials so resignedly. I am glad you have found the true Helper, Miss Vivian."

Ursula hated herself for the feeling of anger and contempt which crept into her heart, but to her such words from these selfish lips seemed little short of mockery.

Anna's was the daily cross, hers the many trials; and Ursula wondered no longer at her pale, worn face, and listless manner.

At ten minutes past nine Robert came, and was received with languid cordiality by Mrs. Trent. Ursula observed how keenly his eyes rested on Anna's sweet face, and also how he watched her at supper, as if he felt much interested in her. He exerted himself to be agreeable, and Ursula marvelled at his success. She had never seen her reticent brother come so far out of his shell.

It was ten o'clock when Ursula rose to go upstairs.

"Come into my den, Ursula, till I show you my picture," Anna whispered, when they left the room.

Ursula nodded, and the two girls proceeded up

to the top-flat of the house, and Anna opened the door of a little chamber with a window in the roof. She struck a light, and, lifting the cover from the easel, said, with a curious mixture of shyness and pride :—

"Do you like it, Ursula?"

"Like it! O Anna!" answered Ursula, and her voice broke.

The subject was an ambitious one for a young artist, but it was a lovely picture: "Jesus at the grave of Lazarus." The colouring was exquisite; the figure fairly drawn; the expression on the face caught with marvellous success.

"Perhaps it is presumptuous, Ursula," Anna whispered, "but the idea grew and grew upon me till I had to go on with it. I like it very much; it is better far than I dared to hope. I prayed, Ursula, that I might be helped to do it well. Do you think it will comfort anyone to look at it?"

"It has comforted me, Anna," answered Ursula. "Looking upon it we know we are permitted to weep for dear ones gone before, because Jesus wept."

"That is what I wanted to show, Ursula," said Anna, in a voice of deep content, and there was a little silence.

"I hoped to have it finished in the spring, but mamma being so ill, I had little time. Besides, she thinks it waste of time painting; so you see I have something to contend with."

"Something! You make me ashamed, Anna. I have grumbled often, but my lot is easier than yours."

"It is ready for papa to see when he comes. He will like it; but if mamma's fears are well-grounded, O Ursula, I shall not be able to bear it!" said Anna, her lips quivering sorely. "The constant anxiety and suspense is so hard to bear, and then I have to cheer up mamma. Then she says I have no feelings. I sometimes don't know what to do, Ursula, and I have to lock myself up here and pray for strength."

"God give you it more and more, my darling," Ursula whispered. Then in silence she left the studio and returned to the dining-room, where, to Ursula's amazement, she found Robert promising to come often round to the Crescent, and to bring Tom with him.

"Your friend is a sweet and lovely girl," he said to Ursula, when they were walking home.

"She is all that, and more," Ursula answered, wondering to hear such words from Robert's lips.

"The mother is a fool. How old is Miss Trent, Ursula?"

"Nineteen. One month younger than I am," answered Ursula, and the subject dropped.

But Anna Trent was not dismissed from the mind of Robert Vivian. She haunted his dreams, disturbed him at business, came even between him and his monetary calculations. In fact, Robert Vivian was in love.

CHAPTER XII.

DR. DUNSCOMBE.

"THIS is a letter from Ursula Vivian, John," said Mary Dunscombe. "Surely she will be coming now."

The brother and sister were at breakfast in the pleasant dining-room of Beach House. Mary is an old friend; but you will look for a moment at Dr. Dunscombe, if you please, for he was no mean person in his own estimation. He was not a handsome man, but he had a striking face, indicative of intellect and mental power of no mean order; and he was a thorough gentleman in appearance and manner. He was not conceited, though the admiration of the women folk in and around Sunnybeach might have made him so; but he was intensely egotistical. Fortune had been very kind to him; he had never been crossed in a desire or whim in his life, and all this he was

apt to attribute to his own merits. He was a skilful man in his profession, and deservedly popular. Although he had not been a year in Sunnybeach, his name was known far and wide.

Such was Dr. Dunscombe. Mary was a sunbeam, as of yore; a little more womanly in her way, perhaps, but just as winning, just as sweet, just as loveable as in the old days at Aldborough. She wore a muslin dress, forget-me-nots on a white ground, a knot of blue ribbon fastening her bonnie brown hair, and a half-blown rosebud at her throat.

She was a fair picture, and one any man might long to see in his home every day. Dr. Dunscombe was very fond of and very kind to his pretty sister, whom everybody loved. She was just the kind of woman he most admired—high-spirited, but tractable; void of any strong-minded ideas, but full of reverence for masculine intellect, as embodied in himself; a thoroughly good housewife, who allowed nothing to be wasted or thrown away; and a lady besides, who could comport herself well in any society. Mutually satisfied with each other, the brother and sister dwelt most amicably together, and Beach House was a favourite house for visitors in the neighbourhood.

Dr. Dunscombe merely glanced up from his

newspaper when his sister spoke, and waited to hear the contents of the letter.

"Listen, John," cried Mary joyfully. "Hear what Ursula says. It is just a few lines.

"'THE GRANGE, KESSINGTON, *June 14th.*

"'DEAR MARY,—If you will have me, I shall come down to Sunnybeach on Friday evening, leaving London by the four o'clock train. A line in reply will oblige.—Yours, in great haste, URSULA.'"

Dr. Dunscombe did not look particularly delighted.

"Friday; this is Tuesday," he said, drily. "You will need to write at once, Mary."

"You are not displeased because Ursula is coming, John?" said Mary, quick to note an indefinable something in his manner.

"Displeased! No, why should I be?" he asked indifferently. "I have no admiration for strong-minded or literary women, such as Miss Vivian appears to be, but that is no reason why you should not have your friend here."

To Mary it seemed reason enough, and for a moment her sunny face clouded, and she felt vexed with her brother.

"Ursula is not that; she is a splendid girl, John," she said, a little warmly.

"Oh, of course, young ladies are always rapturous over their feminine friends," he said, in his cool, sarcastic way. "Let her come by all means, but don't let her spoil you, Mary. I can't have my model woman imbued with any absurd and unwomanly ideas, remember."

Mary smiled a little sly smile. She was a woman, and perhaps there crept into her heart a notion that her brother might receive at Ursula's hands a punishment he would not relish.

Dr. Dunscombe did not understand that smile, and it annoyed him. But the subject was laid aside then, and was mentioned no more till the day on which the strong-minded woman was expected at Sunnybeach. If Dr. Dunscombe had guessed how very little he was in Miss Vivian's thoughts he might have been surprised. She was thinking too much of Mary to have any corner left for her brother. On Friday Dr. Dunscombe had a long round, and, dining at the neighbouring town, only reached home in time for tea at six.

"Miss Vivian has arrived, and tea is waiting, sir," the servant said, in answer to his question when he entered the house. Dr. Dunscombe did not deem it necessary to make any change in his toilet in

honour of his sister's guest. He simply took off his dusty boots, washed his hands, and proceeded to the dining-room. He was conscious of a slight feeling of curiosity about the young lady, but when he entered the room he was surprised.

"My brother, Ursula. John, this is Miss Vivian," Mary said; and a figure rose from behind the window curtain, and Dr. Dunscombe saw a slight, graceful figure clad in deep mourning, relieved by linen bands at throat and wrists; a grave, sad, earnest face, lit by the loveliest eyes he had ever seen: a perfect lady in appearance and in manner, and very different in all ways from the being he had pictured during his ride home. She bowed to him, just looking him keenly in the face; then she offered him her hand.

"I am very pleased to welcome you to Sunny-beach, Miss Vivian," he said, taking the white hand in his; and she answered simply—and very musically he noted—

"Thank you, Dr. Dunscombe."

Then Mary made a movement towards the table, and tea began.

Ursula did not talk much that first evening. She was weary, and somehow felt the presence of Dr. Dunscombe to be a restraint. She mentally

compared the brother and sister, very much to Mary's advantage, and wondered why Mary thought him such a piece of perfection. It was Ursula's way to come to quick conclusions—to form opinions of persons and things almost instantaneously; and she did not feel particularly drawn to the most popular doctor on the Kentish coast. After tea the girls retired upstairs to the drawing-room, and, seating themselves in the wide oriel window, prepared for a long talk; but for a little while Ursula could do nothing but feast her eyes upon the blue sea, shimmering in the sunshine, and watch the ships floating past like white-winged birds. She had all an inlander's enthusiasm for the sea, and Mary enjoyed her enjoyment of it. Beach House stood in a delightful garden, sloping down to the beach, and had an uninterrupted view of the sea from all the front windows.

"O Mary, how beautiful! How glorious it must be to live here!" exclaimed Ursula. "I had no idea you were so near the sea, nor that Sunnybeach was such a lovely place."

Mary laughed.

"It is famous for its beauty, Ursula. But come, sit down, and let us talk. There will be plenty of time by-and-by for sight-seeing."

Ursula resumed her seat, and brought her eyes back to her friend's face.

"You are just the Polly of old, only prettier," she said, laying a light, caressing touch on the sunny head. "Mary, I have hungered to see you."

Mary took the slim fingers in a clasp, which was answer enough, and for a little while there was nothing said.

"I have not recovered yet, Ursula, from the surprise the change in you gave me," Mary said, by-and-by. "You have improved so much; you look like a princess, or something. Only when I look at your mouth, and see the droop of the lips, I remember what has done it, and my heart bleeds for you."

Ursula was silent a little, looking away across the shining sea.

"Mary, I want to thank you now from my deepest heart for that letter. It was like a message direct from God," she said, in a low, quiet voice. "I was just beginning to fold my hands in useless repining, and asking myself very bitterly the wherefore of God's dealing with me. Your letter gave me the key, and with it unutterable peace I have never felt the same since, even in my darkest moments, which do come sometimes

yet. Mary, the thought that God is leading me never leaves me, and comforts me inexpressibly."

"O Ursula! I am so thankful, dear, that I was able to do even that for you," Mary whispered; but Ursula did not seem to hear.

"I can look back with some calmness now, Mary, to that terrible time, though I shudder still at the struggle I had to say, 'Not my will, but Thine.' That is the hardest lesson human hearts have to learn on earth, Mary," said Ursula, and suddenly rising began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

"Mamma was my idol," she went on. "It was in her all my hopes were centred, around her all my interests clung; I was her only daughter, you see, and the bond between us was a peculiar one. I need not enlarge very much here, but must tell you that ours was not a very happy home. My father was not quite all that he might have been, and on that account mamma's life was harder than it need. I was just beginning, Mary, to be of use to her, to spare her fatigue and anxiety, and it was an unspeakable joy to me to be able to do even so little for her. I was just beginning to repay a little of all she had done for me when that terrible thing happened, and she was taken away. I pray,

Mary, that you may be spared the agonies I endured for days after her death. It was all dark. I could see no reason for such sundering of hearts, such sudden ending to a life so precious as hers. I could find no wherefore for my affliction. I just felt like a mariner out in a frightful tempest, without rudder or compass. I feared I was lost altogether."

She paused a moment, and Mary, looking at her, dared not speak. Her face was very pale, her eyes shining, her breast heaving with intense agitation.

"That evening after she was buried, Mary, I stole away to Kessington churchyard in the moonlight to her grave. I stayed there, like Jacob of old, wrestling for the victory, and got it. A glimmering of peace stole into my heart, and I could weep, which I had not been able to do for days. I could pray too, and God heard and answered His poor, weak, suffering child. It is through deeps like these, my friend, some must go to bring them to submission. How foolish we are trying to set up our puny wills against the sweet will of God! and how much easier it is to be in His hand, and say, 'As Thou wilt,' if we would only do it at once and always; but there is a kind of

I stayed there . . . wrestling for the victory, and got it.

rebellious spirit in our nature which seems to be stronger than the submissive element. I think God knows it all, Mary, and pities us with an infinite compassion."

Ursula paused again, and moving over to the window stood looking with dreamy, far-away eyes upon the sunset gilding sea and sky. There was a long silence.

"That is all, Mary. I have never told it before, and may never tell it again," said Ursula. "But you are my friend."

"For life, dearest," Mary answered; and their hands met in seal of the bond.

"I am sobered now with a vengeance," said Ursula, by-and-by, with a return of the old girlish way. "I am housekeeper, mother, sister, and author—all in one. A family is a great responsibility, Polly."

Mary laughed again.

"I must come to the Grange and view you in your fourfold capacity; but I know you will do it all splendidly, Ursula, you are so clever."

"Nonsense, Polly. I make ridiculous failures; but I thank God I can make a home for my brothers, and that there has never been a cloud between us. They help me in every possible

way. You know all there is to know about my private occupation, and what success I venture to hope for in the literary world; so now we will talk of you."

"Oh, there is nothing about me. I live here in peace and quietness with John, and do my best to please him. We are very happy, and he is very kind to me; that is all. What do you think of him, Ursula?"

"It would be unfair to answer yet. When I have been a week here, you may ask me again," Ursula answered, with a slight constraint in her voice. "I saw Anna Trent yesterday, Mary."

"Oh, did you? Isabel was calling here yesterday. She said she had not had a letter for a long time. We are to go to Haydon Hall to-morrow, Ursula; but what of Anna?"

"Anna is a kind of angel, I think, Mary, and you will hear of her presently in the world of art. She——"

The opening of the door interrupted Ursula, and Dr. Dunscombe entered.

"May I come in, ladies; or are the confidences not all exchanged yet?" he asked, in that cool way of his.

Mary jumped up at once.

"Yes, come in, John; we can talk another time. Have you not to go out to-night?"

"Not to-night. Well, Miss Vivian, what do you think of Sunnybeach, now that you have rested a little and had a better view of it?"

"It is a beautiful place, Dr. Dunscombe," Ursula answered, but did not offer to prolong the conversation.

Mary wondered much why Ursula should freeze up so suddenly whenever John entered the room.

"Miss Vivian, do you sing or play?" he asked, glancing at the piano.

"A little, a very little, Mary knows," assented Ursula. "Do you still live at war with the piano, Polly? Do you remember practising hours at Aldborough?"

"Too well," laughed Mary. "That is my one drawback, I believe, in John's eyes. He loves music and knows nothing about it."

"Will you favour us, Miss Vivian?" said Dr. Dunscombe. "I am passionately fond of music, and this sister of mine is too lazy to practise, or she might do wonders."

Ursula rose at once, greatly to the doctor's amazement.

The majority of the young ladies of his ac-

quaintance required so much pressing, and had so many apologies and excuses before they would perform, that this frank readiness was something quite refreshing. There was no nonsense about Ursula. She knew her musical performances were not faultless, but if she could give the slightest pleasure she was always willing—a characteristic which made her a great favourite at home.

"I play and sing from memory, and not always correctly," she said, looking up into Dr. Dunscombe's face as he opened the piano for her. "You must not blame me if I disappoint you."

She ran her fingers lightly over the keys, and in another moment her voice rang through the quiet room, sweet and clear as a bell. It was a simple song, set to a simple but exquisite melody, which was played as if her heart guided her fingers.

Dr. Dunscombe stood leaning a little towards her, his face softened almost to tenderness. Music was one of the few things which could stir his heart.

When she ceased there was a moment's intense silence.

"Something else, please," Dr. Dunscombe said, entreatingly.

But she rose, saying hurriedly:

"Oh no, not to-night; another time. I should not have sung that; it always upsets me."

And as she glided past him in the shadow, Dr. Dunscombe saw that her beautiful eyes were brimming with tears.

CHAPTER XIII.

OF THE WORLD.

"WE are to dine at Haydon Hall, Ursula," Mary said next morning, when the doctor went off upon his rounds, and they were all alone. "John will not be home in time to walk up with us, but he will join us later. He is a great favourite with Mrs. Fortescue, and she always excuses him, though he is late."

"I fear dinner at Haydon Hall will be a doubtful pleasure to me, Mary," said Ursula. "And my gown is hardly fine enough to go among fine folks."

"Nor is mine. We will sink into utter insignificance before Isabel, whose attire will probably be a triumph of Monsieur Worth's; but we need not mind for that."

"What like is Isabel now?" asked Ursula.

"So lovely I can do nothing but stare at her;

but she is very vain and frivolous," answered Mary. "Her talk is very wearisome."

"What like is her brother? Is he at home?"

"He is very nice, Ursula," Mary answered, and Ursula was quick to note the rising colour on her cheek. "Isabel and he do not get on very well together. I think he shocks her aristocratic ideas, being a plain, blunt, country squire. You will like the old gentleman. Mrs. Fortescue is a lady of fashion and a woman of the world. Are you satisfied now?"

"Quite; and now, shall we go out, or have you housewifely cares to occupy you for a time?"

"Not to-day, when we are dining out," said Mary, laughing, "Let us get our hats, Ursula. I have a message to the village, and then we can stroll along the shore."

The morning was one of June's sunniest mood. Sea and sky were cloudlessly blue, and the tiny waves lapped the shore with a musical murmur, just as if there could be no such thing as a storm in the world. Yet it was a wild coast in winter time, and the angry seas had been known to roll up to the very doors of the cottages which stood nearest the beach. The village was very small,—only a few straggling cottages, a schoolhouse standing in the

shelter of a stunted chestnut tree, and the church, an old-fashioned building, weather-beaten with the storms of many winters. Miss Dunscombe's errand was to see an old widow woman who was bedridden and entirely dependent upon charity for the little which kept her in life. Ursula followed her friend into the poor little cottage, watched her pull off her gloves, and set to work to light a fire and get the invalid some breakfast, chattering to her all the while to prevent her words of thanks and blessing. When she had made the old woman comfortable, and given her a nice cup of tea and a morsel of chicken which she had brought in her little basket, she took the worn Bible from the mantelshelf and read a Psalm in a low, reverent voice. That was how Miss Dunscombe's mornings were spent, ministering to the poor and needy, caring for their souls alike. What wonder that she was almost worshipped in Sunnybeach!

"How well you do it, Mary," Ursula said, when they were out of doors again.

"I like the work. Mamma did a great deal of visiting in Drayton before she had so many other claims on her time, and I suppose I inherit her liking for it," answered Mary. "But we have not many very poor in Sunnybeach—old Sally and an

old man at the other end of the village are really the only needful ones. I have a class of poor children on Sunday afternoons at home. That is interesting work, Ursula."

"I should imagine so. I do nothing of that kind, Mary; all my superfluous charities are absorbed at home."

"Of course, you can't do everything. It would be to my shame if I did not try to do a little good during my abundant leisure."

"Do you remember our talk that last night at Aldborough, Polly?" asked Ursula, with a smile.

"Yes, I have often recalled it. Life has begun in sober earnest for some of us already, Ursula."

"Yes, these were happy days at school, Polly," said Ursula, with a sigh. "Void of care, we were as light-hearted as the wind. I often wonder, can I be the same person I was then—I feel so different."

> "The same, the same,
> Yet not the same,
> Ah, never, never more,"

hummed Mary. "There is not much difference in Isabel, except that she is more grown up, you know, and has assumed all the airs of a fine lady.

She patronises me extensively, and will try to do it to you."

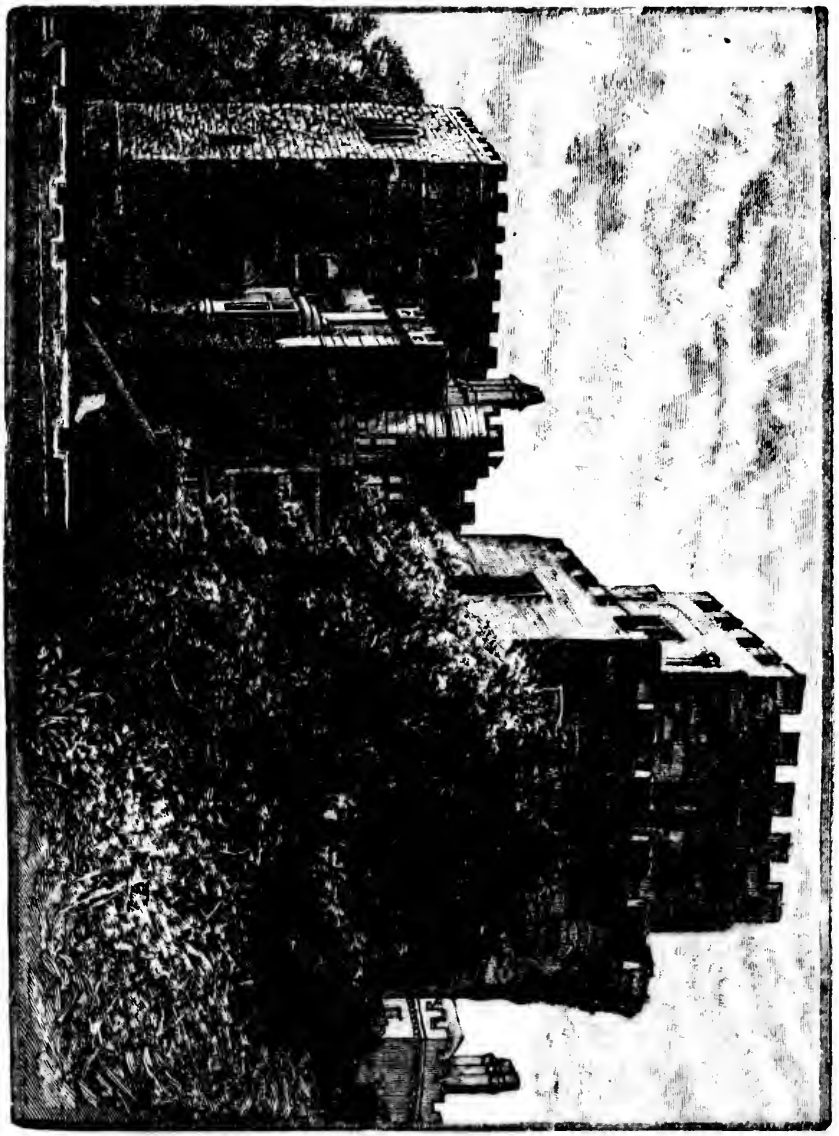
"Probably; but I would not change places with her, Mary, though she has so many worldly gifts."

So in pleasant, sisterly talk of persons, places, and things, the morning hours were wiled away, and they sought their way back to Beach House to luncheon.

At three o'clock they dressed, and set off on their three-mile walk to Haydon Hall. It was a princely heritage, indeed. Ursula could scarcely repress a cry of admiration when a sudden curve in the wide avenue of stately chestnut trees brought them face to face with the massive pile of building, with its towers and turrets, mullioned windows, and wide doorway, guarded on either side with huge stone lions, carved out of blocks brought from the Squire's quarries in Wales.

"I do not wonder Isabel speaks so proudly of Haydon Hall, Polly," said Ursula, as they stood a moment on the steps, before seeking admission.

"No, it is a lovely place, and it is as magnificent without as within," Mary answered, and rang the bell.



Haydon Hall.

A stately individual in purple livery then opened the door, and ushered them upstairs at once to the drawing-room.

Mary was right; almost a limitless wealth and refined taste had been at work in the furnishing Haydon Hall, and the result was something to be remembered. The drawing-room had lately been re-furnished, after the new æsthetic designs, and, if rather confusing and peculiar to homely eyes, there was no doubt about its magnificence.

The footman announced the ladies, and withdrew; then, from a couch in a shady corner of the room, a figure rose, and came forward to greet them.

It was Isabel, exquisitely dressed, and looking as lovely as a poet's dream.

"I am glad to see you," she said, the old sweet, haughty tones a little haughtier than of yore. Then she kissed them both—a little, cool kiss—and looked Ursula all over.

"You are very much changed, Ursula," she said. "Will you sit down and chat a little, or I think you ought to come up to my dressing-room at once, and we can have a cup of tea together. Mamma always lies down in the afternoon, you know, and papa and Gilbert will not be in for hours."

"Yes, we will go upstairs, Isabel," Mary answered promptly. "We are dusty and tired. It is a long walk on a June day."

"Did you walk?" asked Isabel, in languid surprise. "I don't know how you do such things. A mile upsets me for days. I hate walking."

"All the world cannot go upon wheels," said Ursula, a little drily, for Isabel's speech partook of the spirit of boasting.

"Now, I know you are Ursula Vivian," said Isabel. "That is just how you used to speak. Well, come away upstairs."

She led the way to her dressing-room—a large, light room, fitted up with every requisite; nay more, every luxury an idle taste could suggest and money could buy. Isabel drew the blinds to subdue the sunny light in the room, pulled in the lounge from a corner, and an easy-chair from another, bade them be seated, and rang the bell.

"Tea at once, Ellen," she said to the smart housemaid who answered the summons. Then she flung herself into an easy-chair, and watched her friends removing their dusty boots and washing their hands.

"Of course you are frightfully vexed with me

for never writing, Ursula," she said, "but really I have no time. Mary will tell you how much I am occupied one way and another. We have either visitors or are out somewhere, and you know this was my first season in London."

"There is no need to apologise, Isabel," said Ursula, pleasantly. "I never expected you to write. Ornaments of society are not generally voluminous correspondents, you know," she added, slyly; but the point of the good-humoured sarcasm was lost upon Isabel.

"You do not look quite so old, now that the tired look has gone from your face," she said. "But still you look about thirty-six. You surely work very hard, Ursula."

"Perhaps I do, and sorrow ages one, they say," Ursula answered, simply.

The entrance of the maid with the tea-tray spared Isabel the necessity of answering, and she skilfully changed the subject. Her frivolous mind could suggest nothing fitting to say to anyone in sorrow or trouble. "How do you like Sunny-beach, Ursula," she asked.

"It is very beautiful, and the sea is a great revelation to me."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"It is frightfully dull after London. I pleaded with mamma to remain the season out, but she was inexorable. She did not want me to see too much gaiety, nor to be very widely known the first season, especially when I am so young, so she brought me down here just in the height of all the pleasure. Half the entertainments are to come yet. We received cards for the Duchess of Arlington's ball on the 23d, and I should have seen the Princess there; but mamma declined the invitation. All the world wondered at her hardihood in refusing the Duchess's invitation; but mamma is the soul of independence, you know."

"Do you like going to dancing-parties every night, Isabel?" asked Mary. "Is it not wearisome?" Isabel smiled, as if in purest amusement, and stirred her tea meditatively.

"You dear little goose, it is a charming life. One never has time to think such stupid thoughts. I enjoyed it very much; it is such fun snubbing the ineligibles. Mamma says my manner is quite perfect."

Ursula laughed outright behind her tea-cup, and at that moment Mrs. Fortescue entered the room, and greeted the girls with somewhat condescending cordiality.

She was a handsome woman, of haughty and proud demeanour, not a loveable person by any means; yet a certain graciousness of manner she could assume, when necessary or advisable, made her very popular in society. She was just the woman to train a foolish, frivolous-minded girl like Isabel into all the miserable ways of fashionable life. She stayed a few minutes talking with them, and then went to dress.

"Your brother will dine with us, of course, Mary," said Isabel, and there was an indefinable something in her voice or manner which caused Ursula to wonder—she could not tell why.

"Yes, John will be in time, if possible; if not, he will need to be excused, as usual," laughed Mary. "A doctor cannot always observe the amenities of social life."

"I suppose not. Well, shall we go to the drawing-room now? Perhaps Gilbert or papa may be there. It is past six now."

In the drawing-room they found Gilbert Fortescue standing in the window humming a scrap of song. He wheeled round when the ladies entered, and gave them a hearty greeting. Ursula thought he held Mary's hand in his longer than he need have done. He was a fine, manly fellow, like

his sister in appearance, but in nothing else. He had a hearty contempt for all the frivolity of fashionable life, preferring Haydon Hall at any season of the year to the town house in Portland Place. He was the very *beau-ideal* of a country squire—free-handed, generous, warm-hearted, and fearlessly honest. Everybody loved the young squire, and said that he was a true chip of the old block.

Ursula liked him, and because she did, spoke to him frankly at once. That was her way. Dr. Dunscombe did not appear in time for dinner, and the company had been in the drawing-room nearly half-an-hour afterwards when he was announced. He was warmly welcomed, but scolded by Mrs. Fortescue. The Squire gave him a hearty grip, and Isabel gave him the tips of her dainty fingers. Ursula felt impelled to look at her at the moment, and there was something in the lovely violet eyes which could have but one meaning. Could it be that all Isabel's ambition would end in becoming the wife of an obscure country practitioner? If she remained true to her mother's teaching, surely not.

Some time was spent in general conversation, then Dr. Dunscombe asked for some music.

Isabel . . . went to the piano at once.

Isabel, not hard to persuade, went to the piano at once at his request, and played skilfully enough a brilliant piece, which showed her white fingers and the gleaming of her rings to perfection. Dr. Dunscombe stood beside her, turning over her music, but did not look entranced. When it was done, he thanked her, and looked appealingly at Ursula.

"Do you sing or play, Miss Vivian?" asked Mrs. Fortescue.

"Ursula's talents do not lie in that direction, mamma," said Isabel, sweetly. "She is literary, you know."

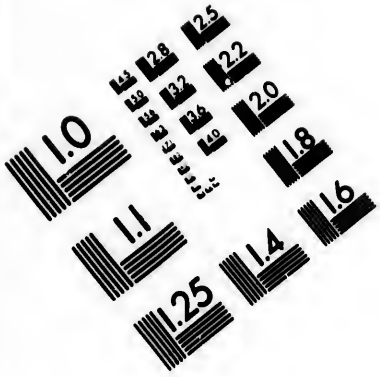
"She is musical also, as I have proved," said Dr. Dunscombe. "Miss Vivian, may I beg you to give our friends the pleasure you gave to me last night?"

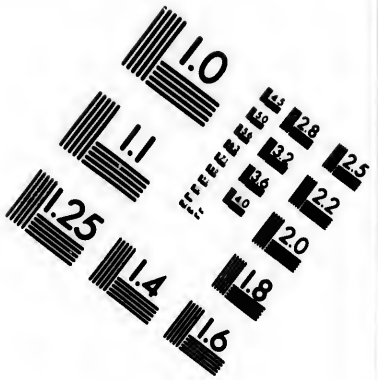
"You are pleased to flatter me, I fear," said Ursula, but went to the piano at once.

There was perfect silence all through her exquisite singing. Perfect silence, too, when she had finished, till the Squire spoke.

"By Jove, now that's what I call singing! that music—eh, Dunscombe. My dear, will you oblige an old man by giving us another?"

Ursula was quite willing, glad indeed that she





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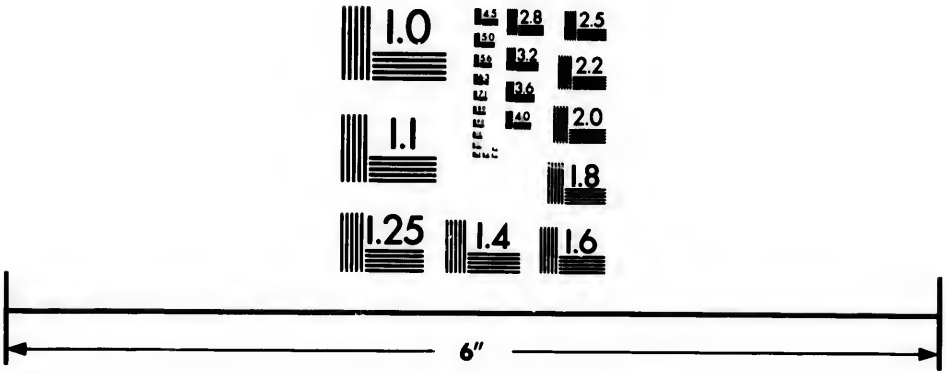

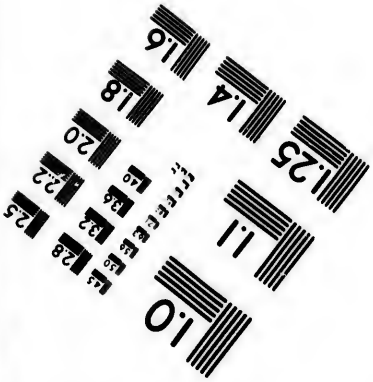

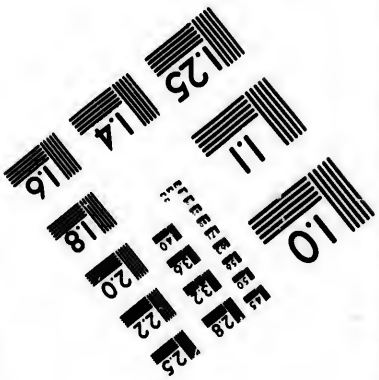

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was giving pleasure, quite unconscious that in Isabel's heart there was rising something very akin to hatred against her.

Yes, Isabel had given her heart unasked to Dr. Dunscombe, therefore it was not sweet to her to see him hanging upon every note of Ursula's singing; nor to see how often his eyes rested upon her face when she returned to her seat and began to talk to Gilbert.

When they left an hour later, Isabel did not ask them to come again.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONQUERED.

"I SHALL go in, Dr. Dunscombe," said Ursula, her voice sounding clear and sharp in the still air, as if she was sorely displeased.

They were walking along the shore, by the edge of the receding tide. It was Sunday afternoon. Mary was busy with her class indoors, and the doctor had persuaded his sister's friend to take a stroll with him, but evidently they had fallen out very speedily.

He looked at her curiously for a moment, then turned his head away, and there was an awkward silence.

"Have I offended beyond all forgiveness, Miss Ursula," he asked, by-and-by, with a half smile upon his lips, "because I ventured to express a candid opinion regarding strong-minded women?"

"Of whom I am an objectionable type. Go on,

Dr. Dunscombe," said Ursula, with curling lips. She was very angry, and she could not hide it.

"Pardon, I did not say so," corrected Dr. Dunscombe, in his coolest way. "I only gave it as my humble conviction that home is the woman's kingdom, and that when her chief interests centre there, her best energies employed to make it happy, it is better for her and for all connected with it."

"And what of those who have no homes in which to centre their interests, in which to employ their best energies?" inquired Ursula.

"I speak of the rule, not of the exception, Miss Vivian."

Then there was another brief silence, during which Ursula recovered her equanimity.

"Let us discuss this subject a little, Dr. Dunscombe," she said at length. "Would you give a woman no place beyond the four walls of her own home, simply because she is a woman?"

"Women were not intended to fight life's battles on equal ground with the sterner sex, Miss Vivian."

"They do not seek it as a rule. But what of that noble band of women-workers whom necessity compels to earn their bread by daily toil, physical or mental, outside their homes? Are they to be called unwomanly for so doing?"

"Not when necessity compels them. They are worthy of all respect. But I have no respect for certain young ladies I have known in my time, who considered themselves specially called to redress the fancied wrongs of their sex. These ladies who go about clamouring on public platforms for women's suffrage, and other equally absurd things, have laid aside that womanly sweetness, which, like the aroma of the violet, is their chiefest ornament."

"You wax very eloquent, Dr. Dunscombe," said Ursula, smiling a little. "I have not studied the subject very deeply, but I see no reason why women householders should not have the franchise, if they desire it. So far as I have been able to judge, women are as capable of voting as fairly and impartially as their——"

"We will not go into this part of the question, Miss Vivian, because I feel very strongly about it, and I might offend you still further."

"Not at all. It might ruffle me on the surface, as that breeze is ruffling the sea yonder. Yet why should you fear to offend? Is it because I am a woman, Dr. Dunscombe?"

"Courtesy is due to a lady," returned the doctor, curtly, "and if the battle were to be fought on

equal ground, courtesy would need to be dispensed with, not only in the matter of discussion, but in everything else."

"Will you tell me what your model woman is like, Dr. Dunscombe?" asked Ursula; "I am curious to meet her."

She spoke quite soberly, but beneath the broad-brimmed hat her eyes were dancing. Her momentary annoyance past, she was enjoying the talk very much.

"Willingly; but in all probability she will only meet with your contempt," returned Dr. Dunscombe. "Well, she must be gentle, cheerful, willing to oblige, acquainted with all house-wifely accomplishments, but able at all times to comport herself like a lady. She must find her first and best interest at home, find her chief happiness in making it a dear and pleasant place for its inmates. There are two verses of Lowell's which contain the sum of the whole matter. May I repeat them?"

"Surely," said Ursula.

"Yet in herself she dwelleth not,
Although no home were half so fair;
No simplest duty is forgot,
Life hath no dim and lowly spot
That doth not in her sunshine share.

"She doeth little kindnesses
Which most leave undone or despise,
For nought that sets one heart at ease,
And giveth happiness or peace,
Is low-esteemed in her eyes."

"I have not heard them before; they are very beautiful," said Ursula, when he had finished. "They are an exact description of your sister Mary. You are fortunate in having your ideal with you in your house, and perhaps that makes you a little hard upon others less blessed than she. But I would remind you, Dr. Dunscombe, that all human lives are not cast in such sweet and pleasant grooves."

Her face was very grave, and her eyes were looking away across the shining sea with a strange shadow in their depths.

At that moment she seemed to have forgotten the presence of her companion, and they stood for a space at the garden gate in silence. She was not a beautiful woman, nor a charming one in any way,—still less was she anything at all approaching to Dr. Dunscombe's idea of womanly excellence, yet—as he looked he felt his heart go out to her as it had never gone out to living woman before. He was not in love yet, but he was interested—

strangely, deeply interested in Ursula Vivian. She was at once a revelation and a study to him.

"Miss Ursula, I have been talking at random this afternoon," he said, leaning a little towards her. "You will bear me no grudge for it, I hope." Slowly Ursula turned her head and looked at him through eyes that had tears in their deepest depths.

"Oh no; I was not thinking of anything you said," she answered, gravely and simply. "Looking upon the sea, my thoughts flew to that other sea which men call Death, and on which so many embark every day of every year—embark every moment of every day. It is a great and grand mystery, Dr. Dunscombe, which we are content to leave unravelled, because it is of God."

So saying, Ursula went very slowly through the gate, and up the wide path to the house, leaving her companion to his own thoughts. They were all of her, and though he did his utmost to banish her from his mind, he failed utterly and entirely.

Ursula did not care for her friend's brother. She liked him for his kindness to Mary, and tried to believe all the praise the fond sister bestowed upon him; but as the days went by she did not feel herself drawn to him any more than she had

been the first night she came to Sunnybeach. On that account Dr. Dunscombe never saw the sweetest, sunniest side of Ursula's character. She was generally curt of speech, blunt of manner, and rather grim of face in his presence, and yet he was interested in her in spite of himself; possibly he enjoyed the novelty of being contradicted without hesitation, and snubbed also, when Ursula thought fit; in fact, Mary was at times rather piqued at Ursula's treatment of her brother. The days slipped away pleasantly enough, and the fortnight came to an end.

Ursula looked better and stronger t! ı she had done when she came. She had enjoyed her visit exceedingly, yet she was unspeakably glad at the thought of going home.

She left Sunnybeach early one morning, taking with her Mary's promise to spend Christmas at the Grange. They parted as sisters part, with true regret on either side. Each had done the other good, and the bonds of the old friendship had received a new and stronger seal. They would indeed be friends for life.

Dr. Dunscombe drove Miss Vivian to the station himself. He was very quiet all the way, and Ursula felt no inclination to speak; her

thoughts were all of home now. He took her ticket for her, looked after her luggage, and then came back to the door of the carriage in which she had taken her seat.

"I have the memory of a truly pleasant visit to take away with me, Dr. Dunscombe," she said, with more gracious cordiality than she had shown to him any time during the past fortnight. "Many thanks to Mary and to you."

He answered nothing, but stood there looking her full in the face. Strange that no suspicion of the truth came home to Ursula then.

"You are so overjoyed to get rid of me that you have got no words to say," she said tauntingly. "We are moving; good-bye."

Then he took her hand in a grip of iron.

"Good-bye, Ursula," he said; but at the moment she did not observe that he used her first name. "When Mary visits you I shall come and bring her home."

"Do; we shall be pleased to see you," said Ursula courteously. "Good-bye."

Then the train steamed out of the station, and Dr. Dunscombe retired out to his gig. Beach House seemed strangely dull that night to the Dunscombes.

"How I miss Ursula," said Mary, with a great sigh, as they sat at their late tea-table in the gathering shadows of the summer twilight. "Now, John, do you like her better than you anticipated?"

"I am not sure of that," returned Dr. Dunscombe, with the contrariness of his sex. "She is certainly a superior girl, and commands respect; but I am very doubtful about the home where she presides."

Yet Dr. Dunscombe would have given a world to see Ursula in his home every day; it was the desire of his heart to make her its mistress, for he loved her—as a man loves but once in life. His mode of speech was characteristic of the man.

"I have no doubt about it whatever, John," Mary said, "but we will see for ourselves when we go to Kessington. If you knew all that I know about Ursula Vivian you would talk differently."

Dr. Dunscombe held his peace.

"I am very vexed with Isabel, John, for her treatment of Ursula," said Mary, after a little pause.

"Yes, Miss Fortescue can annihilate when she chooses," he answered drily.

A silvery laugh fell from Mary's lips.

"Annihilate! Do you imagine she did that to Ursula Vivian? It would take a very skilful person to annihilate Ursula. She pities Isabel, John, with a vaster pity than Isabel bestows upon her, and she would not change places with her for triple the glory of Haydon Hall."

"I do not wonder at it," said the doctor with emphasis. "Miss Fortescue is not a woman to be envied."

A silence fell again, and to both the lack of Ursula's presence was very sad. It was at this hour she had always sung and played for them, filling the quiet room with echoes of sweetest melody, and that was stilled now.

"You will miss the music, John," said Mary, rising with a sigh.

"It would be well for me, Mary, if I missed nothing but her music," he answered brusquely, and quitted the room, leaving his sister sitting like one in a dream.

So Ursula had conquered after all, not by her intellect, nor her music, nor her beauty, but by her chiefest charm—that exquisite womanliness which had been born of a great sorrow, and which sat so beautifully upon her.

How would it end?

CHAPTER XV.

THANKSGIVING.

URSULA received a royal welcome home. The boys hung about her, not saying very much, but their look and touch told the sister who loved them, and whom they loved, how she had been missed. It was very sweet to her. Who among us do not prize such evidences of love from those dear to us?

She was rested and refreshed by her visit to Sunnybeach, ready for the campaign once more, eager to fling open the doors of the garret and again work to win.

Not many days after her arrival home she received a communication from Mr. Farrel concerning her story. I need not transcribe it here. Suffice to say that it was entirely satisfactory, and Ursula foresaw a speedier severing of that hateful bond of debtor and creditor between her

brother and herself than she had dared to hope for. Her contract with the publisher was sealed, the story went to press, and Ursula wrote on.

Slowly the days went by, and the anniversary of their sorrow came again. Its approach cast a gloom upon the Grange, and strive as she might Ursula could not always appear bright and cheerful to her brothers. Her heart grew so rebelliously sore at times that she had to creep away to her garret and utter that passionate prayer which seemed to live in her heart, "Lord help me to say, Not *my* will, but *Thine!*" Sometimes the longing to see her mother's face, to touch her hand, to hear her speak only one word, grew uncontrollable; sometimes she felt so *awfully* alone, so desolate, in the orphaned household, that even God seemed afar off. We who have suffered the like know how it was with her.

Geoffrey continued his studies under the organist of St. Michael's, and it soon became public talk that when Mr. Franz left in the autumn his pupil would succeed him. Every one was pleased, and not a little proud also, for the boy-organist would make St. Michael's famous in the country. Ursula heard the rumours, but hardly dared believe them; they seemed too good to be true.

On the anniversary of her mother's death and her father's funeral Ursula rose feeling nervous and depressed. She would fain have stolen away up the Scaur out of sight of all which brought up so many painful memories. But there were others to be thought of; so she descended to the dining-room at the usual time, and was in her place at the table when the boys came down. It was a sad and silent meal.

"I can't eat any more, Ursula," said Charlie at last, and ran out of the room with a great burst. In a moment Fred followed him, and only Ursula and Geoffrey were left.

"O Ursula, if mamma were only here!" he said, in a choked voice. "It is like a century since she left us."

"Have I filled her place so poorly, Geoffrey?" Ursula asked, with quivering lips.

"O Ursula, surely you don't think I meant that?" said Geoffrey, in distress. "You know all you have been to us, and how we love you for it."

"Yes, I know. Forgive me, Geoffrey; I spoke without thinking," she said, smiling a little. "I feel so sad to-day, I hardly know what I am saying."

"Ursula, I am to be appointed organist of St. Michael's next week," said Geoffrey, by-and-by.

"Next week! Organist of St. Michael's! Why did not you tell me last night?"

"I don't know! I feel funny about these things, Ursula; and, besides, I wanted to tell you this morning."

Ursula understood him, guessing that he had thought the announcement would be a comfort to her to-day, and so it was.

"Mr. St. John told me last night, Ursula; and I am to have a salary of £40; and, with the private teaching there is in Kessington, I shall be able to keep myself and help you," said Geoffrey.

Ursula could not speak. Even at the moment when she was questioning God's dealing with her and hers, He had assured Geoffrey's future. One anxious care He had lifted entirely from her heart, and she had indeed received a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

"God is very good to us, Geoffrey," she said, with fast-filling eyes; "even when we have least faith in Him."

"He has been very good to me, Ursula, I shall never forget it," said Geoffrey, forgetting his shy-

ness, and speaking all his thoughts. "When papa and mamma died, I knew Robert thought of me as a useless piece of lumber, who couldn't make a living for himself. He always despised my music. I wonder if he will despise it now, when it is to give me bread enough and to spare?"

"I think not," answered Ursula, with a little smile. "Yes, Geoffrey, it is a great joy to me that your gift is to be as useful to you as mine is to me. When I rose this morning I thought the world was very dark, and yet it is all blessing—all blessing, if we could but see it;" and under her breath she added the prayer, "Lord, forgive my little faith."

After tea that evening Ursula went to Kessington on some errands, intending to call at Mr. Aarons' for Geoffrey at seven o'clock, but insensibly her feet turned towards the churchyard—to that sacred grave which it was her joy and privilege to keep lovely with the blossoms of the year. It was a beautiful spot, that quiet God's acre on the sunny hillside, removed a little way from the stir of the busy town, upon which it looked down as if to keep the inhabitants in memory of its many silent lessons. It was just the sunset when Ursula opened the gate, and walked slowly with bent head to the enclosure

where slept those she had loved so well. There was no headstone upon the grave. In days to come Ursula hoped to place upon it a tribute to the beloved memory, but not yet. She stooped down at the green mound, touching with tender fingers the sweet blossoms which her hand had planted in the spring. Her tears fell fast all the while, but they were the tears which our Father treasures up—tears in which no bitterness mingles, only that natural and human regret which we are permitted to express, because Jesus wept. Truly I think that to mourners these two words must be at times the very sweetest in God's blessed book! Ursula stayed a little while, enjoying the golden light of the sunset, and feeling an unutterable sense of rest and peace stealing over her heart. She was so unmistakably being led, being cared for at all times,—so many things were daily made plain to her, that she could but say over and over:

"Lord, lead me always. I would seek to lie in Thy hand, knowing Thou doest all things well."

The fading light warned her at length that she must go, so she gathered a single blossom from the grave, fastened it at her throat, and went her way, rested and refreshed.

Outside the churchyard gate, to her amazement, she saw Laurence Abbot slowly pacing up and down, and evidently waiting for her. She knew he had been daily expected home; he must have arrived since she saw Agnes the day before. She went to meet him, perhaps with a little added colour in her face, for Laurence Abbot was oftener in Ursula's mind than she cared to admit to herself. He turned to her, raised his hat, and took her offered hand—his pleasant, manly eyes looking down upon her with an unmistakable meaning in their depths. But Ursula did not look into them just at first.

"Miss Ursula, will you forgive me? I saw you in Kessington, and, guessing where you had gone, followed you here. May I walk home with you, or do I intrude?"

Then Ursula looked at him, and that look was answer sufficient. So Laurence Abbot took her hand upon his arm, as if he had a perfect right to do so, and Ursula did not demur.

"Is Agnes quite well, and when did you come?" she asked by-and-by.

"They are all well, thanks, and I came late last night," he answered. "If this had been any other day save your sad anniversary, I should

have come to the Grange in the afternoon, Ursula."

Ursula said nothing. There came upon her at that moment that strange sense of security and strength—aye, and happiness—which she had experienced before in the presence of Laurence Abbot.

"Your sorrow is not hopeless, Ursula," he said, gently, thinking her heart had grown sore again over the unforgotten past and the lonely present.

"Oh no. I can say now, Mr. Abbot, that I would not have them back," she answered, half dreamily. "Only sometimes I feel so helpless, so unable to fill, even in a small degree, the place my mother has left. I had so little preparation, you know," she added, half pitifully.

"I dare not express a tithe of what I feel and think of the way in which you guide your motherless household, Ursula," said Laurence Abbot, his manly voice very earnest. "You are a living lesson to the womanhood of Kessington."

"Oh, hush!" said Ursula, in genuine distress. "If you say such things to me you will take away all the pleasure of my walk home."

"Is there pleasure in it with me, Ursula?" asked Laurence, bending a little towards her.

"Now, you talk nonsense," said Ursula, turning away her face, but not till he had seen its exquisite blush. "Let us talk to some purpose, Mr. Abbot. Are your college days over now?"

"Yes, and I begin the real work of life in October."

"Where and how, may I ask, without seeming curious?"

"Assuredly you may. I have been honoured with the post of first classical master at Rugby, Miss Ursula."

"I congratulate you with all my heart," said Ursula, warmly.

"Is that all?" he asked, his winning eyes dancing a little.

"How much more would you like?" asked Ursula, saucily. "I am a woman of few words Mr. Laurence, but they mean a good deal."

"A woman!" quoth Laurence Abbot, looking down from his tall height upon the slender, girlish figure by his side. "How long have you called yourself by that name, Ursula?"

Ursula laughed.

"I was a child till I left school, and then I was a woman; I have had no girlhood," she answered, half in jest, half in earnest. "Well, here we are;

you must not come any further than the gate to-night, but will you bring Agnes to tea to-morrow?"

"And go away without mine? No, thanks," said Laurence.

"You are very absurd; you must assume a dignity more befitting your position, else you will not inspire awe and reverence in the minds of the Rugby boys. Good-night."

"How abrupt you are; I want to stand here and talk a great while with you, Ursula," said Laurence. And again Ursula found it advisable to avoid those piercing eyes.

"But I don't want to stand a great while talking with you," she said demurely; "therefore, good-night."

"Good-night, Ursula, since you send me off; but there is a time coming when I shall speak and you will listen too; and that's not very far away," said Laurence daringly; and with a grip which made Ursula's fingers tingle he lifted his hat, smiled his pleasant good-night, and strode off.

Ursula's heart was full of sweetness. Clear and shining as the evening star above her rose up the truth that Laurence Abbot loved her. True, manly, brave and strong; full of reverence for all

things good, and hating all things evil, he was her ideal of young manhood—and he loved her!

Within the ivied porch, in the sweet summer dusk, she paused a little while to quiet her throbbing heart. The crown of her womanhood was coming very near to her, and with it her many cares would have an end; for they would be laid upon the broad shoulders of one who would bear them gladly for love of her, whose tenderness would be to her such a shelter, such a sweet abiding-place, such a joy, that she scarcely dared dwell upon it yet.

"For this also I thank thee, O my Father!" she whispered, very low, and stole into the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT ALLANTON ROAD.

THE letters which came from Tom during the autumn months were not satisfactory to Ursula. She could not tell whether it was drooping health or drooping spirits which took all the liveliness out of them, but there was evidently something wrong. There was no word of a holiday for him; and Ursula was just planning a surprise visit to London, with one of the younger boys, when one October morning a letter came from Robert, which ran as follows:—

"ALLANTON ROAD, LONDON,
Oct. 13th.

"DEAR URSULA,—You had better come up to London at once. Tom has not been well of late, and has been laid up in bed these two days. The doctor is afraid for some kind of fever, but don't alarm yourself. Telegraph your train, and I shall meet you.—Your affectionate brother,

"R. VIVIAN."

Needless to say, Ursula was off by the noon train. She forgot all about the telegraphing, and when she arrived at Mrs. Hill's abode, found Robert at business. She could hardly wait to hear Mrs. Hill's garrulous account of Tom's state of health, but, cutting her short, ran upstairs at once to the dingy bedchamber where Tom had lain these two days, sick of body and sick of heart, longing for home.

She stepped lightly into the room and went over to the bed. He was asleep, and dreaming evidently, for he kept muttering incessantly. Once or twice Ursula caught her own name.

She bent low over him, laid her cool hand on his flushed forehead, and was afraid to feel what a fever burned there. The touch, light though it was, awakened him, and he looked at her with recognition in his eyes.

"Ursula, old girl, that's right. I thought I was in London yet. I'm glad I'm home," he said, and rambled on again of his work, calling his fellows by their names, Ursula listening almost in terror. She had never seen anything like this in her life.

Leaving the room, she stole down to Mrs. Hill to ask when the doctor had been, and what he had said.

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"He didn't say anything, mum, when he was here this morning," said Mrs. Hill; "but it's fever, or I'm much mistaken. He asked if you were coming, and said he'd call in the evening."

Even as she spoke there was a ring at the bell, and Mrs. Hill, hurrying to the door, admitted the doctor. Ursula waited for him in the sitting-room. He was a comparatively young man, but Ursula liked and trusted him whenever she saw him.

"Miss Vivian, I presume?" he said, inquiringly.

"Yes, and you are Dr. ——?"

"Raymond, at your service, Miss Vivian," said the doctor. "I am grieved you have had such a sudden summons to London. Have you seen your brother?"

"Yes, and he appears to me to be very ill," said Ursula. "You are afraid of fever, I fancy?"

"Sure of it. Will you come upstairs with me now?"

Ursula bowed, and the two proceeded to the sick-room. The doctor drew up the blind, glanced somewhat discontentedly round the narrow, dingy room, and then approached the bed.

Tom looked up at him, and addressed him by the name of one of his fellows in the warehouse.

Dr. Raymond looked at him a minute or two in silence, touched his forehead, felt his pulse, and turned to Ursula.

"Typhoid fever, Miss Ursula," he said, in his curt, professional way. "Are you equal to a month's nursing?"

"I am equal to anything, Dr. Raymond, so long as there is hope."

The doctor smiled reassuringly.

"Oh, there is no fear of him. It will be a mild case, but the fever is always a tedious one. It has to run its course, whether it be mild or violent. I wish we could have had our patient in a roomier apartment."

"I wish I had him at home, Dr. Raymond. It will be impossible to move him, I suppose, for weeks?"

"Six weeks at the earliest, then you can take him down to Kessington—I think your brother said that was the name of the place—and make him strong and well again. In the meantime, we must just watch and wait."

"You can do nothing, then?" said Ursula, inquiringly.

"Comparatively speaking, nothing. The disease must have its own course."

"Is it contagious?"

"Strictly speaking no, but I should advise the good lady downstairs to send her children out of the house. There is no use running needless risks. You are not afraid, Miss Vivian?"

Ursula almost smiled.

"Oh no. It was of Mrs. Hill and her family I thought when I spoke," she said quietly. "We will expect to see you every day, Dr. Raymond."

"Certainly; and let me advise you, Miss Vivian, to get your brother to share the night watching with you. You must be careful of yourself for your patient's sake."

"Yes, I shall. I cannot afford to be ill for many reasons," answered Ursula. Then the doctor bade her good-bye and went his way.

In spite of Dr. Raymond's reassuring words, Ursula went about with a continual load on her mind. To her unaccustomed eyes the illness seemed a terrible one, though in reality it was a mild case. In her brother Robert she found a sympathising friend indeed. There seemed to be a great and indefinable change in Robert Vivian, whatever its cause. Ursula was amazed at his gentleness, his consideration towards her, at his anxious solicitude concerning Tom; and she found

his presence a help and stimulus, without which, I fear, she would have succumbed during these weary weeks of anxiety and care.

Little did Ursula dream whose sweet influence had wrought the change, whose example was doing for Robert what nothing else could have done, whose gentle hands were breaking down all the barriers of worldliness and selfishness which had hidden all the real good which lay in Robert's heart.

In three weeks' time the fever spent itself, and one morning, to Ursula's intense thankfulness, Tom looked up at her with eyes which had the clear light of recognition in their depths.

"Ursula, where am I?" he asked, in a voice so weak she had to bend down to catch the words. "Have I been ill?"

"Very ill, dear, but you will be better soon now, please God," she whispered, tenderly.

"I feel as weak as a baby. I don't seem to know anything either. But since you are here I think I shall sleep a bit," said Tom, contentedly; and accordingly he shut his eyes, and fell into a deep and health-giving slumber.

Ursula knelt down by the bed to return thanks to God for His great mercy. Until now she never

knew how great had been her fear of a different issue. But it was all right now, and there was only the getting well to be accomplished; and though her nursing was in reality only about to be begun she felt so blithe of heart she could have sung for joy.

She stole away down to the sitting-room, by-and-by, to write a letter home containing the good news, but presently she was interrupted by the doctor, who only stayed a few minutes, and expressed himself highly satisfied with his patient's condition.

After he was gone, Ursula went back to her letter again, but was interrupted a second time by the announcement of a visitor. To her great astonishment she looked up to see Anna Trent.

"Anna, are you not afraid?" she gasped.

"Not at all," smiled Anna. "I did not know anything about Tom's illness or you being here till last night, or I would have come long ago. I met your brother last night, and I came at once."

"I am delighted to see you, Anna," said Ursula, warmly; "especially to-day, for I can talk to you with a light heart. Dr. Raymond has just pronounced Tom out of danger."

"I'm glad of it. What an anxious time you

must have had! You don't look so worn as I expected."

"Oh no; I'm made of tough stuff, Anna," said Ursula. "Well, I'm not going to let you stay any time, for fear, you know. Just tell me how you have been; and what about the picture?"

"A gentleman, a friend of papa's, offered me a hundred pounds for it. but papa would not let it go, and it is to be hung in the Academy in the spring. Then the triumphal procession will need to come and view it," returned Anna, smiling at the recollection of that memorable talk at Aldborough.

"I congratulate you, Anna," said Ursula, sincerely. "Well, the *Bosphorus* was safe after all."

"Oh yes. Papa and the boys arrived two days after your visit. Papa liked the picture, Ursula. It was worth all my work to see his face."

"I don't wonder at it, Anna. It is an exquisite picture. I have been at Sunnybeach since I saw you last."

"Yes; Mary told me in a letter. Did you enjoy your visit?"

"Exceedingly. Mary is just the Mary of old. Isabel has developed into a woman of the world, Anna."

"Yes. I wonder is she happy?"

"I do not think so. Wealth and fashion cannot buy happiness. Well, Anna, you *must* go."

"Very well. If I must I must, I suppose. You will be round soon. Mamma will be pleased to see you. Perhaps you may see papa and the boys too. The *Bosphorus* is expected in port in about a fortnight."

"Ah, I should like to see them. My brother Fred wants to be a sailor, Anna, and I should like a talk with Captain Trent about him."

"Papa will be glad to tell you anything, and help you in any way," returned Anna. "O Ursula, how I love papa! I sometimes fear I love him too well."

"I don't know, Anna. God first, dear ones after; then no matter how well we love them," returned Ursula. "Well, good-bye, dearest Anna, you always do me good."

"You do love me a little, Ursula," said Anna, wistfully.

"Love you! Who could help it? You are our Saint Anna, you know. You have taught me many lessons, dear, since I knew you first."

"Almost as well as a sister, Ursula?" queried Anna, with strange earnestness.

"What a strange question, Anna! Why do you ask it?"

"Because some day, perhaps, I may be your sister," Anna whispered, with an exquisite blush. Then she ran out of the room, leaving Ursula dumbfoundered with amazement.

Anna's words could have but one meaning, of course; yet Ursula could hardly believe it possible that Robert should have won their sweet Saint Anna!

CHAPTER XVII.

SAINT ANNA.

THE convalescence was a tedious business, yet that sick-room in Allanton Road became a dear and pleasant place to Tom and Ursula, ay, and to Robert also. There were many long talks between the invalid and his dear sister, and many new resolutions were formed which Tom would keep by-and-by, when he went back to his labours again. He confessed to Ursula many mistakes, many slips, much shirking of duty, much carelessness and heedlessness, which had occasioned annoyance both to his employers and his fellows in the warehouse, but which, with God's help, would be ended now for ever.

"I'm going back a man, Ursula," he said, "to work in real earnest now, and you will be proud of me yet."

Dr. Raymond ordered a month's rest at Kes-

sington Grange before he resumed work. Tom would have rebelled, but Ursula went personally to the Messrs. Grimsby, explained the whole matter, and brought Tom such a satisfactory answer, that he grew content, and began to look forward eagerly to going home. It was not, until Tom was able to appear in the sitting-room once more that Ursula found time to go round to Parkside Crescent. Anna had never called again, and somehow though the subject was always in Ursula's mind, and often on her lips, she could not bring herself to mention it to Robert. One evening after Robert came in, Ursula put on her cloak and hat and went off, telling him to see Tom safely in bed, and then come round for her. Miss Trent was at home, the maid said, and ushered her at once up to the drawing-room, from whence echoed the tones of a manly voice singing a sea-song to a pianoforte accompaniment. It ceased, however, when the visitor was announced, and Anna rose from the piano to welcome her friend. Then she introduced her two sailor brothers —fine, handsome lads, bearing on their faces traces of exposure to the elements at sea. They were frank and hearty of manner, glib of speech, and void of shyness, so in a few minutes Ursula was perfectly

at home, and talking as if she had known them for years.

"Papa and mamma are downstairs," said Anna, by-and-by. "Mamma never comes to the drawing-room, so you will need to come down to her, Ursula."

"Just in a minute, Anna," said Ursula, who had grown intensely interested in George Trent's graphic description of a narrow escape the *Bosphorus* had had in a gale off the Pacific coast.

"What a life! How I should like it!" exclaimed she, when the recital was finished. "I would give a world to see what you have seen, to experience a little of what you have told me."

"Two or three months' spell of it would change your opinion," said Willie Trent. "There's mamma's bell, so we'll need to go down, I suppose."

Ursula was full of eager curiosity about Captain Trent. She had pictured him often in her mind's eye, and he was not unlike the picture she had drawn. He had a fine face—one which inspired trust in every man, woman and child who beheld it. It was bronzed and weather-beaten, of course, and the blue eyes, so like Anna's, could almost read one's very soul. His manner was gentle for one accustomed to a rough life, but it was hearty.

Ursula's fingers tingled with the grip he gave her hand.

"How are you, my dear? Glad to see you. I've heard so much about you, you know, from this girl of mine."

Ursula made a frank and hearty answer, then turned to the querulous invalid on the sofa. It might have been imagined that the presence of all her dear ones might have stilled Mrs. Trent's fretful murmurs for a time, but it was not so. She was still the martyr, suffering unkindness from all those about her. Ursula marvelled at their patience with her. It was a touching thing to see Captain Trent's tender chivalrous forbearance with his ailing wife, more touching even than Anna's gentleness. Once Ursula saw George Trent turn aside biting his lip, as some more than usually trying speech fell from his mother's lips.

"You see your fears about the *Bosphorus* were unfounded, Mrs. Trent," said Ursula, cheerfully.

"Yes; God heard the prayers of his poor suffering one, Miss Vivian," returned Mrs. Trent. "But some day the blow will fall, and I shall be left a desolate widow alone in a strange land."

"Oh, nonsense, Emma," said Captain Trent, briskly. "The *Bosphorus* has weathered many

a tough gale, and will weather many more yet, please God."

Mrs. Trent waved her hand in deprecation.

"Your loud speaking grates upon my nerves, William. Please remember you are not shouting to your sailors. I hate to appear even to be thinking of myself, Miss Vivian," she added, turning to Ursula. "But if my nerves are upset in the slightest degree it means a sleepless night. Is Tom quite strong now? and is Robert coming round to-night?"

"Tom is keeping better, thanks," said Ursula, with just a little stiffness. "And Robert will be round in a little while. There he is, I fancy."

Yes, it was Robert Vivian's knock, and Ursula was quick to note how Anna stole out of the room at once. Had she been out in the hall she would have been considerably amazed, for Robert Vivian took Anna in his arms as if he had a perfect right to do so, and bending his face close down to hers, whispered, "My darling!" And Anna did not demur, but looked, indeed, as if she found it very sweet. Ursula looked at Captain Trent when the pair entered the dining-room, and saw from the unmistakable twinkle in his eye that he had a good guess at the state of affairs. Robert Vivian

looked very much at home by Mrs. Trent's sofa. Ursula fancied he had been there oftener than she had suspected. While he was talking to Mrs. Trent, Ursula turned for a word with Captain Trent about Fred.

"How old is he?" was the captain's first question.

"Fourteen. He cannot leave school for a couple of years yet," answered Ursula. "But you would advise me to let him follow the bent of his inclination, Captain Trent?"

"Certainly, certainly; unless he is a born sailor, a month on salt water will be his best cure. When his school days are over, Miss Ursula, send him to me, and I'll take him a trial trip in the *Bosphorus*, after which I'll either send him home to you tired of his fancy for the sea, or else make a sailor of him, something like these lads there."

He turned his eyes fondly and proudly on his two stalwart sons, who were indeed such as any man might be proud of.

"Thank you, oh thank you, Captain Trent," said Ursula, with quick gratitude. "If Fred was with you I should have no fear."

"No need of thanks, my dear," said the captain, in his hearty way. "If old signs speak truly,"

he added, lowering his voice and glancing towards Robert and Anna, who were now standing together in the window, "you and I shall be nearer and better acquainted yet."

Ursula smiled.

"I had no idea of this, Captain Trent," said Ursula, with a rippling smile. "But it is a great joy to me that it is so."

"Miss Vivian, won't you come and talk to me," said Mrs. Trent querulously. "I know I am not very entertaining company, but it is painful to be excluded from general conversation."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Trent," said Ursula, and moved on to the sofa at once to listen with what patience she might to the invalid's selfish, complaining talk of all her troubles.

The evening sped quickly, and immediately after supper Ursula rose, saying they must go, for unless Tom was asleep the time would seem long to him.

Up in the bedroom Ursula shut the door, and laying her two hands on Anna's shoulders, turned her face to the light.

"Anna, is it possible?" she said, in a queer, astonished way.

"What, Ursula?" asked Anna, but the blush told that she understood her friend's meaning well enough.

"Ah, you know nicely, Anna. Is it true I am to have you for a sister?"

"Robert has asked me to be his wife, Ursula," said Anna, in a low, quiet way. "You are quite sure you are not vexed about it?"

"Vexed! my dear girl; my only fear is lest he should not be worthy of you," said Ursula, quickly. "But if anybody can make him all he ought, you can, Anna."

"He *is* all he ought to be," said Anna, shyly. Then Ursula took her close to her heart, and bade God bless her for ever and ever, and Robert too. Ursula spoke truly. Anna's was the one influence which could do all that was necessary for Robert Vivian, and already she had wrought that great change which Ursula had noted, but had not understood. When the brother and sister were out of doors they walked a little way in silence, which neither cared to break.

"You understand how matters stand?" said Robert, by-and-by.

"Yes, and I am very glad," answered Ursula, and slipped her hand through her brother's arm

in sisterly confidence. "I had no idea of such a thing, for you never hinted at it in your letters, Robert."

"I couldn't do it, Ursula," said Robert. "And when you came I wanted to tell you about it, but I couldn't, somehow."

"There are not many girls like Anna Trent in the world, Robert," said Ursula, soberly. "You will need to be good to her."

"Do you think I could be anything else?" asked Robert, quickly.

"No, but I have fancied sometimes that you were just a little hard of heart, Robert," said Ursula, with sisterly candour. "The least coldness or harshness, though meaning nothing, would chill Anna to the heart. You will remember that when she is your wife, Robert?"

"His wife!" How sweet the word rang in his ear and heart. For a moment he did not answer.

"She has taught me many things, Ursula," said he, at length. "She has made a new man of me with her sweet love and faith. God forbid that I should ever forget it."

Ursula was silent in the intensity of her thankfulness to hear such words from Robert's lips.

"I have not been all I should have been in time

past, Ursula; but life has been hard for me. None of the sweet influences of home have crossed my path. I went my way alone, and grew soured and hard, I suppose, and got to think that money and position were all worth living and working for. Anna has taught me differently, and with her help there will be a new life begun, with a higher aim in view."

"She was Saint Anna at Aldborough, Robert," said Ursula, through her tears. "She will be *your* Saint Anna henceforth—yours and ours. God bless her!"

"Ay, God bless her; and *you*, Ursula," said Robert Vivian, pausing at the door, and taking his sister to his heart for the first time within her recollection. "*You* began the work that sad week I spent at home with you, and between you, you have helped me a little nearer Heaven. So God bless you both, Ursula, I say, and make me worthy of such a sister and such a wife!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOT QUITE PERFECT.

A FEW days later Ursula took the invalid home. Tom was like a child in the exuberance of his delight at being home once more, and again, as of yore, Kessington Grange rang with his merry whistle, for the very air of home seemed to do all that was required in the way of restoration in a very little while. When Christmas came Tom had still a week of his month's leave of absence to run, and as the day of Mary Dunscombe's coming was fixed, and Robert wrote to say that he would be down for a day or two, it was likely to be a pleasant Christmas in all ways for the Vivians. Ursula had a house-cleaning before Mary came, and a little of her previous earnings went towards buying new curtains for the dining-room, and one or two other things to improve the interior of the Grange for Mary's

housewifely eyes. Ursula's hands were very busy for a time, but the results repaid the labour, and on the afternoon on which Mary was expected Ursula went round her domain thoroughly satisfied with its appearance. It was a touch of womanly pride which some would scarcely have expected in Miss Vivian, but, as I think I have said before, her character was many-sided. Mary was much surprised that night when she entered Kessington Grange. A great fire crackled in the high brass grate in the dining-room, casting a ruddy glow on the handsome, sombre room, and making a thousand little lights on the china and old-fashioned silver of Ursula's well-appointed tea-table.

"O Ursula, how nice! What a dear cosy room! What a lovely old house!" she exclaimed, all in a breath, before she got out of her furs. "It is like a story just to look at it."

Ursula looked pleased.

"I am glad you like my home, Mary," she answered quietly, "because it is very dear to me."

The boys were shy with the pretty young lady from the southern coast only for a very few minutes. Before tea was half over Tom

was interesting her with a detailed account of his surgery upon a broken-legged hen, at which she laughed so heartily that Tom was quite charmed with her.

"Say, Ursula, she's a treasure," he found time to whisper on the sly. "And so pretty! Wait till Sunday, all the fellows in St. Michael's will lose their heads."

"O Tom, what nonsense!" said Ursula, reprovingly. But it was no use. Tom would give vent to utterances like these in spite of all her remonstrances. He was indeed incorrigible.

"Can you skate, Miss Dunscombe?" he inquired by-and-by.

"Yes," answered Mary promptly; "and I brought my skates too. Is there a pond?"

"I rather think there is; we've a miniature sea on Kessington Common. I'll try you a race on it to-morrow morning, if you like. I don't get out at nights, you see."

"All right," said Mary; "I once won a prize for skating, Tom, so you will need to be on your mettle."

Tom gazed upon her with renewed admiration. He had rather dreaded her coming, picturing a different being from this winsome maiden

with the laughing eyes and frank, delightful manner.

"I'm jolly glad you've come, any way," he said, with perfect sincerity. "I'll go and rub up my skates. The ice wasn't very good to-day, but it'll be prime to-morrow."

After the boys went to bed the two girls drew their chairs closer to the fire, and sat far into the night talking. One thing Ursula had noted—a flashing gem on Mary's left hand, the meaning of which she desired to be told. Very soon it all came out. Leaning her head on her hands, Mary began—

"I have passed through a good deal since you were at Sunnybeach, Ursula. I seemed to have lived years in a few months. Not long after you left us Isabel's brother began to come so often to our house that I could not be blind to his object. I thought it all out before it came to a crisis. I looked at it in all ways, and my mind was made up. I can tell you all this frankly, Ursula, because you are my friend. I knew Gilbert loved me, that he wanted me for his wife, and though I loved him, there could be nothing between us. I have always thought that unequal marriages turn out un-

happily, except in rare instances; and, of course, a marriage between the Squire of Haydon Hall and the doctor's sister would be an unequal one; besides, I know that Mrs. Fortescue and Isabel would oppose it to the bitter end. They showed me that, indeed, when the thing began to be talked of, for you know how gossip spreads in country places. I tried to avoid Gilbert, to be cold and distant to him; but, Ursula, it was no use. He was a man, you see, with a man's right and determination to woo and win, if he could, the woman he loved. Well, when he spoke I could not refuse to listen, for I was only a woman, Ursula, and I loved him very dearly. He knew I loved him—I could not hide it; but when I tried to say there must never be anything between us, he just laughed, Ursula, and by-and-by said I was the wife given to him by God, and that no man or woman could come between us now, no matter what the consequences. But I was firm, Ursula; I would make no promise. I said there must be no engagement without the consent of his relatives, and that I would enter no family against their will. He said he had no fear, that they would welcome me, but I knew better than that. Next day, however, his father came to Beach House and

asked for me. O Ursula, how good he was! He said he loved me very much, and that it would be a great happiness to see me Gilbert's wife; and he said, too, that Mrs. Fortescue would, by-and-by, think the same. From that I gathered that there had been a storm at Haydon Hall; and, whether it was pride or not, Ursula, I said I would make no promise till Gilbert's mother came to see me, and told me she had no objections to the engagement. I don't know what passed at the Hall, Ursula, but it was weeks before Mrs. Fortescue came."

"She *did* come, then," exclaimed Ursula, in breathless interest.

"Yes. O Ursula, I wish you could have seen us in the drawing-room that morning! She was as cold as ice, and just touched my cheek with her lips, and then said, as if she had schooled herself to say it, 'Since you are to be my son's wife, we must be friends, Mary;' then she sat down. We talked a little about the weather, I think, for I did not know what I was saying; then she kissed me again, and went away. It was not very satisfactory, but she had come; so I was obliged to pledge myself to Gilbert and put his ring upon my finger."

"And you are happy?" queried Ursula.

"Happy!" echoed Mary, with a deep, tender

light in her lustrous eyes; "so happy, I can do nothing but thank God all the time, Ursula; so happy, that I dare not fret because there is a little jar upon the harmony. There must always be something. I think no earthly joy can be quite perfect."

Ursula sat silent a little while, and into her mind there crept Miss Proctor's exquisite lines:

"I thank Thee more that all our joy
Is touched with pain;
That shadows fall on brightest hours,
That thorns remain;
So that earth's bliss may be our guide,
And not our chain."

"Every day I live, Mary," she said, with a far-away shining look in her eyes, "I wonder more and more at the beauty and the infinite wisdom of God's leading. All things for good—that is how He deals with His children; and believing, knowing that, even pain is sweet from His hand."

Surely Ursula's sorrow had been sanctified, indeed, when she could speak such words from the very heart.

For such blessed ends is sorrow sent: to teach us our weakness, our dependence upon our Father, to send us ever upward and heavenward for all we need.

To continue in Miss Proctor's words—

"For Thou who knowest, Lord, how soon
Our weak heart clings,
Hast given us joys, tender and true,
Yet all with wings;
So that we see, gleaming on high,
Diviner things."

And in Heaven all dark places will be made light; all mysteries, mercifully veiled below, will be explained away for ever; every "wherefore" will be answered; all the agonies of earth forgotten; all its weariness ended; its heartache exchanged for joy and rest which shall endure for evermore.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHRISTMAS AT HOME.

ON Christmas Eve Ursula and Mary were sitting together in the dining-room. They were alone in the house, the boys being at the skating. The table was set for tea, and the cosy room, lit by the ruddy glow from the fire, presented a pretty picture. So did the two figures on the hearth. Mary, with her sunny head and winsome face, reclined on the hearthrug at Ursula's feet, regardless of crumpling her silver-grey gown, with its trimmings of white lace. Ursula was leaning back in her chair, her face wearing an expression of perfect rest. It was a beautiful face now—the face of a woman worthy the name—a face which many a one in and out of Kessington thought the sweetest in the world. Her perfectly-fitting black dress was relieved by soft frilling at throat and wrists, and in lieu of other adornment she wore a single blossom of a bright red geranium, which became her rarely well.

"I wish the boys would come," she said, sitting up when the clock rang six; "I am afraid Robert will not be till the last train."

At that moment the opening of a door and a great hubbub in the hall caused her to spring up and hurry out.

There they all were—Robert, Geoffrey, Fred, Charlie, and one more unexpected guest, Dr. Dunscombe.

"John!" exclaimed Mary, "what on earth brings you here to-night?" Recovering from her intense amazement, Ursula went forward to welcome her guest.

"You are very welcome to Kessington Grange, Dr. Dunscombe," she said, with exquisite grace; adding, with a little laugh, "even though you have stolen a march upon us."

"Thank you, Miss Vivian," returned the doctor, taking the offered hand in a firm, strong pressure. "I found Christmas at home alone was going to prove too much for me, so I came off, risking the chance of being crowded out by others."

"Oh, we have room enough and to spare," laughed Ursula; then there followed such a string of introductions, during which it transpired that the doctor and Robert Vivian had travelled in the

same compartment from London, and had even walked almost close together from Kessington without speaking, and it was only when both turned in at the Grange gates that they became known to each other.

What a hearty, happy, pleasant tea-drinking that was! Ursula was its presiding genius. She attended to everybody's wants, and had a word and a smile for them all. Dr. Dunscombe found it best for his peace of mind to keep his eyes away from her altogether.

Robert and she got into a very friendly talk, while Tom gave Mary a glowing account of his feats on the ice that day, and challenged her to a race next day.

After tea they adjourned to the drawing-room, and at Ursula's request Geoffrey laid aside his shyness before strangers, and played for them. While he did so all talk was stilled, and Dr. Dunscombe sat with his eyes fixed on Geoffrey's face, his face wearing almost as rapt an expression as the player's own. It was a wondrous, exquisite, heart-touching melody, such as could only be brought forth by a master-hand. It seemed to still all worldly or selfish thoughts, and to infuse some measure of the broad, loving, unselfish

Christmas spirit into the hearts of those who listened. All felt the better for it, and none wondered to see Geoffrey steal away, with his eyes full of tears, when he had finished, guessing his very being was stirred.

"Miss Vivian, I seem to be dreaming," said Dr. Dunscombe, almost breathlessly. "I never heard anything like it in my life. Your brother is undoubtedly a genius; I trust he will make music his profession."

"Yes," answered Ursula, with sisterly pride; "you will hear him with better advantage in church to-morrow morning. He is organist of St. Michael's."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the doctor in surprise. Then the talk drifted into the world of music, literature and arts, and the hours sped like moments.

Surely a pleasanter Christmas Eve had never been spent in Kessington Grange for years.

Next morning the whole household walked together across the crisp, whitened fields to the Christmas service at St. Michael's. The church was full, as usual, and in the Derrington pew Ursula saw the great Herr Baerstein sitting beside the countess, and leaning in the direction of the young organist, whose musical genius had already been

heard of far beyond the limits of Kessington. It was the first time Robert Vivian had heard his brother play in public, and, though he knew nothing about music, he felt his being stirred as the sweet, grand strains filled all the building, holding the worshippers spell-bound.

The Abbots were all in their pew. One swift glance Ursula had cast towards it when she first entered the church, perhaps to see whether Laurence had come down from Rugby to spend Christmas at home. His eyes met hers, and she turned her head swiftly away and put up her hand to hide the blush, but he saw it for all that.

Never in her life had Ursula's thanksgiving been so passionately sincere as it was that morning. There was so much, oh, so much, to be grateful for! so many blessings she could not enumerate them. Her eyes grew moist and tender as her heart re-echoed the beautiful words of Mr. Gresham's prayer, and as she knelt she took upon herself her vows of service for another year, and craved a blessing upon that service.

After the service Ursula left Mary a few minutes at the church door while she went for a word with Lady Derrington. In full view of all Kessington her ladyship leaned out of her carriage and kissed

Miss Vivian, then introduced her to the great composer by her side.

"We may steal your brother for to-day, I suppose, my dear," she said, pleasantly. "I see you have friends, or I should insist upon your coming too. You have deserted Averham of late. Why so?"

"I have so much to do—so many cares, dear Lady Derrington," returned Ursula. "I have just returned from a two months' sojourn in London, where I was nursing one of my brothers through fever."

"My dear, you fill your trying position in a way which makes every one reverence you," said her ladyship warmly. "God bless you, and make the many cares very sweet. Well, good-morning. You will come when you can to Averham, remembering there is always a welcome for you there?"

"Thank you," said Ursula, simply; and there was no need of any more.

"Here comes Geoffrey," said her ladyship, and made room for him beside her, and Ursula went back to her friends. The Abbots had joined Robert and the rest in the porch, and Ursula shook hands with them both, but did not choose to meet Laurence's eyes again.

"Won't you all come up and dine with us,

Ursula?" asked Agnes. "Then we could go skating afterwards."

"Mrs. Abbot would be rather taken aback at such a large invasion," laughed Ursula. "Suppose you and your brother come and eat *my* Christmas dinner instead. Then we can go skating, and take tea with you."

"Very well," said Agnes, nothing loth. Then Laurence took several long strides after his father and mother to announce the programme.

Ursula's Christmas dinner was a great success; and Mary took care to inform the company that she had made it all with her own hands, which occasioned quite a number of compliments to be showered upon her, much to her discomfiture.

To see Ursula here in her own home, its light and centre, guiding her household with gentle, womanly hands, was a new and deeper revelation of her to Dr. Dunscombe. If he had loved her before, he loved her ten thousand times better now, for here he saw the sweetest, most exquisite side of her character. His mind was made up. He would speak before he left Kessington on the morrow. He would place his happiness in her hands, believing she would give him a true and sincere answer at once.

It was not an easy thing to get a private word with Ursula. Everybody wanted her, and she was never a moment alone or unoccupied. But later on, when they were assembled on the loch, Dr. Dunscombe's opportunity came. He asked her to skate with him right round the loch. And away at the furthest end, where they were hidden from observation by the trees, he stood still and looked at her. There was no mistaking that look. Meeting it, Ursula knew what was coming, and would have flown, but he detained her.

"Just one moment, Ursula," said Dr. Dunscombe, in a manner strangely hurried for one who was at all times so self-possessed. "You must know what brought me to Kessington. I must leave to-morrow, and I cannot go without risking my happiness. I love you as I have never loved woman before. I know I am unworthy, but will you give me a chance?"

Ursula looked genuinely distressed. She had no great liking for Dr. Dunscombe, but he was so evidently in earnest that she could not but be sorry for him.

"O Dr. Dunscombe! I am very sorry, but I cannot," she said, almost piteously. "Let us go back."

"You cannot?" he repeated slowly. "Then I have no chance?"

"Oh no. I hate to give pain, but it is far better to be frank at once," said Ursula, in a gentle, womanly way. "I had no idea of this. I am very sorry, but it can never be."

"Perhaps when you have known me longer, Ursula," he began, eagerly; but Ursula shook her head so decidedly that he saw she was in dead earnest.

"Some one else has been before me, I fancy," he said, gloomily. Then Ursula, flushing deep crimson, very deliberately turned upon her skates and sped off to join the rest.

By-and-by Laurence Abbot came up to her and took her by the arm.

"I say, Ursula, I haven't had a word with you to-day, he said, his grey eyes looking keenly down upon her flushed face. "What has that Dunscombe fellow been saying to you? He has no right to say things to you, mind!"

"Go away, Laurence Abbot," said Ursula, sharply, "or I shall say something I shall be sorry for. I am very cross, and I don't want you talking nonsense just now."

"All right, madam, I'll obey," he said, merrily. Then bending his manly head he uttered another daring word—very low, but Ursula heard it, "*My* darling!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE CROWNING JOY.

URSULA'S literary work was falling in arrears, but after the departure of all the guests, after Tom went back strong and well to business, and life flowed on again in its even tenor at the Grange, she took up her pen again with renewed vigour. She had done very well, and was likely to do better, in the path she had chosen. Her name was beginning to be well known among literary people, and her stories were beginning to be asked for. That, of course, meant money in Ursula's pocket. In the course of that year she paid off the remaining portion of her debt to Robert, in spite of his strong protest against it. The next thing to save for was Charles's university course. The lad's mind seemed to be set upon the university, and he was becoming every day more earnest, studious and thoughtful. In

the midst of her great thankfulness, Ursula's eyes would fill sometimes at the thought of what a joy it would have been to her mother's heart could she but have lived to see such days at Kessington Grange; but up yonder she knew all, and Ursula was content.

In the course of that year, also one of changes for the Vivians, Robert and Anna Trent were married. Yes, sweet Saint Anna became Ursula's sister indeed; and surely never was sister more warmly welcome, more dearly beloved, than she! As it was impossible that Mrs. Trent should live alone—and not advisable for many reasons that, during the absence of her husband and sons, she should make her home with the young couple—Captain Trent gave up the *Bosphorus* to his lads, and purchased a house at Gravesend, whither he retired with his wife, to make the best of a landsman's life, and live, in dreams, the stirring days he had spent upon the main.

The change wrought in Robert Vivian by his sweet, gentle, unselfish wife, was marvellous to see. The old, hard, selfish life, was indeed done with for evermore, and a newer, nobler, Christian one begun. Hand in hand they walked the path of Christian duty, doing good in season and out

of season, for the Lord's sake. And they were happy—aye happy—and their home was a haven of rest and peace for the dear mother-sister toiling among her boys, when she grew weary sometimes, and, like a tired bird, flew to them for rest.

So the year went by, and another dawned upon the Vivians, to find them well and busy and happy, each and all with their separate duties and pursuits. That New Year's afternoon Ursula went to Kessington Mount to call for Mrs. Abbot, who had been ailing for some time. Agnes went out, but Laurence was sitting by his mother's couch, and after his brief visit was past, as a matter of course, took her home. They did not speak much on the way; perhaps there was no need. Laurence had never yet spoken to her of the subject nearest his heart, because, knowing her position, he dared not ask her to leave all for him. But each visit to Kessington, each time he saw her, made it all the harder for him to be silent, even although he knew perfectly well that Ursula knew he loved her.

"Life is full of change," said Ursula, when they had left the town behind, and were walking slowly along the quiet road, in the sober, January twilight;

"and time flies so quickly, we can scarcely grasp all that happens while it is flying."

"How long is it since you left school, Ursula?"

"It will be four years when next summer comes," answered Ursula, and an unbidden tear trembled on her eyelash. "It seems very long, and yet very short; but a great deal has happened in these years."

"Yes; and during these four years, Ursula, you have done as much as many women do in a life-time."

"My work was laid out for me, Laurence," answered Ursula, very quietly. "And I could not pass it by. I thank God for strength given to do even what I have done."

"You are a great and noble woman, Ursula," said Laurence. "Your life is a living lesson to all who know you."

Ursula laid a pleading hand on his arm.

"Oh, hush!" she said, humbly and entreatingly; "don't speak like that; it is not like you. Let us talk of something else. Did Agnes tell you Fred goes to sea in March, and Charlie to Oxford after the summer recess?"

"Yes, I heard both these items of interest, and my heart was sore for you, Ursula."

"My family is breaking up, you see," she said, trying to speak bravely. "There will be only Geoffrey and me left at the Grange. I shall have plenty of time to set round in a trailing frock, inking my fingers, as Tom used to say in the first days of my authorship."

"You will be very lonely, Ursula. Your many cares are slipping away from you. The dear lads will grow up and make ties for themselves. Very soon Geoffrey will be off after Aarons to Leipsic, and then—"

He stood still, and looked at Ursula till she was obliged to turn her face to his. The time for him to speak had come now, and Ursula no longer wished to stem his words.

"Then Ursula, my darling, will you come to me?" he asked, earnestly and passionately; his eyes fixed hungrily on the grave, beautiful, womanly face, which had indeed fulfilled all the promise of its early youth.

Ursula stood very still a moment, just thinking a little of all her answer would involve. Then she lifted her eyes to his face, and answered very simply, but without a shadow of doubt or hesitating—

"Yes, Laurence, when that time comes I will very gladly come to you."

"You *do* care for me, Ursula?" asked Laurence, not content even with that assurance.

"Care for you!" repeated Ursula, slowly, as if marvelling a little at the words. "Why do you ask me that? You know very well, I think, that I have loved you all the time."

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"Suppose we move on a little now, as it is quite dark, and past tea-time," said Ursula, by-and-by

"All right, my dearest. Just tell me once more that you care for me, and I shall take you home."

"Indeed I shall tell you no more," returned Ursula, with an odd mixture of shyness and sauciness in her voice. "And seeing that we shall have to wait years and years, perhaps till we are grey, there is no use saying any more about it."

"Do you think so?" queried Laurence. "Let me tell you I have no intention of waiting for my wife till *I* am grey, unless indeed your behaviour should turn it white in a single night."

Ursula laughed, and, laying her hand on his arm, they walked on again to the Grange.

"You must listen to reason, Laurence," she said. "I cannot break up the home here and go away with you to Rugby. What would become of

Geoffrey and of Charlie at holiday time, and of Fred when he came ashore?"

"Your arguments are irresistible, Ursula," answered Laurence. "I should be the last to ask you to do that, but there is another way out of the difficulty."

Ursula's eyes asked the question which her lips did not.

"My father is talking of resigning, Ursula, and the post is mine if I like to take it. Would you marry the Rector of Kessington Grammar School?"

"Perhaps I would," said Ursula, and he saw how her eyes were shining.

"And if you desired it very much, Ursula, we could make the Grange our home, upon certain conditions which will be discussed hereafter, and then the boys would have the old home to come to at all times. Would that please my darling, I wonder?"

Ursula's eyes overflowed, and with one of her rare impulses she turned to him very suddenly and laid her head on his breast.

"O Laurence, I am so happy, I don't know what to do; indeed I am so happy," she said brokenly, and by-and-by he heard her whisper very low,

"Father, I thank Thee from my heart."

CHAPTER XXI.

SUNRISE.

ONE more peep at the friends who have grown dear to me since I began this record of their lives—only one, and I have done.

It was a midsummer night, and never had Kessington Grange been so full since the days when the Vivians had shone in county society. All the boys were at home that night. Geoffrey had travelled night and day from Leipsic to be in time; the *Bosphorus* had got into port the day before, and thus enabled Fred to be present; Tom had got a couple of holidays for the occasion; Charlie was free from Oxford; Robert and Anna were there also with that wonderful baby, so dear to Aunt Ursula because it bore that precious name which was engraved on the head-stone in Kessington churchyard—Millicent Lucy Vivian. Mrs.

Trent had gone to her rest before the birth of her grandchild; but Captain Trent and his two stalwart sons were Ursula's guests that night, and also Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Fortescue, from Pine Trees Hall, Cheshire; for the young squire had won his wife, and in the meantime their abode would be upon his Cheshire estate, so long as the old Squire was hale and hearty in Haydon Hall. Ursula was hard put to it to find accommodation for them all, but it was accomplished; for it was her heart's desire that all dear to her should sleep beneath her own roof-tree on the last night—ay, the last—for to-morrow was her wedding-day. And they were all there, thank God, an unbroken family circle, save that it was a headless one—yet not headless—oh, never that while Ursula lived!

There was a great noise in the house. Everybody seemed to be talking at once, and everybody seemed to be calling for Ursula; but she had stolen away up to the little dressing-room, where lay the bridal robe she would wear upon the morrow. Just to be quiet a little, after all the bustle of the arrivals, and also to kneel down to thank God that, in His great mercy, not one should be wanting this night; that all she loved would be with her on

the morrow; yes, all, for would not the spirit of the angel mother hover near her beloved child on her wedding day?

She was not left very long in peace. Presently Tom's noisy foot came upstairs, and he gave a smart knock at the door.

"Say, old woman, here's Laurence junior, actually. Can he get in, or shall we hunt him off the premises? He'll get you all to himself to-morrow, so he might have left you to us to-night."

Ursula opened the door and came out smiling.

"He *is* in; I hear him speaking, I am afraid," she said. "Come down with me, and I'll help you to eject him."

They went together downstairs, but Ursula lingered a little behind him, and entered the dining-room alone. They were all there, and Laurence was standing by the table doing his best to speak to them all at once. He turned to Ursula, and they shook hands very quietly, but those who were watching closely saw how beautiful was the look in Ursula's eyes when she lifted them to the true, manly face of him who, ere to-morrow closed, would call her wife.

"Ursula's going to put you out, Laurence," said

Tom. "Do it now, Ursula; you came down to do it, you know."

But Ursula only laughed, and sat down beside Mary, looking as if she had no such intention. Laurence did not stay long, and when he rose to go Ursula stole out, and was waiting in the porch for him, with a white shawl wrapped about her head. He drew the door behind him and took her to his heart. No need to write down what he said. There are some words which none may hear save those to whom they are spoken.

"I feel so humble and thankful to-night, Laurence," said Ursula, after a while, "in spite of my great happiness. I have been and am so unspeakably blessed, and I am so unworthy."

"Hush, my darling; you unworthy! What would all those we have just left say to that, I wonder?" said Laurence, half lightly, half earnestly.

Not seeming to hear his words Ursula continued, leaning her head a little on his protecting arm.

"It is so strange that *all* my hopes should be fulfilled, all my prayers answered," she said, very softly. "Tom is exceeding my hope, and will be a successful business man sometime. Fred loves his profession, and will make something of it by-

and-by. Charlie is all I could wish for. Geoffrey's gift will bring him to fame and fortune. And, O Laurence, when I came downstairs to-night and looked upon so many dear ones, my heart was like to break for joy!"

Very closely Laurence drew his darling to his heart.

"God has been very good to us, dearest. We shall never forget it, and with His help we may be able to do a little labour in His vineyard before the sunset."

"Before the sunset," repeated Ursula, dreamily. "Yes, Laurence, we will work together for Him for many years, please God, for it is only sunrise with us yet."

So at the sunrise we leave Ursula upon the threshold of a new life, knowing it will be full of sweetest human cares for her, and that, though griefs may mingle with the joys, she will bear them nobly in the strength of that Mighty Hand which hath so marvellously led her hitherto.

Farewell!

THE END.

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